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The Experience of Social Support in Doctoral Dissertation Student Mothers

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Walden University
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Abstract

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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General Psychology Teaching

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Abstract

Women who are actively parenting and employed professionally comprise a significant number of the overall global doctorate population attempting to complete their dissertation. A Ph.D. in psychology requires years of commitment of which many women will never complete. The final dissertation phase of the degree process is infamous for being viewed by students as potentially isolative. There is a need to better understand how doctoral student mothers completing their dissertation in a Ph.D. psychology program experience social support. The research questions explored doctoral student mothers' social support experiences as they completed their dissertation. Tinto's social integration theory guided the overall study. A generic qualitative study was used with semi-structured interviews with nine doctoral student mothers. Data were analyzed through codes and resultant themes. The four identified themes were perseverance, relationships, self-doubt, and relatability. Gaining knowledge specific to the experiences of doctoral dissertation student mothers can enhance the opportunity for positive social change through students' Ph.D. completion to make significant impact on our global community.

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Dedication

This study is an encouragement to all those mothers who aspire to return to an education goal but believe they don't have the time or support to be successful. It is also dedicated to the many social support persons who recognize the value and sacrifice of pursuing a personal goal.

Acknowledgments

An overwhelming amount of gratitude to all those in my personal and professional life who were patient and supportive of this journey. A dissertation requires social support in various forms and therefore cannot be completed alone.

I also want to express my gratitude to my chair and the women who volunteered their precious time and personal stories to this study.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The United States doctoral education system is considered amongst the best in the world (National Science Foundation, 2017). Unfortunately, the 50% and higher universal attrition rates make this potentially decade long endeavor a risky life decision (Counsel of Graduate School, 2004; Rigler et al., 2017). The choice to commit to a doctoral program and persevere can be especially arduous for nontraditional students specifically the population of women who are professionally employed and raising their children (Lin, 2016; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020; Offerman, 2011; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). There is an increased number of women seeking advanced degrees in psychology who are working in professional roles thus impacting our global future. Psychological well-being remains a need being addressed by the increasing numbers of educated women (Haynes et al., 2012). Women currently represent 60% of all U.S. psychologists (Foley et al., 2019). Although the gender gap is closing for female Ph.D. graduates in psychology, the consistent alarming attrition rates, and increased length of time to academic completion impacting the growing population of women with children is a critical issue (Fiore et al., 2019; Hill & Conceição, 2020; Maher et al., 2004). Doctoral student socialization and stage of the program are both factors associated with female student success (Gardner, 2010).

To address the problem of female doctoral attrition, it is imperative to explore their experiences as student mothers persevering during the most stressful and high-risk stage of their degree, the dissertation. Gaining knowledge through their personal stories

with their various social support system relationships and connections can offer insights into how to better engage this student group (Swift & Wright, 2004). There is a lack of doctoral student mother in-depth stories regarding their social support experiences Mantai, 2019). It is common for most who complete a Ph.D. to acknowledge their informal social support's role in their dissertation (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020; Roberts & Plakhotnik, 2009). The need for generalized academic flexibility and formal mentoring was an identified support theme in a recent quantitative study describing doctoral student mother experiences (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020).

Background of the Study

The inability to complete a doctoral program remains an area of global research interest with numerous individual and institutional factors being examined (Rigler et al., 2017). The depressing number of doctoral students who do not complete their terminal degrees have remained stable across programs for 50 years (McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020). There is value in resolving this concern. Efforts targeting doctoral student attrition by the Council of Graduate School have been in effect for the last couple decades without change (Sowell et al., 2010). Several studies have identified that having children is a primary deterrent to female Ph.D. completion (Brown & Nichols, 2012; Grenier & Burke, 2008; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Noll et al., 2017; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). The phenomena of work-life balance have been described by female students and faculty as a major barrier in academia for decades (Castelló et al., 2017; Grassetti et al., 2019). Several studies documented women's struggle attempting to manage their multiple family and academic roles and responsibilities creating stress, risk of burn out, and possible

program departure (Gray et al., 1997; Pyhalto et al., 2012; Stubb et al., 2011). Gray et al. (1997) and Gardner's (2009) earlier work with female doctoral students highlighted the relevance of social support and personal connections as a contributor of their persistence and its role in buffering stress. More data are needed to better understand the support experiences, as many women in the studies reported lack of support. Several qualitative studies have noted the importance of social support as an important persistence attribute for female doctoral students but there is little known about this population's concerns and experiences with various types of supports while undertaking their dissertation (Gray et al., 1997; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Lovitts, 2001; Swift & Wright, 2000). A more current quantitative study identified 70% of the surveyed doctoral mother's productivity was impacted due to childcare related responsibilities and that formal mentoring support and role modeling was beneficial (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020). Based on their busy and challenging roles and family needs, doctoral student mothers may be in increased need of support, guidance, and resources during the less structure dissertation phase due to the minimal peer opportunities and increased seclusion (Jones, 2018).

Working mothers are included in a portion of the doctoral academic population that reflects a minority non-traditional expanding group of students (Offerman, 2011). The doctoral Ph.D. education process in the United States includes the initial structured course work followed by the less organized and more independent dissertation stage. The combination of role conflict and balance challenges for women with children may be exemplified during the more isolative dissertation stage (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). More recently, researchers have introduced the term academic-family

integration as a comprehensive term to reflect the doctoral student's attempt to balance between their academic and family life (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019). The final dissertation stage is being cited as the most stressful time in one's degree journey and causes many students to drop out, thus severely impacting one's overall life balance (Denman et al., 2018; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Kelley & Salisbury, 2015).

It is evident that many women are graduating with their Ph.D. in increased numbers but less clear why they are continuing to drop out during the dissertation phase and take longer to graduate (National Science Foundation, 2017). A qualitative inquiry into understanding doctoral student mother's meanings and experiences with social support during the dissertation phase may build upon the new terminology of academic-family integration. It may also address the role that diverse types of social support have in doctoral student mother educational experiences.

Problem Statement

Women who are parenting and professionally employed make up a subpopulation of the increasing number of the diverse students pursuing their Ph.D. in the social sciences (Graham & Massyn, 2019; Hill & Conceição, 2020). Motherhood and doctoral completion both require years of financial and emotional commitment (Philipsen et al., 2017). Women who choose to complete their higher degree while building a family may endure additional academic challenges (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). Although, the number of females awarded a Ph.D. in psychology and social sciences exceeded males by 18% in 2018 (National Science Foundation, 2019), doctoral student completion remains an interminable problem (Fiore et al., 2019; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). The

specific doctoral attrition statistics for women with children are not available. However, the general doctoral attrition rate of 50% has persisted for decades with 10 to 20% higher dropout rates for online students (Ames et al., 2018; Council of Graduate Schools, 2017; Terrell et al., 2016). A couple scholars have reported that a large portion of doctoral students completed their coursework but abandoned their programs during the final and more independent dissertation phase (Gittings et al., 2018; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). 2017). Many of those students were women who were within the ages of childbearing (25-40) or were parenting (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).While a portion of women are graduating with their doctorate degree, they are also at a higher risk of an increased length of time to complete their degree, to accumulate an increased debt (National Science Foundation, 2019) and to drop out due to the added barriers related to being a mother (Grenier & Burke, 2008).

Several studies have documented that woman who are completing their higher education degree identify additional stresses due to parenting and family needs (Eisenbach, 2013; Grenier & Burke, 2008; Holm et al., 2015; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Noll, et al., 2017; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). Recently, the terms academic-family integration (Rockin-Szapkiw, 2019) and motherscholar (CohenMiller, 2018) have been identified in limited scholarly literature to reflect the challenges women experience while balancing the numerous personal, social, and professional roles in academia but require further investigation. Limited past research has highlighted struggles by doctoral students' balancing school and work but have not focused on the additional challenge of completing the advanced degree process during the final dissertation phase as an

employed parent of children 18 and under (Haynes et al., 2012; Martinez et al., 2013; Rockin-zapkiw et al., 2017). The dissertation phase, which is the last and the longest of the three doctoral phases, has been linked to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and lack of structure (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2018). This is reflected across the diverse doctoral student learning modalities and populations with a need for support as a consistent theme. Online all but dissertation (ABD) doctoral students attributed a lack of success during the dissertation transition phase to a need for more faculty and peer interactions and support (Fiore et al., 2019). A lack of a relationship with one's advisor and or a change in one's academic advisor were identified as primary reasons part-time doctoral students disconnected during the dissertation stage (Burns & Gillespie, 2018). Female doctoral distance learners in the dissertation stage reported family support, including but not linted to spouse or partner as an integral persistence contributor in their success (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2018). A shift towards independent research during the dissertation may create the risk of accumulated academic, domestic, and professional responsibilities impacting one's progress towards their completed Ph.D. (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). Doctoral female success has been correlated with the ability to prioritize one's academic requirements and to develop positive social connections with academic and personal supports (Burns & Gillespie, 2018; Fiore et al., 2019; Lohr & Haley, 2018; Omera et al, 2017; Posselt, 2018). The final dissertation stage may create an environment in which the non-traditional doctoral student mother who is also employed is unable to academically persevere.

Motherhood may impact professional achievement. Globally, 25% of women in leadership roles have children under age 5 compared to 75% of men (Beghini, 2019). The annual consistent 50% of doctoral student dropouts in the United States create potential social and personal failures that can result in extreme financial and emotional losses (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). This is a social concern given the significant academic, social, and cultural value to supporting and encouraging female completion rates to impact poverty and unemployment rates (Beghini, 2019; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016, p. 92). Women continue to experience a motherhood leadership penalty including in academia (Beghini, 2019). Women hold 26% of the administrative college roles in the United States (Gomez, 2020). Specifically, gaining a deeper understanding of how doctoral student mother's engaging in the dissertation process reflect upon their social support experiences (Kurtz et al., 2006; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of my qualitative research study was to better understand the social support experiences of doctoral student mothers during the dissertation phase of their program. The in-depth life stories of doctoral dissertation student mothers' experiences with their various social support networks and resources can contribute and expand upon the concept of academic family integration, add to the literature on doctoral student social support networks and needs, and shed light on the current challenges of doctoral persistence.

Research Question

The research question:

RQ: What is the experience of social support for doctoral dissertation student mothers?

Theoretical Framework

To understand the experiences of women who are concurrently parenting, professionally employed, and completing their dissertation requires both subjective life views and interpretative contextual stories, all of which a generic qualitative approach can scientifically provide (Kahlke et al., 2014). The flexibility of a generic qualitative design allows the research question to be the focus rather than the rigid methodology. To further explore how employed doctoral dissertation student mothers' experience social support, Tinto's decades of work on student attrition and socialization will be applied (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012; Tinto, 1993, 2000). Doctoral student connection and integration develops both socially and academically (Olive, 2019). Social support includes both iformal and formal relationships of which support networks can comprise of the following: family, friends, peers, coworkers, employment and institutional supervisors, mentors, faculty, and staff (Peltonen et al., 2017).

Tinto's (1975, 1993) original work focused on undergraduate student characteristics that impacted attrition. It later evolved into a complex model of graduate student persistence that included student attributes and their social relationships with the academic institution (Tinto, 2000). Tinto (2007) proposed that academic outcomes were correlated with doctoral students' beliefs and experiences regarding their experiences in and outside of the classroom. According to Tinto's integration theory, student motivation, goals, and doctoral outcomes are contingent on a student's ability to amalgamate with

their online peers, instructors, and program requirements while balancing their role as student parent (Tinto, 2017). Doctoral student mothers' academic integration is challenged both because of their comprehensive responsibilities as a student, parent, and professional while possibly lingering for years in the autonomous dissertation stage. The goal of this research is to shed light on their organic student experiences with their personal and institutional support systems and to also deepen the research knowledge in this complex area of dissertation phase attrition.

Nature of the Study

The generic qualitative method of inquiry is the most appropriate for this type of study because it captures the world views of social support as experienced through the lens of doctoral dissertation student mothers completing the dissertation phase of the degree (Kennedy, 2016). The research goal is to provide an understanding through open investigation of the shared themes of female doctoral parents discussing their experiences with various types of social supports as they navigate their dissertations (Vagle, 2018). The interview questions encouraged doctoral women to share their personal experiences with their various social supports as student parents who are balancing family, work, and college. Each interview was transcribed and organized into categories and themes (Vagle, 2018). This generic qualitative study should provide real life examples without interview bias and interpretation of the true meaning of their experiences of being a contemporary woman who is a doctoral parent completing their dissertation.

Significance of the Study

A limited number of studies have focused on the experiences of employed doctoral dissertation student mothers in the United States, with even fewer focusing on their experiences with social support networks (Burkard et al., 2014; Burns, & Gillespie, 2018; Lynch, 2008). The ABD phase of the Ph.D. is discerned as the most crucial and arduous of the extensive academic process (Burkard et al., 2014; Burns & Gillespie, 2018; Kelly & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). The experiences of doctoral student mothers' support may provide a deep intimate understanding of how they navigate and manage their varying roles, duties, and commitments in the attempt to conduct their research and complete their Ph.D. This research will contribute to filling the gap in research on this phenomenon in areas of social support experiences on this specific target group (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014). This study is significant for those doctoral student mothers, and those contemplating motherhood while pursuing their higher degree, as well as the larger ABD student population and academic community. The student stories' content may fill a gap in the literature by providing a deeper understanding of the social support experienced by these women during the dissertation stage.

Definition of Key Terms

The following words are key terms found consistency in the literature reviewed for this study. The definitions were operationalized to reflect the context of this dissertation.

All but dissertation (ABD). "All but dissertation" is the acronym for the unfinished, manque state applied to candidates who have completed all the requirements

for the doctoral degree except the final research project. For "ABDs," this maxim can be reframed into "Finish or Perish" (McAloon, 2004, p. 229).

Contemporary doctoral student. "a married woman with children and a career who is studying part time, often at a distance, and is funding her own education either through her current income or by borrowing" (Offerman, 2011, p. 29).

Social integration. "Pertains to the extent of congruency between the individual student and the social system of a college or university. Social integration reflects the student's perception of his or her degree of congruence with the attitudes, values, beliefs, and norms of the social communities of a college or university" (Tinto's Interactionalist Theory, 2004, p. 9).

Social support. Social support refers to the social resources perceived to be available and provided to early career researchers by their social environment and researcher community (Vekkaila et al., 2018. P. 1441). Emotional support refers to empathy, trust, listening, caring, esteem and belonging to a network of communication and mutual obligation, whereas informational support is characterized by information, such as advice, feedback, affirmation, and suggestions that enables an individual to cope with the problems faced. Instrumental support, such as time or labor, directly helps a person in need (Vekkaila et al., 2018, p. 1441).

Social Support System. "Support accessible to an individual through social ties to other individuals, groups, and the larger community" (Lin et al., 1979, p. 109).

Assumptions

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the social support experiences of doctoral student mothers completing their dissertation. There are three assumptions identified and reviewed. The first assumption is that doctoral student mothers who are professionally employed experience various types of social support including but not limited to family, peer, institutional, and employer while working on the final stage of their Ph.D. in psychology. The second assumption when conducting a generic qualitative methodological interview approach is that the participants are being honest and forthcoming with their stories and consciousness sharing. The third assumption is that the experience of social support will be interpreted with an unbiased approach (Vagle, 2018).

Scope and Delimitations

The goal of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the social support experiences as expressed during in depth interviews with doctoral student mothers fulfilling the final requirements of their Ph.D. process. The study will highlight doctoral dissertation student mothers' social support experiences.

Limitations

A generic qualitative study requires extensive and thorough interviews so that an exhaustive understanding of the social support experiences of female doctoral dissertation student parents can be reported (Donalek, 2004). The participants needed to speak English fluently so that the interviewer can communicate effectively, and all participants will need to commit to a zoom interview. To support the rigor of the design member

checking will be a requirement (Donalek, 2004). Therefore, the time, and trustworthiness of me, as a Walden Ph.D. student may all be challenges to complete. According to Vagle, (2018), the interviewer should be oriented to the phenomenon. Because I am a woman, doctoral dissertation student parent, personal biases needed to be identified and addressed as to reduce subjectivity. The generalizability was limited based on student subjects and my ability to probe and question can impact responses (Haskins et al., 2016).

Summary

The completion of a doctoral degree in psychology provides a student with vast global professional opportunities in areas of well-being and mental health, all of which may benefit society. Past literature has identified doctoral student mothers as a relevant population who struggle with Ph.D. success due specifically to parenting and family obligations (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). Decades of research are saturated with the identification of work-life balance as a primary factor contributing for females in higher education (Martinez et al., 2019). There is a need to expand upon historical literature to include the undertakings of doctoral student mothers who are professionally employed and completing their dissertation during and after a pandemic. Few studies have acknowledged and highlighted the role social support may have in female doctoral student completion (Jairum & Kahl, 2012). Research devoted to investigating student mothers' reporting of their support experiences while completing their dissertation in real time may expound upon the persistence and attrition related outcomes for this population.

This chapter focused on an overview of the need to fill a gap in the ongoing literature targeting female doctoral student attrition. A generic qualitative study design provides the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of doctoral student mother's compendious social support experiences. Chapter 2 will include a thorough review of the historical literature spanning several decades including the plight of females and motherhood in academia.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Background to the Problem

The broad and global research topic of mothers in academia has remained a prolific and complex area of social concern and change for over sixty years (Baker, 2016; Gardner, 2008; Johnston & Johnston, 2017). The number of female doctoral graduates in the United States have continued to outnumber males for the last decade in seven of the 11 major fields of study (Okahana, & Zhou, 2019). Female doctoral students who are pursuing their advanced degree while professionally employed and managing their family responsibilities make up a large percentage of the contemporary nontraditional student population (Graham & Massyn, 2019; Offerman, 2011). Current statistics show that females awarded a Ph.D. in the social sciences have also surpassed males annually by up to twenty-two percent (Okahana & Zhou, 2018). Although a significant percentage of females complete their Ph.D., 50%-60% of graduate students exit their programs in the United States without a degree (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). This dismal attrition rate has remained consistent for decades and is especially a concern for doctoral student mothers who are advanced to their dissertation phase of the terminal degree (Mason et al., 2013; Theisen et al., 2018). Children related issues are attributed to the primary reason women's academic persistence is jeopardized (Maher et al., 2004) and the overall completion of their Ph.D. (Garnder, 2009). Students' who identifed as women identify the final dissertation stage of the Ph.D. process as a major obstacle to their success due the lack of structure and the reduction of academic interaction as compared to the coursework years (Burns et al., 2018; Rockinson-

Szapkiew et al., 2016). Doctoral student mothers may demonstrate precedence of their family needs over dissertation writing to maintain their daily roles thus jeopardizing their Ph.D. progress. The increased number of women pursuing a Ph.D., especially those within the childbearing age range, may experience increased barriers, placing them at greater risk of becoming an unfortunate attrition statistic, thus, resulting in the extreme loss of female awarded Ph.D. scholars. Despite all the female educational advancements achieved, there is a lack of gender specific college wide policies and procedures regarding the support of women who are pregnant and or parenting in the graduate college environment (Baker, 2016; Beddoes & Pawley, 2014). Childcare availability, lactation areas, funding for conferences, and flexible schedules are just a few of common issues inconsistently offered by institutions for faculty and or student parents (Robertson, 2017). A current plea found in the literature is the implementation and practice of family-friendly polices to impact the college culture to better embrace those with children and families (CohenMiller, 2013; Colbeck, 2015; Holm et al., 2015; Mirick, & Wladkowski, 2020; Philipson et al., 2017). A lack of role models, unsupportive faculty, and institutional resources create an atmosphere where doctoral student mothers may avoid social interactions in fear of stigmatization which in turn increases their attrition (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019). A viable support system is necessary for doctoral student mothers to fulfil their contrasting academic, professional, and family obligations to eventually graduate with their Ph.D. (Roberts & Plakhotnik, 2009). The lack of available academic time, energy, and role distribution place doctoral student mothers at a disadvantage to develop and maintain social support networks and concentrate on their

dissertation. The expansion of private online or distance doctoral program growth has offered more availability and flexibility for women to pursue their doctoral degrees, but there may be a socialization cost to students (Lee et al., 2020; Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014). As a population who have identified significant work life struggles impeding their education goals, they may have less opportunity to connect with academic persons and thus may need to relay more on their informal personal connections as their means of social support and networking. Social supports that reflect both formal and informal networks are attributed to doctoral student success (De Clercq et al., 2019). Based on the increased number of women in doctoral online or distance doctoral programs, there is a need to explore their experiences with various types of perceived social supports to address attrition risks and improve persistence outcomes (Lee et al., 2020). Doctoral student mothers are especially in need of positive supportive relationships with their academic community as well as those in their personal lives to manage their compounded responsibilities (Castelló et al., 2017; Suñé-Soler & Monereo Font, 2020). Healthy, diverse social networks that reduce stress and improve one's overall well-being are vital to doctoral completion (Cohen, 2004; Jarim & Kahl, 2012). Female Ph.D. completion is contingent on integration within their program both socially and academically in combination with one's external attributes, specifically managing family obligations (Tinto, 1993; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Many doctoral student mothers can complete their program coursework, but the less structured and more self-regulated dissertation stage may be complicated by the need to prioritize their day-to-day family and personal needs resulting in feelings of stress, frustration, and role-related guilt and shame thus

leading to burn out and or program departure (Haynes et al., 2012; Gittings et al., 2018; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Mothers in comparison to all other student groups are most likely to depart their graduate programs due to personal reasons (Mason et al., 2013; Theisen et al., 2018). Haynes et al. (2012) documented that female doctoral student reported stress was inevitable in their lives, but they were able to persevere by relying on their support systems. The available social support literature is inundated with studies devoted to the doctoral student and faculty chair or supervisor relationship but is limited regarding the diverse types of social supports most beneficial to this unique population and how stage of program impacts support (Bair & Haworth, 2005; 2013; Burkhard et al., 2014; Marshall et al., 2017; Stubb et al., 2007; Mason et al., 2013). A recent systematic literature review examining support strategies attributed to doctoral student completion identified social support from faculty and student collaboration as a major theme to target (Hill & Conceição, 2020). There is an abundance of literature spanning decades ascribing doctoral student progress to one's connection, engagement, and integration within their diverse environments (Gardner, 2008; Graham & Massyn, 2019; Lovitts, 2001; Pyhältö et al., 2012; Tinto, 1993; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). There has been significant academic progress made by women achieving their terminal degrees as evidenced by the increased number of graduates, but the roadblocks for those parenting and or contemplating motherhood during this journey in the United States remain a present-day researchable problem (Mirick, & Wladkowski, 2020). Providing unpaid childcare can prohibit progression of academic achievement thus employment opportunities (Beghini, et al., 2019). There is a need to better understand the

social support experiences this increasing population of female students require for their academic success and the impact each has during their dissertation process (Aljohani, 2016; Mantai, 2019).

Library Search

Several studies over the span of many decades have documented the multitude of unique factors and challenges impacting doctoral student mothers' attrition and persistence rates including a large body of research on the topic of gender disparities especially for those faculty mothers (Brown & Watson, 2010; Carter et al., 2013; Colbeck, 2015; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012, 2014), work-life balance conflicts (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014; Burns & Gillespie, 2018; Martinez et al., 2013; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019; Spauling & Rockinson, 2012), financial issues (El-Ghoroury, 2012; Flynn et al., 2012; Martinez et al., 2013), and social support concerns (Gilmore et al., 2016; Hill & Conceição, 2020; Hlebec et al., 2011; Mantai, 2019; O'Meara et al., 2017; Spaulding & Rockinson- Szapkiw, 2012). Based on the prominent research topics listed above, all of which highlighted women and motherhood and had an overlapping theme of social support as a significant factor in doctoral student completion, there was a need to further explore the types of support doctoral student mothers experience.

Upon the historical review of this literature, several primary themes were identified to better understand the overall educational plights that women with children in pursuit of their terminal degree have endured. The initial database search focused on the years between 2019 and 2020, with an emphasis on present decade using the EBSCOHOST database and the limiters of English only, full text, books, empirical

articles, government sources, and "all databases." The initial three advanced search terms "*doctoral students or PhD students*," "*mother or motherhood,"* and "*United States"* resulted in only three articles. To increase the number of available articles necessary to complete the literature review the following search terms were added to the original three terms, "*parent,*" "*challenges,"* "*persistence,"* and *"social support."* Most of the relevant articles used in this review were found in the following databases: Academic Search Complete, PsycARTICLES, Psychology and Behavioral Science Collection, Google Scholar, and ERIC. The results of the advanced search with the additional variations of the search words yielded hundreds of articles, with several studies specific to the counseling education program (Dickens et al., 2016; Holm et al., 2015; Pierce et al., 2013; Stinchfield & Trepal, 2010; Trepal et al., 2014; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011) and some articles focusing on the population of African American doctoral mothers (Appling et al., 2018; Holmes et al., 2010; Rogers, et al., 2019). According to Gardner (2009), each discipline and field of study may differ in their cultural norms.

The generalizability of narrowed scope doctoral student research may be limited. The initial search was limited to the counseling education population and African American doctoral student experiences. After eliminating the database retrieved research studies on female populations outside of the United States, specific cultural groups, and specific fields of study there were limited studies available on the general experiences of doctoral student mothers who were parenting while obtaining their Ph.D. in a United States academic setting. There were several research studies on this general topic explored through the lens of female faculty and students attempting to balance work-life

integration challenges in a male dominated culture (Kulp, 2016; Lester, 2015; McCutcheon & Morrison, 2018; Phillipen et al., 2017; Sallee et al., 2016) with a few more recent articles concentrating on the doctoral student mother's attrition and persistence factors of those enrolled, withdrawn, or graduated (Kulp, 2016; Mirick et al., 2020; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Quinn 2011). Although there are numerous studies on the experiences of female doctoral students, the library search specific to the social support experiences of doctoral student mothers in the United States were extremely limited. There is little known about doctoral student mothers' experiences parenting during the years and various stages of their programs (Mirrick & Wladkowski, 2020).

This literature review will examine past research on the population of doctoral student mothers, and their challenges with multiple roles and identity development, (ABD) stage, social support construct, and attrition and persistence as proposed by Tinto's (1993) model and framework.

Doctoral Student Mothers

Motherhood and completing a Ph.D. both require years of financial, physical, and psychological commitment filled with emotional highs and lows. Combining the two has resulted in literature primarily featuring the negative impacts on a women's academic progress (Grenier & Burke, 2008), career trajectory (Grassettiet al., 2019; Mirick, & Wladkowski, 2020; Trepal et al., 2014), and researcher identity (Carter et al., 2013; Leshem, 2020; Mirick, & Wladkowski, 2020; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Leshem, 2020). As the number of doctoral student women increases, so does the potentiality of students who are pregnant and or currently parenting (National Science

Foundation, 2017; Offerman, 2011). Online doctoral programs continue to grow, with more than 60% of their student population being women, many of whom are 30 years or older or peak childbearing ages (National Science Foundation, 2015). Several of the first women in the United States accomplish a Ph.D. never married or had children (APA, 2012). The literature supports a historic negative academic attitude reflecting having children in higher education that persist today (Kulp, 2016; Stinchfield & Trepal, 2010, 2012).

Women have made significant progress in the realm of higher education since the first Ph.D. was conferred in the United States at Yale in 1861 (Jones, 2018). Thirty-three years later, the first female the United States was awarded a Ph.D. (American Psychological Association, 2012). If she were married, the policy allowed her teaching to be limited to all female institutions.

Historical data from the United States show that as of the 1970s, men were much more likely to earn a Ph.D. until women steadily closed the gap by 2000 (Chiswick et al., 2010). For the last decade in the United States women have earned more doctoral degrees compared to men (Council of Graduate Schools, 2020). The most current figure suggests that approximately 14% of doctoral students are parents (Mirrick & Wladkowski, 2020, p. 94). The goal of completing a Ph.D. is promising for women who are parenting or plan to start a family, however, the traditional Ph.D. program remains as it was 200 years ago (Jones, 2018; Offerman, 2011). The historical research Ph.D. was originally designed for White, young, single men who lived and worked on campus with the primary goal of becoming a tenured professor (Jones, 2018). This program model provided numerous

socialization opportunities within the research and academic community to support the development of a scholar (Carter et al., 2013). Fellowships, graduate assistantships, research, and teaching opportunities as well as conference presentations could all be potential student activities (Kulp, 2016). Women with dependent children who are professionally employed need to navigate a variety of demands putting them at a disadvantage in a traditional PhD program. The copious numbers of women who have completed all previous academic goals necessary to be entitled to pursue their Ph.D. have the scholarly motivation to persevere.

Two decades of research have confirmed that doctoral student mothers experience additional barriers to program completion including conflict in the following areas: multiple roles, childcare, financial, and gender inequality (Carter et al., 2013; Grenier & Burke, 2008; Lynch, 2008; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020). The literature consistently reads that they are at risk of dropping out due to their status of having children during this academic process because of missed professional opportunities and the ambivalence towards children by the academic culture. Both Kulp (2016) and Mirick and Wladkowski (2018) found in their research with doctoral student mothers that, due to their numerous responsibilities, the students had limited opportunity for academic engagement outside of the required course work compared to those without children. Both these recent studies lend support to the concern that this population is at a disadvantage to complete their degree because of their family devotion. An ethnographic narrative study of three doctoral mothers' experiences resulted in them all sharing that they each needed to prioritize their children with the realization that this decision would significantly impact

their doctoral goals. Similarly, Greinier and Burke (2008) applied a cogenerative ethnography approach to explore the personal experiences of pregnant doctoral students. They identified stress related to the balance of academic and personal demands as a primary problem, but that family support was "imperative" to their persistence. Over a decade later, Mirick and Wladkowski (2020) found similar outcomes. They published a large cross-sectional, descriptive study with 777 female doctoral students. Only 22 students believed that having a child positively impacted their academic careers. A significant percentage reported negative experiences attributed to their perception of their mother role including less professional development options and their general program progress was slowed. Similar issues were emphasized in two separate studies published by Stinchfield and Trepal, (2010, 2012) on motherhood and academia. They found that doctoral student mothers in counselor education programs voiced concern regarding messages from the academic community about children as barriers to degree completion. A common perception identified in the literature was the pessimistic attitude regarding having and or taking care of children while in academia. However, the research is limited by design, population size, program specific, and generalizability, thus, supporting a need to continue to examine this population.

Identity and Work-Life Balance

The construct of work-life balance has proven to create additional challenges for women in academia (Baker, 2016; Culpepper et al., 2020; Lynch, 2008). Doctoral student mothers who are professionally employed experience a triple role conflict that is the product of both social and personal beliefs. Many authors documented how female

faculty and doctoral students continue to take on most of the household and childcare responsibilities limiting their career opportunities and increasing their stress (Eisenbach, 2013; Odena, & Burgess, 2017; Toffoletti, & Starr, 2016). In turn doctoral student stress levels have been linked to attrition rates (Barreira et al., 2018). Stress, emotional exhaustion, and burn out are predictors of doctoral student withdrawal in several studies (Carter et al., 2013; Pyhalto et al., 2012; Stubb et al., 2011). Doctoral student mothers may have the added societal pressure implying that it is their duty and obligation to nurture and sustain their families (Carter et al., 2013). An additional issue for contemporary doctoral student mothers in the United States may be their need to be everything to everyone (Philipsen et al., 2017). The terms "intensive" or "ideal" student, mother, and worker have been reflected in the literature to express the emotional distress and dissonance doctoral student mothers experience in attempt to prosper in all life domains (CohhenMiller; 2018; Lynch, 2008; Philipsen et al., 2017). Several authors discussed how the multiple roles and responsibilities managed by doctoral student mothers may lead to identity struggles (Carter et al., 2013; Mirick, & Wladkowski, 2020; Spaulding, & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2017). Carter et al. (2013) exploratory study confirmed that the multiple roles women fulfill both in and outside of academia were a primary source of conflict impacting doctoral student's well-being. It was suggested by both Carter et al. (2013) and Philipsen et al. (2017) that the system needs to acknowledge that the needs of women in college settings are "different" and because of their caretaking responsibilities their focus will need to fluctuate. Some women may be unaware of how their identify struggles impact their well-being due to the expectations of the cultural

"ideal norms" (Carter et al., 2013). Gardner's (2009) sequence of doctoral student focused research also echoed the belief that female and older nontraditional students themselves felt they were treated different and "didn't fit the mold". CohenMiller (2018) examination of how mothers in academia present themselves echoed the struggles that this group experienced for those who identified the concept of "ideal mother scholar" having a profound influence on their beliefs about roles and expectations. Doctoral student mothers may be reluctant to seek out institutional resources such as leave of absences or flexibility and support for fear of lost opportunities, advancements, and appearing not fully committed to their work (CohenMiller, 2018; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019).

Doctoral students who are successful at integrating their work, school, and life may be better prepared to navigate their future (Culpepper, 2020). There is a need to know more about how doctoral student mother's view the perfect combination of the roles of mother scholar and the social networks that support them as they complete the final dissertation phase. The available literature is primarily drawn from faculty mothers and doctoral student women. The unique subpopulation of doctoral student mothers' experiences with social support networks is limited (Mirick, & Wladkowski, 2020).

In addition to the research literature on this topic there are a couple of books *Mama PhD* (Evans & Grant, 2009) and *The Mommy Myth* (Douglas & Michales, 2004) *that shed light on the social, cultural, and gender issues women with children experience both inside and outside of the walls of academia*. *The Mommy Myth* book discussed the phrase "new momism" which was promoted by the media and indorsed the belief that a

women's purpose in life was to bear children and dote on them 24 hours a day. Completing a Ph.D. is a demanding endeavor that will demand time and focus. Thus, a portion of doctoral female students may not successfully transition from their roles as wife, partner, and mothers to those of student and researcher. The social process of interacting with one's academic community and personal relationships has profound effects on Ph.D. progress and overall student life satisfaction (Gardner, 2012; Haynes et al., 2012). Previous studies have suggested that doctoral student mothers' lives are saturated with professional work, family needs, and academic requirements that require a personal effort to organization, time manage, sacrifice, and balance (Carter et al., 2013; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014). Philipsen et al. (2017) explored faculty work-life balance issues through several women's life stories. They concluded the term *work-in-life-integration* was preferred over *balance* because of the many unique and complex life choices as well as the out-of-control circumstances that make up a person's well-being. According to Haynes et al. (2012), doctoral mother success should include their overall well-being and ability to cope with their various roles which include mother, student, employee, partner, professional, friend, neighbor, scholar-practitioner, sibling, daughter. More than three-fourths of a large United States sample of psychology doctoral students identified that their well-being was impacted by academic concerns and work-life balance issues creating stress (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Many of the students identified that their coping came from the support of both academic peers and family and friends. The academic journey may be contingent on one's support systems.

Recently and consistently over the last decade female students in several qualitative studies denoted feelings of ambivalence and fear regarding sharing their status, role, and identity of motherhood within their academic communities (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Trepal et al., 2014). Developing and maintaining a healthy balance of one's roles to reduce stress and conflict is a documented theme for general doctoral student success (Roberts, 2020).

The goal of achieving a Ph.D. requires extensive commitment as one transforms into the role of researcher (Culpepper et al., 2020). Several research studies have determined that motherhood during this academic journey can be an added stressor creating challenges in the areas of one's roles and identity thus resulting in work-life balance challenges (Leshem, 2020; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020,).

Faculty Mothers

Much of the historical research and a significant portion of the current literature on the topic of mothers in academia has targeted the experiences of female faculty (Kurtz et al., 2006; Wear, 2013). This literature review will provide an overview of the published information that includes both faculty mothers and doctoral student mothers. The documented outcomes are mirrored for both female groups. A major area of robust research was the review of gender disparities among the population of women with children working in higher educational settings (Carter et al, 2013; Grassetti et al., 2019; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017; Webber, 2017). This first identified research issue has led to the production of many books and numerous articles that have identified a need for

cultural change as well as promoted institutional family-friendly policies (Colbeck, 2015; Danowitz, 2016).

Approximately two decades ago, academic researchers Ward & Wendell (2004) initiated a series of articles highlighting the struggles faced by female faculty in academia. They specifically identified the battle faculty mothers fought with attempting to balance their family and career in an environment that was not yet "family-friendly" (Ward & Wendell, 2004; Wolfinger et al., 2008). The terms funneling, leaky pipeline, and maternal wall have all been found in the literature directly reviewing gender disparities experienced by female faculty in academia (Gardner, 2012; Grassetti et al., 2019; Williams, 2005; Wolfinger et al., 2008). Those metaphors all reflect the limited or non-existing opportunities women may be met with if aspiring to make professional advancements in the world of academia (Philipson et al., 2017). Historically, women in higher education, specifically with children were more likely to leave academia, fail to achieve tenure, be paid lower wages, publish less, or teach at non research institutions due to the challenges of balancing motherhood with their faculty lives (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014). Gardner (2012) reported in a mixed methods analysis of female faculty in a research institution that women left their roles due to work-life issues including salary inequalities, lack of resources and support as well as feeling isolated. Misra et al. (2012) study on faculty revealed that women spent equal time on the required academic work-related tasks except for research compared to their male counterparts but much more time on household chores and childcare. This unbalanced life schedule allowed for males to advance their careers based on their publishing abilities. The plight of faculty mothers led

the way for research dedicated to doctoral student mothers' challenges (Hyun et al., 2006; Maher et al., 2004; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017).

Attrition

An area of public concern for the increasing number of women pursing a Ph.D. is the steady doctoral attrition rate of approximately 50% (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019). There are a variety of factors that contribute to the phenomena of doctoral student attrition. The dissertation phase accounts for 60% of those who chose to drop out (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). This final and more independent stage of the terminal degree has been linked to feelings of isolation, frustration, fear, and trauma for women who reported a negative dissertation experience (Burkhard et al., 2014). To better understand how social supports influence that doctoral student mother persistence in psychology Ph.D. programs the factors that contribute to those dropping out need to also be explored (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019).

Although in the United States more women are pursuing and graduating with their Ph.D. in social sciences and many other fields, the percent of dropouts has remained at 50% for decades (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Many doctoral student mothers who are working and independently financing their education are in jeopardy of extreme academic debt. Doctoral debt for those in the psychology field hovers at 100,000 and above with or without a completed degree (Doran et al., 2016).

It is difficult to produce the exact data on doctoral student attrition (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Tinto, 1993). The available doctoral dropout rates may be limited to

specific programs and institutions because there are no national databases with this information (Bair & Haworth, 2004). Attrition risk for this population is significant because over 20 years ago the same rate of 50% was recognized as a national crucial issue in need of remedy (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Lovitts, 2001; Okahana, & Zhou, 2019). More specifically it is evident that women are graduating with their Ph.D. in increased numbers but less clear why they are continuing to drop out at steady rates and take longer to graduate (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Society loses out when those students who are women are unable to contribute their original dissertation work to the academic world (Lin, 2016). Their opportunities for influencing published knowledge and education are hindered. Women currently hold less than one-third of leadership roles in academia despite their increased presence in overall college graduate numbers (Gallant, 2014). Some of the factors impacting doctoral student mother attrition are stress related (Lovitts, 2001). Those specific areas identified in the literature are their multiple roles interfering with academic goals, lack of institutional support and acknowledgement of their motherhood identify and support challenges. In a mixed-method approach study highlighting positive or negative dissertation experiences of women in the United States who completed their psychology programs identified relationships as a primary factor in their evaluation of the experience (Burkhard et al., 2014). Those women who reported their dissertation experience was positive attributed the social support and professional growth to the academic faculty whereas those who deemed their academic relationships as negative found their personal supports to be a benefit. However, those women with negative social support experiences reported chronic personal and professional issues (p.

48). Doctoral student mothers' fragmented lives may warrant a deeper understanding into how they experience social support during the dissertation stage to reduce challenges impacting their success.

All But Dissertation (ABD) Stage

The traditional Ph.D. can be achieved in four sequential stages: Stage 1 – Preadmission to Enrollment, Stage II – First Year through Candidacy, Stage III- Second Year to Candidacy, and Stage IV – Dissertation Stage (Ali & Kohun, 2007). Many doctoral students will acknowledge that the dissertation stage is marked by meager advancements despite the abundance of rewrites (McAlpinea & Amundsenb, 2009). There are numerous factors linked to a student's decision to depart the program during this final step of this process. Doctoral student mothers identify their departure to family issues. Rockinson-Szapkiw (2019) results indicated that doctoral student mothers' inability to manage their multitude of roles and responsibilities during the dissertation stage caused the most duress. An earlier study conducted by Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) also cited doctoral student mother's susceptibility to creating emotional conflicts related to their children during the dissertation stage. Social support has been linked to doctoral student success during the dissertation phase. The research is contradictory and lacks results specifically analyzing doctoral student mothers. Denman et al. (2018) conducted a case study with nontraditional female students who attributed their ability to persevere during the dissertation stage to peers in a voluntary online support group, however, Akcaoglu & Lee (2018) study of master's level students found that when offered a supplemental Facebook support group many opted to keep their

personal lives private or shared, they had no time while those who did voluntarily engage reported positive supportive and learning outcomes. Twenty years ago, West et al. (2011) documented in a quantitative study how the academic community can address the isolation issues doctoral students experience during the dissertation stage by fostering social network connections. Yet this stage remains a primarily solo endeavor, especially for those exclusively online.

According to Marshall et al. (2017) doctoral students who were able to complete their program identified faculty support or more specifically their chair 's role during their dissertation phase as a primary source of support to be valued and connected to their success. Fiore et al. (2019) study of online doctoral student persistence during the dissertation was awarded to faculty mentoring. Burn et al. (2018) also reported in their qualitative study that students identified the need of a consistent academic relationship during dissertation stage if a student were to complete the program. Those we were assigned to new faculty were not able to develop the needed social rapport to persist. This independent and lengthy academic plight can become increasingly lonely as one transitions into the final dissertation phase of the process adding additional obstacles for women who are also parenting and professionally employed. A steady source of healthy and positive socialization is correlated with academic success during the dissertation stage for all students (Blair & Hawroth, 2004; De Clercq et al., 2019; Gardner, 2010). Further exploration of doctoral student mothers social support experiences during this imperative stage of their education can provide insight into their overall journey.

Conceptual Framework

The emphasis on use and benefits of social supports during the dissertation phase by doctoral student mothers aligns with Tinto's heavily citied theories, models, and frameworks which have been historically attributed to student attrition and persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Half a century ago Vincent Tinto (1975) began to elucidate the higher education attrition problems. He identified that there are 3 stages of the Ph.D. process that a student must master: transition, candidacy, and dissertation (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) stressed the need for student social connections throughout the process if were to succeed. His models theorized that student social and academic integration contribute to their academic persistence. Persistence being defined and understood as college graduation rates. Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory of doctoral student persistence is like his theory of integration that was initially developed for undergraduate students. In 1975 Tinto surmised that student success was linked to one's ability to connect both socially and academically within their college lives. The student socialization process includes one's perception of their fit within their communities' overall culture (Tinto's Interactionalist Theory, 2004, p. 9). This includes one's collegiate and personal experiences and relationships. The development of positive interactions and supportive social engagement with one's peers, faculty, chair, family, and friends during the dissertation phase has been found to enhance one's chances of meeting the rigorous educational requirements (Lovitts, 2011; McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020). Although the study included doctoral completers in England, the researchers learned that the inclusion of a Ph.D. student's families, friends, and colleagues was a protective factor, thus it

correlated with student success (McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020). Negative socialization experiences including inconsistent or fragmented social support from resources have been associated with doctoral student drop out, anger, burn out, and stress (Burkhard et al., 2014; McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020).

Doctoral Socialization Process

This comprehensive review of the available literature on the topic of doctoral student mothers have led to the narrow focus of this research study which is dedicated to doctoral student mother's socialization experiences while completing their dissertation. The goal of this study was to explore doctoral student mothers' experiences with both formal and informal supports during their dissertation phase. A few of the themes that emerged to best understand women who are parenting and in pursuit of their Ph.D. included, gender disparities, work-life balance, identity and roles, and general attrition factors which are all related to the socialization process (Lovitts, 2011). Tinto (1993) and Gardner (2008, 2010) explained the doctoral socialization experience as contingent on potential outcomes. Quality academic and social integration with one's diverse supports is linked to doctoral student progress and well-being while poor or inappropriate comprehensive integration can result in stress, frustration, emotional exhaustion, isolation and drop out (Lovitts, 2001). Social interaction is a necessary component of the doctoral student experience (Byrd, 2016).

According to Jones (2018) completing a Ph.D. represents the peak of scholarly achievement and a pass into the world of academia. This academic journey does not happen in solitary. Doctoral students engage with a variety of social supports while

navigating the personal and academic obstacles within their doctoral programs (Suñé-Soler & Monereo Font, 2020).

Doctoral student mothers are members of many different communities, especially if they are also professionally employed. The socialization process of doctoral students within their various communities has received decades of research attention with many gaps in the literature to explore (Devos et al., 2017). Both Trout (2018) and Ali & Kohun (2006) found that doctoral student success is related to institutional factors such as clear expectation on program policy student with clear pathway to comprehend expectations avid any confusion and miscommunication confusion since that can lead to social disconnect and social isolation which is also linked to attrition.

A current qualitative study exploring doctoral mothering experiences found support echoing the consistent themes of several past studies that identified identity and role conflict resulting in feelings of selfishness and a need to balance and meld their multiple responsibilities (Lundquist et al., 2021). There are decades of redundant qualitative studies pointing out the struggles that this group of women may endure to be able to achieve their Ph.D. There is a social change need to address the problem of doctoral student mothers identified academic struggles. A gap in the literature exists understanding the diverse social support experiences of doctoral student's mother's during this meandering and complex journey.

According to Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) female doctoral students are a significant portion of the nontraditional post graduate community and their specific personal and academic needs including care giver roles should be identified and

addressed by institutions (p. 140). Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012) qualitative study identified doctoral persistence is strengthened by opportunities of support. They cautioned potential adult contemporary students to evaluate their needs for success especially if choosing a distance learning program. Doctoral student mothers limited, and availability of academic time and energy may require a modified program design to accommodate their busy schedule but lend them concentrated socialization opportunities.

Social Support

Several studies have emphasized the direct role social support has on doctoral student success (De Clercq et al., 2019). Several of the studies are international but still provide relevant socialization applications to doctoral student mothers in the United States (Castelló et al., 2017; Mantai, 2019; McAlpine et al, 2012; Vekkaila et al, 2018). Some doctoral students may suffer a lack of social support and lack a connection with academia (Peltonen et al., 2017).

Social support can be perceived as positive and beneficial or negative and lacking (Gray et al., 1997; Peltonen et al., 2017). Peltonen et al. (2017) used a large quantitative sample of Finnish doctoral students to learn that social support can impact persistence. Students who received sufficient verses insufficient social support for both academic and personal networks were less likely to identify burn out and stress and drop out intentions. It is evident that to complete a lengthy, rigorous, and often independent research-based psychology Ph.D. one may need a diverse social network. There is a need to investigate various types of social supports that doctoral student mothers perceive as available during their dissertation process. Recognizing that this group of women are likely to be

experiencing various barriers to integrate with their support systems because of their multiple roles, responsibilities, and time constraints.

Haynes et al. (2012) qualitative study explored female doctoral student's wellbeing. Students identified personal social support such as family and friends as a vital resource to cope with stress and assist with finding balance in multiple roles. Similarly, to the research completed with United States doctoral students, Castelló et al. (2017) surveyed over 700 doctoral students attending colleges in Spain documenting their primary reasons for attrition were "achieving a balance between work or personal life and doctoral studies and problems with socialization" (p. 1065). These findings provide ongoing support for the need to investigate the population of doctoral student mothers because of their vulnerability to successful social integration.

Summary

Student mothers are a significant population each with their own unique academic, personal, and professional experiences and challenges as they aspire to complete their doctoral degree. The past literature, although robust on the topic of women experiences with struggles in higher education are lacking in personal expression of doctoral student mothers' perceptions of social support. A literature gap exists that focuses on their attempt at multitasking the various roles of mother, student, professional, and scholar in a time of post pandemic stress while completing the dissertation. Qualitative research devoted to investigating the phenomenon of social support as experienced by doctoral student mothers was identified as an area in need of future exploration in 2012 (Jairum & Kahl, 2012). A couple more recent studies have devoted

their purpose to examining the benefits of social support during the doctoral process but focus on international select groups of Finnish and Spanish cultures (Castelló et al., 2017; Peltonen et al., 2017). A contemporary interpretation of doctoral student parent voices as they subjectively describe their experiences can enhance and update understanding of how to support this student group. This chapter provides an overview of the well-established and current tribulations that women who choose to be parents in academia may encounter.

The next chapter will provide the methodological steps including an overview of generic qualitative theoretical framework, participant recruitment, and selection processes, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a guided outline of the generic qualitative research methodology and design, including the research question, theoretical framework, the participant selection, and process, and the materials and instruments to be used in the study. A section will also be dedicated to the role of the researcher including data collection and ethical procedures, establishing trustworthiness, limitations, challenges, and barriers.

This generic qualitative study illuminates a deeper understanding of social support as experienced by doctoral student mothers completing their dissertation. The purpose of a generic qualitative design is to explore how humans report experiences in their lives (Kostere & Kostere, 2022). Generic qualitative methods are often applied when a research question does not align perfectly with a grounded theory or phenomenological approach (Kahlke, et al., 2007). Phenomenological designs specifically summarize the internal experiencing of a phenomenon (Vagle, 2018). A generic qualitative design best supports the personal, practical, and intellectual research question that I, as a mother of three completing her Ph.D., sought to pursue (Maxwell, 2005). Generic qualitative research questions seek to understand human experience (Kostere & Kostere, 2022, p.3). The goal of this inquiry is to gain a deeper understanding of doctoral mothers' experiences with social support while engaged in completing their dissertation. Support related experiences of doctoral dissertation mothers are not well understood in higher education literature. A qualitative scientific approach provides a way to explore

experiential life. This qualitative generic approach will allow an understanding of the doctoral mother's personal realities to be analyzed as they are presented to the researcher (Qutoshi, 2018).

The current study focuses on the social support experiences invariant of doctoral student mothers completing their dissertation. The aim of the study is to better understand what it is like to experience social support as a doctoral student mother in the dissertation stage of her Ph.D. (Vagle, 2018). Generic qualitative inquiry was an appropriate methodological choice because as a research method it allows flexibility as it draws from other qualitative designs but provides researcher creativity to analyze rich social data (Kostere & Kostere, 2022). It concentrates on understanding human social experiences.

Thematic analysis is a common and acceptable scientific process to analyze qualitative data (Kostere & Kostere, 2022). Although there are three types of thematic analysis including inductive analysis (IA), theoretical analysis (ThA) and theoretical analysis with constant comparison, I chose ThA as the step-by-step analysis process because it is theory driven and allows for pattered themes from the research question where IA does not apply previous themes in data processing (Percy et al., 2015). This also allows for the researcher to discover new themes during the analysis steps (Kostere & Kostere, 2022). Tinto's (1975, 1993) social integration theory and the concept of social support were acknowledged and identified by the researcher as factors to consider when choosing the most appropriate analysis process.

The methodology ThA steps were applied using the generic qualitative methodology approach detailed by Kostere and Kostere (2022, p. 60):

Step-By-Step Analysis

1. Read, review, and familiarize yourself with the data collected from each participant (interviews). Re-read the documents and highlight intuitively any sentences, phrases, or paragraphs that appear to be meaningful. Keeping in mind the predetermined categories (themes) that are related to the theory and research question posed as well as remaining open to any new patterns and themes that are related to the research question and have emerged from the data analysis. During this process, the researcher immerses him/herself in each participant's data individually.
2. For each participant review the highlighted data and use your research question to decide if the highlighted data are related to your question. Some information in the transcript may be interesting, but not relate to your question.
3. Eliminate all highlighted data that are not related to your question, however, start a separate file to store unrelated data. You may want to come back and reevaluate these data in the future.
4. Take each item of data and code or give a descriptor for the data. The descriptor or name will often be a characteristic word from within the data.
5. Cluster the items of data that are related or connected in some way and start to develop patterns.
6. Patterns that are related to a preexisting theme are placed together with any other patterns that correspond with the theme along with direct quotes taken

from the data (transcribed interviews, field notes, documents, etc.) to elucidate the pattern.

7. Any patterns that do not relate to preexisting themes should be kept in a separate file for future evaluation of the meanings as they relate to the overall topic. Repeat steps 1-7 for all participants.
8. Take all the patterns and look for the emergence of overarching themes. This process involves combining and clustering the related patterns into the preexisting themes.
9. After all the data have been analyzed, arrange the themes to correspond with the supporting patterns. The patterns are used to elucidate the themes.
10. Now revisit the patterns that did not fit the preexisting categories and remain open to any new patterns and themes that are related to the research topic and have emerged from the data analysis.
11. For each theme, the researcher needs to write a detailed analysis describing the scope and substance of each theme.
12. Each pattern should be described and elucidated by supporting quotes from the data.

Research Question

The proposed research question that guided this study:

RQ: What is the experience of social support for doctoral dissertation student mothers?

Research Methods

Role of the Researcher

In a generic qualitative study, the researcher is responsible to address and carry out ethical and scientific procedures and rigor to show accuracy in data (Stadtlander, 2015). This was accomplished by the linear process of recruiting and interviewing doctoral student mothers and transcribing and analyzing the secured data. The researcher is solely responsible to analyze and interpret the rich and thick data transcript details provided by the interviews with each doctoral dissertation mother (Roller & Lavraka, 2018). The researcher is also responsible for being forthcoming to the selected participants about the study's intent, obtaining informed consent, and ensuring that all zoom recorded interviews will be safeguarded with a researcher protected password (Alase, 2017; Resuli & Shehu, 2017). Lastly, a primary charge of the researcher is to set a tone for open conversation and dialogue during the qualitative interview (Kostere & Kostere, 2022).

Procedures for Recruitment of Participants and Participant Selection

Quantitative studies provide statistical significance by means of sampling large populations (Gentles et al., 2015). The recorded and analyzed interview conversations are the data in qualitative research (Kostere & Kostere, 2022). Gentles et al. (2015) stated that qualitative research sample sizes can be smaller because the participants are able to provide rich detailed accounts of their personal experiences. Inclusion and exclusion criteria may direct the participant pool (Lopez & Whitehead, 2007). To be eligible to participate in this study, participants needed to be a current psychology doctoral student

in the dissertation phase of their terminal degree, identify as female with one or more child 18 years of age or younger residing in their home and under their care full time and employed professionally. Exclusion criteria included those who have withdrawn from their academic program, completed their Ph.D., plan to become pregnant but are not currently, identify as male, and or are engaged in a non-psychology program. Purposive sampling was applied to identify those participants who met the specific criteria. Purposive sampling is a common method to locate and qualify participants who meet the specific inclusion criteria. To qualify for this study a doctoral student needs to be actively parenting at minimum a child under the age of 18, working and writing their dissertation in a psychology program, professionally employed and identify as a female. Social networking platforms such as Facebook are an economical and speedy participant research recruitment tool. I joined a Doctoral Moms Facebook group. I posted recruitment requests with the study's overview to the Doctoral Mom Facebook group. I verified each interested participant met inclusion criteria with a follow up email. A sizable subject poll in a qualitative study is eight-12 participants (Alase, 2017). Saturation was addressed by depth of interviews conducted and analyzed. Redundancy of interview data was identified both during interview process and during coding (Kostere & Kostere, 2022).

Material and Instruments

The initial research step is to gain approval through Walden University Institutional Approval Board (IRB). Upon approval, the next course of action in a generic qualitative dissertation is to recruit the participants through purposive and snowball

sampling using Facebook social media and email. Lastly, I conducted semi-structured interviews via the Zoom platform with those doctoral students who responded, met inclusion screening criteria, and voluntarily agreed and signed informed consent to participate. The recruitment study information that I posted in the Facebook Doctoral Mom group is included in Appendix B. The primary interview question and sub questions were created based on answering the research question and specifically addressing social support experiences. The interview questions are included in Appendix B.

Interview Process

The interview sessions will be coordinated and facilitated by the researcher using both email and telephone to communicate and schedule. Interviews were conducted and recorded using the Zoom platform for later review and analysis. Vagle (2018) suggested reorienting oneself to the study's phenomenon by way of ruminating about it through one's day both prior to interviewing the subjects and throughout the interview process. Both the social integration theory and social support literature will be reviewed. Although the unstructured interview is identified as the most favorable form of data collection in generic qualitative inquires, the lack of structure may disadvantage a novice researcher in targeting the research question themes (Kostere & Kostere, 2022; Vagle, 2018). The semi-structured interview is another popular data collection option in social science research and the chosen method because of its exploratory possibilities into subjective material within boundaries (Roller, 2020). The flexibility of a semi-structured interview allowed participants to share intimate perceptions of their descriptive experiences as they live them as well as keep the researcher focused on the phenomena to be studied. The

semi-structured interview is a good choice for this study because the intent is to gain deep understanding of social support experiences by doctoral student mothers managing their dissertation. Rich conversation and open dialogue provided the data necessary in the form of "naïve attitude" of the student mothers (Giorgi et al., 2017). The use of open-ended and probing sub questions can encourage participants to offer the researcher a re-living of their experiences (Alase, 2017). Once interviews were completed and the sessions recorded securely, the next step of analyzing the interview themes took place (Vagle, 2018).

Data Collection, Analysis, and Ethical Considerations

Date Collection

The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain a deeper understanding of doctoral dissertation mothers' experiences with their social support. After reading this qualitative inquiry, the experiences of doctoral dissertation mothers social support should become clearer (see Kostere & Kostere, 2022).

Qualitative Designs

Qualitative methodology should best reflect the tradition most appropriate for the research question. Case study, grounded theory, phenomenology, and narrative were structured qualitative approaches that were considered but not chosen because a generic approach allows the focus to be the in-depth stories told by doctoral dissertation mothers experiences with social support. The purpose of this dissertation was not to develop a new or expanded theory as in grounded theory or a phenomenological design to describe the internal meanings of the lived experiences of doctoral dissertation mothers (Percy et

al., 2015). Generic qualitative designs are best suited for research questions that seek a deep understanding about real life experiences of specific populations (Percy et al., 2015). The goal of the dissertation was aligned with a generic qualitative approach because the research question asks what the social support experiences are of doctoral dissertation mothers. A generic qualitative approach allows for methodological flexibility and creativity with a rigorous scientific step by step analysis process (Kostere & Kostere, 2022).

Trustworthiness

Technology has provided researchers with several coding and analyzing programs to enhance the quality of qualitative research (Lemon & Jameson, 2020), many of which can enhance the trustworthiness of a qualitative design. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are qualitative alternatives to qualitative research measures for validity, reliability, and objectivity, all of which can be strengthened by performance including interviewing skills, design rigor, and acknowledging any preconceived bias regarding the research topic. To protect participants' privacy, all data should be anonymized by removing any information that could identify individuals (Grossohme, 2014). Each participant was therefore given an alphanumeric code and assured their confidentiality as documented and recorded in their informed consent.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to collecting any data, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University reviewed the study's overall research design to assess ethical guidelines and

protocols are met for human subject participant safety and researcher liability. Technological advancements in research methodology such as online interviewing and communication coupled with COVID-19 health concerns limiting potential in person contact may impact qualitative methodological practices (Newman et al., 2021). A benefit of the generic research study design is the many personal accounts of each mother's subjective social support experiences. Therefore, accessing all doctoral student mothers eligible to participate, including those marginalized was a priority to conduct an equitable study. Securing participant privacy and confidentiality in an online environment posed challenges. A verbal and written agreement was outlined, reviewed, and signed by me and each participant discussing their voluntary participation in video conferencing practices for the sole purpose of the research. Each participant was encouraged to use a private space and or a virtual background to ensure their privacy during the video interviewing process.

Limitations, Barriers, and Challenges

Researcher bias and inexperience may limit the quality of a qualitative study. Generic qualitative inquiry approaches focus on the research question development and analysis (Roller, 2020). Although qualitative methodology offers a deep understanding of reality it also poses many challenges including using interviews as the primary data set and researcher inexperience. A generic qualitative study requires a researcher to conduct hours of in-depth personal interviews, followed by weeks of collecting, reviewing, coding, and analyzing the data to identify the themes (Alase, 2017; Valge, 2018). Therefore, this process is both a challenge because it is time-sensitive and a limitation as

it is not viewed as generalizable as compared to a large quantitative data set (Querios et al, 2017). Interviews as the primary data set can also present barriers to sound research. Scheduling and in-depth interviewing can be time consuming, creating unforeseen technological challenges, for example internet outages or connection problems. Generic qualitative methods require all data to be analyzed thus interviews need to be time managed (Vagle, 2018). Too much data can complicate the process of developing themes in the data set (Vagle, 2018). Another challenge in this qualitative study was to attract and capture data from a diverse range of doctoral students' mothers to reflect the fullest range of the doctoral student's experience. Final challenges included the practice to secure maintenance of the interview recordings with password protections which can be negatively impacted my technical problems outside the control of the researcher and interpreting the data without bias (Alase, 2017).

Summary

This qualitative study used a generic approach to take aim at the problem of doctoral student mother attrition. Research design areas such as the role of researcher and ethical issues will also be discussed. The research questions targeted the experiences of social support by participants during the dissertation phase of their degree. Semi-structured interviews arranged in online Zoom platform were conducted. The next chapter will review the thematic data analysis and results. Interpretation of the interviews will highlight a deeper comprehension of social support experienced during the dissertation process by doctoral student mothers.

Chapter 4: Results

A generic qualitative design was used to explore the social support experiences of doctoral student mothers completing their dissertations. This methodology enabled me to gain knowledge and insights through semi-structured interviews with the nine participants as they shared their personal experiences. The doctoral mothers' perspectives provided intimate detailed stories and reflections of their social support experiences while completing their dissertation journey. The following research question was used to guide this study:

RQ: What is the experience of social support for doctoral dissertation student mothers?

The chapter also includes a description of the participant interview audio recorded zoom settings, and a participant demographics table (see Table 1). This chapter will also review the study's data collection and analysis processes, evidence of trustworthiness, results, and a chapter summary before transitioning to Chapter 5.

Setting

I performed semi-structured interviews with nine doctoral student mothers. All interviews were conducted using Zoom video conferencing and prearranged by email communication upon participant request. I used Zoom recording and transcribing to audio record and transcribe each interview. I experienced no technology issues during the interview or recording processes. All participants were in private areas, free of external noises or interferences as they responded to the interview questions. All Zoom audio

technology functioned accordingly. I was able to communicate clearly with each participant.

Demographics

Table 1 outlines the nine participants' demographic information collected in the prescreening correspondence. All the participants reported their Ph.D. dissertation programs were primary online. All the participants had at minimum one or more children under the age of 18 residing in their care. Four of the nine participants had one child aged 3 years old or younger. The other five participants' number of children ranged from two to six. One participant was a grandmother and responsible for two teenage children at home. Four doctoral mothers were single, and five were married. The ages of the participants ranged from 30 to 49 years. All the women were professionally employed. Four of the participants were employed as licensed therapists, three were working in academia, and the other two were in director roles. The number of years devoted thus far to their Ph.D. program ranged from 3 to 10 years. Participants were all in the dissertation phase of their Ph.D. program.

Participant 1

Participant 1 is a divorced and remarried mother of six children whose ages range from 20 to 2. She is 37 years old, employed as a program manager, and has been pursuing her doctoral degree for 10 years.

Participant 2

Participant 2 is a single mother with a 3-year-old child, employed as director and has been active in her doctoral program for 4 years. She is 37 years old.

Participant 3

Participant 3 is a married mother of two children ages 10 and 7 years old. She is employed as both adjunct instructor and mental health worker and has been engaged in er doctoral program for three and a half years. She is 30 years old.

Participant 4

Participant 4 is a married licensed mental health therapist with four children whose ages range from 7 years to 6 months. She has been active in her doctoral program for 8 years and is 33 years of age.

Participant 5

Participant 5 is a single special education teacher with one child 3 years of age. She has been pursuing her doctoral degree for 4 years. She is 35 years old.

Participant 6

Participant 6 is a widowed and divorced instruction design specialist in academia with two adolescent children 6 and 18 years of age residing at home as well as four adult children. She is also a grandmother. She has been active in her doctoral program for three and a half years. She is 49 years old.

Participant 7

Participant 7 is a married clinical director and part-time online academic instructor with one three and half year-old child. She has been in her doctoral program for 3 years. She is 31 years old.

Participant 8

Participant 8 is single with one 2-year-old child. She is a professor and department head. She has been in her doctoral program for 7years. She is 37 years old.

Participant 9

Participant 9 is married with two children ages 8 and 4. She is a licensed therapist in private practice. She has been engaged in her doctoral program for 9 years.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Marital status	# of children	Years in program
1	37	Divorced/remarried	6	10
2	37	Single	1	4
3	30	Married	2	3.5
4	33	Married	4	8
5	35	Single	1	4
6	49	Widowed/divorced	6	3.5
7	31	Married	1	3
8	37	Single	1	7
9	40	Married	2	9

Data Collection

My study was approved by Walden University IRB on March 3, 2023. Upon my IRB approval, I began my recruitment of eight12 participants using a pre-established

Facebook Doctoral Mothers social media group and the Walden University Participant Pool. The approved recruitment flyer was posted on both a social media and Walden Participant Pool site's message board during the months of April and May 2023. I did not receive any inquiries from the Walden participant pool site. Doctoral student mothers who viewed my study's request on the Doctoral Student Facebook page and were interested in participating emailed me at my Walden email address. I immediately emailed them a prescreening demographics attachment form to complete, a consent form to read and review with directions to send an email consenting to the study, and lastly to document their time zone. Once I received a participant's consent and completed demographics form and confirmed they met inclusion criteria, I emailed them potential interview times during the designated week in their time zone. I corresponded using email and did not need to speak directly on the telephone to any of the participants. I interviewed nine participants who met my inclusion criteria, responded with their demographic's information, and emailed their consent to participate in the study (see Appendix C). Two participants who did meet inclusion criteria were unable to schedule and attend a zoom interview within the available time parameters, and a third did not show or respond to my follow up emails. Several doctoral students emailed me in response to my posted flyer in the Facebook group but did not meet inclusion criteria. I emailed those participants thanking them for their interest. They were either not in their dissertation phase of their program or enrolled in a psychology program. I planned to recruit eight-12 participants. I posted my flyer for a couple months (April-May 2023) and reached saturation with participant interviews. I determined that saturation was met by

the transcribed detailed descriptions of the nine doctoral mothers social support experiences. All interviews were conducted in the United States. Seven of the participants resided in the Eastern time zone, one in the Central time zone, and one lived in the Mountain time zone.

I created semi structured interview questions to gain more knowledge about their experiences with social support during their current dissertation phase (see Appendix B). The interview questions targeted areas of social support experienced with a participant's institution, family and friends, and employment. Once the interview started, I asked each participant if they had any questions or concerns about the study or interview. I also confirmed with each participant that they were in a setting where they had privacy. None of the nine parents had any questions or concerns prior to the interview. I also engaged in small talk for a couple minutes to ease any discomfort and to create a rapport with each participant. I then informed each participant I would be recording the interview on zoom on my computer so that I could review verbal transcripts. All the nine women were agreeable to study and verbally expressive.

Data Analysis

I used a 12-step thematic analysis ThA methodology approach detailed by Kostere and Kostere (2022, p. 60) to analyze my generic qualitative study. The steps outlined by Kostere and Kostere recommended analyzing the interview data in two phases. The first phase included steps1-4 that first concentrated on familiarizing oneself with the interview transcripts and highlighting phrases that are meaningful and then developing codes to reflect themes. The second phase involved steps 5-12 that focused on

creating patterns and organizing the themes and subthemes. This was accomplished by highlighting similar participant comments on the interview transcripts and creating a table (see Table 2). Table 2 introduced four themes and seven subthemes that emerged from reviewing responses, highlighting the participant quotes, and grouping them by meaning. To ensure confidentiality, participants were each assigned an alpha numeric identifying number P1-P9. I first read and re-read the interview transcripts to familiarize myself with the data. I used a combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis methods. I read and reread the interview responses to highlight and group phrases from the transcripts that were aligned with the interview questions and that I found interesting and meaningful to the study. I next identified specific patterns by highlighting specific quotes, comments, and phrases from the created themed interview data. The four themes that emerged during the application of the first phase of the ThA steps were perseverance, relationships, self-doubt, and relatability. Several subthemes also emerged during this initial phrase. I then collapsed and reorganized the themes based on theme meanings. This ThA approach allowed me to identify themes, patterns, and meanings within the interview data. I initially read and reviewed each interview transcript several times in a five-day period. I highlighted phrases, comments, quotations, and statements from each transcript that I found meaningful and interesting.

Next, I organized the interview highlighted data using several of the interview questions as a template for the patterns that emerged. I created a table of the themes and manually cut and pasted my highlighted code words that developed into collapsed subthemes. I scheduled each interview for 1 hour. Most interviews were completed in 45

minutes, except for Participant 9, whose interview lasted the full 60 minutes. The interview time reflected the doctoral mother's responses to all the semi-structured questions. None of the interviews exceeded the scheduled 1 hour. There were some participants who provided more detailed personal stories. Some participants chose their car or workplace for an undisturbed setting. Most of the participants shared that they were in their homes for the scheduled Zoom study interview. A couple of the participants were in private spaces in their workplace offices. The technology connections for each interview provided clear communication. I was able to communicate directly with each participant during the interviews. The audio was clear for each interview. I was able to communicate clearly with each participant. P7 had prearranged for her toddler to be occupied during our interview, but there were a few interruptions which did not alter participants' ability to share interview questions responses. Upon completion of all the semi-structured interview questions, I informed each participant we were finished, thanked them of their valued time and stories, and encouraged them to share advice for future moms pursuing a Ph.D. Interviews were all recorded using Zoom conferencing audio recording on my computer. I experienced no problems during the recording or retrieving the transcribed recordings of the nine interviews. Each interview was transcribed immediately upon completion using the Zoom transcription on my computer. All transcriptions were retrieved and accessible without any technological issues. I labeled each interview with corresponding participant numeric code and pass word protected the data on my computer.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes From Thematic Data Analysis

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: Perseverance	Subtheme 1: Sacrifice Subtheme 2: Self-care
Theme 2: Relationships	Subtheme 1: Quality
Theme 3: Self-Doubt	Subtheme 1: Mom shaming Subtheme 2: Imposter syndrome
Theme 4: Relatability	Subtheme 1: Empathy Subtheme 2: Accessibility

Themes and Subthemes

Theme 1: Perseverance

The identification of completing the scholarly journey towards the Ph.D. was a common goal discussed by all the doctoral student mothers. Finishing their academic degree despite all the external life happenings was a common theme identified by participants. Doctoral student persistence is attributed to successful completion of a Ph.D. (Fiore et al., 2019). The accomplishment of being awarded a Ph.D. can be viewed as the ultimate academic success (Jones, 2018). The theme of perseverance reflects their motivation to remain enrolled in years of academic rigor despite the thoughts of possibly giving up or quitting. Participants openly shared stories of times during this stressful yet transformative academic process when they thought about quitting but instead either took

breaks, rearranged their schedules, relied on family supports, and or sought mental health interventions. For example, several of the participants identified a time they thought about quitting or giving up their academic goals. Participant 1 stated: “It’s my personal goal, but it is also to show my kids that you just keep pushing through. You just keep making it happen. You figure it out. You do what you have to do in order to make things that you want to happen.” Participant 2 shared this comment: “I don’t want him to see his mom as a quitter I want him to know that he can do anything he wants to do.” Participant 3 stated, “I thought about giving up, there was a time when I took like a month off from doing anything at all because I was just so overwhelmed by it.” Participant 4 stated, “I should just quit because it is so time consuming and there are so many parts of life that suffer Maybe it is easier to quit in the beginning.” Participant 9 shared this example: “My chair told me three times that I should just quit and I’m like you never offered me support. She is like, I don’t see how you are going to be able to do a proposal, there is stuff missing here. I’m too far financially in debt for me to quit as much as I want to right now, and as much as I just want to spend my summers with my daughters so I can’t back out now.”

Subtheme 1: Sacrifice

Many of the participants spoke about the sacrifices they encountered while managing their dissertation life balance. For example, Participant 1 shared this comment: “Being a mom means not always having time to focus on your dissertation, so I’ve built time into my schedule to have a couple of hours to work on it during my workday because I know I need to concentrate. A lot of my work stuff I can do with kids running

around." "I've had two kids through this process. I've gotten divorced during this process. I've gotten remarried during this process." Participant 2 also identified modifying their schedule due to parenting needs to persevere. I had to keep my job and online was the only way for me to do it, there were days I was writing when he was younger and before he became mobile, and I was wearing him in those baby carrier because he would let me free up my hands". Participant 6 recalled this experience: "I cut everyone else off because of the schedule, there was no way for me to continue all of the social events like birthdays and Christmases I mean I still did some of that but on a much smaller level." Participant 7 discussed how the dissertation impacted her life, "so there's a lot of weekends where I sat in my house and didn't leave to go and hang out, those kinds of things are a sacrifice." Participant 8 stated, "my daughter she needs to know that mommy did this, I don't want her to be like, oh because I came you didn't finish your degree, no!"

Subtheme 2: Self-Care

Previous research findings reported the importance of student well-being to successfully complete a Ph.D. (Cohen, 2004; Jarim & Kahl, 2012). Several participants discussed how completing their dissertation while managing their multiple roles led them to seek mental health therapy and or self-care activities. For example, several participants discussed how working in professional psychology-based roles, specifically mental health therapy, can exacerbate the stress of managing multiple roles. Many participants discussed their need to find time for self-care activities due to the stress of saturated life. For example, Participant 4 stated, "Once every eight weeks I go and get my hair done and

I bring a book and I just sit there. Nobody bothers me. I am not anybody's mom." Participant 3 shared this experience: "I had to myself join a book club for a hobby just to give myself a reason to leave and go interact with people and do something for myself. Like that's my form of self-care." Participant 9 shared this comment: "Everybody that I know that has gone through a Ph.D. program has significantly challenged their mental health, and it's taken at least a year, maybe more to recover from it".

Participant 6 shared, "I was having a lot of dreams of going through my study, like repeatedly all night and I was stressing during the day. I reached out to a therapist specializing in working with doctoral students via online and I pretty much cut everyone else off because of my schedule." All study participants identified their persistence to complete their dissertation was challenged by life stress. Each participants shared stories of perseverance attributed to personal motivations and social support.

Theme 2: Relationships

Past research has identified social relationships and connectedness with various social support is imperative to doctoral success (Byrd, 2016). Prioritizing beneficial relationships was a common theme identified by all participants of the current study. Several participants talked about prioritizing their relationships because they had little time to socially engage with others outside of their family, employment, and dissertation responsibilities. Participant 1 shared, "I keep a tight circle of close friends and then I have a lot of acquaintances, but they are not necessarily people that I spend time with a lot or anything like that. It's just acquaintances causally. So, there is just not enough time to maintain those relationships." P4 also shared that her limited availability to connect with

social supports due to saturated life. She stated, “I definitely think there was strain with social relationships because it was like focusing on the kids, they require so much time and then trying to balance that with school I think that was so much they took so much of my time outside my family my social supports weren’t sure existent.” Participant 7 stated, “I’m more of an introvert I don’t like large groups or going many places. Social support is for me is more intimate.” Although a few participants acknowledged they had heathy quality social support at their employment, others reported a lack of support or negative support from their colleagues or supervisor. Participant 6 stated, “I never want to give up because I had a goal my goal was not to get a Ph.D. my goal was to do case study of this parenting program that I have created.”

Subtheme 1: Quality

Many doctoral student mothers shared that the quality of the social support received from a source was important regarding their evaluation of it as being negative or positive. A recent study identified that not all social support received during a doctoral student’s journey is equally effective (Suñé-Soler & Monereo Font, 2020). Many participants voiced experiences with negative support experiences. Participant 2 shared “negative support can even delay the writing process or the research process for a dissertation. It is important you surround yourself with positive support because it certainly helps accelerate the process and give you a clear mind. Participant 2 stated, “A family member’s negative comments to say about parenting styles and priorities can impede the dissertation process”.

Participant 3 discussed the experience of sharing her Ph.D. proposal concepts with a peer. She reported, “there are some people who don’t understand mental health, so they kind of like get in the way of the mood of like feeling motivated and excited because, I mean, like this is something I’m passionate about and they are like, yeah like sometimes they will act not interested or disrespectful don’t need that kind of energy.” Positive quality social support from participant’s chair and committee member were consistently identified in the current study. Most participants shared positive experiences and valued support received from their academic chair and committee members. Participant 2 reported that the primary academic support from her chair was dissertation focused but not emotional.

Theme 3: Self-Doubt

Many of the participants discussed feelings of self-doubt regarding their ability to be successful in all areas of their multi-role lives. Past studies identified similar outcomes but the theme of identify struggles was documented in a couple studies (Leshem, 2020; Mirick, & Wladkowski, 2020). A few participants in the current study shared how their beliefs about fulfilling expected social roles resulted in fears of mom shaming and imposter syndrome thus impacted their connections and access with various social support outlets. Participant self-doubt and fear of being judged directly impacted their activity on social media outlets which for many was a potential primary source of social support. Participant 1 shared, “I’m on Facebook and so I will every now and then give an update on my dissertation because have a lot of family spread out across the country, I just don’t want to open myself up to any type of negative interaction. I definitely don’t

need to open myself up to people that are potentially questionable as to whether it would be a positive or negative interaction."

Subtheme 1: Mom Shaming

A previous study discussed how doctoral student mothers were influenced about their beliefs of being a "ideal mother scholar" despite their challenges managing their various roles (CohenMiller, 2018). A couple participants in the current study identified the issue of "mom shaming" being a concern of being judged for choosing to add doctoral student to their role of employed mother. Participant 4 shared they were told "Aren't you missing so much of your kids life? Like, because you work and your doing your Ph.D.?" Participant 4 also identified their experiences, "I remember, like trying to hide my kids under my laptop a when I was doing supervision with lie a baby and just holding them rocking them and praying that nobody knew." Participant 6 shared, "this process is transformative, like the whole process, I was observing many people because I wasn't going to put my business out there on social media but I was observing it and it was life changing for me to observe that I wasn't the only person going through this. With the children feeling that way about me as mom wanting to pursue something." Participant 9 shared this experience: "Don't let somebody say that you don't belong, or that you shouldn't be there, even if you have to show up wearing a child, find a support of other moms that are it or have done it?"

Subtheme 2: Imposter Syndrome

Some participants questioned their ability and choice to take on multiple roles.

Participant 1 stated “Am I completing failing at life? Where am I right now? So, I don’t want to open the door to have criticism from people” I don’t want to open that or to have to prioritize someone else that could not be as important as my family”.

Participant 8 shared, although she had support after giving birth to her child, she was in her head thinking “There are days like, I don’t think I got it, being a black woman in the field of psychology, so I’m already there like a war with my mental state.”

Participant 7 shared their thoughts reflecting on an academic roadblock “in my mind the first thing I’m thinking: well, I’ve already come this far how much longer and how much more money is this going to take. Is this worth my mental burn out? Is this worth the money it is going to take to finish this thing? At that point I felt completely defeated.”

Participant 7 stated, “I wanted to do this for my daughter I wanted her to see that you know women can do whatever they put their mind to. And that was the biggest thing I didn’t want her to know I had given up because she was the reason, I started this program in the first place when she was six months old because I didn’t want to wait much longer, I want to get this done before she was old enough to realize I was super busy all the time, but I am almost there.”

Theme 4: Relatability

All participants reported they had some form of available social support. Several participants identified a preference for their social support to have specific dissertation

knowledge, experience, or awareness of the process to obtain a Ph.D. Participant 9 stated, "Family members may not be able to understand exactly because it's not their lived experiences." Participant 4 shared, "I don't have a lot of people I know because my program is online and I don't have a lot of people wo understand the Ph.D. or dissertation process.." Participant 1 shared this comment: "in regards to online academic peer social support "aspects of online probably is a little lacking if were talking about specifically people that are in a similar scenario and understand the process that you are going through." Participant 9 stated, "I think a lot of the people just didn't necessarily understand what I was doing or the process like people in my neighborhood, they don't have college education to begin with to understand what I was experiencing."

Subtheme 1: Empathy

Most participants talked about a lack of connection with people who could directly relate or empathize with the dissertation process. Many participants identified they lacked social support outside of academia who could offer academic direction and feedback. P4 stated, "It is more like my social support is within my family. I am really close with my sister and mom-primary people that come up I have other friendships it just through this process they gotten kind of strained because not a lot of people totally understand the whole being a student, and a mom, and working."

S***ubtheme 2: Accessibility***

Doctoral student social engagement has been identified as relevant in one's academic outcome (Byrd, 2016). Most participants reported needing timely specific

accessible social support. Accessing social media, for example Facebook groups was identified by several participants as a controllable means to gain academic dissertation support and resources as well as emotional support and encouragement. Participant 7 shared this example: "When I first started my program I had deleted my Facebook

> account, but I reactivated it so I could see more of what others were doing and get more news "I would scroll on Linkedin and see if there any new studies that have popped up and those inspirational things any new webinars coming or online conferences it was how I keep in touch professionally but when I stared my dissertation I had really difficult first couple terms I started following mom groups looking for those inspirations."

Participant 2 shared this comment: "during Covid all the residences became virtual so

> there was some of us who met in residency, and we shared our numbers, and we have a WhatsApp group, and we motivated each other to get this done and recommending dissertation editors or who not to recommend."

Many participants shared feelings of isolation, being more introverted, and a lack of time and or energy to engage in meaningful relationships. Many participants were content with their limited social connections and did not aspire to become more socially connected. Many shared that they accessed social media, including Facebook to primarily review others' progress with Ph.D. and or receive specific direction, but most did not actively post their business but instead read about others' lives. Social media was a popular social support resource for all the participants, especially during the COVID-19 restrictions.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

My study included nine doctoral student mothers, professionally employed, with one or more children under the age of 18 residing at home and who were also engaged in their dissertation. Upon initiating each zoom interview, I emailed the participant one day prior to confirm our scheduled meeting time and date and offer to reschedule if necessary. I also began each zoom interview by asking each participant if they had any questions about the study or the interview process. I was truthful and transparent through the study with each participant and password protected all recorded data. I also made efforts to speak clearly as I asked each question, and to clarify participant's responses so that I understood their information accurately. To ensure credibility, I immediately listened to the recorded interview and simultaneously printed out the zoom transcription to ensure accuracy. I used memoing to reduce my bias as I read through each transcript.

Transferability

To adhere to transferability by means of transferring qualitative outcomes in other settings, I clearly outlined the study's inclusion criteria on my social media invitation posting, and any email correspondence prior to accepting the participants to be interviewed. I also acknowledged the study's limitations, specifically the inclusion criteria and recruitment of one Facebook group on social media.

Dependability

I ensured dependability by consistently following and documenting the step-by-step methodological processes of the approved IRB study process. I conducted each

interview using the same semi-structured approved open-ended questions. I repeated the same transcription process after each interview. I maintained communication with my chair and encouraged participants to email me to communicate any questions, concerns, or comments.

Confirmability

Confirmability was established by documenting and reporting interview transcripts objectively and without researcher bias. I applied active listening skills to maintain the interview engagement, openness, and truthful disclosure from participants. I also used direct participant's quotes and conversations from the transcripts. I asked probing follow up clarifying questions to clarify that I understand what they meant in their responses. I used memoing during the interviewing to later match with interview transcripts for accuracy.

Results

I interviewed nine doctoral student mothers who were professionally employed to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences with social support during their dissertation phase of the Ph.D. My research question was as follows: What is the experience of social support for doctoral dissertation student mothers? The ThA step process I used to analyze the data transcripts enabled me to familiarize myself with the rich interview data, and to interpret and organize statements leading to the emergence of several meaningful themes and subthemes to answer my qualitative research question (Kostere & Kostere, 2020). Table 2 outlines the themes and sub themes that emerged from this the THA analysis step process. I asked each participant several semi-structured

interview questions during their zoom interviews. The themes and subthemes emerged as I highlighted quotes from each interview and color coded them. I also used memoing notes that I wrote as I interviewed each participant and read through each transcript and referred to my research question as I documented my themes, patterns, and subthemes. There were four themes that I identified in this study: (a) perseverance (b) relationships (c) self-doubt (d) relatability. There were seven subthemes (a) sacrifice (b) self-care (c) quality (d) mom-shaming (e) imposter syndrome (f) empathy (g) accessibility. The participants' responses to the interview questions shed light on the research question. The nine participants shared personal information during each interview that provided a deeper understanding of their individual perceptions and descriptions of social support experiences. Tinto's integration theory was the theoretical framework applied to this study (Tinto, 1993, 2007). This theory proposes that academic persistence is correlated to student connections and relationships with their various academic and external social supports. The four themes identified by the nine participants highlight their Ph.D. completion persistence in lieu of their many social support challenges. The participant interviews revealed how their experiences with the different types of social support could be inspiring and or thwarting. The themes all reflected the research question.

Summary

Chapter 4 discussed the research setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and the results of the qualitative generic study. The data analysis ThA process allowed me to identify several themes and subthemes. The interviews provided a deeper understanding of the diverse social support experiences

expressed by the nine doctoral student mothers. The four identified themes were perseverance, relationships, self-doubt, and relatability. All nine participants openly shared many social support stories experienced while completing their dissertation. All the doctoral student mothers described experiences of personal struggles and life challenges impacting their progression towards completing their Ph.D. COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were identified as a current study issue impacting academic persistence. Participants shared detailed personal reflections of past and present experiences with their various social supports highlighting the integral role that their academic chair, and few close family members and colleagues have had in their dissertation progress thus far. Social media activity by participants was also discussed as both a resource and a deterrent. Chapter 5 will discuss the interpretation of the findings, limitations, recommendations, and implications of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of the generic qualitative study was to gain a deeper understanding of doctoral student mothers' experiences with social support during the dissertation phase of their Ph.D. There is a lack of qualitative data addressing the attrition problem for this increasing population of scholarly students.

The research question was as follows:

What is the experience of social support for doctoral dissertation student mothers?

A generic qualitative study was the most appropriate method to better understand the perceptions of doctoral students' mothers social support experiences as they plodded towards academic completion. The generic qualitative method provided me with rich detailed personal interview data transcripts from the nine participants. I encouraged each participant to describe their reality of managing their employment, education, and family as they wrote their dissertation and interacted with various social supports. The results of the study were the emergence of four themes to reflect the participants' complex and inspiring lives. Some of the participants noted that the quality of the social support was important if it was going to be beneficial and not judgmental or critiquing.

Recorded Zoom interview transcripts were read and reviewed concentratedly many times. I highlighted phrases and words that emerged into many themes and subthemes to reflect the diverse social support experiences shared by each participant.

Interpretation of the Findings

The results of this qualitative study support previous topics identified in past literature spanning decades regarding the challenges doctoral student mothers experience

(Kulp, 2016; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019; Mirick et al., 2020). The current study shed light on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions identified by this population. COVID-19 further complicated some of the participants dissertation progress by creating limited socialization and childcare options, and virtual only residencies. Most parents shared how COVID-19 restrictions and concerns exacerbated potential barriers to their education goals. For example, Participant 2 shared this experience: "It was so frustrating

> with the pandemic, especially having to deal with daycare closures every time I thought I could makes this deadline for myself." I could have finished sooner if I didn't have to worry about childcare and be primary caregiver, not up in the middle of the night suctioning boogers and stuff life that or giving Motrin to control a fever."

However, other study participants were enabled by the COVID-19 restrictions providing them with more welcomed remote work opportunities and time to multitask with family responsibilities, work, and parenting. Despite COVID-19 impacts on scheduling, all participants shared how they had to modify their daily schedules at some point during their dissertation process for example, reduce work hours, change, or transfer jobs to accommodate their multiple roles of family and Ph.D. requirements (Jairum & Kahl, 2012; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). The current findings addressed the gap in the literature by providing more in-depth shared experiences of doctoral student mothers' perspectives about preferred quality social support experiences.

Previous research studies identified the importance of assessing quality of social support (Gray et al., 1997; Peltonen et al., 2017). The current study provided participants' detailed experiences of their evaluations of negative and positive experiences with their various academic, personal, and professional support persons. Participant stories identifying quality social support experiences provide a deeper understanding of their personal needs and utilization of their support networks. Many participants identified personal restrictions of potential social support experiences due to potential negative interactions. For example, Participant 2 shared this example: "Some people don't make the cut when you get the Ph.D. and it's not that you want to lose friends, but their level of negativity is not what need in your life at that point." Participant 5 shared this comment:

> "You know through this in those trying times when we have that moment of like why am I doing this to myself? Right? I hear their voices saying that, and like you hear negative things you know the other side or when I am doing, when I am making progress because I am like ok, I am going to actually be able to prove them wrong. I am doing this and I'm going to make a difference? The question is it positive or negative that impacts?"

The findings also highlighted the relevance, convenience, and accessibility of social media as a support outlet for this population. Several participants shared how social media, specifically Facebook and Instagram provided potential quality social support experiences as means to connect with peers, family, and friends to share their updates, milestones, and gain information, especially during the COVID-19 restrictions. Many participants also reported how those same social media platforms could be

distracting and a source of negativity. For example, Participant 1 reported, "I definitely don't need to open myself up to people that are potentially questionable as to where it would be positive or negative interaction I guess."

The findings confirmed previous research study findings that documented positive social support experiences with student's academic chair and or committee members. Several of the current study participants shared how their academic support persons were both aware and supportive of their personal family issues thus providing them with needed emotional support to persevere. Many participants stated that most individuals in their lives did not understand the process of completing a Ph.D. and therefore were not beneficial to their direct dissertation goal. A couple participants noted that peers in their residency were not deemed quality support if they were not in their program or at the exact same stage of their dissertation process. Because of their limited time to correspond with others, they wanted support who could provide them with specific timely outcomes, with childcare so they would write, and dissertation process feedback and direction. Some participants shared experiences where they received social support in the form of basic cheerleading and encouragement from family, academic, or employment.

Participant 3 shared an example: "I can say my husband and my friends have been probably the biggest support because they don't let me slack off like I want to. Sometimes they remind me you are going to school for this you are almost done, and you can reward yourself later." All the participant responses regarding their saturated lives requiring personal organization supported past research findings (Carter et al., 2013; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014). Several current participants identified creating large calendars

to display at home so they could document all the daily events to better manage time and prioritize scheduling. Participant 2 shared an example: "What I do is pay for software to connect my work calendar with my Gmail calendar. So, I am like, how can I be more efficient with my time?"

The findings support the commonly identified theme of relatability. Most participants shared that they were willing to engage and integrate academically if those providing the support can empathize and comprehend the overwhelming commitments involved in the dissertation process. Many doctoral mothers shared frustration with those individuals who could not relate to or understand what they were academically accomplishing. A participant voiced a concern about relatability at a residency.

Participant 1 reported, "Just because your sitting in same residency doesn't mean they are in same potion of their program so is difficult to find people that you connect with that are in same part the program." Another finding from this study was the impact of the participant's professional roles in areas of psychology, counseling, and mental health on the students' well-being. A few students shared how providing mental health services as their professional role was creating additional stress, burn out, and vicarious trauma. Previous studies documented students' well-being as relating to academic integration, success, and outcomes (Lundquist et al., 2020; Peltonen et al., 2017).

Although decades of past research focused on gender disparity issues being a concern for female doctoral students and faculty, only one participant identified a gender related issue. Participant 2 shared this experience: "I was at a conference and had run to

> my room for a parent-teacher conference. When I came back, the director of the school says to me, kudos to you Mom I don't think any of these dads would have joined a parent meeting if they were on a business trip."

Historically, gender disparity was reported as a primary concern in academia for females. This study's findings did not report gender as an identified theme or common topic of the participant interviews.

The four identified themes, perseverance, self-doubt, relationships, and relatability, support similar past research topics discussed as doctoral student mothers continue to balance, struggle, and persist while managing several roles simultaneously. In the current findings self-care was also a common subtheme discussed as many doctoral student mothers shared how they cope with their overwhelming daily duties and take time for themselves. The current themes also reflected past research studies findings of the historic negative attitude reflecting having children in higher education. Participant 1

> shared this example, "If this was me 20 years from now with no kids in the house, there is so much more time, so fewer commitments, I feel like I would have work and I would have this and obviously my husband but in not shuttling kids here and there and doing those kinds of stuff. So, I imagine that it would be easier in a lot of ways to not have as many other things that are priorities as well."

A past study identified social student mothers feeling of guilt, shame, and selfishness impacting their academic progress (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2019). The current study found that doctoral student mothers were more concerned about external perspectives opposed to internal feelings.

Several participants in this current study identified how mom shaming can be a deterrent for this population to engage and integrate with this potential social support resource. A primary source of social support for most participants was social media groups. All participants who were interviewed in this study were connected to a doctoral student mother group on Facebook. The participants shared their social support experiences, focusing on quality as being either positive or negative. All participants identified receiving positive academic and emotional support from at minimum one or more source and attributed it to their dissertation progress.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation of this generic qualitative study was the use of a single data source. In qualitative data the interview questions and analysis are the crux of the methodology (Roller, 2020). I created a list of semi-structured interview questions that I was able to clearly ask each participant as well as follow up questions. I also asked participants if they needed me to repeat any questions or provide clarification for any questions. A couple participants did ask me to repeat at minimum a question so that they could fully answer its components. It may be possible that some of the participants were not sharing full information because they were not familiar with me or comfortable disclosing their personal stories. However, all participants were actively engaged in responding openly to all the questions. At times during the interview, a few participants needed to be redirected because they were providing so much information. I used memoing notes to reduce researcher bias.

I matched my notes to the transcripts for participant response accuracy. Another study limitation of using interviews is that they can be time-consuming thus limiting the possible number of interviews conducted. I was able to recruit nine participants for the study. Although this number is smaller, the sample size was within my study's goal of securing eight12 upon saturation. Participant diversity was also a potential limitation of the study. I was able to secure a diverse participant population for this study. The ages of participants ranged from 30 to 49 years of age and the number of years spent in their programs ranged from 3 to 10 years. The sample was made up of single, married, widowed, and divorced parents. Participants also resided in different time zone regions within the United States providing geographical diversity.

Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gain a deeper understanding of the perceived social support experiences of doctoral student mothers who are completing their dissertation. This study targeted the research problem of doctoral student attrition potentially impacting this population's academic success (Lee et al., 2020). Several findings within the qualitative study highlight the potential for future research in exploring the concepts targeting doctoral mothers' experiences with mom shaming and imposter syndrome. Several participants identified a concern about being negatively judged regarding their decision to pursue a Ph.D.

Future studies may examine the implications of social media influences on doctoral student mother academic progress as it impacts social integration and quality social support relationships. Future studies could incorporate social media social support

resources to explore student perceptions on quality and relatability of support. In addition, there is a need to further explore the benefits of social media as a tool for social support connections and engagement. Social media social support networks may be a quality option for controlled and specific support interactions and integration for this population. The current study highlights this population's identification of positive quality social support experiences being valued to progress with all their daily saturated lives. Another future study recommendation is to collect more quantitative statistical data to reflect those doctoral student mothers who receive academic peer rich support during their dissertation.

The findings of the current study found that this population sought those social supports who understood and empathized with their specific dissertation phase and process. Previous research identified the relevance of engagement with various social support networks as being indictive of academic integration (Tinto, 2007). The current study found the opposite to be identified by some participants. Many of the nine doctoral student mothers discussed the choice to reduce, remove, or avoid potential support and relationships to manage multiple responsibilities more effectively. The research findings highlighted the impact social media has as a relevant support network for both personal and academic social needs.

A recommendation for future research studies exploring the perceptions of doctoral student mothers is to expand upon the concept of quality support to determine how institutions can potentially apply social support services as needed in the form of peer mentors or advisors. For example, Participant 2 shared this comment: "There were

some of us who met at residency, and this was virtual residency because during covid, all the residencies became virtual. So, there were some of us who met in residency we shared our numbers, and we have a WhatsApp group and we motivated each other to get this done."

Implications

The results of this study provide a better understanding of how social support experiences can be beneficial to a doctoral student mother's academic journey. The participants identified how positive, relevant, time sensitive support provided by family, friends, peers, academic, and employment communities is viewed as advantageous opposed to generic or negative support. A few participants shared that they identify themselves as becoming more of an introvert as they have aged, while others shared, they are much more selective about who they are and how they spend their time. For example, Participant 1 reported this experience: "By now at my age, this is going to sound terrible, but I am just going to say I don't always have the time to maintain the demand of friend relationships especially from people who don't truly understand. And the people that are like you haven't texted me in 3 weeks I haven't texted anybody in 3 weeks. And I don't have the bandwidth to maintain those relationships." Many of the participants acknowledged that they prioritize their children and family which directly reduces their time devoted to their dissertation writing. Participants also identified potential consequently mom shaming if they chose to focus on their Ph.D. and discuss or promote their academic journey with others. The themes that emerged through following the step ThA analysis included perseverance, self-doubt, relationships, and relatability. Each

theme highlighted the overarching topic of socialization and their struggle with isolation and social engagement. The findings provided a deeper understanding of their personal needs during the dissertation phase, most importantly how they required time sensitive support from their various support systems.

All participants shared some version of needing to prioritize their relationships, cut out certain people, and or sacrifice social connections to manage their busy lives. Participant 1 shared this statement: “To me the hardest part has been when life happens.” Most participants also shared how important academic based social support offerings are in the form of a check in, or specific as feedback on their dissertation writing. Academic institutions providing a as needed academic Ph.D. program mentor may be a beneficial support to this population. The research study has potential implications for positive social change to better support those aspiring female mental health providers, researchers, and scholars to persevere.

As the number of doctoral student mothers pursuing and completing a psychology-based degree increases, the more available support will exist in our immediate and global communities. The findings were able to expand upon the doctoral student mother historical literature to reflect upon a more contemporary viewpoint of career focused women who had the additional experience of COVID-19 restrictions impacting their Ph.D. programming.

Conclusion

The results of this generic qualitative study support previous studies findings regarding doctoral student mother challenges with managing their multiple roles, and the

importance of connecting with various social support social supports to foster their ongoing academic goals (Lundquist et al., 2020). The current study participants were nine doctoral online students, with extremely limited in person opportunities due to Covid 19 restrictions affecting their last few years. The findings support the Integration theory framework developed by Tinto (1993, 2004, 2017). He theorized that academic success is impacted by a students' ability to integrate themselves with their various social supports. Participants in the current study all identified at minimum one or more personal and or academic support persons who they credited with encouraging their dissertation progress, specifically at a time when they contemplated giving up their Ph.D. program. The findings of the current study emphasized doctoral student mothers' purposeful prioritization of engagement with their specific beneficial social supports. The current study interview data findings reflect the significance of a participant's identified need of quality and timely social support to meet their dissertation goals. The findings suggest that doctoral student mother's multiple roles, responsibilities, and obligations are attributed to their choices to prioritize those personally relevant social support connections. Many of participants have purposely limited their social support interaction and integration so they can maintain their daily lives and reduce stress. However, they reported valuing those specific positive social support relationships.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

RQ1: What is the experience of social support in doctoral dissertation student mothers?

a. What are some examples of social support one experiences while completing a dissertation in psychology?
b. How can one's experiences with various support networks impact their education?
c. What supports do you interact with on a daily, weekly, monthly basis while completing your dissertation and can you elaborate on some of those situations?
d. What do you do to engage in social support interactions?
e. What are examples of experiences of family and friend support in the dissertation completion process?
f. What are examples of quality social support in the dissertation completion process?
g. Can you talk about how being a mother affects one's support network connection while completing a dissertation?
h. Can you share how family social support has affected you during your dissertation process?
i. What are some examples of employment-based support one experiences while completing a dissertation in psychology?
j. Can you describe a situation where employment social support can be attributed to your dissertation completion?
k. Can you share how employment social support has affected you during your dissertation process?

l. What are some examples of institutional based support one experiences while completing a dissertation in psychology?

m. Can you describe a situation where institutional social support has affected you during your dissertation process?

n. How has being a mother during the dissertation process affected social support experiences?

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

Seeking mothers to share their doctoral experiences.
The experience of social supports in doctoral dissertation student mothers

Purpose: To better understand the social support experiences of doctoral student mothers during the dissertation phase of their program.

Volunteer Requirements: Actively parenting at least one child under the age of 18; writing a dissertation in a psychology program; professionally employed; identify as a female

Time Commitment: 60 minutes

To volunteer: Email:

Appendix C: Participant Demographics

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Marital Status	# of Children	Years in Program
1	37	Divorced/Remarried	6	10
2	37	Single	1	4
3	30	Married	2	3.5
4	33	Married	4	8
5	35	Single	1	4
6	49	Widowed/Divorced	6	3.5
7	31	Married	1	3
8	37	Single	1	7
9	40	Married	2	9

Appendix D: Themes and Subthemes

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes from Thematic Data Analysis

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: Perseverance	Subtheme 1: Sacrifice Subtheme 2: Self-care
Theme 2: Relationships	Subtheme 1: Quality
Theme 3: Self-Doubt	Subtheme 1: Mom shaming Subtheme 2: Imposter syndrome
Theme 4: Relatability	Subtheme 1: Empathy Subtheme 2: Accessibility