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Experiences of Food Insecurity Among Single Mothers Pursuing Secondary Education

Amber Bernard
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Amber Bernard

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

Experiences of Food Insecurity Among Single Mothers Pursuing Secondary Education

by

Amber C. Bernard

MPhil, Walden University, 2021

MS, University of Maryland University College, 2014

BA, Fayetteville State University, 2009

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Social Psychology

Walden University

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Abstract

The number of single mothers continues to grow across the nation, and many are at a socioeconomic disadvantage. Little research focuses, however, on how single mothers describe their experiences of balancing motherhood, work, and pursuing higher education, all while undergoing food insecurity. Lazarus and Folkman's transactional theory of stress and coping was used to formulate the research design. Semistructured interview questions were used to answer the question of how single mothers with food insecurity describe their experiences pursuing higher education. A generic qualitative research approach was utilized in this study. Interviews were conducted with 10 single mothers pursuing postsecondary education and experiencing food insecurity. A thematic analysis was used for data analysis to address each question in the individual interviews. The themes that developed from this research were the following: (a) enduring while neglecting personal well-being, (b) responsibility overload, (c) recognizing the need for adaptative coping and resilience, (d) intrinsic and external motivation, (e) primarily maternal and female support, (f) a strong sense of personal responsibility for the situation and current life circumstances. The data from this study can help institute positive social change by increasing the understanding of this marginalized group, so it is possible to better determine what is needed to contribute to a better quality of life for single mothers and their children.

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to all the mothers who came before me and all the mothers who will come after me. The sacrifices are all worth it. However, don't forget that you too are very much important.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Dr. Howren for being patient with me on this long journey. Also, thanks to my great friend Greg Williams for helping me get this computer on which I have completed this dissertation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Single mothers are a growing population in the United States. Single motherhood is becoming more prevalent in Western society. Of the 27.5% of children raised by a single parent in the United States, 80% are in a household headed by single mothers (Richter & Leoma, 2017). With the growth of the single-mother population comes changes to the traditional family structure of two parents to one parent. Statistically, the majority of parental responsibility is bestowed upon the mother whether the mother has a partner or is maintaining a single female-headed household (Freeman, 2020; Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2020; Lee et al., 2018). Additional responsibility, perceived limitations, and numerous challenges, including food insecurity, prompt some single mothers to attempt to decrease the likelihood of enduring these circumstances long-term by pursuing higher education to break the cycle (Freeman, 2020) and increase the chances of securing more income and opportunity.

With the growth of the single-mother population comes a future with adults raised in single-mother households. Single mothers and their children are at-risk populations regarding poverty, food insecurity, and being marginalized (Lee et al., 2018). Some of these mothers try to resolve their challenging situations by pursuing higher education. However, these mothers need assistance because it is difficult to take on secondary education due to their competing responsibilities. Thus, more research is needed to understand specific challenges and coping mechanisms among this demographic,

research that may facilitate the development of interventions to improve outcomes for single mothers pursuing higher education, thus facilitating positive social change.

In Chapter 1, there will be an exploration of background information for this research study, specifically literature about single motherhood from a general standpoint. Next is the description of the problem addressed in this research, the purpose of this research study, and the research question. Then there will be an exploration of the theoretical framework, nature of the study, essential definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance, concluding with a summary.

Background

Nonmarital childbearing has been one of the most significant social changes in the United States since WWII (Shester et al., 2019). Single motherhood is currently more prevalent due to the ever-growing expansion of this population. Many reasons support the prevalence of single motherhood, from divorce, choosing to be a single parent, becoming widowed, or choosing to have children out of wedlock. Regardless of how one becomes a single mother, the experience of marginalization is an occurrence throughout this population (Lee et al., 2018).

Such experiences of marginalization can result in single mothers experiencing socioeconomic constraints. Socioeconomic boundaries can adversely affect how a mother cares for their child (e.g., nutritionally, financially, and psychologically). As a result, single-mother-headed households are likely to experience disadvantages regarding income, education, employment, community safety, and social support (Shester et al., 2019). Along with those limitations exists the experience of food insecurity. Studies

indicate that women and children are most likely to experience food insecurity (e.g., Dush, 2020; Lee et al., 2018; Morales et al., 2021). However, despite the circumstances, research indicates that single mothers have higher levels of resilience than their traditional college student counterparts (Chung et al., 2017), which allows them to endure by incorporating coping strategies and demonstrating resilience.

Across the United States, specific populations experience a lack of, an inability to access, and limited quantities of nutritionally dense foods. The populations adversely affected by food insecurity are single mothers, children (Nackers & Appelhans, 2013), and college students (Nazmi et al., 2019). Food insecurity results from many inhibitors that low-income people experience in society. Such an inhibitor is one's community. Low-income people tend to live in environments that do not provide adequate access to locations where one can purchase nutritional foods (Deener, 2017). Research indicates that the ramifications of food insecurity are expansive as it affects one physically, physiologically, and mentally (Laska et al., 2021; Martinez et al., 2020; Myers, 2020). The experience of food insecurity will make one more inclined to experience eating disorders, depression, and high stress levels (Darling et al., 2017). The experience of food insecurity among adolescents can inhibit their mental and physical health (Dush, 2020), cause distress, and inhibit academic performance (Morales et al., 2021). To combat socioeconomic limitations, women must create opportunities or seek opportunities; one way to accomplish this is by pursuing secondary education.

The single-parent student population is growing; however, single mothers represent over half of that population (Freeman, 2020). Generally, women must attain

higher education levels to earn family-sustaining wages that align with their male counterparts (Gault et al., 2020). Being limited by gender is an obstacle that some women must overcome; however, some women take on that hurdle, balancing parenting, school, work, and not having support from a spouse or partner (Gault et al., 2020). Single mothers attending college will likely experience a more significant negative impact on them as they are responsible for caring for themselves and their children. However, that limitation is not slowing down this demographic, as an overwhelming number of single mothers are deciding to pursue secondary education to combat marginalization and stigmatization and improve their lives and their children's lives. Conversely, with this endeavor comes exacerbation of previously stated limitations of food insecurity, which is prevalent among college students. Thus, pursuing higher education increases the likelihood of experiencing food insecurity, specifically referring to the time and effort required to cook and prepare meals.

While there is considerable research on the U.S. population and food insecurity (e.g., Lee et al., 2018; Morales et al., 2021; Nackers & Appelhans, 2013), there must be more knowledge about food insecurity on college campuses. Along with single mothers and children, college students are also among the populations to undergo the experience of food insecurity. A single mother attending college is more disadvantaged than a traditional college student as mothers are responsible for the well-being of themselves and their children.

There is copious research exploring food insecurity in the United States (e.g., Deener, 2017; Dush, 2020; Nackers & Appelhans, 2013; Wright et al., 2016). However,

this research almost exclusively addresses food insecurity in U.S. households and not on college campuses. Specific areas for clarification include descriptions of competing responsibilities such as degree completion, caring for children, and time for school. Finally, there is a need for knowledge about how food insecurity adversely impacts the academic success of single mothers. Although researchers have investigated single mothers and their life problems (e.g., Augustine et al., 2018; Conway et al., 2021; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Taylor & Conger, 2017), studies on the topic of single mothers pursuing higher education while undergoing food insecurity are limited. There is no qualitative research with accounts of how single mothers with food insecurity describe their experience of pursuing higher education and how they may be using coping and resilience throughout their experience. In addition, there needs to be more research exploring the issue of food insecurity among college students, as most of the research on food insecurity derives from U.S. households (Nazmi et al., 2019). It was vital to explore this research topic because single mothers are part of a growing demographic and represent a large portion of the U.S. parental population.

Single mothers are adding to the population of nontraditional students, and this demographic is studied less than other populations. For those reasons, this study was needed to understand single mothers caring for children while pursuing secondary education and how they use coping and resilience to combat food insecurity to understand their unique experiences.

Problem Statement

There is little to no existing research to understand the experiences of single-mother college students and how single mothers may use coping and resilience while undergoing food insecurity. Research involving single mothers and their pursuit of higher education has often been quantitative, and generally, data support the standard burdens associated with single motherhood (e.g., Conway et al., 2021; Fatimah, 2021; Smith & Vamvakas, 2021). For example, from a study conducted on the impacts of COVID and the vulnerability of single mothers in institutions of higher education, the research concluded that 70% of the 19 million children living with single parents were living with their mothers during the pandemic (Ajayi et al., 2021). In addition, these data suggest that, generally, mothers disproportionately bear the burden of parenthood and that seemed to be the case during the pandemic. The problem is that there needs to be more qualitative research to help society understand how single mothers describe their experience of pursuing higher education while undergoing food insecurity.

More data sources are needed to collect information on college students' parental status or caregiving challenges (Gault et al., 2020). Therefore, it is essential to acquire data that reflect the experiences of parents who choose to be students. This information may help in designing programs to aid this population in their endeavors toward higher education.

Through this research study, I aimed to add more data to this body of research through the described lived experiences of this demographic. Socially this research was needed because the accounts of these descriptive experiences may yield an opportunity to

impact multigenerational and social benefits, thus improving the overall quality of life for all willing to pursue better opportunities for themselves and their families. In addition, positive economic outcomes may include poverty reduction and potential increased tax contributions (Gault et al., 2020).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how single mothers with food insecurity describe their experience of pursuing higher education. This study allowed single mothers to describe their experiences and ways in which to incorporate resilience and coping strategies as they pursue their studies. The research approach for this study was a generic qualitative research design, as the intent was to allow these single mothers to describe their experiences while undergoing their current life circumstances. The phenomenon of interest for this research was the perceived limitations and how the single mother copes, endures, and utilizes resilience while pursuing higher education and experiencing food insecurity. The primary research question was the following: How do single mothers with food insecurity describe their experiences pursuing higher education? The relevance of this topic is paramount as the world is continuously adjusting to the ever-growing population of single mothers. Thus, collectively, it is a societal responsibility to ensure more equitable opportunities for higher education so that this group can have an opportunity to experience economic prosperity (Ajayi et al., 2021).

More specific details describing how this theoretical framework shapes this research design will be covered in Chapter 2.

Research Question

How do single mothers with food insecurity describe their experiences of pursuing higher education?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The theory that grounded this study was Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping. This theory explains how coping processes directly modify stressors and alleviate emotional distress when enduring individual and environmental ordeals. As people go about their days, they constantly appraise the stimuli they encounter in their environments (Biggs et al., 2017). The appraisal of the stimuli generates emotions, and when stimuli are perceived as threatening, challenging, or harmful, these feelings result in feelings of distress, resulting in the need to appease these feelings and emotions by initiating a coping strategy to manage the feelings that come about from the stress that an individual is experiencing. The goal of the coping process is to change the person's relationship with the environment, which can be either favorable, unfavorable, or unresolved.

The transactional theory of stress and coping aided me in understanding how single mothers cope with their environments utilizing problem-focused or emotion-focused coping strategies and whether their strategies are adaptive or maladaptive. The transactional theory of stress and coping forms a foundation for qualitative inquiry because it provides an understanding of the process these mothers undergo to alleviate stressors generated from their environments. The logical connections between the frameworks presented and this study approach include Lazarus and Folkman's theoretical

work, which has been used extensively in all academic research, as people's everyday lives are becoming demanding, overwhelming, and stressful. The approach suggests processes that may be used to cope with stressors and ease the emotional distress single mothers may experience when faced with internal and environmental challenges.

Nature of the Study

The rationale for using the qualitative and not the quantitative method was the saturation in research with quantitative data about single mothers in higher education. Quantitative data comprise numbers and statistics to depict the circumstances of a population. However, using qualitative data, research can help describe the lived and perceived experiences of people existing within a phenomenon. Of the different types of qualitative research, the generic qualitative research design was chosen because of the limited structure and the ability of the study to be more flexible. Thus, a generic qualitative method addressed the research question stated above in this qualitative study.

In this study, I utilized a generic qualitative design to address the research question stated above. Semistructured individual interviews were employed to understand better the experiences unique to each single mother college student experiencing food and nutritional insecurity. Generic qualitative research is not bonded to a rigid and strict process like other methodologies, as generic qualitative research is less restricting (Kahlke, 2014). The generic qualitative research approach allowed me the space to make adjustments with my analysis, deviate from methodological prescriptions, and remake existing methodological approaches. Chapter 2 includes a thorough breakdown of how this theory shaped the research design.

I conducted semistructured individual interviews to understand better the experiences unique to each single mother college student experiencing food and nutritional insecurity. Generic qualitative research is not bonded to a rigid and strict process like other methodologies, as generic qualitative research yields more freedom to the researcher in the research process. The generic qualitative research approach allowed the analysis to have space to make adjustments, deviate from methodological prescriptions, and remake existing methodological approaches.

The generic qualitative research design approach allowed more freedom when exploring the lives of these mothers as they described their experiences of being single mothers while they were dealing with motherhood, food insecurity, and their academic journeys. Single motherhood is a phenomenon of considerable importance as the population of single mothers is growing at a rapid rate for a multitude of reasons. The data gathered from this study can aid researchers in understanding the perceived limitations of some single mothers and how the single mother copes, endures, and utilizes resilience. For this planned research design, 10 single mothers pursuing postsecondary education and experiencing food and nutritional insecurity were recruited for individual semistructured interviews. There are no rules regarding sample size for qualitative inquiry (Kostere & Kostere, 2021); however, it is generally accepted that 10–12 will suffice to reach saturation. The data included responses from individual student interviews. Semistructured individual interviews were conducted using six questions designed to support answering the research question of this study. In addition, probing questions were incorporated to provoke further information if necessary. These

interviews were in-depth and semistructured, in keeping with the most recommended approach, and they were conducted remotely via Zoom and were audio-recorded (Cooper & Endacott, 2007; Kostere & Kostere, 2021).

The recruitment efforts for this research study entailed reaching out via social media by posting advertisements on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok.

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions apply:

Competing responsibilities: The compound of responsibilities and demands that create stress due to the need for one's attention. Such responsibilities and demands may include employment responsibilities, caring for and for and or supervising learning for dependents, and pursuing higher education (Hertz et al., 2021).

Food insecurity: Reduced caloric intake, not having access to healthy food, lack of variety in diet, hunger without eating, and reduced weight due to not consuming enough calories.

Female-headed household: A household normally consisting of a mother and their dependents, where the mother is the sole provider for those dependents (financially, emotionally, etc.).

Secondary education: Any type of education acquired after high school, including education leading to a certificate, associate's degree, or bachelor's degree, but excluding education past a bachelor's degree.

Single mother: A parent of female gender who is the sole parental unit for a child or children.

Coping strategies: Techniques that an individual may utilize to deal with a stressful situation or occurrence.

Assumptions

The initial assumption was that participants would be truthful regarding aligning with the conditions for this study, which were being an undergraduate single mother college student, experiencing food insecurity, and being a primary provider for their family and from any ethnic background. This assumption was necessary for the context of this study because this research would only be helpful if members of the demographic that this study aimed to assist were participants in this study. The second assumption was that the participants would provide authentic accounts of their lived experiences without the desire to dramatize their experiences for personal reasons. This assumption was essential because truthful and trustworthy statements would facilitate a genuine understanding of this demographic. The third assumption was that I would be mindful of personal beliefs, experiences, and feelings relating to the research topic, essentially being mindful in the effort not to disrupt the research or research process with personal biases about the research topic. This assumption was important because the goal of this research was to capture the real stories, experiences, and descriptions of the participants in the study without the incorporation of information that was not from the spoken experiences of the participants. Finally, the fourth assumption was that the best way to answer the research question was with a generic qualitative research design utilizing semistructured

interviews. This assumption was necessary because understanding the capabilities and freedoms from the use of a generic qualitative research design would allow for the ability to acquire meaningful information by way of rich accounts of participants' lives and challenges, and how they endured as single mothers pursuing secondary education while undergoing food insecurity.

Scope and Delimitations

The specific aspects of the research problem that were defined through scope and delimitations came from the need to explore multiple populations (e.g., college students, single mothers, and low-income parents). These aspects were chosen because they needed to be explored more regularly in qualitative research. In this study, I looked at the perceived experiences of these single-mother college students, how they practiced resilience, and what coping strategies they would incorporate into their daily practices to endure their circumstances while undergoing food insecurity. Single mothers pursuing secondary education while facing food limitations was the topic of interest for exploration because limited research exists about college students and food insecurity (e.g., Ilieva et al., 2019; Laska et al., 2021; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018). The lack of research on the college student demographic and food insecurity exists because college students are often considered dependent even if they are not living in the family home or consuming shared meals at home (Freudenberg et al., 2019). In addition, more research is needed to support the rapid growth of single-mother college students and the full range of the needs of the single mother and her children (Gault et al., 2020). Thus, there was a

need for more qualitative research that explores the experiences of single mothers taking on education (Gault et al., 2020; Hotez et al., 2020; Serrano et al., 2022).

The boundaries for this research regarding the populations were single mothers pursuing higher education and enduring food insecurity. This population included mothers from any ethnic background, academic discipline, and community college or 4-year-degree institution. This study did not involve married mothers, single fathers, or single mothers seeking higher education beyond a bachelor's degree. Although women of color who attend college are more likely to be single mothers (Kruvelis et al., 2017), this research was intended to be broad regarding the ethnic and racial identity of the participants for this study as there is a general need for concern across all racial backgrounds. Research exists where Lazarus and Folkman's 1984 coping theory and the exploration of coping strategies were applied to single-mother families (Fatimah, 2021; Peng et al., 2018; Taylor & Conger, 2017). However, those research studies focus on the overall concept of coping as a single mother in a particular area (i.e., parenting, food insecurity, and mental health).

In this research, however, I used Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping by aiding the participants with guided questions to help them describe their experiences with food insecurity, employment, and duties as single parents. In addition, from this research, descriptions of experiences with resilience were also an area in which it was possible to better understand the single mothers from this demographic. There is potential for transferability from the results of this research, as colleges and universities can apply this research to get another perspective as to what

their single-mother college students are enduring as they pursue their studies. Hopefully, from this viewpoint, perhaps this research will ignite the desire for all colleges and universities to consider the needs of all student parents. Using thick descriptions, transferability, and external validity were established through the rich interpretations of the circumstances of the research participants (Stahl & King, 2020).

Limitations

The initial limitation of the methodology was the selection of the participants as it presented a constraint as the research was limited to single mothers pursuing secondary education and nothing past a bachelor's degree. This limitation excluded a sector of single mothers who have issues that need to be addressed regardless of the level of education they decide to pursue. The reasonable measure to address this limitation was gathering as much information from this chosen demographic. The information gathered can aid in assisting the collective groups of single mothers pursuing education on all levels for the betterment of themselves and their families. Secondly, regarding the transferability of this study, the research data from this study are only generalizable to some single-mother college students of this study, as their perceptions and inherent capabilities are all unique. A reasonable measure for this limitation was the use of thick description, which entails being as descriptive as possible so that readers have limited questions regarding how to duplicate this study if desired. Finally, again specific to the methodology and selection process, this study encountered mothers' difficulty in following through with the research as they were limited on time; their participation in this research study was something else in their lives for which they had to make time. The time limitation was addressed by

working within the mothers' availability for this study, which meant rescheduling as many times as needed to complete the interviews.

Also, a potential bias that could have influenced this study's outcomes was assuming all the participants in this study were having the same difficulties. This bias was addressed by simply taking the responses from the participants as they were stated versus projecting my perceptions from their described experiences.

Significance

This study advances knowledge in social psychology and may be instrumental in many ways regarding the opportunity to add more experiences and descriptions of personal accounts to the understanding of the qualitative research on single mothers pursuing secondary education while undergoing food insecurity. This research offers an opportunity to understand this demographic from the perspective of members' descriptions of what they are enduring in life. Regarding social change, this study affords more awareness regarding understanding what is perceived to be missing from these mothers' lives and how society can assist in filling in the gaps where needed. Essentially, women, children, and single mothers are at-risk populations as they are marginalized groups. However, when an individual endures trying life circumstances from two or more of these marginalized groups, the need to understand becomes more complex, thus cultivating the need to comprehend further how these experiences feel from their point of view.

The data from this research contribute to the advancement of study about the phenomena of single motherhood and experiences endured when achieving educational

advancements, as this kind of research is still in its infancy stages. In addition, even though college students who are parents make up more than one fifth of undergraduate students, colleges and state database systems still lack information pertinent to these students' success (Gault et al., 2020). Thus, this study provides data that reflect the experiences of student parents, as this type of information is vital when creating policies and practices that will increase student enrollment, persistence, and completion of degrees.

Summary

In summation, this initial chapter provided an understanding of the existing knowledge about the challenges of single mothers in the United States. A significant amount of research pertains to single mothers and their efforts to pursue higher education for the betterment of themselves and their children; however, the existing analysis is primarily quantitative and limited regarding data about their unique yet parallel experiences. With the growth of the single-mother population in the United States and the higher education arena, there needed to be more research to support the needs of the ever-growing demographic. In addition, it was necessary to understand their perceptions of their experience to understand what resources are essential to assist as they proceed with their education and manage competing responsibilities. With this generic qualitative research design, the acquired knowledge may facilitate the development of programs to aid this demographic. In Chapter 2, I will explain the literature search strategy and the theoretical foundation. Then I will describe the current literature on single mothers

pursuing higher education, their coping strategies, their use of resilience, and how food insecurity impacts college students and single mothers.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Qualitative research on single mothers and their experiences of motherhood while pursuing higher education is limited. Through this qualitative study, I aimed to understand how single mothers with food insecurity describe their experience of pursuing higher education. Single motherhood is becoming more prevalent, as is the single mother's desire to succeed regardless of the stigmas associated with their life circumstances. Single mothers taking on higher education are likely to experience setbacks and limitations. This chapter shares pertinent and unique information relevant to single mothers pursuing higher education while undergoing food insecurity. This chapter reviews literature exploring how single mothers seeking higher education disprove stereotypes, practice coping, and exercise resilience. The chapter also reviews literature that explores food insecurity and how it has historically impacted people from underrepresented and marginalized backgrounds. Finally, this chapter describes the link between food insecurity and single mothers pursuing secondary education. The following research presents relevant findings that support a baseline understanding of the experiences of single mothers endeavoring to receive higher education while undergoing food insecurity.

Literature Search Strategy

I used the Walden University Online Library and Wiley Online Library for the literature search strategy. The search engines used were both Google and Google Scholar. The databases used to retrieve the sources were Academic Search Complete, EBSCO

database, Education Source, ERIC, JSTOR, PsycInfo, PsycArticles, PubMed, ProQuest, ResearchGate, SAGE Premier, and ScienceDirect. I searched for peer-reviewed articles from the databases published within 5 years of this research. The key search terms used to search for articles were the following: *single mother, single mom, single parent home, college student, secondary education, community college, four-year institutions, higher education, academic success, student achievement, nontraditional student, food insecurity, nutritional insecurity, food deserts, food stamps, food equality, stress and coping, resilience, maternal depression, and financial insecurity.*

I began with a broad search for *single mothers AND food insecurity* in the Walden University Online Library and Google Scholar. I acquired a significant amount of knowledge with those key search terms; however, I began to use a variation of those words such as *single mom, female parent households AND nutritional insecurity, and public assistance.* The databases ResearchGate and JSTOR populated with a plethora of literature about food insecurity. I then broke the two search terms down so that I could begin to gather more background information about the state of single motherhood in America and the state of food and nutritional insecurity.

I went on to explore the experiences of single mothers in the United States. Once again, I used the Walden University Online Library, Google, and Google Scholar. I used Google Scholar primarily; however, when articles were not accessible, I searched these articles by title and located them in the Walden Online Library. As I gathered data on experiences of single motherhood in the United States, the database ResearchGate populated significant amounts of data on these key research terms. I then proceeded to

search for a combination of everything previously researched. However, I added in attending college: *single mothers AND food insecurity AND college*. This combination led me to determine the knowledge gap. I realized that no research could explain a broader experience for these single mothers attending school. In addition, a significant amount of the articles retrieved were quantitative, which did not allow members of the demographic to describe their perspectives.

After identifying the gap, I used *food insecurity AND college campuses* to search. I found limited but valuable data, which helped me better understand why there were limited data regarding single mothers in college experiencing food insecurity. The topic of food insecurity on college campuses is still in its infancy regarding the existing knowledge. After acquiring sufficient data and developing a better understanding of food insecurity on college campuses, I researched how stress, coping, and resilience influence the lives of single mothers and their families. The key terms were *stress and coping AND single mothers*. I also used *resilience AND maternal depression*. In addition, I researched *Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory of stress and coping AND single mothers* to see how this theory was used concerning single motherhood. A significant amount of quantitative data emerged, making me desire to acquire information about their experiences. Therefore, I began to look up qualitative data that explained the experience of one single mother attending college. I found an article entitled "Following a Semester in the Life of a Single Mother at a California Community College." This report provided a wealth of knowledge about one student's experience; however, one experience does not account for an entire population. Because there was limited

knowledge about this research topic, I combined all research elements of this study and was able to interpret the situation and cultivate a basic understanding of single mothers in secondary education experiencing food insecurity.

Theoretical Foundation

Lazarus and Folkman's psychological stress and coping theory was used to conceptualize this research study. This theory explains the stress experienced by describing it as four experiences: an external stimulus, stress as a response, stress as an individual/environmental interaction, and finally, stress as an individual/environmental transaction. This research utilized the transactional theory of stress and coping with conceptualizing the experiences of single mothers attending college. The transactional theory of stress and coping has shaped stress and coping research for over 30 years (Biggs et al., 2017). The key concept within this theory is that people are constantly appraising stimuli they experience in an environment. Three cognitive elements are associated with the stress and coping theory: primary appraisal, coping process, and encounter outcome (Ahmad et al., 2018).

This theory proposes that the appraisal process is where one initially encounters stress, which will affect the coping strategy. Appraisals are broken down into primary appraisal, secondary appraisal, and reappraisal. When undergoing the appraisal process, individuals experience emotions that are either threatening, challenging, or harmful (Biggs et al., 2017), and their emotional response determines the actions taken after that. For example, if the stimuli have been appraised as stressful, the person may incorporate a coping process to change the outcome, either favorable, unfavorable, or unresolved.

Individuals base their ability to deal with a stress stimulus on their perception of stress. People have different tolerance thresholds for stress based on their past ability to cope, as how experiences are perceived determines an individual's belief in their ability to cope or not cope. The coping process will generally be problem-coping or emotion-coping, and the outcome will be either satisfactory or non-satisfactory (Ahmad et al., 2018). In addition, according to Lazarus (1993), an ongoing element of cognitive and behavioral efforts is used to manage the psychological stress encountered.

The following are examples of literature and research-based analysis of how the theory has been applied and some of the similarities these pieces of research have with my study. For example, the theory of stress and coping was used to conceptualize research about the problematics of single-mother parenting by identifying coping strategies, religious coping, and cognitive distortion among single mothers (Fatimah, 2021). This survey research study utilized 100 Muslim single mothers from Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The participants used three instruments in this study: the Coping Strategy Inventory, the Religious Coping Inventory derived from the Brief Religious Coping Scale, and Briere's Cognitive Distortion Scale. Of the three factors being assessed, the results indicate that the highest coping score came from cognitive restructuring among single mothers. Cognitive restructuring is how an individual modifies the meaning of a stressful situation, essentially finding meaning in the situation to make it easier to accept responsibility for the situation. This research study was critical because it used the theory of stress and coping to break down how some single mothers can withstand their current

circumstances and how they manage competing responsibilities associated with single motherhood.

Another article that used the theory of stress and coping was a study conducted to understand the self-coping mechanisms of single mothers and strategies to achieve financial security while being head of a household. Five hundred twenty-one female heads of households in Malaysia were selected as the population in this research study (Ahmad et al., 2018). The participants used self-administered questionnaires as assessments for this research study. The questionnaires pertained to questions related to income, credit lines, loans, and the participants' financial security. In addition, a self-coping mechanism instrument was administered, which helped measure the coping associated with household financial strains and whether the coping approach was problem-focused or emotion-focused. The results from this study indicated that 34.9% of the population identified as having low financial security, 37% were moderately financially secure, and 28% had high financial security. Also, the research study provided evidence that supports the idea that these participants leaned more toward the problem-focused approach when coping with the stress of financial insecurity. This research is necessary because it shares another way in which the single-mother population is coping with situations that may temporarily seem to be out of their control.

Finally, a study explored the coping style of mothers with and without serious mental issues. This research gathered data from participants by administering the Coping and Parental Distress Questionnaire. The data came from 120 mothers, half of whom had a serious mental illness, and the other half of whom did not have a mental illness. The

results of this study indicate that mental illness was not associated with parental distress; however, coping styles were associated (Malka et al., 2020). The coping techniques of disengagement and externalizing pain were positively related to parental distress. This research is vital because it supports the idea that single motherhood has universal stressors that need to be supported by helping individuals enhance adaptive coping styles.

The rationale for choosing Lazarus and Folkman's psychological stress and coping theory for this study was the initial common belief that single mothers endure significant amounts of stress compared to their two-parent-household counterparts. Thus, with the higher stress levels these single mothers endure, it was helpful for them to describe their experiences through questions guided by the theoretical foundation to uncover stress and coping mechanisms that are employed as they shared descriptions of their experiences.

Lazarus and Folkman's psychological stress and coping theory related to this study because stress is something that the average person in the United States has to undergo daily. The populations more prone to experiencing higher stress levels are worth investigating so that society can determine where it can lessen or alleviate elements of daily stress for these demographics. The research question built upon this existing theory because although the interview questions have a foundation from this theory, the responses from the research participants presented descriptions of a process that aligned with the appraisal process outlined in Lazarus and Folkman's theory.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

State of Single Motherhood

Of the ever-growing single-parent population in the United States, single mothers account for over 75% of the single-parent families in this country (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Being a single mother is becoming a "norm" as the single-mother population gradually increases. With that, a unique set of circumstances unfolds for these single mothers and their children. There are several reasons for the growth of this population, from having children out of wedlock to separation, divorce, annulment, becoming widowed, or the fact that some women are choosing to have children and remain single (Ramos & Tus, 2020). Whether single motherhood was a choice or an unforeseen occurrence, struggles are likely to arise and potentially hinder or change how single mothers manage their work–life balance. Unfortunately, some single mothers experience fewer financial and emotional resources, higher stress levels, poor physical and mental health, and maternal depression (Taylor & Conger, 2017). In addition, the lack of time with their children can result in these mothers' encountering problems with disciplining their children (Ramos & Tus, 2020). The lives of single mothers and their children are much different from the two-parent household as the support of two parents may yield different outcomes. For example, single parenting affects children and significantly impacts stability regarding finances and parental control and supervision (Ramos & Tus, 2020). With these single mothers splitting their time among so many responsibilities, it may become difficult to manage their children effectively.

Women, in general, are part of a marginalized group and experience the reality of earning less than their male counterparts. In addition, single-parent families that are managed only by a mother tend to have lower earning capacity due to a lack of training or education, along with lack of support from nonresidential fathers. However, even when the single mother has a job, they can encounter work-related difficulties because of their responsibilities as a single mother. Single mothers experience a lot of hardships and tribulations on their journeys of trying to improve their lives and their children's lives.

The life of a single mother is multifaceted and, according to Ramos and Tus (2020), comprised of three aspects: the individual, the social, and the parent–child contact. Although the general experience of single motherhood is challenging, it is essential to think of all single mothers as having their own unique experiences. Some factors such as the age of the single mother, education history, financial income, and personal motivations influence the experiences of single mothers. The single-mother population explored in this research consisted of single mothers pursuing higher education. It has been noted that single college-educated mothers experience more trouble adjusting to life changes than single mothers who do not have college degrees. Single mothers attending college tend to have higher demands in life, and they find that adjusting and managing competing responsibilities is challenging. However, despite the limitations and challenges that these single mothers face, they exercise resilience by incorporating coping mechanisms such as staying positive and focusing on their children and family goals, faith in God, and moral and social support. Single motherhood is not an easy feat; however, with the single-mother population becoming more of a norm, it is

vital to explore the experiences of this population to inform work that may facilitate improved outcomes.

Single Mothers, Food Insecurity, Coping Strategies, and Resilience

Research suggests that single mothers who are also attending college may be at increased risk of experiencing food and nutritional insecurity. This is due to national poverty levels, as single mothers in every state are more likely to live in poverty than other women (Cruse et al., 2019). In addition, single-female households with children are those that are most likely to experience food and nutritional insecurity (Maroto et al., 2015). With poverty comes limitations regarding economic resources, medical resources, and food limitations. Moreover, research indicates that college students are more likely to experience food insecurity at a higher rate than the U.S. population (Henry, 2017; Martinez et al., 2020, Nazmi et al., 2017). Food and nutritional insecurity is defined as a nutritional risk that negatively impacts one's diet, which can potentially lead to malnutrition, including undernutrition or overnutrition in the form of excessive weight and obesity (Myers, 2020). Single mothers attending college while experiencing food and nutritional insecurity demonstrate resilience and employ coping strategies that may be either adaptive or maladaptive. Adaptive coping strategies are strategies that allow for them to deal with their current situation in a positive way such as journaling, working out, or engaging in a spiritual practice. In contrast, maladaptive coping strategies are a less productive way of coping and may yield negative outcomes such as emotional eating, drinking, or drug abuse (Taylor & Conger, 2017). Single mothers employ many coping strategies to combat food insecurity, such as dietary change, buying in bulk, decreasing

the number of people eating together, and rationing strategies (Peng et al., 2018). In addition, from an internal perspective, attributes such as optimism, self-esteem, and self-efficacy are associated with adaptive coping and aid in managing one's stress and avoiding issues with mental health (Taylor & Conger, 2017).

In an article that highlights current research on single mothers and resilience from 2017, Taylor and Conger emphasize factors that impact the well-being of single mothers and how those factors impact a mother's ability to contribute to their child's adjustment. Particularly, this article explored two such factors: perceived social support and specific internal resources. The researchers reviewed current research to help apply those previously stated factors and use them in behavioral interventions. Regarding the first factor of perceived social support, the study notes that supportive relationships have a healthy psychological impact on the single mother's well-being and are likely to reduce depression. Individuals who have higher levels of perceived support tend to be more resilient as they are better equipped to deal with stressful situations. In addition, the positive interactions that come about from the perceived social support create feelings of self-worth, self-esteem, and positive effects overall. Finally, having social support enables the mother to be a more confident parent, which yields better relationships with their children. The second factor of internal strengths and coping is that optimistic mothers who have self-efficacy and high self-esteem tend to have lower levels of depression and higher levels of parenting behavior that is positive and supportive to their children.

The compilation of information that came from this article is paramount to the research about single mothers attending college because it provides information that separates them from being a victim. This research supports the idea that if one is willing to get a college degree by any means necessary, it requires working on oneself and is more than possible. This research also supports the idea that you are not likely to succeed if you do not have support or are unwilling to get that support. The mothers who have support and higher levels of internal resources that help foster more vital coping strategies are the parents who are most likely to succeed. Overall, these inner strengths help manage stress and maintain better mental health (Taylor & Conger, 2017).

Unfortunately, mental health is an aspect of the single mother attending community college life that is often neglected due to the demands that single mothers must manage. Shenoy, Lee, and Trieu (2016) conducted a secondary analysis of data collected in 2013 from the American College Health Association-National College Health assessment. The intent was to investigate the difficulties single-parent students face attending community college. Some of the specific factors assessed in this investigation were comparing single parenting and adverse mental health, including depression, self-injury, and suicide attempts. The demographic and mental health were characterized utilizing a univariate descriptive analysis, while adverse mental health and traumatic/complex events were assessed via bivariate analysis (Shenoy, Lee & Trieu, 2016).

The main result from this research indicates that issues with finances, family, and relationships disproportionately affect single parents. Thus, the single-parent college

student was more likely to experience poor mental health, twice as many suicide attempts, and higher stress levels than other community college students. This research data is essential because it demonstrates the reality that the life of a single mother is impacted by the endeavor of taking on secondary education. This research study aids in helping one to understand that single mothers must seek from within their natural strengths as well as seek outside help for them to be successful throughout this journey.

Resilience is a concept that is closely related to coping and enables long-term ability to deal with food insecurity and eventually ensure food security over time (Peng et al., 2018). In a research study conducted by Chung, Turnbull, and Chur-Hansen (2017), they sought out to compare levels of resilience between "traditional" and "nontraditional" students. The research sample consisted of 442 students, 316 women, and 126 of them were male, with ages ranging from 17-58 years. All students were first-year undergraduate psychology students at a major publicly funded university. The data from this research study came from an online mental health survey. The results from this study indicate that the students who identified themselves as "nontraditional" had a slightly higher level of resilience compared to their "traditional" student counterparts. In addition, the findings from this research study demonstrate how life experiences that are generally associated with mature-aged students help them retain their level of resilience.

Resilience enables one to sustain and achieve long-term growth (Peng et al., 2018), well-being, and academic success (Chung et al., 2017) throughout this journey. For single mothers' resilience is fundamental while pursuing higher education and caring for their children. Managing these competing responsibilities is a taxing and never-ending

endeavor. It is becoming more common for women to pursue higher education after having children (Augustine, 2017) instead of completing education before becoming a parent. With that said, they are generally mature-aged nontraditional students who have maintained jobs, family, and other 'adult-related' life responsibilities before college. Thus, they tend to have a higher level of resilience than their traditional college student counterparts (Chung et al., 2017). These adult life experiences contribute to the higher levels of stability among single mothers pursuing secondary education. This research helps add another layer of understanding to the strength and resilience of the "nontraditional" student and the many reasons why this degree is worth acquiring despite the sacrifices.

Food Insecurity Overview

Food insecurity is when one experiences insufficient food, whether in quality or quantity (Myers, 2020). Potential ramifications of this experience yield psychological distress, nutritional risks, and experience of deprivation in those that it affects. Food insecurity has long been a problem in the United States and still exists today (Pescud & Pettigrew, 2014). An element tied into the concept of food insecurity is the food desert. A location lacking supermarkets or affordable fresh fruits and vegetables is called a food desert (Deener, 2017). The concept of food deserts dates to the 1930s. It stemmed from the reorganization of public and private infrastructures in response to the unique and changing structure of population settlements and distribution systems, also known as infrastructural exclusion (Deener, 2017). Historically, minorities, woman, children and individuals zoned in low-income areas tend to fall into food insecurity. Also, college

students due to no longer having the support of their parents are likely to experience food insecurity.

A systematic literature review gathered data from eight studies containing information from 52,085 students to explore food insecurity among U.S. students attending higher education institutions. Criteria used for inclusion in this review were for all studies to have used the USDA food security assessment instruments, consisting of a 10-item U.S. Adult Food Security Survey Module (AFSSM) and a 6-item Short Form of the Food Security Survey Module (Nazmi et al., 2017). This review suggests that food insecurity may impact one in two students. This review of research is relevant to this paper because it supports the idea that food insecurity still affects low-income and marginalized populations. Also, this review helps the body of research about the college student population and their experiences of food insecurity.

A study that examined the differences in physical health and mental health among young adults both with and without a history of food insecurity strengthens the phenomenon of food insecurity among U.S. college students. This research study used 98 first-year college students as participants from a northeastern Ohio university (Darling et al., 2017). The researchers added more knowledge to the lack of understanding of the relationship between food insecurity and physical and mental health outcomes. One of the measures used in this study was a validated self-report questionnaire derived from the Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire (EDE-Q) with 38 items that measure food disorders. In addition, the study includes data collected from the Depression, Anxiety, and stress scale short form (DASS-21). This research supports the belief that young

adults with a history of food insecurity have higher rates of disordered eating patterns, depression, and stress than those without a history of food insecurity (Darling et al., 2017). This research is essential because it adds another layer to the complexity of food insecurity's impact on young adults and college students.

In another review, the researchers examined the most recent research about contextual and behavioral factors that will better understand how food insecurity impacts adolescent health outcomes (Dush, 2020). This review consisted of thirty studies that explored food insecurity with the sample population of the studying adolescents currently experiencing food insecurity. The research results support the idea that food insecurity is associated with poor mental and physical health in adolescents. This research review is essential because it brings awareness to another demographic currently suffering from food insecurity and how it can be combated earlier on in their adolescent years so that the bad habits are decreased, and a better understanding evolves as they reach adulthood.

Finally, a cross-sectional research study that explored the impact of COVID-19 on household food insecurity gathered data from the 2020 Household Pulse Survey (HPS). This data includes information from all 50 states from 74,413 households in the United States (Morales et al., 2021). This research provides one of the initial assessments of the household food insecurity issue across racial/ethnic groups in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that food insecurity is disproportionately high among racial/ethnic minority groups. In addition, the results also indicated that food-insecure households reported experiencing poorer physical health, anxiety or depression, lower self-esteem, and poorer overall mental health status. Also, children who live in food-

insecure homes are likely to experience emotional distress, a decreased quality of life, and worse academic performance (Morales, Morales & Beltran, 2021). This research study is relevant because the data helped bring more attention to the phenomenon as it was made more prevalent due to the pandemic.

Single Mothers Pursuing Secondary Education

In the United States, student parents account for 25% of the total undergraduate population, with 70% of these student parents being mothers and over half of those mothers being single mothers (Freeman, 2020). Of the nine million mother-only households in the United States, two million are college students (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). As a mother, becoming a successful college student contributes to elevating social marginality and positively influences parent-child relationships. Essentially, there is a societal understanding that pursuing higher education will boost one in society's eyes and thus create more opportunities for one to excel. Education overall is the key to advancing past poverty and lessening the experiences of socioeconomic and political inequalities (Ajayi et al., 2021). Because single mothers are more inclined to fall within the category of low-socioeconomic and experience medical and political inequities (Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2020). Because single mothers are likely to experience financial challenges (Taylor & Conger, 2017), they may be more likely to seek out higher education as a means to improve their livelihoods.

According to Greenberg and Shenaar-Golan (2020), studies have noted that one in three single mothers in the United States lives under the poverty line. Thus, it is important to understand why single mothers, high-income and low-income, decide to

pursue higher education. In addition, a factor associated with low socioeconomic status among single mothers is limited education (Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2020). A mother who pursues higher education is more inclined to influence their child through one's academic achievements. Such as better communication, more effective help when helping with homework, and exposing one's child to cognitive stimuli. Their children are more likely to take education more seriously, as their mother is setting the example. There is a plethora of benefits that are associated with acquiring higher education as a single mother. However, only 33% of single-mother students graduate with an undergraduate degree within six years (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Single-mother college students have hindrances that inhibit their ability to complete their degree (Cruse et al., 2019).

A study conducted by Lindsey and Gillum (2017) explored the perceptions of 10 single-mother college students from a university in the northern part of Texas through their college-related experiences on their academic journey. The criteria for which these single-mother students were selected were unmarried, undergraduate students who completed at least one semester at the institution and were the legal guardian of a child 18 years or younger (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). The researchers further understood how these experiences exposed them to or prevented them from learning about campus services that could aid them in their educational endeavors as single-mother college students. This research was conducted via a semistructured interview guide and had three prominent themes derived from the interviews, which were that the mothers are motivated managers, and these mothers are time pressured. However, from the study, two

additional themes were yielded: these single mother college students should be treated as individuals with unique circumstances, these single mother college students would like for their institutions for higher learning to consider their children as well. Still, each individual single student mother has their own unique experience and expects the university to consider them as such. In summation, this study found that these single mother college students want their colleges to design programs that consider their lives outside of school, especially motherhood status. of the classroom for a cohesive understanding of these single mother college students as whole individuals.

This research study adds to the necessity of further exploration of the unique experiences of single mothers overall, not just college students. Frequently stigmas force us to generalize experiences for a specific demographic; however, it's essential to understand that these experiences are as unique per individual.

In a report by Green (2021), who followed the life of a single mother at a California community college for a semester. In each of the fourteen weeks of this single mother's semester, this research participant reported ones experiences each week. This research participant's fourteen weeks were filled with financial burdens, feeling overwhelmed with schoolwork, feeling guilty, and essentially struggling in some way every week of the semester. The study participant notes that they skipped meals on an average of two times a week, had late bills, no gas money, borrowed money from family and friends, and also accepted in-kind gifts (Green, 2021). Unfortunately, financial problems correlated with their academic performance, and their stress over finances negatively impacted their academic performance. This report provides a more in-depth

account to the experiences that single mothers face attending school as it provides a more comprehensive account of the ebb and flow across a term. This report amplifies the need for support for single-parent students because this phenomenon is still prevalent.

It is also important to note that there are other experiences of single mothers struggling and enduring hardship while managing single motherhood, college, and work. Research suggests that increased education is associated with increased income and economic quality of life (Ajayi et al., 2021; Dotterer et al., 2021; Gault et al., 2020; Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2020). The process of acquiring higher education may also enhance the relationship between a single mother and their children and perhaps motivate them to excel. For example, Greenberg and Shenaar-Golan (2020) conducted a study to examine the perspective of the children of these single mothers as they work towards getting a college degree. This research study explored 19 children with single mothers coping with poverty in the Northern Israel periphery. This study yielded three themes, with the first being pride as the children expressed satisfaction in their mothers for taking on the endeavor of secondary education in several meaningful statements.

The second theme was what the children may have to do without because their mother is a college student (Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan, 2020). One of the discoveries from this theme was that some of the children became more independent because of the mother not having the time to devote to parenting. However, the interviewee explains that they deal better as individuals by not having to rely so much on their mother. Finally, the third theme deals with how college has influenced the mother-child relationship. The interviewees in this study perceive pursuing secondary education and getting a degree as

an appropriate endeavor and will help them achieve economic success, job mobility, and a positive overall experience on both the mother and the children.

Another notable study was one conducted by Bateau (2007). Although dated but worth noting, this research sought to discover the characteristics associated with a successful single mother pursuing higher education, such as balancing their many roles and responsibilities like being a mother, employee, family member, friend, and college student (Bateau, 2007). This phenomenological study utilized semistructured interviews to explore the experiences of fourteen single mothers who are either enrolled in, or had recently completed, a bachelor's degree program at a mid-sized university in the Midwest. All participants were employed as 6 held full-time jobs, and 8 had part-time jobs. Several themes came about from the interviews, which were the values of education, mother as a role model for their children, faith in a higher being, quitting means failure, patience, external support, and sacrifice.

This research is essential to my study because it shows that pursuing secondary education, work, and being a mother is possible, although it is a difficult feat. More specifically, the knowledge from this research can better enable other researchers to understand ways in which these single mothers were able to maintain, overcome, and practice resilience as this information can be instrumental when creating interventions to aid single mothers while enduring the many responsibilities of single motherhood. Of the many notable themes, the one that stood out was that each of the fourteen women actively sought out some external support, whether it was financial, words of encouragement, or even help with their children. This study testifies to the idea that although the single

mother is managing these trying circumstances, help is still necessary to ensure continued success in parenting, work, and academic studies.

The Link Between Food Insecurity and Single Mothers Attending College

Single mothers and their children as well as college students may be more likely to experience food insecurity. When one is responsible for caring for children, one is more prone to experience food insecurity (Lee et al., 2018). However, higher education is the only way to combat limitations and achieve better pay and more economic stability over time (Freeman, 2020). Still, being a mother, in general, puts you in the position to be selfless, and many mothers are willing to sacrifice their well-being to preserve their child's well-being. For example, some mothers are willing to risk their own nutritional needs to ensure that their children have adequate nutrition (Lee et al., 2018). The act of a single mother sacrificing or reducing one's food intake is a protective response and is a form of maternal deprivation (Myers, 2020). As a result, a mother's food insecurity may compromise academic achievement for a single mother (Lee et al., 2018). Maternal deprivation, in turn, results in a host of consequences, a prominent one being an adverse impact on maternal psychological health.

In a qualitative descriptive study, Lee et al. (2018) explored the experiences of food insecurity among nine food-insecure university students caring for children. All these students reported accessing food banks on their college campus. This research study was conducted via semistructured individual interviews. Several themes arose from this research including the impact of food insecurity on children's perceived well-being, experiencing with food in the hamper, changes in perceived nutritional quality of diet and

coping strategies (Lee et al., 2018). However, the most impactful theme was that these student parents were trying to shield their children from food insecurity by sacrificing their nutritional health. Another theme derived from this research was a difference in beliefs regarding the impact of food on their children's well-being. One student reported that they believed that food insecurity did not negatively impact their child, being it was a baby that was exclusively breastfed. Another theme was their experiences with getting food from food banks, nutrition changes since starting school, and coping strategies developed to help mitigate food insecurity. This research is essential to this study because it speaks to the experiences of food insecurity among college student parents. Very little is known about the needs and experiences of student parents attending college, with a significant percentage of them being women.

Gaps in the Research

Several studies explore the phenomenon of food insecurity in the United States as it is an ever-growing problem (e.g., Deener, 2017; Dush, 2020; Nackers & Appelhans, 2013; Wright et al., 2016). However, food insecurity research is almost exclusive to households in the United States versus university and college campuses. This is so because most of the statistics gathered on food insecurity in the United States if gathered from U.S. households and not specifically from college campuses as some students are considered part of a household. In addition, a significant amount of quantitative analysis addresses some of the hardships experienced by single mothers with competing responsibilities and caring for their children. However, not much information exists to these experiences along with being a college student and undergoing food insecurity.

Finally, this research will explore the experiences of single mothers and the impact of food insecurity on them and their children. Nevertheless, no research exists to help understand how single mothers with food insecurity describe their experience of pursuing higher education. This study will address those experiences.

Competing Responsibilities

Degree Completion

Being a single mother is complex and challenging because there is only one parent in the household. Such responsibilities include frequently occurring tasks such as meal preparation, house-cleaning, laundry, etc. (Dugan & Barnes-Farrell, 2018). These chores are generally associated with the female gender as tasks such as yard work, car maintenance, and home repairs are associated with males and are considered occasional tasks. Single mothers do not get the opportunity to spend their free time like traditional students as their additional time is used for taking care of children and maintaining a full-time job (Sallee & Cox, 2019). All these competing responsibilities the single mother faces make them less likely to complete their degree in the time allotted than their dependent and nonparent counterpart (Beeler, 2016). Single parents pursuing higher education are considered a marginalized group, and single mothers comprise a large portion of that group (Lovell & Scott, 2019). This marginalized student group is ever-increasing, as is the single-mother households. Single mothers are a growing proportion of nontraditional students and have low degree completion rates (Freeman, 2020).

A study conducted by Freeman (2020) sought to explore lived experiences including some of the obstacles that single mothers face when they are pursuing a college

degree. Over three years, the researcher conducted 66 in-depth interviews with 37 distinctive participants associated with an antipoverty program in Boston, Massachusetts. This study utilized a feminist action research framework to explore the experiences of these single mothers through the interviews conducted. The most prominent theme is that these mothers report struggling to complete their education programs. This theme presented three obstacles that caused issues for these single mothers: initially, the institutions are inflexible, impasses, and lack of career guidance (Freeman, 2020). These mothers are not receiving the support they need from their institutions to achieve a more comfortable life. This research is vital to this study because it expands the knowledge of the experiences of these single mothers and sheds light on the need for support.

Care for Children and Time for School

Single mothers who pursue secondary education must "do it all." The reality for this demographic is that they must manage their families, school, and employment (Lindsey & Gillum, 2018). Managing life at times can feel daunting as a mother will at some point have to choose between completing an academic assignment and spending time with their child. Constantly being faced with situations that may cause them to choose one responsibility over another will naturally result in them feeling guilt as they attempt to balance their roles (Lowell & Scott, 2019). Single mothers must balance the pressure of being a "perfect parent" and a "perfect student" (Beeler, 2016). However, realistically one of the responsibilities will fall short of getting the attention needed to thrive, and if that happens to be the child, it can yield to a mother feeling stressed due to lack of self-care. In addition, the prolonged occurrence of maintaining these competing

responsibilities can result in high levels of stress, resulting in emotional distress and ultimately disruptions in parenting (Taylor & Conger, 2017). The inability to parent to "acceptable" standards causes negative feelings within the mother and their physical and mental well-being, which may impact the child negatively.

For example, a research study was conducted on single mothers and single mothers who lived in multi-adult households to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their daylily lives. The research focused on three questions relevant to some of the experiences that single mothers faced during the pandemic which is: (a) Does the experience of having created a support network before becoming a single mother mitigate the impact of the pandemic on single mothers? (b) Will the weight of daycare for preschool and school-age children lead single others to look for new ways to organize their household? (c) Will the antagonism between production and reproduction be altered because of the pandemic? Online surveys were used to gather data from 722 single mothers for this study and were administered by authors from June 1-30, 2020 (Hertz et al., 2020). The finding from this research study suggests that single-adult households were impacted more negatively by the pandemic (Hertz et al., 2020). Also, single mothers reported feeling tired, stressed, and guilty because they were not able to effectively compartmentalize both responsibilities of being a paid worker and mother (Hertz et al., 2020).

Time constraints are ranked high in the list of obstacles faced by single mothers attending college (Crumb, 2021). In a research study conducted by Augustine, Prickett, and Negraia (2018), they sought to determine whether increased education for single

mothers will improve the lives of themselves and their families or whether the competing demands create a burden. They used data from the American Time Use Survey (2003-2015) that records respondents' time use over 24 hours (Augustine et al., 2018). The research used three different subsamples to gather data for the analysis in this study. The first two samples came from data from 13 surveys that consisted of mothers ages 18-45 who had less than a college level of education and had a child living in a household under age 13. The final sample came from 13,121 mothers with 1,278 of them being in college at this time of the survey. The focus was on mothers who had children under age 13 as they were more likely to have caregiving needs.

This research indicates two significant challenges: the initial challenge of mothers experiencing significant limitations on time, which resulted in them having less time in all aspects of their lives compared to the mothers that are not in school. The second set of findings indicates that these mothers were tired during their children's activities and during activities that did not affect their children. Unfortunately, this research could not conclude whether the increased education for single mothers will improve the lives of single mothers and their families or will the competing demands create a burden. However, it simply added more data to this field of study regarding the actual time these mothers spend in a day on their competing responsibilities. They broke down the time measurement of this study so one can see how single mothers spent their time. The study noted that student mothers spent an hour or less with their children than mothers who were not in college and little time on child-focused activities with a reported 23 minutes or less per day.

Food Insecurity Adversely Impacts Academic Success

College students are an at-risk population when it comes to experiencing food insecurity, primarily low-income nontraditional students. These nontraditional low-income students must manage their finances to cover many expenses (e.g., school expenses, clothing, and housing). The experience of food insecurity for single mothers pursuing secondary education and caring for children is detrimental to their endeavors as a single mother, employees, and students. For example, poor nutritional health results from food insecurity and poor physical, psychosocial, and overall well-being (Nazmi et al., 2019). Due to food insecurity's impact on one's cognitive ability, it's linked to lower grade point averages (GPA) (Maroto et al., 2015). Not acquiring adequate nutrition can adversely impact your body, thus eliminating the ability to get sufficient nourishment to ensure that the body operates at its optimum capacity including the mind and cognitive capabilities. Food insecurity is strongly associated with lower cognitive performance (Payne-Sturges et al., 2018).

In a study conducted by Martinez et al. (2020), the researchers examined the relationship between food insecurity, mental health, and academic performance among 8,705 college students from a public university in California. The study used structural equation modeling to examine the direct pathway from food insecurity to student grade point average and an implicit path through mental health, controlling for demographic characteristics. The main result from this research supports the idea that food insecurity is directly related to a student's grade point average and indirectly related to poor mental health. Several studies align with the finding that food insecurity is linked to lower

academic performance among students in higher education settings (e.g., Martinez et al., 2020; Hagedorn & Olfert, 2018; Maroto et al., 2015; Silva et al., 2017; Cady, 2014). An additional finding from this research extended the knowledge that supports poor mental health being the mediator in the relationship between food insecurity and academic achievement among students pursuing secondary education. This research adds to the ever-growing body of research that links poor academic success with a lack of sufficient nutritional intake. This research supports the position that it is ever more essential to ensure that students can have their needs met for them to experience the full benefits of what it truly means to acquire higher education. To the single mother, this is far more detrimental as they are trying to manage their nutritional health and the nutritional health of their children.

In a similar study, researchers described the relationship between food insecurity and academic performance, food insecurity and student health, and finally, health and academic performance. O'Neill and Maguire (2017) utilized a qualitative research design on a sample of 65 college students who visited and sought out emergency food resources at the campus pantry at a mid-sized public university in northern California. The study included brief, open-ended questions concerning (a) food insecurity and academic performance, (b) food insecurity and student health, and (c) health and academic performance. Some of the themes from this research were energy, focus, and academic performance. Some students reported having low energy when they had to take on everyday tasks, including work, school, and daily life activities (O'Neill & Maguire, 2017). Low energy made it difficult to focus on their studies in the classroom and when

they made efforts to study at home. One student stated, "I can't concentrate on my schoolwork when I'm hungry and "I believe being well-fed increases my ability to maintain focus and comprehension in my classes especially being a senior and attending classes that are at the panicle of my major." Finally, students also linked their poor health conditions to low food security as a proper diet is essential for brain development and efficient energy. This research supports this study because it includes accounts from students experiencing these hardships related to food insecurity. This research supports the notion that acquiring a secondary education is not an endeavor that can be accomplished without a full support system, whether you are a "traditional" student or a "nontraditional" student such as a low-income single mother.

Eliminating the stress associated with food insecurity may allow more attention to other essential areas in life. According to a past study conducted by Patton-Lopez et al. (2014), higher food security is correlated with higher academic performance. Poor health and low food security were related to poor academic performance. In addition to poor academic performance, food insecurity causes lower energy levels and one's ability to concentrate (O'Neil & Maguire, 2017). However, in the Patton-Lopez et al. (2014) research study, the researchers used a cross-sectional nonprobability survey of 354 students attending a midsize rural university in Oregon in May 2011 (Patton-Lopez et al., 2014). The researchers examined the prevalence of food insecurity among students from the rural university in Organ. The findings from the research show that 59% of the students were food insecure during the previous year, and students who reported being food insecure are less likely to report a GPA of 3.1 or higher. This research is essential

because it adds to the body of knowledge regarding food insecurity's impact on an individual.

Regarding academic outcomes that come about from being food insecure, first-of-its-kind research to examine how food insecurity among college students negatively impacts educational outcomes was conducted by Phillips, McDaniel, and Croft in 2018. The researchers explored this research topic by focusing on students' debt, their academic outcomes, and their food insecurity status. The results of their study demonstrated that the uncertainty in many facets of life intersect in students' college experiences (Phillips et al., 2018). This research study utilized online survey data collected from 508 currently enrolled undergraduate students from freshman to senior at a large university in the Midwest. The main result from this research indicates that students from underrepresented backgrounds were more likely to experience food insecurity, and it was correlated with their experience with student debt. As a result of this association, food-insecure students were more likely to consider or had no choice but to experience academic disruption. In essence, food insecurity is a compounding challenge that underrepresented students must face on top of other challenges not explored in this research study. This research is essential to the research that will come from this dissertation research because this study examines a different avenue regarding how debt impacts food insecurity. In addition, it explored a plethora of other challenges that exist outside of what students are willing to share and outside of what is currently known about this phenomenon of food insecurity on college campuses and universities.

The final part of this research section is a study investigating the impact of food insecurity on college students in a high-health disparate region (Hagedorn & Olfert, 2018). This research used a cross-sectional research design to assess the prevalence of food insecurity among young adults at a large university in rural Appalachia and understand the relationship between food insecurity and how it potentially impacts behavior, academic performance, coping strategies, and finances. A 56-item survey given to participants investigates food insecurity among 716 undergraduate and graduate college students attending an Appalachian Higher Education Institution. The results from this study align with the other studies that support the idea that food insecurity is higher on college campuses and universities than the national average. In addition, poor academic success was associated with food insecurity among students and lower academic progress scale scores and GPA.

One such study that supports the finding that food insecurity is prevalent on college campuses and hurts academics is a study conducted by Silvia et al. (2017). The authors explored the food and housing vulnerabilities that may negatively impact students' academic success (Silvia et al., 2017). The researchers collected data from 395 student participants via self-reporting surveys. This study confirms that experiencing food insecurity and housing security harmed a student's academic performance, attendance, and class completion. However, food insecurity, in particular, may cause students to experience fatigue, difficulty concentrating, anxiety, and irritability. In addition, food insecurity may make it difficult for students to learn new material and experience behavioral difficulties and emotional problems. This research is essential to

this study because it adds more knowledge and understanding to unique issues that college students experience and how those experiences impact their academic success.

Along with poor academic progress and outcomes, the students' behaviors also suffered negatively as insufficient access to food yielded unhealthy behaviors. Some students experienced having to leave college without completing their degree due to financial burdens (Hagedorn & Olfert, 2018). This research is vital to this study because it supports the knowledge surrounding the compounding issues that students face while improving their lives and becoming contributing members of society. This research supports the idea that this issue is everyone's responsibility. Finally, it shows that some students are not having their basic human needs met, and not only does this negatively impact the student, but it creates a burden on the university.

Summary and Conclusions

Single mothers attending college have competing responsibilities that put them at risk of experiencing food insecurity. This research will add to the body of knowledge about single mothers pursuing higher education while caring for children and research for food insecurity among colleges and universities. Hopefully, this research will aid colleges in helping to educate their single-mother student populations on the resources that are available to them. In addition, this new body of knowledge can help bring light to the unique experiences of single mothers attending college. Also, it may aid in determining how and where the needs of the single mother college student are unmet and hopefully ensure these single mother students can complete their degrees and maintain food and financial security. The goal is to elevate past their circumstances and improve their

overall quality of life. The best way out of poverty and on the road to success is educating themselves and their children.

Chapter 3 will discuss the design of this generic qualitative research aimed at addressing this literature gap, the research design and rationale, the methodology, the data analysis plan, trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

This qualitative study aimed to understand how single mothers with food insecurity describe their experience of pursuing higher education. This chapter introduces the research design, rationale, and methodology. The methodology includes the participant selection logic, instrumentation, and the procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection. Then the chapter will introduce the data analysis plan, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures, followed by a summary of this chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

This study used a generic qualitative approach to aid in answering the following question: How do single mothers with food insecurity describe their experiences of pursuing higher education?

The phenomenon of central interest for this research study was single motherhood and a single mother's pursuit of higher education while undergoing food insecurity. In addition to participants' descriptions of their lived experiences, this study explored coping strategies and how single mothers endure and exercise resilience while pursuing their studies and experiencing food insecurity.

The research approach for this research study was a generic qualitative research design. A qualitative research design seeks an understanding of the human experience (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). However, this generic qualitative research design was not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophical assumptions like other qualitative methodologies (Kahlke, 2014). The generic qualitative research design seeks to achieve

the same understanding in a less established method. Qualitative research designs aim to fulfill the following five intellectual goals: Initially, the researcher strives to understand the meaning of events, situations, actions, accounts, and lived experiences of the study participants (Maxwell, 2008). Secondly, the researcher seeks an understanding of the influence of context for which participants act or respond. Thirdly, the researcher attempts to identify an unexpected phenomenon, influences, and the cultivation of new theories grounded within those unforeseen discoveries. The last two goals are understanding the process by which events and actions occur and developing explanations.

Through this research study, I sought to fulfill those five intellectual goals using the transactional theory of stress and coping to create semistructured interview questions. Because the generic qualitative approach focuses on words and language, I sought out rich descriptions from the research participants' experiences (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). I achieved rich descriptions by ensuring that all questions were open-ended, enabling the participants to candidly express their experiences.

The rationale for why the generic qualitative research design was chosen was that it was most appropriate for this study as this approach was less structured and offered the liberty for me to be less restricted by the boundaries of other qualitative approaches. In addition, I had an initial understanding of this demographic through experience and watching others endure this experience. According to Percy et al. (2015), when having preknowledge or preunderstandings in generic qualitative research, the researcher must have the desire to be better able to fully describe the experiences from the perspective of

others who are living it. Percy et al. (2015) stated that “researchers considering any study of people’s subjective ‘take’ on actual external happenings and events should consider generic qualitative inquiry as their approach” (p. 5). Thus, this generic qualitative approach was the best design for me to achieve the desired research goals.

Role of Researcher

I am a Walden University student pursuing a PhD in social psychology. None of the participants had a direct relationship with me, as a prior relationship could have resulted in a conflict of interest as the participants could have presented responses that supported my personal experiences. I was knowledgeable regarding the skills needed to facilitate a generic qualitative research study. I had conducted a qualitative study in undergraduate school to prepare for an undergraduate degree.

My primary role was to facilitate the interviews and observe and access the opinions and outlooks of the research participants (Sutton & Austin, 2015). There were no relationships between myself and the participants as participants were randomly selected based on meeting the research participant criteria. Thus, there was no power or influence over how the participants answered questions during the interview. I was able to manage potential biases by making a significant effort to exercise a heightened awareness of personal experiences with being a single mother, work, education, and food insecurity. My heightened awareness at the forefront aided in the mindfulness of the research interviews, and having an additional researcher monitor the data collection helped avoid the transference of bias within the research.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The population for this research study included any single mother from any ethnic background and academic discipline currently enrolled at a community college or a 4-year degree institution. The criteria for the participants were that they must be single mothers working towards achieving a certificate, associate's degree, or bachelor's degree. The participants also needed to be surviving primarily off their own income. However, participants could still partake in the study if they received assistance from the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), food stamps, child support, or assistance from friends and family. Finally, participants needed to be experiencing food and nutritional insecurity. This broad range of single-mother participants allowed more opportunities to gather enough participants for this research study. Married mothers, single fathers, and single mothers seeking higher education beyond a bachelor's degree. (e.g., college students, single mothers, and low-income parents) were all excluded from this research study. I chose this sample because this population (single mothers, low-income mothers, and college students) is more likely to experience food and nutritional insecurity regardless of whether they seek higher education or not, due to their marginalized positions in society. In addition, of the populations pursuing higher education, the single-mother demographic is disproportionately more likely to experience disadvantages than their male, married female, and traditional student counterparts.

Purposeful sampling was the sampling strategy, as this approach encouraged the recruitment of participants who were currently experiencing the phenomenon and were inclined to describe their experience (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). In addition, purposeful sampling allowed me to gather information-rich samples that derived from in-depth descriptions of populations directly experiencing said phenomenon (Shaheen & Pradhan, 2019). Also, it was of paramount importance to gather information-rich data because the small sample size could have resulted in questions regarding credibility, thus the importance of ensuring that the participants fulfilled the requirements for participation in the study. Lastly, purposeful sampling aided me in selecting participants who could help answer the research question.

I confirmed that the participants met the criteria by conducting a pre-interview and asking them questions specific to the criteria needed for participants in this study. These questions aligned with determining whether they were single mothers enrolled in a community college, in a certificate program, or at a 4-degree institution. Also, the pre-interview questions ensured that the participants understood the concept of food insecurity and knew that they were undergoing the experience. Additionally, it was verified that they had an understanding of and were receiving little to no assistance from the other parent to their child or children. I recruited 10 single mothers pursuing postsecondary education who were experiencing food and nutritional insecurity. It is important to note that the sample size was small due to the expectation of participants providing descriptions of experience, data, and rich information regarding the described experiences of this phenomenon. The recruited participants underwent individual

semistructured interviews for this planned research design. According to Kostere and Kostere (2021), there were no rules regarding sample size for qualitative inquiry.

I achieved saturation, which is the process by which additional collection of data will not yield additional themes, insights, perspectives, or information to expand the study further (Shaheen & Pradhan, 2019), I asked open-ended, guiding, and analytical questions to generate robust and sound research data. Thus, to reach saturation, 10 was sufficient.

Instrumentation

I created two data collection instruments for this research study: the initial close-ended demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A) and the semistructured interview protocol (see Appendix B). The close-ended demographic questionnaire ensured that the participants met the criterion needed to participate in the research study in addition to the opportunity for me to gather a summary of characteristics associated with the participants interviewed in the study. Secondly, the semistructured interview protocol contained questions developed by me and approved by an expert committee. The second instrument was intended to help understand the research problem through questions derived from the transactional theory of stress and coping (TTSC).

This semistructured interview was designed to sufficiently answer the research question: How do single mothers with food insecurity describe their experiences of pursuing higher education? Seven nonleading, open-ended questions were created to enable the research participants to provide detailed and in-depth descriptions of their experiences and aided in sufficiently answering the research question. To ensure the

sufficiency of data-rich information, I was mindful to ensure that the interviews remained on the topic by redirecting when the interview went astray. In addition, I intentionally encouraged participants to expound on their responses to continue the theme of data-rich responses and create data saturation. Through data saturation, I arrived at a point where there were no longer fresh data concepts or new theoretical insights from the interviews with the research participants (Kostere & Kostere, 2021).

The basis for developing the semistructured interview protocol came from the research literature as well as questions derived from the foundation of the TTSC. I achieved content validity by ensuring that the questions and broadening of answers from the participants aligned with the study's objective. Credibility was established by ensuring that all interviews were recorded and that the information scribed was verbatim and not rewording the participants' responses.

The interview questions were designed to explore (a) the influence of food insecurity parenting and nutritional health of children, (b) challenges encountered throughout the process of experiencing food insecurity, (c) experiences as a single mother student caring for children, (d) coping strategies utilized for coping with challenges, (e) motivations to continue on the pursuit of the degree, (f) emotional support, and (g) overall feeling of managing all competing responsibilities.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

After receiving approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB), I began the recruitment process upon establishing the sample study size of 10–12 and the criteria participants needed to meet to take part in this research study. I created a

flyer with all pertinent information about the study. The relevant information on the flyer consisted of a statement of purpose for the study, participation criterion, researcher contact information, and compensation. The recruitment process occurred exclusively online via social media. I used Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok to recruit potential research participants. Once participants expressed interest in participating in this study, I contacted the participants and screened them to ensure that they met the criteria for inclusion in the study. Once I acquired 10 participants, I conducted semistructured qualitative interviews. The data collection events took place within a time frame of 6 weeks and consisted of 10 semistructured interview sessions averaging 30 to 60 minutes per participant for two participants each week. This data collection approach allowed for a more comprehensive exploration of the phenomena through open-ended conversation (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Information about the sample, data collection, and data analysis is provided in this study to aid readers and researchers in achieving a more concise understanding of replicable elements of the research. This level of transparency assists others who would like to replicate this study as it provides a blueprint on how to proceed with this study. In qualitative research, face-to-face, audio-recorded, in-depth, semistructured conversation interviews are recommended; however, the data were collected via Zoom. This approach was necessary because all participants were not local and accessible for me to interview them in person.

After receiving informed consent from all research participants, I collected the data, and the data collection events took place over 3 weeks. During the interviews, I was in a secluded place to interview and record the conversations with the research

participants. After each interview, I worked with a peer to aid in debriefing procedures. Such procedures entailed discussing the nature and findings that surfaced from each research participant interview.

In this generic qualitative research study, I focused on gathering descriptions associated with the target population. All questions for this research were developed with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) TTSC as a guide to formulate the questions. I used the TTSC to create questions because this theory helped align the interview questions with the research question. This approach was essential because a lack of alignment between the interview questions and the research question tends to disrupt the clarity of the research data (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). After the questions were reviewed and filtered through the assessment of peers, I proceeded with the semistructured interviews. I acquired informed consent from all participants before the initiation of the interview. The participants were provided with a copy of the informed consent form, and I maintained a copy for record.

Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis began during the data collection process. During this progression, I incorporated the process of constant comparison, which calls for comparing previously analyzed and coded data, the current data, and clustering all operational data into patterns (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). I used thematic analysis during the interview to analyze the data gathered from the semistructured interviews. Thematic analysis is the researcher's search across data sets to find patterns of meaning from the data (Percy et al., 2015). This approach was used for this research because thematic

analysis is a generic approach for analyzing people's reports and is suitable for many kinds of qualitative interpretation. In addition, thematic analysis aids in understanding the descriptions presented by the research participant data set (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

I utilized a six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) in “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology” to conduct the thematic analysis of the research data. The initial phase entailed becoming familiar with the research data. Because this phase entailed transcription of the verbal data, this task was crucial for me to become more familiar with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This phase also required me to read the transcribed data attentively and be mindful in noting initial ideas, themes, and data that arose throughout the interview process. The second phase involved the generation of initial codes after I had become familiar with the data. In addition to familiarization, I created a list of ideas derived from the data and what it was about those ideas that was noteworthy. The process of identifying the ideas is called *coding* and involves the most basic segment of the raw data that wishes to develop into themes. The coding process entailed examining a portion of the recorded data, whether a word, a paragraph, or a page with a label that summarized the intent of that data (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). A benefit of coding is that it reduces the amount of recorded data to a workable size that can be used for analysis. I used a specific type of coding referred to as *inductive coding*, which is developing codes directly from the data being collected to ensure that the “wording” and “phrases” are coming from the participants themselves. The development of codes was data-driven as this research only provided data from the descriptions by the participants without a preconceived idea of how to categorize their accounts. Although

the familiarization and initial coding process occurred during the individual semistructured interviews, I provided each participant with a transcription of their responses to confirm, deny, or modify before the data were finalized during the coding process.

Thirdly, I searched for themes. I used the codes developed from phase two to refocus the analysis on a broader level to create overarching themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To aid in being better able to visualize these themes, the research created mind maps by putting codes on index cards and placing them with their respective themes.

Next, I moved on to phase four, which reviews the identified themes. This process entailed refining the candidate theme until I was able to identify coherent patterns. After identifying the coherent patterns, I assessed the validity of the themes concerning the data set and ensured that the themes accurately reflected the descriptions provided by the interviewees. Fifthly, I defined and named the themes. To accomplish this phase, I determined the "essence" of each theme and decided what portion of the data each theme represents. This process entailed referring back to the data extracts for each theme, organizing those pieces of data, and providing a narrative to summarize the meaning of that theme. In addition, I provided a detailed written analysis of the story for each theme and the overall narrative of the research data concerning the research. Finally, I produced the report. This final phase required me to demonstrate this analysis's merit and validity by providing concise, coherent, logical data that tell a story across themes. I provided vivid examples and extracts from the interviews that demonstrate the essence of the data collected from the descriptions of the research participants.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

I established credibility by ensuring prolonged contact with the research participants, conducting member checks, and achieving research saturation and peer review (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). I remained in connection with all participants to ensure they understood the dissertation's progress and flow. Secondly, after the participant interviews, I contacted each participant to confirm that the data accurately depicts their perceptions of their experiences within the phenomena. Thirdly, I researched until saturation and ensured no new information developed from the participant interviews. Finally, I had a peer review and analyzed findings to aid in eliminating the potential for researcher biases, elevate research quality, and establish validity.

To achieve reflexivity, which is the process for which one uses a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices to self-consciously critique oneself, appraise, and evaluate how one subjectively influences the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). I intentionally thought about myself as the researcher and interviewer and omitted thoughts of personal experiences on the research topic. I only considered the information presented by the research participants, took what they said word for word, and omitted the incorporation of rewording or paraphrasing to align with any other perspectives outside of what they provided.

Transferability

The concept of transferability is a unique factor to try to establish in one's research, as it is not possible to replicate in totality a qualitative research study (Stahl &

King, 2020). However, research tactics can be applied to aid in providing an in-depth understanding by way of thick description (Stahl & King, 2020). I established transferability and external validity by using thick descriptions through the rich portrayal of the circumstances of the research participants. Transferability is challenging in qualitative research due to the data collected from individuals' experiences. The research was descriptive, with detailed descriptions and the interpretation of the data that the research was able to observe (Shenton, 2004). Thus, I was as descriptive as possible when preparing the study to be reviewed and explored by readers. Finally, I strove to get a variety of participants during the selection process. However, that was not achieved regarding ethnic and cultural identity. However, the differences in financial situations and different levels of experiences with food insecurity helped to develop a broader narrative.

Dependability

The intent of dependability in qualitative research is the establishment of trust. I established dependability through triangulation. The practice of triangulation entails utilizing data from multiple and various sources to cross-reference and reaffirm themes and similar experiences (Shenton, 2004). In addition, I incorporated peer debriefing to integrate scrutiny of the research data (Stahl & King, 2020). I had another researcher read over the notes and data collected to get feedback before proceeding with the research study. Enlisting help from other researchers aided in monitoring the influence of the primary researcher's values and personal passions. I also used reflexive auditing which is the act of being immersed in the research keeping in mind my values which cultivates another level of trust.

Confirmability

In qualitative research, the intent behind confirmability is to get the research as close as possible to objective reality (Stahl & King, 2020). In achieving confirmability, the I to ensure that the data and findings are only that of the research participants' experiences and not my preferences (Shenton, 2004). In addition, within this document, I provide the readers with a step-by-step outline of the process to be undertaken by myself and the research team (Nguyen et al., 2021). The intent behind this approach was to allow others to follow the process to understand better the logic, the research aims, and more apparent interpretations of the findings (Nguyen et al., 2021). Reflexivity was utilized to achieve confirmability because I was certain to always keep an objective reality present. This prevented me from creating a reality from this study's findings and forced me to rely on precisions and accuracy from the data collected from the participants (Stahl & King, 2020).

Ethical Procedures

Upon gaining approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) with approval number 10-03-23-0514608, I awaited the IRB's confirmation to commence recruitment. I recruited students from community colleges and universities. In addition, because I used social media to acquire participants, the institutions for which the participants attended were not a significant factor in this research. After acquiring the desired number of participants, I began prepping the participants for the data collection process. I provided each research participant with an informed consent form to comply with IRB regulations. Within the consent form, I outlined the purpose of the study, a

general description of the study, and any other significant information that pertains to the study. I delivered the consent form to the participants via email. I provided each participant with electronic consent forms so they could maintain for their records. I used the Walden University resources to construct the consent form to ensure adherence to guidelines.

Regarding the ethical concerns related to data collection, I stored all research data about participants in a locked file cabinet, with me being the sole individual to acquire access to research data materials. However, for electronic data, I stored that data on a USB external drive and stored it in a locked file drawer when data was not in use. In addition, the data collection had no identifiers on the data that would tie the data directly to a participant as numbers were used as identifiers to aid me in tracking and managing data.

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the phenomenon explored via a generic qualitative research design. In this research study, I gathered data to help describe the experiences of single mothers pursuing higher education while undergoing food and nutritional insecurity. This chapter also describes the research design and the approach. I also provided the rationale for why a generic qualitative design was the most appropriate to fill this type of research gap about the experiences of single mothers pursuing higher education while undergoing food and nutritional insecurity. There was a breakdown of the methodology and trustworthiness issues. Regarding methodology, I broke down the instrumentation, recruitment, participation, and data collection processes. Finally, in the

section, I covered issues of trustworthiness by discussing all ethical procedures that will take place to ensure the protection of the participants and their personal accounts of information.

In Chapter 4, I will provide information about the setting of the research, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, results, and summary.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

In this qualitative study, I aimed to discover how single mothers with food insecurity describe their experience of pursuing higher education. This study allowed single mothers to describe their experiences and discover how they incorporated resilience and coping strategies as they pursued their educational endeavors. A significant amount of quantitative research provides statistics for the general experience of single mothers attending college (e.g., Augustine et al., 2018; Conway et al., 2021; Lindsay & Gillum, 2018; Taylor & Conger, 2017). However, this current study allowed single mothers pursuing higher education while undergoing food insecurity to describe their unique experiences as they managed their competing responsibilities.

Through this research study, I aimed to answer the following question: How do single mothers with food insecurity describe their experiences pursuing higher education? This research responded to the question through a series of six questions aimed toward breaking that question down into a more accessible understanding. The six semistructured interview questions are referenced in Appendix B.

This chapter will break down the general themes and the narratives described by the single mothers who chose to share their experiences of single motherhood, higher education, and food insecurity. In this chapter, I will describe the setting for this research study and the demographics. In addition, I will describe the data collection process, data analysis, and evidence of trustworthiness. Next, I will share the overall findings, segmented into categories. Finally, in this chapter, I will conclude with a summary and

transition into the final Chapter 5, which consists of a discussion, conclusion, and recommendations.

Setting

This generic qualitative research study utilized Zoom Video Communications, which is a video conferencing software. I acquired the participants from advertisements on social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram. My chair approved the advertisements, and final approval came from the IRB. I screened each participant to ensure that everyone met the criteria. Additionally, each participant was filtered by the approved criteria noted on the flyer and referenced in Appendix A. Also, each participant was assessed utilizing the criteria built into Survey Monkey, an online survey development cloud-based free software. The inclusion criteria were as follows: Participants needed to be single mothers working towards a certificate, associate's degree, or bachelor's degree. The participants also needed to be surviving primarily off their income. However, participants could still partake in the study if they received WIC, food stamps, child support, or assistance from friends and family. Finally, they needed to be experiencing food and nutritional insecurity. Upon meeting the criteria, all research participants received informed consent via email, and all replied with "I consent." After confirming consent, the research participants provided their availability, and I scheduled them for their individual Zoom interviews. The interviews began in October 2023 and continued until late January 2024, when the interviews were completed. The participants were accounted for via the order in which I interviewed them: Participants 1–10. I recorded all research participants' interviews via Zoom. I removed participants' names on

Zoom before recording and replaced participants with participant numbers to achieve confidentiality.

Demographics

The sample comprised 10 single-mother students seeking education after high school (e.g., certificate, associate's, and bachelor's degree). These single-mother college students lived in different locations across the United States. Four of these single-mother college students were between 26 and 30 years of age. Two of these participants were between the ages of 36 and 40. Finally, four participants were between the ages of 41 and 50. All the participants had completed their high school diplomas and were pursuing a bachelor's degree. All 10 participants reported being responsible for 85% to 100% of the financial needs of their children.

Regarding external assistance, four reported receiving child support, with the remaining six not receiving child support. Of the 10 participants, three indicated receiving WIC and food stamps. All participants except Participant 6 received financial assistance from family. All participants reported having full custody of their children. All participants reported being employed for wages except Participant 8, a home worker. Nine participants identified as Black or African American, and one as White or Caucasian—reference Table 1 for all demographic data.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age Range</i>	<i>Completed Education</i>	<i>Currently Pursuing</i>	<i>Support Given by Mother</i>	<i>Type of Assistance</i>	<i>Type of custody</i>	<i>Employment Status</i>	<i>Race</i>
1	26-30	High School	Bachelor's Degree	100%-85%	N/A	Full Custody	Employed for Wages	Black

2	26-30	High School	Bachelor's Degree	100%-85%	Child Support, WIC & Food Stamps	Full Custody	Employed for Wages	Black
3	41-50	High School	Bachelor's Degree	100%-85%	GI Bill, No Child Support	Full Custody	Employed for Wages	Black
4	36-40	High School	Bachelor's Degree	100%-85%	Child Support, WIC & Food Stamps	Full Custody	Employed for Wages	Black
5	26-30	High School	Bachelor's Degree	100%-85%	Child Support	Full Custody	Employed for Wages	Black
6	26-30	High School	Bachelor's Degree	100%-85%	Child Support, No Family Support	Full Custody	Employed for Wages	Black
7	41-50	High School	Bachelor's Degree	100%-85%	N/A	Full Custody	Employed for Wages	Black
8	36-40	High School	Bachelor's Degree	100%-85%	N/A	Full Custody	Homeworker	Black
9	41-50	High School	Bachelor's Degree	100%-80%	N/A	Full Custody	Employed for Wages	Black
10	41-50	High School	Bachelor's Degree	100%-80%	N/A	Full Custody	Employed for Wages	Caucasian

Data Collection

There was a total of 10 participants in this research study. I used survey data collected from Survey Monkey and the data collected from the semistructured interviews for data sources. Most participant engagement regarding interest in the study came primarily from LinkedIn and TikTok. I used the Zoom video communication conferencing software to record and conduct semistructured interviews with all 10 participants. All participants had their Zoom interviews scheduled according to their availability. I scheduled the interviews via the email the participant used as the primary source of contact. I worked with the chair and methodologist to create a preestablished protocol to ensure alignment with research questions, interview procedures, and overall unfoldment of the interview process. I recorded all interviews via the audio recording feature on Zoom. The average duration of the interviews ranged from 25 to 30 minutes.

All interviews were transcribed manually after their completion. I stored all the electronic data on an external USB drive and kept it in a locked file drawer when the data were not in use. In total, there were 10 transcribed documents, one belonging to each participant. I reviewed the audio recording and transcripts repetitively and constantly to aid in absorbing the research interview data. I reviewed all files and underwent the time-consuming process of manually coding and creating themes and narratives for the interview data.

Data Analysis

I conducted a thematic analysis to analyze the data. This process consisted of a six-phase progression. The process entailed (a) becoming familiar with the research data, (b) generating codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) identifying themes, (e) defining and naming the themes, and (f) producing reports (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Fortunately, I did not experience discrepancies in the cases. However, if discrepancies had been detected, I was prepared to seek aid to assist me in reaching a consensus on understanding the data, coding, and definitions and resolving those discrepancies (Raskind et al., 2019).

Familiarization With Dataset

The first phase of data analysis is familiarizing oneself with the dataset. This step began with Participant 1. After completing that interview, I listened to the audio several times before manually transcribing the interview. After the manual transcription, I listened and read along with the audio to ensure accuracy. This process allowed me to become deeply immersed in the data's content and familiar with the narrative that the initial participant described. While listening and transcribing, I took notes about ideas and

insights the participant brought forward through the interview. I completed this same process with each participant to guarantee that I had sufficient time with all datasets to ensure complete immersion in all the participant interviews. After transcribing each interview, I read through each interview word for word to identify codes, information, themes, and narratives derived from the description, keeping the research question in mind.

Generation of Codes

In the second phase, where I began coding, I systematically analyzed the datasets meticulously, going line by line to identify information that was intriguing or interesting and relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I recognized vital words that were frequent throughout the study. In addition, it is essential to know that when there was no clarity in a statement presented by the interviewee, I summarized my understanding of the statement. With my summarized statement, the participant would either agree with the statement or correct me to ensure accuracy and clarity in all the participants' expressions. Nonetheless, I developed an analytical perspective on the data throughout the coding process. After collecting all the codes, I gathered all relevant data specific to the respective codes.

Search for Themes

In the third phase, I compiled codes to generate themes. This process entailed looking at the cluster of codes and determining the meaning of a cluster of codes. I used my knowledge of this area of research, the research question, and most notably, the data

gathered from the research participants to aid in the generation of codes (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Identify Themes

In the fourth phase, I spent significant time ensuring that the themes derived from the data gathered, and prior knowledge of the topic were substantial. The intention was to ensure that shared meaning came about from the descriptions presented by the participants and not from my personal experience or my perceptions of what the participants might be experiencing.

Define and Name the Themes

Phase 5 was the most tedious because it entailed stepping away from the data to return with a fresh perspective and ensure that the data themes were cultivated with vital core concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Therefore, after creating those initial themes and making adjustments, I took a few days to process the information. As a result, once returning to the data, I could modify the themes to ensure more fortified themes that support the narratives that were presented by the participants. Table 2 displays the themes and the definitions.

Table 2

Themes and Definitions

Theme	Definitions
Enduring while neglecting personal well-being	The theme is defined by the act of taking care of external responsibilities yet neglecting proper care for one's overall health.
Responsibility overload	Managing the responsibilities of mother, father, student, employee, and more all at once

Recognizing the need for adaptive coping and resilience	Despite the experience, they had a desire to regulate themselves when they reached a breaking point or felt overwhelmed.
Intrinsic and external motivation	The motivational factor that they held within themselves and the motivation that came from external influences
Primarily maternal and female support	Most of the support that the single mothers reporting receiving came from a female relative or a female outside of their familial ties.
Strong sense of personal responsibility for situation and current life circumstances	This theme is defined by the participants' sense of personal responsibility as they did not share blame toward anyone in their interviews. They took full responsibility for their circumstances despite the impact that others may have had to cause them to become single mothers.

Produce the Report

In the final phase, the evaluative data come together to tell the stories of the research participants based on the descriptions they provided. Table 3 showcases the data set used to create the narratives on behalf of the research participants. This table presents the research question followed by codes created by meticulously reading and becoming heavily immersed in the data. In addition, the themes helped to describe the codes under a cohesive phrase. Then, finally, the quotes and statements made by the participants generate the overall narrative.

Table 3*Results From Interview Data*

Question	Code (s)	Theme (s)	Supporting quote
1. Describe any challenges or issues you encounter as a single mother who attends college despite experiencing food insecurity?		Enduring while neglecting personal well-being	
	Unintentional self-neglect *Survival mode		Participant 1: I think surviving would be the best word because at the end of the day I just crash.
	*Sleep deprivation		Participant 1: Due to sleep deprivation, it is hard for me to be a good mother and a good student. Participant 3: It's a challenge to work, be a student, lacking in sleep, no personal time and be a mom to my child.
	*Overextension of oneself		Participant 3: I have an older parent that I am providing for who is not working. Participant 5: I don't have the time or energy to spend good quality time with my kids, outside of homework, dinner, or bath. Participant 6: I am too overwhelmed to cook regular food. So, it like, oh lets go to McDonalds!
			Participant 9: My kids have activities and I want to be there to support despite working full-time and wanting to be successful in school.

Question	Code (s)	Theme (s)	Supporting quote
	Financial hardship *Too many solo financial obligations		Participant 2: I provide food at home and while my child is with the babysitter. I am paying double. This is a big financial burden.
			Participant 4: Just having enough money to make it from one period to the next and still focus on studying.
			Participant 5: Overspending because I don't have the time to prepare meals. We take shortcuts just to they can have a meal.
			Participant 7: I make just enough to cover my living expenses.
			Participant 8: I have to pay for everything on my own and that is a big challenge.
			Participant 10: It's difficult to maintain finances and stability to provide adequately for my children and myself.
	Obligation to be a protector/caregiver *Keeping the issues from children, masking realities, *business as usual		Participant 4: Also, I think another big challenge would be making sure my child doesn't know what is happening.

Question	Code (s)	Theme (s)	Supporting quote
2. How would you describe your experience as a single mother pursuing higher education while caring for your children?	*Adverse experience. (Challenging Exhausting, Burdensome, Difficult and Mom Guilt)	Responsibility overload	Participant 1 (Adverse): I would describe my experience as difficult. It's definitely not something I want to experience again.
	*Favorable experience. (Worthwhile, Focused and End Goal)		Participant 5 (Adverse): I feel like I am constantly under some kind of pressure Like I am always in a race with the clock.
			Participant 6 (Adverse): Sometimes, I am in my phone digitally studying, highlighting notes and she like "Look mommy, I did it!" and I missed the moment.
			Participant 7 (Adverse): I think it's a lot of mom guilt. I feel like I miss a lot of events. I feel like I am missing a lot of time, a lot of time with my kids.
			Participant 1 (Favorable): But I think this experience is worth it.
			Participant 3 (Favorable): I always have my mind on the goal.
			Participant 4 (Favorable): Knowing that I'm not just doing this for me helps me to continue.

Question	Code (s)	Theme (s)	Supporting quote
3. What coping strategies you have used to overcome challenges or issues you encountered as a single mother in college?	*Self-care	Recognizing the need for adaptive coping and Resilience	Participant 1: I cry a lot. I pray and journal.
	*Faith in the Creator/God		Participant 2: The biggest thing I do to cope is exercise. So, really being active. I like to pray a lot and create art.
	*Thinking of end goal		Participant 3: I cope by focusing on time management, self-regulating myself, and the end goal.
	*Time Management		Participant 4: I lock myself in the bathroom, take a long shower and he is okay for about 15 minutes.
	*Alone time		Participant 5: I remind myself to take time for myself and take a day to myself.
	*Creative activities		Participant 6: I have picked up meditation and yoga. I also, lock myself in the bathroom for a quick few seconds to do breathing techniques.
	*Support from family &		Participant 7: I went back to church.
	*Friends		Participant 8: Journaling helps when I am in tough moments.
			Participant 9: I like to bake and listen to music. Anything that will help me wind down
			Participant 10: I love to cook, and I get strength from my spiritual mother.

Question	Code (s)	Theme (s)	Supporting quote
4. What has motivated you to continue your path to obtaining your college degree despite the challenges you may have been experiencing?	End goal Financial Improvements Self-fulfillment Better future for my child/Family	Intrinsic and External motivation	<p>Participant 1: Knowing that I will be able to make a lot of money at the end of it. Also, I am doing this for my son but mostly for me.</p> <p>Participant 5: I am motivated by career options and an increase in my finances. Also, to provide a better life for my children.</p> <p>Participant 6: Honestly, having my daughter is my motivation.</p> <p>Participant 7: My mom. And this is the one thing that is for me.</p> <p>Participant 8: Making more money. I had goals before I became a mother, and they still exist.</p> <p>Participant 9: my kids motivate me.</p> <p>Participant 10: My motivation is a long-term commitment I made 10 myself years ago.</p>

Question	Code (s)	Theme (s)	Supporting quote
5. What emotional support that you have received from family and friends?	Mother	Primarily maternal and female support	<p>Participant 1: My mother has been my biggest support. She brings my son to school so that I can breastfeed him between classes. Also, my grandmother encourages me.</p> <p>Participant 3: I have a life coach to encourage and motivate me.</p> <p>Participant 4: I am very, very blessed with my mom, my dad, and literally my brothers. They all help me.</p> <p>Participant 5: I have family and friends that I can vent to and reassure me that I am doing a good job.</p> <p>Participant 6: Honestly, none.</p> <p>Participant 7: I had to create my own circle or family</p> <p>Participant 8: Not much family support. Support from some friends.</p> <p>Participant 9: My sisters.</p> <p>Participant 10: My spiritual mother has been my greatest support.</p>
	Grandmother		
	Siblings		
	Life Coach (Outsourcing)		
	None		
	Spiritual mother		

Question	Code (s)	Theme (s)	Supporting quote
6. Throughout your experience as a single mother college student, describe how you feel overall regarding managing your competing responsibilities?	Overwhelming Grateful/worth it Stressful Exhausting Obligated (My child is watching me) Appreciative Encouraging Experience Rewarding	Strong sense of personal responsibility for the situation and current life circumstances	<p>Participant 1: The overall feeling is overwhelmed. I feel like I am close to drowning, but I don't, I keep swimming. In some place deep in the waters just trying to keep my head up.</p> <p>Participant 3: The overall experience is stressful and exhausting, but I keep pushing because I keep the endpoint in mind.</p> <p>Participant 4: I know it might sound crazy but I am grateful for having to go through everything. I am grateful for this season allowing me to be stronger for future seasons.</p> <p>Participant 5: I am appreciative of my progress this far despite being overwhelmed and feeling a lot of pressure.</p> <p>Participant 6: Honestly, it is very overwhelming trying to balance it all.</p> <p>Participant 7: It's overwhelming. I am learning to show myself grace.</p> <p>Participant 8: Very overwhelming.</p> <p>Participant 9: I feel encouraged. My eyes are on the finish line.</p> <p>Participant 10: Overall, it has been rewarding.</p>

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In this study, I ensured the accuracy and trustworthiness of my findings by confirming the accuracy of all participants. In this section, there will be a presentation of the evidence of the fidelity demonstrated throughout this study. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are the four criteria of trustworthiness demonstrated in this study and discussed in this section.

Credibility

I established credibility by ensuring prolonged contact with the research participants, conducting member checks, accomplishing saturation (Kostere & Kostere, 2021), and asking for clarification and understanding of each participant's response to ensure the data was collected and transcribed the actual verbal response of each participant and not researcher interpretation of their responses. I connected with all participants to ensure they understood the protocol of the interview, the process, and the flow. Secondly, after the participant interviews, I reviewed notes with each participant to confirm that the data accurately depicts their perceptions of their experiences within the phenomena. Thirdly, I interviewed until saturation and ensured no new information developments from the participant interview (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Finally, I utilized a peer to review and analyze findings to aid in eliminating the potential for researcher biases, elevating research quality, and establishing validity.

Reflexivity was achieved by being mindful of thinking about myself as the interviewer and omitting thoughts of personal experiences about the research topic. I only considered the information presented by the research participants. I only considered

word-for-word information stated by research participants and only reworded or paraphrased if it was paraphrased during the interview and confirmed by the research participant being interviewed. Omitting personal interpretation was to achieve alignment with any other perspectives outside of what they have provided.

Transferability

I established transferability and external validity by using thick descriptions through the rich portrayal of the circumstances of the research participants (Stahl & King, 2020). The research was descriptive and provided detailed descriptions and the interpretation of the data that the research could observe (Shenton, 2004). I had participants on differing phases of their journey during the selection process, which helped to achieve a multitude of experiences.

Dependability

I established trust through triangulation. To achieve dependability, I incorporated a peer debriefing to integrate scrutiny of the research data (Stahl & King, 2020). I had another researcher read over the notes and data collected to get feedback before proceeding with the research study. I heavily exercise reflexive auditing by immersing myself in the research.

Confirmability

I achieved confirmability by ensuring the data and findings only represented the research participants' experiences and not my perspective (Shenton, 2004). I utilized reflexivity to achieve confirmability because I was mindful of keeping an objective reality present. Having an objective reality prevented me from creating a reality from

personal findings. It forced me to rely on precisions and accuracy from the data collected from the participants (Stahl & King, 2020).

Results

This segment covers the codes and themes from a more in-depth perspective.

Table 4 shows the themes, the number of participants who produced descriptions to support that theme, and the number of participants' references from the overall data set.

This section also goes in-depth with each of the codes and themes derived from the research and excerpts are prominent and support the themes.

Table 4

Overview of Themes

Theme	Number of Supporting Participants	Number of References
Enduring while neglecting personal wellbeing	6	19
Responsibility overload	10	11
Recognizing the need for adaptive coping and resilience	8	18
Intrinsic and External motivation	10	15
Primarily maternal and female support	7	10
Strong sense of personal responsibility for the situation and current life circumstances	10	23

Enduring While Neglecting Personal Well-Being

The initial code that derived from the preliminary question was unintentional self-neglect. This code came from words like survival mode, sleep deprivation, and over-extension of oneself. Another code that derived from the first question was financial hardship due to having too many solo financial obligations. Finally, the last code that developed from that data was an obligation to be a protector/caregiver due to keeping the

issues away from the children and continuing with business as usual, as though the participants were not experiencing hardships. The theme that derived from the initial question was enduring while neglecting personal well-being. Evidence to support the theme of enduring while neglecting personal well-being came from Participant One, who stated: "I think surviving would be the best word because, at the end of the day, I just crash."

Regarding sleep deprivation, research participants one and three reflected on the impact of the lack of sleep on their ability to continue their educational endeavors. Next, in the code on overextension, four participants stated ways they are doing more than they know their bodies could take on and still maintain good health. For example, Participant Four said, "I don't have the time or energy to spend good quality time with my kids, outside of homework, dinner or bath." Fourthly is the code for financial hardship. Despite these single mothers' variations in income levels, many expressed some financial hardship due to too many solo financial responsibilities. Of the six participants who stated economic issues, Participant Four said, "Just having enough money to make it from one period to the next and still focus on studying." Finally, the last code was being a protector or a caregiver. This code was an inherent obligation to be a protector or caregiver. Participant Four expressed that one of her challenges was trying to protect her child from knowing the truth about the difficulties that they were experiencing.

Responsibility Overload

The code derived from the second question was perceived adverse and perceived favorable experiences. The codes that came about from perceived adverse and perceived

favorable experiences were challenging, exhausting, burdensome, complex, and experiencing mom guilt. Therefore, the theme of this question was responsibility overload. While listening to the interviews, some of the participants cried as they described their experiences, and while hearing them share, one could listen to the distress in some of their voices. Then, after recovering from those moments, the affected participants got right back into the interview as if they were experiencing one of their daily struggles. Essentially, cry to release the emotions and continue with business as usual.

Regarding the adverse experiences, the codes were worthwhile, focused, and end goal. One of the statements that stood out regarding the perceived negative experiences was Participant Five, who stated, "I feel like I am constantly under some kind of pressure like I am always in a race with the clock." Regarding the favorable experiences, the one that stood out most was "I always have my mind on the goal."

Recognizing the Need for Adaptive Coping and Resilience

Self-care, faith in the creator/God, thinking of an end goal, time management, alone time, creative activities, and supportive family and friends were the codes derived from the third question. The theme of these codes was recognizing the need for adaptive coping and resilience. Participant One states, "I cry a lot. I pray and journal." This statement was the most impactful statement from the participant when asked this question because it exposed the vulnerability that single mothers may experience in this situation and the desire to self-regulate by praying and journaling so that they can persevere with resilience.

Intrinsic and External Motivation

From the fourth question, the codes were the end goal, financial improvements, self-sufficiency, and a better future for my child/family. The theme that came about from those codes was intrinsic and external motivations. All participants stated that they were externally motivated by circumstances and people that directly impact their daily lives and life outcomes. For example, regarding intrinsic motivation, participant 10 stated, “My motivation is a long-term commitment I made ten myself years ago.” Other participants also described achieving this endeavor for oneself as a primary motivational factor. Concerning external motivation, Participant Six stated, “Honestly, having my daughter is my motivation.” Along with having their children be their external motivating factor, they noted the potential for more money, better career opportunities, and being motivated simply by completing the degree, thus achieving that end goal.

Primarily Maternal and Female Support

The codes from the fifth question were mother, grandmother, siblings, life coach, siblings, none, and spiritual mother. The theme that came from these questions was primary maternal and female support. Seven participants mentioned some support from a female, whether a mother, sister, grandmother, or an organization primarily consisting of women (sorority). Participant One stated, “My mother has been my biggest support because she brings my son to school so I can breastfeed him between classes. Also, my grandmother encourages me.”

Strong Sense of Personal Responsibility

Finally, for the sixth question, the codes that surfaced were overwhelming, grateful/worth it, stressful, exhausting, obligated (my child is watching me), appreciative, encouraging experience, and rewarding. The theme was a strong sense of personal responsibility for the situation and current life circumstances. The research participants demonstrated the mindset of personal responsibility and accountability throughout the interview; however, this description encompasses the entire theme. Participant One stated:

So, the grand feeling is just an overwhelming feeling. I feel like I am always half underwater, always trying to come up to breathe. That's how I feel like I am so close to drowning, but I don't drown; I keep swimming, I keep treading water, so that is my overall feeling. It's like I'm someplace in deep waters, just trying to keep my head up.

This statement uses a metaphor to represent what some of the participants are experiencing visually but is more descriptive.

Summary

In summary, in this chapter, I presented the findings from this research study. I derived the research outcomes from this study from all the correspondence from the participants and the ten semistructured interviews completed with each of the 10 participants. I utilized a six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) in *using thematic analysis in psychology* to conduct the thematic analysis of the research data.

The primary research question was, "How do single mothers with food insecurity describe their experiences pursuing higher education?" The initial question aimed to understand the experience of being a single mother going to college without considering the experience of food insecurity. The theme that was derived was enduring while neglecting personal well-being. The second question sought to gather descriptions of experiences as a single mother pursuing higher education while caring for children. The theme that derived from this question was responsibility overloads. Although the experiences were both adverse and favorable, they all experienced an overload of responsibility. The third question aimed to understand and discover the coping strategies used to overcome potential challenges. The theme that came about from the third question was recognizing the need for coping strategies and resilience. Fourthly, the question aimed to find out their motivation to continue with their degrees. The theme of these questions was both intrinsic and external motivation. They were all motivated to continue, but different things inspired them. In the fifth question, we strived to figure out what emotional support these mothers received from friends and family. The theme that came about from this question was primarily maternal and female support.

Finally, in the sixth question, the participants were split in half regarding their overall experience, with the primary response being overwhelmed. However, the participants used other words to describe the adverse and favorable overall experience. However, because they were not all on the same page regarding their feelings, the theme was a strong sense of personal responsibility for the situation and current life

circumstances. This theme came about because, despite their experiences, they knew that or felt it was up to them to achieve their endeavor for themselves and their children or families.

In Chapter 5 there will be an introduction, interpretations of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications for social change, and a conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Single motherhood is a phenomenon that has steadily been on an incline and is not showing signs of declining. There is a plethora of reasons as to why single motherhood is so prevalent and a multitude of impacts that single motherhood has on those living through this experience. In this qualitative study, I aimed to understand how single mothers undergoing food insecurity describe their experiences while pursuing higher education.

Due to the saturation in research regarding quantitative data addressing single motherhood and academics, this research study utilized a qualitative approach. Many statistics address the numbers relating to this demographic and their experience; however, more research must provide information that accurately depicts single mothers' college student narratives and how they describe their experiences. More specifically, the generic qualitative approach was chosen due to its ability to allow more flexibility due to the limited structure of this qualitative approach. This study was conducted to add to this research arena by expanding the understanding of this demographic's perceived experiences regarding their professed limitations, coping strategies, and incorporation of resilience.

The themes that developed from this research were the following: (a) enduring while neglecting personal well-being, (b) responsibility overload, (c) recognizing the need for adaptative coping and resilience, (d) intrinsic and external motivation, (e)

primarily maternal and female support, (f) a strong sense of personal responsibility for the situation and current life circumstances.

In this chapter, I interpret the research from the findings presented in Chapter 4. There will be an interpretation of the findings and how those findings are and can be incorporated into the overall understanding of their phenomenon. In addition, this chapter will address the limitations of this study, its recommendations, and implications for social change, followed by a conclusion.

Interpretation of the Findings

In this section, I explore the interpretations from Chapter 4. To make this section more concise, I break down the information into themes from the coding process of this research study.

Enduring While Neglecting Personal Well-Being

The initial theme of enduring while neglecting personal well-being was explored in the literature reviews. Research articles (Shenoy et al., 2016; Taylor & Conger, 2017) explored the impact of self-negligence that single mothers experience while being the primary caregivers for their children. My research was not intended to have African American women as the primary demographic regarding participation in this study. However, African American women were the prominent respondents to this research study. With that said, it is worth noting how enduring while neglecting personal well-being could be closely associated with the African American female single mother experience. Because of this finding, it was worth exploring the role of the “strong Black woman.”

In 2016, a study conducted by Nelson et al. examined the perceptions of 30 Black women regarding what it means to be a strong Black woman. Five characteristics evolved from this qualitative study: independence, caring for family and others, hard-working and high achieving, overcoming adversity, and being emotionally contained (Nelson et al., 2016). All these concepts arose in this research. However, because this research did not pertain specifically to Black/African American women, it was not discovered until the data retrieved from this dissertation study were interpreted. However, specifically from Nelson et al.'s research study, the characteristic that stood out aligns with this dissertation study and this first theme of being “emotionally contained.” As referenced, regarding problem-focused coping being the primary coping strategy to be emotionally contained, personal matters and emotions must be kept at bay. Keeping emotions at bay and contained is generally a trait associated with masculinity in addition to a characteristic associated with being a strong Black woman. However, on the other hand, this emotional containment can be associated with working mothers in general due to the guilt of the mother, which is culturally associated with being a good mother within society.

Nevertheless, with the omission of racial identity, the findings from this research add layers of responsibility as they are not only single mothers; they are tasked with attempting to figure out how to spread their time adequately across all competing responsibilities. Regarding Lazarus and Folkman’s psychological stress and coping theory, it is believed that people constantly appraise the stimuli they experience in an environment (Biggs et al., 2017). These appraisals are either primary, secondary, or reappraisal. The emotions experienced are either threatening, challenging, or harmful. To

a degree, it is safe to say that these single mothers experienced all these emotions; however, challenging is the most prevalent experience from the research gathered from this study. Thus, from these emotions, one will choose to take on either emotion-based coping or a problem-focused coping approach.

As noted in the study by Ahmad et al. (2018), results indicated that the participants (female heads of household) leaned more towards a problem-focused approach as the participants were primarily concerned with managing their environments and the situation. For example, time management and goal setting (Sharma, 2023) were all aspects of each participant's interview. However, it is essential to note that the participants also incorporated an emotion-focused coping strategy. However, it appears that this strategy came when the participants gave the impression of feeling "out of control" regarding their environment and had to seek inward to self-regulate themselves. For example, several participants mentioned exercising, finding time and space to relax, meditation, yoga, and spiritual/faith-based practices. With all this said, current literature supports the social belief that motherhood requires one to be selfless to a degree higher than the male counterpart. However, to take on the role of a village (i.e., mom, dad, etc.) as a single person creates unrealistic expectations of a mother, let alone a single mother. Perhaps the guilt associated with being a single mother and "failing" oneself, marriage, or children can be associated with moral masochism, which is when feelings of guilt lead to the need for suffering (Bronstein, 2022), as to some degree, these single mothers are self-harming by neglecting their mental well-being to achieve a level of accomplishment or success that is attainable at whatever cost.

Responsibility Overload

The second theme from the semistructured interviews of this research study was responsibility overload. The single mothers in this research study took on most of the burdens of parenthood while managing other demanding aspects of life. Further exploration of responsibility overload uncovered a concept referred to as *intensive mothering*. Intensive mothering is the societal expectation that prescribes what it means to be a good mother (Forbes et al., 2020). According to this article, good mothering expectations require a mom to provide their children with copious amounts of time, energy, and material resources. In addition, according to societal expectations of being a “good mother,” they cannot prioritize personal or career goals, as the child must be put first. These unrealistic expectations create unrealistic parenting standards and can create a barrier to the mother's mental health and development, in addition to hindering the mental development of their children. However, because the concept of intensive mothering is deeply ingrained within U.S. society, women need help to stray from that concept. However, research indicates that mothers who do not subscribe to an unrealistic view regarding motherhood are less susceptible to adverse outcomes.

However, the mothers who do subscribe to the unrealistic responsibility load have to find ways in which to cope with their life circumstances. Thus, to cope with the competing demands, these single mothers within this dissertation research study took a problem-focused approach to dealing with their stress and high demands. With this theme, the responsibilities are primarily external, regarding issues or situations that are not manageable internally but externally. The “luxury” of self-regulation and self-care is

often suppressed due to the time that it would require to step back from external responsibilities. As a result, the research participants attested to neglecting to prioritize internal issues (i.e., feelings, emotions, etc.). There were instances within this theme where the participants spoke about taking a quick moment away to self-regulate. However, the external problems were the focus, not the emotional load associated with said problems.

Essentially, a study conducted by Malka et al. (2020), discussed in the theoretical foundation of this research study, found that disengagement was a coping strategy used by single mothers to cope with their daily life stressors. This confirms and adds to the existing body of knowledge concerning ways in which single mothers cope with distressing situations. The preference for problem-focused coping over emotion-focused coping also aligns with the initial themes of neglecting personal well-being.

Recognizing the Need for Adaptive Coping and Resilience

The third theme of recognizing the need for adaptive coping and resilience describes the subconscious knowing of the need for self-preservation. Although these single mothers used both problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping, emotion-focused coping was used primarily to prevent oneself from disengaging altogether. From the research participants' responses, self-care was not the primary concern as they all had many external obligations that required them to show up regardless of their emotional state. However, there was a common inherent understanding that, to some degree, self-care, self-acknowledgment, and the use of resilience must come together for them to move forward with their educational endeavors. This concept aligns with the study from

Beeler (2016), where it was discussed that at some point, single mothers will fall short of being able to provide all responsibilities with adequate attention needed to flourish, even if that means sacrificing themselves to prioritize the needs of their children.

In addition, these mothers recognize an intrinsic need to incorporate coping and resilience, and the act of fulfilling this need could result in experiencing parental burnout. Parental burnout is associated with undergoing situations where one becomes exhausted due to being physically and emotionally overwhelmed by one's parental responsibilities (Hubert & Aujoulat, 2018). Three characteristics are associated with parental burnout, which are physical and emotional exhaustion, emotional distancing from one's children, and a sense of incompetency in one's parenting role. However, for this research, I focused more on maternal burnout. Maternal burnout occurs when mothers with children over 18 months of age and 2 years of age experience the feeling of being a lesser parent. These deleterious feelings are based on feeling as though they do not meet societal standards of prime maternal performance. Also, it is essential to note that the depressive mood is not generalized by experience concerning one's parental role and tasks.

The concept of parental burnout was explored in a study by Herbert et al. (2018). This study intended to give voice to exhausted mothers so that there could be a better understanding of what it means to be exhausted concerning one's parental roles. From the five participants and the 8 months of in-depth interviews, I discovered that these single mothers overinvested in their maternal role for a significant amount of time before they started to experience exhaustion. The concepts that arose from the overinvestment and maternal tasks to exhaustion were perfectionism, self-pressure, and projection. In this

study, although the mothers were not all adjusting to adaptive coping strategies, they were doing what they could to maintain, which resulted in surviving as if being on automatic pilot. Although there are more effective approaches than this, there are still ways of coping for the time being. So essentially, from this research, it was coping by any means necessary, which was relevant to the information that was gathered from this dissertation research.

Intrinsic and External Motivation

Naturally, the theme of motivation would surface when one is faced with adversity and continues to persevere regardless of those circumstances. Thus, intrinsic and external motivation was the fourth theme for this research study. In fact, according to Ramos and Tus (2020), personal motivation, education history, and financial income are all factors that are prone to influence the single mother experience. Thus, regarding the theme of intrinsic and external motivation, the research participants exercised both inherent and external motivation. According to Theodoratou et al. (2023), intrinsic motivation is associated with active coping, involvement in personal objectives, and emotions.

Not a significant amount of research has explored the different types of motivation mothers practice throughout their life endeavors while balancing motherhood. There was a lot of research, however, that explored a mother's ability to continue despite the circumstances (Chung et al., 2017; Malka et al., 2020; Morales et al., 2021). However, these pieces of research were all associated with some sacrifice on the mother's part; this dissertation research study did uncover aspects of motivation that the mothers

expressed using to move forward. With that said, the mothers utilized problem-focused coping strategies more frequently.

Though problem-focused coping is influenced by external motivations, fundamentally, there is an issue or problem in the environment that is causing the individual stress, but because it is outside of the individual's emotional realm, they have to create a way to solve said problem. Thus, taking an active approach involves steps that enable the individual to directly address obstacles in achieving their end goal. The use of these coping strategies interchangeably confirms and extends to the current knowledge regarding a single mother's motivation to endure.

Primarily Maternal and Female Support

The fifth theme of primarily maternal and female support came about because all the research participants expressed some female support, whether from a mother, sister, grandmother, or extended female family member or friend. Fewer than three participants mentioned anything about the ability to get support from a male. The limited male support could be because females are more inclined to view emotional support as a coping strategy than males (Theodoratou et al., 2023). In addition, gender plays a significant role in how people choose to cope with life stressors. Women are more likely to use emotion-based coping strategies such as expressing emotions and seeking emotional support. Males tend to primarily use problem-focused coping as they strive to resolve issues they are experiencing actively. It is important to note that emotion-focused coping is not a coping strategy that can be used long term as it allows an individual to avoid the issue that they are currently facing. Emotion-focused coping is helpful in the

moment to evolve past the feelings and emotions that one is feeling at a particular moment in time.

It is important to note that there are gender differences associated with loneliness and the need for social support to manage stress. In a study conducted in 2016, Lee and Goldstein sought to understand social support and how it is essential to the individual's well-being; thus, within their study, they tried to understand the impact of the different sources of social support that one might receive while in college. It is known that social support is essential when protecting individuals against difficult situations throughout their lifespan. This study, however, consisted of 636 ethnically diverse students and sought to understand how social support impacted them as they ventured through their academic experience in college. It is essential to note the gender differences in developing social relationships. Because this dissertation research is primarily associated with the female gender, that is where this information will focus. This research indicates that intimate relationships and associated emotions are generally emphasized in the early socialization of young girls and not so much with young boys (Lee & Goldstein, 2016). In this study, the researchers found three specific sources of support: family, friends, and romantic partners. Relationships with friends and romantic partners help alleviate loneliness. In addition, the research found that the perception of low support from family or friends was relatively deleterious for female college students. With that said, during this period, it is essential for maternal support through the practice of getting advice and emotional support from the family of origin. This research supports the fact that most of

the participants in this dissertation research had a significant amount of female and maternal support.

The gender differentiation regarding preferred coping strategies could also be why the research participants were more inclined to lean towards problem-focused coping and relied on emotion-focused coping in times of emergencies and distress. This interpretation adds another layer to the already existing body of research exploring how single mother's cope.

Strong Sense of Personal Responsibility for Situation/Current Life Circumstances

Mom guilt is a concept explored in research about motherhood. Due to mom guilt, the theme of *a strong sense of personal responsibility* for all the research participants surfaced as the final theme of this research study. A mother's sense of her actions never being enough for their children perpetuates the fear of being a bad mother (Collins, 2021). This information extends the knowledge from the Chapter 2 literature review, as the concept of mom guilt was not mentioned heavily as a prominent component in existing research about this phenomenon. This sense of sole responsibility can also be attributed to the unrealistic standards of being a "good mother."

In 2023, there was a case study conducted by Fensie et al., (2023), on distance learning education and working mothers; a concept of dysfunctional high standards surfaced regarding the research that was conducted. In this research study, they sought to understand the experience of six academically high-achieving working mother students as they participated in a distance learning course during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This case study showed how family support and feelings of guilt impact how mothers manage their competing responsibilities (Fensie et al., 2023). In addition, this case study shows how a mother's feelings of guilt derive from the belief that their failures and the inability to be in control results in them feeling unable to balance all of their competing responsibilities. Also, this case study indicates that mothers are more likely to suffer at a disproportionately higher rate than single fathers regarding a dysfunctional high standard regarding what it means to parent. The experience of having dysfunctional high standards could be why these single mothers take more responsibility for their situation because they feel obligated to their children based on the current circumstances that they are facing, regardless of whether they are responsible for their circumstances or not.

To a degree, however, mom guilt can be productive, and perhaps the pressure that mom guilt puts on mothers serves as a motivational source for them to continue to endure to reach some arbitrary standard of what it means to be a good mother. Standards include child-centered, self-sacrificing, intensive mothering, and all energy being placed on their children (Collins, 2021). All of these can set a mother up for failure if she is striving to achieve other things in life or if she is a single mother. This theme adds to the ever-expanding knowledge of the pressure that single mothers put on themselves and the pressure they experience from trying to be a "good mom" in the eyes of society.

Limitations of the Study

This study aimed to understand the experiences of single mothers attending school while undergoing food insecurity. Naturally, in this research, we experienced

limitations, and the initial restriction of this study was the exclusion of single mothers pursuing secondary education higher than a bachelor's degree. The exclusion of single mothers pursuing education beyond a bachelor's degree limits the ability of this research to describe narratives of their experiences across all levels of higher education.

Next, the second limitation regarding transferability was prevalent because the data was not generalizable. From the descriptions presented by the participants, none of their narratives aligned, as their experiences were all unique to the individuals presenting the information. That is why thick descriptions are incorporated, and explanations are provided to ensure accessibility and understanding for all readers of this research study.

The third limitation was the potential difficulty of the participants in following through with the research as they were already limited in time. This limitation presented itself when interviews with these mothers were rescheduled multiple times due to cancelation arising from their competing responsibilities. The final limitation is that nine out of the 10 participants identified as Black/African American, and one identified as White/Caucasian. Most of this data is from one cultural perspective versus a spectrum of cultures containing single mothers who are having this experience.

Recommendations

From this research, I sought to gather a deeper understanding of the single mothers' perspectives regarding their experiences of pursuing higher education while undergoing food insecurity. From this research, four primary recommendations may be helpful for further exploration in the area of research to gather a more in-depth understanding of this demographic and the phenomenon. The initial recommendation is

that future research should be more expansive and include degrees beyond bachelor's degrees. One of the criteria for this research was that the mother was not pursuing a degree higher than a bachelor's degree. Therefore, mothers in the process of completing higher levels of education may have a different level of resilience, considering they have already completed a four-year degree. Perhaps a mother began her single parenthood journey while working on a master's or PhD. These experiences exist as one can find an article or two on a personal blog of a mother describing her experience pursuing a master's degree or higher as a single mother. However, little to no research explores this phenomenon across the academic diaspora.

Secondly, the impact of enduring while neglecting personal well-being, the responsibility overload, and the strong sense of personal responsibility for the situation and current life circumstances on their mental and physical health. Single mothers are likely to experience stress from trying to maintain a work-life balance, emotional struggles, lack of financial support, and pressure from a multitude of sources. In addition, it is common knowledge that the primary person caring for a child, male or female, will experience the pressures of overload. Lastly, that strong sense of personal responsibility or the internal locus of control is also worth exploring. Future research would help investigate the impact of these three themes on this demographic.

Next is understanding and more in-depth descriptions of primarily maternal and female support. This theme may be unique to this research; however, this theme is still worth exploring as it is something that is happening with this demographic and it would be beneficial to this demographic to understand why it is so. The research participants

spoke of a plethora of female assistance. However, very few talked about the male assistance and impact they received throughout this experience.

The final recommendation is to examine their stick-to-itiveness and resilience and why there is such a strong sense of personal responsibility for the situation and current life circumstances, as they did not blame anyone. They take full responsibility for the problem regardless of the circumstances that brought them to this experience. They all possessed an internal locus of control; essentially, the power over a situation comes from within.

Implications for Social Change

From the data gathered from this research study, several implications for social change came about that can lead to the potential application of social change on many levels. The initial implication can be applied on an individual level as this research data can assist single mothers with learning that they are among a group of individuals who are having this experience in a unique way. This research can bring attention to ways in which single mothers pursuing secondary education while undergoing food insecurity cope regarding both maladaptive and adaptive. This research can also explain how and when problem-focused or emotion-focused coping strategies are used throughout their day-to-day experiences. The themes allow mothers to see which ones they associate with and find a way to change or modify a theme to suit them and their children.

Secondly, on a family level, this research can shed light on the need for conversations. This research can provide information to facilitate a discussion regarding the potential stress a single mother in college may be experiencing. After a family

conversation, awareness in areas that an individual within that family may be lacking and may desire to show up for the single mother and the children within that family. This support could be food, financial, watching the kids, or assisting with homework. Support in any way the family or friends of that single mother have the capacity for aid on this academic endeavor.

Thirdly, on an organizational level, this data can assist stakeholders within the community responsible for helping this demographic and can see the new ways these single mothers require aid. This research could ignite further research within specific community demographics to determine their needs. Perhaps they don't need food but better ways to prepare food. Maybe they don't need money but ways for which they are better able to manage money. Perhaps there can be an incorporation of a course that will educate all student mothers on coping strategies and ways for which strategies are helpful long term and short term. In addition, attention can be brought to adaptive and adaptive coping strategies. In addition, if specific resources are out of immediate reach, stakeholders can research potential resources and make them accessible to single mothers who need that information.

Finally, on a societal/policy level, leaders within the government can use the findings from this research to see what similar and unique experiences single mother college students face. In addition, this research can give an understanding of the psychological and mental states that these single mothers described during their interviews. The research from this study showcases the information from a group of single mothers who demonstrate a high level of personal responsibility and an unyielding

drive through the incorporation of resilience. With that information, mental health resources can be provided to this demographic to aid in mental care management while they endure.

Regarding methodological implications, throughout this research study, the participants demonstrated a level of comfortability and vulnerability, thus implicating that the lack of structure offered by this method allowed me and the participants to be more relaxed and feel free and comfortable to be candid. Participants were allowed to express themselves freely in a judgment-free zone.

Conclusion

The generic qualitative research study sought to gather descriptions of the experiences of single mothers pursuing higher education while undergoing food insecurity. This study aimed to examine the lack of understanding and awareness of the different and unique experiences that single mothers undergo while enduring this experience. The findings from this research study derived from electronic correspondence and semistructured individual interviews with ten single mothers pursuing higher education while undergoing food insecurity. Some criteria that the single mothers met were being the primary caregivers and providing most of their children's financial responsibility. The research data was analyzed via the 6-step thematic analysis model. Through the analysis, I developed six themes from the semistructured interviews with the ten research participants.

Those six themes were (a) enduring while neglecting personal well-being, (b) responsibility overload, (c) recognizing the need for adaptive coping and resilience, (d)

intrinsic and external motivation, (e) primarily maternal and female support, (f) a strong sense of personal responsibility for the situation and current life circumstances. The research participants had similar yet unique experiences regarding life demands and responsibilities; however, they fluctuated between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Despite the obstacles these single mothers faced and are facing at some time in their journey, they still desired to remain steadfast and unyielding as they approached completing their secondary educational degrees. As stated previously, a plethora of quantitative research supports the experiences of single mothers pursuing higher education; however, very little information depicts their unique experiences to provide a broader perspective of how these single-mother college students are living their day-to-day lives. This information was worth exploring so that there could be an understanding that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing this demographic, whether it's more so understanding the individual needs and providing resources and informing them of resources so that they know where they can go if they need help.

This research study only provides information from the experiences of 10 single mother college students pursuing higher education while undergoing food insecurity, and with that said, several other single mothers out there have even more unique experiences that are not being explored in this way. Further research can continue to address this gap in research and gather more narratives regarding how these single mothers describe their experiences. For society to assume that they are all under one umbrella of an experience is limiting to them, their children, and society overall because their desire to be contributors to society is evident as they embark upon this journey, seemingly undaunted.

Thus, with a deeper understanding, we will better serve this demographic and better serve society in the future.

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Appendix A: General Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire for Single College Students Mothers with Children.

1. Age

Ages 18-25

Ages 26-30

Ages 31-35

Ages 36-40

Ages 41-50

2. What level of education have you completed?

- High school Diploma
- Certificate
- Associate's degree
- Bachelor's Degree

3. What level of education are you currently pursuing?

- Certificate
- Associate's Degree
- Bachelor's Degree

4. What percentage indicates the average level of financial support you provide for your child/children?

- 100% -85 %
- 84% -75 %
- 74% -60%
- 50 % or less

5. Do you receive any of the following, if so, indicate which one (s)?

- WIC

- Food Stamps
- Child Support
- Family, friends, and community support (Financial)

6. Custody

- Full Custody
- Shared custody, with you having the child over 50% of the time.

7. Employment Status

- Employed for wages
- Self-employed
- Out of work and looking for work
- Out of work but not currently looking for work
- A homemaker
- A student
- Retired
- Unable to work

8. Race

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other (Specify _____)

Appendix B: Semistructured Interview Questions

Issues of Food and Nutritional Insecurity

1. Describe any challenges or issues you encounter as a single mother who attends college despite experiencing food insecurity.

Coping Strategies and Assistance

2. How would you describe your experience as a single mother pursuing higher education while caring for your children?

3. What coping strategies have you used to overcome challenges or issues you've encountered as a single mother in college?

4. What has motivated you to continue your path toward obtaining your college degree despite the challenges you may have been experiencing?

5. What emotional support that you have received from family and friends?

Wrap Up Question

6. Throughout your experience as a single mother college student, describe how you feel overall regarding managing your competing responsibilities.