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A Phenomenological Examination of Single Mothers Rising Out of Poverty

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Shaunta Hemingway

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

A Phenomenological Examination of Single Mothers Rising Out of Poverty

by

Shaunta Hemingway

M.S., Grand Canyon University, 2014

B.S., University of Phoenix, 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

November 2022

Abstract

Transitional factors that help mothers to acquire higher education, community resources, and stable employment and the family dynamics that impact their success are often shadowed by domestic violence, chronic poverty, substance use, mental health, and public assistance. There are 12 million single-parent households in the United States, of which 80% represent single mothers as primary caregivers to children; the majority of which are living below the poverty level. Few extant studies have employed a strengths-based approach to investigate how single mothers rise out of poverty. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of seven women who had children under the age of 18 years old while living at home at the time they transitioned out of poverty and the resources that increased their mobility and helped them break the cycle of generational poverty. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory served as the theoretical framework. Results indicated four themes: (a) pervasiveness and culture of poverty, (b) universality of education as the most crucial step to transitioning from poverty, (c) financial and social support were vital to assisting with the transition from poverty, and (d) the importance of resiliency and coping strategies for transitioning from poverty. Implications for positive social change include helping single mothers understand how others like themselves have navigated the challenges and successfully transitioned from chronic poverty. Policymakers can use the results of this study to aid in advocating for increasing the financial and socioeconomic wealth of single mothers as well as supplying them with mentorship and literacy programs.

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Dedication

I dedicate this to my son, Langston Hemingway!!! Thank you for your patience, love, and understanding when there have been things you have wanted to do, and I was on a time crunch to complete some tasks or another. However, this is my dedication to you that no matter what is in front of you, keep pressing forward and never give up on yourself or your dreams. Dream big and believe that God will always be with you and supply every need. I love you and am so grateful to be your mom.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank God and knowing by faith that my purpose in this world has kept me from quitting and finishing this race. I want to make sure my son, Langston, knows how much I love him, and this gives him zero excuse in life to not keep pressing through difficult things. This journey has had some challenges that I have had to navigate through, both wonderful and painful, but I know that this study is needed to benefit other single mothers and to give hope of life on the other side of hardship and struggles as single mothers. Thank you to all my committee members: Dr. Gary Burkholder, Chair, Dr. Christie Nelson, 2nd Committee Member, and Dr. Brandy Benson, URR. You all have been such a blessing throughout this process, and I know without your guidance it would have been even more of a challenge. I appreciate you believing in me and the quick turnaround for every step in this process to complete my dissertation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the lived experiences of single mothers who have overcome and transitioned out of poverty. The lack of resources and support to help single mothers transition beyond chronic poverty increases the United States' deficit by limiting a potential earning pool, and the lack of resources sets up the factors that support generational poverty and trauma. The amount of research available to validate poverty is overwhelming, yet the research suggests that more studies from a resilience approach are needed to understand how women rise out of poverty. The social implications of the current study include improving the understanding of how higher education, public assistance, and family dynamics impact single mothers' successful transition out of poverty. In Chapter 1, I provide background information to establish the importance of the study, the purpose of the study, problem statement, research questions, theoretical framework, the nature of the study, assumptions, delimitations, limitations, scope of study, and definitions.

Background

The number of single-parent homes run by women continues to rise, and little research has been conducted using a strengths-based approach to understand how some women transition out of poverty. Research has shown an increase in single mother homes over the last 20 years (Rendall & Shattuck, 2019). Single mothers make up majority of homes within the United States (Walsh, 2017). Richard and Lee (2019) reported that there are 12 million single-parent households in the United States, of which 80% represent single mothers as primary caregivers to children who are also the only source of

financial stability for the household. In 2019, 15.76 million children within the United States lived in a single mother household compared with 3.23 million children living with a single father. In other words, in 2016, there were 4.2 million households headed by single mothers versus 400,000 headed by single fathers (Kramer et al., 2016; Long et al., 2019, p. 344). Both studies established the need for more of a research focus on single mothers living in poverty. Lee (2017) stated that 38.8% of Black, 40.8% of Hispanic, 29.9% of Asian, 42.6% of Native American, and 30.2% of White single mothers live below the federal poverty level.

Green and Hulme (2005) noted that the extreme poor "are structurally constrained by the social relations which produce poverty effects" (p. 869). They identified poverty as a social condition and not an inevitable fact. The overall quality of life for single mothers decreases as their role shifts to head of a household (Golombok et al., 2016). Emotional and mental barriers have the potential to lead to domestic violence, welfare reliance, substance use, dead-end jobs, and mental health concerns for both mothers and their children.

The responsibilities that single mothers carry have a strong impact on the future generations through their children. Single mothers have increased responsibilities within the home and often face the challenges of balancing motherhood and household responsibilities with employment requirements (Rendall & Shattuck, 2019). This creates hardships that include but are not limited to poor living circumstances, minimal education, financial hardships, and unstable employment (Golombok et al., 2016). Living

below the poverty level has been shown to be linked to crime, violence, and poor mental and physical health (Dowd, 1997; Kjellstrand & Harper, 2012, p. 312).

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and other public assistance programs help to provide mothers with relief from economic challenges and have kept single mothers from being completely in poverty (Waring & Meyer, 2020). TANF was enacted to help families with dependent children and low-income families gain financial stability through additional monetary benefits. TANF provided a safety net to increase the financial stability of single mothers and their children (Falk, 2019; Haskins & Weidinger, 2019; Waring & Meyer, 2020). The TANF system was designed to help individuals become employable and transition from public assistance within 5 years of being on the program (Haskins & Weidinger, 2019; Hildebrandt, 2016). However, the program did not remove the barriers that hindered women from keeping employment, such as lack of social support systems, access to community resources, and lack of higher education (Hildebrandt, 2016, pp. 165-166).

Ritcher and Lemol (2017) identified that changes in socioeconomic status during childhood and adulthood contribute to poor education, the inability to find stable employment, and overall decreased life satisfaction. Studies have suggested that instability resulting from growing up in a single-mother home decreases the adult lifespan due to poor adjustment to life circumstances and inability to cope with environmental factors (Ritcher & Lemol, 2017). This also increases the risk of mental health disorders, comorbid disorders, and exposure to substance use disorder for both the mother and their children. Self-care and wellness are often luxuries many single mothers neglect due to

mental, emotional, and physical hurdles that limit prioritizing oneself and are not seen as accessible in daily life (Long et al., 2019, p. 353).

Single-mother homes have a higher rate of substance use, which exposes both the mother and the children to domestic violence, child welfare involvement, and instability regarding secure and permanent housing (Stringer & Baker, 2018; VanDeMark et al., 2005). Cole et al. (2011) noted that social exclusion is linked to several problems, such as unemployment, low income, poor housing, substance use, and involvement with the criminal justice system (p. 13). Substance use by single mothers has been shown to lead to substance abuse issues in their children in adolescence and adulthood (Lam et al., 2007; Seljamo et al., 2006; Stringer & Baker, 2018).

Problem Statement

Recent research related to single mothers living in poverty has focused primarily on substance use, unhealthy culture and lifestyle aspects of their lives, divorce, and factors related to living in low socioeconomic status. Previous researchers have indicated that there has been more focus on the barriers and hardships faced by single mothers than on the available resources single mothers have access to to help them transition out of poverty (Golombok et al., 2016). Therefore, I determined that a strengths-based approach to better understanding the factors that helped single mothers transition from poverty was needed. Shifting the research emphasis to the factors that helped women transition out of poverty can help practitioners and policymakers focus resources on the areas that will likely have the most impact.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of single mothers who have transitioned out of poverty and the experiences that supported them in their journey. The results of this study can provide insight into the experiences of single mothers who were caught in a cycle of poverty and help increase the mobility of single mothers out of poverty.

Research Questions and Subquestions

The main research question guiding this study was to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of single mothers who have overcome poverty. Three subquestions were also addressed.

- What support systems did mothers use that helped them to rise out of poverty?

- What qualities and strengths contribute to the success of single mothers who rise from poverty?

- How do these single mothers define success when rising out of poverty?

Theoretical Framework

I used Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as the theoretical framework of this study to help describe the experiences of single mothers with poverty. Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979) developed the ecological systems approach to describe the development of children. According to the ecological systems theory, there are four environmental levels: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. In the ecological systems theory, the influences of the social environment on development are

acknowledged as interrelated yet functioning independently of each other

(Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979).

Ecological systems theory has been used to examine the experiences of women

and employment. For example, Cook et al. (2002) developed the career ecological model

of women of color and White women, and Richard and Lee (2019) used this framework

to better understand the individual-environment system interactions influencing the

vocational choices of single mothers. Landers-Potts et al. (2015) applied ecological

systems theory to the experiences of single African American mothers and understanding

their challenges. These previous studies show that the ecological systems theory can be

useful in understanding the dynamics that cause poverty, the contextual factors that

exacerbate poverty, and potentially those factors that provide resilience and help mothers

emerge from poverty. A more detailed description of ecological systems theory will be

provided in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

In this qualitative study, I employed a phenomenological approach to understand

the lived experiences of women who have transitioned out of poverty. Previous

researchers have suggested that it is important to understand this transition directly from

the women who have lived it. Qualitative phenomenological research helps uncover the

meaning behind a phenomenon rather than the cause and effect of the relationship

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 5). Phenomenology is a reflective approach that uses

interpretation, subjectivity, and representation to understand lived experiences. This

design focuses on the meaning behind the phenomenon through a textural and structural

description reflected by the words of participants (Rasid et al., 2021). Because so little is known about what internal and external resources make escaping poverty a possibility, I determined that a qualitative approach was best suited for this study. The participants were seven single mothers who had transitioned out of poverty and had children under the age of 18 living in the home.

Definition of Terms

Federal poverty level (FPL): The economic measure of income level for an individual and family used to qualify for federal and state benefits and programs. The FPL is the poverty line threshold that qualifies individuals or families for housing vouchers, Medicaid, and welfare benefits (Hayes, 2021). The FPL is updated annually and starts at two as a family and gives a specific dollar value of annual income (Aber et al, 2012). In 2020, the federal poverty level for the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia for a family of two was $17,240.

Generational poverty: A family living in poverty for at least two generations (Tischauser, 2019).

Single mothers: Women who are unmarried and not cohabiting with a romantic partner living in the home. Single mothers are also defined as women who are no longer married/divorced or separated from the spouse who no longer residence within the home of the mother and have any children 18 years or younger. The term single mother is broadly defined as the sole provider if not the only paternal provider for children 18 years or younger. In the present study, mothers who met any of these criteria were considered.

Strengths-based approach: The examination of internal and external resiliency factors that inspire success rather than focusing on barriers that prevent women from moving out of poverty.

Transition from poverty: Single mothers who have historically accessed public assistance and are no longer eligible or need the public assistance due to changes in their incomes. For this study, single mothers who have increased their socioeconomic status through higher education and employment and are no longer dependent on family, friends, charitable support, or government assistance were considered as having transitioned from poverty.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope of the Study

Assumptions

Assumptions are unexamined beliefs about a topic or subject that are taken to be correct. One assumption I made in this study was that the participants would readily and accurately recall the factors that have helped them to move out of poverty. As time has passed since they were in poverty, it may be that the participants do not remember correctly what factors were most salient, so I assumed that what the participants reported in the interviews was a correct reflection of their experiences at the time of transition. While initially participants who transitioned out of poverty within the past 5 years were recruited, this requirement was relaxed when I understood that the information received was valuable regardless of the transition period. I also assumed that the participants would answer the screening tools correctly because it was not possible to collect information to verify their responses.

Limitations

The primary limitation in qualitative studies is the small sample size; thus, the study results cannot be generalized to the entire population of single mothers. However, qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of experiences that likely are shared with the larger population of single mothers. An additional limitation to qualitative research is that researcher bias must always be managed. I am a Black, single mother who has transitioned out of poverty. Black single mothers represent 40.8% of single mothers in the United States (Lee, 2017). To manage my own bias, I practiced epoché, or bracketing, which allowed me to put aside my own preconceived notions of the data collected (see Dawidowicz, 2016). I maintained a close connection to the research questions and completed member checking of the data. I also used reflective journaling to manage my own thoughts and feelings before and after each interview.

Scope of the Study and Delimitations

The scope of this study includes single mothers who have transitioned out of poverty within the past 5 years. I selected single mothers who had transitioned out of poverty as participants to better understand the factors that supported their transition. Single fathers were excluded from this study because current research indicated that 15.49 million families in 2020 were headed by single mothers, which makes up 80% of households in the United States (Statista, 2021). This statistic led me to deem it important to focus on single mothers and not single fathers in the present study. I chose to focus on the past 5 years as part of the scope to minimize the effects that the passage of time can have on participants' memories and interpretations of their experiences. The study also

did not include women who transitioned out of poverty solely because of marriage because I assumed that these women would be qualitatively different in that they may have primarily transitioned from poverty due to a change in socioeconomic status (SES) that resulted from marriage. Women still currently receiving any type of public assistance (e.g., TANF, Medicaid, Welfare, or food stamps) were not included in this study because the focus was on the transition out of poverty.

Significance of the Study

The study results may improve the understanding of how single mothers overcome barriers, such as substance use, culture, divorce, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and socioeconomic challenges, and this represents a different approach from previous studies that focused on the barriers themselves. The lack of resources and support to help single mothers transition out of chronic poverty increases the United States' deficit and sets up a potential cycle leading to generational poverty (Golombok et al., 2016). The implications for positive social change include helping single mothers understand how others have navigated the challenges and successfully transitioned out of chronic poverty and thus develop their own internal resilience. Health care providers can use the results of this study to better understand the circumstances that result in the chronic poverty of single mothers and help empower single mothers living in poverty to develop the resilience needed to transition out of it.

Summary

I conducted this qualitative phenomenological study, guided by the social ecological theory, to gain more insight into the lived experiences of single mothers who

have transitioned out of poverty. The need for this study was driven by the fact that previous research has tended to focus on understanding the barriers women in poverty face rather than focusing on understanding the factors that help them to transition out of it. To answer the research question, I interviewed seven single mothers with children at home. A more detailed analysis of the literature and description of the conceptual framework are presented in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative study was to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of single mothers who have overcome poverty and the events and opportunities that impacted their journeys. Richard and Lee (2019) reported that there are 12 million single parent households in the United States, of which 80% are led by single mothers who are primary caregivers to children and also the only source of financial stability (p. 143). Statistics from the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (2020) indicate the median income for all households in 2019 was $68,703 compared to the official federal poverty level guideline for the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia for a family of two of $17,240. In 2016, there were an estimated 17.2 million children under the age of 18 living in single-mother households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). In 2016, there were 4,200,000 households headed by single mothers versus 400,000 headed by single fathers (Kramer et al., 2016; Long et al., 2019, p. 344). In 2019, 15.76 million children in the United States living in a single-mother household compared with 3.23 million children living with a single father. Lee (2017) reported that 38.8% of Black, 40.8% of Hispanic, 29.9% of Asian, 42.6% of Native American, and of 30.2% White single mothers live below the federal poverty level.

Single mothers may live in circumstances that include isolation, deprivation, discrimination, poor education, substance use, and poverty (Tischauser, 2019). Crime and substance use rates are higher in impoverished communities, reinforcing the shaping of attitudes and expectations (Tischauser, 2019). Green and Hulme (2005) noted that the extreme poor "are structurally constrained by the social relations which produce poverty

effects" (p. 869), showing that poverty is a social condition and not an inevitable fact.
The stereotype that single mothers are poor creates a stigma that prevents women from
seeking public assistance. Single mothers have been labeled as "undeserving poor" and
"deviant" because of the aid they receive from taxpayer contributions (Sidel, 2006, p.
32).

In this study, I focused on developing an understanding of the factors that help
single mothers rise out of poverty. The image that all single mothers remain in poverty
creates hopelessness among the population and allows the stigma to remain. The ability
of single mothers to adapt and overcome financial hardship, lack of education, and
instability with employment are factors to help them move out of poverty (Bradshaw et
al. 2019; Zahn, 2006). The inability to adjust and cope with behavioral and mental health
issues is strongly correlated with poverty among single-mother households (Kjellstrand &
Harper, 2012). Using a social economic model and resiliency thinking approach to
analyze the consequences of interventions that impact how ecological and social factors
reinforce poverty, Lade et al (2017) identified how the social economic model tied
culture to poverty and how the characterization of poverty traps offers limited pathways
to alleviate poverty, especially in rural areas. The current research has generally failed to
provide sufficient data on mothers who have successfully navigated their way out of
poverty and improved their socioeconomic status.

In this chapter, I review the literature on chronic poverty and single mothers rising
out of poverty. The chapter begins with a discussion of the background and purpose of
this study of single mothers who live in poverty in the United States as well as touch on

how single mothers are affected globally. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the conceptual framework guiding this study, is described as well as its limited applications in previous research. Next, I identify various factors that affect and influence poverty for single mothers, including domestic violence, welfare/public assistance, substance use, employment, the mental health of mothers and their children, education, household composition, and resilience. Finally, the gaps in the literature are summarized to demonstrate the need for a better understanding of how education, public assistance, and the roles of family dynamics and social supports are important to understanding the mobility of single mothers related to rising out of poverty.

Literature Search Strategy

I searched the EBSCO, Thoreau, ProQuest Central, Elsevier, Social Science Research. Springer Publication, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, and Sage Pub Journal as well as the websites of the National Institute of Mental Health and the *Journal of Social Welfare*. The main keywords used was *single-parent mothers*, and I combined it with the following search terms: *socioeconomic status (SES) marginalization, teen pregnancies, resiliency, success, social support, life experiences, coping, achievements, economic mobility in the United States,* and *escaping poverty.* My literature search focused primarily on research published since 2016, although seminal sources are cited where appropriate.

Theoretical Foundation

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was useful to describe the experiences of single mothers experiencing poverty. Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979)

developed the ecological systems approach to describe the development of children.

According to the ecological systems theory, there are four environmental levels: the

microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. In the ecological systems

theory, Bronfenbrenner acknowledged the influences of the social environment on

development and that these systems are interrelated yet function independently of each

other. The *microsystem* includes the immediate surroundings, such as home, daycare, and

park, and frequently visited places in which the individual interacts with others

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). The *mesosystem* is a combination of two or more settings

within the microsystem in which the developing person actively participates

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). For children, this combination consists of home, school,

and neighborhood peer groups; for an adult, this combination consists of family, work,

and social life. The *exosystem* refers to one or more settings that do not immediately

affect the developing person as an active participant (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). An

example for a child would include a parent's place of employment, older siblings'

schools, and parents' network of friends. The *macrosystem* includes the values and

cultural influences on the individual and refers to the socioeconomic status of wealth,

ethnicity, and poverty as well as how an individual lives and adapts to their environment

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.26).

A fifth system that Bronfenbrenner (1977) alluded to, the *chronosystem,* includes

transitions that occur throughout a person's lifetime. It "represents the effect of time on

the behavior and on the context in which that behavior takes place" (Barboza et al., 2009,

p. 103). Examples of these transitions include divorce, the birth of a new sibling,

relocation, death of a loved one, or being diagnosis with life altering condition (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The chronosystem can also reflect repetition of behaviors over time or an evolution of attitudes over time (e.g., see Barboza et al., 2009, for an example related to bullying).

Ecological systems theory has been used to examine the experiences of women and employment. Cook et al. (2002) developed the career ecological model of women of color and White women to help identify career strengths, areas that create discrimination, and how gender and ethnicity plays a role in salary inequalities. Richard and Lee (2019) used ecological systems theory to better understand the individual-environment system interactions influencing the vocational choices of single mothers. These include interactions with employers and family obligations in the microsystem and mesosystem levels that may increase burnout in single mothers due to lack of work-life balance. Macrosystem policies (e.g., maternity leave and hiring policies) have an influence in limiting vocational development and growth in single mothers because of the imbalance and hardships between work and home life (Richard & Lee, 2019. p. 144). Through interviews, Richard and Lee discovered several domains that captured the work experiences of single moms, including decision-making challenges, adequate resources, and coping strategies.

Landers-Potts et al. (2015) applied ecological systems theory to the experiences of single African American mothers to develop an understanding of the challenges experienced by single mothers and the relationships between support systems, parenting skills, and poverty. Their results showed that low income and negative financial events,

including reduced wages, loss of business, and being fired/laid off, predicted economic

pressure that then, in turn, predicted depressive symptoms of caregivers; depressive

symptoms were also shown to predict positive adjustments of parenting for caregivers (p.

243). Their findings showed that primary and secondary caregiver depressive symptoms

influence economic pressure and caregiver conflict between parent and child because the

depressive symptoms affect the positive adjustment and can lead to hostile parenting (p.

240).

These previous studies show that, the social ecological model can be useful in

understanding the dynamics that cause poverty, the contextual factors that exacerbate

poverty, and potentially those factors that provide resilience and help mothers emerge

from poverty. The social ecological model focuses on individuals and their association

with the people, organizations, and communities that help them adapt to the environment

(Lade et al., 2017, p. 2).

Literature Review

Factors Impacting Single-Mother Families

Chronic Poverty

Bishaw and Fontenot (2014) reported that 46.2 million people lived in poverty in

the United States, with single mothers representing 17% of the 7.3 million households

living in poverty. Fontenot et al. (2018) found that for every year from 1959, when

poverty statistics were first collected, to 1995, at least 1 in every 3 single-mother families

was living below the poverty level. In 2012, it was estimated that 5.5 million families

representing single mothers with children under 18 years of age and described as working

poor continued to live below the poverty level (Bloom et al., 2011; Statistics, 2013, 2014; U.S. Bureau of Labor). In 2018, unmarried mothers made up 31.1% (approximately 11.9 million) of mothers with children under the age of 18 living in poverty (Bleiweis et al., 2020). Data showed that single mothers with children living in poverty increased from 8.5 million to 11.9 million between 2016 and 2018. In 2019, 3.33 million single-mother households with children under the age of 18 were reported to be mothers who were never married (Statista, 2021). A United Nations study of women and poverty identified that time poverty and asset poverty are intwined because each impact income poverty (Bradshaw et al., 2017, p. 1682). Living below the poverty level has been shown to be linked to crime, violence, and poor mental and physical health (Dowd, 1997; Kjellstrand & Harper, 2012, p. 312).

The U.S. Census Bureau (2018) reported 38.1 million people living in poverty, of which 21.4 million (56%) were women. The feminization of poverty was first coined by Pearce (1978) in a study conducted to show the trend of how women and children represented the poor in the United States and globally. The feminization of poverty is the tendency for women to be more represented in poverty status than men (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Christensen, 2019; Peterson, 1987). Bradshaw et al. (2017) used United Nations Women 2015–2016 data to show how poverty is feminized with an overrepresentation by poor women and their children, and based on the data, this appears to be the case in the United States as well.

Damaske et al. (2017) analyzed data from the American Community Survey administered in waves between 2001 and 2010 and found that 40% of people of color

(i.e., African American/ Black American, American Indian, and Hispanic) women reported living in poverty versus 30.7% of Asian women and 28% of White women. In 2017, the level of poverty remained at 40% with a decrease to 25% for Asian women and a slight increase to 29% for non-Hispanic, White single mothers living in poverty (National Women's Law Center, 2018; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018a, 2018b). Damaske et al. showed that poverty increased among single mothers across the 2000s, jumping from 35.7% in 2001 to 40.5% over approximately 10 years (p. 125). Households headed by Black and Hispanic single mothers and their children tend to be more at risk for poverty than White single mothers (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008).

In 2017, 18.5 million people of color lived in poverty, with single mothers representing half of this number living in deep poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018a). Many of these families had an income of $9,757 or less for a family of three for the entire year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018a). Isolation, deprivation, discrimination, poor education, and substance use are associated with living in chronic poverty (Tischauser, 2019).

Zilanawala (2016) analyzed data collected between 2003–2010 by the American Time Use Surveys to study the differences in time poverty. Time poverty was described as the lack of time for leisure or rest after prioritizing the family's needs, mainly the result of mothers working outside of the home (Vickery, 1977; Zilanawala, 2016, p. 370). Zilanawala found that single mothers are more likely to experience significant time poverty and more discrepancies in wages than women who are partnered or cohabitating.

The Great Recession, caused by a global financial crisis that resulted in the most brutal economic recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s and lasted longer than

any economic recession, began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009 (Duignan, 2019). The Great Recession was estimated to have caused $16 trillion dollars of lost worth for U.S. families, and many have struggled to regain their previous wealth. Duignan (2019) identified this as the lost generation that would be poorer than previous generations for the rest of their lives because of the Great Recession. In 2010, in the wake of the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009, poverty rates were at an all-time high of 15.1% nationally, compared with 45% for single-mother homes between 2006 to 2008 (Bratter & Damaske, 2013).

The loss of income and child support during the Great Recession significantly impacted single mothers. TANF and other public assistance programs helped to provide mothers with relief from economic challenges and kept single mothers from being completely in poverty; however, after the Great Recession, those single mothers who were relying solely on public assistance suffered significantly because public assistance no longer provided sufficient income to support women. To live above the poverty level, women required stable employment in addition to TANF benefits (Waring & Meyer, 2020).

After the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, employment rates increased for single mothers, notably families headed by Black and Hispanic single mothers; this increase resulted in reduced public assistance benefits received before the Great Recession (Damaske et al., 2017, p. 120). From 2001 to 2010, many single mothers once again faced increased poverty, declining wages, and decreased employment (Damaske et al., 2017; Flouri et al., 2015; Zilanawala, 2016). Single mothers often face challenges in

addressing and meeting their children's needs. The financial hardship of raising children alone creates emotional problems for mothers and emotional and behavioral problems in their children (Amato, 2010; Chereni, 2017; McLanahan et al., 2013).

Single mothers living in poverty experience mental health concerns, lack of nutrition, and poor physical health (Long et al., 2019, p. 353). Self-care and wellness are often luxuries many single mothers neglect due to mental, emotional, and physical hurdles that limit prioritizing oneself and are not seen as accessible in daily life (Long et al., 2019, p. 353). The overall quality of life is lower for single mothers living in poverty (Hildebrandt, 2016). Single mothers have more demands placed on them as head of a household with limited income sources and having to support children under the age of 18 (Hildebrandt, 2016). Mothers who work must leave older siblings in charge of children and/or rely extensively on the extended family caring for children (Gonzalez et al., 2014). The ongoing concerns to address how women live in different forms of poverty within a complex environment have failed to measure how the intersection of gender and poverty continues to manifest (Bradshaw et al., 2017, p. 1683).

Generational poverty is defined as a family living in poverty for at least two generations. Thus, children of single mothers who are living in poverty have an increased risk for generational poverty that makes it harder to elevate their lives and move out of poverty (Tischauser, 2019). Lewis (1966) made a distinction between being a *victim of poverty* and a *culture of poverty*. More focus is placed on the study of the personality and characteristics of the individual who is a victim of poverty instead of the poor

communities and generational behaviors that are passed down that led to the culture of poverty in the first place (p. 19).

Tischauser (2019) identified culture of poverty (p. 3) as values, principles, and lifestyles associated with individuals living at the lowest socioeconomic status in society and who live in an environment dominated by economic deprivation. Lewis (1966) labeled culture of poverty as a subculture of Western society. Lewis used the conceptual model of culture of poverty to identify the cultural mindset concerning poverty that is passed down from generation to generation. Several markers have been found to be associated with escaping poverty, including fewer years spent in poverty; more years in poverty is likely associated with and contributes to generational poverty (Caputo, 1997; Lewis, 1966; Tischauser, 2019).

A culture of poverty often includes deprivation and disorganization, characteristics associated with generational poverty, and a lifestyle that has adapted to the value systems of an impoverished environment (p. 19). A culture of poverty and the learned value systems associated with it perpetuates itself among the poor. Poverty grows, and the needs of many poor are not served by community resources. In many cases, those in need may be suspicious of offered services or are ignorant of available services (Lewis, 1966, p.21). Caputo (1997) found in an analysis of the National Longitudinal Youth Study, in which data were collected starting in 1979, that the odds of individuals receiving public assistance and escaping poverty were 1 in 3 in 1992 (p. 18).

Domestic Violence

The World Health Organization (WHO) defined domestic violence as "behavior by a partner that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviors" (Tennakoon et al., 2020; p. 206). Flood (2012) defined domestic violence as "a systematic pattern of power and control being exerted by one person against another, involving a variety of physical and non-physical tactics of abuse and coercion." Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a form of domestic violence that occurs in the context of a close personal relationship that is often intimate and has emotional connectedness (Tennakoon et al., 2020, p. 207). National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (2020) reported that 1 in 4 women have experienced at least one instance of physical violence, sexual violence, and intimate partner stalking since age 15. It is estimated that 20 people per minute experience IPV in the United States (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2020). In 2016, it was estimated to cost $4.9 billion annually to cover medical bills, loss of productivity, and loss of earning over a woman's lifetime due to IPV, not including pain and suffering (Ellingrud et al., 2016; Stupakis, 2019). Data show that 90% of all IPV is perpetrated by men (Flood, 2012; Hook, 2020; Tennakoon et al., 2020). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC; 2010) identified that 50% of women are victims of sexual and physical violence by a partner. Domestic violence and IPV were reported to be twice as likely to occur in single-mother homes (Moore & Gertseva, 2014).

The Family Violence Prevention and Services Act was enacted in 1984 to provide shelter and assistance to domestic violence victims (Sacco, 2015). The Violence Against

Women Act (VAWA) was passed in 1994 by the United States Congress (Stupakis, 2019). Before the VAWA, there were no comprehensive laws to protect women against domestic and sexual violence. The number of women experiencing IPV was 2.1 million in 1994 and declined to 907,000 in 2010 (Catalano et al., 2009; Modi et al., 2014). Provisions in the VAWA protect women living in Housing and Urban Development (HUD) housing against wrongful eviction from HUD or housing authority management. The zero tolerance or "one strike policy" (p.1149) allows for eviction by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for what HUD defines as criminal activities (Ramsey, 2018). VAWA was designed to be revised every 5 years (Stupakis, 2019). The reauthorization of VAWA in 2013, for example, added more stability to protect women against domestic and sexual violence by enforcing the regulations around wrongful evictions based on domestic violence (Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013: Implementation in HUD Housing Programs, 2016).

Rosenberg and Grab (2015) suggested that the legal system became more willing to protect victims and hand out harsher sentences to those who perpetrated domestic violence in 1994 with the passage of the VAWA. This encouraged more women to leave abusive relationships to protect themselves and their children from further abuse. Financial and housing concerns have been cited as factors causing women to remain in violent domestic relationships (Hook, 2020). The additional stressors related to financial security, housing stability, social exclusion, and dealing with the legal system make it difficult for many mothers to leave relationships characterized by domestic violence (Smith et al., 2017).

Moore and Gertseva (2014) found that children who experienced domestic violence were more likely to suffer from behavioral problems. Miranda et al. (2021) conducted a study on IPV effects on children and the children's understanding of what IPV entails. The narratives were from children who reflected on the negative impacts of emotional well-being and family relationships due to experiencing chronic IPV in the home. IPV exposure in the home predicted an increase in cognitive threat appraisals and decreased coping efficacy. Interparental conflict affects the adjustment of children and forces children to side with one or the other parent that affects the quality of the parent-child relationship (Figge et al., 2018, p. 12).

Welfare/Public Assistance

There are several supplemental services to support single mothers, including TANF, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and housing subsidies based on income (Haskins & Weidinger, 2019; Pavetti, 2016; Waring & Meyer, 2020; p. 3;). The 1996 Welfare Reform Act replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with the TANF program. TANF provided a safety net to increase the financial stability of single mothers and their children (Falk, 2019; Haskins & Weidinger, 2019; Waring & Meyer, 2020). TANF was enacted to achieve four goals (Falk, 2019). These goals included: (a) providing public assistance so that children can be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives; (b) ending dependence on state and federal benefits; (c) reducing out-of-wedlock pregnancies; and (d) promoting formation and maintenance of two-parent families (pp. 10). The TANF system was designed to help individuals become employable and transition from public assistance while on the

program and within 5 years of being on the program (Haskins & Weidinger, 2019; Hildebrandt, 2016).

Haskins and Weidinger (2019) noted that 1.2 million households received TANF as of January 2019, with a minimum cash benefit averaging at $425 per month for a family of three. Falk and Landers (2020) noted that in September 2019, 2.9 million recipients received TANF or Maintenance of Effort benefits; of this number, 2.1 million recipients were families with children. Maintenance of Effort benefits are state-funded subsidies in addition to federal TANF dollar requirements and are placed upon many federally funded grant programs. State and local education agencies are required, as part of TANF, to demonstrate that the level of local and state funding remains relatively constant from year to year.

TANF was initiated to help families with dependent children and to help low-income families gain financial stability through additional monetary benefits. In 2008, 1.63 million families were receiving TANF benefits compared to 5.05 million in 1995 (Haskins & Weidinger, 2019, pp. 290-291). The decrease in the number of families receiving TANF benefits suggests that mothers were leaving welfare programs and had gained steady employment. Welfare program funding increased from 1.6 trillion dollars in 2007 to 2.1 trillion dollars in 2010 as caseloads continued to grow (Moffitt, 2013, p. 144). In 2018, TANF was allotted $31.3 billion to be used to help fund the child welfare system, childcare assistance, earned income tax credit (EITC), and emergency and short-term benefits (Falk 2019, p. 14; Falk & Landers, 2020, p. 3). TANF monthly benefits for a family of three had an additional increase of just under $20 monthly in 13 states and the

District of Columbia from July 2019 to July 2020 (Safawi & Floyd, 2020). With the COVID pandemic, additional cash resources were added to TANF benefits and varied from one-time benefits to monthly benefits in each state starting in March 2020 (Safawi & Floyd, 2020).

While the TANF program included 5 years of cash assistance, job training, and childcare support (Hildebrandt, 2016), success was limited due to the loss of cash benefits resulting from employment and the termination of benefits after 5 years. The program did not remove the barriers that hindered women from keeping employment, such as lack of social support systems, access to community resources, and lack of higher education (pp. 165-166). Additionally, findings from the U.S. Health and Nutrition Examination Survey and General Well-Being schedule identified complex challenges regarding work, health, and socioeconomic well-being that play a significant part in single mothers' lives after TANF support ends (Hildebrandt, 2016, p.166).

Some states limited or reduced TANF benefits when individuals were attending continuing education programs or gaining experience through job training (Falk, 2019, p. 11). Unfortunately, support for individuals after the termination of TANF benefits has been limited, and there has been little known research and follow up on the recipients. Freeman (2015) identified that until the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, 649,000 welfare recipients were in school full-time and receiving cash benefits and this number deceased significantly with providing benefits to welfare recipients as education was no longer deemed work activity. After the 1996 policy reform its estimated only 35,000 TANF recipients were full-time students (Freeman, 2015). As conflicting as the 1996 policy

reform there was a push with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 to get people off TANF (Falk, 2019; Haskins & Weidinger, 2019). Policy reforms around welfare and public assistance served as barriers to education, since the time spent to pursue a 4-year degree is not supported as work activity for those on TANF and other public assistance systems (Freeman, 2015). Additional research is required to assess post-TANF participation, which is necessary to inform revisions to policies and benefits that would better assist in the assessment of the enrollee's strengths and challenges before having TANF benefits terminated (Falk, 2019; Hildebrandt, 2016, p. 166).

Supplemental security income (SSI) is a federally funded program that offers monthly case benefits for disabled individuals who are no longer able to work mentally or physically (Social Security Administration, 2021). SSI was seen as a favorable because it has fewer requirements for mothers who suffered from disabilities both physically and mentally. For example, TANF participation included work requirements, time limitations on the program, and sanctions for not following TANF requirements (Schmidt, 2013). Single mothers having minimal work experience and lower education were more likely to utilize TANF/AFDC benefits in the early 1990s. However, benefits of TANF/AFDC, combined with other community resources, provided more benefits for single mothers than SSI alone (Schmidt, 2013, p. 7). SSI was considered a welfare reform (public assistance) of TANF as it provided cash benefits for basic living needs to be met for individuals with physical or mental disabilities. The debilitating disabilities kept many mothers from gaining stable employment and no future safety net when TANF was

terminated. Individuals awarded SSI saw a 6% increase in income for a family of three in 2003 compared to a family of three in 1996 on TANF (Wamhoff & Wiseman, 2005, p. 22). SSI provided larger supplements for income and was reviewed annually for adjustments to cost of living, while TANF benefits over the 5-year allotment on the program did not change due to increases in the cost of living (Schmidt, 2013, p. 7).

Waring and Meyer (2020) conducted a study of nonmarried women who gave birth to their first child in 2002 and compared them to a similar group of women who gave birth to their first child in 2007 (p. 4). The research question was whether women who gave birth in 2002, which represented the stable labor market that existed before the great recession, would have higher earnings and child support at the end of 5 years compared to women who gave birth in 2007, which was during the great recession. Findings suggested that single mothers who gave birth in 2002 were worse off in 2007 in terms of stable employment than mothers in 2012 who gave birth in 2007. The findings showed that the public assistance safety net was equally necessary for mothers who gave birth in both periods (Waring & Meyer, 2020, p. 9). Public assistance buffered the loss of earnings and child support for the great recession cohort. Earnings from employment were the largest source of income, but they were not enough to live above the federal poverty level (Waring & Meyer, 2020, p. 9).

Evidence suggests that women on public assistance were earning more than they did when they transitioned back to employment (Haskins & Weidinger, 2019; Waring & Meyer, 2020). The earned income tax credit (EITC) was developed to support the transition from welfare to working parents in hope to reduce childhood poverty with the

rising tax rates (Johnson, 2001). The EITC is an antipoverty program designed to be utilized by working families, and in 2001 it was reported that 5 million people benefited from the EITC federal program. The EITC offsets the rising tax rates which ultimately burdens the poor working families (Johnson, 2001, p.7). The relief that many single mothers and other families in poverty experience comes often in the form of the annual EITC and child tax credit, two federal benefits designed to offset poverty for low-income working families (Haskins & Weidinger, 2019). The EITC was developed to support the transition from welfare to working parents in hope to reduce childhood poverty with the rising tax rates (Johnson, 2001). Multiple sources of income, with earned income being the largest source, was not enough to keep mothers out of poverty, and they continued to seek out public assistance or private funding (Johnson, 2001).

Substance Use

Data show that between 2009 and 2014, 1.4 million single mothers with children under the age of 17 living in the home used substances, including 427,000 who used illicit substances and 1.1 million who abused alcohol (Lipari & Van Horn, 2017; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration, 2004). The use of prescription opioids by pregnant women increased by 14% between 2005 to 2011. Prescription opioid use frequency was highest, followed by nicotine, alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine (Qatoa et al., 2020).

 The misuse of prescription drugs in the United States is an epidemic (Smirnova & Gatewood Owens, 2019). The epidemic resulted from the misuse of medications that at one point, were legitimately prescribed to treat and manage pain (Smirnova & Gatewood

Owens, 2019; CDC, 2013). Women of low SES misuse prescription drugs more than any other illicit substance (Burdette et al., 2018; Ford et al., 2014; Frenk et al., 2015).

Mui et al. (2014) found that prescription drug users are introduced to illegal prescription drug use by friends or family who are active substance users (p. 249). People who suffer from pain because of injury can abuse and misuse prescription medications, and pain has been documented to be a pivotal pathway to addiction (Boscarino et al. 2010; Burdette et al., 2018; Mack et al., 2015). Single mothers cope with poverty, violence, childhood trauma, drug use, the need for independent living, and psychological pain, all of which create stressors that can often lead to the misuse of prescription drugs and other illegal substances as a coping mechanism (Carbone-Lopez et al., 2012).

Smirnova and Gatewood-Owens (2019, p. 958) provided a cultural critique of motherhood and showed the ways in which it is defined by how society, medical professions, and culture view mothers and their ability to navigate expectations regarding emotional responses and behavioral roles. Society tends to medicalize women's concerns more than men's and to address women's experiences such as menstruation, childbirth, fertility or infertility, and pregnancy, as conditions that need to be "treated" (p. 958). The biomedicalization of women's experiences keeps the focus on a cure or "improvement." leading to the prescription of psychopharmaceuticals drugs to effect the cure (Clark et al., 2003; Smirnova & Gatewood Owens, 2019, p. 958). The misuse of prescribed medications and illicit substance use by single mothers are the result of physical pain and mental health issues resulting from trauma, domestic violence, sexual violence, and chronic poverty (Boscarino et al. 2010; Burdette et al., 2018).

Smirnova and Gatewood Owens (2019) coined the term "good mother" as one who conforms to cultural and society norms to regarding motherhood. They studied prescription drugs used for nonmedical purposes in a sample of incarcerated women. They found that the use of prescriptions pills helped single mothers cope with stress, especially where IPV was present and was associated with caretaking and keeping their families together during prolonged periods of poverty. These researchers drew the conclusion that the initial use of pharmaceutical drugs helped mothers to cope and to provide continued mothering while balancing work and home life. They also found that prolonged use hindered their ability to care for their children and led to high risk taking and crimes to maintain pill use (Smirnova & Gatewood Owens, 2019, p.7).

While psychopharmaceutical treatments have been used to normalize unhealthy emotions and produce healthy feelings, they often lead to addiction with prolonged use, which can result in criminalization, incarceration, and separation from children (Haritavorn, 2016; Smirnova & Gatewood Owens, 2019). Pharmaceutical drug dependency can reduce the perceived need or desire to enhance support systems and foster healthy relationships with others. Prescription drugs often are used to help stabilize women after emotional and physical trauma; however, using addictive prescription drugs can lead to abuse and misuse (Smirnova & Gatewood Owens, 2019).

Mothers are encouraged to seek prescription drug treatment rather than seeking social support resources (e.g., helplines and community support groups) for postpartum anxiety, depression, and stress; these treatments can lead to addiction to pharmaceutical drugs (Fox & Neiterman, 2015). As the management of pain shifts to self-medicating or

abuse of the prescribed medication in larger quantity and frequency than advised or recommended, criminalization and the potential involvement of child welfare agencies and incarceration of the mother because of illegal activities associated with obtaining prescription drugs illegally can result (Haritavorn 2016; Smirnova & Gatewood Owens, 2019).

The continued use of prescription drugs is believed to help mothers cope with the victimization and became a means of escape or fantasy to numb oneself from caretaking responsibilities (CDC, 2013; Ferraro, 2006; Smirnova & Gatewood Owens, 2019). However, long term prescription drug use frequently leads to a false experience of safety resulting from being in control and hinders mothers from caring for their children (Smirnova & Gatewood Owens, 2019, p. 966). Hays (1996) stated that drug use is not merely a recreational choice to get high but the result of several competing social pressures that can encourage the use of drugs to meet the overwhelming demands of motherhood at the margins.

Substance use by low SES women tends to be associated with social exclusion from opportunities to participate in economic, social, and civic life (Cole et al., 2011. p. 13; Fischer, 2008). Cole et al. (2011) noted that social exclusion is linked to several problems such as unemployment, low income, poor housing, substance use, and involvement with the criminal justice system (p. 13). Single mother homes have a higher rate of substance use, which exposes both the mother and the children to domestic violence, child welfare involvement, and instability of secure and permanent housing (Stringer & Baker, 2018; VanDeMark et al., 2005). Substance use by single mothers has

been shown to lead to substance abuse issues in their children in adolescence and adulthood (Lam et al., 2007; Seljamo et al., 2006; Stringer & Baker, 2018).

Data show that women and are less likely than men to utilize treatment services for substance use. Motherhood can be a barrier to treatment due to lack of economic resources and reduced social support (Cohen et al., 2007; Greenfield et al., 2010; Stringer & Baker, 2018). The stigmatization of mothers who actively use illicit substances is rooted in perceptions held by many about the core role of the mother in raising children. Single mothers who use substances, illegal or not, have been stigmatized as dirty, masculine, and sexually available because of the problematic behaviors that develop because of substance use (Anderson, 2010; Peralta & Jauk, 2011; Stringer & Baker, 2018).

Gallagher and Nordberg (2017) found that a drug court showed more compassion and empathy for women than standard criminal judicial systems. This support was noted to be a strength, as the drug court staff involvement consisted of frequent contact with the judge, case workers, therapist, attorney's, probation officer, and program managers. Most of the women involved with the drug court were single mothers with self-reported traumatic histories (Zweig et al., 2012). Drug courts as a concept allowed single mothers to stay out of the prison and jail system and gain access to community resources to address mental health and substance abuse issues. It was also found to reduce recidivism (National Association of Drug Court Professionals, n.d.). Researchers have found that the women who presented to the drug court had a complex history of trauma, substance use, and mental health issues (Gallagher & Nordberg, 2017; Lynch et al., 2014; Zweig et al.,

2012;). Single mothers felt that while the drug court was supportive, being a single mother created challenges in meeting legal court requirements while simultaneously providing for their children. Challenges included barriers associated with finding childcare, maintaining employment, and managing stresses that result from being a single mother (Barlow, 2014; Gallagher & Nordberg, 2017; Zweig et al., 2012;).

Employment

Women who give birth before having stable employment were less likely to work between ages 26 and 30 than mothers who already had a steady job (Rendall & Shattuck, 2017). Single mothers often are disconnected from earned income and public assistance (Loprest & Nichols 2011, p. 3). Moore et al. (2012) found that single mothers who had more work history were less likely to be disconnected from multiple income sources and more likely to leave a disconnected status. Single mothers may not earn enough income from employment to live above poverty, yet they make too much to be eligible for public assistance of any sort (Rendall & Shattuck, 2019). Single mothers often face an inherent challenge of balancing motherhood and household responsibilities with employment requirements (Rendall & Shattuck, 2019). And, while employment is essential for single mothers, full-time employment is often not enough to lift women out of poverty (Damaske et al., 2017. p. 132). Damaske et al. identified the risk of poverty by race and employment status across the first decade of the 21st century (p. 131). Findings showed a dramatic increase in poverty rates among most single mother homes without full time employment for all mothers from 2001 to 2010 (except in Asian American families). Poverty decreased for full time employed single mothers at the end of the decade with an

exception for Asian mothers (Damaske et al., 2017, p. 131). Racial disparities in poverty appeared to improve in some races by the end of that decade, indicating reduced inequality.

Racial differences in poverty between White and Black single mothers and White and American Indian single mothers has remained persistent regardless of stable employment (p. 132). Litcher and Crowley (2004) saw a decline in poverty in single parent homes at the start of the 21st century, as employment levels were on a rise and the number of women on welfare decreased. Even with the decrease in unemployment rates, employment appears to be less of a protective factor from poverty in 2010 when initially compared to data collected from 2001 and 2005 (Damaske et al., 2017, p. 132). White single mothers living in poverty increased over the decade, whereas Black and Hispanic single mothers continued to have the same poverty risk at the end of a decade-long study (Damaske et al., 2017, p. 132). Thus, while it appears that the disparity is decreasing, this is only because the poverty rate of White mothers increased primarily due to unemployment and an increase in public assistance usage.

The limitations of strict work policies, high-stress levels, and financial insecurities offer limited ability to grow in wages, promotion, or employment for single mothers. Single mothers, predominantly working people of color mothers who earned disproportionately lower wages, struggle to remain gainfully employed (Richard & Lee, 2019). Minority single mothers can face problematic discriminatory practices that often lead to being denied work, being paid lower wages, and receiving inadequate training (Lu et al., 2017; Rendall & Shattuck, 2017). The polarization of the labor market resulted in

higher quality jobs, those including benefits and ability to advance with promotion, and lower quality jobs, work that offered limited or no career advancement (Autor et al., 2006; Kalleberg, 2011). Damaske et al. (2017, p.126) found an increase in the percentage of single mothers who were working part time or were unemployed between 2001 and 2010.

There was a decrease in employment among single mothers from 2001 to 2010. Damaske et al. (2017) found full-time employment of women decreased from 57% to 52% between 2001 and 2010, but for single mothers the part-time or unemployed work status did not change from 2001 to 2010. Single mothers not employed were three times more likely to be in poverty versus women working part-time of full-time. Data suggested there was no change in the percentage of single mothers in managerial and professional occupations. However, the percentage of women employed in the service industry increased from 36% to 39% between 2001 and 2010 (Damaske et al. 2017, p. 126). Richard and Lee (2019) noted that limited research has been conducted on the types of employment single mothers in the low- and middle-income levels occupy. However, research has focused on work related behaviors and the mental health disorders and diagnoses most associated with being single mothers (p. 145). In another study, single mothers who are members of racial minority groups were less likely to focus on physical and mental health and physical exercise because of chronic stress related to work and work environment (Dlugonski et al, 2017).

Black and Hispanic women are more likely to have children at a younger age than White and Asian women; this interrupts the work experience (Hoffman & Maynard,

2008). Social safety net and welfare programs in the United States have typically acted as buffers against poverty for single mothers who were either in low paying employment or unemployed. Those who were employed saw their incomes move just above poverty level, and this was due mostly to the EITC program. Those who were unemployed saw an increase in SNAP and unemployment insurance benefits but continued to remain below the poverty level (Moffitt, 2013). The ability to maintain work decreases for single mothers when faced with the challenges of low education levels, single-parent births, and lack of work experience (Damaske et al, 2017, p. 121).

Mental Health of Mothers and Their Children

Signs of depression in adolescents living in homes headed by single mothers were more prominent than those living in households with two parents (Daryanani et al., 2016). The underprivilege associated with low SES, limited emotional support, increased chronic poverty, and increased caregiving for siblings and daily household responsibilities impact emotional well-being of older siblings in single mother homes. Results of the study by Daryanani and colleagues also suggested that single-mother households are at a higher risk of more frequent stressful life events, such as financial hardships, lack of community resources, not enough food in the home, and mental health issues including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Mental health issues affect 30% of single mother versus 18% or partnered mothers (Pond, 2018). Other authors have noted similar findings (Flouri et al., 2018; Liang et al., 2019). Luhmann et al. (2012) found that life events such as poverty, divorce, childbirth, bereavement, unemployment, and re-employment affect cognitive and affective well-being. The ability to care for a

family becomes overwhelming and places more demands on single mothers, reducing their quality of life and impacting their physical and mental health (Hildebrandt, 2016). Physical exercise was recognized as being a valuable preventative measure to reduce chronic physical and mental stress (Dlugonski et al., 2017).

Physical and socioeconomic stressors associated with disconnection from public assistance can lead to mental health problems for mothers, including depression, anxiety, and feelings of abandonment by the social support systems provided by community, family, and friends (Hildebrandt, 2016). Liang et al. (2019) identified psychological factors such as depression, anxiety, and stress as common risk factors among single mothers. Approximately 30% of single mothers reported symptoms of depression and anxiety, and 37% reported general stress due to lack of community support, childhood history of maltreatment, and inadequate partner support or active involvement from the other parent (Liang et al., 2019).

Empirical studies show that mothers who feel supported have more access to coping strategies, have better mental health, and use more positive parenting strategies with their children (Taylor & Conger, 2017, p. 353). Improvement of overall well-being appears to be more cost effective with group-based interventions than with individual therapy to build more meaningful and lasting relationships with other peers within the community. Peer support groups and cognitive behavioral treatment programs can have positive impacts on well-being of the parent and the behavioral adjustment of children. Bolstering self-efficacy and self-esteem helps decrease hopeless which decreases mental and physical health symptoms (Taylor & Conger, 2017, p. 353).

Napora et al. (2018) found that single mothers use different copings strategies to function at work and deal with burnout both physically and mentally. These coping strategies include ignoring the problem, avoidance/resignation, alcohol use, help seeking, and positive thinking (p. 64). The results from the study concluded single mothers were less likely to ask for help and reported a decreased life satisfaction and healthy coping mechanisms to address work-related stress (Napora et al., 2018, p.66). This study focused on nurses specifically and identified nurses in management as less likely to ask for help to avoid being seen as unable to perform job duties.

Napora et al. (2018) found that avoidance and resignation coping strategies serve as a protective factor for single mothers to preserve energy, emotional well-being, and mental and physical health. The avoidance/resignation coping strategy is frequently used by both single and partnered mothers; however, a single mother is more likely to use this coping strategy to protect herself against loss of energy (Napora et al., 2018). Single mothers have more obstacles compared to partnered mothers or mothers without children in terms of work satisfaction and limited skills to cope with burnout. However, researchers found that work satisfaction and types of motherhood are differentiated only in use of avoidance/resignation coping mechanisms.

Research shows that single mothers living in poverty experience an inability to adjust and cope with behavioral and mental health issues including depression, anxiety, and adjustment disorders (Jadva, 2009). Left untreated, these conditions can result in hopelessness and maladaptive behaviors such as self-defeating negative thoughts (Atkins, 2010; Rohleder, 2012). Risk factors for low self-efficacy include but are not limited to

lower educational attainment, poorer mental and physical health, increased psychosocial and socioeconomic risk factors, and lower social support. Self-efficacy has been found to be higher for single than for partnered or married mothers, likely because of the added roles and responsibilities associated with being a single mother (Atkins, 2010; Rohleder, 2012).

The lack of integrated and collaborative support from community resources such as health care providers, vocational rehabilitation, and increased educational support challenge the coping abilities of single mothers (Frankham et al., 2020; Golombok et al., 2016). Single mothers require more comprehensive services to address mental and physical health risk factors. Alternative and holistic approaches other than medication management alone can help single mothers begin to develop healthy coping mechanisms (Atkins, 2010; Rohleder, 2012).

Mental health symptoms and socioeconomic deprivation are associated with behavioral problems in children and adolescents from poorer families; children from poorer families were 2 to 3 times more likely to develop mental health problems than children living in better socioeconomic families and situations (Reiss, 2013, p. 28; Tichovolsky et al., 2013). Children with absent father's manifest identity development problems that manifest as antisocial behaviors; this is especially true for boys (Amato, 2005; Ritcher & Lemola, 2017). Female children are more likely than male children to experience depression or internalizing mental health symptoms because of their absent fathers (Reiss, 2013; Tichovolsky et al., 2013). Studies have suggested that more male support from family members, teachers, coaches, and friends is associated with decreased

behavioral problems in children, such as acting out, conduct disorder, and disrespect to the mother and other siblings. Reduced social support can cause isolation and unmet emotional needs for both the mother and the child (Daryanani et al., 2016).

The capacity for single mothers to engender self-worth and self-esteem in their children is just as important as providing monetary needs (Kulukjian & Pagan, 2015). Increased social support results in mothers being more emotionally and physically present in supporting their children and reducing the children's isolation, anxiety, and depression (Tichovolsky et al., 2013). Kulukjian and Pagan (2015) conducted a study on children who were now adults having been raised by a single mother. The findings validated that single mothers instilled positive values and strengths in their children and reinforced the notion that hard work would result in success. Many of the adult children raised by single mothers noted that they had a sense of optimism and understood what exemplified a positive role model (p. 82).

Single mother homes are typically characterized by inconsistencies in setting rules, parenting practices, and discipline, which increases behavioral problems among their children at home and in school. It has been shown that adjustment disorders in children lead to substance abuse, social deficits, and mental health disorders (Daryanani et al., 2016). The inability of some single mothers to create emotional balance results in insecurity that can interrupt the ability to form intimate relationships, including those with their children (Daryanani et al., 2016). Children who grew up with a single mother were more likely to see a decrease in overall life satisfaction and were likely to have lower socioeconomic status and education as adults. Children growing up in single

mother households also struggled with social skills needed to integrate into society and had few intimately romantic and social platonic relationships that did not end in divorce or estranged relationships (Ritcher & Lemola, 2017, p. 7).

Daryanani et al. (2016) noted that children raised in single mother homes are more likely to develop psychopathology than those raised in two parent traditional homes; surprisingly, severe anxiety was lower in single mother households. Studies suggest that the unpredictability associated with growing up in a single mother household result in decreased adult lifespan due to the inability to adjust to life circumstances and to cope with environmental factors (Richter & Lemola, 2017).

Daryanani et al. (2016) noted the need for future research to understand mechanisms by which single motherhood confers risk for psychopathology to children. The increased risk of episodic and chronic depression, anxiety, stressful life events, and low self-esteem continue to make demands on single mothers (p. 11). Women experience additional stress because of limited time for caregiving to children, transportation difficulties, and extended work hours (Daryanani et al., 2016, p. 11). Studies suggest that single mothers, more than married mothers or cohabitating partners, are more likely to be controlling of their children, and such control can be associated with psychopathology in children (Daryanani et al., 2016).

In summary, stressful life events such as poor education, financial hardships, and the lack of social support contribute to the breakdown of parenting and coping skills. Single mothers often lack the coping mechanisms to reduce life stressors, which increase mental health problems and can cause burnout (Daryanani et al., 2016, Flouri et al.,

2018). The struggles to access social and community resources for both mother and child decrease the quality of life and manifest mental and behavioral health conditions. The integrated community resources increase the quality of life for single mothers in communities to gain coping skills, educational skills, and services to address mental and behavioral health. Current literature offers insight into the need for strength-based mental health approaches to help mothers who struggle financially and parenting resources that address mental health (Kulukjian and Pagan, 2015).

Demographics: Education and Household Composition

Education

Brady et al. (2017) identified low education as one of the four major risks factors for poverty (the others including single motherhood, being head of household, and unemployment) across 29 global democracies. The Institute for Women's Policy Research found that single mothers would increase their income over a lifetime if they were more educated. Single mothers were 69% less likely to be in poverty with a Bachelor of Arts degree compared with having just a high school diploma (Reichlin et al., 2018) and would contribute $7.8 billion additional dollars to taxes over their lifetime (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2018). When comparing mothers giving birth in 2001 and 2010 cohorts, a nearly equal percentage of single mothers had obtained college degrees (16.1%) and reported no more than a high school education (17%). had obtained college degrees. These numbers are substantially better than those in 2001, when the same percentages were 13.3% and 22.4%, respectively (Damaske et al., 2017, p.126).

Pursuing education creates additional stresses resulting from financial limitations, lack of available childcare, and lack of leisure time for single mothers (Freeman, 2020). For single mothers able to pursue education beyond a high school diploma, institutional barriers existed, including lack of flexibility by the institution, lack of guidance from and accessibility to information on career paths, and insufficient financial support to pay for higher education. The result is that single mothers are not able to pursue degrees of their passion; they are likely taking longer to complete their degrees, thus incurring more expense, and losing lifetime income (Freeman, 2020).

Low Income Families' Empowerment through Education (LIFETIME) was founded in 1996 for and by mothers on welfare. The goals of the program were to help families achieve higher education, stable employment, and more economic stability (Katz, 2013, p. 279). The participants developed a welfare rights organization to advocate for parents to gain the resources needed for educational programs and welfare assistance. LIFETIME is an independent nongovernmental organization that services an estimated 300 parents a year and has 200 active advocacy peer supporters and over 2,000 non active members (Katz, 2013, p. 279).

The Katz (2013) narrative study referred to mothers who participated in LIFETIME as "model welfare participants" (p. 299) as they transitioned from welfare and obtained higher education. The transition from welfare was successful in the eyes of policy makers as the women fit the rhetorical model of welfare participants gaining higher education while using TANF benefits. However, these mothers identified that gaining higher education caused them and others to be penalized and they had to learn to

navigate and manipulate the system to complete their education and maintain benefits (Katz, 2013, p. 299). One participant stated that she was in noncompliance with the TANF "work first" regulation (p. 298) even while in school and trying to improve the quality of her life. Policy makers wanted to know how these mothers were able to stay motivated in obtaining higher education, as welfare programs tend to devalue higher education (Katz, 2013). The Vocational and Applied Technology Act (34 CRF 400.4 (b) allowed individuals participating in the TANF program to count 12 months of vocational education for advanced or baccalaureate degrees in lieu of job participation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008, p. 6792). The TANF program unfortunately allotted only 12 months of educational credit to be counted as work participation before participants were noncompliant with the regulations of the program (p. 6792).

Augustine (2016) noted mothers who were high school dropouts at the time of giving birth to their first child were more likely to obtain their high school diplomas or Genera; Education Development (GED) in the first 5 years of the child's life. Women who already had a high school diploma before having their first child often waited until the children were older to further their education beyond a high school diploma (Augustine, 2016). Poor single mothers were more likely to struggle and were less likely to have continued education and on the job training than middle- and higher-income single mothers (Zahn, 2006).

The two-generation policy offered on the job training for parents and early childhood education (head start) for children so that low-income parents were able to go

back to school for trades or advanced education (Sommer et al., 2018, p.133). The two-generation policy was developed to help gain education and job training for adults with low SES to promote economic stability and human capital across more than one generation (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014, p. 33). This policy had the biggest impact in increasing job training skills for low SES mothers to improve economic status (Augustine, 2016, p. 750). The Career Advance Program was another program that was part of the two-generation policy that offers skill building, coaching, and peer support to parents who work and made decision to return to school.

The two-generation approach was designed to reduce poverty in the near and long term and motivate parents to gain advanced education to increase their human capital (Sommer et al., 2018). Breinholt and Holm (2020) noted that when mothers improve their education, this promotes educational success in their children. The heightened stress single mothers experience ultimately influences their ability to continue their education and depends upon the cultural, social, and financial support mothers have before enrolling in higher education. Financial stress and emotional support are deciding factors for mothers continuing to pursue higher education (Breinholt & Holm, 2020). Grootaert et al. (1995) noted that the educational obtainment was important and reduced hardships, but the job skills learned from education were more important; this was especially true in rural areas. It is believed that education helps to cope with economic recession, as higher education means better paying jobs that can help in the transition from poverty. The similarities to skills learned through education and on-the-job training continue to be strong factors of economic mobility and moving out of poverty both within the United

States and globally (Breinholt & Holm, 2020; Grootaert et al., 1995; Strumbos et al., 2018).

Household Composition

Research shows that living with extended family helps provide necessary resources to reduce the poverty status and the higher expenses associated with single motherhood including housing, utilities, food, and childcare (Bratter & Whitehead, 2016; Cohen & Casper 2002; Pilkauskas, 2012). The share of households that include multigenerational families increased from 12.9 % to 15% between 2001 and 2010 (Damaske et al. (2017, p.126). Vespa et al. (2013) noted that in 2012 4.6% of Americans lived with extended family in multigenerational households. Pilkauskas (2012) found that more single mothers (45%) lived in 3-generational household than married mothers (9%) and cohabiting mothers (17%); (p. 936). Advantages for single mothers with older children living with extended family included the mothers being more likely to have a full-time job and be more highly educated (Bratter & Whitehead, 2016; Keene et al., 2012; Mutchler & Baker, 2009). Bratter and Whitehead (2016) found that 40% of single mothers living alone are in poverty versus 30% of single mothers living with extended families of the same or older generation (p. 23). They found that 20% of Black American/African American single mothers and 20% of White single mothers, 11.73% of Asian single mothers, and 41% of Hispanic single mothers live with extended family members.

Bratter and Whitehead (2016) suggested that the decreasing numbers of traditional two-parent homes may be related to corresponding increases in extended

relatives living in homes to provide additional support to single mothers. They conducted

research to examine the impact of multigenerational families on poverty. Their sample

included 69,664 families headed by single women. Of this, approximately 9% of the

sample had same and older generation relatives of the mother living in the household.

The researchers found that homes having both generations living in the household had the

lowest percentage (22%) of households living in poverty; this compares to 46% of the

households with no extended family members (Bratter & Whitehead, 2016, p. 18). In

multivariate models, mothers who are Black or Hispanic were more likely to be living in

poverty regardless of household status. Thus, living in multigenerational households can

serve as a protective factor against poverty.

Resilience

The American Psychological Association (2002) defined resilience as the

"process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even

significant sources of stress" (p.1). It is "(1) a personality attribute, a relatively stable

disposition, which determines adaptability to changing life requirements, and (2) a

process of adaptive capacity to overcome negative life events" (Grzankowska et al., 2018,

p. 2). Resiliency thinking is a combination of persistence, adaptability, and

transformability which help to manage complex changes (Lade et al., 2017, p.2).

Resilience is evident in people who are presented with difficult or imminent

adverse situations and must use strength and motivation to overcome and adapt to

circumstances (Grzankowska et al., 2018; Luthar et al., 2000). Resilience allows for an

individual to perform at optimum levels of efficiency and to recover despite failures,

setbacks, and encountered difficulties (Heszen, 2013). Resilient people tend to demonstrate higher social skills that are seen mostly in communication and empathy skills in the family context (Compas et al., 2014). Grzankowska et al. (2018) found that single mothers, more than cohabitating and partnered mothers, showed more resilience in coping with difficult situations and that this resilience contributed to higher job satisfaction (p. 11).

Henderson (2003) identified that resiliency is fostered in two ways: utilizing internal resources and utilizing resources provided by people, community, and organizations. Resiliency thinking changes how policies are developed to alleviate poverty and further development of sustainable social ecological research helps to have systematic responses to poverty (Lade et al., 2017, p. 9). The continued focus on the adverse impact of poverty on single mother families fails to focus on solution orientated approaches that highlight the successful strides mothers make and would be characterized by resilient mothers. The authors suggest focus needs to be more on correlations and predictors of resilience and competence for single mothers (Murry et al.,2001, p. 136).

Grzankowska et al. (2018) noted that single mothers are one of the most vulnerable populations with limited economic, social, and psychological connections. The researchers found no significant differences in coping mechanisms and resilience when comparing single mothers and partnered and/or cohabitating mothers. Single mothers were less open to new experiences, which is typically seen as a risk factor, and showed less sense of humor than married women and/or cohabitating women (p. 8).

State of the Research on Single Mothers Emerging From Poverty

Current research demonstrates that the accumulated benefits of home ownership, having bank accounts, having independent transportation outside of public transportation, continued education, and on-the-job training help single mothers rise out of poverty (Zhan, 2006). Zahn (2006) found a relationship between middle income single mothers having a bank account and economic security and their pursuit of education job training (p. 144). Poor single mothers were more likely to see having a vehicle as a necessity or asset compared to middle- or high-income mothers (p. 143). Zahn also showed that education plays a significant role in human capital development, but high-quality job training increases economic mobility and provides stability that allows women to rise out of poverty (Zahn, 2006, p. 146).

The public assistance and federal programs such as TANF, SNAP, SSI, and EITC were created assist families in moving out of poverty (Waring & Meyer, 2020). Studies indicate that these antipoverty programs have not proven to be enough to raise single mothers out of poverty and have created a dependency that keeps many single mothers in poverty both with the United States and globally (Bradshaw et al., 2019). However, studies indicate that public assistance and federal programs, combined with employment, help single mothers gain economic stability (Waring & Meyer, 2020). The policies associated with public assistance and federal aid programs require proof of employment or active job search and aid in providing on the job training to increase sustainable employment (Bogle et al., 2016; Hildebrandt, 2016). Incentives including childcare, early development learning for children (Head Start), access to parent life coaches, access to

advanced education and/or obtaining a high school diploma or General Education Development (Breinholt & Holm, 2020; Grootaert et al., 1995), and access to medical and mental health services also create opportunities to help women move out of poverty (Bogle et al., 2016; Sommer et al., 2018).

Bogle et al. (2016) identified 13 fundamental building blocks to increase economic mobility for single mothers. These include stable housing, living in communities with reduced crime rate, supportive social networking groups, cash welfare benefits, transportation, increased wages from employment, and having a bank account, among others. Ellwood et al. (2016) showed that structural racism within the criminal justice systems results in harsher sentencing and drug law standards for minorities and further creates instability in gaining housing, employment, and family reunification (p. 2). Structural racism particularly impacts single mothers who are of Black/African American and Latina descent, as the ability to find employment, housing, and access community services is reduced or denied altogether, especially if the woman has a criminal record. One result is that underage children become caught in generational cycles of poverty and thus remain in poverty (Ellwood et al., 2016).

Advanced education offers increased opportunity to move out of poverty; however, the challenges of transportation, childcare, and financial assistance have been barriers for many single mothers. Researchers have noted that antipoverty programs need to include academic and career development components (Strumbos et al., 2018). The lack of higher education limits social mobility and the ability to rise out of poverty. To improve the transition from poverty, on the job training and skills building for career

advancement will increase wages for women and thus help them to become more economic stable, especially for minority single mothers who have less access to higher education (Bogle et al., 2016).

The research has abundant examples that show the negative aspects of poverty and the various factors that are associated with increased risk for living in poverty. The research provides insight into the impact and influence poverty has in several aspects of the lives of single mothers. What is missing are studies examining how single mothers have successfully moved out of poverty, changed their socioeconomic status, or interrupted generational poverty cycle. The literature provides limited understanding of the factors, in their own voices, that helped single mothers transition from poverty. The findings suggest that characteristics of human and physical capital, such as home and land ownership, are assets that help to gain economic mobility (Grootaert et al., 1995).

More research is needed in understanding the resilience of single mothers in adapting and overcoming financial hardship, lack of education, and instability with employment, support systems, and advanced education and how this resilience helps them transition from poverty (Bradshaw et al., 2019; Grzankowska et al., 2018; Zahn, 2006). The inability of single mothers to adjust and cope with the behavioral and mental health issues is strongly correlated with poverty. However, there is limited research on the challenges faced by single mothers and their transition from poverty using a resilience approach.

Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to conduct a phenomenological investigation, using a resiliency model approach rather than a deficits approach, to

understand in their own voices the key factors that helped single mothers transition from poverty. Current research provides investigation of many factors that influence poverty status; yet there are still millions of single mothers living in poverty. Several factors, such as higher education, public assistance, and roles of family dynamics, are implicated in successful transition. However, the present study can help to understand the lived experiences of single mothers who are caught in a cycle of poverty and increase the mobility of single mothers rising out of poverty. In Chapter 3, I will provide the rationale for a phenomenological approach to investigating the phenomenon of women transitioning from poverty as well as a detailed explanation of the methodology for the study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

In Chapter 2, I provided a detailed literature review to introduce and explain factors associated with the chronic poverty of single mothers and the challenges that keep single mothers and their children in poverty. The purpose of the present study was to develop an understanding, from the voices of women, the lived experiences of single mothers who are no longer living in poverty and the resources that were available to help them rise out of poverty. In Chapter 3, I present a detailed description of the methods used to collect and analyze data for this study. The chapter begins with the main research question and subquestions for the study. This chapter also includes a discussion of the research design and rationale for using a qualitative phenomenological approach as well as my role as researcher, the study population, recruitment, data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations.

Research Questions

The main research question focused on developing an understanding the lived experiences of single mothers who have overcome poverty. There were three subquestions:

- What support systems did mothers use that helped them to rise out of poverty?

- What self-perceived qualities and strengths contribute to the success of single mothers who rise from poverty?

- How do these single mothers define success at rising out of poverty?

Research Design and Rationale

Rationale for Qualitative Approach

Understanding he phenomenon of single mothers rising out of poverty and the factors that impact poverty supported the need for a qualitative approach in this study. There appears to be a tremendous amount research available about the impediments or negative factors that keep single mothers in poverty, such as lower education, substance use, mental health issues, and minimal or nonexistent social supports; however, there are still millions of single mothers living in poverty. Several factors, such as higher education, public assistance, and family involvement, have been shown to aid in the successful transition out of poverty. I conducted this study to develop an understanding of the experiences of single mothers who are caught in a cycle of poverty and increase their ability to rise out of poverty. Because so little is known about what internal and external resources make escaping poverty a possibility, a qualitative approach was best suited for this study.

Qualitative research is an "umbrella term that encompasses many approaches" (Atkinson et al., 2001, p. 7) and is descriptive (Dawidowicz, 2016). Qualitative research is defined as by Denzin and Lincoln (2018) "as a set of complex interpretive practices without a single discipline that studies subjects in their natural settings to make them visible to the world" (p. 43). Qualitative research helps uncover the meaning behind a phenomenon rather than the cause and effect of the relationship (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 5). The sole interest of qualitative research lies in identifying and understanding

how individuals perceive their experiences and attribute meaning to those experiences

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The qualitative research method offers the ability to gain an enriched

understanding of individual stories through unstructured and/or semistructured interviews

that allows patterns of characteristics, behaviors, values, and morals to emerge that would

otherwise be lost (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Cruz & Tantia, 2017). The qualitative

approach offers researchers the ability to explore humanistic conditions and provides a

methodical approach to processing and interpreting data to develop theory (Cruz &

Tantia, 2017).

Phenomenological Design

I used the phenomenological design to understand how women transition out of

poverty, so the lived experiences of single mothers were the central phenomenon under

study. Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) founded phenomenology as a philosophical

movement that focused on the consciousness of lived experience of individuals (Rasid et

al., 2021). Husserl wanted to capture the lived experience and how individuals perceived

and lived through a phenomenon (Alase, 2017; Dawidowicz, 2016). Alfred Schutz

(1899–1959) expanded upon Husserl's phenomenology, considering it to be too abstract,

and introduced an applied phenomenology to social science research (Rasid et al., 2021).

Schutz believed that individuals are conscious and present in the reflection of day-to-day

life experiences (Rasid et al., 2021). This phenomenon is called "stream of

consciousness," when individual life experiences are examined and analyzed (p. 192).

Schultz believed in multiple realities, such as dreams, fantasies, and social life, and

believed that humans' experiences in life are intermingled with others' realities and consciousness (Rasid et al., 2021, p. 193).

Dawidowicz (2016) defined phenomenology as "a collection and analysis of people's perceptions related to a specific, definable phenomenon. A phenomenon is an event or experience that an individual goes through" (p. 203). In the theory of social action, Max Weber (1864–1920) identified that a person's behavior is subjective, yet intentional and deliberate (Rasid et al., 2021). As a research design, phenomenology is inductive and allows the researcher to build patterns, themes, and categories to quickly organize and analyze data. Creswell (2007) identified meaning units as themes and patterns that can be identified and grouped. When using phenomenology, a researcher seeks to understand the reality of lived experiences of a research participant that is subjective and inductive (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Schutz's idea of phenomenology identified the need to understand the action, speech, and interaction that are required for social interaction (Rasid et al., 2021).

Phenomenology is a reflective approach that uses interpretation, subjectivity, and representation to understand lived experiences. The design focuses on developing an interpretation of the meaning behind the phenomenon through a textural and structural description reflected by the words of participants (Rasid et al., 2021). Textural description describes what is experienced about something that is factual and takes places empirically. Structural description describes how an individual understands and experiences a phenomenon (Rasid et al., 2021, p. 195). Epoché, or bracketing, is a step in phenomenological reduction in which the researcher sets aside their preconceived notions

or experiences to better understand the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Rationale for Phenomenological Design

The growing concerns of poverty and how single mothers are impacted by and rise out of poverty, while others stay in poverty, warranted exploration. The goal of using the phenomenological design in this study was to capture each participant's lived experiences and understand the shared characteristics of their lived experiences. There is limited extant research on how women experience poverty as they are transitioning out of it and what resources have been helpful in transitioning them out of poverty. The phenomenological approach was my preferred approach to examine how women experience the transition out of poverty. Other approaches may have been appropriate for this study; however, I provide an argument for why phenomenology was the most suitable choice for this study in the following subsection.

Rationale for Eliminating Other Research Designs

A case study involves the examination of an individual, group, or other unit over time, with the goal of understanding the unit through triangulation of data from multiple sources (Creswell, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Schoch, 2020). I deemed the case study design not appropriate for this study because a case study design would typically involve one person or organization and the focus would not have allowed for an exploration of the lived experiences of single mothers transitioning out of poverty (see Creswell, 2006).

Narrative research is a chronological storytelling of the individuals' life and sequence of events of what has taken place. This design is used to explain how culture, race, and belief systems influence individuals and their environments. Narrative research was not appropriate for the present study because I was less interested in the story of the participants' and more interested in the specific depth of their experiences related specifically to transitioning out of poverty with the goal of understanding the key factors that impact how single mothers rise out of poverty (see Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Grounded theory is the process for generating a new theory for research that has limited data available to be tested and analyzed (Creswell, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Grounded theory is used to provide a general explanation of the theory based on the perceptions of the participants in the study (Creswell, 2006). The purpose of the present study was not to generate a theory that can potentially be generalized to women and tested empirically. The understanding of the factors impacting sing mothers' transition out of poverty are still not well enough understood, and grounded theory works well in areas where there is depth of understanding of the phenomenon of interest.

 Ethnography is a study of cultures and is loosely based on the interpretation of how the researcher defines culture and shared beliefs. In an ethnography, a researcher studies the shared patterns of behaviors, languages, and actions and that requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the daily lives of the participants (Creswell, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I did not consider an ethnography appropriate for this study because the focus of the design is on the culture rather than the individual (see Creswell,

2006). An ethnography also challenges traditional approaches and can limit the audience because the content has a storytelling approach that can focus on behaviors of a group culture instead of individual experiences (Creswell, 2006, p. 72).

Although many of these qualitative research designs overlap, it was clear from my review of the literature that a phenomenological approach was the best suited for the purposes of this study. To better understand how some single mothers rise from and transition out of poverty while others remain in poverty and continue the cycle of generational poverty, developing an in-depth understanding of their experiences was key to identifying the factors responsible for the transition out of poverty (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Cruz & Tantia, 2017).

Role of Researcher

My role as the researcher in this study was to evaluate, from the lived experiences of single mothers, the factors that contribute to their rise from poverty. In qualitative studies, the role of the researcher requires the ability to identify one's own biasness and subjectivity, necessitating self-awareness throughout the entire research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This insight helps understand how the researcher can cause subjectivity that can influence how the data are interpreted. Dawidowicz (2016) identified how the researcher can impact how participants react to questions during a study (p. 207).

As a single mother, I could validate and understand both the physical and emotional impact of the interviews on the participants as they shared their stories. I moved out of generational poverty; came from a family in which many failed to finish high school, much less gain postsecondary education; and at one point utilized public

assistance. I have personally experienced the struggles of navigating poverty. Given the amount of time reviewing the extant literature on this topic and my personal experience as a single mother who has risen out of poverty, it was difficult to set aside my preconceived knowledge. However, it was important to note that each single mother experiences poverty differently even when faced with the same challenges in navigating poverty.

As a single mother rising out of poverty, my experiences helped me to build rapport with the single mother participants and helped them feel more comfortable and confident in sharing their own lived experiences. As a single mother who navigated poverty and utilized public assistance, I understand that there are internal and external barriers that are more challenging. Given that each person's experiences are unique, I had to bracket my own experiences and clearly acknowledge the reality of multiple experiences presented to me by the participants.

I had no prior relationship with any of the participants in the research study. A continuous process of self-assessment was important because my own biases could have impacted my interpretations and the meaning made from the data, so I needed to be aware of how my own biases impacted my own thinking processes. This is known reflexivity (Dawidowicz, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Schwandt, 2015). The role of the researcher is to diligently collect and analyze the data while also having self-awareness of possible bias to capture the participants' lived experiences and provide a more in-depth understanding (Dawidowicz, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Epoché, or bracketing, occurs when the researcher puts aside their own preconceived notions of the data collected to

gain a new and fresh perspective of the lived experiences of each participant (Dawidowicz, 2016). The interpretation of the data can be heavily influenced by the researcher's subjectivity or personal bias towards the research study (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Researcher bias can occur as the researcher becomes uncomfortable both physically and mentally, which can jeopardize the truth and value of the data obtained (Chenail, 2011; Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003).

To better manage my bias and practice epoché, I had to consider how to approach the interviews and data with as much objectivity as possible. I remained close to the research questions and did not deviate from them because loss of focus could have resulted in insensitivity to the participants (see Chenail, 2011; Dawidowicz, 2016; Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003). Chenail (2011) suggested conducting a pilot study to pretest the procedure and execution of the proposed methods and to test the instrument.

To better manage my own bias, I also kept a reflective journal in which I recorded my own thoughts and impressions in writing or recording before and after interviewing each participant (see Chenail, 2011; Meloy, 1994). This helped me to recognize my own thoughts, feelings, and impressions, all of which can lead to implicit bias, and to limit those biases from being interpreted into the study (see Chenail, 2011). The research committee members carefully reviewed the transcript of my first interview and offered advice to ensure the interviews followed the research questions and provided guidance in areas where bias might have presented itself. In addition, I used the verbatim transcripts of each participant for data analysis. The research committee also carefully reviewed the data and resulting themes to help ensure bias management.

Methodology

I conducted this qualitative phenomenological study to develop an understanding

of the lived experiences of single mothers who have transitioned out of poverty and the

factors contributing to their successful transition. The study was approved by the

Institutional Review Board (# 01-14-22-074209).

Study Population and Sample

Population

The population for this study was single mothers in the United States who had

risen out of poverty and parented a child or children under the age of 18 at the time of

transitioning from poverty. The criteria defining a transition from poverty are described

in the inclusion and exclusion section below. The participants were between the ages of

18 and 45 years old and did not live with a financially supportive partner (i.e., marriage

and single mothers cohabiting with a partner) at the time of transition from poverty. I

used a simple screening tool to discern which participants were best suited for taking part

in this study.

Sample and Sampling

The sample comprised a diverse group of seven single mothers who are no longer

living in poverty. The use of purposeful sampling is common in qualitative research

(Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Purposeful sampling, also called strategic and purposive

sampling, intentionally targets a specific population (single mothers, in the case of this

study) to gain more understanding on their experiences of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015;

Ravitch & Carl, 2019, p.167). Purposeful sampling allows the researcher the ability to

select participants that are better suited to the study based on their lived experiences. Enough women will be interviewed to achieve saturation in the data (Patton, 2015; Shakman et al., 2017). Saturation occurs when the data collected provides no new information (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Tolley et al, 2016). I also consulted with the committee of experienced researchers while completing the interviewing and data analysis to ensure saturation has been achieved (Chenail, 2011).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Prospective participants were given a screening instrument to determine their eligibility to participate in the study. Single mothers who transitioned out of poverty based on marriage alone are not considered appropriate for this research study, as marriage will likely mask other factors that are important in transitioning. Broadly, participants must be single mothers who had children living at home while living at or below the poverty level. For the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia, the federal poverty level for a family of two was $17,240 in 2020 (ASPE, 2020). To gain insight into actual events as they occurred and minimize the effect of history, participants will have transitioned out of poverty within the last 5 years or less. This was later revised due to difficulties of finding participants to any woman who had children while living in poverty. Women still currently receiving any type of public assistance (TANF, Medicaid, Welfare, or food stamps) would not be appropriate for this study.

To define single mothers, the terminology is broadly used and appears to have no single universal definition. However, key terms are described below to gain understanding of the research population that data will be collected. Merriam-Webster

(2021) defined single as a separate individual person, unmarried person, unaccompanied by others, and not having a serious romantic relationship with another person. Thus, for this study, single mothers are defined as women who are unmarried and not cohabiting with a romantic partner living in the home. Single mothers are also defined as women who are no longer married/divorced or separated from the spouse who no longer residence within the home of the mother and any children 18 years or younger. Single mother broadly defines as the sole provider if not the only paternal provider for children 18 years or younger.

Using these broad criteria, a screening tool was developed to help me identify women appropriate for the study. Questions include the following. If the prospective participant answers Yes to Questions 1 – 4 and No to Question 5, the woman would be eligible to be interviewed for the study. Question 6 will be asked to ensure participants are within 5 years of transitioning from poverty status.

1. Have you at any time been a single mother of children living in your home?

2. During the time when you were a single mother of children living in the home, were you ever living below the federal poverty level of $17, 240 for a family of two?

3. During the time when you were a single mother of children living in the home, did you receive any kind of public assistance (TANF, Medicaid, Welfare, or food stamps) during that time?

4. Are you currently a single mother who is living is now living above the federal poverty level $ 17, 240 for a family of two?

5. Are you currently receiving any form of public assistance (TANF, Medicaid, Welfare, or food stamps)?

6. If you are currently living above the federal poverty level, how long have you lived above the federal poverty level? The federal poverty level for a family of two was $17,240 in 2020.

Study Procedures

Recruitment of Participants

I identified the targeted population of single mothers within Facebook community groups through organizations such as Black Therapist ROCK, Single Mothers Support (S.M.S), mothers helping mothers, Single Mother's Club, and Mother to Mother: Support and Advice, and explained the nature and focus of the study to administrators. Prospective participants were invited to participate in the study and were screened based on the criteria. Single mothers were recruited by posting a flyer within Facebook communities of single mothers and therapist referral groups. The use of Black Therapist ROCK is a private Facebook support group for established practitioners and interns that can be used for a referral group to advertise for research participants. Participants can volunteer themselves and/or they can refer other women in their own networks to the researcher for consideration in the study.

Participants were able to respond to the screening questions via email. Selected participants were provided a detailed consent form that ensures confidentiality, describes the purpose of the study, and presents benefits and risk of participation. The participants were informed that the interview can be face–to–face or via Zoom video conference.

Upon successful completion, the participants were asked to provide feedback on how they felt being able to share their individual experience of rising out of poverty.

Instrumentation

Interviews are one of the most common methods used to collect and organize data for a research topic (Croker, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The main research question involves understanding the lived experiences of single mothers who have overcome poverty. The three subquestions are:

- What support systems did mothers use that helped them to rise out of poverty?

- What qualities and strengths contribute to the success of single mothers who rise from poverty?

- How do these single mothers define success at rising out of poverty?

To collect sufficient information to address the sub-questions, the following questions were asked of participants. These helped ensure sufficient depth of information to answer the research questions (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Croker, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015;).

Interview Questions

1. What does living in poverty mean to you?
2. How do you define poverty?
3. What are the life circumstances that you have had that contributed to you living in poverty?
4. How long did you use public assistance over your lifetime?

5. What kinds of public assistance did you receive? [Note: Interviewer will prompt participant by asking various kinds of public assistance]

6. How did each type of public assistance help or benefit you?

7. How do you feel the use of public assistance hindered you?

8. Were there any types of assistance that you did not find helpful? What was most helpful? Why or why not?

9. Were you ever denied benefits? If so, why?

10. What do you think was the largest impact of having benefits to you?

11. How many children did you have living in the home while you were living in poverty?

12. How did your children cope with poverty and living on public assistance? Did older siblings take on more responsibilities for helping at home? Did they work to help support the household?

13. What role did/ do your children play in helping you to overcoming poverty?

14. What is your currently education level? Did you pursue education beyond high school education? Describe your experience trying to further your education. Have you been successful in achieving your education goals?

15. What role has education played in helping you to rise out of poverty?

16. What problems has living in poverty caused you in terms of physical and emotional health? What coping strategies did you use to help you deal with these?

17. Who currently lives in your home? Do you have people from multiple generations – parents or grandparents, for example – living in the home? What roles do they play in the family? What impact has having family support in the home had on your managing poverty?

18. How has social support both with community resources and friends help you rise out of poverty? Did you find some community resources easier or more difficult to access? Did you ever feel you were denied access to services because of being a single mother? What was the most impactful resource you used and why was it helpful? Do you still utilize this resource or refer others to this resource?

19. Do you consider yourself as presently living in poverty? What situation prompts you to believe you are or are not still living in poverty?

20. How comfortable on you feel with your present income to be able to meet the needs of you and your family? What are the needs you are most concerned about?

21. Once you transitioned out of poverty, what support did you have access to with your new role in employment?

22. Are there any challenges you face with accessing resources that was never a barrier while in poverty?

Data Collection and Storage Procedures

Data were collected through open-ended individual interview questions to allow the participants to freely share their experiences. Unstructured/ informal interviews

allows the researcher and participant to be flexible and offers more opportunities for exploration around a topic (Croker, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Semistructed interviews are more controlled and will help the interviewer to begin to ask questions about specific lived experiences (Croker, 2015). Data for the study included interviews that are conducted face to face and video conference; the choice was left to the participants to ensure their comfort level during the interviews. Each of the seven participants agreed to an interview via Zoom based on location and time zone differences of the researcher.

The individual interviews consisted of an approximately one-hour meeting. The interviewer and participant agreed upon the formal process to collect data through either a zoom conference call or in person, if possible. At the end of the interview the participant will be asked, if more information is needed, whether they be willing to have a follow up interview if needed.

Where possible, the interviewer will observe physical and nonverbal cues signifying discomfort and distress. I paused interviewing as necessary to assess the needs of the participant and continued recording the interview with the permission of the participant. If distress was still present, I would discontinue the interview. This did not happen with the participants. Participants were offered community resources of a local mental health therapist accepting new patients or to the local acute crisis resources to help with distress that may arise due to interviews before the interview process begins. A number to the National Alliance on Mental Illness 1-800-950-6264 (Monday- Friday 10:00am- 10:00 pm ET) was offered. I took notes on initial feelings and perceptions as an

audio voice recorder captured the interview process. The interviewee was made aware of the audio recording for validity and note taking during the interview for the purpose of accuracy (Crawford & Lynn, 2016).

Data Transcription and Analysis

Qualitative research requires a researcher to obtain raw data from interview transcripts, and notes, recordings to interpret the phenomena of interest (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This study examined the lived experiences of single mother's rising out of poverty, including the challenges each woman faced in their environment and the factors that facilitated their transition. I conducted in person, video, or telephone interviews with a representative sample of single mothers who have successfully risen out of poverty (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Creswell (2009) suggested that the data be transcribed from each interview as soon as possible to preserve the information. Data included interview responses to questions regarding their lived experiences of overcoming poverty. After each transcription it is recommended that the researcher listen to the recordings again to ensure accuracy of the data being reported (Creswell, 2009). Digital voice recordings will be transcribed using a commonly used transcription service, Otter.com. I then listened to all recordings and matched them against transcriptions to ensure accuracy. The data will be stored in a file on my personal computer which is password protected. I will maintain the data for 5 years and then destroy it.

Data Analysis Plan

Coding in an integral part to qualitative research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Coding is the process of synthesizing data from different patterns, categorization, and

themes to produce larger conceptual patterns (Mihas, 2020; Saldana, 2016). Coding is an

interpretive and exploratory process that synthesizes the data collected by the researcher

to enrich the understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Rogers, 2018; Saldana, 2016).

Coding makes the connection to the data analysis and qualitative data collection (Rogers,

2018, p. 889). Coding interpretation is based on the researcher's perception and what

aligns to the research data, and satisfactory coding requires the researcher to be aware of

their own biases during problem solving and data analysis (Mihas, 2020; Rogers, 2018).

Once data have been collected and transcribed, first cycle coding takes place

(Saldana, 2016). First cycle coding is deductive and inductive and is used to categorize

data in the early stage. Deductive coding, also known as a priori coding, happens in the

initial stages and depends on the researcher's familiarity with previous exposure to the

researcher literature or knowledge of population from which data are being collected

(Mihas, 2020; Saldana, 2016). Inductive coding is unknown information at the outset that

emerges from reviewing the transcripts; it focuses more on the content of the collected

data (Mihas, 2020, p. 101).

Descriptive coding is the first cycle coding used in qualitative research.

Descriptive coding uses codes and patterns to organize data and is important as it allows

the researcher to develop a tracking method to reference data later in the research as it

increases trustworthiness of the data collected (Mihas, 2020; Rogers, 2018). The

researcher is constantly challenged throughout the entire research process to analysis and challenge bias assumptions. The descriptive coding also allows the researcher to reflect on their own thinking in the coding process which also organizes data in an analytical memo (Rogers, 2018).

Second cycle coding provides a systematic process to reorganize and reanalyze data from the first cycle coding (Mihas, 2020; Saldana, 2016, p. 234). Second cycling coding offers an opportunity to categorize and organize data that have the potential to develop new codes, update codes that share meanings, and remove codes within the patterns and themes discovered in the first cycle coding (Mihas, 2020; Rogers, 2018).

After each interview I reviewed the transcription from Otter.com, which provided both audio and transcribing and frequency of word count for key codes and themes developed. I manually developed codes, themes, and patterns from comparison of first and second code cycling. I completed another data analysis to develop interpretive codes from the data collection to develop characteristic that could potentially be recommended for future research. I journaled and made notes in each interview and then discussed with my committee any findings that created discord within my bias. To remove bias, I consistently looked through data collection and reviewed the research questions to ensure findings continued to support the research gap. Lastly, the entirety of Chapter 4 was sent to each participant for review and member checking, and I gave each participant the opportunity to review and edit their responses.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the reliability and accuracy of findings. Trustworthiness is reflected though credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability, and reflexivity of the study (Daniel, 2018, p. 265; Creswell, 2006; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The findings enable a level of assurance and confidence in the quality of the research through investigation that the accurately reported by the participants (Marrow, 2005; Shenton, 2004). Trustworthiness requires the researcher to acknowledge their own personal bias in the process to establish and analysis data, explicitly maintaining credibility and neutrality to the research experience of each participant (Daniel, 2018; Shenton, 2004). Trustworthiness requires the research to develop a systematic system to track, analysis, and interpret data through schemes of coding, categorizing themes and patterns, and defining data saturation (Daniel, 2014; Daniel 2018).

Credibility

Credibility is the researcher's ability to truthfully represent findings while ensuring the data is applicable to be transferable to other individuals, groups, time, locations, and context that evolves into the lived experiences of single mothers rising out of poverty. Credibility establishes the plausibility of the data gathered as the participant's perception (Creswell, 2006; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Trustworthiness results by following all ethical procedures and standards for data collection and analysis that have been approved by Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The credibility of the study is arguably the most important factor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004) in establishing trustworthiness when gathering data on a subject study. Prolonged engagement involves asking specific questions of the participants about their lived experiences and detailed examples. I will thoroughly review data through persistent observation and revision to develop concepts and characteristics representing the data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The use of member checking allows the participants to review the collected transcripts and to make corrections if needed.

Transferability

Transferability is the researcher's ability to bring context of behaviors and experiences of the participant to another setting and readers use transferable judgement (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 122; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order for my research data to be transferable I followed the audit trails and thoroughly describing my targeted populations, sample sizes, data collection, member checking, and using a manual transcriber of each participants' interview. This allows for another researcher to access the same data and come to the final conclusion that the information is trustworthy and credible to be used as academia research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

Dependability and confirmability are reflected in the audit trial and explain the process of the research steps taken to develop and report findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p.122). Dependability of the data offers explanations of the changes in the context. Dependability allows the researcher to use member checks of the participants to review

the findings of the data research. In addition to ensuring dependability, I used multiple participants to collect data to compose through persistent observation and prolonged engagement.

Confirmability

Confirmability offers transparency which reduces bias in the research (Creswell, 2006; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Confirmability is a measure of reliability in that it is a way to demonstrate that what is found can be replicated. Confirmability is preserved through accuracy, truthfulness, and consistency in reporting the steps of research (Creswell, 2006; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Confirmability, as mentioned above in dependability, is a process in the audit trial to ensure accuracy to the reported findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p.122).

To ensure confirmability, I had consistent interaction with the participants for prolonged engagement to ensure I capture the accuracy of the lived experiences of single mothers rising out of poverty. Reflexivity offers the researcher the ability to examine their own perceptions and biases through epoché or bracketing, and I will accomplish this through journaling (Creswell, 2006; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In using the journaling approach, I recorded my own thoughts and impressions in writing or recording before, during, and after interviewing each participant (Chenail, 2011; Meloy, 1994). I made comments in my journal on my own internal reaction during the interviews, especially when there are areas that could be emotionally challenging to me and the participant.

Ethical Procedures

Informed Consent

All steps to protect the human rights of the participants were followed. All participants were provided informed consent and can refuse participation at any time. All informed consent forms were prepared in English and written for ease in reading and comprehension. Informed consents are important, as they are voluntary agreements that ensure participant awareness of the study and the potential benefits without being coerced or forced into participation (Azim, 2018).

Confidentiality

Participants were assured confidentiality of responses and that their individual responses cannot be connected back to them. Digital notes will be password protected, and interviews will be conducted in a private location. The data collected will be transcribed was also be reviewed and sent to the chair to ensure accuracy and preservation of meanings. Participant identities were protected by using a first name alias only when reporting the data.

All collected data will be stored for 5 years after the conclusion of the research study. All transcriptions of data, journal notes, digital paper trails, and information collected will be sent to the committee chair for review to ensure accuracy.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I provided an in-depth description of the methodology and procedure I used to collect and analyze data. An introduction of rationale for a phenomenological approach and relevance to the study of single mother's rising out of

poverty was presented. Guidelines for confidentiality and privacy to address the research question in this qualitative phenomenological study were described. The detailed analysis helped to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of single mothers and the factors important in their transition from poverty. It will be also important to understand what these women define as success. Results of the study will be reported in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of the study was to understand, from the participants' voices, the lived experiences of single mothers who are no longer living in poverty and the resources that were available to help them rise out of poverty. In Chapter 3, I provided a detailed description of the methods used to collect and analyze data for the study. Chapter 4 includes a discussion of the settings and demographics of each participant, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and qualitative results of the interviews conducted with the seven participants who transitioned out of poverty. The main research question guiding this study was focused on developing an understanding of the lived experiences of single mothers who have overcome poverty. The main research question was supported by three subquestions:

- What support systems did mothers use that helped them to rise out of poverty?
- What self-perceived qualities and strengths contribute to the success of single mothers who rise from poverty?
- How do these single mothers define success at rising out of poverty?

Setting

I interviewed each participant via the Zoom platform. I used Otter.com, which had a verbatim capture feature, to audio record each interview. Interviewees agreed to being audio recorded; video recording was not used to protect the privacy of each participant. All identifying information, such as the participants' real names and specific community resources, were removed from each of the transcriptions to protect the privacy and confidentiality of each participant.

I explored the lived experiences of each participant in a semistructured interview. Each participant successfully completed the screening process to be eligible for the study and successfully completed the entirety of the interview process without interruption. The interviewees chose their homes as the location from which to participate in a Zoom virtual interview, and I conducted the interviews from my home office to ensure privacy. Since each participant is a mother, there were minor interruptions of needing to step away to remind their children that they were in an interview session, each lasting less than a minute to redirect. Each participant gave me permission to reach back out to them if further information was needed and asked to be notified of the final study when publication was available.

Demographics

To be included in this study, participants needed to live in the United States and to have been (or still be) a single mother who transitioned out of poverty. Of the 14 women who inquired about the study, seven completed an interview. I provided selected participants with a detailed consent form that assured their confidentiality, described the purpose of the study, and presented benefits and risk of participation. The participants were also informed that the interview could be face-to-face, when applicable, or via Zoom video conference. After careful consideration, I contacted the Walden University Institutional Review Board to revise the stipulation that women had to have transitioned from poverty within the past 5 years. There were initial difficulties of finding women who fit this description, and the research committee felt that, after reviewing the first

pilot transcript, women were able to contribute valuable information regardless of the time since transition.

Data Collection

I collected data through open-ended, individual interviews that allowed participants to freely share their lived experiences. The individual interviews consisted of an approximately 1-hour meeting. Each participant responded to my initial email and reported that they had learned about the study via the flyer posted on Facebook, Walden University's research participation site, or a flyer posted in a local physical location. Each interview was scheduled and confirmed via email for a virtual Zoom appointment. Each participant gave permission for the audio recording of their interview without video to protect their privacy, which I confirmed at the start of each interview.

The semistructured interviews followed the interview questions I developed to align with the research questions while allowing each participant to freely talk. Otter.com was used to record and transcribe the interviews because this gave me the ability to focus on each participant during the interviews. I listened to the recording of each interview several times and made corrections to the transcripts where needed to ensure accuracy. I saved the interview transcripts in a Microsoft Word document and then emailed the documents to the chair and committee member for review.

Data Analysis

Deductive and Inductive Codes

I reviewed and coded the transcripts multiple times. Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method was used to develop coding, themes, and patterns (see Morrow et al., 2015;

Wirihana et al., 2018). The seven-step method helped me identify which themes and patterns were more relevant to each participant across the study. Step 1 required the reading of all seven transcripts and checking for the accuracy of what was transcribed and recorded. During each interview, I employed b the good interview skills of reflective listening and then manually checked for accuracy in the coding. Step 2 involved reviewing each code and manually grouping them by the frequency of words counted in the software transcription. During this time, I highlighted significant statements to form inductive and deductive codes. Step 3 involved grouping familiar words and counting the words of each transcription to begin the second coding cycle (Colaizzi, 1978, Morrow et al., 2015; Wirihana et al., 2018). I began grouping the deductive codes that I expected to find in the interviews of the lived experiences of single mothers. During the first and second steps of the coding process, both research committee members reviewed and cross-referenced the codes as a means of improving reliability. Step 4 involved organizing and condensing codes into common themes shared across the lived experiences of single mothers rising out of poverty. Step 5 involved cross-referencing the four themes with the data from the transcripts and developing an exhaustive description of each theme. In Step 6, I provided a summary of the four themes and how the research questions were addressed in each theme. In Step 7, I ensured the credibility of the data by having research committee members review and provide feedback on the data (see Colaizzi, 1978, Morrow et al., 2015; Wirihana et al., 2018).

I used deductive and inductive codes as well as my interpretation from repeated and in-depth analyses of the transcripts to address the main research question that involved developing an understanding of the lived experiences of single mothers who have overcome poverty. Deductive and inductive codes were used to create a codebook (see Appendix). I started with deductive codes based on the literature review in Chapter 2. I first created a simple statement that defined each code and then supported each code with a direct quote that exemplified what women were saying about that code. After reviewing each transcript, the deductive codes that appeared more frequently across transcripts were education, public assistance, mental health, employment, household composition, and resiliency. The least numerous deductive codes across the transcripts were substance use and domestic violence; these may have been present in the women's lives or environment but appeared to have minimal impact on their transition out of poverty. Inductive codes produced new codes across all the participants that were not found in the literature review. The most frequently mentioned of the codes were generational curse, copping strategies, unstable relationships, exposure to trauma, and dehumanization/demoralizing. These codes were consistent with my understanding of the findings related to the deductive codes. The codes that emerged with prioritizing money, delayed psychological response to coming out of poverty, and internal drive spoke more closely to how each woman was able to transition out of poverty and the resources they utilized (see Appendix). The interpretive codes included generational poverty, scarcity mindset, resiliency mindset, early pregnancy and responsibility, solution focused strategies, overachievers, and uphill battles. Deductive codes and their

frequencies are provided in Table 1, while inductive codes and their frequencies are

provided in Table 2. Appendix includes interpretive codes.

Table 1

Deductive Codes by Participant

Codes	Esther	Ruth	Leah	Hannah	Mary	Mikhal	Naomi	Total
Poverty	15	14	14	4	5	13	28	93
Domestic violence	1	4	0	4	16	3	1	29
Public assistance	14	9	10	44	15	13	25	130
Substance use	0	0	4	5	1	2	3	15
Employment	3	17	15	25	34	30	13	137
Mental health	5	16	11	4	24	64	14	138
Education	29	52	20	27	53	47	52	280
Household composition	13	24	25	26	28	6	49	171
Resilience	31	14	8	8	17	27	20	125
Single mother	5	13	5	1	7	2	5	37

Table 2

Inductive/Emerging Codes by Participant

Codes	Esther	Ruth	Leah	Hannah	Mary	Mikhal	Naomi	Total
Generational curse	15	14	14	4	5	13	28	93
Mentorship	3	7	0	0	0	0	0	10
Dehumanization/demeaning/ Criminal/Less than human (debase/demoralize)	4	7	4	2	6	7	1	31
Prioritizing money (which essentials to pay)	4	9	2	2	7	2	2	28
Coping strategies	20	4	6	6	19	7	4	66
Unstable relationships	0	5	2	4	10	10	5	36
Exposure to trauma	0	6	3	5	16	13	7	50
Delayed reaction to coming out of poverty: not psychologically out of poverty	2	4	8	1	1	5	1	22
Internal drive	4	4	5	4	1	4	2	24

Interpretive Codes

After careful review of the deductive and inductive codes with independent

coding from each committee member, the following interpretive codes emerged:

generational poverty, scarcity mindset, resiliency/ perseverance mindset, early

pregnancy/early responsibilities, solution focused strategies and motivating factors, uphill

battle/challenges of motherhood, and overachieving. These interpretative codes provided

more insight into the factors that caused single mothers to be living in poverty and what

helped them transition out of poverty. These codes also helped drive my

conceptualization of the themes.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to the reliability and accuracy of

findings. I conducted a rigorous study to establish trustworthiness and applied the

independent analysis of both committee members and member checking to the collected

data. Trustworthiness is reflected through credibility, dependability, transferability, and

confirmability (Creswell, 2006; Daniel, 2018, p. 265; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Credibility

Evidence of credibility consists of the ability to truthfully represent findings in the

study while ensuring the data are transferable (Creswell, 2006; Korstjens & Moser,

2018). First, I practiced good interview skills and reflective listening in each interview

and created a summary of themes and patterns that came from the data collection. After

each interview, I reviewed the transcription from Otter.com, which provided an audio

recording of the interview, the transcript, and a frequency of word count for the

development of key codes and themes. I then relistened to each transcription and sent all

seven transcripts to both my chair and second committee member. They provided

feedback and approved the accuracy of the transcriptions. During a second review of

data, my chair and committee member independently reviewed codes and themes and provided intercoder reliability independently. I also sent the entirety of Chapter 4 to each participant for their review and member checking and gave each participant the opportunity to review the results and edit their responses. Another round of data analysis was completed to develop interpretive codes and characteristics that could potentially be recommended for future research. To remove bias, I consistently looked through data collected and reviewed the research questions to ensure the findings continued to address the gap in the literature. I also send frequent revisions to my committee to get their feedback related to the findings of the study.

Transferability

Transferability is the ability to bring rich and in-depth data about behaviors and experiences of participants to another setting (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 122; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is established through providing in-depth descriptions of the phenomenon of each participant's lived experiences. During each interview, I asked open-ended questions using a semistructured approach to allow each participant the opportunity to give a descriptive story of their own experience as a single mother rising out of poverty. The richness of the data is made transferable by including the raw data of direct quotes from each single mother of their experiences of navigating poverty and eventually transitioning out of poverty. I integrated details from the interviews into the study to allow readers to interpret the data and arrive at their own conclusions of the study being transferable.

Dependability

Dependability is the reliability of consistent data collected in a manner in which the study can be reconducted and yield comparable results (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I established dependability through the use of audit trails, triangulation, and the member checking of participants. No further interviews beyond the initial seven were required, but each participant willingly agreed to be contacted if new developments had occurred. I used Otter.com to audio record and transcribe the interviews. I manually provided accuracy checks and corrections where needed in each interview and sent the transcripts to both committee member independently. Both committee members provided feedback and intercoder reliability. I manually developed the codes, themes, and patterns from a comparison of the Otter.com word frequency count and words mentioned, which allowed me to provide a second cycle of coding and break down the categories to establish new themes.

Confirmability

Confirmability measures the reliability of data that can duplicated using the same methods to procure equivalent results (Creswell, 2006; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I had consistent interactions with each participant to ensure the accuracy of their interview responses. I consistently used epoché, or bracketing, to reduce researcher bias and cross-examine my own perceptions. Through journaling and keeping notes during each interview, allowed me to discuss any findings that created discord related to possible bias with my committee. I manually developed codes, themes, and patterns from a comparison of first- and second-cycle coding. Member checking was conducted by sending each

participant the completed Chapter 4 so they could attest to the accuracy of their

statements and give them the opportunity to provide edits where necessary.

Results

Table 3 contains a summary of the descriptive information of the seven women

who participated. All women were educated at the master's degree level and pursuing

doctoral degrees. They lived in various locations in the throughout the United States. All

were professionally employed. The average age was 39 years and ranged from 28 to 52

years.

Table 3

Demographic Profiles

Participant	Age	Location	Children	Race	Employment
Esther	48	Georgia	3	Caribbean/Black American	Teacher
Ruth	52	Oregon	4	White/Canadian	Licensed Clinical Social Worker
Leah	28	Texas	1	White	School teacher
Hannah	32	New Jersey	1	Black American/ White	Nurse
Mary	33	California	3	White	Licensed Clinical Social Worker
Mikhal	37	Pennsylvania	1	White	Therapist
Naomi	42	Kansas	2	African/Black American	Licensed Clinical Therapist

Descriptive Summaries of Participants

I invited seven participants to engage in the study of single mothers rising out of

poverty. As the lived experiences of each participant unfolded, it was astonishing to hear

each woman's perception of how poverty impacted their lives. The unfolding of each story added a layer of missing information that provided more depth to the literature review. Each participant shared their individual experiences of how they navigated poverty and the resources that had the most and least impact to them transitioning out of poverty. They shared what poverty meant to them and how education, family support, and public assistance were viable resources that had the biggest impact of rising out of poverty. Below is a brief overview of the stories of each of the seven women.

Esther

Esther is 48 years old and identifies as Caribbean/Black American. She currently works as a teacher and is the mother of three. The women of her family were cursed with getting pregnant at 19 and falling into poverty. Esther was made to feel bad for taking assistance and the lengthy process made her "feel less than human for stuff that is needed." Esther believed that poverty was a part of her life, but her children never knew they were in poverty. She said, "I'm Jamaican so you know I believe in working hard and no one cannot keep me down, at least not too long." With a strong connection to her Jamaican cultural background Esther found that a solid work ethic and family support helped her to rise out of poverty. She has made it her life mission to educate and give back to women to help them transition out of poverty.

Esther reported that she has a nonprofit business and provides mentorship to provide informative education and informational sessions like homeowners' rights or housing financial literacy to help other single mothers rise out of poverty. She continues

to educate herself on current community resources and is furthering her own career as she works toward her doctoral degree. Esther identified poverty as

> Not being able to meet the monthly bills, wondering where the next meal is coming from, you know, to have your kids in the right school getting the right education, to be able to afford them some type of recreational activity that they like to do, when you don't have the funds, you have to sacrifice you know pretty much rob Peter to pay Paul.

Esther stated, "I am very active in the community, and I believe in a hand up versus that handout mentality, you know." She also indicated that her strategy has always been to "get up each day and do something differently."

Ruth

Ruth is 52 years of age and identifies as White/Canadian. She is currently employed as a licensed clinical social worker. She is a mother of four who used humor and creativity in making ends meet to help her transition from poverty. Ruth stated that she was born and raised in poverty and that poverty is generational in her family. She is a first-generation college graduate. While she was married, Ruth was preparing to be a single mother because her then husband was deployed throughout most of their marriage. She struggled with making decisions and loneliness during her first year as a single mother. Ruth shared that generational poverty reaches back to her parents' childhoods. She shared her "least favorite memory of growing up in poverty was eating soybean everything for 2 months, because that's all her parents could afford." Coming from a

generational poverty context helped her to understand how to navigate poverty on her own, and with the support of her parents she was able transition from poverty.

Ruth defined poverty as "on one level, like not having the money or the means to survive, which was, you keep your house cold in the winter, except the room that you are in, because that is all you can afford to keep warm. Or you shop at a specific grocery store, because you can get more food for your money for you to eat, but it also is a culture that can keep being repeated." She felt that poverty was not only a physical aspect but also a mentality as she battled to be the responsible adult to her children,

It was I think the hardest thing for me, besides all that stuff, the hardest thing for me was being the only one making the decisions and not having somebody else to talk through the decisions with like that stress of am I making the right decision.

Leah

Leah is 28 years of age and identifies as White She currently works as a schoolteacher. She is a mother of one who was raised poor and stated that applying for and being on food stamps was a norm for her. Leah really wants to be "better than [her] sisters and break this crazy generational poverty thing." She stated that she got pregnant at a young age and because her family used public assistance her whole life it was never an issue to apply for assistance when she realized she would be a single parent. She shared her experiences of navigating the public assistance system and the shaming factor of being a "privileged White woman" getting public assistance. Leah found the process of navigating public benefits to be "frustrating and embarrassing."

Leah said she did not realize she was living in poverty until she was older. But to her, poverty is

Relying on food stamps. It is relying on Oh, Dad does not get paid until Friday. So, I cannot buy anything extra. No, I cannot go to the book fair. No, I cannot be a part of that. You know, activity at school. But it is more now of just missing out on things and relying on others.

Poverty for her was defined by what she could not do. She shared that she overcame family addiction and poverty while also having limited family support from a single mother who was in prison when she was a child." Leah is currently enrolled in a doctoral program and gives back to the community through educational purposes for children. She strongly believes that she is much better off because of her education and that there would have been no other way for her to get out of poverty. She stated that she often finds herself looking for and having more awareness of the high-risk poverty children in her class. Giving back does not mean only giving these kids the best education; she also provides "weekend bags" to ensure at each child can eat at least one meal a day.

Hannah

Hannah is 32 years of age and identifies as Black American/ White. She works as a nurse. Hannah had an estranged relationship with her mother most of her life and the furthest "I can get away from home was where I wanted to go, which put me in West Virginia." Hannah reported

I was an 18-year-old living the college life and wild partying, which then set me up for early pregnancy and poverty, because I could not afford to go back to school or my parents' home, because they were getting divorced.

Not long after, at the age of 19 years, Hannah found herself pregnant by a man she barely knew. To survive while pregnant and living in poverty, she had to do whatever she needed to survive and provide for her unborn child. This included stealing and selling drugs to make ends meet; public assistance was not able to meet all her needs. For Hannah, poverty is "the difference between the haves and the have nots, knowing I am not able to meet the basic needs that a human being requires and not having the means to finance the shelter and the food for my child." She knew she was out of poverty when she found herself wanting something that she did not need.

Hannah found herself trying to make a dysfunctional unstable relationship work; this cost her time, increased stress, and created physical health problems for her. Although she could not get financial support from her family, her mother did help her with childcare when needed. This was the only unified front she had with her mother that never met any resistance; her mother provided a lot of support when it came to her granddaughter. Hannah was in an abusive and unstable relationship that took years to recover from; she had to at times block and cut all contact with her child's father because he was so unstable. Hannah is a doctoral student and for her education was a principal steppingstone to move out of poverty.

Mary

Mary is 33 years of age and identifies as White, she works as a licensed clinical social worker. She is a mother of one who found herself in a position to raise a child with limited help and support from her family or the father of the child. Mary said she could have gotten out of poverty much sooner with additional help with affordable housing and childcare. For her, poverty is "synonymous with a lot of anxiety. It feels like not having a safety net." It was

> Having to think about so many decisions daily and feeling guilty for buying a latte, even if that was what I needed to get through the day. It was feeling insecure about kind of everything because I just, I knew that what money I was making was barely enough to cover what needed to be covered.

Mary experienced an several unstable relationships that impacted her mental health. Her parents supported her, but that support came at a cost of guilt tripping and manipulation. Mary's experience with public assistance was so tricky; she worked, and because of this, she would have to unenroll herself from public assistance because some months she made more money "I feel like you know, applying to the Ph. D program was far more straightforward than applying for food stamps, which sounds wild, but it is true." Mary stated the reality clearly: "I was living close to the line. I made $1500 for the month and rent was $1200." She was able to navigate public assistance to provide better care for her child with the limited resources and income that she did make. "The food stamp program at least made it able for me to go into the grocery store and get what I needed, and it took a layer of stress around the grocery budget off."

By the time she was 26, Mary was out of her third marriage. She shared, "I was like, okay, I need to do something different." Mary joked that the choosing part was not good, and that the divorces were not the problem, her marriages were the problem." Mary reported that that she was not prepared to be a parent financially and educationally. When Mary was in her bachelor's degree, she experienced mixed emotions and "feeling weird and uncomfortable in some ways about helping these people who are in poverty when I was in poverty, and it just felt like …it felt just strange and uncomfortable to be trying to help." Laughing Mary said, "if I had had the body to do stripping, I absolutely would have dropped out of my bachelor's program and would have become a stripper." Mary continues to live with a scarcity mindset even though she is out of poverty; she has experienced delayed psychological response to things she could not address while living in poverty.

> I don't have the ability to plan ahead because I don't know what my future is going to look like. I was in survival mode for so long. I did not have the luxury to breakdown or to sit with my trauma caused by poverty and toxic relationships, because it was taking everything that I had to get through the day, to pay the bills, taking good care of my child, and trying to get ahead in life.

Mary states that since transitioning out of poverty she refuses to pay for a fancy haircut and will cut her own hair or go a super cheap place but has no problem splurging on food. Mary noted that she finds she has extreme neurotic response for simple things like she did when she was living in poverty and directly related this to a scarcity mindset.

Mary is currently a doctoral student, and that education was the best thing she could have ever done for herself to get out poverty.

Mikhal

Mikhal is 37 year of age and identifies as White, she works as a therapist. Mikhal grew up in poverty and her dad worked multiple jobs trying to make ends meet, but never made more than $30,000 and they were a family of seven. Mikhal was married to a man who had untreated mental health conditions, and they had three kids and one of the children had a heart condition that kept Mikhal out of work. She struggled to keep a job because of her child's physical health conditions, which required multiple trips to a specialist weekly during her first year as a single mother. When she separated from her husband, she and her children fell into poverty. Mikhal described poverty as

> An inability to provide necessities. And not because I do not want to, but because I just financially cannot afford to. And I also think a lot of the word ingenuity comes to mind. That it takes some creativity to be able to juggle. Do I pay for my groceries? Or do I pay for my lights this month? Do I buy the kids the new shoes that they need, or do I pay for the water? And all of that takes creativity to either make ends meet or figure out which one you are going to do.

Mikhal was raising her children alone and had to navigate the systems of public assistance; this is something she was used to until the last couple of years before she remarried. Mikhal resisted applying for public assistance, and when she finally did, it was necessary. She was treated well and respected by public assistance professionals but, "remembered it being a frustrating process." Mikhal had great family support and was

able to live rent free in her family's home for a while and knew that she could turn to her

family if she needed help being able to meet the needs of her children. She has spent

years in and out of court with her ex-husband who is an "undiagnosed narcissist, which

led to a very contentious relationship filled with verbal, emotional, and sexual abuse."

Mikhal tried to get into therapy and at that point in time, other than substance use

treatment, there really was not a lot of mental health services available. "I would have

had to drive 45 minutes, you know, with three kids by myself, it wasn't accessible." She

feels the custody battle with her ex-husband contributed to her being in poverty and she is

"currently paying off almost $5,000 in legal fees from the latest custody battle." Mikhal

is currently a doctoral student and stated that without education and working towards

getting licensed she would not have been able to transition out of poverty.

Naomi

Naomi is 42 years of age and identifies as African/Black American. She works as a

licensed clinical therapist in her own independent practice. Naomi was a single mother

who was raising one while in poverty. She thought of poverty as being for people who

> Are homeless and who do not have anywhere to go. If I am driving down the
>
> street and they have the signs of saying I need to eat or need to do this. But you
>
> know, I also see people who are also in low-income housing, who are also on
>
> Section 8, but I also know these people, they are my cousins, they are my sisters.
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> You know, they are my, you know, my relatives. And when I look at them, I do
>
> not look at poverty. I look at them as just people. I mean, they do not seem to be

unhappy, you know, that they seem to be making away with what they have and making the best out of that situation.

Growing up in poverty, Naomi did not identify this as generational poverty until she began to see the imbalance within her socioeconomics through employment and seeing her peers making more money than her and doing the same jobs. She did not see poverty in her environment growing up because those people were her family members her cousins, sisters, mother, aunts, and uncles. Even growing up in poverty, her mother made it feel like they were not. "I can remember when I was an 18, I went to prom. My mother got me a limousine to go to the prom. Now who does that on Section 8?" Because she grew up using public assistance, she was able to access the public assistance she needed with ease and do exactly what she could get to be able to care for herself and her child as a single mother. Naomi felt guilty because she put the child's father on court-order child support when he was only doing what he knew how to do, and they were both young parents.

Naomi shared she was "always kind of a go getter, because her mother never really motivated her, and her mother was not the mother that would say oh, you need to go to college. Naomi shared her mother never told her once she needed to go to college to improve her life. Public assistance through Section 8 was crucial for allowing her to go back to school and finish her education.

"I cannot remember one time in my life if she ever told me that." Not once. But she showed me how I had to walk that out and create my own path and do what I needed to do to make ends meet and figure out how do I fit into this world."

Themes

The overarching research question involved understanding the lived experience of single mothers who overcame poverty. As a result of this analysis, four themes emerged that addressed the research question. These themes are (a) pervasiveness and culture of poverty, (b) universality of education as the most crucial step to transitioning from poverty, (c) Financial and social support were vital to assisting with the transition from poverty, and (d) the importance of resiliency and coping strategies for transitioning from poverty.

Theme 1: Pervasiveness and Culture of Poverty

A culture of poverty ensnares single mothers in destitution, however inward drives give inspiration, motivation, and energy for escaping poverty. The pervasiveness of poverty creates a scarcity mindset in single mothers even as they operated in an elevated socioeconomic status. A culture of poverty continues to affect single mothers who rise out of poverty and raises a question to the longer-term effects of stress and pressure of living in poverty. Deeply ingrained cultural aspects consist with delayed psychological responses to being out of poverty. Ruth stated she, "stopped checking her bank account repetitively 4 months, because I was not used to money just sitting in and not having a bill to pay and felt weird with money sitting in account so long." Esther stated she felt she was "still only a few paychecks away from being there in poverty again. Esther identified, "so you know when I was in it did not really know that I was in it until I step out of it" and say wait a minute, and look back, "I was broke." Mary stated,

You know, but when you have a child young, that is the unfortunate thing is that I delayed some of my own development because I was so busy taking care of another person. And so, you know, I was 25 or 26, but only 20-ish in terms of figuring myself out. I will always struggle sometimes with a scarcity mindset I would have to think about it more, but I did. I did not do well in poverty. It was it… was bad. It is like, you know, just because I got through it alive does not mean that I am not scarred from it and that I am not worse for the wear.

Naomi stated that "It would be a culture shock, but I would not breakdown if I go back into poverty, because I know what to do now that I have lived through poverty and what services are available to help me."

Theme 2: Universality of Education as the Most Important Step to Transitioning From Poverty

Throughout the entirety of each interview the importance of education was stressed as the single most crucial factor to rising out of poverty. Education was the single factor identified by all seven women as necessary to transition out of poverty and to staying out of poverty once they transitioned. Despite education, it was alarming to hear the lived experiences of these women still being in poverty and having to access public assistance. Majority of the women reported that they went back on public assistance during their bachelors' and master's degree, which created a loss of income to many of them. This once again allowed them to meet eligibility for public assistance criteria. However, the decision to go back to school was because they made enough

money to no longer meet eligibility requirements or public assistance but did not make enough to live above the federal poverty level.

All seven participants are currently life learners and enrolled in doctoral programs. Mary shared her advice of

Education at all costs. I do not care if you must have a ridiculous amount of student loan at the end like me. But you must get an education. You just must or you know; I just do not know that I could have ever gotten to this place without it.

Mikhal's advice is that "the education piece is so vital, but that does not mean a 4-year education or a master's degree or doctorate for everybody, but getting some type of training, you know, and dreaming big." Leah identified,

I feel like the education route was the only way for me. I do not feel like there would have been any other productive way for me to get out of poverty and make, you know, make a life for myself.

Most of the women said they needed to access public assistance again even with higher education of a Bachelor and master's degree, when income levels changed to start attending college, which required lower paying jobs or cut working hours.

Theme 3: Financial and Social Support Were Vital to Assisting With the Transition From Poverty

Many of the women noted that requesting public assistance was often a humiliating experience, and the women reported receiving demeaning treatment by public assistance providers. Financial assistance and social support through family household composition were two key factors for navigating the transition from poverty

mentioned by all seven participants. Financial assistances came in the form of family support, public assistance, and employment. Unfortunately, the more stable the income coming in the home, the less beneficial it was to receive services such as WIC, TANF, medical insurance, and discount vouchers for utilities. However, this aspect was to be expected, but majority of the women still struggled to provide the necessities with a bachelor's degree. This prompted many women to seek continued higher education of a master's degree, which caused a reduction of work and making them eligible once again for public assistance. With higher education the demoralizing treatment and dehumanization was no different, but Ruth identified that she was able ask more questions the second go round to getting public assistance and alleviated some of her stress. Ruth found out the second time that she had to apply for public assistance that she could do a phone interview and drop her paperwork off in a drop box without ever seeing anyone in person.

About half of the women shared they had financial support from family, if necessary, but most of the financial responsibility for their children fell to them. This required mothers work outside of the home because of the financial strain. The family support more often came in the form of meeting emotional needs and childcare for many of the women. Many of the woman expressed strained relationships with their family members and lacking social support because they were single mothers. Mary stated that "the offer of financial support, picking up groceries, occasional childcare came with a guilt trip from her parents." Hannah stated that she absolutely head-butted with her mom on most things, but she could depend on her to always watch her child when it came to

making sure she could go to work, this often happened when she switched from daytime hours to overnight shifts. Mary shared that she would "ugly cry" in the parking lot after a car mechanical expense and then cut corners with expenses until her next pay period, which showed her how to prioritize money during that time.

Naomi identified how her mother helped her gain public assistance and she had a strong family support,

> My mother you know, although she is not an educated woman, she is very resourceful. So, you know, see, she teaches, she taught me how to, you know, basically navigate my environment, you know, so she taught me where to go to get food, where to go to if I needed my bills paid. She taught me to sign up for section 8, my mother said, "although, you know, I know you are going to accomplish way more than this. This is just, you know, just in case, here just sign up for Section 8", and actually it worked out great, because I was able to go to school full time and not be as stressed meeting basic needs.

Ruth identified that, "Whereas my parents would say, work hard. Keep trying do not give up. So, my dad was taught to just let things be how they are, not creating any change, and just live" and

> And my mom she would show up when I needed her, and this has been the same for me as an adult. She has flown to Germany to help, she has flown to North Carolina to help, she would still be here in an instant now if I asked her.

Esther identified that, "I was at home when I had my oldest, so yeah, I have my mother, father, cousins, aunts, brothers, you know sisters everybody's it was, you know, there is a multi-generational thing happening."

A shared emotional reaction from all seven women and their dependency on public assistance produced anger, outrage, dissatisfaction, and frustration that was compounded when they earned even a dollar over the eligibility sum. Naomi stated,

> I remember when I started actually making more than what was allowed for me to get TANF, I actually got upset, like what ya'll cutting me off, because I made $1 more." Leah shared her perception, "is that those programs are put into place to keep people in that poverty level. I do not feel like I was ever truly able to rise out of poverty even with the public assistance.

Theme 4: The Importance of Resiliency and Coping Strategies for Transitioning From Poverty

Resiliency was important in navigating poverty; all women provided examples of coping strategies that demonstrated their ability to keep moving forward. All seven participants admitted that their children were the driving force in their resiliency to keep moving forward despite humiliation, frustration, and shaming factors that led to being a single mother. All seven participants identified that their children helped them to stay strong in the face of daily adversity and stress that came from living in poverty and doing what it took to transition out of poverty.

Mikhal was faced with the internal struggle to applying for public assistance and felt

It was a frustrating and humiliating process and I had to resubmit a stack of papers every six months and found myself asking at different times, is it worth it? Like yeah, the kids need medical insurance and need food, yes, it's worth it. Let's keep doing this.

Esther shared that because she "grew up in poverty and has experienced extensive poverty in her own life resiliency has made her more accepting of others in poverty." However, a popular sentiment across all the women's stories was to not let society define you into what they believe a single mother should be. They sacrificed self and self-pride to provide for necessities of their children. Naomi stated she developed a mindset of

Don't let society define who you are, don't let social constructs of America and white patriarchal society define what you should be or what you need to be. You need to make your own way, you define who you are you, go be a trendsetter.

The ability to use each barrier as a steppingstone to bounce back and learn from mistakes without defeat or failing is evidenced in each interview. Esther said,

Some days were hard to be a single mother and I would cry and call out to God. Every day I would just get up and show up for me and my children. I told myself to just get dress and show up because I could not just let life defeat me. I told myself to get up out of the bed, go through the rituals, do whatever I need to do, just get up and work hard, you have to rise up, you can't stay stuck.

One woman used positive affirmations to help her weather the ups and downs of poverty and reduce complacency. Esther stated,

In my household I had a saying on the fridge that "today should be greater than yesterday", so they [my children] knew that you have to be great, you know you can't just be how you are yesterday, something had to change each day.

Mary used extreme self-discipline by exercising rigorously and keeping herself on a restrictive diet to keep from turning to drugs, alcohol, or other things that would damage her future. Naomi's resiliency was evident as she turned the traumatic loss of a friend through murder to learning to educate herself through reading, which also became a coping mechanism for her. Hannah worked two jobs, went to school, and got clean and sober to care for her child. All seven participants exemplified a strong inner desire to be good role models and support systems for their children to flourish and never live in poverty again.

A resiliency mindset was evidenced by a focus on internal drive and motivation. Adversities faced included poverty, early pregnancy, experiencing traumatic and abusive relationships, and being dehumanized and humiliated in the public assistance system; yet the women were able to successfully rise out of poverty through means of education that created employment opportunities. Despite these circumstances each of these women succeed and found better jobs that paid higher wages through education. Hannah stated,

I was looked at like I am never gonna be nothing and looked at like I was another leech on the system so to speak… Because my child needed a better life, I went back to school and worked two jobs to support us. Now I am enrolled in a doctoral program and completed a nursing master's program a few years ago.

Naomi shared

I always had that kind of an innate drive. I was always kind of a go getter, you

know. But I think because the fact that I live through poverty, you know, I know

what to do now and how to access resources to survive. I learned how to manage

my mental health and my self-care, you know, being able to manage my life and

transition out of poverty by using the resources in my community.

For Mikhal, resiliency came in being creative in providing for the family needs.

I made $5,000 in 2014, and somehow was able to be creative to get all three kids

what they needed for the year. My children did not look neglected, and I was able

to utilize resources of public assistance and family support.

Mikhal juggled meal planning, color coordinated chart calendars of pickups, and

which family member could take the kids so she could work a few hours each day. Ruth

learned ways to creatively provide for her family from her parents

Growing up, which was you keep your house cold in the winter, except the room

that you're in, because that's all you can afford to keep warm. Or you shop at a

specific grocery store because you can get more food for your money for you to

eat.

Ruth laughed as she shared that her least favorite memory growing up in poverty

was eating soybean everything for 2 months. "My mom made soybean pancakes, that

were gross, but she was creative in cooking for us, and we got pancakes."

Naomi shared,

My best friend was murdered when we were 18. It was actually the week before I

graduated from high school, I can remember, when after she passed, I remember

going to the track and running so that's how I dealt with her death, that I ran, because my mother would not let me sink into depression. I went to the track because there was a school next door. So, I would go to the track every day and just run until I just got all that energy out or whatever it was, and it just really helped me get through it. because like I said, I've always been kind of an overcomer.

Mary shared that she used "exercise and going to the gym and getting out in nature" as a coping mechanism and found that it became like therapy for her. Mikhal shared that

If I get overwhelmed, I shut down right so I had to, I had to learn to cope with that piece of I can't just shut down, right now especially, you know, when three little children are relying on me, I can't just shut down. I started to make list and setting intentions and goals for myself for the day and at the end of the day I would check things off my list that I accomplished.

In summary, women used many coping strategies that helped them to be resilient in challenging time of living in poverty. The resiliency and coping strategies used to rise out of poverty were paired with determination to provide a better life for their children. These coping strategies included exercise, crying, prayer and talking with God, substance use, selling drugs, stealing, unhealthy relationships, staying busy, being in nature, socialization with peers, and family support.

Subquestions

I posed 3 subquestion to answer the main research question. Based on the results of thematic analysis, answers to the sub question are below.

Research Question #1: What Support Systems Did Mothers Use That Helped Them To Rise Out Of Poverty?

Each of the four themes provided data regarding support systems that were utilized by each single mother. The most impactful resources were education, public assistance, mental health, employment, and household composition. Across all stories, public assistance was the most accessed for resources to continue education and to meet essential needs including food stamps, medical, housing, utility vouchers, and welfare/cash benefits. The support of extended family was also just as important, because the family support in providing childcare, housing, and emotional support alleviated many of the mental health concerns for single mothers. Each of the four themes addressed how the women accessed the support systems even when it was uncomfortable and demeaning to them as individuals because of the treatment they received. Despite the poor treatment the women used resiliency and coping strategies to keep pushing forward until they rise out of poverty.

Research Question #2: What Self-Perceived Qualities And Strengths Contribute To The Success Of Single Mothers Who Rise From Poverty?

Each participant shared about their struggles as single mothers and how they were born and raised in poverty, kept in poverty, or fell into poverty when they became mothers. Each mother was able to identify how resiliency, household composition, and

pervasiveness of poverty and culture of poverty that stretched across generations helped them navigate their environment. Each single mother shared in their stories an almost innate desire to rise out of poverty for not only themselves but their children. However, even though many of the women were raised in a continuing cycle of generational poverty, they used their own creativity allowed within the scope of their own poverty as adults. All seven participants relied on some form of public assistance for both their finances and educational purposes which required them to shed pride, fear, anger, and frustration. This allowed for the strengthening of resiliency to be formed and motivated them to push past discomfort to never be at a place where poverty dictated their lifestyles again.

Research Question #3: How Do These Single Mothers Define Success At Rising Out Of Poverty?

Each of the seven women shared their lived experiences of what poverty meant to them and how it impacted them mentally, physically, and emotionally. The success was defined in how they were able to use resilience to help them navigate poverty and to utilize their experiences with poverty as a steppingstone instead of a gravestone of dead-end living. Most of the women identified how their lifestyles changed with further education and employment. All the women agreed that without public assistance they would have had more struggles navigating poverty, but that public assistance did not transistor them out of poverty. The public assistance helped them in the moment, but the work and dedication they contributed to the long-term investment of education and employment allowed them to rise out of poverty. They no longer must live paycheck to

paycheck, are no longer dependent or even eligible for public assistance, and now have more financial freedom to enjoy activities for themselves and their children that would have been considered impossible without added financial hardships.

Table 4 provides a summary of the key themes and the codes that were incorporated into the themes.

Table 4

Key Themes With Associated Inductive and Deductive Codes

Theme	Deductive Codes	Inductive Codes	Interpretive Code
Pervasiveness and Culture of Poverty	Poverty; early pregnancy; domestic violence, public assistance	poverty, culture of poverty, struggled, generational/generation, eligible, unstable relationships, exposure to trauma, delayed psychological response	Generational poverty, early pregnancy/early responsibilities, uphill battle/challenges of motherhood, scarcity mindset,
Universality of Education as the Most Important Step to Transitioning from Poverty	Master's degree, doctoral degree	Coping strategies, licensing,	Overachieving, solution focused strategies and motivating factors, resiliency/ perseverance mindset
Financial and Social Support Were Vital to Assisting With The Transition From Poverty	Public Assistance, employment, household composition,	Prioritizing, dehumanization/criminal, mentors	generational poverty, scarcity mindset, early pregnancy/early responsibilities, solution focused strategies and motivating factors, uphill battle/challenges of motherhood, and
The Importance of Resiliency and Coping Strategies For Transitioning From Poverty	Public Assistance (Childcare)	Prioritizing, innate drive, education, mentors	Overachieving, solution focused strategies and motivating factors, resiliency/ perseverance mindset,

Summary

The findings of this study focused on understanding the lived experiences of single mothers' stories of how they rose out of poverty. Four themes emerged, which were:(a) pervasiveness and culture of poverty, (b) universality of education as the most crucial step to transitioning from poverty, (c) Financial and social support were vital to assisting with the transition from poverty, (d) the importance of resiliency and coping

strategies for transitioning from poverty. Many of these women grew up in a culture of poverty that was generational; they either never transitioned out of poverty or fell into poverty when they unexpectedly became mothers at a young age. Almost all the women had given birth to their first child under the of 21 with limited education and financial stability.

Each of the participants identified that public assistance was a key factor to making sure they could survive month-to-month, but the financial assistance did not replace the need for financial literacy and education that would allow them to improve their circumstances. Across all stories, education was viewed as a crucial factor in transitioning out of poverty. Education provided the means for gaining meaningful employment. In Chapter 5, I will provide a descriptive interpretation of findings, limitations of study, implications, and future recommendations.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of the study was to understand, from the women's voices, the lived experiences of single mothers who are no longer living in poverty and the resources that were available to help them rise out of poverty. In Chapter 4, I provided profiles of the participants, the data collection and data analysis procedures, evidence of trustworthiness, and qualitative thematic results of the participant interviews. The main research question guiding the study was focused on developing an understanding of the lived experiences of single mothers who have overcame poverty. The main research question is supported by the following three subquestions:

- What support systems did mothers use that helped them to rise out of poverty?

- What self-perceived qualities and strengths contribute to the success of single mothers who rise from poverty?

- How do these single mothers define success at rising out of poverty?

I conducted interviews by asking semistructured interview questions that aligned with the research questions and allowed the participants the freedom to talk about what was most important to them. Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method was used to complete coding, pattern analysis, and theme generation (see Morrow et al., 2015; Wirihana et al., 2018). Four themes emerged from data analysis: (a) pervasiveness and culture of poverty, (b) universality of education as the most crucial step to transitioning from poverty, (c) financial and social support were vital to assisting with the transition from poverty, and (d) the importance of resiliency and coping strategies for transitioning from poverty.

Interpretation and Integration of Findings

In the ecological systems theory, Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979) acknowledged the influences of the social environment on development and stated that these systems are interrelated, yet function independently of each other. The participants' responses lended credibility to generational poverty being real and something that is handed down across the generations with learned behavioral patterns and habits that keep women in poverty (see Caputo, 1997; Lewis, 1966; Tischauser, 2019). Public assistance was seen by the participants as a system that rewards poverty and does not support education. The lack of support causes many educated single mothers to sacrifice basic needs in order to pursue higher education that can help them live above the federal poverty level (Gault & Zeisler, 2019). Single mothers comprise 1.7 million degree earners, with only 8% of them successfully completing school in 6 years or less for an associates or bachelors (Gault et al., 2018; Gault & Zeisler, 2019). The development of resiliency is enhanced with each of the unique circumstances faced by single mothers who often require coping mechanisms to adjust to their situations (Matin et al, 2018). The stories reflect single mothers being able to adapt to adversity through supportive relationships (Walsh, 2021).

Liu and Wang (2019) suggested that people remain in poverty because they lack effort and exhibit poor money management. However, the data that emerged from the present study are not consistent with this explanation. In the current study, the participants' responses suggest that single mothers remain in poverty because of learned survival behaviors for relying on public assistance, lack of education, financial illiteracy, substance use, domestic violence, and mental health issues. Public assistance systems are

designed to alleviate poverty, but in the end, keep women in poverty; women fear losing benefits when the workforce caps their ability to wealth with limited to no education (Damaske et al, 2017; Taylor et al., 2021). The majority of all single mothers work, but the jobs are low paying and offer no benefits and limited ability to move up and, thus, increase earned income wages (Damaske et al., 2017; Hoffman & Maynard, 2008).

I identified education and employment as crucial factors to rising out of poverty, and this was consistent with Damaske et al.'s (2017) findings. However, in the present study, these factors came at a steep price for single mothers who experienced immediate lost or reduced benefits, including housing, medical insurance, and food stamps. Education, although a necessary factor to rise from poverty, also resulted in extremely high loans and debt for single mothers, particularly single mothers who are people of color (Akee et al., 2019; Clark et al., 2021).

In the following subsections, I provide an interpretation of each of the major themes in the context of the existing research and the results of the current study.

Theme 1: Pervasiveness and Culture of Poverty

The findings indicated that single mothers can and do rise out of generational poverty. Generational poverty is learned and passed down, and the findings of the current study indicate that single mothers who grow up in poverty find themselves living in poverty with their children much longer until they can break the cycle of generational poverty (see Zilanawala, 2016). The term culture of poverty reflects a long-standing societal issue, and research on breaking generational poverty is sparse (Lewis, 1966). The pervasiveness and culture of poverty experienced by these single mothers resulted in a

scarcity mindset that helped them to switch to survival mode; even when the mothers transitioned, that scarcity mindset did not disappear. Such a mindset impacts economic decision making (De Bruijn & Antonides, 2022).

The marginalized treatment of single mothers created even higher risk of exposure to poverty for their children and an increased risk of poor psychological functioning and maladjustment in those children (Taylor & Conger, 2017). Being the sole provider or primary caregiver means that single mothers have less emotional resources to give while trying to provide and reduce economic hardships. Current studies have suggested that during the COVID-19 pandemic, single mothers had a higher risk of stress and mental health problems (Taylor et al., 2021). Even with increased financial resources, many times the single mothers continued to experience delayed psychological reactions to the trauma and long-term exposure to poverty and the environment associated with poverty (Taylor & Conger, 2014, 2017; Taylor et al., 2021). The long-term exposure associated with poverty increases stress, which results in increased anxiety and depression. The consequences of long-term exposure to poverty include maternal depression, poor parenting methods, emotional distress, social isolation, and financial strain, which are exacerbated with preexisting conditions.

Single mothers in the current study had to rely on multiple resources, such as public assistance, family support, and education, to successfully navigate poverty. However, inward drive and a strong desire to provide a better life for their children allow single mothers to stay motivated and gain coping skills to navigate their environment. Previous studies have indicated that the children of single mothers have an increased

change of living in poverty as adults if generational poverty is not broken (Taylor &

Conger, 2017; Taylor et al., 2021; Tischauser, 2019).

Theme 2: Universality of Education as the Most Crucial Step to Transitioning From

Poverty

In the current study, education was the most important and consistent factor that

contributed to transitioning from generational poverty and staying out of poverty.

Education provided the means of securing stable and sustainable income above the

federal poverty level. This finding is consistent with those of other authors who have

written about the importance of higher education as an important way to transition from

public assistance programs (Breinholt & Holm, 2020; Grootaert et al., 1995; Katz, 2013;

Strumbos et al., 2018). Brady et al. (2016) identified four risk factors associated with

poverty, one of which was low education. Lower education contributes to the lack of

financial literacy for Black and Hispanic women; employment gaps between these groups

and others have resulted in lower earned income and exclusion from employer-sponsored

benefits of health care and retirement benefits (Clark et al., 2021).

Mothers in the current study admitted that to gain higher education, significant

amounts of student loan debt was incurred; this finding has also been previously written

about and is an important problem (see Freeman, 2020; Katz, 2019). Financial stress

associated with increased debt is 20%–30% for higher single-parent students, and this

financial debt increase due to student loans moves single mothers from one type of

poverty to another, even if in the long term this is beneficial, because single mothers take

longer to complete degree (Freeman, 2020; Katz, 2019). Scholarships and financial aid

are helpful but added stress results from meeting the demands of coursework while continuing to meet the responsibilities associated with being the head of their household.

Participants in the current study found themselves going back to school once their children were older and were in debt from taking loans trying to get out of impoverished lifestyles. This is an area that has been underexplored in the literature; for example, Katz (2019) examined the impact of the loss of benefits while women were in full-time student status. Current study participants talked about the importance of education and the double-edged sword of going into debt with student loans. Despite loans, they still had to access public assistance for the duration of their educational programs. This finding is not consistent with those of other studies, including Katz (2019) and Freeman and Dodson (2021), who suggested that women lose access to public assistance benefits since the 1996 Welfare Reform Act because education was not considered a work activity (Freeman, 2015; Mangin, 2021).

Economic and financial mobility was reduced for the working single mothers in the current study while in school. As reported by the present study participants, they often must take lower paying jobs, struggle to find affordable childcare, and have undependable transportation. This finding is consistent with other literature (e.g., Noelke et al., 2019). This barrier to financial and economic mobility helps explain why single mothers have a higher risk of economic hardships and often wait to gain higher education once their children were older (Augustine, 2016). Previous studies have suggested the increased availability to on-the-job training and higher education supports economic and financial mobility to higher wages and educational advancements as well as promoted

human capital across more than one generation (Augustine, 2016; Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014; Sommer et al., 2018; Zahn, 2006). The findings in the present study are consistent with this suggestion. Payne (2009) identified education as a key factor to human capital that produces employment and intergenerational transfer of knowledge, and the participants' responses in the current study affirm this finding.

Theme 3: Financial and Social Support Were Vital to Assisting With the Transition From Poverty

Financial support in the form of public assistance was supported by all seven participants in the current study as a necessary resource to help transition out of poverty; however, it often came with a high price of humiliation and dehumanization. Mothers were willing to suffer this price so that their children could have a better life (Dodson & Deprez, 2019).

Financial assistance (Gault et al., 2014; Wladis et al., 2018) and social support from family (Freeman, 2020; Katz, 2019; Taylor & Conger, 2017) were key factors that helped women navigate the transition from poverty (Hardie, 2015; Katz, 2019). Both were important in the stories from women in the present study. Taylor and Conger (2017) found that single mothers who had social support had more access to healthy coping strategies, exhibited better mental health, and used positive parenting skills. However, the emotional trauma of humiliation, frustration, and feeling dehumanized were reported by all seven participants when asked about their experiences with applying for public assistance (see Freedman & Dodson, 2021; Katz, 2019). Despite the treatment, the participants recognized the importance of social support and public assistance, including

WIC, TANF, medical insurance, housing, food stamps, and discount vouchers for utilities, as a means to achieve an important end of generational poverty (see Falk, 2019; Haskins & Weidinger, 2019; Hildebrandt, 2016; Schmidt, 2013). Taylor and Conger identified perceived peer social support as a positive adjustment of coping skills for single mothers that specifically targets optimism, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Dodson and Deprez (2019) found that single mothers were forced into employment with undesirable, low-paying jobs because of the enactment of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, specifically under the Work First policy and regulation. This program allowed mothers to still gain and have access to public assistance, but they ultimately made less earned income and forced them out of the public assistance programs (Autor et al., 2006; Dobson & Deprez, 2019; Kalleberg, 2011; Richard & Lee, 2019). Falk (2019) noted that $31.3 billion was allocated for TANF benefits with $3.3 billion allotted to work, education, and training, and $6.7 billion to other public assistance benefits, like medical, discount vouchers, food stamps, and housing. Waring and Meyer (2020) noted that even with all the financial assistance, single mothers were still living below the federal poverty level. Participants in the present study spoke of similar experiences.

Theme 4: The Importance of Resiliency and Coping Strategies for Transitioning From Poverty

The participants in the current study identified several characteristics they felt were important to their transition out of poverty. All exemplified an internal drive that powered their resiliency, ability to adapt to the environment, and develop coping skills to navigate challenges that single mothers face with adversity (see Grzankowska et al.,

2018; Luthar et al., 2000). Additionally, the current study findings indicated that having children served as an additional motivator to be a better parent and role model. Children helped mothers to keep pressing and not give up in the face of adversity. However, this concept was widely discussed among the current study participants. and scholarly review would suggest that Bandura (1977) theoretical framework is more a personal causation of internal cognitive processing. In other words, this translates to an individual's internal ability to follow through and not be externally motivated through self-efficacy to perform and follow through (Goto & Martin, 2009). There is more research around stress levels increasing when one becomes a single mother (Grzankowska et al., 2018; Provencher & Carlton, 2018). The single mothers in the current study developed coping strategies that helped them to refuse to give up and conform to societal stigmas of single mothers (see Grzankowska et al., 2018; Henderson, 2003). The participants in the current study exemplified the ability to face barriers; perform at exceptional efficiency as single mothers; and utilize community resources, such as public assistance, education, and social and family support systems, to rise out of poverty (see Compas et al., 2014; Heszen, 2013).

Some of the participants reported the benefits of using physical exercise as a coping strategy. This finding is consistent with the findings of Dlugonski et al. (2017) who also reported that physical activity was a positive coping mechanism for chronic stress and that it improved the overall quality of life for single mothers (specifically Black single mothers).

Single mothers embody multiple social identities within their roles as caregivers, providers, nurturer, comforters, and protectors, and this often helps to promote resiliency (Dlugonski et al., 2017). Previous studies have suggested that gratitude is a form of developed resilience that produces hope and zest for emotional well-being (Seligman et al., 2005; Taylor et al., 2021). These studies confirmed the resiliency of single mothers and their ability to perform at maximum effectiveness to produce an environment that is not ideal but meets their needs as they grow (Heszen, 2013). Single mothers develop resiliency through adversity and depend on that innate drive and strength to preserve (Grzankowska et al., 2018; Luthar et al., 2000).

Limitations of Study

The main strength of the qualitative phenomenological designis that it is useful in understanding the lived experiences of the participants through their voices. However, the small sample size does not allow for generalizability. I took numerous steps to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings to improve the reliability and validity of the themes. While the participants in the study spanned different ages, races, and geographical locations, the sample was highly educated with all participants pursuing their doctoral degrees. It may be that the experiences of this highly educated sample are different from those who have not had the opportunity to pursue higher education.

Implications for Research and Theory

The Great Society (1964-1968) shifted focus and blamed poverty on community breakdown, which included lack of education, lack of job skills, discrimination, poor health care, and living in the low-income environments or slums (Small et al., 2010).

Theme 1, Pervasiveness and Culture of Poverty is associated with the macrosystem, which identifies culture and values that are learned behaviors from the broader society. The long-term effects of poverty increase stress and exacerbate generational poverty conditions that have been passed down. Theme 2, Universality of Education as The Most Crucial Step to Transitioning from Poverty, can be identified with the exosystem and chronosystem. The exosystem reflects the surroundings of the individuals which were not changed while the women were in poverty. Women found their situations unsustainable, inappropriate, and inadequate while engaged in their journeys in higher education. The study results validate education as the most important and true crucial factor to rising out of poverty.

Theme 3, Financial and Social Support Were Vital to Assisting with The Transition From Poverty, can be associated with the mesosystem, which included two or more environmental factors that the single mothers in my study actively used daily and identified as key factors to navigating and transitioning out of poverty. Despite the limitations for many of the women in having both financial and social support, the lack of these factors associated with the mesosystem would have resulted in the women remaining in poverty.

By the 1980s, policy reform in the United States shifted and began to blame dependency on public assistance and the breakdown of family dynamics. This resulted in the 1996 Welfare Reform that replace the Aid to Families with Dependent Children with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, also placing stricter requirements on participants (Falk, 2019; Haskins & Weidinger, 2019; Waring & Meyer, 2020). The same

system that created the band aid of public assistance now blamed single mothers, teen pregnancy, drug addiction, lack of mainstream values on dependency and lack of self-efficacy as resulting from dependence on public assistance (Small et al., 2010). However more recent studies suggest that shifting the focal point from victimizing poor people in poverty and identifying structural influences as root causes to universal and social issues associated with poverty (Assari, 2017). Therefore, researchers should continue to re-examine faulty assumptions about antipoverty policies.

Theme 4, The Importance of Resiliency and Coping Strategies for Transitioning from Poverty, has aspects that can be identified with the chronosystem, which tells the story of single motherhood and poverty status over a lifetime. This reflects healthy (and unhealthy) behavioral patterns adopted by these mothers that resulted in a resilience mindset and coping mechanisms that helped them to transition.

Thus, understanding the ecological model and social policy reforms can help to identify causes of poverty and what exacerbates poverty for single mothers. I would suggest future research in understanding the role children play in mothers moving into and out of poverty. Other researchers should also explore the relationship between federal financial aid and debt single mothers accumulate when gaining education. The choice between higher education and loss of benefits cripples many single mothers; the literature demonstrates how much this continues to be a disadvantage to women gaining higher education (Freedman & Dodson, 2021; Katz, 2019).

Implications for Policy and Practice

Policy makers and advocates makers can advocate to take the steps to improve and implement change around promoting socioeconomic wealth and supplying mentorship and literacy programs to improve financial and social economic wealth for single mothers. Placing more awareness on policy structures can help reduce poverty (see Small et al, 2010). The higher-level functioning of each woman in my study indicates that no one factor was responsible for transitioning from poverty. The women in my study had the awareness the ability to multitask in ways that supported their transitioning from and remaining free from poverty. Thus, the implications of this for policy is that programs need to consider multiple factors to support transitioning women from poverty.

Other people have mentioned the importance of understanding the causes and effects of a culture of poverty (see Hill, 2022). There has been a significant amount of research on single mothers and economic mobility. What they need is stable housing, living in communities with reduced crime rate, supportive social networking groups, cash welfare benefits, transportation, increased wages from employment, and having a bank account (Bogle et al. 2016). By increasing academic and career development components of on-the-job training and skills building for career advancement, which has proven to help transition out of poverty, single mothers gain higher earned income wages (Strumbos et al., 2018).

More insight into the consequences of vulnerabilities caused by poverty and the behaviors that manifest is suggested to aid policymakers (see Hill & Sharma, 2020). Understanding how poverty affects the whole person mentally, physically, and

emotionally is important, but how poverty affects the next generation continues to be an unhealed wound in undeveloped self- efficacy and dependency on a system that will never allow single mothers to live above poverty level; this also requires policy attention (see Small et al., 2010).

The idea that society would consider single mothers lazy and uneducated and as "undeserving poor" and "deviant" (Sidel, 2006, p. 32) has been cast in doubt, as several participants noted that even while many had master's degrees, they still had to go back on public assistance for the duration of their educational journeys. Results showed that single mothers are reducing from full time work to part time or not working at all when they transitioned from their bachelor's to master's degree. The participants shared that they were again in need of medical, childcare, food stamps, and housing aid. Single mothers accumulate a large amount of debt to get out of poverty through obtaining higher education. It raises the question of women trading one debt for another and jumping from the hot skillet into the fire. This is very impactful for single mothers who have generational poverty when they have large amount of student debt (Breinholt & Holm, 2020; Freeman, 2020).

Lewis (1966) stated that poverty is passed down from generation to generation and a learned behavior, and Tischauser (2019) stated that a mindset of culture of poverty comes from the lifestyle, values, and principles of living in economic depression characterized by many of the women in the study. The women's stories suggest that the majority experienced poverty in childhood. These experiences helped them to process, problem solve, task management, and make decisions. The generational aspect ensured

that each participant learned to use the public assistance to their advantages to gain higher education but challenged each participant to be a change agent in breaking the generational poverty cycle.

Implications for Social Change

The issue of poverty is a societal problem that keeps getting swept under the rug and has been subjected to "band aid fixes." Interestingly, the women reported that public assistance was helpful in their time of need but lacked the sustainability to help them transition out of poverty. Women reported that keeping aid often required going through an arduous process of renewing services every 6 to 12 months. Their stress levels increased with the amount of documentation needed to keep services. Many participants shared that public assistance was very helpful for short term but only reinforced their poverty as there was no mentorship around helping them not be dependent on public assistance.

Thus, implications for positive social change include understanding the power of education in these women's lives and that there are ways women coped and adapted that helped them to transition. This can be helpful to policy makers as well as for enhancing resources for women that address the various aspects of poverty. Policy makers could consider more resources to help women obtain financial literacy, homeownership, and means to achieve advanced degrees without having to go into debt. Such resource, in addition to enhancing acquisition of coping strategies, can help improve resilience and create mindsets that disrupt generational poverty.

Conclusions

After careful consideration of the lived experiences of these seven single mothers, they needed to tell their stories but strongly desired to protect and their privacy speaks. This speaks to a struggle that society is not ready to address. It speaks to how the overall person is developed and molded by fear, doubt, anxiety, poverty, trauma; yet there are many women who rise from poverty to be better. For all the mothers, motherhood put or kept them in poverty for some time; however, their children motivated them to do and be better and to become a better version of a mom than their circumstances many times allowed.

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Appendix: Code Book Definition

Generational poverty is defined as a family living in poverty for at least two generations

and lifestyles associated with individuals living at the lowest socioeconomic status in

society and who live in an environment dominated by economic deprivation.

"I don't want to be poor anymore. I don't want to live paycheck to paycheck anymore, I

just want to be comfortable."

Domestic Violence or Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a form of manipulation to gain

power over another through the form of mental, physical, psychological, sexual, and

financial to maintain power and control of a partner. "My parents believed in corporal

punishment, so spankings and whatever. And particularly with my dad a lot of time that

did become abusive. during my undergrad years I was also a victim of sexual assault.

From a stranger in the study abroad program. There was definitely even headed into the

relationship with my girls' father. There was already significant trauma that I had

endured that was just compounded. "

Public Assistance is the government program assistance that provides monetary, medical

insurance, housing subsidy, and food assistance to families living under the federal

poverty level in the United States. "My perception is that those programs are put into

place to keep those in that poverty level. "

Substance Use is the use of illegal substances or abuse of prescribed or overt the counter

medications that alter the state of mind with erratic and impulsive behaviors

"That whole doing drugs selling drugs situation would have led me in a whole another

path wholeheartedly like easily had been in jail"

Employment is an agreement to provide a service, trade, or specialty to be paid a fee

between two or more individuals. "I was eligible for licensure. That's really when the

opportunities opened up for me as far as my career is concerned, which allowed me to

transition to a private practice and out of poverty."

Mental Health is a state of well- being in which a person's is capable of carrying out

responsibilities based on their abilities. "I don't remember my childhood because I

blocked d it out because it was so traumatic. "

Education is the ability to acquire knowledge, skills, values, and learn from another

individual in a school, university, or trade. "But I think that education piece is so vital,

but that doesn't mean a four-year education or a master's degree or doctorate for

everybody, but getting some type of training, you know, and dreaming big."

Household composition is composed of individuals living together in and sharing a home

in which they may or may not all be directly related to each other. "So, I tried to I tried to

do the keep my family together situation. I wanted it as best as I possibly could. Because

a child deserves a mom and their dad happy under one household but happy is the underlying word there for me

Resilience is the ability to cope with mental, physical, psychological stressors and recovery quickly from adverse effects to form a protective factor. "if I get overwhelmed, I shut down right so I had to I had to learn to cope with that piece of I can't just shut down, right especially, you know, when three little girls are relying on me, I can't just shut down"

Single Mothers defined as women who are unmarried and not cohabiting with a romantic partner living in the home, women who are no longer married/divorced or separated from the spouse who no longer residence within the home of the mother and any children 18 years or younger, and the sole provider if not the only paternal provider for children 18 years or younger. "I was angry there for a while, I'm like I'm never going to be able to do this you know."

Culture of Poverty is the role people play in both societal and individually in perpetuating generational poverty across multiple generations. "So, I'm now 19 and pregnant by a man I don't know with no money to take care of myself with a not necessarily loving home relationship at the moment."