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Las Chingonas: An Ecological Approach to Latina Student Mothers' Journey Through College

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

LAS CHINGONAS:

AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO LATINA
STUDENT MOTHERS' JOURNEY THROUGH COLLEGE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY

EMELY E. MEDINA-RODRÍGUEZ

CHICAGO, IL

MAY 2022

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For all the women in my life.

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ABSTRACT

Women with children are one of the growing student sub-populations in higher education. However, the support student mothers receive in colleges and universities has been historically unreliable and their experiences in college have not been studied in depth. This is especially true for student mothers from minoritized backgrounds with differing racial, ethnic, sexual, gender, and ability identities. This research aims to understand the experiences Latina graduate student mothers from an ecological and critical perspective. Guided by Critical Human Ecology and Black Feminist Thought, eight open-ended interviews were conducted and analyzed. Themes and categories came out of the patterns in the collected data. The results of this research are shared in the form of a composite narrative based on the experiences of student mothers in college. Student mothers use different navigation strategies to cover their needs. They depend on the support of their family, especially women of the family. This research aims to be a resource for the scholastic and policy-makers community that brings to light the inequities in the experiences of minoritized student mothers in college.

Keywords: *student mothers, minoritized student mothers, human ecology, feminism*

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Women in Higher Education

The development of women's education has a long history of being ignored, if not sabotaged, by the patriarchal establishment. Barriers such as quotas, legal limitations, policies, and regulations have restricted women's access to higher education institutions (Parker, 2015). However, women have contributed to society in many ways, but they have not been able to further their academic contributions because of their historical exclusion from education. Except for a few women, the doors of knowledge have been closed to women worldwide. Nevertheless, there are honorable historical examples of women's contributions to society, such as Hypatia, a thinker from ancient Greece who devoted her life to uncovering the laws of mathematics or the nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's theological and philosophical contributions. The fight for equality worldwide has had many champions. Early feminist thinkers, such as Olympe de Gouges during the French Revolution, believed in granting women equal education and rights. From Sojourner Truth to Susan B. Anthony and many other women's rights activists were pivotal in propelling social and policy changes in the US. Today, women are fighting against gender oppression at all social and political life levels.

Even so, many women have encountered and are encountering prejudices and have been left out of academic, social, and political debates because they have become mothers. Motherhood is a contentious aspect of being a woman that has left its mark in history. Women's

historical debate with motherhood has been portrayed in books and other media, and it is still discussed today. One important aspect that has inhibited women from studying has been the ideologies about motherhood. Examining the ideologies and policies that have historically disenfranchised women is the starting of this dissertation proposal. Considering the historical development of ideologies about motherhood allows me to position the research I am proposing. The discussion about motherhood in history will be followed by exploring the status of women in higher education, especially mothers and single mothers. I will present the purpose and the search, and my research question in this chapter. Followed by chapter 2: Literature Review, where I will explore the literature on student mothers, and chapter 3: Methodology, where I will expose the design of this research. Chapter 4: Results and Chapter 5: Conclusions.

Motherhood in History

1890–1930

Motherhood, in many ways, defined the opportunities women had to pursue their education. For example, before reliable birth control, a woman's reproductive life was filled with births spaced out through her reproductive period. Women's life expectancy was about 50 years of age; this could have meant that motherhood was a lifetime endeavor for some (Mann & Patterson, 2016). In 1890-1930, motherhood was considered a virtue (Mann & Patterson, 2016). Most women were not against having children; instead, some wanted emancipation in motherhood and work even though wanting a job and a family could mean painful emotional choices and practical difficulties (Mann & Patterson, 2016). At this time, the first-wave feminist movement in the twentieth century proposed maternal employment, which included childcare

and the recognition of motherhood as work. These debates on mothers' economic status laid the foundation for the welfare state, which made the well-being of mothers and children a public concern (Mann & Patterson, 2016).

Nevertheless, women's work outside the home was perceived as evil; the most concerning part of this regime for women was women's lack of social benefits. Making women's work seen as evil was an excuse to pay them less and improve their workspaces' conditions (Mann & Patterson, 2016). Yet even philosophical leaders of the time, such as John Stuart Mill, considered women's work a "common arrangement" that benefited women the most. This division of labor was seen as natural and part of the economic system of the time. In Ellen Ross's words, women "saw themselves as workers for their husbands and children: productive rather than emotional functions were at the center of female identity" (Allen, 2005, p. 67). However, many women advocated for housework to be considered as valuable as work outside the house. Though many women admitted that employment outside the home often brought more hardship than satisfaction, many also saw it as an essential condition for women's emancipation (Mann & Patterson, 2016).

Women's independence advocacy was depicted in novels such as Mona Caird's *Daughters of Danaus*, 1894, or Lily Braun's *Women and Economics*, 1910. They advocated for a new relationship between men and women in the workplace and the home. These and many more authors of the time provided the scaffolding for the women's movement. One example of the feminist critique on motherhood was called "sex parasitism," where housewives' economic dependence was thought to produce harmful states of idleness in women (Mann & Patterson, 2016). However, this referred to elite women; idleness might simply mean rest for working-class

women. The women whose professions were constricted by marriage or celibacy clauses such as female teachers were worse off. These clauses made women give up their jobs once they married. María Montessori was a single mother who, initially, could not pursue a career and have a child. Therefore, in this period, she advocated for communal childcare, which would give working women the freedom to have other interests in their lives (Mann & Patterson, 2016).

One crucial figure that stressed the social and economic differences between women was Alexandra Kollontai in Russia in 1916. In her writing, Kollontai focused on the lives of two women with the same name, Manshenka. She recounts the story of both women dealing with pregnancy and maternity from different social and material conditions. Before the women give birth, Manshenka, the laundress, keeps working until the last moment; the other Manshenka is a lady who lies in a soft bed surrounded by doctors and midwives. While childbirth is a safe and optimistic event for the lady, childbirth is a source of worry and anxiety over the child's needs for the laundress. The author offers alternatives to this last picture by suggesting maternity wards, where women can give birth safely and relatively worry-free. She calls for all working women to unite to achieve their demands (Mann & Patterson, 2016).

1930–1960

In the aftermath of the Second World War (WWII), an ideology of patriotic motherhood emerged because women returned to the home after the soldiers returned from war. The trend was to have a big family, generating the well-known Baby Boom. The state's policies changed in favor of providing women with support with the new welfare-state policies. Simultaneously, new contraceptives were being developed, and women's educational level and workforce participation rose (Tylor, 2005). Unlike World War I, when the suffragettes were in their most productive era,

WWII inspired almost no feminist activism. This was due to the abolishment of many feminist groups around Europe and the focus on the marginalized populations that the Nazis were condemning. Nonetheless, countries like France, Italy, and Belgium gave women the right to vote after WWII (Tylor, 2005).

Furthermore, Simone de Beauvoir wrote about women's position in the western world in times of war in her famous book *The Second Sex* (1949). De Beauvoir presents an extensive critique of the views about abortions during her time, advocating for legalized birth control and abortion. She perceived that forced motherhood resulted in children being mistreated or ignored by society. She articulated women's desires at different points of her life of becoming a mother and the ease of having children among different classes. Her writing critiques the responsibilities and fears of motherhood as imposed by patriarchy. Women's fantasies and the realities of being a mother get exposed in her writing. The married woman was to reproduce the species and serve as a housekeeper.

While Simone de Beauvoir explored maternity from a philosophical standpoint, Betty Friedman exposed the realities of a suburban housewife. The problem with no name, she named the lack of satisfaction women felt about being subjugated to housework and child-rearing. She spoke about women's ideologies about being women, wives, and mothers. A self-imposed disposition to become the perfect mother and wife was reinforced by the ever-growing house-appliance market and women's magazines. Friedman explained that *the woman question* had been answered in the US; in many women's minds, they were satisfied with their social positions and were not aspiring to become something other than housewives (Marks et al., 2016).

1970–1990

During this period, the second wave of feminists pushed for more rights and protections for mothers, such as the public acceptance of contraceptive pills all over the western world. Women were fully integrated into the workforce, thus raising demands for childcare and equal pay. Full-time motherhood gradually faded during the post-war era (Tylor, 2005). Feminists in the 1960s were already questioning the myths of "mother-love" by focusing on the relationship between mother and child. Many writings in the post-war era called for distinguishing the quantity of time a child spent with the mother and the quality of the relationship (Tylor, 2005). At that time, birth rates decreased, and women took more control over their reproduction. The ideology of obligatory motherhood was being questioned all over the western world.

Firestone (1970) exposed some revolutionary demands for women's and children's freedom from the burden of patriarchy. She argued that the excuse of biology was a means to exploit women and subject them to the family's obsolete demands. Firestone demanded technology for the redistribution of labor between men and women. She demanded the political autonomy and economic independence of women and children. Firestone explained that housework is not being counted as labor by the capitalist class, thus making women virtual slaves of the household (Mann & Patterson, 2016).

Furthermore, The Civil Rights Movement resurrected the topic of motherhood and its intersection with class and race. Movements in the era urged for a change in family dynamics. Especially when it came to women of color, motherhood was present in their fight against racism and sexism. One example of this was Diane Nash, whose Civil Rights Movement efforts led to her being incarcerated while pregnant. She argued that her incarceration served her future child's

interest and that her sacrifice ensured Black children's freedom in the future. In part, she coordinated the Freedom Riders, which got her incarcerated yet again (Buchanan, 2013). In groups like the Black Panther Party in the 1970s, women were the majority of the party (Coleman, 2016). They advocated for marginalized populations' rights and started the Breakfast Program which later became institutionalized as the WIC program (Blakemore, 2018).

1990-2019

Third-wave feminists embraced personal identity and claimed space in the mainstream. For example, Evelyn McDonell's *Mama Roma* exposed her experience as a mother without leaving motherhood critique aside. She advocated for seeing motherhood as a choice rather than a biological mandate. Another example is the autobiographical writing of Rebecca Walker explaining her contentions with motherhood and her quest to become a birth mother. She suggested that motherhood is a state of being and a state of mind (Jones, 2012). Haines (2011) explained that the tensions between empowered motherhood and self-sacrificing motherhood were unique aspects of the Third-Wave feminist movement.

Angela Davis gave a profound discussion on women's reproduction rights in 1993. She explored current reproductive policies and technologies to understand the new ways of being or becoming a mother. Davis argued that the socio-economic conditions whereby these reproductive technologies were being developed could exacerbate the inequities among middle-class, higher-class, and working-class women. She also discussed the inherent biases in reproductive technology access for those who cannot afford it. Working-class women are relegated to marginal positions by affluent women looking for surrogate mothers or egg donors. She explained that low-income Black, Latina, and Native American women confront biases in

reproductive practices regarding accessible abortions, forced sterilization, and biases toward teenage single mothers.

Single Mothers

Since the Colonial and Post-Revolutionary Eras, single motherhood was considered immoral and a burden to society. Bastardy laws were employed to discourage single motherhood in White women; Black women's children had no legal connection to the mother; instead, they were the landowner's property (Duquaine-Watson, 2017). The political and economic changes in the US brought a new sense of responsibility to single mothers. Policies and programs were implemented to ensure their well-being. Nevertheless, by the 1950s, new Freudian ideas about child development insisted that women who had children out of wedlock had a dysfunction or mental weakness. For Black single mothers, motherhood was a pathology of the culture of poverty and was thus customarily considered a burden to taxpayers. Single motherhood was portrayed as evidence of the decay of society. News outlets highlighted Black and Latina single mothers as especially irresponsible and lacking good judgment (Duquaine-Watson, 2017).

Black Motherhood in History

Black motherhood has been defined by the historical, social relations with the dominant White population in the US. The asymmetry in class and race influences the principles of what it means to be a woman and a mother (Lawson, 2000). Although WWII and The Great Depression questioned the feminine and masculine gender roles, the incoming liberal discourse was still championing traditional gender roles. Women specifically were seen as the embodiment of the nation's spirit and aspirations (Feldstein, 2000). However, Black women's maternity was regulated to safeguard the state's interests. Such as prosecuting poor Black women for exposing

their children to drugs, which essentially punishes poor Black women for becoming pregnant. Also, the solution to social and racial instability felt on Black women's behavior and rearing practices. For example, Black women were blamed for fermenting parasitism in their sons and the neurosis epidemic if they did not become mothers (Feldstein, 2000). Black mothers were accused of fomenting racial tensions and molding their Black sons' future political behavior (Feldstein, 2000).

The celebration of Black motherhood was also prevalent before WWII. Although not identical to White motherhood, good Black mothers were celebrated as defying the White majority's racial stereotypes (Feldstein, 2000). The strong Black women's image was attributed to the rearing of sons that conflated aggression with masculinity, suggesting fears of homosexuality (Feldstein, 2000). Black motherhood is influenced by white women's racist stereotypes. Black mothers of all social classes, at some point, correct their children based on the White ideal of good behavior. Simultaneously, Black motherhood's negative imagery helped shaped the social and moral boundaries of what it meant to be a white mother (Feldstein, 2000). Further along, in the 1960s, the literature on Black families argued that mothers who work could not give enough attention to their children, which weakened their family structure because of their work's public character (Feldstein, 2000). Being too prolific was also seen as a problem because Black mothers could not divide their attention among their children.

Nevertheless, historically, and now, Black women see motherhood as a community endeavor, expressing their emotions and values through motherhood. They resist negative stereotypes through their parenting practices (Lawson, 2000). Motherhood and the community are central to the idiosyncrasies of African Americans and African immigrants. Community is a

primary value within Black motherhood; bloodmothers are supported by othermothers that help with childcare, such as family members and friends (Hill Collins, 2002). This primordial place of community is present in their relationships with others. For women, the community plays a role in their motherhood. Black women have a proactive position in creating the philosophies of motherhood in the Black communities (Hill Collins, 2002). Black motherhood is in constant negotiation; Black women's relationships with one another have changed historically. Black women have been influential in their critique of motherhood, bringing an intersectional perspective where gender, race, and class are considered in the discussion about motherhood. Intersecting oppressions mold Black motherhood; resisting stereotyping through motherhood is how Black mothers protect their children (Hill Collins, 2002).

Prejudices for Being a Queer Parent

Unfortunately, research on the history of LGBTTT+ parenthood is still scarce, especially before WWII little is known about the experiences of LGBTTT+ parents. Parenting for LGBTTT+ people was not recognized by US law before WWII; divorced parents could not have custody of the children. Many had to hide their parenthood status, had to live a double life or live in isolation to maintain a relationship with their children (Rivers, 2013). For decades, a lack of access to the institution of marriage prevented gay and lesbian individuals and couples from exercising fully recognized parentage (Rudolph, 2017). Chauveron, Alvarez, and van Eeden-Moorefield (2016) explained that the co-evolution of same-sex marriage and parenting rights occurred over decades from prior legal designations and decisions. Parental rights laws highlight how families headed by same-sex couples have been discriminated against socially, politically, and legally. Having a same-sex parented family brings many legal issues to the table. For

example, surrogacy in Canada still considers the birth mother as responsible for the child. The members of queer families who experience the greatest legal challenges are nonbiological parents, who are sometimes relegated to a legal stranger's status regarding their children. The absence of legal recognition of non-normative family arrangements made prospective queer parents less willing to create such a family structure (Kelly, 2013).

Prejudices in the lives of queer people are not new; however, queer parents deal with prejudices, even in places like their children's schools. Lee (2009) explained that sometimes gay and lesbian parents are sexualized: i.e., their relationship is regarded as exclusively sexual and not involving commitment, love, or communication. The author also suggested that some parents feel "desexualized" by other parents to cope with the sexuality of the Queer parents. The literature presents queer parenting as experiencing struggles such as higher-than-average postpartum depression; lesbians struggle with fears and stereotypes regarding their sexuality that might affect their mental health after birth (Lee,2009). Epstein (2005) discusses the different myths and prejudices about gay parents that hurt families, such as stating that gay parents affect their children's gender identity. Our understanding of LGBTT+ parenthood is still scarce; this research aims to highlight how LGBTT+ people experience parenthood while in college.

Women's Access to and Representation in Higher Education

To conclude this introduction, I want to situate women's status in higher education nowadays. Women have defied the many limitations and stereotypes imposed historically. Now, in the US, women are more likely than ever to attend college. Sixty-six percent of women choose to go to college after high school, equal to male students (Allen, 2011). Before 1980, male students made up most students in colleges and universities in the US. However, since the year

1988, women have taken the lead. Nevertheless, women thriving in higher education have not negatively affected male students; men have maintained the same enrollment levels as women since 2006 (Allen, 2011). However, women's education is qualitatively different from males; implicit biases mediate their classroom experiences and learning process. For example, teachers are more attentive to males' learning, empowering them to keep searching for a solution for a longer time. Besides, they are likely to ascribe men's success to talent and women's success to hard work (Allen, 2011).

Since 1988, more women are enrolled in higher education in the US than men; however, 62% of women in college are Pell Grant recipients, and 61% of federal education loans are taken out by women (AAUW, 2020; PNPI, 2020). Most low-income students and most minoritized students in higher education are women (Allen, 2011). Women's access to higher education is also mediated by race; White women have an advantage over ethnic and racial minorities; they are granted more bachelor's, master's, doctoral and professional degrees than minoritized women. Women are still not well-represented in STEM; they represent only 22% of engineering and computer science students (Allen, 2011). The gender inequalities continue even after they finish college; women's median income as a college graduate in the US was \$10,000 less than that of men in 2019 (AAUW, 2020). Inside higher education, women faculty represent only 39% of full-time faculty; they are less represented in doctoral-granting institutions and hyper-represented in two-year colleges (Allen, 2011). Women continue to be primarily paraprofessionals, secretaries, and clerical staff in the university; moving to professional roles is rare (Allen, 2011).

Women and the College Climate

Allen (2011) explained that the college climate reflects "values, belief systems, norms,

ideologies, rituals, and traditions that serve to guide the culture" (p. 66). These factors can affect how students perceive and engage with the university. Students' self-efficacy, achievement, and emotional and social development are affected by the college climate (Allen, 2011). Robust and longitudinal studies have studied how the college climate affects women students; a chilly climate in the classroom reflects the gender biases that put women at a disadvantage (Allen, 2011). Examples include classroom dynamics such as when male students are called to give their opinion more frequently or when women are judged by their appearance rather than by their contribution to the classroom discussions. Outside the classroom, female students also often encounter a chilly climate. From athletics to the student government, women encounter comments and jokes regarding women, and their ideas are rarely noted. Furthermore, some female students experience rape and harassment while in college, leading to mental health issues and impaired academic performance.

Student Mothers in Higher Education

Student mothers are among the most represented non-conventional students in higher education institutions: 4.8 million students or 23.3% of all enrolled students. Many of these students are single mothers, first-generation, low-income, or ethnic and racial minoritized students (Institute for Women's Policy Research [IWPR], 2016). Their college experiences depart from the standard college student experience in Western countries and the US. Student mothers dedicate 40% of their income to childcare and commit 30 hours or more a week to taking care of their children (IWPR, 2016). Their responsibilities as mothers pose a series of obstacles to attaining college success and completion (Miller et al., 2011). For example, balancing coursework with childcare duties and outside jobs is emotionally and physically taxing

for student mothers (Lynch, 2008). The Council of Graduate Schools states that women now represent 57.2% of all students enrolled in higher education institutions in the US. Of these, 16.5% have children, and 9% are single mothers. Despite these statistics, the resources that higher education institutions have committed to student mothers' needs in the last few decades have been inconsistent across the US (IWPR 2016).

Single Mothers in Higher Education

Today, single mothers represent 11% of undergraduate students in the US (2.1 million), which has more than doubled from 1999 to 2012. Thirty percent of single mothers attend for-profit universities, while 44% attend two-year public universities; only 19% go to public or private four-year universities (IWPR, 2017). Women of color are more prone to be single student mothers: 37% of Black women, 27% of Native Americans, 19% of Latinas, 14% of White women, 7% of Asian and Pacific Islander women, and 17% of mixed-race women fall under this category. Eighty-nine percent of undergraduate single mothers are from low-income backgrounds, and 63% live below the federal poverty level and have \$4,800 more in student debt than women without children (WIPR, 2017). Fifty-four percent of single mothers work 20 or more hours a week; "[f]or students with dependent children, *any* amount of paid work is associated with declines in degree attainment" (WIPR, 2017, p.5, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, single mothers with college degrees are less likely to live in poverty; they are 33% more likely to leave poverty behind with every degree they gain (WIPR, 2017).

Title IX and Student Mothers

One of the main reasons women drop out of school is pregnancy; before 1972, students who became mothers were discriminated against and dismissed (Duquaine-Watson, 2017). Since

Title IX was passed as an amendment to the 1964 Civil Rights Law, discrimination against parenting and/or pregnant students is prohibited. Schools that receive federal funding are prohibited from imposing any rule about students' parental, family, or marital status (US Department of Education, 2020). Pregnant students cannot be excluded from curricular and co-curricular activities and must be reintegrated into these activities after giving birth. Although special programs for student parents are allowed, these must be voluntary. Additionally, if a doctor considers a student's absence medically necessary, the student must be excused by the school. Schools offering accommodations for ill students must offer accommodations to students after childbirth as well (US Department of Education, 2020).

Minoritized Student Mothers in College

Minoritized women make up most single mothers in college; their intersecting identities mediate their college experiences. Identities such as gender, race, income status, or special abilities inform how they navigate and negotiate their time in college (Appling et al., 2018). On top of being stereotyped and questioned for being mothers in college, minoritized students also deal with discrimination based on their gender identity, special ability, race, or ethnicity (Appling et al., 2018). Student mothers of color try to counter the effects of discrimination by utilizing navigational strategies derived from their cultural heritage, such as when Black and Latina student mothers build their relationships with their families, who support them through college. The cultural appreciation of the families of minoritized women can also define their college experiences; for example, Latinas' ideologies around *familismo* or seeing family as primordial inform how they navigate college (Espinoza, 2010). Hurtado et al. (2012) focused on the effects of college climate on students of color and found that they perceive a chilly or hostile

climate that can lead to low academic performance and dissatisfaction. Other populations on campus, such as LGBTQ+ and women, also report a hostile climate in college (Hurtado et al., 2012).

Statement of the Problem

Both the literature and the statistics about student mothers speak to an experience of struggle and resilience on multiple and interconnected levels. The number of women with children entering higher education is rising throughout the US. However, the literature is still scarce on how student mothers from minoritized backgrounds experience college. The lives of minoritized student mothers do not happen in a vacuum; instead, they respond to the environment. This environment is bound in time and space; its history influences students' current social and political processes and college experiences. The study of minoritized student mothers' experiences falls short in integrating a holistic perspective that allows us to see these experiences in context and from multiple levels.

Furthermore, the literature rarely uses a feminist or intersectional framework to understand the experiences of minoritized student mothers. Using an intersectional and feminist perspective brings new set of considerations to understanding minoritized student mothers' experiences in college. This framework examines students' positionalities integrating their identities and bringing to light the gender, racial, and social class inequities present in their experiences. Minoritized student mothers experience college on multiple levels, but these levels are also contextual, historical, and intersectional. The current literature does not capture the complexities of their experiences nor provides a critical understanding.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to understand minoritized student mothers' experiences in college, especially the strategies they utilize to overcome higher education obstacles. This study explored how student mothers interacted with the university's actors and explored the resources they employ to assist them in navigating chilly campus climates. This study focused on what actors inside and outside the university are essential for student mothers' access, retention, and degree completion. The support student mothers receive in college also comes from different actors in their lives. This study delved into the different kinds of relationships student mothers maintain, develop, and nurture while in college; the study wanted to understand the significance of such relationships to student mothers' success in college.

Research Questions

1. How do minoritized student mothers experience college?
 - a. What support systems do minoritized student mothers have in college?
 - b. What support systems do minoritized student mothers have in college?

My main question responds to the lack of literature about the experiences of minoritized student mothers in college. Many researchers have studied different aspects of student mothers' experiences as a collective, but not many have focused on minoritized college student mothers. Exploring the experiences of minoritized students can illuminate the resources these groups need to thrive in college. The first subquestion asked how student mothers navigate the university. Their navigational strategies for college success could look different from those utilized by students without children and even from married or white students. Students could be using different strategies that can significantly change their outcomes in college. The second

subquestion responded to the lack of information about students' support systems to aid them in college. The literature indicates that student mothers receive support from multiple sources in their lives, but the family is their primary college support. For Black and Latina student mothers, their cultures inform how they see family; this influences their college experiences. Studying the support of minoritized student mothers is significant because this group of students has a greater number of financial and academic needs that are usually invisible to the institutional actors. Understanding the support they receive from those significant relationships could paint a different picture of their needs and rethink their support in college.

Conceptual Framework

To guide this research, I draw from Human Ecology Theory (HET), Critical Human Ecology (CHE), and Black Feminist Thought (BFT). These three theories facilitated the formulation of questions regarding the different levels of experience in college of student mothers. The dialectical nature of human ecology consists of understanding the relationship between the person and their environment. Not wanting to create a dichotomy between the internal and the external, CHE proposes to understand a person's development from their perspective and an ecological one, i.e., where these systems interconnect to create the complete experience of their reality (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). This approach to human development was studied deeply by Bronfenbrenner (2005), who critiqued modern social research limits and believed that this research was inadequate to understand human development. He advocated understanding students' development in a space where social systems interlock and interact between and across social realities. Throughout this research, I centered my analysis on the interactions between systems. I did not attempt to name each system but will instead highlight

the interactions among the most common topics. To accomplish this, I used the vocabulary provided by Bronfenbrenner (2005) in his HET.

As Bronfenbrenner (2005) presented, the fundamental element of HET is context, which is described as the critical positionalities that help explain the interactions between students and their environment. Four contextual levels surround the students; these represent the ecological systems where development occurs. The first level is the microsystem, where students engage in activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships. Potential microsystems for students are the workplace, family, and church, among others. The mesosystem comprises the synergetic relationship students experience between microsystems. These can be dissonant or consonant influences that enable the students' development, e.g., institutional culture. The exosystem consists of external influences on students' development, ranging from national politics or institutional policies to supervisors' decisions. Finally, the macrosystem comprises all the cultural structures that the students do not control, such as a society's culture or ideologies, which are not universal and constantly shift. These systems are interactive and syncretic; they provide students with challenges and resources to thrive, adjust, and develop (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Bronfenbrenner's (2005) theory complements CHE's ideas about the interactions between the personal and public areas of life; nevertheless, CHE further integrates power dynamics that plague those interactions.

CHE advocates for a materialist epistemology where the relationship between humans and the natural world is a "process of the transformation of energy in which human beings were dependent on larger material and ecological conditions" (York & Mancus, 2009, p. 130). Utilizing this framework allows for a clearer understanding of how the environment influences

student mothers and how they influence the environment. For CHE, "inequality should play a central role in the way we explain human and natural systems" (Clement, 2010, p. 35). The tenets of CHE suggest that personal and environmental factors determine people's ecology and that those factors have inequitably developed among the population (York & Mancus, 2009). Thus, I will also explore student mothers' social positionalities that might determine their personal and structural realities in college.

In Bronfenbrenner's HET, social class, gender, sexuality, ability, and racial and ethnic backgrounds are not apparent in the different ecological levels. Nevertheless, integrating BFT can expand how these ecological levels affect the development of minoritized student mothers. BFT acknowledges that women have been historically disenfranchised by virtue of their gender. It further argues that women's contributions have been diminished or erased from history and that inclusion has been more symbolic than concrete (Hill Collins, 2002). BFT advocates for women's social and political inclusion and that women's contributions, especially those from minoritized backgrounds, need to be given their rightful place in society. It also acknowledges that women's lives are intersectional, that their social locations mediate their experiences. Women's gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and physical and cognitive ability influence their experience and how they react to their social and political environment. BFT is an empowering theory that brings to light inequities hidden by ideologies regarding womanhood and motherhood and provides a path forward in a more equitable manner.

Researcher's Positionality

The Daughter of a Student Mother

As a child, running around a La Inter, in a building with an elevator, my sister and I use to go up and down, up and down, while my mother was taking classes nearby. My mom's friends or my Dad watched over us. We got to be inside a classroom and even got to speak with my mom's professors before I could spell my name. We were talkative little girls, and my mother promoted our curiosity when possible. My mother often had to ask for consent from the professors for me to sit in a chair with a coloring book. My mother told me, professors always allow her to bring us into the classroom, albeit with rules about noises and movement.

Nevertheless, I remember professors telling my mother to read to us and introduce us to the English language soon in life. I believe now that my mom's parenting style changed because of her academic focus on English as a second language teacher. She agrees that studying changed how she understood the development of her children and her approach to it.

Many nights after we were done with homework, I saw my mother put in many hours of reading and writing for her assignments. During the nights, she was away taking classes two towns over. She did not have a car or financial support other than my grandparents. She had to take el carro público early to get to school. My mother graduated from college with honors. She was a first-generation college student with four children and was victorious against all odds. Now I understand that this effort was for us, her children, to set an example, trace a path, and provide the resources to get there. The four of us when on to college and understand the value of my mother's effort. Our excitement toward education and knowledge stems from our mother, who envisioned our future away from the obstacles she had to deal with throughout her life. The

stability and hope for the future higher education brought to my home translate into gains beyond the material. It has given us shared experiences, shared dreams, and an abundance of faith for our children's future.

College Access Researcher

College accessibility has been part of my life and scholarship since I entered the university more than ten years ago. In 2007, I was introduced to students from public housing projects as part of a research project my mentor was conducting. This experience was full of new knowledge that expanded my critical thinking. This first experience working in a college access program as a research assistant gave me a new purpose in life. I had a shift in perspective, and my engagement and commitment with poor communities around Puerto Rico were consolidated. Young students from public housing projects were my guides and teachers to understand their needs and desires better. In 2014, I had the opportunity to evaluate this college access program by exploring the experiences of first- and second-year undergraduates from public housing projects in Mayagüez. In this group, only one student had children, and her story was different; her experience in college was dissimilar to that of her peers from public housing projects. In getting to know this student, I realized that student mothers' needs were not considered in the university's policy or the college access program's policy. All this has led me to this study, as I see a need for more representation, access, and support for student mothers in college.

Feminist Activist

I believe that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman," as Simone de Beauvoir said in her famous book *The Second Sex*. My experience with gender informs what I believe about womanhood and motherhood. I first became involved with feminist activism around 2013;

that year, I was introduced to gender issues by my feminist comrades at the university. Many years and many experiences with activism have given me a new perspective on how to go about creating social change for women. The struggle in the streets, the long meetings, and the actual hate I experienced in Puerto Rico guided my social consciousness to consider new strategies and tactics for women's liberation. I learned that institutions are made of people and that people have the power to change the structures. However, I have also learned that having facts or excellent reasons is not enough to win women's emancipation. Action must be taken. Bringing critical theories that expand my vision of how student mothers are experiencing college is a start. I will also provide more robust knowledge that considers many levels of experience, the context, history, intersections of class, gender, and race, which is rarely seen in academia.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation will be organized into five chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, results, and conclusion. The literature review in Chapter II will be divided into three main areas of study: 1) the student mother's well-being, 2) the college climate for student mothers, and 3) the support systems in student mothers' lives. The review aims to give a background and context to this research. It is vital to locate student mothers within the literature to understand their higher education status and to acknowledge the needs that still go unmet. The literature review will be further divided into ecological systems, from the most internal or psychological, to the family and the external influences of higher learning institutions and the state. HET, CHE and BFT will guide my analysis of students' ecological systems in higher education. These three theories bring to light a historical and critical perspective that will allow me to have a holistic perspective "where the whole is a complex system that is greater than the

sum of its parts" (Patton, 2002, p. 56). With the help of BFT, I will identify intersectional oppressions that affect student mothers, especially those from minoritized backgrounds.

Chapter III will cover methodology; here, I will present this dissertation's purpose, design, and procedures. This chapter will introduce the purpose of this research and its analytical strategy. I will also expand on this qualitative research design's paradigm and philosophical assumptions. Furthermore, I expound on the topics of validity and reliability of the data and discuss the data source that will be primary in this study. I also describe the demographics data survey and the data collection procedures of this research. Finally, in chapter three, I explain the researcher's role and the limitations and ethical considerations of this study.

In Chapter IV, the results are organized into a composite narrative. I created four stories in the form of fieldnotes to organize the results of the interviews with Latina student mothers. Each fieldnote, when united, forms a meta-story that follows their journeys in higher education. The results are disclosed in each quote from the Latina student mothers in the study. In the final chapter, Chapter V, I further expand on the results and the meaning students give them. I organized the conclusion into ecological levels, which helped be thorough with the experiences of the Latina student mothers. I connect the results and the literature, enriching the finding and the information I collected in the interview.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review, I explore three major topics of the student mothers' experiences in college. I used an ecological framework to explore different topics, starting with the closest influences such as family and friends to the most distant ones, such as the state. Firstly, I discuss what influences student mothers' well-being while in college. I start by exploring the research literature on student mothers' emotional and personal well-being, where I discuss student mothers' mental health and their personal social lives, respectively. Followed by discussing the influences on their family and academic well-being. Here I focus on their family relations and the different influence of their fields and levels of study. Finishing with the exploration of the influence of neoliberalism ideologies on the well-being of student mothers.

Secondly, I explore how student mothers relate to the college climate. I focus on their path to graduation, their experiences with the college climate, and their life-study balance. I also explore the experiences of Black student mothers with the college climate. This discussion sheds light on the relationships students have with different actors inside and outside the university. Finally, I place a question about the sources of support student mothers enjoy while in college. I start by discussing the support of the family while in college. Followed by the support of the institutions of higher education and the state. This discussion will help understand the support students receive and the needs that are still unmet. I highlight Latina students' experiences with the culture of *familismo* that makes family primordial in their lives. I pose these questions to the

literature to better understand the student mothers' experiences in college.

What Influences the Well-being of Student Mothers in College?

I identify how the environment influences different aspects of student mothers' well-being with this question. This holistic perspective comprises as much of the experiences of student mothers as possible, especially those that are influenced by environmental factors. First, I focus on the emotional well-being of student mothers by understanding the psychological stressors they struggle with and their emotional outcomes, such as feeling guilty while studying. Second, I focus on the personal well-being of student mothers, especially on developing their identity as college students amidst pursuing their degrees. Third, I explore the family well-being of student mothers interested in finding out their motivation to continue their studies. Fourth, I focus on the academic well-being of student mothers, especially regarding how they are fair against the demands of college and how they navigate their contradicting expectations. The final section responds to the literature on how neoliberal policies influence the well-being of student mothers. The reason behind studying this is to understand the external environmental pressures students receive but cannot control. This sequence makes it easier for me to understand the interplays between the external environment and the internal life of student mothers, from the most personal and emotional influences to the more public family and academic life influences and the external influence of neoliberal policies. I will use literature from western countries, different ages, races, socio-economic statuses, and academic fields to help me understand the extent of the experiences of student mothers in higher education.

Emotional Well-Being

In this section, I aim to understand what influences student mothers' emotional well-being

in college. Emotional well-being literature focuses on the psychological health of student mothers; in this section, I focus on how their mental health is affected while in the university. Firstly, I discuss the feelings of guilt that can come from becoming a student mother and about them navigating school and housework. This will be followed by exploring the stress they suffer from having to balance being a student and their family responsibilities. Emotions respond to the triggers in the environment, and the support students perceive in their surroundings, such as family and friends (Gigliotti, 2004). Being in higher education can produce new feelings student mothers have not felt before, causing an imbalance while studying (Gigliotti, 2004). Finding this balance is a substantial part of their lives; balancing the internal and external duties of being a student and a mother occurs internally by developing students' perceptions about the university externally, such as in the case of neoliberal policies influencing their decision-making processes (Gigliotti, 2004).

The emotional well-being in the life of student mothers was conceptualized by Colbry (1995) as the opposite of distress and as identified by mood, satisfaction, and energy. Student mothers must balance their roles of being students and mothers, which can lead to adverse and beneficial psychological outcomes (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Quimby and O'Brien (2006) studied the psychological well-being of a diverse group of undergraduate student mothers that included White, Black, Latina, Native American, and Asian student mothers in the US. Their results indicated that students who feel secure and have external social support could have positive psychological outcomes, such as performing well academically (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). However, student mothers need assistance to feel safe in the environment of the university because being judged by others and stereotyped as a mother can lead to adverse psychological

outcomes such as stress and guilt (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Starting a higher education degree comes with the challenge of having to balance their parenting responsibilities with their new responsibilities as a student. Quimby and O'Brien (2006) considered that this transition could cause psychological stressors such as fatigue, guilt, and low self-esteem in student mothers. The interplay between the environment and personal life of the student mothers played a role in how they react to psychological stressors (Chang & Fine, 2007).

A significant psychological stressor for student mothers is the role of guilt in their lives while in college. Student mothers can experience a range of emotions – being in the university can bring happiness and self-fulfillment. However, the most common sentiment is guilt, especially concerning their children (Brooks, 2015). For example, many believe that dedicating time to school takes away from their time to be with their children, and hence they go through feelings of defeat, indignity, and alienation. The multiple demands of motherhood, such as spending time with children, earning a living, and the energy spent on caring for children, can lead them to feel guilty (Brooks, 2015). This perspective is of student mothers in the United Kingdom (UK) and Denmark. Unfortunately, this study does not divide their interviews by gender, ability, race, or social class, giving me little understanding of how these stressors reflect in student mothers from diverse backgrounds. However, focusing on the emotion of guilt gives me a very concrete insight into how the experience of having to divide their time to study and to care for their children are causing them mental health issues.

Nevertheless, successfully balancing their two roles can help student mothers feel more efficacious as students and as mothers. Van Rhijn and Lero (2014) explain that for student mothers, both their roles as mothers and as students define their success in college by positively

stimulating the self-efficacy beliefs of student mothers, which in turn reduces their attrition (Scott et al., 1998). What is expected of mothers and regular students sometimes can be contradictory, causing internal strife in student mothers (Home, 1997). "Student-parents take cultural understandings into account when interpreting and constructing their actions and articulating their identities, especially ideas about what it means to be successful (and not so successful) as parents and students" (Estes, 2011, p. 206). Contradictory expectations can be a source of stress and guilt for student mothers; nevertheless, Estes (2011) argued this could be counter by providing psychological support to students during their time in college. The internal and external conflicting influences from their environments, such as family and the university, gave me a better idea about the contradicting nature of this relationship. Importantly, Estes' (2011) study considers the experiences of multiple students, such as graduate and undergraduate White, Black, Latina, and Native American mothers.

Furthermore, another article that focuses on a diverse set of student mothers is by Van Stone et al. (1994), in which the authors include graduate and undergraduate students from poor backgrounds. These student mothers tend to qualify their experiences based on the personal relationships they build through their time in college. For example, poor single mothers who are college students believe sociological factors such as social relationships are a determinant in their development (Van Stone et al., 1994). They attribute their academic success to three factors: personal ambition, supportive family, and faculty. Family support and encouragement, as well as financial support, can have an enduring effect on the experience of student mothers in college (Van Stone et al., 1994). Relationship building in college can lead to student mothers having more support and more success as a college student. The support of their family and

children allowed them to aspire, causing positive outcomes such as resilience (Van Stone et al. 1994). With this set of articles, I can interpret that student mothers have positive and negative psychological outcomes that affect their college experience.

Internal and external forces such as the stressors from college and the home intermingle, making it more difficult for student mothers to achieve their goals in college. Emotional well-being is difficult to achieve in an environment that pressures student mothers to act as if they do not have family responsibilities. However, family ties help student mothers feel more secure about their decision to continue their studies. Although they do not extensively focus on diverse student mothers, these articles help me understand the connecting thread between student mothers from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds. These articles use an ecological understanding of the emotional influences vis-à-vis the environmental ones. For example, the relationships student mothers from poor backgrounds appreciated and relied upon for their emotional well-being while in the university. The interplay between personal life in the form of the family reacts to the influence of the powerful ecological system that is the university leading students to search for support within their environment.

Personal Well-Being

In this section, I discuss the personal well-being of student mothers, starting with identifying the influences on their identity, which can cause positive and negative outcomes in their lives. In the following section, I focus on self-development, which depends on internal processes such as self-esteem and external ones like recognition. I use studies from graduate student mothers from the UK and Black undergraduate student mothers from the US, who live in countries with a robust higher education system that admits student mothers every year (Cox &

Sallee, 2018). The interplay between the internal and external environmental influences on their identities allows me to understand these experiences as a developmental process. This process is characterized by the knowledge student mothers acquire from the environment, which informs their strategies for navigating their experiences in college. This is seen in the literature about the personal well-being of underrepresented and diverse student mothers, such as Black undergraduate student mothers.

Personal well-being is the particular interest in the development of the self, however, this development is influenced by multiple factors in their environment, such as how stereotypes of being a student mother influence the development of their identity (Hooks, 2015; Lashley & Ollivierre, 2014; Lynch, 2008). Self-perception and identity formation have a constant clash with the different ecological levels of the environment in common, student mothers develop different strategies to handle their new environment in college (Lynch, 2008). The identity formation of graduate student mothers is reflected in how the students navigate their experience in higher education. They sometimes have to negotiate their movements depending on which contextual level they encounter. Students negotiate their time to study in two levels, with professors and their employers, which might not be informed of their positions as mothers (Lynch, 2008). These strategies allow graduate student mothers to pass as students without family responsibilities in their college environment, but at the same time, they do not allow them to develop as a regular student. For example, when student mothers want to participate in curricular and co-curricular activities in the university but do not find the time (Lynch, 2008). Furthermore, navigating the university environment as a student mother also depends on the external recognition they receive as mothers in the university that inform their development as well.

Recognition from professors, supervisors, and peers can incentive many student mothers to continue their studies. The outcome of seeking recognition amidst a hostile environment is generating strategies that hide their actual responsibilities to project confidence. The graduate student mothers in Lynch (2008) believe that their identity as mothers can detract from their identities as students. Many student mothers choose to keep their identities as mothers hidden from their peers and supervisors because they are afraid they will not respond well to their identity, perceiving them as less committed to their studies or as bad students (Lynch, 2008). When forming their identities within the university, many students opt for "maternal invisibility" as a strategy to navigate college, downplaying their roles as mothers in college and their role as students in the home (Lynch, 2008). Although Lynch (2008) emphasizes graduate students in the UK, these experiences are similar across other western countries, such as in the case of Black undergraduate student mothers in the US.

Self-development of student mothers is influenced by an environment that does not always take them into account, as in the case of Black undergraduate student mothers (Maudry-Beverly, 2014). For example, by not recognizing their needs for adequate housing, tutoring, and financial and time restraints. Knowing the self through higher education allows the student mothers to develop their self-esteem, social maturity, and emotional fulfillment (Maudry-Beverly, 2014). Nevertheless, Maudry-Beverly (2014) highlighted the interlocking identities that merge in the lives of Black undergraduate students in the US. He stated that dealing with the multiple stereotypes of being a Black student mother makes their identity formation and recognition of their needs more challenging by causing them even more stress than to White

student mothers. Nevertheless, student mothers have a sense of personal achievement and confidence when pursuing their degrees.

Personal well-being involves self-improvement efforts that lead to the recognition of student mothers by others inside higher education. The environment surrounding the student mothers may or may not incentivize the development of a healthy identity and self-esteem. The influences on the personal well-being of student mothers come from conflicting identities once they are in college. Lynch (2008) does not discuss the graduate students' class, race, ethnicity, gender, or diverse ability, limiting these conclusions to only a specific sector of student mothers, mostly White and Asian students. The only diverse group, the articles on this topic, focuses on is Black undergraduate student mothers, who have a different experience than other minorities in the US and other western countries.

Family Well-Being

In this section, I seek to understand the impact of the family on the well-being of student mothers. First, I start by discussing the literature on the benefits of having highly educated mothers, especially regarding the children's attitudes towards schooling. Secondly, I explore how student mothers benefit from having children while in college. These experiences start to give a more precise appreciation of how family influences the way student mothers navigate college. Family is part of the private lives of mothers but is also a very public part of it. It is difficult for student mothers to completely separate this part of their lives from school and its requirements (Domina & Roksa, 2012). Family helps student mothers develop inside higher education, but higher education also benefits the student mother's family. The self-efficacy they experience

from being a good mother is reflected in their academic performance as well (Domina & Roksa, 2012).

Domina and Roksa's (2012) longitudinal study on educational attainment and parenting practices explains that having a degree can increase economic stability for the children and help provide a positive attitude towards education. The benefits of student mothers having a college degree can stream to their treatment of their children, making the mothers more involved with their children's schooling. They also develop a different discipline style and provide a positive role model for their children. Student parents also benefit from having children while in school, by generating feelings of self-efficiency, having the confidence of doing an excellent job as a parent and as a student (Devos et al., 2007). Devos et al. (2007) discovered positive trends in the student mothers' educational attainment, attitudes towards discipline, as well as attitudes toward family activities.

In her study of single student mothers living in poverty, Lovell (2014) clarified the motivation for the degree attainment of these students by the age of the mother. Motivation to attain a degree comes from intrinsic and extrinsic incentives, such as the desire for a better life or the responsibility to support their children (Lovell, 2014). Nevertheless, both older and younger student mothers acquired their self-fulfillment through schooling with their children as primary motivation (Hurley & Palonen, 1967). However, their degree of emotional investment varies depending on the age of the mother; losing time with their children creates significant pain for younger mothers, while for older mothers, the concern is more about balancing the role of mother and student (Ricco et al., 2009; Wainwright & Marandet, 2010). Balancing their roles as mothers and students brings a sense of success to student mothers, motivating them to be

academically successful. Although this article brings the experiences of younger and older students, unfortunately, Lovell (2014) did not divide her data based on race, ignoring the racialized nature of the social class. Nevertheless, the article focuses on distinguishing the outcomes of mature and young students, which leads me to infer that the experiences of student mothers also vary depending on their characteristics.

Student mothers' interactions with the family change how they develop in college. Furthering their education in college also develops their abilities as parents, making them more confident about their parenting skills. Although these articles were broad in their observations about the influence of family on the well-being of student mothers, they focus on how the family is influenced by higher education. I believe this view gets me closer to understanding the dialectic nature of the experiences of student mothers and their families, where both the children and the mothers develop while in college. The experiences with higher education change their personal experiences and those of their families. A limitation I see in these articles is that they do not focus enough on how higher education affects the families of diverse and underrepresented students. It presents a problem if I aim to understand how their gender and diverse abilities and their racial and ethnic backgrounds affect their personal well-being.

Academic Well-Being

In this section, I go deeper into the experiences of certain student mothers, such as medical students and Ph.D. students, to understand the influences on the academic well-being of student mothers in different fields and educational levels. This diversity of experience allows me to understand most of the experiences from diverse student mothers. The academic experiences of student mothers are external, meaning students interact with the environment of the university

to determine their academic well-being. Students from different fields are subject to different rules depending on the needs of the academic field. I focus on the influence the environment exercises on the personal experience of student mothers with their academic life. This aspect takes me a little further out in the contextual ecology of the student mothers. It shows me how higher education institutions and their culture and policies affect the academic well-being of student mothers.

Cujec et al. (2000) touched upon the topic of student parents' career and parenting satisfaction of residents and physicians. This research is vital to understanding the academic experiences of student mothers concerning different academic fields. The medical culture defines how medical student mothers navigate their experiences in college; Cujec et al. (2000) suggested that excessive work demands inadequate support networks and that a sense of professional inadequacy can have a toll on the lives of medical students with children. The perceptions regarding having children while in medical school are mixed. Women are less likely to recommend parenting to other students and are less satisfied with their parenting time, as they experience role overload, they juggle between home life and work (Cujec et al., 2000). This study revealed that medical students need a more flexible experience in their fields to accommodate their career demands and their motherhood demands. Students from underrepresented backgrounds might have a similar experience in this field. However, this study was not disaggregated by race or social class, making it challenging to reach that conclusion.

Student mothers at all levels of schooling are affected by having children while studying; Ph.D. students have similar difficulties. In her study, Kulp (2016) investigates the Ph.D. student mothers' path to becoming professors. Although fathers and mothers have an advantage in

getting a tenure-track position after their Ph.D., mothers fell short of other groups, such as men without children (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018). It is important to remember that the career-related resources these students can achieve during graduate school influence the kinds of jobs they can obtain in the future (Mirick & Wladkowski 2018). Kulp (2016) informed that because students accumulate a diversity of funding and support through their academic careers, the current culture can put student mothers at a disadvantage when competing for highly valued jobs. This author suggested that supplementing the academic and life balance of student mothers helps them take advantage of the university's institutional support.

Even within the experiences of student mothers, there is a spectrum of experiences depending on the student mothers' academic field or degree. This research was not focused on racial or social class issues, it was rather focused on the gender roles influencing how student mothers experience their fields and levels of study, making it difficult to understand the needs of diverse and underrepresented student mothers in these fields and level of study. Nevertheless, this gave me a better sense of the diversity of experience student mothers have, the ecological systems are rearranged differently for each group of student mothers. The main limitation of these studies is their lack of attention to the underrepresented communities that form part of these fields and levels of schooling.

Influence of Neoliberalism on the Well-Being of Student Mothers

In this section, I focus on the influences of the neoliberal policies in higher education in the lives of student mothers, starting with understanding how neoliberal ideologies pressure student mothers to struggle for recognition while also competing with others academically individually. Lynch (2008) described this ideology as "institutionalizing market principals to

govern organizations", meaning that values from the market are generalized to other sectors of the social world. Home, family, and the workplace have been influenced by neoliberalism, making them the private sphere of students, thus making their needs invisible to the public (Sinnott, 2017). Under this ideology, learning is an individual effort; individuality serves to decontextualize student mothers by not considering the nuances of gender, race, or socioeconomic status. In equal measure, competition among students serves to exploit students' individuality by putting all the weight in the individual set of skills and credentials a person has, holding one student against another in school and the job market (Gouthro, 2009).

Neoliberal policies have filtered through the public sector and social services, such as in the case of cutting welfare, housing, and financial aid funding. Policies toward student mothers in college are influenced by neoliberal ideologies that promote efficiency and ignore the students' social location. Cutting funds for welfare at the state level also affects student mothers' well-being in college; promoting policies catering to the student's needs can reverse these adverse outcomes. In this final section, I will focus on one influence on the lives of student mothers that comes from the environment out of the sphere of control of student mothers. I aim to understand how ecological levels influence student mothers' inner life and decisions in college. Unlike other areas of their lives where student mothers have more control, the influences of neoliberalism run deep and wide in the university. The ecological structure is more evident as the ideologies trickle into the daily life of student mothers bringing an extra layer of pressure to finish their degrees.

Moreau (2016) described three neoliberal approaches from universities toward student mothers: care blind or minimal policy interventions, targeted, meaning some provisions are made for student mothers, and mainstreaming, which is a more comprehensive policy where all the

university is responsible for their well-being. The discourses of the labor market that drive the university are managerial principles that focus on measurable outcomes and performance indicators. Lynch (2008) noted that neoliberal regimes in higher education have made worse the "careless" nature of the university and praise masculine gender roles. "This managerial culture of Higher Education has been described as masculinist as the characteristics of the ideal manager are broadly associated with hegemonic forms of masculinity" (Moreau, 2016, p. 26). This culture prefers long hours, worldwide geographic mobility, and short-time availability from their students. According to Moreau (2016), neoliberal regimes highlight the importance of parental choice for mothers, mainly working-class and single mothers, putting motherhood as an individual choice and not a collective responsibility.

Neoliberal policies render the support of the state insufficient for student mothers (Cox & Sallee, 2018). The marketization of higher education drives the acquisition of knowledge for the satisfaction of specific sectors of society, such as the military and the industry (Cox & Sallee 2018), thus bringing restricted curricula and policies due to budget cuts at the federal and local levels. Following the state's neoliberal logic, institutional support is conspicuously absent from the lives of student mothers. The aim of greater efficiency pushes the university to increase tuition, enroll more international students, and to move courses online, ignoring the social, financial, and emotional needs of student mothers. Moreau (2016) referred to the lack of childcare services, transparent policies, and protocols predestining student mothers to marginality within higher education institutions. This literature reflects the troublesome nature of the dynamics between student mothers and neoliberalism, leaving no space in neoliberal policies to acknowledge the needs of student mothers.

Neoliberal policies influence student mothers' well-being by neglecting their needs and creating a culture of invisibility inside the university. Competing roles and the weight of individual efforts undermine the communal characteristics of motherhood. Students' internal beliefs about being a successful student are connected to neoliberal ideologies and policies promoting efficiency and competition. At the same time, universities have an unequal responsibility with the student mothers as they do not see the need to cater to their needs. Although these articles are not extensive, they allow me to see the relationship between the personal and the public sphere of student mothers. The interplay between the external and the internal life of student mothers is more apparent when discussing neoliberal ideologies and their impact on the life of student mothers.

Limitations of Existing Literature

The literature on the well-being of student mothers can be arranged by how each ecological level affects their well-being. However, it would have been informative to discuss how the different ecological levels intermingle with each other to create a unique experience. The outcomes of this mixing of influences could be further study as the current literature only focuses on static influences on the well-being of student mothers that stream from the environment to their private lives. This approach could allow researchers to acknowledge the agency of student mothers to generate change in the university and to change the negative outcomes of these interlaced influences. Looking at the relationship between ecological levels that intermingle to inform the development of student mothers could help to identify the dynamic process of co-evolution between higher education institutions and student mothers.

Conclusion

The contributions of these authors to the literature of student mothers are essential to generate discussion and visibility of their needs. One element needed to understand the experiences of student mothers is learning how they experience guilt, which is experienced when student mothers dedicate time to their studies rather than their children. Another critical concept the literature highlights is maternal invisibility, a strategy student mothers use to shift the focus from their personal life to their academic life. The contradictions of their roles as mothers and students drive the discussion in this literature review. However, most studies focus on a broad spectrum of student mothers in college, preventing researchers from underscoring the interlocking identities of student mothers and seeing them as a diverse group of students. The evidence from the data supports the idea that student mothers have a different experience in college than students without caring responsibilities. This brings a set of challenges for student mothers, which they cannot resolve on their own, given the environmental influences outside their control. Resources for student mothers need to focus on countering the influences of the environment and providing psychological, financial, and academic support for them.

Critical Human Ecology creators made a critique of idealist epistemologies that do not recognize "history and culture in the formation of social attributes and behaviors" (York & Mancus, 2009, p. 128). I believe this can apply to this body of literature as well. When discussing the experiences of student mothers, this literature seldom focusses on how historical forces have influenced student mothers' current experiences. Not paying attention to this can lead to decontextualizing many experiences of student mothers. One example of this is the historical development of the university as an organization catering to the needs of men and their gender

roles. Another example is the years of segregation that blocked the aspirations of students of color to study in the university. The same is true for student mothers' antecedents, understanding the coexistent historical and ahistorical influences streaming from the environment, and the social context could illuminate their current experiences.

How do Student Mothers Relate to the College Climate?

With this question, I want to understand how student mothers experience the college climate and how the university can serve to support their ambitions. It is essential to contextualize the students' position vis-à-vis their peers and superiors and identify the university's responsibility towards these students. This process starts with the students' transition to higher education where student mothers confront challenges such as being unable to see their children as much, followed by the hurdles of adjusting to the university, which can detriment their motivation to continue studies (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). I explore the chilly climate many student mothers and other students from diverse genders, abilities, races, ethnicities, and working-class students feel when entering higher education. Finally, I discuss how student mothers in college do not have the same experience as other students in higher education, especially in terms of having caring responsibilities intertwine with schoolwork (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). I conclude the discussion with examples from policies that are focused on student mothers and their children that can counter the negative influences in their transition to college.

Although the college climate encompasses many facets of the lives of student mothers, my analysis in this section is not centered on understanding the internal and external ecological levels in their lives. Instead, I will be looking at the "in-between" or outcomes of the

relationships between ecological systems. This analysis aims to reveal that student mothers have two experiences at the same time, which form their feelings and navigation strategies inside higher education. My perspective on the college climate is understanding it as a tool for identifying the experiences of student mothers with nuance. More than going deeply into the topic of college climate utilizing ecological levels, I aim to understand the relationship between ecological systems that influence their experiences in higher education. I am interested in the outcomes of such a relationship given that the interplay between ecological systems can inform my understanding of the complexity of the experiences student mothers are having more than just understanding the influence of each level specifically. I want to capture the experiences that are more than just the sum of their parts, I want to study the interaction between them.

Path Through the University

In this section, I review the literature on different aspects of how student mothers relate to the college climate, starting with their transition to college and adjusting to their new student responsibilities. I focus on their feelings of being overloaded and unbalanced in their dual role as students and mothers. I explore what impacts their retention and leads to their attrition in college, especially the lack of support and access they experience. I use the literature on student mothers from Portugal, Canada, Australia, and the US in search of varied experiences. My analysis focuses on students from working-class backgrounds, which are highlighted in the literature on retention. I centered on their process of transition and attrition in college, highlighting the relationships between ecological systems in these processes.

The main barrier to the transition of student mothers to higher education is the difficulty of balancing family life and professional and academic responsibilities (Santos & Cabral-

Cardoso, 2008). For example, many student mothers must study on the weekends to spend more time with their children during the week (Fragoso et al., 2013). Fragoso et al.'s (2013) study of diverse Portuguese low-income student mothers exposed how student mothers sometimes have difficulties understanding certain course content and accessing tutors, which can be an obstacle for their transition to college. The transition is worse for student mothers depending on their time managing skills and commute to school. Many student mothers cited that coming back to the university can be stressful after they have been away from school for an extended period. The outcome of the interconnections between the ecological systems can leave students feeling unbalance in their new position, causing them adverse psychological and academic outcomes (Fragoso et al., 2013).

In the transition to higher education, student mothers reported feelings of guilt when they were absent from the home – "a mechanism powerful enough to lead them to consider withdrawing from higher education" (Fragoso et al., 2013, p. 75). Family and school demand that student mothers experience represent an overload for student mothers rather than a lack of organizational skills while in college. This overload is made worse with the pressure of receiving constant feedback, which they consider unclear, deceptive, or not contributing to their learning process (Fragoso et al., 2013). The outcomes of the relationship between the ecological systems of the home and school reveal that student mothers in the transition to higher education endure the burdens that can lead them to attrition (Fragoso et al., 2013). Furthermore, these disparities start for student mothers even before entering the university and continuing throughout their academic careers.

Throughout their time in college, student mothers suffer stress that can lead them to

attrition. Stress for mothers may cause a strain that can be aggravated by the lack of support, hostility from family members, health problems, and financial difficulties (Scott et al., 1996). Moreover, the demands of mothering vary according to the children's age and physical and cognitive ability, putting more stress on certain student mothers. Scott et al. 's (1996) study on mature student mothers from Australia revealed three primary motives for student attrition: strong socioeconomic class background, women married to lower-paying partners, and domestic responsibilities. At the same time, these authors noticed how having lower socioeconomic status is related to more conservative gender roles for women. It suggests that these student mothers could be experiencing more conflicts around their gender roles than others. This study is precise in discussing the conditions that can lead to the attrition of mature student mothers in Australia. However, I would have liked the authors to examine the different racial and ethnic backgrounds of students and their gender identity and diverse abilities to understand better the experiences that can lead to their attrition.

Furthermore, in their college trajectory, multiple factors influence their attrition. Adamo (2013) explains that Canadian student mothers faced higher attrition rates than other college-age students. Her study of mothers in science and medicine found that women often leave these fields because of the workloads, stress, and rigid hours. However, this depends on the social-economic status of the mother, some female physicians earn as much as to have "high-quality care for children and support for domestic duties" (Adamo, 2013, p. 44). Meanwhile, Scott et al. (1996) remind us that other student mothers, such as those with other family responsibilities, suffer from difficulties such as lack of money, domestic challenges, or lack of skills for the university.

Moreover, a crucial aspect in the attrition of student mothers is the influence of the intersections between gender and social class in their experiences in college (Barr & Simmons, 2012; Reay et al., 2002). Reay et al. (2002) studied 23 mature women attending different school types, the authors observed the differences in school choice for student mothers. For example, most student mothers living in poverty have "no choices", and the ones they have are limited by the options they can afford (Demeules & Hamer, 2013). Student mothers from low socioeconomic backgrounds are also "poor on time" meaning finances is not the only factor considered when deciding to enroll in higher education, taking care of their children and working also play a role (Reay et al., 2002). Having no choices and being poor on time are two adverse outcomes of the relationships between the ecological systems of school and home, their retention is affected by this interchange.

Transitioning to higher education is experienced differently by student mothers as they need to consider how their family responsibilities will impact their studies. Feeling unbalanced and overloaded by the transition can make students feel guilty about studying. Their social positionality also influences how they navigate college, such as in the case of low-income students being poor on time, which can lead to their attrition. Social class plays a significant role in how students manage the demands of college, while some high-income student mothers can afford to buy support, others do not have the financial means. Ecological systems are arranged differently for low-income student mothers, the interchange between their social class and the new environment of the university influences their transition to college. By looking at the individual and the systematic spheres of their experiences, I can infer that student mothers from low-income backgrounds have their experiences marked by factors beyond being student

mothers, in this case, social class can determine their experiences in college.

College Climate

In this section, I discuss some of the factors that weigh in the relationship student mothers have with the college climate, primarily focusing on the outcomes of various ecological systems intermingling in the lives of student mothers. First, I discuss the lack of support and information student mothers face that can affect their success in college. Second, I explore how unclear policies can make student mothers feel unwelcome and marginalized in the university. Finally, I discuss the childcare services provided by the university, which can illuminate the positive outcomes of the relationship student mothers have with the institution. Nevertheless, I pay close attention to the student mothers' experience with the environment of the university and the adverse outcomes highlighted in the literature.

The institutional climate is described by Hurtado (1992) as the level of respect a student receives for their needs and abilities based on the behaviors, attitudes, and standards of administrators, staff, and faculty. Nevertheless, according to Hooks (2015), Australian student mothers describe the institutional climate as avoidant of their needs and exclude them from research and teaching opportunities. Staff and faculty sometimes do not understand student mothers' time and emotional requirements. Also, unclear protocols, little or no reasonable accommodation, and differentiated treatment continue to foster the invisibility and social stigma of having children while studying (Nichols et al., 2017). Ecological systems as distant as policy and as close as faculty interlace to provide student mothers with a unique experience in college. In these experiences, I see the institution's negative influence on the personal lives of student mothers as they interact with institutional actors that ignore their needs.

The institutional climate of the university can influence student mothers negatively; external factors can affect how they perceive the college climate (Beeler, 2016). In his study, Duquaine-Watson (2007) describes how single student mothers from a midwestern community college perceive a "chilly climate," which makes them feel marginalized in the institution. This author argued the mistreatment of these students is visible in the attitudes, practices, and policies of higher education. Nevertheless, this differentiated treatment is not intentional; these behaviors go unnoticed and are reproduced in higher education (Duquaine-Watson, 2007). Furthermore, a chilly climate in college for student mothers can contribute to unequal treatment by peers, low confidence in their academic abilities, and a decrease in satisfaction with their experience in college (Duquaine-Watson, 2007).

The chilly climate also manifests when student mothers are not aware of the unsuitability of the university to cover their needs until they are taking courses. Thus, having to supplement their needs with resources outside the university, such as having family help with childcare (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009). The students took the lack of information and activities for families as a sign of not belonging to the campus. In this case, the university is signaling to student mothers that their needs are not primordial for the university (Kannen, 2011). The absence of care and knowledge about benefits for student mothers can cause financial hardship, thus compromising their retention (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009). Although from the UK, student mothers in Marandet & Wainwright (2009) were from diverse cultural backgrounds, varied by age, degree, and the number of children. However, these authors did not abound on what makes their experiences unique. Student mothers experience the chilly climate as an interplay between the ecological system of the university and their personal lives. In these

articles, the interplay between multiple contextual levels work inside the university to negatively influence the perception of institutional actors about student mothers in higher education.

The interplay between ecological systems can be seen in the "good mother stereotype" merging with the ideologies of peers. The good mother stereotype mandates that women should be mothers, and the more time the mother spends with the children, the better mother (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Mottarella et al., 2008). Student mothers' college peers perceive student mothers who return to school after six months as more cold-hearted, arrogant, and calculating (Moreau, 2016). This stereotype can block the integration of women to school after birth; social inclusion is critical for student retention (Lovell, 2014; Mottarella et al., 2008). The personal lives of student mothers are scrutinized through this external ideology and not controlled by them. These articles highlight how two very dissimilar ecological systems, such as peers and ideologies about motherhood, negatively influence the experiences of student mothers in college.

Nevertheless, not all influences from universities are negative; one crucial support some universities offer student mothers is childcare on-campus, such as in the example of Lehman College in New York City. In this research, most student mothers interviewed were undergraduate students of color, but the researcher did not disclose the racial or ethnic background of the student mothers. Student mothers can substantially benefit from receiving this service on-site, it brings them satisfaction and recognition from the university (Gonchar, 1995). Having childcare on-campus means students can spend more time with their children during the day and can also enjoy the classes, services, and social life of the university. Student mothers who have access to childcare on campus develop educational experiences and career goals

similar to traditional students. They also cultivate new relationships with other student mothers, which serve as support. Not having proper childcare services could affect their retention and academic achievement (Gonchar, 1995).

The institutional climate student mothers navigate is distinct from other students on campus because of the perceptions about the motherhood of peers. In the chilly climate of the university, student mothers confront the good mother stereotype, which can be disempowering. Universities' relationship with their students shapes how students form positive and negative ideas regarding the campus while they live their experiences inside it. These experiences are the outcome of the interplay among ecological systems, such as when family, policies, and social stereotypes, influence student mothers at the same time. Although lacking essential aspects of the diversity and social positionality of student mothers, this literature captures the negative and positive influences students receive from the college climate.

Dealing with Race Inside Higher Education

In this section, I focus on the experiences of Black undergraduate student mothers with the institutional climate. Starting with the cultural and personal navigation strategies these students use to counter the negative experiences with the college climate, followed by exploring the relationships that allow Black student mothers to thrive in higher education. Highlighting the experiences of Black student mothers expands my understanding of how the university's environment influences their racialized interactions in college. Understanding how race interconnects with other areas of the lives of student mothers, such as being in college, goes further than other literature in understanding the ecological systems in their lives. In the example of Black undergraduate student mothers, I identify different attributes of their lives that crash

with the mainstream ideologies of being a college student, but I also observe attributes that facilitate their experiences in college. In the next section, I identify some of the Black undergraduate student mothers' navigational strategies when dealing with the university.

The struggles with parenting and study responsibilities can have a toll on the career development of Black student mothers. Appling et al. (2018) examine their experiences and discovered that one way they navigate the university is by being proud of their cultural heritage. They also found that student mothers are proud of their identity as mothers and sometimes even be a mother figures for some of their peers. Nevertheless, the challenges of balancing life and school can be reflected in students as an internal conflict, isolation, guilt, and regret about their studies. Black undergraduate student mothers also feel marginalization based on race, as they see themselves being questioned and stereotyped. These race issues can aggravate the isolation and perceived lack of support for Black undergraduate student mothers (Appling et al., 2018). Powerful social structures such as racial ideologies mediate how student mothers experience higher education; nevertheless, these can be countered by family support (Appling et al., 2018).

Black undergraduate student mothers' relationships with their responsibilities depend on their relationship with family and friends and with the child. A concrete example of the support of family and friends is their support with childcare while student mothers study or go to class (Appling et al., 2018). Another relationship important to some Black student mothers is their relationship with God; this serves them to feel like they are solving their problems (Appling et al., 2018). These relationships help student mothers navigate college more easily (Appling et al., 2018). Nevertheless, negative relationships, such as having a strained relationship with the other parent of the child, can adversely affect Black undergraduate student mothers (Brown &

Amankwaa, 2007). Although Appling et al. (2018) had a small sample of only ten Black undergraduate student mothers, it illuminates how the relationships they have between their private lives and external ideologies are present in simple ways like the support of family. Internal processes such as personal religious beliefs also intermingle with the external process of being in college to offer students more emotional support.

Navigating the university as a Black student mother entails finding ways to deal with campus racist and sexist stereotypes. Their strategies emanate from their cultural heritage, empowering them to continue their studies. Building relationships with family members can generate confidence in Black student mothers and allow them to succeed in college. Nevertheless, not all relationships are beneficial for Black undergraduate student mothers, and some can be taxing. Their private life cannot be generalized; however, it is a good example of how ecological systems such as school and external factors such as racial stereotypes interact in their lives. The outcome of such interactions can be positive, such as providing childcare, or negative, such as being stereotyped by others. Adding a discussion on the racialized experience of Black undergraduate student mothers expands my understanding of their unique experiences in college and the outcomes of their relationship with the university.

Life-Study Balance

This section explores the life-study balance of student mothers in college. First, I start by discussing how student mothers sacrifice their time to either study or be with their children. Second, I focus on the literature on student mothers' relationship with faculty members. Negotiating their time and interests is an experience student mothers navigate by accommodating themselves to the new circumstances. I am interested in this negotiation because I believe it

reflects how different ecological systems intermingle in their daily life. Life-study balance is not a fixed experience but is the actual act of balancing, which is distinctive in their experiences in college. I dedicate this section to exploring the experience of balancing their life and study because it has been an idea that repeats itself in the literature of student mothers but is not studied as a balancing act but rather as a more static experience. In the dialectic movement between life and study, student mothers experience the influences of multiple contextual levels.

Life-study balance often means balancing multiple roles for student mothers, some of them gendered (Carlson et al., 2009). Sallee (2015) explained that graduate student mothers often employ compartmentalization and elimination as two main strategies for dealing with their life and study balance. They compartmentalize their multiple roles using time management skills or downplaying their roles as mothers, focusing on either role at any given time. Other strategies for managing time constraints are to deemphasize their interaction with others or downplay their roles as graduate students outside academia (Sallee, 2015). The elimination strategy is often used by graduate student mothers when making decisions about their life-study balance. Many eliminate their personal interests or hobbies or reject professional development opportunities to be with their families (Chesser, 2015; Sallee, 2015).

Inside the university, graduate and undergraduate student mothers from varied racial and ethnic backgrounds must negotiate the accommodations they need with their professors (Medved & Heisler, 2002). Most student mothers ask for more time for assignments, ask to miss a class, or contest a grade. When speaking with professors, student mothers stick with facts about their condition, so they are perceived as objective (Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008). However, many students do not have the tools to negotiate with professors, resulting in limited options or

negative responses from the professors (Medved & Heisler, 2002). "Repeated failures at negotiation interaction in this particular context may influence student-parent success" (Medved & Heisler, 2002, p. 118). This article suggests that negotiation is mediated by the power professors have over student mothers. This sheds light on yet another layer of the relationship between ecological systems that are unequal in power.

Balancing multiple roles during their time in college necessitates having numerous strategies to get the support needed to thrive. Among these are displacing their attention from personal interest and negotiating the deadlines for assignments with their professors. These strategies allow student mothers to have more time for their children, albeit the sacrifice. This might not be an experience specific to student mothers, nevertheless, it opens the door to questioning all power structures in the lives of student mothers. Not many researchers focus on how students negotiate their time with professors or how they change their social life for school. I believe these components are important to demonstrate that ecological systems intermingle in an unequal terrain. In this study, I would also like to see the historical evolution of the interplay between those with power and those without inside the university.

Limitations of Existing Literature

The literature on the influence of college climate on student mothers uncovers a great deal of how students perceive and respond to the college climate, but it still falls short in exploring one important topic. The discussion about strategies student mothers use to navigate college focus only on the students' reaction to their environment and not on any preventative measure students have used to adjust to college. It can be misleading when understanding the experiences of student mothers, the assumption is that students are reacting more than they are

preventing adverse outcomes. Complicating this discussion would entail systematically exploring how student mothers develop the strategies they use to navigate college. Studying the historical development of student mothers' strategies to navigate college and the unequal balance of power characteristic of their relationship with the college climate can further expand the knowledge on how student mothers navigate negative influences from their environment.

Conclusion

The literature on student mothers focuses on the individual response to the climate and their navigational strategies to counter the different difficulties presented in the environment. The personal responsibility of student mothers on their academic success is an implicit assumption I can identify as problematic because it leaves out the university's social commitment toward student mothers. The main problem this literature proposes is that student mothers are ill-prepared to confront the institutional climate during their time in college. Disclosing their status is not always safe in a college climate that does not support mothers. The term "the good mother stereotype" is an essential term that defines the experiences and strategies of student mothers in college. Avoiding having too much to do outside studying and caring for their children is often how student mothers navigate the college climate. The literature tends to explore student mothers from a group perspective rather than seeing students as a community, suggesting that these students are not in contact with each other, which can be deceiving.

Age differences, type of school, race, ethnicity, and level of schooling are part of the discussion about the student mothers. These critical characteristics, although not all-encompassing, give me a sense of the diversity within student mothers. Diversity is important because it counters generalized claims about this group of students and their needs. The central

argument in the literature is that student mothers uniquely experience college climate and that the higher education institutions are not meeting their needs. It is significant not only because student mothers are ever more present in higher education institutions but also because their accessibility to complete a degree is diminished. The literature complemented my understanding of the needs of student mothers in college; however, focusing the analysis on separate aspects of the phenomenon and not on the ecological systems intermingling in the lives of student mothers leaves me with a void in understanding the process that generates these outcomes. Developing this discussion would entail focusing on different levels of environmental influence and the spaces and places student mothers occupy in society. Recognizing the dialectic relation between people and their environment, understanding that context is continuously changing people and people can change the context in a process of co-evolution is pivotal in understanding the experiences of student mothers in college.

What Types of Support do Student Mothers Receive During their Time in College?

The support student mothers receive comes from a multiplicity of institutional levels, from the closest support given by the family to the most distant provided by the government. My intention with this question is to understand the levels of support in the lives of student mothers during their time in college. It helps me identify the voids in the support students receive during their time in college and the possible solutions. Support can be an array of actions and practices in higher education that help students navigate their new responsibilities (LaMastro, 2001). These are protective factors that allow students to feel comfortable and in a good mood towards their responsibilities with school (Juang et al., 2016; LaMastro, 2001). In this section, I explore the support student mothers receive from their family as in the literature, they are one of the most

important groups of students to facilitate student success in college (Kensinger & Minnick, 2017). Also, I focus on the perceived and tangible institutional support student mothers receive from the university and its members. I explore programs, policies, and practices inside the university, which have successfully accommodated student mothers. Finally, I discuss welfare and governmental support for student mothers. I delve into how different student mothers react to receiving financial aid from the state or through the university, such as in the case of student loans.

The literature on support for student mothers viewed through an ecological lens can help me decipher the different levels of support they receive in college and how student mothers react to them. Different ecological systems in the lives of student mothers intermingle to generate an experience particular to this segment of the population. In this literature review, I will be highlighting the positive and negative outcomes of the relationships between ecological systems and the levels of support they receive while in college, which allow me to be more nuanced with the description of their experiences.

Family Support

This section will shed light on the negative and positive influences family can have on the lives of student mothers in college. I discuss literature on how student mothers' education can stream to their children, making them achieve well academically. I start this section with the family; I want to go deeper into the experience of the support student mothers receive from family and explore how student mothers react to the support of family. I look closely at the experiences of Latinas and Black student mothers to identify the support they receive from family and what sets their experiences apart. Although the literature is sparse in exploring the

experiences of diverse and underrepresented student mothers, these articles give me a better idea about how family supports them. HET helped me identify the different levels of support students receive to understand better the relationship between ecological systems.

The university is not a solitary experience for student mothers; instead, the family is crucial because studying impacts the whole family. Unfortunately, depending on the value the family places in education, there are negative reactions to mothers going to college. For example, the family can mock, envy, or be resentful toward student mothers, especially at the beginning of their studies (Gill et al., 2015). These levels of disruption and the general unwillingness of family members to change can cause difficulties for student mothers to find support during their degrees (Gill et al., 2015). Nevertheless, family support is the students' main form of encouragement; emotional and financial support and helping with taking care of the children are protective factors against stereotypes, motivating them to thrive in college (Kensinger & Minnick, 2017).

Motivation to continue studies is partly due to the amalgamation of the ecological systems most proximal to the students with those outside their control, which can generate positive and negative outcomes. One example is Ricco et al.'s (2009) study comprised of White, Black, and Latina mothers, where they examined their motivation and attitudes toward parenting school-age children. Student mothers' extrinsic motivation and academic self-efficacy can contribute to their children's academic motivation. Attending college can put parents in a unique position to share their experiences with their school-age children (Ricco et al., 2009). However, mothers' attitudes can also negatively impact their children if the mothers' attitudes towards their own experience in college are harmful as well. "The attitudes that college mothers develop in their student role are viewed as informing, and possibly enhancing, their parenting of a school-

age child” (Ricco et al., 2009, p. 80). For example, student mothers might draw parallels between their studies and their children’s or stress the importance of a college education. In this article, the authors are aware of the ecological understanding that the microsystems such as the family and children can have an impact on other systems, such as in the case of the university impacting the parenting styles of student mothers. Although this article focuses on student mothers from diverse backgrounds, the authors do not clarify how their identities influence the way student mothers experience college. Nevertheless, in their study, McLaughlin and Randolph (2012) stated that student mothers from marginalized communities in the US are three times more likely to leave college.

Furthermore, Lashley and Ollovierre's (2012) research on the experiences of Black student mothers from impoverished communities found that student mothers experience stress related to time management, housing stress, and economic hardship more often. Student mothers need to prioritize their time, usually taking shortcuts like studying while working or studying in other classes (Brooks, 2012). The social positionality of underrepresented students from Black and marginalized backgrounds influences their college experiences. For example, the relationship between race and poverty reflects two ecological contexts that interlock, thus constructing a unique multi-level experience (Macan et al., 1990). Furthermore, social positionality also influences student mothers’ experiences in college, such as in the case of the ethnicity of Latinas.

Culturally, women with Latino heritage deal with the stereotype of the “good daughter,” which Espinoza (2010) explained as related to “*familismo*,” which emphasizes “loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity” with the family (p. 318). *Familismo* promotes strong identification

and attachment to the family, which requires the members to prioritize their family over individual interests. Nevertheless, Meléndez and Meléndez's (2010) study on parental attachment cross-culturally found that for students of Hispanic descent, maintaining ties with their family can be beneficial in periods of transition to college. Thus, family time, which entails no obligations at home, reduces stress related to studies and encourages academic progress. With these two examples, we can start to understand how ethnicity mediates the parenting styles and the family support student mothers receive while in college. The particularities of their social positionality are projected in their experiences with the different ecological systems. In this case, the ideologies about family inform how they see their commitment to family and the university.

Family can be a source of empowerment and a source of struggle for many student mothers. The family is the ultimate support of student mothers while in college, but it can also pressure them. The literature on the support of students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds allows me to infer that these students have different relationships with their families, which can encourage or discourage them from continuing their studies. Utilizing an ecological framework helps me understand the particularities of having ethnicity, race, and social class mediate the experiences of student mothers from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds. The interplay between these ecological systems generates a new experience unique to their social positionalities, which entails different responsibilities for students of color, this could be an advantage or a disadvantage for college success.

Institutional Support

In this section, I explore the support institutions of higher education offer to student mothers in college. First, I focus on the support they receive from staff and faculty during their

degrees, with attention to the particularities of the experience of low-income students and students of color. Second, I discuss the different policies and programs inside the campus that were highlighted in the literature as beneficial for student mothers in college. I conclude by discussing the advocacy student mothers need to do on campus to receive the resources they need. From an ecological perspective, student mothers make decisions and navigate their new environment with the help of the university and its members. I focus on how the support of universities impacts the personal life of student mothers.

Perceived institutional support is defined by Kesinger and Minnick (2018) as having feelings of being adequately rewarded, enjoying challenges of the position, and experiencing manageable stress in the role (p. 568). McLaughlin and Randolph (2012) consider that student mothers from diverse racial backgrounds receive tangible and emotional support from staff and faculty. Services, goods, informational and instrumental support, as well as desirable advice and suggestions from staff and faculty, are also seen as institutional support. Verbal encouragement, empathy, appraisal, caring trust, and constructive feedback from faculty are ways in which the institution emotionally supports the student mothers as well (Home, 1997).

Furthermore, Brown and Nichols (2012) studied the tangible and intangible resources, policies, and programs universities need to acquire to serve the population of Black and White student mothers better. They advocated for subsidizing childcare for students as well as maternity leave for graduate students. Among other noteworthy policies, Brown and Nichols (2012) advocated for “family aid services, childcare facilities, healthcare options, legal aid, housing, pregnancy support, nursing support, and social services and transportation” (p. 503). Especially for low-income students, having the support of the university can change their

academic and social outcomes (Nichols et al., 2017). Although this literature focuses on low-income and racially diverse student mothers, the studies do not explore their racial experiences with the institutional support. Nevertheless, Brown and Nichols (2012) acknowledge that these supports are not equally distributed among the different races, therefore creating a social hierarchy that puts students of color at a disadvantage in college.

Another example is low-income student mothers who do not receive the support they need from the university. However, this could mean lower attrition rates, higher enrollment, and more revenue for colleges (Nichols et al., 2017). The lack of institutional policies to safeguard the safety and needs of student mothers has pushed faculty members to approach student mothers' needs on a one-on-one basis. In her study, Madden (2018) explained that low-income student mothers experience stigmatization from the professors, requiring student mothers not to bring their children to class or being put in the spotlight in front of classmates. The outcomes of these harmful practices relate to "equity of access, social mobility, educational equity, and quality of life" (Madden, 2018, p. 388). These seemingly small experiences inside higher education can amount to significant social and educational disparities. Nevertheless, harmful practices can be countered by studying the needs of student mothers as well as implementing comprehensive policy on campus.

There are many ways in which higher education institutions support student mothers while they finish their degrees, starting from understanding that many student mothers come from low-performing schools, and they are less likely to be ready for a 4-year college (Romo & Segura, 2010). There are examples of specialized programs for transitioning students who receive attention if they are not achieving in school. Adolescent mothers have well-received

these programs, as they inspire to be financially independent. Romo and Segura (2010) observed that these student mothers “adapt their aspirations to incorporate their motherhood status” (p. 175). Students receive flexible class schedules, instructional practices, and individualized learning contracts to facilitate their attendance. Other programs have combined homeschooling with tutoring programs. Nevertheless, one critique of these programs is the segregation of the students from the mainstream student body, which might affect their networking and learning opportunities.

Furthermore, the program Flying Solo is one example of structured support for undergraduate single student mothers in college. This program provides activities for families, financial aid, and mentoring for student mothers. Students have access to career planning, academic support, and even health support through this program. The financial assistance offered by the program is not bound to just tuition cost, but it also has a flexible award that students can use at their discretion. Carpenter et al. (2018) explain that with these programs, undergraduate single student mothers can be successful when they have access to tutoring and advising as well as childcare and flexible schedules. Students receiving the services had better GPA and degree completion rates than students not in the program. Unfortunately, these articles do not explore how students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, as well as students with diverse genders and abilities, react to these programs, exploring their experiences could reveal a more complicated story. The university creates these programs to support student mothers, but they are also evolving with the students as students advocate for their needs.

Student mothers who are breastfeeding and those who have recently given birth are examples of how the institution evolves to accommodate the needs of student mothers. Although

the university provides by law some necessary accommodations for students and faculty such as parental leave or breastfeeding rooms, they must happen in part from the advocacy of women inside and outside academia (Dinour et al., 2015). In their study, Dinour et al. (2015) focus on documenting the advocacy efforts of graduate student mothers in a US urban public university. Student mothers in this research investigated the use of the current facilities and the needs of other nursing mothers around the university. They also networked with different faculty and administrators to use as leverage to foster the creation of breastfeeding policies on campus. Finally, these student mothers organized other mothers on campus to gather support for accessible and ventilated rooms for breastfeeding mothers. This struggle demonstrates how sometimes support is not automatically given to student mothers, but rather students need to advocate for their needs. I believe this is a good representation of how student mothers also change the systems around them. Their agency to toil with the institution and change the services received from the university is a demonstration of a process of co-evolution between ecological systems.

Staff and faculty members can be of support to student mothers by accommodating their needs inside and outside the classroom. Nevertheless, this is not a comprehensive policy on campus; instead, it is left to the individuals to choose to support student mothers. Policies and programs on campus that support student mothers have had good outcomes; however, student mothers have had to advocate for institutional changes to happen on campus. The evolution of the institutional support for student mothers goes hand in hand with the evolution of the needs of student mothers. Nevertheless, this group still has a social hierarchy that rewards more privileged students. Making the emotional support of the university available more sustainably and amply

could provide student mothers with the support that can have a positive impact on their personal life.

Financial Support

This section presents literature on the financial support student mothers receive from the state and the university. First, I discuss the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) literature and student loans student mothers receive in college. Second, I focus on the literature on the federal welfare given to student mothers via the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The financial support student mothers receive from two main places, the university and the state, these two are interconnected as well in a web of policies and regulations. Although there are negative and positive outcomes to these supports, they have begun to meet some of the most urgent needs of student mothers. They both influence the daily life of student mothers, especially in their financial well-being. I chose these two topics to exemplify how different ecological systems interconnect to provide students with the support they need to succeed in college.

FAFSA is single mothers' first access to financial aid to study. Receiving financial aid is important for single mothers because of their vulnerabilities, such as the cost of living and childcare (Butler et al., 2004). As many as 87% of single mothers in college use financial aid, many running into the burden of debt (Wilson, 2011). Student mothers feel pressure academically and in their financial security, especially low-income student mothers (Cuthbertson, 2004; Zhan & Pandey, 2004). Gerrard and Roberts (2006) explained that "financial adversity affected their psychological well-being" (p. 393). Nevertheless, with the right support, student mothers taking financial aid can be as successful academically as regular

students (Fenster, 2004). From this literature, I interpret that the social class of student mothers who receive the FAFSA informs how much or how little financial support they receive from the university. Furthering the discussion on how different social identities inform different ecological systems would require discussing the financial experiences of students from diverse gender backgrounds and students with diverse abilities. It would allow me to understand the extent of this influence in the lives of student mothers.

Fortunately, Forster & Jacobsen (2013) explored the experiences of divorced student mothers from diverse racial backgrounds in Utah, whose financial stability in college depends on student loans, which is crucial financial support the university provides for students (Forste & Jacobsen, 2013). Many divorced student mothers believe student loans are their only way to secure parenting costs. Although it has positive outcomes, the investment in higher education comes at financial difficulties in the future (Forster & Jacobsen, 2013). The unintentional consequence of this opportunity is felt more by student mothers, especially those without support from college-educated parents (Forste & Jacobsen, 2013). Although this article focuses on racially diverse divorced women, most of the students in the study were white, and the authors did not expand on the influence of race on the experience of student mothers of color in their research. Nevertheless, it is a good example of how the ecological system of the university and the social class of student mothers interconnect, creating a specific experience for diverse divorced women from Utah, which are informed by their social positionalities and can lead to the adverse consequence of debt.

Another ecological system also appears in the western world – the welfare state. Although welfare policies can have adverse effects on student mothers, they also can be a

positive influence in their lives. Cerven (2013) points out how these policies can help students access support to enroll in higher education by supporting students with cash aid and 24 months of welfare-to-work activities, as in the case of the state of California. The welfare program also provided low-income student mothers with guidance and tips, and they helped fill forms for the school's financial aid and enrollment. The adverse effects occur when the welfare program limits mothers to 12 months of schooling or requires them to work while studying. Welfare policies can be a tool to grant access to the most vulnerable people, such as single mothers, or it can be an obstacle if it only focuses on providing work and not educational opportunities. This support is not standardized throughout the western world or inside the US, and hence it has a wide range of outcomes. Nevertheless, those programs that offer resources and support to continue studies enable students to start or continue education.

For example, in her study of student mothers in welfare while in college, Fenster (2004) discovered that with the right support, racially diverse low-income students on welfare could do as well in a psychology class as regular non-welfare recipients. TANF recipient student mothers enrolled in a psychology class were investigated for two years. The results showed that TANF “students attained higher grades in a Freshman level Psychology course, were elected to the Dean’s list at higher rates and experienced academic dismissal at equal rates to general population students”. (Fenster, 2004, p. 346). This study is an example of how student mothers can have better academic outcomes when they are supported financially and academically. However, survival narratives of racially diverse and low-income single mothers in pursuit of higher education, such as the ones presented by Katz (2013), explained that single mothers struggle even when they are receiving financial aid.

As governmental financial assistance such as TANF assumes working as a means to end poverty, the participants can only acquire the benefits for 12 months of vocational schooling, which contrasts with the desire of many women to study to have stable incomes rather than depend on welfare benefits (Katz, 2013). The “work first” system cannot create upward mobility for low-income mothers; however, higher education can serve as a ladder to better social conditions (Bianchi, 2000; Jacobs & Gerson, 2001). Welfare can be an excellent resource for student mothers, and providing students with financial aid has had positive outcomes. Student mothers suggested that the TANF funding should provide for spending in textbooks, transportation, and childcare for them to further their education (Katz, 2013). This literature is an example of how the welfare received by student mothers provides students with some of the means to access higher education, such as when providing more financial support for longer, which allows them to fulfill their academic goals. In this case, the relationship between ecological systems is unequal, the powerful structure of the state makes or breaks students chances in higher education. However, neither Cerven (2013), Fenster (2004), nor Katz (2013) discussed the influence of race in the student mothers’ experience with the welfare from the state. This limitation of their analysis leaves out the racial experiences student mothers of color might be having.

Financial aid is essential to student mothers in college; students flourish academically when presented with comprehensive aid. Financial struggles can be a burden that causes psychological distress in student mothers or submerge them in debt. Welfare programs provide minimal support to student mothers, which is insufficient to satisfy their needs and desires. This literature makes me acknowledge that the financial policies from the welfare state can influence

the lives of student mothers positively and negatively, depending on their social positionality. Ecological systems so distant as the government and financial need of student mothers intermingle to generate this experience in their lives. Supports come from multiple levels of the ecological system but are not evenly distributed to cover all the needs of student mothers. For example, mothers must pay for childcare for their children when they do not receive childcare from family or a higher education institution. It shows how support is juggled between ecological systems. This literature gets me closer to understanding the support low-income students receive from the state. Still, it is unclear how the race and ethnicity of these low-income students inform the experiences they have with the financial aid they receive. Understanding how these and other students from diverse genders and abilities are receiving the support of the state and the needs that are still unfulfilled might illuminate this discussion further by questioning the power asymmetries in the welfare system.

Limitations of Existing Literature

The literature on the support student mothers receive in college centers on the support they receive by the family, the institution, and the government. Although the literature helps have an overview of the supports, they leave out many topics that are still to be researched to understand the subject thoroughly. I identify the lack of literature on student mothers of color. The literature provides an example from Latinas and Black student mothers, but it leaves behind many other student mothers from non-white backgrounds. Although the literature focuses on some of the cultural aspects that differentiate student mothers of color from the general population of student mothers, little is said about how their social positionalities influence how ecological systems intertwine to support student mothers. This lack of representation is

problematic, given that many other minority student mothers might be impacted and are not being accounted for. This seemingly arbitrary omission can lead people to believe that this group of students is well supported through college, while many other supports could be made available for them.

Conclusion

The literature on student mothers' support systems closes this literature review, shedding light on the different levels of support they receive from their environment. With this question, I highlight the multiple people, institutional policies, and programs that support student mothers and also the many needs that are still disregarded. The literature reveals some of the social responsibilities people and institutions take upon themselves. The level of analysis focuses on the types of supports these people, policies, and programs provide students, ranging from emotional support to academic support. Some of the critical characteristics of those supporting student mothers were no strings attached, decentralized, and at will. These characteristics are unreliable and can leave some student mothers without some of the support they need.

Critical Human Ecology helped me identify the power struggles in student mothers' experiences and give them a primary place in this discussion. Student mothers only have so much power to take on the policies and administrators of the university. Understanding the diversity of resources student mothers bring to college can empower students to organize toward more equity. The central argument of this literature is that students receive support from the different ecological systems, but it is not sufficient to comprehensively cover their needs. Nevertheless, these findings are significant to further question the experiences of student mothers in college. All support systems need to be considered to make this possible, with the family as a

starting point. The historical role of student mothers in college needs to be questioned by the student mothers and administrators, and policymakers inside and outside higher education. The intersections between ecological systems can guide creative and multidimensional policies for student mothers.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This research identifies the different experiences of minoritized college student mothers. I try to understand these experiences' meaning from the student mothers' perspective. I explore their strategies to navigate college, especially those that support their success in college. I examine students' support systems in college and the essential ecological factors for their access, success, retention, and degree completion. To gather this knowledge, I generated qualitative data. I invited minoritized college student mothers with children; students of all ages, academic fields, and degree levels at colleges and universities in the U.S. The open-ended questions explored the subjective experiences of minoritized college student mothers. In the following sections, I discuss the data sources, the data collection procedures, and the researcher's role. Equally, I examine the validity and reliability of this research and its limitations and ethical considerations.

Research Purpose

The primary purpose of this research is to understand the experiences of minoritized college student mothers. Also, explore their navigation strategies and understand the support they receive in college. Creating qualitative research allowed me to explore these topics in-depth and from the participants' perspectives. I sought to bring to light the nuances that make their experiences unique and noteworthy and from which the university's actors can learn to create an inclusive and supportive college climate. An ecological perspective allowed me to generate guiding questions that consider different levels in student mothers' experiences in college.

At the same time, BFT allowed me to tie their experiences with more significant social issues and understand how social inequities are reflected in the different levels of their experiences in college. I will use these theories to generate a guiding question organized by ecological level and critical questions regarding inequities in these experiences. This qualitative design will allow me to create rapport with the participants and expand and clarify their answers. The information stemming from this exploration can generate change in policy and practices regarding student mothers in college.

Design

Qualitative research aims to understand people's perspectives on their experiences and the meaning they give to their world (Creamer, 2018). In this research, I used open-ended interviews to receive insight into the phenomenon's nature from an emic perspective (Patton, 2002; Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2016). Generating open-ended interviews to understand this group's experiences provides a depth of information; open-ended interviews can allow for a longer and more detailed account of an experience (Patton, 2002). The emic perspective it provides helps create an understanding of the student's experiences from their perspective. Rather than predetermining a set of responses, open-ended interviews can capture the students' subjective and ample experience. I interviewed eight student mothers from diverse social and academic backgrounds in this research. Eight Latinx student mothers responded to the call. Students were recruited from different universities around the U.S. and Puerto Rico (See Appendix A for Protocols and Appendix B for Guiding Questions).

The narrative analysis will focus on the stories of student mothers. Considering both the structure and the texture of the stories, I focus on their actions and events and representations of

their sensations and feelings about their experience in college. Narratives can serve the purpose of helping people develop their identities, which can be beneficial for student mothers participating in this research (Kohler Riessman, 1993). The narrative data from these interviews will also expose the social and cultural patterns by which they experience a phenomenon (Patton, 2002). I used an ecological theoretical framework to analyze the narrative data from the interviews with student mothers. It facilitated a structure for determining the patterns in the data. In this case, the ecological structure allowed me to reach different levels of understanding of the phenomenon, from the most internal and psychological to the external: family, higher learning institutions, and the state.

On the other hand, BFT will allow me to bring to light the social, historical, and political dimensions of these experiences. It will also allow me to explore the symbolic and tangible exclusion of student mothers in the university. Through an intersectional perspective, I can understand how the student mothers' positionalities mediate their college experiences and how social inequities are present in them.

Paradigm

A paradigm is "a set of philosophical assumptions that are inherently coherent about the nature of reality and the researcher's role in constructing it" (Creamer, 2018, p. 43). In this research, I will be guided by a human ecological and critical paradigm where the individual's reality is constructed in a relationship with the environment, which at the same time is influenced by social and political inequities (Da Silva et al., 2019; Paat, 2013; Patton, 2002). This theoretical approach emphasizes the interconnectedness between structural levels in the student's life: it focuses on understanding the interaction between the person, the processes, the context,

and the time. Human ecology acknowledges that students do not exist in isolation; instead, they are embedded within a broader social structure encompassing institutions and social domains such as the family. Meanwhile, BFT exposes the intersecting oppression present in the ecological levels. Ontologically, this paradigm assumes that the world exists independently of our perceptions. Epistemologically, all knowledge that people acquire is partial and context-dependent. Axiologically, this theoretical approach values the multiplicity of a single phenomenon's perspectives per their relationship with their material and cultural environments (Creamer, 2018).

Validity and Reliability

Validity in qualitative research is multifaceted; from the theory to the methodology, the quality of research is evaluated from multiple perspectives (Golafshani, 2003; Martens, 2020). I assure validity in this research by being transparent about the theoretical underpinning of choosing the population, the methods, and creating the phenomenon's analysis. I intend to guarantee the congruency of student mothers' lived experience with the collected data and assure the tool's suitability to the research design and questions. I will pursue this research with design rigor, remaining true to the research intent and design and maintaining data and interpretative transparency.

Selection of Participants

Criteria

The criteria to choose the participants for the open-ended interviews are limited to those populations of student mothers for whom literature is missing. These were students from minoritized backgrounds such as student mothers from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds,

sexual and gender identities, and students with diverse cognitive and physical abilities. I used the snowball sampling technique to reach minoritized student mothers (by race, ethnicity, gender, and ability) in any higher education stage. I asked students to connect with me via email to reach out to peers. I will focus on understanding the commonalities and differences of these groups in various degrees and fields. Eight Latinx student mothers from around the U.S. and Puerto Rico answered the call for the interviews. I created Zoom meetings for each interview, which were recorded. I contacted colleges and universities' diversity and multicultural affairs offices in that area (See Appendix for C Contact Email and Appendix D for Invitation for Students). The interview with student mothers took around 1-hour, talking about their experiences in higher education. Students from my personal social network were invited to participate in the interviews. Students from the Facebook ground named Latinas Completing Doctoral Degrees were also invited to participate. I also reached to individuals in my network share a recruitment flyer where students could contact me.

Instrumentation

Online Open-Ended Interviews

An ecological perspective guided the qualitative data collection instrument creation. I generated a list of guiding questions inspired by Paulo Freire's critical and participatory questioning (Freire, 1970). The fundamentals of participatory research stem from Freire's analysis in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and ideas from Marx, Gramsci, and Habermas. The knowledge gained in the study is acquired through a dialogic inquiry process where knowledge is constructed in a contextually meaningful way. The stakeholders' concerns, issues, and problems must be central to the research. Also, I added to this approach a BFT perspective, where I

captured the inequities surrounding the experiences of student mothers in college. The intersection among students' different social positionalities provided ample and detailed discussion. The interviews were online via the Zoom platform. Zoom calls are well-suited for sensitive topics and facilitate honesty (Ketto & Barnett, 2007). In this case, the target population was easier to reach, considering the limited time available to student mothers. Open-ended interviews helped me understand the experiences of student mothers from a direct and unbiased source.

Data Collection Procedures

Demographics

The demographic section in this research was used to identify the students using the criteria (See Appendix E for Demographic Survey). The intent of the demographic survey was not to collect their demographic data in detail, instead for them to disclose their background in a standardized manner. Students usually self-identified in the email and communication on Facebook before sending them the demographic survey.

Qualitative Data

I conducted 45-minute to an hour of interviews with minoritized college student mothers. They were invited to participate in the interviews online; this will ensure students' safety during the Covid-19 pandemic and give them more flexibility to choose the time. Using a list of guiding questions based on my main questions and the ecological framework used to construct it, I interviewed students about their college experiences, especially their college support and relationship with the college climate. I transcribed all interviews and codified them into themes following an ecological framework where I am looking for the different influences of the

environment on their college experiences. BFT aided in bringing to light the inequities present in their experiences. I used axial coding to make sense of the codes and generate themes by exploring their relationship (Wicks, 2010). I wrote a narrative explaining the students' responses for each ecological level, citing the most notable quotes.

Composite Narrative

To represent the results of the experiences shared by minoritized student mothers, I generated a composite narrative. A composite narrative systematically organized the research data and portrayed it as a story. This representation of the data can help make the data more accessible to the public. The narrative also situates students' accounts in time and space and can allow us to make sense of students' lived experiences (Freeman, 2017; Willis, 2018). Willis (2018) explained that “an important advantage of composite narratives is that they allow the presentation of the contextualized stories, without resorting to fiction. And while offering a significant degree of anonymity” (p.6). Furthermore, Freeman (2017) states that narrative work can bring to light the nuances of the experience and the meaning participants give to them. “In other words, narratives can bring order out of chaos, provide explanations for unexpected events and also spark reflection, critique, and rearticulation of events” (Freeman, 2017, p. 35). Narratives allow researchers to connect events, interconnect with the participants, and connect readers with the human experience (Freeman, 2017).

In this section, I present stories as represented by the students. I explored and made explicit the student mothers' agency to construct meaning about their experiences in college (Kohler Riessman, 1993). In writing the composite narratives, I am reflexive about what I choose to see in their experiences. I rooted their experiences in time, space, and place, shedding light on

their personal experiences. Wertz et al. (2011) explain that writing a narrative out of qualitative data needs to have a human quality and an organized structure. Also, interpreting a phenomenon entails acknowledging that the researcher and the participants need to create shared understandings of the experience (Wertz et al., 2011). Rather than re-telling their stories, the composite narrative's purpose is to create cohesiveness among all the stories told by student mothers. My reflexivity on student mothers' experiences is accounted for in the narrative (Wertz et al., 2011).

To generate a composite narrative, I considered minoritized student mothers' actions, themes, context, and points of view. The composite narrative is divided into 5 cases, a compendium of minoritized student mothers' experiences. Each case will be composed of three to five interviews. I will clarify how they derive from the transcripts by quoting the students' answers to be transparent. I will generate a self-reflection at each case's end to avoid my prejudices and biases to trickle into the composite narrative. I will also do member-checking with the students participating to assure students feel represented in the narrative's stories and voice of the cases. Eight interviews are presented as four cases that focus on prominent themes in the data. I utilized Critical Human Ecology to bring forward the ecological levels in student mothers' lives and how this influences their college experiences. Also, BFT will allow me to highlight the intersectional experience in college. Thus, it brings to light the inequities based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, or ability.

Role of the Researcher

In this research, my role was to be an interpreter of the data findings. Per Stake (1995), the researcher acknowledges and validates new meaning from the data in this role. The

interpreter recognizes and studies a problem to connect the new knowledge with what is already known. My aim in this research was to become proficient in college student mothers' experiences and the meaning they give to them. I acknowledge my limitations in understanding student mothers' experiences. I do not have children; nevertheless, I aim to capture their nuanced experiences through their own words. As a researcher, I strive to be culturally responsive to the population of students I will be working. Cultural responsiveness involves putting social justice and human rights at the center of the research.

Limitations

The open-ended interviews I generated in this research will not generalize to the whole population of minoritized college student mothers. Instead, I explore a group's experiences bound in space and time to specific experiences in this research. I do not make predictions or hypotheses about the population based on this data. The study is limited to minoritized college student mothers from around the U.S. and Puerto Rico.

Ethical Considerations

In this research, minoritized college student mothers participated voluntarily. I provided each student participating in the open-ended interviews with a copy of the informed consent document explaining the research's purpose. Before the interview started, I explained the risks and benefits to students and emphasized that their participation was voluntary (See Appendix F for Consent Form).

Risk and Benefits

In this research, I chose the participants based on their inherent social characteristics; they are mothers coursing diverse academic careers and come from historically marginalized

social groups. Their participation in this study may improve student services, experiences, policy, and overall institutional culture related to students with children. The interviews might have helped the participants reflect on their experiences as students with children. No gifts or remuneration were provided to the participants before or during the study. Students received a document with different resources available in the community for student mothers in Chicago.

Some people might learn more about their personal life than they may during everyday interactions with the participants; this could —positively or negatively— shape their perceptions and interactions with students. To counterbalance this risk, locations, people, and personal identifiers will were erased from all collected data before presenting the study. The interview may have caused emotional discomfort when discussing personal experiences and people related to their programs and families. Hopefully, this discomfort was minimal. Professional help from the Loyola University of Chicago Wellness Center was available at the participant's request.

The researcher will not disclose any personal information gathered in the interviews or the survey. The confidentiality of the participant was safeguarded by erasing all essential identifiers from transcripts and databases. Only anonymous data from this study was analyzed by the researcher and reported. No individual participant was identified or linked to the results. The public may inspect anonymous study records. The results of this study may be presented at national and international conferences. All materials were stored in a secure location within a file on a computer with a locked password. Access to files was restricted and only was used for research purposes. All documents related to this study will be destroyed after one year of the publication of this research.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This study focuses on the experiences of minoritized student mothers in college. The population I studied was limited to student mothers who were graduate students at the time of the interviews and belonged to a Latinx background. I recruited the participants from multiple states and Puerto Rico. This combination of student mothers from the continental U.S. and territories reveals the vivid reality of student mothers from all over the U.S. and not just a small geographic area. In my conversations with student mothers, several themes were emphasized by the participants. I will discuss these themes in the form of five composite narratives. I codified the interviews and created code sheets for each to generate the themes. I triangulated the data by coding the interviews in three different ways – first, by generating an axial coding process where the themes emerged from the patterns in the data. Second, by coding by the research questions, and third, by coding by ecological level. Out of this analysis, four theoretical categories present throughout the composite narratives emerged.

The composite narratives were generated from my perspective as a researcher creating fieldnotes. I divided the themes into five fieldnote-style composite narratives, where I intertwined my personal reflections about the topic with connections to the students' experiences. This format will make the results more approachable and accessible to non-academic readers. I hope to capture the experiences of the student mothers from their perspective. While acknowledging that I am not a student mother, I will have my own biases

concerning motherhood. Integrating myself into the story makes for a more approachable report.

To end this chapter, I summarize the findings and conclusions of this study.

Research Questions

1. How do minoritized student mothers experience college?
 - a. What navigational strategies do they use for college success?
 - b. What support systems do minoritized student mothers have in college?

These questions guided this research and were the main topics students talked about during the interviews. From their answers, I made follow-up questions related to their experiences, navigational strategies, and support systems in college. In each question, the stories, anecdotes, and memories started to emerge, and the students reflected on their experiences as they had never had the chance before. Although the students came from different socio-economic backgrounds and marital statuses, an underlayer of commonalities spoke to bravery, struggle, resilience, and sacrifices. With these questions, I want to capture those areas of the literature where little is known about the support systems of minoritized student mothers. Expanding on this topic allows me to visualize the changes in culture and policies in higher education institutions.

Description of Participants

All participants identified as minoritized student mothers in college. All of them were from a Latinx-American background. The students were from all the cardinal points on the U.S. map, the midwest, westside, eastside, south, and the Caribbean. Two students studied in Texas, one in Illinois, three in Puerto Rico, one in Virginia, and one in California. Only one student identified as gender-fluid; the rest did not specify their gender identity or assumed the role of cisgender women. Of the eight students interviewed, six were married, one was divorced, and

one was single. Students were recruited using a snowball technique, where the students contacted me through my email address after seeing a flyer I distributed to my networks. One crucial network I tapped into for this research was a Facebook group named ‘Latina Completing Doctoral Degrees.’ I also received requests through my networks on Facebook and LinkedIn. I provide a profile of each participant in the compositive narrative.

Interview Questions

To assemble the interview questions, I utilized an ecological perspective where students were asked about their experiences in college in a stratified manner. I focused my questions on the support systems student mothers have in college. This support can come from different people or institutions in their lives. The void I saw in the literature regarding minoritized student mothers guided my questioning. My first question asked about their experiences in college, which was the starting point for the rest of the questions. I divided the questions into five categories to explore how they balance their responsibilities with school and home and who supported them in college. My first set of questions was regarding their academic lives, and I engaged them in a discussion regarding how they navigate and balance their roles as mothers and students. We talked about their strategies to succeed academically and who supported them academically. The role of the support of the family and how they navigated family responsibilities with schoolwork was discussed too. My conversations with the student mothers were on how they balanced their personal lives and who supported them emotionally—both areas tapping into a deeper level in their lives. My final set of questions was organized to explore their experience with discrimination and being stereotyped for being a student mother. We also discuss their experiences navigating college being Latina student mothers and the role of culture

in their parenting style.

Analysis of Results

Ecological Framework

For the analysis of the interviews, I used HET as a theoretical framework to help me understand the social location of the students I interviewed. The ecological levels work toward creating a perspective that allows me to dissect the different influences in the lives of student mothers. But it also brings to light the areas where students resist the influence of different social actors. Understanding each ecological level brings value to this analysis given the in-depth descriptions of relationships and context where the experiences of student mothers develop. Merging the experiences of student mothers in different ecological levels brings an understanding of the relationship between ecological levels. The importance of the context where such experiences occur is the premise of this theory. However, having the coordinates to the experiences of student mothers and how they navigate these experiences is not enough to understand their experience as a whole. The setting where these experiences occur is a determinant, I describe and give evidence of the social context students developed in college. BFT allowed me to center on the experiences of student mothers, which best highlight the inequities student mothers struggle with during their time in college. At each ecological level, I identified the gender biases and prejudices of people who interacted with student mothers, the university's climate, and the Latinx cultural influences. These biases are oblivious to Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological levels and need to be central to the data analysis, as these experiences are central to the lives of student mothers.

With these theories, I cast light into the experiences of student mothers in college to

expand the lens from which the literature currently sees them, understanding the breadth of ecological levels in the experiences of student mothers while considering the context and the racial, economic, and gender biases in these ecological levels. Each theory's potency is enhanced by utilizing the other theories to better understand other aspects of student mothers' experiences in college. For example, the interactions between people and individuals can be better understood if we know how the context influences the experience and how the gender, economic, and racial biases are mirrored in their experiences. Additionally, understanding the location and interactions between the individuals and people in the lives of student mothers allows us to see the details of these relationships.

This new framework proposes that all experiences can be analyzed by their location in the lives of student mothers; the experiences are context-dependent, and gender, racial, and economic biases are central to their experiences in college. HET's ecological model is a guide through which the experiences of student mothers are made explicit. However, Bronfenbrenner (2005) does not make history and inequalities central to the experiences of student mothers in college. These theoretical differences are not mutually exclusive, working together, the theories are congruent. The analysis of the interviews reflects all three approaches in different sections of the research. I used HET in coding the research interviews, while CHE and BFT are more prevalent in the composite narrative and discussion section.

Coding Process

Elman & Kapiszewski (2014) reiterate that researchers cannot reach conclusions without sharing how they got them. One of my priorities in this dissertation is to present transparent research. Especially when it comes to the steps I took to reach my conclusions. Moravcsik

(2014) explains that analytic transparency is needed to achieve transparency in the research project, where the interpretative process is open and helps support the claims. I make explicit the analytical steps I took to get to my findings and conclusions. I will discuss how I went from the excerpts to the themes and the theoretical categories in this research. Linking the quotes to their respective owner will allow the reader to understand the perspective of each student mother. I will make clear which participants' quotes I am using.

I generated a narrative analysis of eight interviews with Latina graduate student mothers to answer the research questions. Narrative analysis recognizes that narratives are representations, and through stories, people construct the narratives of their experiences and personal identities (Riessman, 1993). All narratives have a context, and decontextualizing the experiences of student mothers could be a disservice to them. For this reason, I created space in the results sections to set up the context in which the student mothers experienced college. To understand the narrative of student mothers as a whole rather than fragmented experiences, I expose the research results in a composite narrative where various interviews are made into one large story in a fieldnote format.

Getting to the composite narrative was done through axial coding. Axial coding focuses on finding patterns in the data, clustering the topics that relate to each other to make arguments about the data (Ravitch, 2016). The first coding was open to identify the most prominent patterns in the interviews. The second coding of the interviews was done with the research questions in mind, first by coding for concrete experiences, second by coding for strategies they used to navigate college, and third, by looking for references to their support systems. In the third coding, I explored how the data fit the different ecological levels in the lives of student mothers.

In this section, I make a walkthrough of how I coded each level and their connections to one another.

1. Coding level 1: Axial coding is grouping quotes by clusters to create topics. I found 195 excerpts and clustered them into 18 themes. These themes are related to answering the research questions. Together, I clustered themes into theoretical categories. Topics in each theme are closely related to the interview questions and go from a concrete quote to a theoretical category. These categories intend to answer the research question.
 - a. Connection with level 2: The coded data helped answer the research questions by being broad enough to describe the experiences of student mothers in a different context but nuanced enough to provide a better understanding of the experiences students are having.
 - b. Connection with level 3: The results yield that all ecological levels are present in answering question 1.
 - i. Most codes in question 1 connect with the microsystem and the least with the meso and exosystem.
 - c. The most frequent themes related to question 1: professors, university, peers, pandemic.
2. Coding level 2: In this level of coding, I looked at the clusters and previous codified quotes to answer the research questions. It allowed me to understand the connection of the topics with the data and identify the connections with the literature.
 - a. Connection with level 3: To further identify the gaps in the data, I coded for how each category fits into different ecological levels.

- i. All ecological levels are present in question 2. The most frequent ecological level was the microsystem. The least frequent is the exosystem.
 - b. The most frequent themes related to question 2: pandemic, compartmentalized, balance, timing, peers.
- 3. Coding level 3: This third coding level was done by understanding the connections between the categories from the data and Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological levels. I coded each quote by how they fit in in the student mother's ecology.
 - a. Connection with level 1: The first level coding allowed me to create the categories that fit into the ecological model.
 - b. Connection with level 2: Answering the research questions connected to the ecological levels allowed me to understand the ecological levels present in each research question.
 - c. All levels were present in question 3. The most frequent levels in this question were the exosystem, and the least one was the mesosystem.
 - d. The most frequent themes related to question 3: school resources, microaggressions, government support, childcare, family, husband, mother-in-law.

Theoretical Categories

To reach these theoretical categories, I considered the themes related to axial coding, coding by the research question, and coding by the ecological level. This analysis yields theoretical themes that are large and flexible concepts that were repeated throughout the interviews. The reader will recognize these categorical themes throughout the composite

narrative. These themes were my main guide to organizing the composite into a narrative with a setting where people interacted with the students in circumstances that generated feelings in student mothers.

Feelings: Students highlighted the way their experiences in college made them feel. The relationship between themes across ecological levels revealed a pattern of different feelings students reported in their experiences in college. These feelings ranged from happiness and proudness to anxiety and guilt. The emotions were part of the stories they told about their experiences in college. Their stories tied people, circumstances, and settings where these experiences occurred. Throughout the research questions, students referred to their feelings as an integral part of their experiences in college. In navigating these experiences, they identified positive and negative emotions; these could come from specific circumstances or people they interacted. We jointly explored the academic, family, personal, and emotional support they received in college in the interview questions. These questions brought up people, circumstances, and settings where students felt positive or negative feelings.

People: Students highlighted their interactions with other people in their experiences in college. Across research questions and ecological levels, students referred to people in their lives that supported them or with whom they had interactions during their time in college. The themes range from family members to peers and professors they had positive and negative interactions. This category is related to the research questions in that every answer to the questions students stated involved people that interacted with them in their experiences in college. The interview questions asked about specific people in the lives of student mothers that supported them or interacted with them in their college experience. The aim of asking about people was to explore

their closest influences relevant to their college experiences.

Circumstances: Students highlighted the circumstances when using a strategy to navigate their college experiences. Across interview questions and ecological levels, students referred to specific circumstances that reflected their experiences in college. These circumstances represent the positive and negative experiences in the lives of student mothers, which affected them. The interview questions do not focus on exploring specific circumstances; however, they prompt students to remember many circumstances with people or settings.

Settings: Students highlighted the environment of the settings where experiences in college took place. This theoretical category came from the themes related to places and spaces inside and outside the university where student mothers experienced college. Students referred to the settings such as the university or the home to speak about their experiences. The research questions do not directly prompt the students about settings; however, the nature of the stories students shared naturally set the environment where the experience occurred. The research questions are answered by this theoretical category when the experiences of student mothers are contextualized by themselves.

Triangulation

Ravitch (2016) describes triangulation of the data as a series of strategies to assure the validity and trustworthiness of the conclusion and claims presented in the research. I reached triangulation in this research by collecting data from different participants, generating three levels of coding, and including different theoretical frameworks to understand the data from different perspectives and reach conclusions based on the evidence.

1. I interviewed eight Latina graduate student mothers from around the US and Puerto Rico.

2. The first level of coding was axial coding, where patterns emerged inductively.
3. The second level of coding themes emerged from checking which quote answered which research question.
4. I deductively coded the third coding level for ecological levels identified in the students' quotes.

I included three perspectives in the data analysis: HET, CHE, and BFT.

1. Utilizing HET, I sought out how the ecological levels were present in the lives of these student mothers while in college. I arranged the analysis into ecological levels to make sense of the data. This arrangement allowed me to explore each categorical level and major themes from the interviews. At each ecological level, I included CHE to analyze the interview data. It added more nuance into the history and context where the experiences took place and allowed me to explore important influences like the Latinx culture in the experiences of student mothers.
2. At each ecological level, I added a discussion on BFT. This theory allowed me to highlight the racial, economic, and gender inequities present in the experiences of student mothers in college. Especially in how the intersections of race, gender, and class affect Latina graduate student mothers.

Composite Narrative

The composite narrative allowed me to create prose that evokes feelings and represents the person's susceptibility to sharing their experiences. The narrative results from a conversation between the researcher and the participants; presenting their voice using direct quotes. It assures that the participant's voices are accurate and contextualized (Johnston et al., 2021). Creating a

composite narrative can be clouded by a lack of transparency in the steps taken to pass from code sets to a narrative. The data interpretations must not be random; rather, there should be a direct link between the interviews, the literature, and the researcher's positionality (Wertz et al., 2011). Johnston et al. (2021) recapitulated Todres' (2007) idea of 'embodied interpretation' as the process of how the researcher embodies the data in the form of a story. How the data analysis leads to the composition of the final narrative needs to be clear.

1. The fieldnotes are organized following the stories of eight Latina graduate student mothers in college.
2. Each fieldnote is connected to the interviews of 3 to 5 student mothers at a time.
3. In each fieldnote, I discuss several principal topics in the data, depending on the extent of the topic.
4. Most quotes are verbatim. The researcher translated some quotes from Spanish, closely following the students' intended meaning.
5. Each student's direct quote is identified in the narrative with the participant's code name.
6. All details related to the interview context are taken directly from the interview or the students' reactions to the topics discussed.
7. The accompanying reflections and anecdotes are autonomous of the data collected in the interviews with student mothers.
8. Profiles for the students came from the researcher's perspective about the character of the participants parting from their self-identity.

Introduction

This morning, I woke up with an idea. Through my fieldnotes, I planned to retell my

experiences interviewing Latina student mothers in graduate school. I remembered my old fieldnotes from college, and going through them, I found that they were written precisely the way I wanted to tell their story, with vivid and detailed stories. They reminded me of the long hours I spent with teachers in the only middle school inside the public housing project where I was doing ethnographic work. There were many pages of observation—many interviews in the school’s halls. I clearly remember my most emotional moment, when a teacher told me, “you see all those public housing projects around here? All those students will never get out of here”. I was barely nineteen and fresh out of high school. My jaw dropped, and my mind started questioning education. I could not believe that a teacher had the wrong expectations for her students. I began to understand that “el caserío” was not my home, nor my reality growing up. I started to realize that people’s prejudices and my own biases can sometimes be unconscious.

I want to write this story with all my biases in mind, not as a footnote but front and center. I realize now that this story is both theirs and mine; I cannot tell their story without telling mine along with it. Nobody wants to reveal their thoughts and ideas, especially when they have not gone through the same experiences as the people you write about. More than being a capricious idea, this story poses the need to bridge the gap between the researcher and the people being studied. Taking Paulo Freire as an inspiration, I want to merge our understanding of the problem to reflect the actual context of this research. It is not enough to simply report the data, nor is it fair for my status as a student without children to go unacknowledged.

At first glance, the data results of this research feel familiar. The student mothers describe their experiences in higher education as a challenge to overcome. Like drops in a stream, small and large material and social obstacles generate a multidimensional experience. In a fight

between external and internal expectations, the lives of the student mothers are debated. Resources and supports are scarce in their lives, in and out of the classroom. Each student mother had a story to tell about balancing her personal life with her college career. In each of these fieldnotes, the difficulties and triumphs of mother students in higher education are highlighted.

My goal in these fieldnotes is to present the research results in an orderly manner, interspersing my reflections and anecdotes with the opinions of student mothers. I want to present a composite narrative where I narrate the student mothers' stories. I do not intend to speak for the students but to speak from a researcher biased by her privileges and life experiences. My reflections and anecdotes can create empathy between the reader, the researcher, and the participants. In the fieldnotes, I will talk about the heroines of this story and what their personalities and dreams are. I will explore the challenges they have experienced in their college life and discover the strength needed in this path.

Roadmap

In the first fieldnote, I focus on presenting the student mothers. I generated a profile for each student describing their character from my perspective and what they shared in the interview. It will give the reader a better sense of who are the student mothers in this study. In the second fieldnote, I describe the context student mothers are immersed in during their college time. I start by describing the students' experience with Latinx culture. I quote students' discussions about managing the expectations of culture as mothers. I also focus on the university as part of the context of students in college. I quote students' discussions about how the university works for them. These two contexts are different and influence student mothers in

different ways. Nevertheless, they are the social spaces where their experiences as student mothers occur. They reflect on the spaces and the people they relate to in these spaces.

In the third fieldnote, I discuss the experiences student mothers have in college that challenge deficit mentality. Student mothers have many reasons to continue their studies, and they are resourceful when it comes to finding resources for themselves and their children. In the fourth fieldnote, I go into the experiences in college that challenged them as students and mothers. I started by discussing other people's expectations, such as peers, professors, and family members. I quote students discussing their experiences with expectations and how they manage them. Anxiety affects student mothers when having to manage the expectation of others. I explore the student mothers' experiences with feelings such as guilt and emotional well-being while in school. The pandemic is also a source of anxiety that challenges student mothers in college. I discuss their navigational strategies before and during the pandemic. Finally, I examine the balance student mothers endure in managing their responsibilities as mothers and students.

In the final fieldnote, I focus on student mothers' support systems during their college time. The academic support from the university is lacking, and students must use other means such as asking family to help with academic support. I also discuss the emotional support they receive from their friends and family. I discuss the support they received from school and how they discovered the resources available. In each fieldnote, there is a mix of my anecdotes and reflections with the quotes of the student mothers. I end up with each fieldnote summarizing the findings and connecting with the theoretical framework. I finish the fieldnotes with a closing message from student mothers to future student mothers.

Fieldnote 1: Las Chingonas

I have witnessed eight people compete in a race, but I am not impartial since my path has differed. I recognize that to run their race, and you have to be strong, as one of them told me: “Strong women, *Chingonas*, you want to play with me – *¿quieres jugar?* – I’ll play, and I play to win.” *Chingona* is not used as derogatory, but it is a word Chicana women claim to refer to strong women. In my country, they call them *fajonas*, and it seems to me that it emits the same image of a woman who fights for her dreams and lives for them; those who, against all odds, regardless of the obstacle or difficulty, do not quit the race. I have known many of these women throughout my life, starting with my mother. Seeing her toil through school with four children was an experience that marked my mind forever. Nevertheless, this story is not the story of sad women. I will not even call it resilient women because it is a struggle and resistance story. I do not mean to be melodramatic, but their inner power and volition need to be highlighted because, in the case of student mothers, people mostly bypass their needs as if they were invisible or a nuisance.

Las Chingonas

Luisa. Luisa is a determined woman who has a vision of what she will accomplish in her life. Her plans for the future are to write a book about her topic of study and make changes in her field. Academically, Luisa is a strong-willed student determined to finish her studies and become empowered to make changes that make students’ susceptibilities central to policymakers’ decisions. Luisa is grateful to all the people in her life who have helped her get her degree and understand the value of people’s attention to her academic progress. She is persistent in her goals and will go through great struggles to achieve them.

Jessie. Jessie is moved by justice and the love for her children. Her values guide her studies and her personal life. She is no stranger to self-advocating, as she has had to do so even before starting her graduate degree. Her charming sense of humor and upbeat personality draws you into her story. But sometimes, you see her brave face crumble under the vulnerabilities that make her much sympathetic, and you can identify with her struggles. Jessie self-identifies as gender-fluid, which has posed new challenges in parenting within the Latinx culture. She battles the toxic aspects of Latinx culture to ensure that her children grow in a safe and productive space.

Alejandra. Alejandra is a professional and put-together doctoral student. She has a “do what it takes” attitude toward her goals. Her determination has landed her in many uncomfortable positions, but she has managed her struggles with or without support from others. Alejandra is in love with her child; behind her professional façade, she is a loving mother and wife. She is constantly thinking about her family’s needs and how to fulfill them. Having a baby, working, and studying is her life. She puts together a balanced act every day to reach her goals.

Melissa. Melissa means business when it comes to her studies. Her life plan involves being successful in her endeavors. She is strategic; she does not let things fall through the cracks as she counts on her current efforts to bring her and her child stability for the future. Having control over her time and space is very important for Melissa as this helps her maintain a beneficial environment to accomplish her goals. She is compassionate and seeks justice through her studies. Her role as a mother is a side of her life that complements her goals rather than hinders them. Nevertheless, she emphasizes the importance of having a barrier between home and school, although she believes in only compartmentalizing her activities when it comes to

schoolwork.

Andrea. Andrea is friendly, happy, and optimistic about her parenting style and career goals. She has a strategic plan to graduate with her master's degree and get a job as soon as possible. Although determined to gain the future she expects for her child, Andrea is worried about her job opportunities in Puerto Rico. The center of her life is her child, and she juggles many tasks and responsibilities as long as is for her baby. Nevertheless, she is not one to stay quiet when injustices take place. She was observant of all the microaggressions toward her as a mother in school.

Penelope. A calm soul, Penelope inspires peace. Nevertheless, this is not to be confused with a lack of determination, rather, she has a clear vision of her needs and wants during her studies. In her studies, she has made many accommodations to finish. Being away from her country and dealing with a different parenting culture has made Penelope flexible about her parenting. Her husband and children are her main family; this has been a blessing and an issue. She feels like her family is not supportive of their parenting needs. Nevertheless, studying gave her the flexibility to take care of her children.

Mariana. Mariana is smart and persistent, and she has been working on her doctoral degree for many years now. Her determination to study is her child and do justice to her abilities. Conflicted about her role as a student and mother, Mariana feels like an impostor in the classroom. Nevertheless, she is a dreamer, sure of herself, and plans to make her dream come true. Mariana's vision for the future prompts her to search for balance between the time she spends at home and the time she spends working and studying. She feels guilty and selfish when she cannot spend time with her child, although she dedicates many hours to parenting.

Elena. Easy to be around and speak to, Elena engaged in conversation about her field of studies with great passion. She was hopeful that her graduate degree would help her accomplish her academic and personal goals. Being pregnant during her community college years fueled her aspirations of tumbling the glass ceiling. Many years later, she is a master's student with a teenager, whom she inspires to be academically the best he can be. She and her son study together and support each other's dreams.

The main similarity between these students is that they heard the call for adventure at some point in their lives. The adventure of becoming a college student has its hurdles but also its rewards. Starting it means accepting the obstacles along the way and preparing for the final battle. For this experience, they need tools and wise people to guide them.

Nevertheless, most students find themselves without any tools and guides to cross the college path. To be successful in college, they must use all their resources, including family and friends. They do not go alone in this journey; their children go with them. It is important to notice this because the children's needs are different from the needs of student mothers, making this journey through college more complicated. Nevertheless, student mothers are determined to cross the gate of success with their children by their side.

La Identidad

The identity of student mothers is connected to motherhood, and the expectations of others about their motherhood produce anxiety. When they arrive at the university, they face a new identity that is not linked to their motherhood. There are no children around anymore because the university does not provide space for them. Now, there are only people that do not want to know anything about children and believe that having children while studying is a

mistake. Entering college with your child in your arms is submitting to the gazes and comments of peers without children. Getting used to your student identity is much more difficult when your family questions your decision to study. The family demands attention; they do not stop being mothers when they become students.

The Latinx culture also questions their identity because it is not just having a mother's identity but being a Latinx mother. For their families, being a mother comes before being a student, which puts pressure on how the students see themselves. The Latinx identity is reinforced at home, but some students reject the old-fashioned ways of Latinx parenting. Student mothers constantly reevaluate their Latinx identity not to reproduce its negative aspects. Maintaining and challenging the culture is another balancing act they endure in the privacy of the home.

Nevertheless, the biggest challenge is being a good student and a good mother simultaneously. Time management is fundamental for them to guarantee their academic success and to fulfill the expectations of the family and society. It is the case of Alejandra, a first-generation student from the Midwest, working toward her doctoral degree. Her enthusiasm for her child was contagious. Nevertheless, coming to terms with her new identity as a student mother has been a journey.

Emotional support has been very hard to have with a child and full-time work and school. When I first had my child, I went through postpartum depression, and it was hard to navigate that with school. It was so hard because a lot was happening in my personal life. The change of becoming a mother, the anxiety, am I good enough mother? So much going on, plus school and work, it was difficult to navigate. I didn't get any help for it, at the moment it was like I did not have the time. My partner was my support system, I told him early on, I don't feel right, super anxious. He was so supportive, that helped me get through it.

Many of the student mothers told me that they understood that the pressure to be a good mother comes from inside. However, society and their experiences with family members also pressured them to be a certain kind of mother, like Mariana, a doctoral student from Puerto Rico. She decided to come back to school one year after her baby was born.

Yes, I think culture has an impact... is a bunch of little things that you have to do to be good, little by little, I have been leaving that behind, but the guilt of not having physical, social, psychological stimulation for my child is like putting a thousand pressures on me.

Student mothers constantly doubt themselves as students and mothers, questioning if they are good enough. In school, they feel like pretenders because they do what they can with the available time. It was what Mariana was telling me when I asked her about feeling the impostor syndrome.

I've had to try a lot harder to get to some levels, and I feel like I want to, but I never get there, and it's because I don't have the time. For example, they read a lot, almost all my classmates, weekly books in addition to the university's, and I read what the university tells me I have to read. I'm not going to read anymore.

Am I good enough? It is a persistent question in the minds of student mothers. Having children can complicate studying; however, none of the students said they regretted being in school and having children. Nevertheless, the clash of the two roles can be a stressor for student mothers. Culture limits how they view motherhood and their priorities as mothers. The Latinx culture further reinforces the family-centric view of motherhood through the culture of *familismo* (Espinoza, 2010). Individual goals are not a priority for mothers under *familismo* only family members are the priority. The demands of family and society make student mothers rethink their identities as mothers. Though motherhood has been a source of happiness for student mothers, I believe that women's relationship with motherhood is more complex.

Borrowing from de Beauvoir, I believe that mothers are not born; they are made. What is

expected of mothers is not natural or predetermined by nature. Becoming a mother does not start with a woman getting pregnant, it begins much earlier when that first baby doll is handled to little girls and when they are expected to attend to the doll's supposed needs. Patriarchy drives this violence when they expect girls to take responsibility for their future children even before having them. There is a discontinuity of the violence in the affirmation of women as individuals. When student mothers reaffirm their status as students, their education empowers their choices, needs, and desires. But in this, they also reaffirm their identity away from the constraints of motherhood. Under patriarchy, women reaffirming their independence in motherhood is considered selfish. Nevertheless, the support and resources mothers now need from the social structure, and the culture at large to thrive is paramount to support their independence as women.

The ecology of each student mother in this research varies with their context. Nevertheless, there are similarities in the theoretical categories they use to describe their experiences in college. Some students highlighted the circumstances that led them to question their role as students and mothers while in college, while other student mothers highlighted how they felt about these circumstances. It means students do not have linear experiences in college; rather, sometimes different components of their experience get more attention. In the cases of Alejandra and Mariana, their approach to their experiences in college made different areas of the same experience gain more importance. However, guilt is a theme that cuts across experiences. The context is not the same for all student mothers, but their feelings are similar when they come across impossible situations such as Alejandra's, where no matter how dedicated she is in managing her time, anxiety is present to make the experience more complicated.

Racialized and gendered experiences mediate the different ecological levels present in

each context. Student mothers do not feel guilty in a vacuum, rather they feel guilty while attempting to study as a Latina with children and a graduate student. Their identity plays the role of a stressor for student mothers trying to figure out their position at the university. The theoretical categories of people, feelings, circumstances, and settings are embedded into the gendered and racialized experiences of student mothers in college. The relationship between these two aspects can work together to facilitate students' experiences, and together they put pressure onto student mothers in college. When students speak of their identity, they speak of these actors, places, feelings, and circumstances that work together to generate their individual and collective experiences. Being a Latina student mother in college is a mix of experiences in an unequal society.

Fieldnote 2: El Contexto

The identity of our heroines is the lens through which they see and respond to the world. Their personal stories are embodied in the prerogatives and decisions they make daily. The culture in which they are raised and how they see the world can be seen as the masks of comic book superheroes, both masking them and exposing their identity. The family plays a primary role in reproducing culture. However, our heroines are not simple recipients of culture. They defeat the grand dragon of toxic culture through their parenting styles and resistance. Machismo and heteronormativity pose a challenge to the progressive upbringing posed by our heroines. For them, identity is a determinant of self-image; they are not only student mothers but Latina student mothers. Due to their identity, they do or do not go through certain experiences, such as racism or ageism. It also determines their relationship with others, how they communicate with others, and how others see them.

During their time in college, they have experiences that make them believe they do not belong there. Their identities as mothers and as Latinas intermingle with the expectations and prejudices others have of them. Students are confronted with microaggressions from peers and professors and institutional violence when they do not see their needs are reflected in the university's policy and culture. Latina student mothers enter college as a whole being with great hopes and great fears.

La Cultura Latina

The Latinx culture permeates many areas of the lives of student mothers. Even before they become mothers, they see the restrictions around gender, such as family members restricting their mobility. Student mothers struggle with the pressure of being a good mother. Some believe this comes from within, from their expectations about motherhood. Others believe that the pressure comes from society, especially their Latinx culture. Comments from others, especially family and peers, bring a misfit sense. Some mothers report that being a mother is the priority in the minds of many family members, but in school, being a mom can be seen as lacking commitment to one's studies. It is what Elena explained while she sat in her kitchen remembering her experiences in community college when she first got pregnant:

When I found out I was pregnant, I was in my first semester in community college. It is a very life-changing experience because [when] I started school, I wasn't a mother yet, then when I became pregnant, I felt like the odd child surrounded by all these other students that are not soon-to-be parents. And the stigma also of being a young mother...I was trying to navigate college and also having that stigma, you know in the Latinx community is like –Oh ella no esta casada,' so that held a lot of pressure in me when I was in community college. I felt like people thought, 'Oh, she is already pregnant, she is not going to make it.' I used that toward breaking the stigma – I'm going to continue my education. It was very emotional throughout my time in community college because I kept hearing bad stuff about mothers dropping out, all this stuff. Also, as a mother, I was navigating trying to fit my schedule when my son was a baby. I had to take part-time, it took me forever to get out of community college.

Student mothers have different reactions to microaggressions; some feel they need to justify themselves, and others see it as a personal flaw. Student mothers struggle with their families, especially when it comes to parenting. Students explained that they try not to repeat the generational trauma, understanding it happens in their families and culture. *La Cultura de la Chancla*, or Chancla Culture, is what they have learned from their own families, which entails physical and verbal violence from the parents to the children and submissiveness from the children. There is also a norm of how to raise girls versus boys. Women are afforded room to play with gender roles, while boys are treated with more heteronormative expectations. Jessie and I discussed the Chancla Culture as part of our parents' parenting styles. We agreed this was a culture that was not healthy for our communities and our families.

I just saw a meme somewhere, and it had the picture of the chancla [laughing]. It's hilarious, but that's not the way that I parent at all. I'm very much in the gentle parenting camp, and it is very different than [how] either of my parents parented. Or that their parents parented, so it's been very confusing for my family. Culturally, if I greet family, hugs, kiss, I teach my kids body autonomy and consent, so they never have to give a hug or a kiss or receive one if they don't want one. That has been the single most difficult thing to get behind. But this is not a boundary that I was going to budge on, is support [is] important for them to know that they are in charge of their own body, and they decide when they get touched and how. They always get to say no.

In Puerto Rico, we dread coming back from school with a bad grade, a bruise from fighting with others, or a teacher called our home. We joked amongst each other who would receive "la pela," which was the basic way of saying your parents would abuse you verbally and physically because you did not do what they wanted. The Chancla culture has produced trauma in me. Everyone is afraid of talking about how parents can lead you to deal with their mistake many years after it happens. My experience growing up with a disciplinarian was far from ideal. On many occasions, I had to confront my mother about her lack of understanding and her plain

foolishness in cultivating this culture. It is not that I do not love my mother, but life has allowed me to heal, and I want to transmute my traumas into healing for me and everyone who had to deal with this culture of violence in the Latinx culture.

The student mothers also report having others, such as family members, take on the disciplinary role toward their children as they perceive a lack of structure or a normative discipline regime. When they see a single mother, older people, especially men, believe a man is missing to put “order” in the household. At the same time, others reproduce the heteronormative ideals of masculinity. Jessie, who raises her children in a gender-affirming way, has encountered resistance from family members.

So, as a parent, it’s that I don’t put my children in gender boxes. Toys are gender-neutral, limited. With my daughter, no one had anything to say about it [when] she dressed up as spiderman, then comes my son and everyone has a problem. I let my son like things because he likes them. He wanted to wear a bow in his hair all the time, and I let him. People had an opinion about that, and my mom would literally take them out of his hair – he doesn’t need that – no, but he wants it. It literally says nothing about his gender or future sexual orientation, it only says he likes that object. He gets to like it because it’s pretty. He doesn’t need any other reason. [I] also let both of my kids paint their nails. It’s a thing that gets a lot more pushback with my son than with my daughter. It’s not OK for him to do more traditionally feminine things and I’m like fuck, it can be whatever.

From ideologies of how-to parent to heteronormativity, we also find xenophobic ideologies that permeate the Latinx culture. For students whose families immigrated to the U.S., identity can also be a stressor. Elena told me how she has had her identity questioned inside the U.S. and Mexico. It provoked an identity crisis that made her question the true place of belonging.

I feel that in Mexico, also intersect with La del norte. I go to Mexico, and I want to learn about my culture, but at the same time, is like you are not from here. I do feel dismissed. – You are not really from Mexico – I feel like I have an identity crisis. They see me as too Americanized. And here, in the US, I’m also not wanted here by the dominant culture. Ni de aquí, ni de allá.

Immigrating from your country to a new one is a story that, in my experience, not many Americans want to hear, especially if the story is intersected by the policing structures that until today keep immigrant children in cages until today. Immigration is not a joke, and most people willingly do it. So many people have told me how I came here because it is a better country. I wonder who are they thinking of when they say better, better for whom? I never thought I would migrate, mainly because I had a good job, and my economic status in my country was good. I moved not because I wanted, but because if I did not move, I would have seen my potential decline with a lack of support from the state, a colonial government, which complicates the panorama.

Immigrating is not glamorous, on the contrary, it is traumatic. Keeping with the culture, the people, and family is hard once you migrate. For me, the future looks complicated and messy when you migrate. Especially when I think of my future children, I still do not understand how I am supposed to make them embrace a culture they will barely experience? Many people try to keep their language to transmit part of the culture to their children. For Penelope, the main issue was trying to teach Spanish to her children in an environment that discourages them. She wanted to have Spanish as a special bond with her children.

As I speak English with my husband and [at] work, I ended up speaking English all the time, and my children do not speak Spanish. I speak to them, and sometimes they do not understand me, and that is difficult...it disconnects me a bit. I feel like I have failed as a mother in not teaching them Spanish.

In my conversations with the student mothers, I noticed how they take actions to reinforce their cultural identity. Some wish to maintain Latinx traditions, while others wish to break the macho and heteronormative traditions. On the one hand, they reinforce the culture by teaching their children Spanish. On the other, they reject the toxic characteristics of Latinx

culture by teaching them to reject unwanted physical contact, for example. In both cases, some expectations cause anxiety in the student mothers. Sometimes they think they are not doing enough to reproduce the culture, while other times, they think they are not doing enough to limit the negative influences of Latinx culture. For some, these things happen at the same time. The student mothers of Puerto Rico believe that their culture promotes violent discipline and heteronormative ideas of raising children. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that reinforcing their culture was not a priority for the Puerto Rican student mothers. Rather, they were preoccupied with how to change the culture they replicate in their children.

La Universidad

The cultural climate of the university does not reassure students that they are doing the right thing by getting a degree. The structure of the university supports those who fit the mold of a student who only goes to school and does not have caring responsibilities. Although many student mothers use the university as a springboard to social mobility, students must pass many hurdles to get to mobility. Furthermore, their responsibilities at home collide with their responsibilities at school, and this balancing act they endure causes anxiety in student mothers. The expectation of their peers and professors puts student mothers in an uncomfortable situation. Peers' comments and professors' demands can overload student mothers, making them feel like outsiders in the classroom.

Exasperated with the university, Alejandra told me that there is a gap in the university in viewing student mothers as both mothers and students. Especially the time to bring their children to school came, they felt like they were not supposed to do it. "For you [the university] to not encourage me to bring her to class or something, or not thinking about me as parent is a

disconnect there.” Andrea was also frustrated with the university's culture as she felt it was misogynistic. In her attempts to breastfeed her baby in school, her peers were unsupportive. Her peers' uncomfortable looks and comments deterred her from bringing her child to school. "Yes, I don't know if there were breastfeeding rooms, but I would take off my breast, and that's it, but you feel like everyone is looking at you and like I did something wrong."

Meanwhile, Jessie was more concerned about the lack of responsiveness from professors about her academic and personal interests. One professor dismissed her interest in parenting topics, not considering them academically worthy.

A lot of times there would be a pressure or something to tie it back to your personal life, so I go back to parenting, and I watch some professors get turn off by that and they would be like, this is not valid because is about parenting or being a mother. My response to that is to talk about it more.

The aggressions of the university are structural and cultural. On the one hand, students are not shown support for their academic interest if it has to do with their status as mothers. On the other hand, professors' and peers' culture makes students feel othered or do not belong. There is a separation between who the student mothers are and how the university sees them. A simple act such as lactating can bring feelings of being outside what is expected of students. There are no other options for student mothers. It is either being open to aggression or hiding their status completely.

People influence student mothers' experiences in college. Culture is reproduced by family members advising student mothers how to parent and the expectations they have from them as Latina mothers. These relationships limit how student mothers parent, which sometimes

clashes with their family's traditional parenting styles. This relationship with people and their circumstances can impact their feelings toward an experience. Nevertheless, in this fieldnote, the setting becomes important, given its influence on the lives of student mothers in college. The importance of the setting is the culture and policies that constitute the setting. The setting is the place and space where these experiences happen. The boundaries of these spaces are material and social. It means that it is a dialectical relationship that cannot be separated. The context of their experiences is related to the culture in these spaces. Unspoken rules determine how student mothers experience these spaces within the university and the family context.

The settings where the experiences of student mothers unfold can be located in the microsystem, which is the family, and in the exosystem, the university. It means that different ecological levels are in play in the landscape where the experiences of student mothers take place. It is important because the influence of the microsystem ecological level is different from that of the exosystem. The first is the closest system where people can influence the students, while the influences in the exosystem are external to the development of student mothers (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). These influences have a context: the university and the Latinx culture are subjugated to their historical development. This historical influence should be considered because it sets the current historical landscape. This context is embedded in a gendered and racialized reality that cannot be detached from each other. The student mothers navigate their experiences based on expectations and prejudices based on race and gender. Nevertheless, the student mothers in this story were not just influenced by these ecological forces, they also created an identity that stands against racial and gender supremacy.

Fieldnote 3: La Felicidad

La Felicidad

The stories of student mothers are similar to my mother's in that their aim to get a degree is linked to their children. The student mothers spoke with their eyes glittering when recalling their children. The purpose of going to school for student mothers is to set up their children with a stable environment and the resources they need to succeed. In doing this, they find satisfaction and happiness. They discover the power they have to change their children's lives. They are the fuel that enables them to succeed in college. Every action they take toward their personal goals is also a step toward fulfilling their children's goals. When Elena spoke of her son, she was a proud mother, and her excitement reverberated in her voice. For Elena, this empowerment comes from her son working hard on his studies. Having a teenager working on his future inspires both the parent and the child to make the most of the experience of going to school together. This shared experience is an extra boost of support for both the mother and the child. When I asked Elena if she wanted her child to go to college, she responded:

Yes, I hope he does, he is on top of his homework, and he is an honor roll student. He is in a college gear program so his focus. Cuando yo veo all his accomplishments, you are making me feel proud, I want to be like my son too.

Big and small moments in the experience of student mothers in college are considered important by student mothers. Alejandra reminisced about when her baby was a newborn, and she was still writing for class. She told me she was tired, and the job was difficult. Nevertheless, she remembers her time fondly as a tiny memory of the effort she made for her baby and herself.

I remember giving birth to her and literally getting back to class the next week. I have a picture that I love so much, that is, she in her bassinet and me typing away, and she was like a week old. It was a nice experience to get pregnant during I felt really supported, but after was such a hard time, such a challenging experience.

Small memories cover the landscape of the experiences of student mothers in college. Going to school could be seen by some as selfish, but student mothers do not have an option to be selfish. Their motivation is composed of the moments they fight for their children's well-being. I could only interpret the happiness in the students' eyes during this part of the interview as empowering. In the promise of a better life for their children, they find their inner power. Like a superhero's journey to discover their powers, student mothers find their power in their children. Their experience in school mediates the relationship between the child and the mother, and this seems to be one way student mothers receive support from their children.

We all have a decisive aim that drives our determination to study. Not everyone has their aims linked to other human beings, though some focus on making the choices that benefit others near them. Tangible and intangible connections to others sustain this extrinsic motivation. While many material demands unite mothers with their children, the emotional connections cannot be ignored. Ricco et al. (2009) explained that student mothers' position is unique and influences their children's schooling. In the case of Elena, I can identify how the relationship between the mother and son helped create a culture of studying and being educated. It also happened in my home as my siblings and I developed college aspirations while my mother finished her degree. Growing up with my mother as a reference, I believed that I also could study. Her aspirations for me also influenced my decision to continue with school.

Student mothers emphasize the importance of the microsystem in the decision-making process of student mothers in this fieldnote. The inspiration and motivation to study are related to their children's current and future well-being. The student mothers' attachment with their children goes beyond the material; they feel responsible for their wellness. The circumstances

and the setting of the experience are not as relevant as the feelings student mothers encounter regarding their children. Feelings such as love, and empowerment are related to how they see their experiences with their children while in college. Unlike other experiences student mothers have in college, these positive experiences affect their perceptions of their effort into their schooling. Student mothers feel their efforts in college are worth it because they mean the present and future well-being of their children.

Utilizing BFT allows me to focus on the positive experiences that motivate student mothers. Battling deficit mentality, BFT sheds light on the cultural wealth student mothers bring to their experiences in college (Yosso, 2005). Their relationship with their children influences student mothers, but this is not a negative influence; rather, it is inspirational. Even though student mothers feel guilty for not spending time with their children, their share time is important because it reinforces their motivation to study. Their stress is not based on being a mother but on balancing their school and home responsibilities. Student mothers challenge the deficit mentality of the society and actors inside the university through personal or public displays of resistance and empowerment. The weight falls onto student mothers rather than on the society or the different actors of the university.

Fieldnote 4: Los Retos

Las Expectativas

The first monster students battle during their quest is expectations. Expectations for student mothers are not the same as those are usually held for students without caregiving responsibilities. The expectations student mothers deal with come from their families and society. Many student mothers, even when married, deal with unwanted comments from peers

and family members about being a good student or a good mother. Student mothers feel that society does not expect them to be mothers and students simultaneously. On the one hand, they feel the pressure to become educated, while on the other, they feel the pressure of not being a regular student on campus. Alejandra and her husband wanted to have their baby early in their marriage, which coincided with Alejandra's entry into her Ph.D. She reflected on this in the following words:

In terms of society, I don't think society expects me to have a kid while I'm in school. When I tell people I'm a doctoral student, they are like, 'Fantastic!' If I happen to mention my child, they are like, 'You have a kid already? That's not the right step.' To be honest, we didn't want to wait. I always wanted to be a mom; it was important to me. I wasn't going to wait because school says so. People, they don't expect me to have a kid and to be a doctoral student, as a woman. Is like that feeling, no one has told me that.

The pressure of being a good mom comes from family and society as they expect student mothers to be 100% dedicated to their studies and 100% dedicated to their children. Many students also commented on their self-expectations of being a good mom. They believe it is their responsibility to maintain the household and their children's well-being. Being a good student is also present on their minds, but being a good student is cutting their time at home. This culture is also present in the university, where professors dictate new expectations for women with children. It was true for Penelope, an international student from South America, who, along with her husband, are doctoral students. She told me that despite having time to be a full-time student, her professor's expectations for her doctoral career changed once she had her first child. Her advisor prohibited her from taking more than one course per semester, and funding for her research was scarce.

There are many classes that I would have liked to take, many things that I would have liked to do. I think I have lost many opportunities; I have passed the program like this with the requirements, and that's it. But there would have been many more things to do

and papers that I could have produced. But I think it was worth it because having a child while working wouldn't have given me so much flexibility.

Expectations, external and internal, create feelings of guilt in student mothers. Guilt was the most repeated sentiment among student mothers in the study. They feel guilty for dedicating time away from their children to study or take time for themselves. Some students questioned this sentiment, feeling that it is unfair for them to feel guilty when doing something good, such as studying to become a better version of themselves. Jessie was one of the students that questioned the expectations of being a good mother; she also suffered from the guilt student mothers feel because they want to have a college degree.

Honestly, I had a lot of guilt right at the beginning, and then I had to give up caring about some of the things because I couldn't manage it all. I got to the point that I thought, what's the point of feeling guilty about this if I feel like I'm doing the right thing and I have done my best? If it was reversed, is anybody going to question it? If I did it all the time, would anybody question it? I feel guilty, but is it right to feel guilty?

Expectations for student mothers come from the patriarchal expectations imposed on women in and out of the Latinx culture. They are asked to be students or mothers, making it impossible to fulfill all expectations. These expectations can put students at a disadvantage, like in the case of Penelope, whose professor limited her resources and contributions because she had children. The family also plays a role in setting expectations for student mothers. Familismo is the way they express these expectations toward student mothers. The outcome of these expectations is negative, they bring feelings of guilt to student mothers when they are not focusing on one or the other.

Internalizing these patriarchal expectations can generate negative sentiments in student mothers. When I was thinking about how expectations work, it reminded me of Memmi's (1991) discussion of the ideological aggression the oppressed receive from the oppressor. Although the

context is different, there are similarities between the experiences of student mothers and what he calls the colonized. Those who push their expectations to student mothers and student mothers are unequal. Family, professors, and peers hold power over student mothers, who resist responding to ideological violence. Nevertheless, student mothers are also misled by society to believe that these expectations are natural for mothers. They learn how to adjust to these expectations and even validate them by acting on them (Memmi, 1991). This tug and pull leave student mothers with little agency to reverse the equation between them and those setting the expectations.

Peers and Professors' Expectations

The tentacles of the monster of expectation are the expectations from professors and peers. The expectations that can cause anxiety in student mothers are embodied in the students' stories about professors and peers. I decided to highlight Luisa's story, which portrays how professors' expectations can cause severe consequences for student mothers. Luisa told me the story about being pregnant with her first child. She was due to give birth in the ongoing semester then. She and her husband were excited about the baby's arrival. Luisa never thought that having a child in the middle of the semester would cause problems for her. When she told me her story, Luisa could not hide that she felt that the university had played a trick on her even after many years. She told me that when she negotiated with her professor, she refused to reschedule her work and excused herself from class to have her baby.

She was like, my policy is there is black and white of how I feel about absences in the class. I like, I totally understand, but I'm not going to spring break or anything, I'm going to have a baby. This is my first child; I don't know what to expect, I don't know what's to come. Do I need to give you a medical notice? She looked me straight in the eye and told me, "You didn't plan this very well, did you?"

On the least expected day, Luisa's water broke in the middle of the professor's classroom, who denied accommodating her. The professor counted tardiness as an absence. She also counted the student absent if they left the classroom early, which caused Luisa not to want to leave the classroom until the teacher dismissed the class. An early dismissal could mean one more year of classes for Luisa, delaying her graduation.

She was like, –OK, we are going to go. Obviously, you need to go, but and you are not going to go unless I dismiss the class–. I was like, I'm not absent today,' I said. She said, – 'No, you are not,'– and she dismissed the class. My husband wheeled me in the chair to put me in the car and take me to the hospital. I had my child, and I was in class the following week.

Luisa's story is important because it shows the extremes both parties are willing to go to either satisfy the requirements from school or impose a rule in the classroom. Luisa was not the only student who had a story about professors, but the unwillingness of Luisa's professor to help her makes this story a cautionary tale. Professors can be a great source of inspiration and support for student mothers. Students in this study also told me stories about professors supporting and understanding their roles as mothers. Nevertheless, the expectations some professors have from their student mothers are draconian. Asking a student to risk her health and her baby's health for a class in college is unethical. New rules of the game need to be written between students and professors – new dynamics that help student mothers achieve their potential rather than being in another battleground.

Peers

The final battle for student mothers is fighting the expectations of their peers. Peers are the other group of student mothers identified as problematic when it comes to reproducing the status of student mothers in college. Peers do not hold the power professor do; nevertheless, they

are in many ways closer to student mothers. While walking along the beach in Puerto Rico, cooling off at twilight, Andrea remembers all the times she took her baby to school. Between questions, you could hear the joy of her child playing in the sand and seeing the school bus go by. Andrea told me that sometimes she needed to take her little one to university, and she felt observed and mistreated by other peer students.

At the university, it is another world because in my town it is normal for me to have a baby, but at the university, many classmates do not have children. When I go with the baby, entering the university as everyone looks at me, you feel like an extraterrestrial.

They treated her as an oddity and made sarcastic and hurtful comments to her. These comments were varied, but all are intended to make Andrea feel like she did not do things right like she jumped a step.

It is something that can affect your professional training process; it feels that way a bit. It is even common to hear comments, derogatory comments about children, and that feels...for example, me with the baby, and someone says –I do not want to know about babies, or are you crazy?’ – in your face. That has happened to me a lot and especially in college, and it feels horrible when you are in the struggle.

When students cannot find childcare or just want to bring their children to class, they feel unsure how others would receive their presence. No one reported unwelcoming professors but expressed feeling internal pressure and not wanting to disturb others. Andrea said to me when I asked her about taking children to class:

I felt tense because I was very worried that the baby would bother my classmates. More to pay attention to the class, I left with a headache, but that group did not feel very comfortable with the baby in the room; it felt like severe pressure.

Elena, a Chicana student mother, also struggled with uninvited comments from peers at the university. She was in community college when she got pregnant. She told me she internalized the stereotypes she had heard from her family and what people around the

community college said about young mothers. These included comments about how young mothers made a wrong choice and how it marks their destiny forever. Peer feedback can fan the flame of damaging self-image in student mothers. When these comments are derogatory or expressing low expectations about the student mothers, they are resented, as in the case of Andrea. However, they can also resist the stereotype, as in the case of Elena:

I do remember having one classmate saying something like, – ‘I didn’t think you were going to be where you are at now,’ – after I transferred out of community college because I was pregnant. That was very like, ‘Wow, oh!’ Those are the comments that would make me feel like, ‘Let me prove you wrong, let me break the stigma.’ I was really taken aback.

Although some of the student mothers were recounting good moments with peers who accommodated their needs, most students felt peer culture was unsupportive. The culture in the university reflects the misogynistic culture at large, where women’s independence is not highlighted. Motherhood is unthinkable for many of student mothers’ peers, and they reproduce the idea that there are specific steps towards motherhood. The microaggression student mothers receive from peers causes anxiety because they perpetuate the negative prejudices they fear most. The expectations peers have of student mothers are unwelcome by student mothers and do not contribute to their development. Although other students talked about accommodating peers, this theme was present throughout the students’ experiences.

La Ansiedad

Anxiety underlines all the experiences of student mothers in college. Some students explained that their anxiety in college was a new sentiment they had experienced. Many feared they were not contributing enough to their relationship with their children and this cause anxiety. Not all student mothers receive the support they require or want from their families. Some have

unsupportive family members questioning their ideas and actions regarding schooling and parenting. In the case of Jessie, a gender-fluid student mother of two children, her family's commitment to her studies is conspicuously absent. Jessie held back tears during the interview while I listened intently to her accumulated rage that seemed like a great dam about to overflow.

I was angry and frustrated. I also felt really sad, and heartbroken, because I felt like they didn't see me, they couldn't see me as a person, only as a mother. It was like I didn't exist. It was just heartbreaking; it was a rough start to the beginning of the year.

Student mothers feel anxious because they do not have outlets such as mom groups to help them cope with the tremendously taxing task of being a student mother. Many feel selfish, taking some time off for themselves, even resting. They believe they are using up time meant for their children and thus, feel like they are not doing enough for their children. Although some student mothers have arrangements with the other parent of their children, which allow them to have more time for themselves, this was seen only for divorced and single mothers. Even when they had the time for themselves, they preferred to clean and do schoolwork. Andrea made this reflection when I asked about it:

At the beginning, it was very difficult for me. Before, the father helped a lot with the division of tasks, but I felt it when I started living alone, but it gave me stress and frustration. I felt that I could not do everything. I go to therapy, and that was what we talked the most about, that I felt that doing everything at the same time did not work out for me. To be honest, I look at the floor and clean when the baby falls asleep. I have about three hampers. I have one of clean clothes and another of almost clean clothes. It no longer gives me so much stress. Weekends are the days of deep cleaning and learning that there will always be a mess and that I am not a bad mom for that, but at the beginning, it was like, I have a baby, and I have to keep the house very clean.

Anxiety permeates the lives of student mothers on many levels. The lack of support from family members and schools puts students in an uncomfortable position. Motherhood dictates how they use their time and what their priorities are. The expectations that cause this anxiety can

be self-imposed, but mainly because the culture of motherhood asks mothers to be perfect in every way. Clean house and clean children are expected, even when there are no resources available, such as in the case of Jessie, where in the middle of a storm without power or water, she was worried about what others would think of her as a mother. Mothers are asked to keep up with the household chores and focus on the cognitive and physical well-being of the children, even if it meant not taking care of their own cognitive and physical well-being.

My battle with anxiety and depression started right in the middle of my degree. It was not a sudden experience, rather it was an accumulation of feelings and fears. I wish I could say I knew how to identify the signs of the illness. But I was completely by myself for three years, and the support that I received from the school was minimal. I often questioned myself and the culture that allows depression to sink in. The causes of depression are multiple, nevertheless, for minoritized people, depression is always looming on the horizon. For me, this is not a matter of asking the literature but of hearing the community. The experiences students face can be so extreme or constant that it can deteriorate their mental health. Aggressions and microaggressions make student mothers rethink their identities and internal expectations.

La Pandemia

Like any good story, the heroines' progress is more complicated with an unexpected twist. At the time of these interviews, the COVID-19 or Coronavirus pandemic had taken the lives of thousands of people worldwide and had disrupted my life and the lives of the student mothers in this study. For many student mothers, there was a before and after the pandemic. They used strategies to be on campus and spend time at home, such as studying on certain days and staying home on other days. After the pandemic, students find it more challenging to focus

on different school tasks because they also need to take care of their children while at home.

There is no separation between the time for school and the time for their children. It has been

difficult academically for many, and some feel guilty about not balancing their time amid a

pandemic. It is the case of Melissa, a young woman from Puerto Rico who is studying law, a

very demanding career. She had already met with the dean of students to present her needs to go

back to the classroom.

Lately, feelings of guilt have come out because sometimes I have to tell my child I can't play, tell her no. With the pandemic, everything has been transferred to the home. She thinks that it is synonymous with me being available to play, but the reality is that I don't, I have to read cases to prepare jurisprudence. I have to prepare for exams. It is very difficult. It is exhausting, I need to use a time, for example, at dawn where I should sleep. Sometimes I need those hours to comply with my university.

Even with grown children, student mothers must juggle between spaces to accommodate their children's educational and social needs as well as their own. Nevertheless, some students

feel happy to work from home because they spend time with their children that otherwise would

not exist. More than one student reported feeling anxious about the status of the pandemic, and

some even revealed feeling sadness and depression. Some students have received mental health

support from the school or their own devices, but not all have found therapists for themselves.

This topic came up in my conversation with Andrea; since being a single mother, she is mostly

alone with her baby.

I never before had anxiety, and now, in the pandemic, I find myself with moments of great anxiety without being able to connect to the present. I know that this is devastating, I have already been doing my master's degree for three years, and it still is a challenge. Thoughts have come to me of dropping off school, but my motivation is that when my child starts school, I [need to] have a solid job to have more possibility of work. That has been my main motivation beyond learning because I am interested in it, but it is also a move, a strategy.

Although students regularly suffer from anxiety, the pandemic heightens their anxiety about their roles as mothers and students. Strategies that used to work for them during the pandemic do not work anymore. Transferring the work or school to the home creates an unbalance in their settled and fragile organizational structures. Feelings of isolation arose because the students could not see friends and family for a long time. The childcare the family provided was no longer available during the pandemic, which means that they cannot take the time to focus on schoolwork while they are home. The pandemic was important for student mothers because it forced them to confront the fears of mixing their two worlds. The home became the school in many ways, and new issues arose. The climax of this story is not on how they battle with the pandemic but on how they were forced to change abruptly to fit the school's needs. Given the changes, the battle is certainly external, such as lack of space, childcare, or self-care time. But the real battle was internal; student mothers battled their expectations in the pandemic and their ideas of motherhood. What matters for student mothers is not doing a perfect job but balancing their worlds, so both areas of their lives are equally important.

The pandemic had real consequences for student mothers. The pandemic disrupted their lives and changed their ideas about being a student and being a mother. The urgency in the voices of the student mothers confirmed this to me. I am no stranger to disasters similar to a pandemic. In hurricanes, lives change, people wake up to a different reality. My first disaster was hurricane George in 1998 when I was ten years old. We had no power and no running water for weeks, but I have many good memories of my family and neighbors. I remember the fear and excitement of being amid the storm, but also the sadness of seeing that most of the trees had fallen and that our neighbors' roof was gone. In Puerto Rico, mutual aid is the most natural part

of the culture. Helping your neighbors was the task of everyone in the house, from the oldest to the youngest. I could not see it then, but now I see how many levels of oppression there are when disaster strikes. Like Naomi Klein says in her book ‘The Battle for Paradise,’ disaster capitalism takes advantage of the times people are most vulnerable to push forward their exploitation strategies. These strategies in Puerto Rico usually had something to do with privatizing public assets. The pandemic brought its alcohol wipes and masks markets but has also pushed forward more important processes such as transferring the office to the home or making school online. This last one has had the most consequences for student mothers.

Student mothers amidst the pandemic do not feel they are on solid ground. Their material lives are concretely affected by the shift to online school. Their home lives and school get mixed, imposing new routines and challenges. At the same time, there are emotional challenges where the students feel the pressure of mixing both worlds. Everyone assumed that the pandemic would challenge students, but universities were not prepared for the conditions students encountered at home. Although there are apparent differences between natural disasters and a public health pandemic, one similarity remains – their ability to disrupt students' lives. The physical and mental challenges damage student mothers personally. The resources to fight for their needs are limited, mainly because student mothers must arrange their support before meeting their demands. Balancing one more responsibility could become a burden for student mothers.

El Balance

For student mothers, balance means many things. It is not only balancing housework and schoolwork, but it is also balancing their personal time and the time they dedicate to their children. Flexibility comes with balance, as students need to evolve to meet their challenges.

Adapting to their new circumstances is a form of balance; student mothers make many and constant changes to their schedules to have time for their children's needs. Student mothers feel that balancing their world is a challenge, and they need to count on all their support systems to do so. Alejandra was reflecting on this while she was taking her lunch break to talk to me about her experiences in college:

Being a mother, having a million things to balance, working full-time, going to school full-time has been difficult. I don't like to pay the petty party; it has been difficult, but I've been able to deal with it. I hope my child sees that. I would take my daughter to class, I want to do that. I want students to see that it is OK if you have to bring your kids to class, that's fine.

Student mothers struggled with balance, they used one main form to balance their time at home and their responsibilities as students. They sacrifice their social and emotional life to pay more attention to their children; many also sacrifice the health of their relationships. Student mothers sacrifice their experiences as students in college and the university's activities and opportunities to expand their network. More than one student explained that having a child deprived them of going to conferences, associations, or professional development. Sometimes they compartmentalized their roles as mothers and students, while other times, they tried to merge the two, meaning they could be working with their child nearby or in the class. This way, they felt that they did not miss opportunities. It was the case with Penelope. I talked to her late at night while she was practicing the routine she describes as sad but necessary, named the 'Crying Out Method' to help their children sleep and self-soothe.

I couldn't go to the meetings that were going on [in school] to create more connections for me. They are very important. Student meetings seemed more than they were for children, and I felt very old. We went to conferences, they let us take our child. We went and he went to different talks in the stroller. The doctors played with my baby.

Student mothers do not have an option but to balance their schoolwork and the housework. Balance is more of an imposition than a typical process for student mothers. Expectations of how this balance should look like are common for student mothers. The balancing process for student mothers is severe, it is not a process that supports their development. They are always expected to be balanced, even if mentally and physically exhausted. The university does not offer student mothers the opportunities to develop time management skills. Rather than helping student mothers, the university expects them to have these skills already. The sacrifices student mothers endure to balance their lives are not reasonable because they are being asked to rearrange their priorities based on the university's priorities.

I have never been able to have a completely balanced life. I think the aspirations of having a balanced life do not correspond to what is expected of people in the workforce and school. While work and school demand time and resources, self-care and self-development are abandoned. The expectations of others toward me have shaped what I expect of myself. As for student mothers, my self-identity is questioned when others put their expectations on me. My experience during my doctorate has been one of imbalance, however, I know that there is a difference between my experience and that of student mothers. Nevertheless, I can see that the consequences for student mothers are much more profound than mine. On the one hand, the family is one source of expectations that pressures mothers. On the other hand, society also expects mothers to be wholly absorbed by their role, leaving no choice on how they want to relate to their motherhood experience.

In this fieldnote, the ecological levels are revealed throughout the experiences of student

mothers in college. Expectations about student mothers are situated in the macrosystem, meaning there are influences to the lives of student mothers that come from social and cultural values, which student mothers cannot control. Expectations can be a source of frustration for student mothers, and many feel guilty for not fulfilling the family's expectations. Guilt comes from internalizing these expectations that derive from historical gender biases. In the microsystem, these expectations are reproduced by peers and professors through microaggressions too. The ecological systems are syncretized when the student mothers deal with proximal influences like comments from peers and more distant influences such as culture. The experiences of student mothers happen in multiple ecological levels that intermingle. This relationship between the different ecological levels creates a new ecological system, the mesosystem. Bronfenbrenner (2005) explains that development happens at each ecological level, especially when ecological levels meet each other. However, this development is not caused by the ecology alone, rather student mothers have the agency to influence these ecological levels (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Student mothers reported feeling anxious mainly with people and processes in their microsystem, such as family, children, or school. Everyday tasks can be overwhelming, especially if there is no material and emotional support from others. Nevertheless, events out of their control, such as the pandemic, are detrimental to student mothers' mental health. The pandemic is an example of how the macrosystem can directly affect student mothers' lives. In the case of student mothers, patriarchal ideologies about being a mother are mixed with contextual and historical influences. Bronfenbrenner (2005) believed that the influence of the macrosystem could affect the development of people. In the example of student mothers, their development as a student and as a mother was affected by the pandemic materially and

psychologically. Student mothers reported increased anxiety during the pandemic because it was more difficult to fulfill others' expectations.

The balancing of the students' worlds endure in college happens in the mesosystem, where two or more systems interact. The relationship between the home and the university creates a new reality that students navigate using different strategies. These strategies help them balance one reality with the other. The mesosystem is also seen in other areas of students' lives, such as when the pandemic in the macrosystem interacted with the university in the exosystem. Together, these interactions can help understand how the relationship between the different systems affects student mothers' experiences in college.

Although Bronfenbrenner (2005) suggests using the chronosystem for accounting for the historical sequence in the lives of student mothers, I believe York and Mancus' (2009) perspective on how history dictates the current events in students' lives. This view is critical, given that, for example, we could not understand how minorities are affected more by the pandemic or why the university has a male-centric culture, and how these two appear in the lives of Latina graduate student mothers. Bronfenbrenner (2005) does not account for the importance of power disparities women experience in their lives. This void can lead to making erroneous assumptions about their development. Contrary to Bronfenbrenner's (2005) idea that context and personal attributes are enough to understand students' social address, I believe power relations need to be considered to understand their positionality. Historically and now, the masculine, white, and western political and social views predominate. If this is not considered, one can assume student mothers have the same experience as men in college without questioning who has more privilege and access to resources.

Fieldnote 5: El Apoyo

Academic Support

Student mothers report having little to no academic support. Most students reported not seeking academic support on campus, while others recruited their friends to help them academically. One student mother confounded the support from family with academic support, with her husband being her primary resource. Mentors and professors support students academically, but not to the extent student mothers want. Some say that the academic support they received was inadequate for them as Latina women. The support they received was not appropriate for Latinas because white males gave the support, making them feel like they would not understand their needs and viewpoints. Elena told me about her experience looking for academic support at the university.

I went on the website to see who the tutor was, and there was a picture of a white man, and our papers in social work is about self-reflections about social issues. I didn't feel comfortable to send my paper to someone in the university who is white.

Although most student mothers would benefit from custom academic support, academic support for students who have children is non-existent. Students who search for academic support are disappointed by the lack of support available for Latina student mothers. Their backgrounds and fields of study also influence their interactions with the academic support available at the university. If there is no representation in the resources they receive in college, student mothers would not feel comfortable reaching out for help. Unlike other students in the university, they do not find the help they need at the university. Many reported having little or no support from peers and professors, given the individualistic culture of the university. The

university's culture is one of competition rather than cooperation and solidarity. Student mothers feel this when they cannot reach the same potential as students who do not have children.

Emotional Support

Student mothers often do not have an outlet to vent and be supported emotionally. Nevertheless, married people pointed to their partners as their primary emotional support. Others pointed to their friends, especially female friends and women with children, as a central emotional support system. The support consists of listening and supporting the students' choices through constant contact online or in person. Women with children are common friends with student mothers, given the facility to get together while their children play. Others report being less social since they had children and not creating meaningful relationships with people in school. It was the case of Elena, especially when she was in community college, as she was not able to get close to others.

With my peers, I didn't build any connection with the ones in community college. Como estas embarazada con que, me I guess internalizing the stigma of a young [Latina] mom. I didn't build connections because I was like, I'm pregnant, they are going to be like, 'You fucked up.' I was very self-conscious, pressured. I don't recall them looking down on me or anything like that. It felt like como que no hice connections.

When they find a community to support them and their children, they get involved for their own good and their children's. In the case of Andrea and other student mothers, she found support in the community and fellow student mothers she met through social media. Andrea told me that since she moved into her apartment, where most people in the building are single mothers, she has found a niche of emotional support and shared parenting.

An important factor is social media; otherwise, I would not have connected with women with similar interests and parenting styles. With my neighbors, we live in small apartments, and they need to take the children out. And I opened the door for my baby to play up front, little by little we met, and every afternoon at 8 pm, we were outside

talking. For Halloween, we had a party right here. All of Christmas, too, we are four neighbors, and we always do something to make the children happy. We decorated the corridors, we ordered a *lechón* to be roasted. The pandemic united me with my community of neighbors that we are all single mothers, and it has been nice.

The support student mothers receive in college is scarce, nevertheless, they create spaces for their children to meet other children. Student mothers are proactive in seeking out support from friends and family. This support comes in different forms, but emotional support is the one most students feel lacks. Students have limited time and space to generate community; many feel they cannot create many new connections during their time in college. The lack of emotional support makes them feel isolated. Feeling isolated at school makes them feel unwelcome and do not belong in the university. Student mothers need more spaces with people like them to make meaningful connections.

Emotional support is often neglected as a need students have in college. Although the university offers mental health services, these are not shared enough with the students. The university could provide students with activities and resources such as mental health therapy for them and their families. Students complained about never getting to know the academic and social resources at the university. More than one student mother was already taking therapy outside the school or wanted to take therapy but did not trust the university's mental health resources. Sometimes, the therapies offered by the university are for a short time rather than it being available as an alternative to therapy outside school. In many instances, the services offered at school are urgent for student mothers and help in moments of crisis.

Family Support and Childcare

When student mothers think of family support, they think of their closest family, partners, parents, parents-in-law, etc. They are the team of people from whom the student mothers

primarily receive support. This support can be financial, emotional, or academic. The main support student mothers receive from their families is childcare. Student mothers do not have the financial freedom to pay for daycare while in school, and some use the school's daycare. Most student mothers have their mothers or mothers-in-law as primary caretakers while they go to school or work on their schoolwork. Divorced students feel that having a good relationship with the child's other parent facilitates their home and schoolwork. It is the case of Melissa, who shares custody of her child with her ex-husband. It allows her to have 50% of her time free from caregiving responsibilities, which gives her much more time to focus on her studies and maintain a social life.

I have good support networks. Even though my baby is the victim of divorced parents, we have joint custody. He is 50% with the baby and me 50% because he deserves to share with both figures. My relationship with his father is excellent; sometimes I tell him I have finals, I need you to stay with her, [and] he stays with her.

For married women, their husbands are their biggest support. They all spoke of having emotional and financial support from their husbands, who also cared for the household and children. Luisa said:

My husband brings a lot of like, 'Don't worry I got this,' and he sees when I'm stressed and he is like, 'You have to let me know what to do because I don't know, I could do something that I think is helpful but will stress you out even more, so tell me exactly what to do.' So, to have that is more than a crutch, it's my foundation, my solid foundation to always have that.

The support student mothers receive from their family and friends is why they stay in school. Childcare is received from inside and outside the family. However, the help they provide student mothers in balancing the responsibilities at home with those in school is what they have in common. Nevertheless, some students have had unresponsive families that do not provide childcare or had trouble convincing their families to help with childcare. It was the case of

Penelope, whose family is in South America, and her husband's family in the south of the U.S. mainly were not involved in childcare.

My husband, his whole family is in the south. We are just the two of us, which has been very shocking because we have felt they do not help us that much. We have been unlucky.

Jessie had a similar experience when asking her mother-in-law for help with childcare when she was about to start graduate school.

The date was getting closer and closer. 'Are you going to be able to help?' and she wouldn't respond. I was just like, if no one is going to help me, I'm going to solve it on my own.

Stable and affordable childcare is mostly how student mothers have time to go to school. Not having stable and affordable childcare means staying home, paying high prices, or depending on others for childcare. The family mostly does childcare, especially the women taking on childcare responsibility. It means childcare in the case of student mothers is feminized. For me, it is not surprising that women are doing most of the work here. Historically, women have been pressured to have children and principal caretakers. It means the unjust arrangement reproduces patriarchal expectations of women's work. My grandmother used to take care of my siblings and me in my home while my mother studied. Most women do this work without remuneration and with very good intentions. However, for many women, taking care of their grandchildren is very taxing. Many grandmothers and mothers-in-law are made to feel guilty for their lack of help as if taking care of children even at an old age is their responsibility. Of course, these women are not asking for anything in return, even when they do much more than keep an eye on a child. The university counts on this invisible labor to maintain the practice of ignoring the needs of student mothers in college.

School Support

The most common answer to the question ‘have you received resources from the university that cater to student mothers?’ was ‘absolutely nothing.’ Depending on the university, the support offered to pregnant students and students with children is not comprehensive.

Students reported that the daycare is unreliable, and the students are not prioritized. Alejandra was reflecting at the time when she was pregnant.

There were no resources, no one ever reached out to me, never got an email from anyone. I was in the system; they knew I was pregnant. I was never flagged or given resources, never given extra accommodations. I had to advocate for myself as a mother. I really wish there was an open space where you can go to for extra support. There wasn’t like a club of moms or something or groups for moms.

There are no resources for student mothers’ support, no clubs or organizations for student mothers, and no family days. The lack of material resources makes bringing a child inside the campus more complex, such as changing tables or functional elevators. Frustrated with the university, Andrea told me about how she navigates the university’s campus space with a baby:

As having a baby is rare – ‘Look at this one! She has a baby and is in university!’ – for example, I walk with the stroller, you have to go up floors, and the elevator does not work. The factor that there are [no] facilities to have a stroller in the university feels terrible. There are no changing tables in the bathrooms. When I was walking with the baby one time, I changed the baby in the library, and the librarian told me how it is possible that there are no changing tables in the bathrooms. That feels ugly like it is not a space to take children.

The accommodations reported were few, including some of the university’s accessibility office accommodations. Students reported that there are breastfeeding rooms. However, not all rooms have the same resources, as some have expressing machines and refrigerators for the students, while others only have a room. Some students never used the rooms. Only one student reported getting a scholarship for paid family leave. When asked if they would participate in

activities for families on campus, all student mothers agreed that they would use the resources and go to the activities. Mariana was dumbfounded that the university had never done activities for families in her eight years in school. She suggested things that would make her life as a student mother easier.

No, the university, if it has, I have not found out, but absolutely nothing. They do not promote seeking help, not even a list of free mental health providers. Something as simple as preferential enrollment would be a game-changer because there are classes that I have not been able to take because of the schedule. Those types of accommodations are not spoken [about]. I never felt that there was anything in particular for me, I always placed myself with others. I had to do it like the others. It is not a preference, the same with the care center, entering is difficult because they do not give preference to the students.

The university's resources are not shared with student mothers in a meaningful way; most students cannot recall when they were officially oriented. Alejandra said her peer parents helped her navigate the university's resources, pointing her to the offices around the university. Meanwhile, Luisa told me that she received knowledge about school resources through her mom, who previously studied there.

No, my mom did. It turns out I went to the same undergrad school as my mom, and my mom, because she already had two girls when [she] my mom went to undergrad [...] My sister and my mom went to live in the family dorms at the university, and later I went too. So, my mom knew about all the resources, because she had already taken advantage of all of them when she was there. Eight years later, she told me, '*Mija*, go fill out this application for this, so you can get a family home.

The lack of resources and accommodations for student mothers makes them feel like outsiders. Student mothers welcome the resources that exist because they support their goals. Nevertheless, students learn about the resources from other sources from other students or even their families. Rather than finding a welcoming and well-provided university, students find microaggressions and institutional violence. Unlike other students' accommodations,

accommodations for student mothers are not a priority. Student mothers are seemingly invisible to policymakers in the university.

Institutional violence is tangible in the lives of student mothers. Facilities as basic as changing tables and working elevators are sometimes where the university starts to neglect the needs of student mothers. However, there are instances where institutional violence against women is apparent, such as in the case of pregnant athletes being discriminated against or sexual violence being covered up by the schools. I believe student mothers are discriminated against daily if they bring their children to campus and also receive microaggressions from peers and the antagonism with professors for being interested in topics related to parenting. Universities need to uniformly share their resources with students, especially those with limited time on campus. Student mothers need their orientation to focus on services for pregnant students and students with children.

Support is an external process to student mothers, meaning they have little or no control over their support at home and school. Bronfenbrenner (2005) referred to the institutions that make decisions that affect the person as the exosystem. According to student mothers, academic, emotional, and school support are three areas lacking in college. They feel like they are not considered in the decisions that affect them in the university. Students need to arrange their support most of the time, mostly depending on their family for support. It takes time and effort from student mothers and can ignite a chain of events that negatively affect students. The example of Elena brings this process to light. She did not want to be misunderstood by the white tutor, and her fears impeded her from receiving the academic support she needed. This process is also present in their experiences looking for emotional support and school support.

Elena's experience also reveals how race, gender, and ethnicity can mediate their approach to the university's resources. First, being pregnant is not accounted for by the university, so they cannot offer comprehensive support. The male-centric culture of the university has not responded to their diverse population. For women, their essential needs are not considered relevant enough to change the culture and policies that affect them. Institutional violence can be seen as the obliviousness of the university to the student mothers' most basic needs. Second, being Latina involves knowing how others perceive you and the prejudices we must battle. Their fear of being misunderstood can lead to them not feeling safe looking for school support. Nevertheless, student mothers are proactive in acquiring support despite the lack of support from school and some family members. It contradicts deficit mentality because students are not passive recipients of support, but they take control over this experience by searching for support whenever they can find it.

Conclusion

Student mothers in this study do not feel like martyrs of a drama, rather they feel like the heroines of a great epic story. At the end of each interview, I asked them what they would tell other mothers who want to continue studying. First, they cautioned that it was no easy task to balance out their responsibilities and needed support to go through with it. However, they also would like them to be honest with themselves and not play into society's stereotypes. They should aspire to be interdependent rather than independent because people are willing to help. Self-love and self-care are fundamental to becoming successful in college, and this does not mean that they are selfish.

Discussion

The HET helped reorganize the experiences of student mothers into different levels in their ecology. In the mesosystems of the students, where we find the interactions between the different ecological systems, I found their emotional well-being was fragile, and anxiety and depression were part of their experiences navigating college. Balancing and merging their worlds helped them manage their stress. In the microsystems, I found that the students' families and friends were the first line of defense from the unbalanced reality of being a student mother. Support came from the people closest to the student mothers, such as friends and family and peers and professors. These people constituted their microsystems, and their central role was to support the student with childcare, academically or emotionally. In the exosystem resides the college climate and the school support. These influence student mothers' feelings of belonging to the university. Students received support from the university, although it was not always what they needed. But mainly, the chilly climate the students felt was caused by a lack of resources for them in the university and the microaggressions from peers and professors. Finally, in the macrosystem, the culture and the social expectations were materialized. The Latinx culture pressures student mothers from Latinx backgrounds by reproducing '*familismo*' in their relationships with their families. In the second year of the pandemic, I see in the macrosystem how the pandemic disrupted the lives of the student mothers, especially the fragile balance they were already experiencing.

I will also use BFT to understand the intersections of race, gender, and social class in the experiences of these student mothers. It will help me identify the areas of their lives where gender inequity is present. I have identified three areas where BFT can help me analyze the

experiences of Latina graduate student mothers. First, the good mother stereotype is reproduced by peers and family through comments and microaggressions that can cause stress and anxiety in student mothers. Second, BFT can help me better understand the students' sentiments of guilt that come from not dedicating 100% of themselves to their children and can cause them to feel selfish. Finally, culture, reproduced through childrearing and replicating traditions, can cause students to question cultural traditions. I will also use CHE, which would allow me to understand the historical and atemporal characteristics of the experiences faced by the student mothers in my study. I will examine how the institution's history reproduces patriarchy through rules, regulations, policies, and culture of the university, which can cause feelings of estrangement in student mothers. The COVID-19 pandemic will also be examined through CHE's lens, given its historical nature.

Mesosystem

The relationships between systems can be seen in each ecological system. The relationship between systems is dialectical, meaning they influence each other to generate a new reality in the mesosystem. Student mothers learned how to manage the contradicting nature of the influences of the different ecological systems. Not achieving this balance can lead to feelings of guilt and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. Gigliotti (2014) explained that balancing the mother's role and the student's role could make students sensitive to stress. It was the case for the students in this study. They had to balance their lives to ensure they had enough time with their children to not feel guilty for not spending enough time with them. Meaning that for some students, compartmentalizing is the best strategy to navigate college, while for others, it means merging their lives as mothers and students. Quimby and O'Brien (2006) remind us that

balancing roles can lead to positive psychological outcomes. Nevertheless, for the students in this study, guilt was the most frequent feeling that the student mothers referred to while talking about spending time away from their children.

Brook's (2015) study on guilt in students' lives underlines that the main reason students feel guilty is that there is an expectation that they are the primary caretakers of the children. It was also true for the students in my study who thought they were selfish for studying in college. Guilt is a powerful feeling, and in this case, it is a gendered sentiment. The women in the study felt they were not doing enough as mothers to take care of their children. Furthermore, they feel this guilt comes from internal and external pressures. Family and the Latinx culture can push student mothers to feel guilty. Brook (2015) brings the idea that this is a gendered issue because this feeling is "closely linked to assumptions that, irrespective of the demands of studying, they [women] will carry the main responsibility for caring, while student-fathers and male partners [...] remind largely absolved from childcare" (p. 517).

In all relationships between systems, there exist power inequities. Although Bronfenbrenner (2005) argues that looking at developmental outcomes without looking at the context misconstrues the inferences about someone's background, he does not consider the power structures at play in each system that allows or discourage the development of students. In the experiences of student mothers, some systems have more power over them than others, for example, students can have more control over family than over the government. In the case of student mothers, this power inequity between systems leads to adverse experiences in the university. Students must confront the influences of ecological systems out of their reach while balancing the ones in their control. This power inequity has historical roots and can be seen in

the racial, gender, and class inequities students experience in college. Student mothers develop navigational strategies to balance these influences, either by merging worlds or compartmentalizing them. Either way, student mothers are looking for ways to succeed despite these influences.

Microsystem

In the microsystem, the student mothers use their network to counter the feelings of guilt and help them balance their responsibilities as mothers and students. For the students in this research, the family was their primary support system, helping them emotionally, academically, and with childcare. Students also had unsupportive family members who commented on the students' decisions or were unwilling to help with childcare. Gill et al. (2015) also speak of unsupportive family members in the lives of student mothers. They believe that student mothers can be severely affected by negative emotions surrounding them. Such was the case of Jessie, who was frustrated with her unresponsive family members. Nevertheless, for students in this study, spending time with their children was seen both as a duty and a way of demonstrating affection to them. The emotional support they receive from their husbands and friends can positively affect student mothers, as they feel listened to and supported in their decisions. Some students wish to break the barrier between the time spent with their children and the time spent in the classroom or the workspace.

'It takes a village to raise a child' is the perfect example of how culture has crystalized the notion that childrearing is the duty of many. The village that supports student mothers comprises those closest to them, such as family, friends, and partners. Nonetheless, the primary responsibility for their children is on them, even when they are married. The division of labor in

the household and the responsibility of taking care of the children falls on the mother rather than the father. Some students prefer to outsource the household or childcare labor than toll their husbands with it, such as Jessie and Penelope's cases. Patriarchy is present in these arrangements. Women must request help from others, especially their mothers and mothers-in-law, but rarely their fathers or fathers-in-law. There is a disparity in who cares for the children; women do the most work, mostly without payment.

Exosystem

Student mothers in this research reported that peers and professors could contribute to the chilly climate they feel on campus. In my third fieldnote, I explained how the students could view the looks and unsolicited comments as aggressions that can make them doubt if they belong on campus. However, not only the peers contribute to a chilly climate. In the case of Luisa, it can be seen how extreme the experiences with professors can be. Adding to Duquane-Watson's (2007) work on the chilly climate student mothers perceive in college. The interviews in this study captured the instances where peers and professors made students feel inadequate or unfit to be students. The chilly climate of a university did not develop in a vacuum; rather, the university's history has generated an unequal experience for student mothers. The attributes that we now see as natural in the university are all but natural; they are culturally and socially constructed. The male-centered culture of the university reflects the university's history (Allen, 2011). Student mothers confront microaggressions based on the assumption that they are not in college. Scholarly work, such as writing papers or teaching, was based on the availability of men with wives who could take care of the children while they worked (Allen, 2011). For student mothers, this prerequisite is unrealistic and puts pressure on student mothers to perform at an

idyllic level. Visible in the dynamics inside and outside the classroom, the result of this study suggests that this chilly climate is still affecting student mothers around the U.S. The environment student mothers are submerged can be internalized by the student mother when feeling like an impostor in their roles as students. The university's culture contributes to the feelings of estrangement on campus, as the student mothers perceived.

The institutions in the exosystem, such as the university, reproduce the dominant ideology and projects it to the microsystem of the student mothers. However, not all the influences of the exosystem are out of the control of people. Rather than student mothers being passive receivers of these influences, they have some agency in the form of self-advocacy. When student mothers choose self-advocacy, they voice their needs to the institution's representatives, such as professors. The outcome of this advocacy can be positive or negative and can empower or disempower student mothers. Between the microsystem of the student mothers and the exosystem, power inequities generate a chilly climate for them while in college. The lack of policies and resources affects student mothers' motivation and sense of belonging. Student mothers' mental health can be affected by the influences of the exosystem, and the guilt of not being a good enough student can lead to impostor syndrome. Nevertheless, the university's potential to empower student mothers is also reported by student mothers, such as when the institution acknowledges their needs or professors have good relationships with them.

Macrosystem

In the macrosystem, student experiences in college are mediated by their more general culture and the stereotypes of being a good mother. Mottarella et al. (2018) say that this stereotype can "impede a women's process of social integration and adjustment upon return to

school after the birth of a child” (p. 223). I found that student mothers struggling with this stereotype believed that this could come from the internal pressure they put on themselves. Others said that it was a pressure that comes from society. The Latinx culture was described as another way mothers are pressured to be good mothers. Espinoza (2010) talks of ‘*familismo*,’ or the culture of putting family first. It is similar to what Alejandra, in this study, said about their parents putting the pressure of being a mother before being a doctoral student. But the pressure for the student mothers in the study was also in being a good graduate student. Being present and being available is part of being a good student. Some felt they should be allowed to do more, while others felt they were not doing enough to be good students. Both pressures come from the macrosystem.

The influences of the microsystem are extensive, for example, when this research was taking place, another entirely new obstacle came about for student mothers. The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the routines and lives of student mothers in this study. Although the environmental crisis is studied in some areas of knowledge, little is known about how the pandemic changed the lives of Latinas student mothers in college. Nevertheless, Harper (2003) explains that the environment influences the ability to fulfill their needs. Crisis, such as natural disasters, violent warfare, famine, migration, and diseases, can challenge students’ stability and the ability to acquire resources. The pandemic disrupted the schooling of student mothers and their family life. This historical moment is making society and student mothers evolve.

People, institutions, and processes in all systems help reproduce the influence of the macrosystem in the lives of student mothers even including the person through internalization. The macrosystem is so powerful that it can change all other systems in some instances. The

macrosystem affects student mothers' self-esteem and development in college due to the power inequities between the microsystem and the dominant culture. Student mothers make decisions based on these power inequities, for example, when students succumb to the culture of *familismo*. Although the macrosystem is influencing women, they can counteract these influences by identifying the inequity and taking actions in their personal lives to correct it, for example, the case of Jessie, whose parenting idiosyncrasy went against the Latinx homophobic elements. Nevertheless, sometimes, the macrosystem's power cannot be avoided, such as the pandemic. This experience changed all ecological levels. Where power inequities are more rigid, and student mothers cannot exercise their agency to enact change in the macrosystem.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Study

This research aims to understand the experiences of Latina graduate student mothers from an ecological perspective. This perspective allows me to think of their lives as ecologies where the factors that influence their lives have a relationship with other ecologies. CHE and BFT helped me identify the power struggles and the historical influences in the lives of Latina graduate student mothers. Understanding their navigation strategies and support systems was the secondary aim of this research. From the interviews with the student mothers, I gathered several vital themes. From these themes, four theoretical categories emerged: people, circumstances, feelings, and settings. These aspects constituted their experience in college and guided me in the construction of the five fieldnotes. In each fieldnote, I discussed the experiences of student mothers in the form of a composite narrative.

In the first fieldnote, I created a profile of each student mother based on their interview and my observations. In the second fieldnote, I explain the context where students' experiences unfold. I described the Latinx culture the student mothers in this study are a part. I identified the ecological systems that influence the context of the university. In the second fieldnote, I focused on the student mothers' experiences challenging the deficit mentality. Their relationship with their children motivates and inspires student mothers to become better students and achieve their academic goals. In the fieldnote, I discussed the challenges student mothers confront during their time in college. I featured the influences from the different ecological systems, from proximal

influences such as professors and peers to the most distant ones such as the pandemic. In the final fieldnote, I explained the support systems student mothers have during their time in college. I centered on how their family serves as a shield against the influences of more powerful ecological systems.

In the discussion section, I highlighted the literature on the experiences of student mothers that best explain the experiences student mothers have in college. For each ecological system, I discuss my conclusions based on the critical perspectives of CHE and BFT. I believe the ecological systems have a dialectical relationship in the mesosystem, where the systems influence each other. In the microsystem, people can protect students from negative influences from other systems. The dominant ideology is reproduced through policies and institutional culture in the exosystem. The macrosystem influences all other systems in an unequal way and student mothers have little control over the influences of the macrosystem. Through the lens of BFT, I concluded that the relationships between ecological systems are unequal and are influenced by patriarchal ideologies. CHE allowed me to understand that each ecological system is dependent on the historical developments of society. Together, this critical view brings to light the biases and unaccounted historical development of the ecological systems in Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Human Ecology Theory.

Reinstatement of the Research Questions

1. How do minoritized student mothers experience college?
 - a. What navigational strategies do they use for college success?
 - b. What support systems do minoritized student mothers have in college?

With the first question, I wanted to deconstruct the experiences of student mothers into their ecological levels to understand the different influences they receive in college. The experiences of Latina student mothers in college are relevant in a space and a time where minoritized people's needs are not a priority. Focusing on their navigation strategies allowed me to understand their mechanisms to succeed in college. Their navigational strategies change depending on student mothers' ecological systems. Meanwhile, studying the support systems allowed me to know how students shield themselves from the influences of more powerful ecological systems. The support student mothers receive primarily comes from female family members such as mothers and mothers-in-law. It is due to the historical influences of patriarchy over the lives and spaces students inhabit. Unified, these research questions guided me to bring to light the nuances of the experiences of student mothers in areas where there is a lack of literature.

Review of Methodology

The qualitative methodology I utilized in this research helped me capture the essence of the experience of student mothers and the meaning they give to these experiences. I recruited minoritized student mothers, from which Latina graduate students answered the call. The criteria I chose for this study allowed me to limit the findings to Latina graduate student mothers. I generated eight open-ended interviews to explore the experiences of student mothers. These interviews allowed me to appreciate their experiences from their point of view. I transcribed and coded the interviews utilizing an axial coding technique, and to triangulate, I coded for each research question and ecological system present in the experience. I discovered 18 themes from this analysis that I sectioned into five fieldnotes. I organized the themes into four theoretical

categories that traverse the experiences student mothers share in this research. The themes and categories helped me write the final composite narrative. The composite narrative in the form of five fieldnotes aided me in portraying the experiences of student mothers in college in an accessible manner. I intertwined my thoughts and anecdotes into the fieldnote to identify my privileges and biases while discussing the lives of Latina graduate student mothers.

Synopsis of Conceptual Framework

In this research, I utilized three theoretical frameworks that allowed me to have an in-depth understanding of the experiences of Latina graduate student mothers. Using HET, I organized the results of this research from an ecological perspective considering the different social influences that impact the experiences of student mothers in college. HET also helped me understand the relationship between ecological levels and how students relate to them. The analysis of the results of this research would not be complete without BFT. With BFT, I identified the inequities and biases in the experiences of Latina graduate student mothers in college. I learned about the power struggles between ecological levels and how they influence the lives of Latina graduate student mothers. The racialized and gendered nature of some experiences of student mothers is made clear, thanks to BFT. I also used CHE, which helped me identify the historical influences in the lives of student mothers. There is a development and co-evolution of the environment and the student mothers that changes them both; these are subjected to historical forces out of their control. From each theory, I extracted the aspects that helped me create a more nuanced profile of the experiences of Latina graduate student mothers in college.

Conclusions

This document's conclusion section is organized following Bronfenbrenner's (2005)

ecological systems. Doing this allows me to reach one conclusion for each system, which gets me to utilize this theoretical framework as a guide to the environment of the student mothers. For each ecological system, I also discuss the gender biases and inequities present in the experiences of student mothers. I considered the historical development of the ecological systems that illuminate why biases are integrated into the ecology of student mothers. Together, the theoretical framework gives the social location and acknowledges the social positionality of Latina student mothers in college.

Mesosystem

When the different ecological systems intermingle, the student mothers try to balance them; this causes anxiety and depression. The microsystem and the exosystem meet in the clash of school and childcare. This clash implies that student mothers feel guilty for studying and taking time away from their children. The microsystem and the macrosystem clash in the expectations society and culture put onto student mothers to be 'good mothers.' This stereotype causes student mothers to feel inadequate as mothers. Inequity between the ecological systems is plastered in their experiences as they are at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the influences of the ecological systems. The development of these systems cannot be isolated; they amalgamate in the daily lives of student mothers. History and power struggle influence how these systems interact with each other. The chilly climate of the university is an example of a culture that is reproduced to benefit men with wives. Student mothers feel at odds with this culture, making them feel they do not belong on campus. The chilly climate student mothers experience has evolved with history. The advancements of women in academia are reflected in their experiences. Nevertheless, their disadvantage is also present in their experience.

Microsystem

Student mothers mitigate the influences of other more powerful ecological systems with the help of people in their microsystem. Family and friends procure them academic, emotional, and childcare support. The help family and friends give to student mothers with childcare is paramount for studying. This help is gendered, given that most of the time, mothers and mothers-in-law take on the responsibility of childcare which is the main support they receive from family. This inequity is based on social and historical biases related to women being the main caretaker of children. In these systems, students have the most agency to voice their needs. Student mothers are proactive in getting support from others and voice their needs to their families to balance the influences of other ecological systems.

Exosystem

The institutions in the exosystem influence the lives of student mothers. These institutions reproduce the dominant ideologies displayed in the macrosystems through the policies and culture of the institutions. The college climate resides in the exosystem. Professors and peers project the culture onto student mothers. People in the university can reproduce the culture of men with wives, which excludes student mothers. Furthermore, professors can make student mothers feel like they are unfit to be students. It can deter students from seeking support or accommodations from professors. Peers contribute to this chilly climate through comments and by imposing their expectations of a good student on student mothers. The university's history is reproduced through its culture, and the biases that affect student mothers are present in the chilly climate they experience. However, student mothers' agency allows them to interact with this chilly climate and advocate for their needs to be served.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem influences all other ecological systems. The culture, expectations, or the pandemic influenced student mothers' experiences in college. Culture can influence their parenting styles, leading to resistance to the negative aspects of the culture, such as machismo. Expectations of being a good mother or a good student can make students stressed. Student mothers sometimes internalize the stereotypes and sometimes resist them to motivate themselves to continue their studies. The COVID-19 pandemic is one influence of the macrosystem that has disrupted the balance student mothers try to maintain daily. The pandemic has changed their education and household work, and all other areas of their lives. Students' efforts go to balance the influences of the different systems on their microsystem. The macrosystem is also dependent on historical undulations, and as society evolves, the macrosystem evolves. The biases and prejudices drawn from history are present in the microsystem, influencing all other ecological systems.

Implications

There are many levels of implications for this study. Utilizing the HET's ecological system, I identified implications at each level. Starting with the microsystem, I believe solidarity is the key. Peers and professors can reflect on their biases concerning student mothers, befriend them, and be an ally. Being present for student mothers can be as simple as changing the time people meet over assignments or writing together. Professors need to acknowledge students' responsibilities beyond the classroom. Also, by changing negative behaviors toward student mothers such as comments about inconveniences related to having children or microaggressions. Family members of student mothers need to be supported as well. For example, there needs to be

a redistribution of tasks among female and male family members to reduce the load on female caretakers such as grandmothers and mothers-in-law.

The exosystem is where institutions influence the experiences of student mothers in college. Higher education institutions can start by changing and refining the infrastructure of the campus to reflect the needs of student mothers on campus, such as having changing tables in all bathrooms, accessible and well-equipped breastfeeding rooms, and areas for children on campus such as parks. Childcare at school must always be affordable and accessible. The university can support students with childcare vouchers as well. Programs for student mothers could support their academic and personal development, such as parenting support groups and family therapy. Student mothers need more opportunities to network with professors, peers, and professionals in their fields. The university can provide more research and other networking opportunities for student mothers. They can also offer professional development and guidelines for professors regarding student mothers. Finally, academia can support student mothers through research on their needs and the policies and culture of the university. Each ecological level offers a plethora of research areas from family to ideologies surrounding student mothers. Research needs to be further developed on the needs of minoritized student mothers.

In the macrosystem, the culture influences the experiences of student mothers in college, especially the expectations regarding motherhood. Patriarchy is an all-encompassing system of exclusion for women. To combat it, an all-encompassing response is necessary, meaning that at the institutional, governmental, and personal level, we must take a stand against perpetrating the expectations and prejudices that keep student mothers in a disadvantageous position. If society keeps ignoring student mothers' needs, we are condemning many to poverty, doubling their

workloads, and preventing them from accessing economic and emotional stability. Furthermore, we are preventing women from achieving their full potential as students and mothers. Providing student mothers with the support they need and deserve can lead them to contribute their knowledge and wisdom back to society. Like the proverb says, “women sustain half of the sky” without their contributions to society, we will always be working to half of our potential as a species.

Strengths of the Study

One strength I identify in this study is the diversity of places inside and outside the U.S. from where student mothers came from. This diversity aided in my goal of capturing the experiences of student mothers around the U.S. and territories. The experiences of the Puerto Rican student mothers enriched this study by providing information from a territory of the U.S. whose higher education institutions are mainly not researched by scholars in the U.S. Students in the study were also from different Latin American countries and were of different ages and fields of study. Student mothers had different numbers of children. All student mothers self-selected improving the chances of having information-rich informants. This self-selection provided me with stories that showed the experiences of Latina graduate student mothers in college. Adding information about the historical moment of the COVID-19 pandemic is also a strength, given that the context is paramount to understanding the experiences of student mothers. Exploring the pandemic’s influences on the lives of student mothers gave the study more depth.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation I identify in this study is the sample size. Only eight people were interviewed; more students would have given the study more reliability. Students in the study were self-selected

to participate, which could have attracted students who already had negative experiences or were biased. Since most students were recruited from a Facebook group of Latinas in graduate school, the study is limited to a pool of only Latina graduate students. This small pool of participants makes the study capture only a part of all student mothers in the U.S. Another limitation is that the study has only one researcher interviewing and analyzing the data. Having a single observer can dent the findings through biased views throughout the research process.

Recommendations for Future Research

The literature on student mothers' experiences is still in development. There are still many areas of their experiences that have not been studied. One of the most expansive areas is the path of student mothers through the university, starting with the transition from high school to college and their community college experience. Little is known about student mothers in professional schools, especially those in sciences and mathematics. It is also vital to understand the areas where support does not exist and how student mothers navigate this lack of support, such as when they do not have a family. The diversity of student mothers has not been studied by scholars, especially those from minoritized ethnicities. Future research needs to focus on the needs of Afro-descendants and Asian and Native American student mothers.

Research Summary

There have been many social barriers in the history of women in education. These barriers have been inherited from a masculinist culture reproduced in colleges and universities until today. Nevertheless, the contributions of women to society are paramount to the development of civilization. Women's work has redefined how people relate to each other and their jobs inside and outside the home. Women are the primary caretakers of children; this

includes mothers, mothers-in-law, and other females who contribute to raising children.

Confounding the world of the house and the scholarly work seems like a contradiction to the culture of universities today. Women with children are invisible to many, from peers to the policymakers of the university.

This research aims to understand the experiences of female students with children while in college, understanding primarily the strategies they use to navigate college and the support systems at their disposal. To provide a lens from where to analyze the experiences of student mothers, Bronfenbrenner (2005) has provided me with tools to understand their experiences from an ecological perspective. Furthermore, through BFT, I analyzed the experiences of student mothers with the inequity in college. BFT helped me explore the power struggles that student mothers experience in college. At the same time, CHE aided me in capturing the historical influences in their experiences. These three frameworks combined to create a critical and feminist ecological perspective.

This phenomenological study utilized qualitative methodology to explore the experiences of Latina graduate student mothers. The participants and I generated eight open-ended questions. These open-ended questions about their experiences, navigation strategies, and support systems helped me understand their experiences more deeply. Five composite narratives facilitated the organization of the results of this research. The composite allowed me to include my reflections and anecdotes about the different themes. In this research, I reached four conclusions. First, student mothers feel a chilly climate in the university, which comes from reproducing the stereotypes of a good student. Second, student mothers feel guilty for taking time for themselves even when studying. Third, the family reproduces the stereotypes of a good mother, which

causes anxiety and depression in student mothers. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted students' delicate balance while studying, causing them guilt and discomfort.

The implications of this study are both material and cultural. The university needs to update the infrastructure to include facilities for students with children. The university's culture needs to include women with children as part of the school community. Classroom boundaries need to be discussed with students for a more equitable relationship between students and professors. Research on the minoritized student mothers' path through the university must be further explored.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Open-ended Interviews:

1. Multicultural Affairs offices around the United States will be contacted by e-mail, an invitation to participate in the study by contacting the researcher.
2. Students will take the online survey in the Qualtrics platform to determine if they fit the criteria.
3. Student mothers from minoritized backgrounds that fit the criteria will be asked to participate in a 1-hour interview about their college experiences.
4. The students will choose among favorable dates for the interview and schedule via Doodle. Each student will receive an independent invitation, students will not be able to see the information of other participants.
5. The researcher will interview the student mothers for 1-hour interview via Zoom while recording the meeting.
6. Only the audio file of the meeting will be kept and transcribed for further analysis.
7. The transcriptions will be coded axially utilizing an ecological framework.
8. A narrative with the data will be created by the researcher and share with the participants for member-checking. Member-checking will be done by inviting the students to an online meeting with the researcher. The member-check will be limited to the composite narrative.
9. The results of the research will be shared with the dissertation committee.

APPENDIX B
OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEW GUIDING QUESTIONS

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Experience in college:

1. Can you tell me about your experience as a student mother at the university?
 - a. What have been your experience with professors?
 - b. What have been your experience with staff?
 - c. What have been your experience with peers?
 - d. What have been your experience inside the classroom?
 - e. What have been your experience outside the classroom?

Academic:

1. How do you navigate balancing schoolwork with motherhood?
 - a. Time for class
 - b. Time for schoolwork
2. What strategies do you use to be successful in college?
3. Who supports you academically?
 - a. When you are struggling academically, where do you go or what do you do?

Family:

1. How do you navigate balancing homework/caring responsibilities with schoolwork?

- a. Time for children
 - b. Family time
2. What strategies do you use to be a successful parent?
 3. How do you support your family (financially and otherwise)?
 4. Who in your family supports you in college?
 - a. Any non-supporting people?

Personal:

1. How do you navigate your personal (social) life in college while being a mother?
 - a. Social time
 - b. Partners
2. What strategies do you use to maintain a persona/social life?
3. Do your peers support you (childcare, moral support, academic support, etc.)?

Emotional:

1. How do you navigate your emotional life (mental health) in college while being a mother?
2. What strategies do you use for self-care?
3. Do you receive support in your emotional life?
 - a. When you are struggling, where do you go to?

Diverse backgrounds:

4. Do you feel stereotyped for being a mother in college?
 - a. Have you ever experienced discrimination for this?
 - b. Can you share a specific moment when this happened?
5. How do you navigate the experience of being from a diverse *racial/ethnic/gender/sexual/diverse ability* background and being a student mother at the same time?
6. How do you feel like other people see you?
 - a. Have you felt stereotypes for this?
 - b. Have you ever experienced discrimination for this?

APPENDIX C

CALL FOR STUDENT MOTHERS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

Subject: Call for student mothers: Research Study

Date to be sent:

Draft 1st Contact Email:

Greetings,

I hope this email finds you well, my name is Emely Medina-Rodriguez, I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education doctoral program at Loyola University of Chicago. I am contacting you because you are the _____ of the Office of _____. I want to extend an invitation to all students related to your office that identify as female students with children to participate in a study about the experiences of student mothers in college. I am interested in understanding minoritized student mothers' experiences, especially those from varied ethnic, racial, gender, and physical and cognitive ability backgrounds. The study's purpose is to highlight the voices of student mothers that are underresearched and provide evidence of the needs and desires of these students while in college.

The study consists of a 1-hour interview via Zoom focusing on their experiences at multiple social levels such as their support from family or the university. Today, I ask to please share my personal contact information with students you believe are willing to participate in this study. To determine if the student mothers are from a minoritized background I will send them a link to a demographic survey. Student mothers fitting the criteria will be invited to participate in the interview.

I am open to explain further the purpose and procedures of this study; please find me under this email address: emedinarodriguez@luc.edu or through my telephone number: 1-312-532-1996.

Please, find attached the invitation for student mothers with link provided.

APPENDIX D
INVITATION FOR STUDENTS

Hello,

I hope you are well, my name is Emely Medina-Rodriguez, currently in the dissertation stage of my doctoral degree in Higher Education. Thank you for your interest in sharing your experience as a student mother from a minoritized background with me. No matter what field or degree you are seeking, you are invited to participate in a 1-hour interview via Zoom to go deeper into your college experiences. I am especially interested in student mothers' experience from diverse racial, ethnic, gender, and special abilities backgrounds. This study wants to add to the discussion about student mothers' experiences and needs in college by highlighting the voices of students from minoritized backgrounds.

To determine if you fit the criteria for this study please fill a short demographic survey:

https://qfreeaccountssjc1.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_7NB55IYwbW58eSG

The interviews will be recorded, and notes will be taken, but no identifying information will be shared. All the information you provide will only be used for research purposes and not shared with anyone.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and anonymous.

APPENDIX E
DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

1. Racial identity
2. Ethnic Identity
3. Gender Identity
4. Sexual Orientation
5. Physical or Cognitive ability
6. Number of children
7. Degree seeking status
 - a. Currently in Bachelor's degree Currently in Master's degree Currently in Doctoral degree Other

APPENDIX F
CONSENT FORM

Project Title: An Ecological Approach to the Experiences of Minoritized Student Mothers in College

Researcher(s): *Emely Medina-Rodríguez*

Faculty Sponsor: *Dra. Aurora Chang*

Introduction:

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research study being conducted by Emely Medina-Rodríguez for a *dissertation* under the supervision of *Dra. Aurora Chang* in the School of Education at Loyola University of Chicago.

You are being asked to participate because you are a student mother in college from a minoritized background. Students in this study would be from a diversity of racial, and ethnic background as well as diverse sexual and gender identities. Students with cognitive and physical special abilities will also partake in the study. Student mothers wanting to participate should have children and need to be enrolled in any higher education institution around the United States.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to participate in the study.

Purpose:

The study aims to examine how student mothers from minoritized backgrounds navigate their experiences during college. It intends to understand the navigation strategies and meaningful

relationships they develop during their time in college. Their experiences balancing their studies with their caring responsibilities will also be considered.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to:

- Participate of a demographic survey where you are invited to share your racial and ethnic background, sexual and gender identity, and any cognitive or physical ability. As well and your degree-seeking status and whether you have children will be asked. The survey will serve to determine your eligibility for this study.
- Participate in one 60-minute interview to allow the researcher to collect data regarding your college experiences. You will be asked to share your experiences inside and outside the classroom and with faculty, peers, and staff. As well as your support systems during college. The question will me open-ended so you can go into detail of important events or experiences you have in college.
- The interviews' results will be shared in a composite narrative that will be made available for your verification.

Risks/Benefits:

Your participation may improve student services, experiences, policy, and overall institutional culture related to students with children and help you reflect on your experiences as a student with children. The interview may cause emotional discomfort when talking about personal experiences and people related to your program and family; hopefully, this will provide

minimum discomfort. Professional help will be contacted at your request. Your contributions will help support the experiences of other student mothers in the future. New policies and resources could be inspired in the information you provide in this research. You can benefit personally from this research by sharing your experiences with the researcher.

Confidentiality:

- The researcher will not disclose any personal information gathered in the interview. Anonymous data from this study will be analyzed by the researcher and reported back to you before sharing in the form of a composite narrative where all participants' experiences will be merged to tell a story.
- No individual participant will be identified or linked to the results. Study records, including this consent form signed by you, may be inspected by this research's sponsor Dra. Aurora Chang and the Institutional Research Board of the Loyola University of Chicago for appropriateness.
- All audio recording will be stored in a secure location within a computer file with a locked password or an online database with a password. Access to files will be restricted and only be used for research purposes. All documents related to this study will be destroyed one year after the last person is interviewed.

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have questions about this research study, please feel free to *contact Emely Medina-Rodríguez at emedinarodriguez@luc.edu/312-532-1996 or Dra. Aurora Chang at achang2@luc.edu.*

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

APPENDIX G
LIST OF PUBLIC INFORMATION AND SOCIAL AND HEALTH RESOURCES FOR
STUDENT MOTHERS IN COLLEGE

List of public information and social and health resources for student mothers in college

1. Information about current statistics about student mothers in college.
2. Book and online references to support students socially, mentally, and academically.
3. Website addresses online and physical resources for student mothers, social and support groups, childcare, or community support.
4. Physical and email addresses of community resources for student mothers.
5. Physical and website addresses to Loyola's resources for students.

Publicly Available Resources:

1. Section 8 assistance program for single mothers
2. Low Income financial assistance Programs for single mothers
3. Foreclosure Assistance Programs for single mothers
4. Mortgage assistance programs for single mothers
5. Medical Bills Assistance Programs for single moms
6. Get help with buying your medications
7. Financial Assistance Programs for Women
8. Organizations That Offer Free or Low-Cost Credit Counseling to single parents
9. Local Church Assistance Programs for single moms
10. Get Help from the Salvation Army
11. Get Free Legal Assistance and Advice
12. Help for single moms With Paying Off Student Loans
13. Catholic Charities Financial Assistance for single mothers

14. [Get Help Paying Electric Bills](#)
15. [Get Help Paying Water Bills](#)
16. [LIHEAP Energy Assistance Program for single mothers](#)
17. [Low Income Assistance Programs](#)
18. [Most Helpful Government Assistance Programs for single mothers](#)
19. [Grants and Scholarships for Adults Back To School](#)
20. [Assistance Programs for American Indians](#)
21. [Assistance Programs for Hispanic single mothers](#)
22. [Popular Charities that Help single mothers With Bills](#)
23. [Financial Assistance Programs for Seniors](#)
24. [Financial assistance programs for disabled](#)
25. [Financial Assistance for Single Mothers](#)
26. [Assistance Programs for African American single mothers](#)
27. [Perkins loans for single mothers](#)
28. [Children's health insurance program for single mothers](#)
29. [Grants for single moms with no health insurance](#)
30. [How to apply for government benefits](#)
31. [Food stamps for single mothers](#)
32. [Unemployment benefits for single mothers](#)
33. [Grants for paying telephone bills](#)
34. [Debt consolidation programs for single mothers](#)
35. [Bankruptcy assistance for single mothers](#)

36. Government financial help for single mothers
37. WIC program for single mothers
38. Welfare benefits for single mothers
39. Education grants for single mothers
40. Cash assistance for single mothers
41. College grants for single mothers
42. Free scholarships for single mothers
43. Rent assistance for single mothers
44. Low income assistance for single mothers
45. Housing grants for single mothers
46. Child care assistance for single mothers
47. Grants for felons

Resources for Student Mothers in Chicago:

Illinois All Kids

Illinois' All Kids program is a children's health insurance program. The program caters to an extensive array of medical and dental needs related to children. You may apply to get your children covered by calling the All Kids Hotline at 1-866-255-5437.

Family Care

Family Care is another healthcare assistance program available to single mothers. The program caters to the medical and dental needs of families with children up to the age of 18. You may

apply for medical benefits for your family by contacting the DHS Customer Helpline at 800-843-6154.

Medicaid

Medicaid is a low-income healthcare assistance program that provides access to quality, affordable medical and dental care services. Assistance is provided by the Illinois Department of Health Care and Family Services, and as such, you can call them at 217-782-2570 if you would like to apply for coverage.

Women, Infants, and Children

As a food assistance program, WIC caters to the nutritional needs of pregnant women, single mothers, and their children. To become a WIC participant, you may apply for benefits at your nearest Department of Human Services office, or call the State WIC Office at 217-782-2166.

Head Start

The National Head Start Association provides educational assistance programs that can help low-income families ensure that their children receive quality child care. To see if you are eligible for Head Start benefits, call the NHSA office at 703-739-0875.

Child Care Assistance Program

The Illinois Department of Human Services offers a Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) that can help families pay for the cost of their children's child care costs. The program is based on a sliding scale model, and as such, benefits are determined by income and family size. To apply for child care assistance, call the CCR&R Hotline at 1-877-202-4453.

Summer Food Service Program

The United States Department of Agriculture funds the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and it is a program that aims to provide children with nutritious foods during the summer school holiday months. You may apply for benefits by contacting the State Board of Education at 217-782-2491.

Monetary Award Program

Students that need financial help to complete their education might be eligible for grant assistance, provided by the Monetary Award Program (MAP). You may get in touch with the Illinois Student Assistance Commission at 800-899-4722 to see if your children are eligible for these grants.

TANF

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program can help single mothers living in Illinois with the payment of their utility bills. You may also be eligible for a time-based cash grant if you meet program requirements, as well as the option of transitional services. To apply for TANF benefits, call the DHS Help Line at 1-800-843-6154.

APPENDIX H

CONSENT STATEMENT FOR DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Consent Statement for Demographic Survey

In this survey you will find several questions related to your personal social location. This includes information about your racial and ethnic background as well as your gender and sexual identities. The survey will ask about any special ability you have as well. Your degree-seeking status and whether you have children will also be asked. 10 mothers will be asked to participate in this survey.

If you agree to completely or partially to share this information with the researcher, please chose consent to the statement in the first question.

I consent to share my demographic information with the principal investigator of this research project. I acknowledge the researcher will keep this information safe in a computer with a password only the researcher has access.

APPENDIX I
RECRUITMENT FLYER

Parenting while in school?



Are you a student mother?

Do you want to share your story?

We are looking for students identified as mothers from minoritized backgrounds such as diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, diverse sexual and gender identities, and diverse physical and cognitive abilities to participate in a 1-hour interview on their experiences in college.

- Any field or degree
- Enrolled in a higher education institution

**For more information please contact:
emedinarodriguez@luc.edu**

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