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# The Relationship Between Stress, Coping Strategies, and Social Support Among Single Mothers

Nikitra Yvette Williams  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Walden University  
2016

Abstract

The Relationship Between Stress, Coping Strategies, and Social Support Among

Single Mothers

by

Nikitra Yvette Williams

MS, Walden University, 2010

BS, Strayer University, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

General Educational Psychology

Walden University

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## Abstract

Researchers have neglected to focus on understanding the relationships between stress, coping, and social support among single mothers versus mothers who are not single. Knowledge regarding how single mothers' lives are affected by stress, social support, and coping is important, and such information can help readers better understand how effectively single mothers raise children compared with mothers who are not single. A convenience sample of 173 mothers completed this study. Participants in this study consisted of mothers who were (a) raising at least one child ages 18 and under who lives in the home and (b) who were between the ages 20 to 55 years old with a 12th-grade education or greater. Participants were classified into single mothers (those who reported their status as single, to include never married, separated, divorced, in a committed relationship, and widowed;  $n = 75$ ) and those who were not single (those who reported their status as married,  $n = 98$ ). Data were scored based on 3 measurement scales: (a) the Perceived Stress Scale, (b) the Ways of Coping Questionnaire, (c) and the Social Support Scale. An independent samples  $t$  test determined that mothers who were not single had higher social support than did single mothers, whereas single mothers had higher perceived stress than mothers who were not single. There were no significant differences on measures of coping. An analysis of covariance revealed no significant difference between stress and coping strategies among the mothers when social support was held constant. This study contributes to social change by providing awareness of the importance of social support to professionals and for single mothers. The findings of this quantitative study can thus guide single parenting research and interventions.

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## Dedication

This work is dedicated to the loving memory of my mother, Janice Faye Williams, whose belief is pushing beyond the stars even when I felt like giving up. She inspired me to aim higher in my education. I watched her many years holding it down as a stay-at-home mom raising all four of her children while my dad went out to work every single day. Many people may think it is easy being a stay-at-home mom. There is much work to be done day in and day out. She made many sacrifices to make sure that all of her children were well taken care of even when times were hard. She gave up her teaching career to raise her family. She taught me love, strength, perseverance, and courage. Because of this, I am able to be an awesome mother to my two children, Teyiah and Xavier, and a wonderful sister to my three brothers Mike, Gerald, and Maurice. As a single mother, I've learned how to cope and manage with the daily stressors that often come my way. I greatly appreciate the struggles and obstacles that I have overcome to be the person I am today.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

The number of single-parent households has increased dramatically. In the United States, approximately 1.74 million households are headed by single fathers, whereas nearly 9.88 million households are headed by single mothers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Although researchers have conducted studies on general topics about single parenting, fewer studies have focused on the views that society and individuals hold about single parents (DeJean, McGeorge, & Stone-Carlson, 2012). Moreover, single parents need to balance work and family. In two-parent homes, mothers are usually the nurturers of the family, whereas the men are breadwinners. In today's society, roles have changed for many women. They are working long hours and having to balance family at the same time. Single mothers tend to have more role strain in raising children alone than do women who are not single, and single parenting demands often turn into stress and conflict between family and work (Robbins & McFadden, 2003). Single mothers' perceptions of raising children alone often go unnoticed. Previous studies have focused on barriers and struggles that single mothers face but have not shown research indicating the capability of single mothers to effectively raise children in a single-parent household. Insufficient research explores the experience of stress and social support among single mothers. The current research provides a better understanding of the demands that single mothers face related to stress and social support in their daily lives. This research integrated positive social change by increasing awareness of how mothers are dealing

with challenges in raising children ages 18 years and younger and by identifying the needs for ongoing support network.

The focus of this study was on the relationship between stress, coping strategies, and social support among single mothers. The study was to examine the daily challenges and responsibilities of single mothers and the factors that contributed to their specific sources of stress, social supports, and coping strategies compared with mothers who were not single. Most research on single mothers has considered only a limited number of stressors. Although it seems clear that single mothers, in general, are at greater risk for distress and vulnerability, they are capable and able to manage and raise their children in a single-family home (Son & Bauer, 2010). Single mothers have high demands in parenting stress and other stressors that require them to readjust their behaviors. Turner (2006) indicated that demographic regions affect the relationship between stressors, social support, and coping among individuals based on ethnicity, marital status, and socioeconomic status. Previous researchers also found that never-married mothers, for example, have been typically ignored and their status combined with previously married women in most research (Turner, 2006). Therefore, I included single mothers who have never married as participants for this study.

### **Problem Statement**

Research suggests that, after a divorce or separation, mothers tend to take on more responsibility as a single parent than the responsibilities they shared with their previous spouse. Without physical and emotional support, divorced mothers tend to experience higher levels of parenting stress than married mothers' experience (Cooper, McLanahan,

Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). Although researchers know the potential demands of stress that single mothers may face on a daily basis, they do not know how stress, social support, and coping relates to raising children effectively compared with the experiences of mothers in a two-parent home. Studies in the past have focused on the negative consequences of single parenting instead of positive, influential outcomes. The current study allows readers to understand the relationships between stress, coping strategies, and social support among single mothers compared with mothers in a two-parent household.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this quantitative study was to understand the lives of single mothers and compare two groups, single mothers versus mothers who were not single. The variables for this study were single mothers and nonsingle mothers, stress, social support, and coping. This study investigated how single and mothers who were not single responded to their day-to-day responsibilities of raising children younger than 18 years old, and to determine the difference in the support system for both single and mothers who were not single. This study identified the stressful situations in the lives of single mothers and the factors that contributed to their stress. The information related to the single mothers' experiences helped readers better understand the factors that affect the relationship between stress and social support in a single-parent household.

### **Research Question(s) and Hypothesis**

The following research questions guided this quantitative study:

1. Does stress theory explain the relationship between stress and social support among single mothers and mothers who are not single?



*Null hypothesis:* There is no significant difference between stress and social support among single and mothers who are not single.

*Research hypothesis:* There is a significant difference between stress and social support of single and mothers who are not single.

2. Does coping theory explain the relationship between stress and coping strategies among single mothers and mothers who are not single?

*Null hypothesis:* There is no significant difference between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.

*Research hypothesis:* There is a significant difference between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.

3. Do the coping and stress theories explain the moderating effects of social support in the relationship between stress and coping strategies and does this vary by status of the mothers?

*Null hypothesis:* There is no significant moderating effect of social support in the relationship between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.

*Research hypothesis:* There is a significant moderating effect of social support in the relationship between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The research questions guiding this study included investigating ways mothers respond to their daily living relating to stress and social support. The ideas of the

conceptual framework were explored through various studies conducted by previous researchers in the literature. I focused on the relationship between stress, coping strategies, and social support among single mothers.

To analyze conceptual framework, I used theories of stress and coping supported by theoretical foundations developed by Holmes and Rahe (1967), Lazarus (1990, 1993), and Thoits (2010). Stress theories were chosen for this study to understand and further identify the stressful situations in the lives of single mothers and the factors that contributed to their stress. Coping theories addressed the minor and major events of an individual problem or situation. This theory helped to identify the occurrences and circumstances of single mothers and how they managed their responses to stressors.

The research consisted of measuring the level of stress, coping skills, and social support of single mothers and mothers who were not single. I conducted surveys that helped answer the central research questions that pertained to stress and social support, as well as coping measures among single mothers and mothers who were not single, using validated tools such as the Perceived Stress Scale, Social Support Behaviors, and Ways of Coping Checklist.

### **Nature of the Study**

Quantitative research searches for a relationship among variables. The variables can be measured on instruments so that data can be analyzed by using statistical procedures (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). I used a quantitative design to address quantitative questions on the relationship between stress, coping strategies, and social support among single mothers. Quantitative research designs are used to determine aggregate

differences between groups or classes of subjects (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). I approached the research through a cross-sectional survey design that consisted of survey questionnaires using an internet survey and administering it online. Creswell described survey design as a description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population.

I used an online survey tool for data collection purposes. For recruiting purposes, I used an online research participation system. This survey method process allowed me to develop an idea view of the study because the participants provided their input of experience to help increase the knowledge of the researcher to understand the relationship between stress, coping strategies, and social support among single mothers. Collecting data as time progressed allowed me to make a comparison between single mothers and mothers who were married for patterns and linkage among the data.

### **Definition of Terms**

To facilitate clarity of thought throughout this research, I provide the following terms and definitions:

*Coping*: Lazarus (1993) found that coping reflected every aspect of a situation based on the occurrences of condition and circumstance that will change with time.

*Married mothers*: *Married mothers* are mothers who care for one or more children with the physical assistance of the biological or step parent who live together.

*Parenting stress*: Cooper et al. (2009) defined *parenting stress* as “a condition or feeling experienced when a parent perceives that the demands associated with parenting exceeds the personal and social resources available to meet those demands” (p. 2).

*Psychological stress*: According to Lazarus (1990), *psychological stress* refers to “a particular kind of relationship between a person and environment” (p. 1)

*Single mothers*: Gucciardi et al. (2004) define *single mothers* as “persons who are never married, or who are separated, divorced, not currently living with a legal or common law spouse or widowed with children” (p. 70).

*Stress*: The American Psychological Association (APA) (2013) described *stress* as the pattern of specific and nonspecific responses an organism makes to stimulus events that disturb its equilibrium and tax or exceed its ability to cope.

*Social support*: This term refers to resources, including material aid, socio-emotional support, and informational aid, provided by others to help a person cope with stress (APA, 2013).

### **Assumptions**

I assumed that the participants in this study would honestly share their experiences about their perceptions of their parenting stress, social support, and coping skills among everyday living. It was also assumed that the survey design strategy would identify the trends, attitudes, or opinions of single mothers. I also assumed that significant differences exist between stressors, coping, and social support among married and single mothers.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Delimitation of this study may have occurred from the omission of participants who may have decided to leave or drop out of the study, which could have been an important source of data but were not within the scope of the study. There was no

attempt to include individuals outside of the purposefully selected participants of this study.

The boundaries of this study consists of single mothers and mothers who were not single regarding their experiences with the relationship between stress, coping strategies, and social support in raising children in the home ages 18 years and younger. I focused on women who were ages 20 to 55 years, social economically diverse, had a 12th-grade education or higher, and who were raising at least one child 18 years and younger in the home. I needed an average of approximately 200 participants. The surveys were collected in a period of 8 months until I had reached the number of participants needed for this study. The data collection was web-based and administered online. The participants were from the Walden student pool and Survey Monkey who come from various geographical regions. I assumed that they represented the population of married and single mothers. Although several factors may have been related to the status of the mothers, the scope of this study was limited to an investigation of the relationships between stress, coping strategies, and social support among the single and mothers who were not single.

### **Limitations**

The online survey had several limitations, which include data trustworthiness. Trustworthiness was acknowledged by establishing validity and reliability. Threats to external validity included selection or response bias. I had control for response and selection bias by inviting all the students from Walden University and Survey Monkey who satisfied the inclusionary criteria. I did not stop the data collection after desired

numbers had been met, but I used SPSS to identify a random sample of the desired size from the sampling frame for the analyses. Threats to internal validity included the manipulation of the status of mothers. It was likely that some mothers may have been single but in a living relationship with another person. This status was identified via questionnaire on the demographic form.

### **Significance of the study**

The purpose of this quantitative study was to understand the lives of single mothers and to investigate how single mothers and mothers who were not single respond to their day-to-day responsibilities of raising children ages 18 years and younger. I explored aspects of how single parent household for single mothers differed from coupled mothers. Previous quantitative studies on this topic dealt with the effects of consequences and negative outcomes of single parenting. Although there is profuse literature on single mothers and stress, there is a lack of research that explores the experiences of stress, social support, and coping strategies among single mothers. This study integrated positive social change by increasing awareness of the challenges faced by mothers raising children ages 18 years and younger, information that can be used to develop support networks for these families.

### **Summary**

The perception of single motherhood has been driven by others who lack a clear understanding of the relationship between stress, coping strategies, and social support among single mothers compared with mothers who are not single. Having children alone is a significant responsibility. Single parenthood has rapidly increased, especially single

mothers. Many stigmas depict single mothers with more struggles than married mothers have. Factors affecting the relationship between stress, coping strategies, and social support were determined by how single parent households for single mothers differed from mothers who were not single. In Section 2, I incorporate related literature and current research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

In Chapter 2, I discuss conceptual literature followed by current research. In the first section, present content of the review, organization of review, and my strategies for searching the literature. I then explore stress and coping theories to explain the conceptual framework that has been applied in previous studies, similar to application in the current study. In the second section, I discuss the variables related to mothers' statuses related to stress, coping, and social support. Insufficient research explores the experience of stress and social support among single mothers. Although many studies exist on single-parent households, researchers have failed to focus on the mother's ability to cope with stress and social support in a single-parent home versus a two-parent home. The population of single mothers is known to struggle with parenting stress. According to Butcher, Wind, and Bouma (2008), to understand parenting stress, sources of stress must be identified and next investigate how they associate with parental characteristics that may act as buffers. By examining the single mother's perception of raising children alone, factors affecting the relationship between stress and social support can be determined. Further, consideration of how aspects of single-parent households for single mothers differ from households' of coupled mothers.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

To complete a thorough review of the literature, it was necessary to complete multiple searches. I used Walden Library to conduct research. I conducted a database search by using behavioral studies and psychology database in the subject area, focusing



on the following databases: Academic Search Complete, PsycARTICLES, PsycBOOKS, PsycCRITIQUES, PsycEXTRA, PsycINFO, ERIC, Education Research Complete, and SocINDEX with Full Text. I used various keyword searches to conduct research, such as *single mothers AND stress AND coping* (27 results), *stress, social support AND single mothers* (29 results), *single parenting* (78 results), *nonsingle mother AND single parent* (246 results), *stress AND coping research* (61 results), *single mothers AND stress* (679 results), and *effects of stress AND social support on mothers* (25 results). I used additional articles of relevance on topics such as *theories of stress and coping*. High numbers of articles generated when using keywords *single mothers* and *stress*. I used full-text, scholarly journals with available references and published dates. The parameters of research included articles published in the last 5 years, although occasionally I used publication journals beyond 5 years to analyze conceptual framework supported by theoretical foundations. I also reviewed articles with secondary sources. As a scholarly writer, it is important to refer to the source. Therefore, it was necessary to use articles beyond 5 years to cite original sources. The research is limited, the experience of mothers is universal, and the literature review will draw on U.S.-based and international studies.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

I focus on the relationship between stress, social support, and coping strategies among single mothers. Somerfield and McCrae (2000) found that the outcome of stress and coping during the past 2 decades is based on the focus of how an individual manages his or her problem and situation. Theories of stress and coping are used to analyze

framework related to the area of inquiry. According to Thoits (1995), *stress* or *stressor* refers to any environmental, social, or internal demand. Holmes and Rahe (1967) stated that demands of stress require the individual to readjust his or her usual behavior patterns. Holmes and Rahe emphasized the term *stress reaction*, which refers to the state of physiological or emotional arousal that usually, but not inevitably, results from the perception of stress or demand. Stress connects with the relationship between the person and environment, account for behavior and how the individual manages emotional response to stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

According to social stress theory, changes in relationships lead to disruptions in resources and routines (George, 1993; Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Parent transitioning for single mothers often occurs when social environment, family structure, and changes in resources raise questions in parenting, which, in turn, increases strain and affects the relationship a mother has with her child (George, 1993; Holmes & Rahe, 1967). Cooper et al. (2009) conducted a study on family structure transitions and maternal parenting stress. In this study, the authors suggested “for some mothers, the challenges associated with single parenthood (e.g., difficulty supervising or discipline children) many led to parental stress” (p. 560). The day-to-day functioning for single mothers who face daily interruptions of routine may experience increased stress. Disruption in everyday routine may become problematic for single mothers who simply do not have support from family or friends.

## **Stress Theory**

The study of stress in humans began to rise decades ago with the publication of Holmes and Rahe's (1967) checklist of major life changes and their associated readjustments. Thoits (1995) indicated that exposure to negative events and social statuses of the disadvantaged social groups are more vulnerable to stressors than groups that are not disadvantaged. Thoits conducted a study comparing similar levels of impact to stress among women, the elderly, the unmarried, and those with low socioeconomic statuses. Thoits found evidence showing that there were higher levels of psychological distress or depression in the low economic population than their counterparts. Mothers who raise children alone often are faced with vulnerability which can lead to emotional instability (Thoits, 1995). Building a support system will increase stability, but without support, single mothers begin to fit into the category of the disadvantage social group. Thoits emphasized not all socially disadvantaged groups are generally vulnerable to all types of stress. According to Thoits, "When cumulative indices of events or strains are disaggregated into particular types of stressors (e.g., love loss events, income loss events, uncontrollable events, and so on), different groups appear to be vulnerable to specific subsets of stressors instead" (p. 55). Women seem to be more vulnerable to attachments, or events that happened to loved ones among their social network such as declined health, becoming unemployed, divorce or loss of a love one.

According to Lazarus (1990) *psychological stress* refers to a particular kind of relationship between a person and environment. A stressful relationship involves high demands. There are high numbers of demands in parenting stress for single mothers,

such as, childcare, finding employment, finances, assistance from previous partners/spouses, family support and social support (Lazarus, 1990). Single mothers are vulnerable to stressful life experiences when parenting. While searching for employment, the single mother's education will often determine the type of job she finds. Mothers with a higher education tend to report less parenting anxiety and experience less constriction while reporting more joy and new meaning to life (Nomaguchi & Brown, 2011).

Thoits (2010) found "early stress research in psychology and sociology focused only on the health effects of acute changes in people's lives (e.g., divorce, job loss, bereavement, child's car accident" (p. 542). Thoits also emphasized that previous researchers disregarded other problems or demands that were recurrent or lasting, requiring individuals to readjust their behaviors over long periods of time. Thoits provided examples of persistent and repeated demands which were similar situations that may have contributed to single mothers' stressors, such as insufficient income to pay monthly bills, work-family conflict, caring for a disabled child or frail parent, troubled relationships with coworkers, and living in a dangerous environment. The ongoing problems continue to exist among single parenting households especially among single mothers.

Lazarus (1990) identified stress as a particular kind of relationship between a person and environment while Thoits (1995) suggested that disadvantaged social groups are more vulnerable or emotionally reactive to stressors due to inconsistency in regards to social status and exposure to negative events. Thoits emphasized that previous

researchers focused mainly on health effects on people lives and ignored other problems or demands of stress which were recurrent or lasting, requiring individuals to readjust their behaviors over long periods of time. Stress related problems still continue to exist among single mothers. Thoits suggested that researchers should focus on specific subsets of stressors instead. The study will focus on the subset of stressors to identify the factors and effects of stress among single mothers and married mothers.

### **Coping Theory**

The concept of coping exists among previous studies involving individuals with minor and major events. It began to spread during the 1960s and 1970s along the interest in stress. Lazarus's (1993) views of coping theory had begun to change in the late 1970s. Lazarus no longer viewed coping as a major standing. Instead, Lazarus treated coping in a different approach, which in turn, people were treated based on their behavior and action. From a coping perspective, Lazarus found that coping reflected every aspect of a situation based on the occurrences of condition and circumstance that will change over a period of time. Lazarus conducted a study using *ways of coping* and adopted the ideas of using other scales demonstrating related viewpoint and methods. In the research, Lazarus found that some coping strategies were somewhat consistent, and others were very consistent across stressful encounters. For an example, "seeking social support was very inconsistent, whereas positive reappraisal was modestly—but insignificant statistically—consistent" (Lazarus, p. 238).

Lazarus (1993) emphasized that "approaches to coping as style and as process are both essential in that they each address different aspects of the problem" (p. 243), but yet

found that both approach concur with one another. In helping single mothers cope through crisis situations, professionals must first examine how they are responding to new situations and what they are doing about themselves in an effort to cope. In doing so, professionals must determine what coping strategies are working and which ones are not working in creating short and long term goals for single mothers (Lazarus, 1993).

Stress theories were chosen for this study in efforts to understand and further identify the stressful situations in the lives of single mothers and the factors that contribute to their stress. Stress involves environmental and major life changes that exist among many mothers who are single. As mentioned previously, Lazarus referred stress to a particular kind of relationship between a person and environment, in turn relates to the purpose of this study.

Coping theories were chosen in this study to address the minor and major events of an individual problem or situation. This theory will help identify the occurrences and circumstances of single mothers and how they manage their responses to stressors. The consistency of coping strategies will be used to support this study.

### **Literature Overview**

A study conducted by Robbins and McFaddin (2003) stated "employers and family studies specialists find that the changing American family structure is a major source of stress and role strain in both the work place and the home" (p. 1). As an individual attempts to balance work, family, role strain, and conflict, often result in stress. It is essential to maintain a balance in work and family as a single parent. Mothers are normally the nurturers of the family while the men are breadwinners. In today's society

roles have changed for many women. They are working long hours and having to balance family at the same time. Single mothers tend to have more role strain in raising children alone than women who are not single (Robbins & McFadden, 2003). Research has shown that children who come from single parent homes are faced with consequences which include lack of a support system, an increased rate of high school dropout, less parental control, inadequate supervision, and less money available to take care of their needs (Robbins & McFadden, 2003). Single parenting demands often turns into stress and conflict among family and work.

### **Status of Mothers (Single Versus Not Single) and Stress**

Butcher and Bouma (2008) emphasized that “individual parents differ in how well they are able to manage the short-term physiological and psychological impact of the feelings of irritation, concern and uncertainty that accompany parenting” (p. 531). The majority of single-parent families often consist of single mothers and their children. Single parenthood often results from the following: separation and divorce, widowhood and children born out of marriage (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, and Racine; 2003). Wolf (2011) conducted a research on single parenting and pointed out the statistic results from the U.S. Census Bureau. The report showed that approximately 84% of custodial parents are mothers, and 16% of custodial parents are fathers. Of the mothers who are custodial parents, 45% are currently divorced or separated, 34.2% has never been married, 19% are married (In most cases, these numbers represent women who did remarried) and 1.7% were widowed (Wolf, 2011). Single working mothers often experience a higher level of financial stress and work-family conflict than not-single mother due to the responsibility

of caring for and providing for their children (Bull & Mittelmark, 2009). The report also indicated that work–family conflict arises when the demands of the home domain are in conflict with the demands of the work domain, and for many, it reduces life satisfaction, among other indicators of wellbeing.

Cooper et al. (2009) conducted a study on the relationship between the transition of family structure and the status of a mother’s stress in parenting during the first 5 years of a child’s life. Research suggested that, after a divorce or, separation, mothers tend to take on more responsibility as the single parent than what they once shared together with their spouse. In some cases mothers who move out of the home, often lack resources because they are unfamiliar with community resources. Without physical and emotional support, divorced mothers tend to experience higher levels of parenting stress than mothers who are married (Cooper et al. 2009).

According to Copeland and Harbaugh (2005) single mothers were identified as a group who were susceptible to stressful lifestyles when parenting. Single mothers face many challenges when transitioning to parenthood, challenges such as financial strain, limited time and less support (Harrison & Magill-Evans, 1996; Copeland & Harbaugh, 2005). In a study conducted by Cairney, Boyle, Offord, and Racine, (2003) and; Weinraub and Wolf, (1983) comparison to one and two parent households and revealed single mothers reported being more stressed and tend to isolate themselves from others. Single mothers rely on their environments and surroundings by various stressors than married women (Copeland & Harbaugh, 2005). The researchers conducted a secondary analysis comparing 22 first time single mothers to 52 married mothers determining



parenting stress in two large metropolitan hospitals recruiting from postpartum units, in the southeastern United States. The study findings suggest that parenting stress is higher for single mothers as they face more challenges and experience greater stress. Copeland and Harbaugh (2005) suggested further study is needed to meet the needs of reducing stress in parenting. Developing early interventions and educational programs for this susceptible population will also reduce parenting stress.

Previous research has focused on risk factors related to mothers who are single, but have not focused on protecting single mothers who are at risk affecting many families remains limited. Further research is much needed in this area. Taylor, Larsen-Rife, Widaman, and Cutrona (2010) conducted a study by using the Family Stress Model (FSM). The main purpose of this study was to understand the lives of single mothers coping with stress related to their everyday stressors and lived experiences and the negative influences it has on their children. The population of this study was based on African American families. The study tried to address the ethnicity gap in the literature. Risk and vulnerabilities were found among mother-headed households. Taylor et al. (2010) found that single mothers were more vulnerable to internalizing problems and created an unintended parenting behavior which resulted of early childhood difficulties along with life stressors. Among limitations for single mothers, Taylor et al. (2010) suggested that interventions are needed to address the stressful life events that point toward parenting behaviors, personal character, and prior history of childhood may be beneficial in promoting healthy functioning in single mother households. The authors' findings suggest that further research on African American mother families and single

mother families in general should be conducted by investigating channels and promoting result for positive outcomes (Taylor et al. 2010).

Avison, Ali, and Walters (2007) conducted cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses to compare the difference in vulnerability to stressors that involved variations in psychological distress among single and married mothers. The longitudinal survey consisted of 518 single mother and 502 married mothers living in London, Ontario, Canada. The study revealed “the higher levels of psychological distress experienced by single mothers compared to married mothers were almost entirely related to their greater exposures to stress and strain other than any group differences in vulnerability to stressful experiences” (Avison, Ali, & Walters, 2007, p, 302). Although psychological distress, exposure to stress, and strain are closely related for both groups of women, single mothers’ experiences are more exposed to stress and strain than married mother. Avison, Ali, and Walters (2007) indicated that there was no evidence showing that the vulnerability rate or direct stressors for single mothers are much higher than for married mothers.

Single mothers generally experience more stress than married mothers due to strain (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, and Racine, 2003). Single parenthood includes separation and divorce, widowhood and children born out of marriage (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, and Racine, 2003). The increase of single parent families is not a concern in general but more so for single parent families who experienced major disadvantages socially and economically (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, and Racine, 2003). Many single mothers face difficult times in finance, housing stability, childcare, job security and support which may

lead to stress. Cairney et al. (2003) found “stress appears to play a role in the accounting for differences in psychological well-being between married and single mothers” (p. 443). Family members and friends are more likely to offer support to a single mother knowingly the support of her partner is not available (Cairney et al. 2003). Contact between family and friends may alleviate the various stressors single mothers often experience. Although studies on single mothers and married mothers’ stress are somewhat related, previous studies have shown that single mothers are more exposed to stress and strain than married women (Avison, Ali, & Walters, 2007). Single mothers rely on the environment and surroundings by various stressors than married women (Copeland & Harbaugh, 2005). Avison, Ali, and Walters (2007) indicated that there is no evidence showing that the vulnerability rate or direct stressors for single mothers are much higher than for married mothers. Although studies on single mothers are limited, authors Taylor et al. (2010) suggest that further research on African American mother families and single mother families in general should be studied.

### **Status of Mothers and Coping Skills**

Lee (2003) conducted a study on maternal coping skills as a moderator between depression and stressful life events and the effects on children’s behavior problems in an intervention program. In this study, active coping approaches were suggested and data collected was by gender. Avoidant coping strategies were determined by denial and withdrawal among higher life stressors and adaptive coping strategies were determined as the moderator of life stress among adults and children. The study found that maternal coping skills were moderators between negative life events and maternal depression.

Adaptive coping skills were used more among mothers who reported significant stress depression than mothers who have less adaptive coping skills. Intervention programs were offered to mothers who obtained adaptive maternal coping skills. Mothers who used the least adaptive coping skills had smaller intervention effect, but they were still able to benefit from reducing the amounts of maternal depression. The findings of this study found “maternal coping skills were an important moderator in better emotional health, which, in turn, enhanced the child outcomes” (Lee, 2003, p. 435). While intervention programs were being offered single mothers tended to cope with finding childcare along with its cost expenditure.

Sheppard (2005) conducted a study focusing on 102 families who received social assistance, having received assessments, but were not assigned case managers for extended intervention; (65/102). These families were ‘headed’ by single mothers, and a further thirteen families were restructured. This study also focused on the coping strategies employed by mothers in adversity. The strategy varied among the mothers, and the focus was on how well the women themselves felt they have coped. Sheppard (2005) emphasized the women as active problem solvers and incorporated the theoretical aspect of coping. Families were referred for child-care social work interventions to a social service department. In this study, one-seventh of households with dependent children were headed by a single parent and mass parts of this group were women. In the process of qualifying for this study, the families had to at least have one child or parental problem, which would have been identified during the questionnaire interview. The use of the COPE questionnaire was used to examine coping strategies and action. In regards

to parenting, the researcher found that there was a strong relationship between problem severity and women's rating of their coping (Sheppard, 2005).

Dennis (2007) conducted a study on single mothers who received social assistance with high levels of depressive symptoms than the general public. This study examined "the relationships among employment status, stressful life events, and depressive symptoms among single mothers with a special focus on the potential mediating and moderating roles of coping repertoire" (Dennis, 2007, p. 491). The study addressed the following research question: *Does coping repertoire mediate or moderate the relationship between single mothers' employment status and depressive symptoms?* A cross sectional survey design was used with the sample of 96 single mothers. Among the single mothers, 48 were employed, and 48 were on social assistance who was primary caregivers for at least one child 4-18 years old (Dennis, 2007). Study participants completed a questionnaire by mail consisting of an adaptive version of the Social Adjustment Rating Scale, Coping Strategy Inventory, and the Beck Depression Inventory, 2nd ed. (Dennis, 2007). The researcher found that coping had differed effect on employed single mothers and mothers who received social assistance that were linked to employment status and depressive symptoms.

In contrast, although Dennis (2007) found different coping effects among single mothers and mothers receiving social assistance, single mothers who often lived on a low income budget were able to manage their family role and employment. Son and Bauer (2010) conducted a qualitative research study to examine how low-income, single mothers manage their family and work lives. Data was collected longitudinally. Eleven

states were sampled from 28 rural low-income mothers that had retained employment lasting over longer periods of time. Son and Bauer (2010) identified four subjects in this study who had several demands from family and work, and had limited resources. However, the mothers were able to maintain employment, work-family conflict, and use coping strategies to retain employment. The study concluded that although the mothers faced many difficulties they were able to maintain and utilize what resources they had despite being limited. Mothers are finding ways to combine family and work despite the fact that demands and resources may vary over time (Son & Bauer, 2010).

Hilton and Desrochers (2000) conducted a study “to develop and test a conceptual model, based on microstructural theory that explained how sex of parent, economic strain, role coping, and parental control combined to predict the parenting behaviors of divorced custodial mothers and fathers” (p. 55). The sample consisted of 30 single mothers and 30 single fathers with custody of at least one child 6 to 10 years of age. A standardized questionnaire was administered during a two-hour interview in the homes of each recipient. The researchers revealed “higher economic strain in custodial mothers had contributed to impaired role-coping strategies and loss of parental control, which ultimately interfered with parenting” (p. 72). The loss of a loved one can lead to an impaired relationship between the parent and child. The custodial mother’s responsibility increases while financial obligation may not be met which creates strain with parenting. The rate of divorce has been high over the past decades and has raised concerns of the consequences of divorce for parents and children. Many studies on parenting are in divorced families that have compared single mothers with parents who are married. The

researchers also found “single mothers use more negative parenting behaviors and fewer positive parenting behaviors than married parents” (p. 56). Cohen and Dekel (2000) conducted a study examining ways of helping divorced mothers cope with crisis circumstances. The researchers found that two parent families have higher levels of functioning than divorced mothers. Anticipation of both groups was determined by a sense of coherence. The study showed consistencies among mothers who benefitted from effective coping strategies. Among the two groups differences in situation determined how well coping strategies were used. The researchers finding showed “divorced women used less active coping and were less inclined to request advice and emotional support from friends and relatives than their married counterparts” (Cohen & Dekel, p. 478).

Maternal coping skills are important moderators in emotional health, in turn, enhances the child outcome. Coping strategies will vary among mothers on how well they cope. Lee (2003) conducted a study on the relationship among employment status, stressful life events, and depressive symptoms among single mothers and mothers receiving social assistance. The author’s findings showed that mothers who lived in low income budget were able to cope and maintain employment and balance family. Despite limited resources, mothers are finding ways to combine family and work to meet demands that may vary over time. Over time, parenting roles may change as divorce rates increase. Parenting behavior of divorced custodial mothers and fathers raises consequences for both parent and child (Hilton & Desrochers, 2000). In most cases, the father’s income is twice as higher than the mother’s income, which in turn, creates economic strain for the mother (Hilton & Desrochers, 2000). Previous research found

that children who live with their father experience less behavior problems than children who live with their mother (Lee, 2003). Although mothers may experience children with behavior problems, there are intervention programs designed for both parents and children that include comprehensive components targeting at-risk groups that will better contribute to well-being of mothers and ultimately for their children (Lee, 2003).

Hilton and Desrochers (2000) not only focused on mothers' coping and parenting skills but also compared their skills to married mothers and fathers in the ability to raise their children. There is a difference in coping and parenting skills among single mothers and married mothers. Hilton and Desrochers (2000) found "single mothers use more negative parenting behaviors and fewer positive parenting behaviors than married parents" (p 56). The researchers revealed "higher economic strain of custodial mothers that contributed to impaired role-coping strategies and loss of parental control, which ultimately interfered with parenting" (Hilton & Desrochers, p. 72). Mothers who are faced with financially and economically strain more often need some type of social support to help meet parenting role of responsibility.

### **Status of Mothers and Social Support**

Many mothers are finding ways to cope and survive as single parents. Non-family and social supports often become barriers for single mothers. There are mothers who simply do not have close relationships with family members and have limited resources in child care support or either finances simply does not permit them to afford it. Coohy (2007) conducted a study on mothers to determine whether negligence of child care supervision of from family and friends is related to why some mothers receive less



child care. The study consisted of 32 low income mothers who paid less attention to supervising their children to 32 mothers who provided sufficient time and effort in supervising their children. The mothers who provided inadequate supervision, received little to none child care support from their partners and relatives, but not their friends. Coohy (2007) study revealed that differences appear to be linked to quite a few qualities of the mothers' social networks. The mothers who provided inadequate supervision were single and only knew their previous partner for less than a year. The mothers had fewer relatives in their social networks than mothers who provided adequate supervision.

Coohy (2007) recommends professional involvement as a source of support system for mothers and their partner if present, evaluate and enlist support from a broader range of potential providers of informal and formal child care. The researcher also expressed the importance of professionals helping mothers to evaluate their social and conflict-resolution skills. Mothers, who have less support, often end up with an inadequate caregiver.

### **Work and Family Strain**

Mothers often experience work to family strain in single and couple parent families (Baxter & Alexander, 2008). Working mothers' roles may vary from one person to another. Baxter and Alexander conducted a study that focused on mothers of young children and considered the work-to-family strain differences among single and couple mothers. The analysis was a longitudinal study of Australian children based on the "2004 growing up in Australia." Data collected contained 10,000 families, with at least one child aged 5 or under; the sample size is significantly large to increase the analyses

survey data. The researchers stated “demographic, employment, supports factors and work-family balance were used to determine whether the work-family balances were significantly worse or better for single mothers than for otherwise similar couple-parent mothers” (p. 195). The study identified that single mothers do not have the same opportunity in sharing day to day responsibilities in balancing family and work as couple mothers do (Baxter & Alexander, 2008).

Baxter and Alexander (2008) revealed that not all coupled mothers received the same amount of support from their partners in relation to childrearing responsibilities with the demands of employment. The relationship single parents have with children without a non-resident parent found that some had received a substantial amount of support and shared responsibility of childrearing duties and others did not at all. The researcher found the following:

Single mothers were more likely than couple mothers to agree that because of their work responsibilities they had missed out on the home or family activities that they would have liked to have taken part in and single mothers were more likely strongly agree that their family time was less enjoyable and more pressured because of their work responsibilities. (p. 204)

Many mothers are longing for support in balancing work and family. Married couples versus a single mother are able to balance family time by sharing activities and taking part in shared responsibilities. Therefore, social networks are much needed in many cases for single mothers.

## **Social Network**

Ward and Turner (2007) conducted a study that examined rural single mothers associated with reliance on work or welfare in the community linking to interpersonal networks. Single mothers were interviewed via telephone in rural Northern England. Various data were collected such as demographical information, community, familiar and known social networks, and perceived social support on employment, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and other service use (Ward & Turner, 2007). A woman's household structure is an important source in how she is able to manage household composition. Single mothers who live under the same roof of others in certain periods of time are considered cohabiting partners. In other cases, the single mother is simply living with an adult, family member or friend. Moreover, the shared living arrangement aspect provides extra support for the single mother as an added resource to help reduce the socioeconomic strain. The researchers found that newcomers were at a disadvantage in the working force if she did not have any outside connections and fewer network ties with the community and not as much of opportunity to get past possible community resources (Ward & Turner, 2007). It is very important for single mothers to find some sort of social network to help reduce the strain or stress that she may face on the everyday basis.

Single mothers who have network connections in the community will often have better resources and support in getting their needs met. In the Ward and Turner (2007) findings, social support from friends and family decreased as the single mother relied on public assistance. In contrast, the study showed that social support from family increased

the likelihood of working. The study found ongoing consistencies of the length of residence for outcomes. The longer a woman had lived in her locality, the less likely she was to depend on public assistance and the more likely she was to be working (Ward & Turner, 2007). Extended assistance from outside resources will decrease as the mother continues to maintain stability. Baxter & Alexander (2008) found that single mothers do not have to the same opportunity in sharing the day to day responsibilities in balancing family and work as couple mothers do.

### **Relationship Between Single Mothers, Stress, Coping Strategies, Social Support**

According to Cairney, Boyle, Offord, Racine (2003), "being married or having a common-law partner, for example, is generally considered as primary sources of support for parents" (p. 443). Cairney et al. (2003) found that the "demand of being sole caregiver of children is also apt to limit contact with friends in social settings and to limit participation in voluntary social organizations; this social isolation may in turn produce feelings of distress" (p. 443). The researchers suggest that social disadvantages among single parent families have increased over the years due to ongoing health related problems. Single mothers suffer excessively higher rates of physical and mental illness compared to mothers who are not single (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, and Racine, 2003). In another study, Crosier, Butterworth, & Rodgers (2007) found that single mothers tend to experience poor mental health associated with financial hardship and lack of social support than coupled mothers.

According to Broussard (2010) research conducted in the last decade indicates that relatively small income for single mothers and their children continue to be

susceptible to chronic risk factors. They have insufficient funds and lack access to health insurance leaving both mother and children worried. A low income combined with job insecurity leaves them with instability of food. Often time single mothers are working several jobs to secure ends meet which can lead to inadequate childcare supervision. Unforeseen situations can also lead to both the mother and child homeless, living place to place in unsafe neighborhoods and inadequate housing, where violence and environmental health risk are at stake (Broussard, 2010).

Lack of supportive networks for single mothers can lead to unstable life situations. Turner (2006) indicated that "stress for single mothers also extends beyond financial problems, to include a variety of stressors associated with the demands and pressures of parenting alone" (p. 480). Turner (2006) implies "loss of a parenting partner may make parenting particularly stressful for divorced mothers since the changes it imposes may increase women's perceptions of inadequate parenting support and resources" (p. 483).

Single-parent homes have increased over the years and are socially disadvantaged among other groups due to ongoing related health problems (Cairney et al, 2003). There is a higher rate of physical and mental illnesses among single mothers than mothers who are not single which creates vulnerability and instability. Although physical and mental health rates are higher in single mothers, Cairney et al. found that single mothers are less reactive to negative events due to their previous experience of stress and strain. They have become acclimated to dealing with adversity. Married mothers lack the experience of adversity to safeguard the impact of negative events.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The conceptual framework of this study focused on the relationship between stress, social support and coping among single mothers. The research examined how single mothers respond to their day to day responsibility of raising children alone in the home and the factors that contribute to their specific sources of stress, social supports, and coping strategies compared to married mothers with children. Theories of stress and coping were used to analyze conceptual framework supported by theoretical foundations developed by Thoits (2010), Lazarus (1993), Lazarus (1990), and Holmes and Rahe (1967). Most research on single mothers, however, has considered only a limited number of stressors. Although it seems clear that single mothers, in general, are at greater risk for distress and vulnerability, they are capable and have the ability to manage and raise their children in a single family home (Son & Bauer, 2010). Single mothers have high demands in parenting stress and several stressors that require them to readjust their behaviors over periods of time. Single mother's perception of raising children alone had determined what factors affected the relationship between stress and social support. Turner (2006) indicated that demographic regions had impacted the relationship between stress, social support and coping among individuals based on ethnicity, marital status and socioeconomic status. Social environment, family structure transitioning, and changes in resources affected divorced custodial mothers and never married mothers. In Turner findings, the researcher did find where single mother's coping strategies had related to how they were able to manage stress as single parents. The literature focused on consequences and negative outcomes of single parenting, instead of the parenting success

of single mothers in overcoming challenges. The ideas of the conceptual framework were explored through various studies conducted by researchers in the literature. The nature of previous studies has not made the comparison between stressors, social support and coping strategies between single and married mothers. Despite the perception that single parenthood household is primarily female headed households little research has failed to recognize the subgroups within single mother population (Turner, 2006). Previous researcher found that never-married mothers, for example, have been typically ignored with combined previous married woman in most research (Turner, 2006). Therefore, the researcher included single mothers who had never been married as a participant for this study. Further research of literature is needed for future studies on exploring the experiences of stress, social support, and coping strategies among single mothers. I explored the ideas surrounded by the conceptual framework through a cross-sectional survey design using the methodology discussed in Section 3.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

In Section 3, I address the research design and methodology. I provide details regarding the method, population, justification of sampling, recruiting procedures, data collection, and analysis. In this section, I also describe threats to validity and ethical considerations.

The purpose of this study was to understand the lives of single mothers and compare two groups, single mothers versus mothers who were not single. This study investigated how single mothers and mothers who were not single responded to their day-to-day responsibilities of raising children ages 18 years and younger. I also sought to determine whether a solid support system was in place for both single mothers and mothers who were not single. This study identified the stressful situations in the lives of single mothers and the factors that contributed to their stress. I used my research framework to examine their specific sources of stress, social supports, and coping strategies. In search of a methodology, I chose the cross-sectional design rather than the qualitative study. I used means of testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables. The variables can be measured on instruments analyzing numbered data using statistical procedures, whereas qualitative research explores the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. For a qualitative study, data are typically collected in the participant's setting, whereas a quantitative design can typically collect data from the survey method (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, I found that the quantitative design was appropriate for this study.



I used a quantitative design to address quantitative questions on the relationship between stress, coping strategies, and social support among single mothers. Quantitative research designs are used to determine aggregate differences between groups or classes of subjects (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). The study was a cross-sectional survey design with data collected at the same point in time. A survey was the preferred type of data collection procedure for the study. I measured the levels of stress, coping skills, and social support among single mothers and mothers who were not single.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this quantitative study:

1. Does stress theory explain the relationship between stress and social support among single mothers and mothers who are not single?

*Null hypothesis:* There is no significant difference between stress and social support among single and mothers who are not single.

*Research hypothesis:* There is a significant difference between stress and social support of single and mothers who are not single.

2. Does coping theory explain the relationship between stress and coping strategies among single mothers and mothers who are not single?

*Null hypothesis:* There is no significant difference between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.

*Research hypothesis:* There is a significant difference between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.

3. Do the coping and stress theories explain the moderating effects of social support in the relationship between stress and coping strategies and does this vary by status of the mothers?

*Null hypothesis:* There is no significant moderating effect of social support in the relationship between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.

*Research hypothesis:* There is a significant moderating effect of social support in the relationship between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.

According to Creswell (2009),

Survey research provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population. . . . It includes cross-sectional and longitudinal studies using questionnaires or structured interviews for data collection, with the intent of generalizing from a sample to a population. (Babbie, as cited in Creswell, 2009, p. 12)

The cross-sectional survey design consisted of survey questionnaires using an internet survey and I administered them online. The advantage of using internet online survey was that the respondents were able to complete them in the comfort of their homes or at central remote places, such as a public library or a career center. When conducting such surveys, it is important to know who and how many participates are needed among the sampling. An online survey has advantages compared with mail-in surveys. Completing surveys online has better rapid turnaround in data collection than mail-in surveys.

Participants who complete surveys via mail may take their time in completing it. Mailing surveys back to the surveyor, he or she may decide they no longer want to participate without notice, which may interfere in results of data collection. The cross-sectional survey choice is consistent with research designs needed to advance further knowledge in the discipline.

### **Participants**

The target population for this study was single mothers and mothers who were not single with children. The research drew on participants who were women ages 20 to 55 years, social economically diverse, had a 12th-grade education or higher, and were raising at least one child ages 18 years old and younger living in the home. The level of significance for this study was set at  $\alpha = .05$ , I used a power of .389. The Cohen's  $d$   $t$  test for two independent samples was relevant for power analysis. I conducted a sample size analysis. The effect size was estimated from a secondary data analysis of a Canadian National Population Health Survey (1994–1995). The mean differences between the single and married mothers on items related to stress and social support were used to calculate the average effect size. The Canadian study conducted by Cairney et al. (2003) reported means and standard deviations, which resulted in an average effect size of .41. Thus, the effect size of .41, power of .80 for an independent samples  $t$  test requires a sample size averaging 100 per group. The current study recruited a total of 173 participants. The power for detecting the effect of status on stress was .267. Power for the effect of status on coping ranged between .052 and .285. I used the online survey tool for data collection purposes.

**Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria**

An online research participation system was used for recruiting individuals through Walden University participate pool, with approval from the IRB. The Walden participant pool allowed current students and alumni, who were interested, to volunteer for online surveys. The researcher provided information related to the study and eligibility requirement prior to taking the survey. The pool of participants in this study consisted of single mothers and mothers who met the first criterion of (a) raising at least one child ages 18 and under who lives in the home and the second criterion of (b) participants who were between the ages 20 to 55 years old with a 12th-grade education or greater. The survey terminated if respondents did not meet the inclusionary criteria (mothers between the ages 20 to 55 with children ages 18 and younger living with them).

The sample was drawn from Internet survey and administered online through Walden Pool granted through the IRB process of approval 10-14-14-0057914. Informed consent was provided for the participants that explained the purpose and reason for this study. Surveys items focused on central research questions that pertained to stress and social support, and coping measures among single/mothers who were not single, such as the Perceived Stress Scale, Social Support Behaviors SS-B, and Ways of Coping Questionnaire.

**Perceived Stress Scale**

Perceived Stress Scale assesses how often an individual felt a certain way in order to measure his/her perception of stress (Cohen, Kamarck & Mermelstein, 1983). The scale was designed as direct queries for scoring current levels of experienced stress such

as, 0 = "Never," 1 = "Almost Never," 2 = Sometimes, 3 = "Fairly Often," and 4 = "Very Often." The maximum score for this scale is 14 and the minimum score is four. The PSS was designed for use with community samples with at least a junior high school education. The data reported in this article were from somewhat restricted samples, in that they were younger, more educated, and contain fewer minority members than the general population. The PSS was administered, on two occasions separated by two days, to 82 college students enrolled in courses at the University of Oregon. Coefficient alpha reliability for the PSS was .84, .85, and .86 in each of the three samples (Cohen, Kamarck & Mermelstein, 1983).

Perceived Stress Scale has been used in previous studies by other researchers on various subjects. In addition to the PSS, Lin (2009) conducted a study on international Chinese 5-year junior college students explaining how actual social support operates. During this study, the following were examined: the status of actual social support and perceived stress, the relationship between actual social support and perceived stress, and the status of a social network. Questionnaires were collected out of the 64 students, (49 female, and 15 males). According to Lin (2009) results showed that students in Taiwan exhibit higher perceived stress and experience lower actual social support, higher actual social support may result in lower perceived stress, and the students' social network was limited to segregation with international Chinese college students in Taiwan. The Perceived Stress Scale was used among this study. The results of the questionnaire have proven stable over time:  $r = .80$  in its test-retest reliability and correlates to  $r = .62$  on the

stress inventory (Machulda, Bergquist, Ho & Chew, 1998; Lin, 2009), and  $\alpha = 0.87$  in this study.

### **Social Support Behaviors**

The SS-B is a 45-item multidimensional measure of social support that will facilitate a respondent sharing perception of the social support they experience from both family and friends. The maximum and minimum score possible is as followed, 5-point Likert Scale from 1 (no one would do this) to 5 (most would certainly do this). The items will consist of: Emotional support (10 items), socializing or social contact (7 items), practical assistance (8 items), financial assistance (8 items), and (12 items) for advice and guidance (Vaux, Reidel, & Stewart, 1987). Cronbach alpha was computed for each of the five SS-B mode scales for the family and friend support mode scales. Mean alphas for the family and friend support mode scales were .90 and .89, respectively for the black sample, and .86 and .83 for the white sample. The SS-B mode scales showed excellent internal consistency.

### **Ways of Coping Questionnaire**

The Ways of Coping Questionnaire contains 66 items. It assesses a broad range that an individual might use in a specific stressful episode. The scale is designed as direct queries for scoring current levels of experienced stress such as, 0 = "Does not apply or not used," 1 = "Used somewhat," 2 = Used quite a bit, 3 = "Used a great deal." The highest possible score can be 66 and a 1 at the lowest. An interdisciplinary group consisting classified each item as problem- or emotion- focused. Cronbach's alphas were calculated for two administrations of the problem-focused scale was .80 and for the

emotion-focused scale, .81. Correlations between the P- and E-scales were .35 (N = 81), .52 (N = 63), and .44 (N = 83). The mean correlation was .44. Because both scales measure processes believed to be used together in normal coping, a relationship between the two was expected (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980).

The study consisted of a cross sectional survey design with data collected at the same point in time. The level of significance of  $\alpha = .05$  a desire power of .80. Tables\_to\_Calculate\_Necessary\_Sample\_Size.pdf from Walden University doc sharing shares four different table charts for necessary sample sizes. After carefully reviewing each table, the researcher believed that the Cohen's d t test for Two Independent Samples was relevant to use for power analysis. The design consisted of two groups: single mothers/mothers who were not single who were raising at least one child under the ages 18 in the home. The research consisted of measuring the level of stress, coping skills, and social support among single mothers and mothers who were not single.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

In order to answer the research questions, internet surveys were completed through Walden University On-Line Research Participation System and SurveyMonkey database. Below is an explanation of the data collection procedures and instruments.

### **Survey Process**

This survey method process allows a researcher to develop an idea of the under study because the participants are providing their input of experience to help increase the knowledge of the researcher to understand the relationship between stress, coping strategies and social support among single mothers. Creswell (2009) stated

Survey research provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population (p.12).

This study was cross-sectional using questionnaires for data collection. The data was collected, analyzed, and entered into SPSS software using statistical procedures. The survey protocol can be found in Appendix B, C, and D. The survey was collected over a period of eight months until the researcher had reached the number of participants needed for this study. The data collection was web-based and administered online.

### **Data Analysis**

The purpose of data analysis was to analyze data collected over time and being able to interpret steps that lead to another. The researcher collected a total of 173 online surveys from participants who chose to volunteer for this study. The process of collecting data took some time to collect. The less response of participants will slightly lead to response bias. Bias means that if nonrespondents had responded, their responses would have substantially changed the overall results (Creswell, 2009, p. 151).

Data was collected and drawn upon the sample of population measuring the level of stress, coping skills, and social support among single mothers/mothers who were not single, who had children living in the home ages 18 and below. Opportunity of participation was given to the Walden online community of students from the Walden online internet survey database and Survey Monkey. After data was collected over a period of time, the researcher was able to make a connection among the single and married mothers by examining the patterns and linkages amongst the data by using SPSS software to input data for results.



The following are the list of hypotheses and the statistical test the researcher conducted:

1. *Null hypothesis 1*: There is no significant difference between stress and social support among single and mothers who are not single.

*Research hypothesis 1*: There is a significant difference between stress and social support of single and mothers who are not single.

2. *Null hypothesis 2*: There is no significant difference between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.

*Research hypothesis 2*: There is a significant difference between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.

3. *Null hypothesis 3*: There is no significant moderating effect of social support in the relationship between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.

*Research hypothesis 3*: There is a significant moderating effect of social support in the relationship between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.

In order to test the hypotheses, the researcher computed an independent groups t-test with status of mothers (single versus not single) as the independent variable and stress, social support, and coping strategies as the dependent variables. Assumptions to conduct the t-test was checked; homogeneity of variance was established prior to conducting the test. If this was violated, the researcher conducted non parametric test, such as a Mann-Whitney U test.

To test whether social support moderates the relationships between stress and coping strategies by the status of the mothers, an analysis of covariance was conducted, with social support as the covariate, and status of the mothers as the factor and stress and coping as the dependent variables. In chapter four, the researcher reports whether the results of the statistical test were statistically significantly or not, and reports how the results answered the research question. The researcher explained why the results occurred referring back to the theory.

### **Trustworthiness of the Study**

Validation of quantitative research is often referred to the trustworthiness of a study. Score of instruments was used to establish validity and reliability from individuals who developed them and any permission needed to use them. The study was conducted on a volunteer basis. Participants had an opportunity to take part in an online survey from software used to develop online research.

Reliability for this research was achieved using Walden's Online Research Database and Survey Monkey. The instruments used for this study was given prior approval before researcher began conducting survey. Elmes, Kantowitz, and Roediger (1995) stated,

When observations are internally valid, the researcher can safely believe that one variable caused changes in another. If the observations are not internally valid, then the researcher is not able to make assertions about whether one variable caused another to change. (p. 149)

Threats to external validity included selection or response bias—researcher controlled for responses and selection bias by inviting all the students from Walden who serve an exclusionary criteria. The researcher did not stop the data collection after desired numbers were met, but used SPSS to identify a random sample of the desired size from the sampling frame for the analyses. Threats to internal validity included the manipulation of the status of the mothers. It was likely that some mothers may have been single but in a living relationship with another person. Threats to external validity included selection or response bias—researcher would control for response and selection bias by inviting all the students from Walden who served an exclusionary criteria. Each participant had the same amount of survey questions using the exact same questionnaire from each instrument. The participants' response was based on measuring the perception of stress, measures of social support, and ways of coping. The researcher ruled out unintentional confounding so that the results reflect the effects of the intended variables (Elmes, Kantowitz, & Roediger, 1995, p. 226).

### **Ethical Protection of Participants**

Creswell (2009) discussed how ethical issues may arise during a study and what researchers may anticipate during the writing process of a proposal. Creswell described measures that can be taken to reduce the likelihood for ethical issues to develop. Researchers need to have their plans reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) which requires assessing potential for risk, such as physical, psychological, social, and economic and any legal harm (Creswell, 2009, p. 89). In order to ensure protection of participants, an approved human research protection training course with the National

Institute of Health was completed by the researcher in order to minimize the risk for research participants (Walden University, 2013). The researcher developed an informed consent for participants before engaging in the survey research. The consent provided a measure in identifying the researcher, sponsoring institution, purpose of the research, the benefits of participating, notation of risk to the participants, guarantee of confidentiality, assurance that the participant could have withdrew at any time, and provisions of names of persons to contact if questions had arose.

This type of study involved some risk of the minor discomfort that could have encountered in daily life, such as stress and fatigue. Being in this study did not pose a risk to safety or wellbeing. Participating in this study did not only help the researcher in gathering information for this study, but also, allowed the researcher to understand the lives of single mothers and married mothers with children and by understanding the relationship between stress, coping strategies and social support among them.

### **Summary of Methodology**

Section 3 provided the details of the methodology used in this study. The research consists of measuring the levels of stress, coping skills, and social support among single mothers and mothers who were not single. A quantitative design was used to address quantitative questions on the relationship between stress and social support among single mothers and provided insight on their coping experiences. This study identified the stressful situations in the lives of single mothers and the factors that contributed to their stress. The cross sectional survey design guided the development of methodology. The researcher used the online survey tool for data collection purposes.

The sample was drawn from Internet survey and administered online through Walden University Participant Pool and Survey Monkey granted through the IRB process of approval 10-14-14-0057914 addressing confidentiality, securing data, and securing protection for participants. Trustworthiness was addressed by establishing validity and reliability. The researcher used a score of instruments to establish validity and reliability from individuals who developed them and any permission needed to use them such as the Perceived Stress Scale, Social Support Behaviors, and Ways of Coping Questionnaire in search for answers to the research questions. Section 4 of this study reports the results and findings of the quantitative data in this study.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

The purpose of this quantitative study was to understand the lives of single mothers and compare two groups, single mothers versus mothers who were not single, by comparing the levels of stress, coping strategies, and social support. The research questions guiding the study were as follows:

- Does stress theory explain the relationship between stress and social support among single mothers and mothers who are not single?
- Does coping theory explain the relationship between stress and coping strategies among single mothers and mothers who are not single?
- Do the coping and stress theories explain the moderating effects of social support in the relationship between stress and coping strategies and does this vary by status of the mothers?

The following are the hypotheses and the statistical tests I conducted:

1. *Null hypothesis 1:* There is no significant difference between stress and social support among single and mothers who are not single.  
*Research hypothesis 1:* There is a significant difference between stress and social support of single and mothers who are not single.
2. *Null hypothesis 2:* There is no significant difference between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.  
*Research hypothesis 2:* There is a significant difference between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.

3. *Null hypothesis 3*: There is no significant moderating effect of social support in the relationship between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.

*Research hypothesis 3*: There is a significant moderating effect of social support in the relationship between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.

In this section, I describe the results of the data collected of the research. I organize the chapter by characteristics of the sample, data collection, data analysis, findings for Research Question 1, findings for Research Question 2, findings for Research Question 3, and a summary. Tables are also included in this chapter.

### **Characteristic of the Sample**

The participants were students from Walden University who signed up voluntarily through Walden University On-Line Research Participation System. I also used SurveyMonkey to recruit additional participants from Facebook to reach audiences outside of Walden University to increase results for this study. A web link was created that sent participants directly to the survey site. The inclusionary criteria had to be met to participate for this study. Some questions were presented at the beginning of the survey to target a specific audience. Skip logic features were used to identify disqualified participants. I asked the following question: “Are you a mother between the ages of 20 and 55 and have children ages 18 and under currently living with you?” The answer choices were “yes” or “no.” Respondents who chose “yes” were routed to take the rest of the survey. Respondents who chose “no” were routed to the disqualification page that

displayed “end of survey.” A consent form was provided at the beginning of the survey. The informed consent consisted of background study, procedures, voluntary nature of study, risk and benefits, and privacy and contact information for the pool of participants who may have had any questions regarding the study. To protect their privacy, signatures were not collected and their completion of the survey indicated their consent if they chose to participate.

### **Data Collection**

The collection of data started after receiving the approval from Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) with the approval number 10-14-14-0057914. Data were collected for an 8-month period from Fall 2014 to Summer 2015. The participants were able to take the survey at any given time of their choice. Most participants completed the survey within an average of 15 to 20 minutes. During the survey, participants were able to change answers and return to certain questions. Once the surveys were completed and submitted, the participants were unable to return to the survey to make changes. Several incomplete surveys could not be used for this study because some of the participants did not complete the survey.

The mothers who responded to the survey were categorized and coded based on their marital status. The six categories were: (a) married with children ages 18 years and younger; (b) single, never married with children ages 18 years and younger; (c) separated with children ages 18 years and younger; (d) divorced with children ages 18 years and younger; (e) single, but in a committed relationship with children ages 18 years and younger; and (f) widowed with children ages 18 years and younger. The status was



coded with 1= married and 0= single (which incorporated all other marital statuses including single, never married; separated; divorced; single, but in a committed relationship; and widowed). A total of 75 single mothers and 98 married mothers included for this study. The samples were convenient samples drawn from Facebook participants using SurveyMonkey and Walden University students using Walden On-Line Research Participation System. Of those who responded, 1 (0.6%) was American Indian or Alaska Native; 62 (35.8%) were Black or African American; 1 (0.6%) was Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Island; 4 (2.3%) were other nonspecified; 97 (56.1%) were White; 1 (0.6%) was Arab; 1 (0.6%) was biracial; 1 (0.6%) was Black/American Indian; 1 (0.6%) was British; 1 (0.6%) had dual ethnicity; 1 (0.6%) was Hispanic American; 1 (0.6%) as Korean, Black, Cherokee, and Irish; and 1 (0.6%) was White/Native American. There were 32 (18.5%) participants who had custody arrangements involved, 43 (24.9%) who did not, and 98 (56.6%) for which custody arrangements did not apply. A total of 29 (16.8%) were custody arranged by court order, 9 (5.2%) were shared custody, 7 (4%) were verbal arrangements, and 128 (74%) did not have custody arrangements that applied. A total of 10 (5.8%) were mothers who had their children 50% of the time, 1 (0.6%) who had her child every other weekend, 34 (19.7%) who had their children more than 50% of the time, and 128 (74%) to which it did not apply. Of the 173 participants, 37 (21.4%) received financial assistance from the father in the form of child support court ordered, 19 (11%) received voluntary child support based on agreement without courts involved, 3 (1.7%) received no support at all, and for 114 (65.9%), it did not apply. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the study sample.

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Study Sample (N = 173)*

Characteristic	N = 173	%
Age bracket (years)		
21–30	29	17
31–40	78	45
41–50	57	33
51–55	9	5
Marital status		
Divorced with children ages 18 and younger	29	16.8
Married with children age 18 and younger	98	56.6
Separated with children ages 18 and younger	15	8.7
Single, but in a committed relationship with children ages 18 and younger	11	6.4
Single, never married with children ages 18 and younger	17	9.8
Widowed with children ages 18 and younger	3	1.7
Highest level of education		
Associate's degree (e.g., AA, AS)	10	5.8
Bachelor's degree (e.g., BA, BS)	35	20.2
Doctorate's degree (e.g., PhD, EdD)	13	7.5
High school graduate (high school diploma or GED)	5	2.9
Master's degree (e.g., MA, MS, MEd, MSW, MBA)	94	54.3
Professional degree (e.g., MD, DDS, DVM, LLB, JD)	1	.6
Some college	15	8.7
Employment status		
Employed for wages	111	64.2
Homemaker	9	5.2
Out of work and looking for work	10	5.8
Out of work, but not looking for work	4	2.3
Self-employed	13	7.5
Student	23	13.3
Unable to work	3	1.7

## Data Analysis

Data collected from the 173 participant survey responses were scored based on three measurement scales: Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-14), Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WOCQ), and Social Support Scale (SSS). PSS-14 were obtained by reversed coding items and then summing the reverse coded items with the remaining items to gather how they felt or thought a certain way. WOCQ provided how coping were used in certain situations. The *Ways of Coping Questionnaire* described coping efforts into eight types of coping. High raw scores indicated that the person often used the behaviors described by that scale in coping with the stressful events. The eight categories were: Confronting coping, distancing, self-controlling, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, planful problem-solving, and positive reappraisal. The *Social Support Scale* obtained were ranked based on items consisted of: Emotional support (10 items), socializing or social contact (7 items), practical assistance (8 items), and financial assistance (8 items) and (12 items) for advice and guidance. The data set were entered into SPSS and analyzed using the independent groups t-test with status of mothers (single versus not single) as the independent variable and stress, social support, and coping strategies as the dependent variables, Mann-Whitney Test- a nonparametric alternative to the t-test that measures whether two groups differ from each other based on ranked scores, and Analysis of Covariance to test whether social support moderates the relationships between stress and coping strategies by the status of the mothers.

## Findings for Research Question 1

*Research Question 1:* Does stress theory explain the relationship between stress and social support among single/mothers who are not single?

*Null Hypothesis:* There is no significant difference between stress and social support among single and mothers who are not single.

According to George and Mallery (2011), the *t*-test for independent samples is a test that “compares the means to see if there is sufficient variable in which there is no overlap of membership of the two groups being measured” (p. 377). An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to test the hypothesis on whether there was a difference between stress and social support among single mothers and mothers who were not single. The results indicated that there were significant differences on perceived stress and social support as a function of marital status. The results related to perceived stress between single mothers and married mothers revealed a,  $t(171) = 1.98, p = .050$ . Results of social support indicated significant differences on the five categories of social support, namely, social support\_emotional, social support\_socializing, social support\_practical assistance, social support\_financial, and social support\_advice. Results indicated significant differences between single mothers and married mothers,  $t(171) = -3.33, p = .001$ ; social support\_socializing,  $t(171) = -2.76, p = .006$ ; social support\_practical assistance,  $t(171) = -3.51, p = .001$ ; social support\_financial,  $t(171) = -2.88, p = .004$ ; and social support\_advice,  $t(171) = -2.85, p = .005$ .

Table 2 displays the results of the independent *t*-test explaining the relationships between stress and social support among single mothers and mothers who were not

single. The assumptions for conducting this test were checked. The variances of the group are noted below. Results were also crossed validated via a nonparametric Mann–Whitney *U* test.

Table 2

*Independent Samples Test Using the Summary of the Perceived Stress and Social Support Measures*

	Marital status	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Perceived Stress Scale	Single mothers	75	27.65	6.76
	Married mothers	98	25.49	7.40
Social Support-Emotional	Single mothers	75	68.38	21.36
	Married mothers	98	78.34	16.83
Social Support-Socializing	Single mothers	75	46.52	14.87
	Married mothers	98	52.13	11.85
Social Support-Practical Assistance	Single mothers	75	49.21	17.28
	Married mothers	98	57.66	14.33
Social Support-Financial	Single mothers	75	45.55	17.18
	Married mothers	98	52.32	13.74
Social Support-Advice	Single mothers	75	77.64	25.62
	Married mothers	98	87.63	20.50

### Findings for Research Question 2

*Research Question 2:* Does coping theory explain the relationship between stress and coping strategies among single mothers and mothers who are not single?

*Null Hypothesis:* There is no significant difference between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.

An independent sample *t*-test was conducted to test the hypothesis on whether there was a relationship between stress and coping strategies among single mothers and mothers who were not single. Results revealed significant differences between the single and married mothers on perceived stress,  $t(171) = 1.98, p = .050$ . There were no significant differences between mothers on measures of coping. Coping was broken into eight categories for comparison as the second variable. The categories were confronting, distancing, self-controlling, seeing social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, planful problems, and positive reappraisal. There was no significant difference in coping: confrontive,  $t(171) = -.097, p = .923$ ; coping: distancing for single mothers and married mothers,  $t(171) = .059, p = .953$ ; coping: self-controlling for single mothers and married mothers,  $t(171) = 1.43, p = .155$ ; coping: seeing social support for single mothers and married mothers,  $t(171) = -.734, p = .464$ ; coping: accepting responsibility for single mothers and married mothers,  $t(171) = .724, p = .470$ ; coping: escape-avoidance for single mothers and married mothers,  $t(171) = .443, p = .659$ ; coping: planful problems for single mothers and married mothers,  $t(171) = -.389, p = .698$ ; and coping positive reappraisal for single mothers and married mothers,  $t(171) = -.495, p = .621$ .

Table 3 displays the results of the independent *t*-test explaining the relationship between perceived stress and coping strategies among single mothers and mothers who were not single.

Table 3

*Independent Samples Test Using the Summary of the Perceived Stress and Coping Measures*

	Marital status	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Perceived Stress Scale	Single mothers	75	27.65	6.76
	Married mothers	98	25.49	7.40
Coping: Confrontive	Single mothers	75	6.31	3.23
	Married mothers	98	6.36	3.52
Coping: Distancing	Single mothers	75	5.89	2.86
	Married mothers	98	5.67	2.87
Coping: Self-Controlling	Single mothers	75	10.19	3.44
	Married mothers	98	9.45	3.31
Coping: Seeing Social Support	Single mothers	75	7.67	4.13
	Married mothers	98	8.11	3.82
Coping: Accepting Responsibility	Single mothers	75	4.32	2.90
	Married mothers	98	4.01	2.70
Coping: Escape-Avoidance	Single mothers	75	8.07	4.56
	Married mothers	98	7.75	4.87
Coping: Planful Problems	Single mothers	75	8.57	3.69
	Married mothers	98	8.79	3.46
Coping: Positive Reappraisal	Single mothers	75	9.05	5.34
	Married mothers	98	9.43	4.61

### Findings for Research Question 3

*Research Question 3:* Do the coping and stress theories explain the moderating effects of social support in the relationship between stress and coping strategies and does this vary by status of mothers?

*Null Hypothesis:* There is no significant moderating effect of social support in the relationship between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who are not single.

An analysis of covariance was conducted to test whether social support moderates the relationship between stress and coping strategies by status of mothers with social support as the covariate, and status of the mothers as the factor; stress and coping as the dependent variable. Results indicated that there was no significant difference between stress and coping strategies when social support was held constant. Therefore, social support played a major moderating effect between both stress and coping. The results for perceived stress indicated that there were no significant differences in the differences between the single and married mothers when social support was held constant,  $F(1, 171) = 1.75$ ,  $p = .187$ . There were no significant difference in coping: confrontive when social support was present varied by status of mothers,  $F(1, 171) = .169$ ,  $p = .681$ ; coping: distancing,  $F(1, 171) = .277$ ,  $p = .599$ ; coping: self-controlling,  $F(1, 171) = 1.23$ ,  $p = .269$ ; coping: seeing social support,  $F(1, 171) = .259$ ,  $p = .612$ ; coping: accepting responsibility,  $F(1, 171) = .218$ ,  $p = .641$ ; coping: escape-avoidance,  $F(1, 171) = .105$ ,  $p = .747$ ; coping: planful problems,  $F(1, 171) = .060$ ,  $p = .806$ ; and coping positive reappraisal,  $F(1, 171) = .460$ ,  $p = .498$ .



Table 4 displays the results of analysis covariance explaining the moderating effects of social support in the relationship between stress and coping strategies varied by status of mothers.

Table 4

*Analysis of Covariance Summary Perceived Stress and Coping Measures Varied by Status*

	Marital status	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Perceived Stress Scale	Single mothers	75	27.65	6.76
	Married mothers	98	25.49	7.40
Coping: Confrontive	Single mothers	75	6.30	3.23
	Married mothers	98	6.36	3.52
Coping: Distancing	Single mothers	75	5.89	2.86
	Married mothers	98	5.87	2.87
Coping: Self-Controlling	Single mothers	75	10.19	3.44
	Married mothers	98	9.45	3.31
Coping: Seeing Social Support	Single mothers	75	7.67	4.13
	Married mothers	98	8.11	3.82
Coping: Accepting Responsibility	Single mothers	75	4.32	2.90
	Married mothers	98	4.01	2.70
Coping: Escape-Avoidance	Single mothers	75	8.07	4.56
	Married mothers	98	7.75	4.87
Coping: Planful Problems	Single mothers	75	8.57	3.69
	Married mothers	98	8.79	3.46
Coping: Positive Reappraisal	Single mothers	75	9.05	5.34
	Married mothers	98	9.43	4.61

Based on these results, after controlling for social support, I conclude that there were no significant difference between stress and coping strategies when social support was held constant varied by statuses of single and married mothers.

### **Summary**

Based on the above results, the findings indicated that stress theory does explain the relationship between stress and social support among single/mothers who were not single. There were significant differences in the scores for perceived stress and social support. Secondly, the results also indicated that the relationship between stress and coping strategies among single mothers and mothers who were not single were expected to have no significant difference in the scores. Coping strategies indicated scores  $p > .05$  while perceived stress indicated scores  $p < .05$ . Thirdly, the results indicated that moderating effect of social support in the relationship between stress and coping strategies among single and mothers who were not single were expected to have no significant differences in scores after controlling for social support and is held constant.

The next chapter will present the interpretation of findings and present the conclusion about the study. Chapter 5 will also describe the limitations of the study, provide recommendations for future research, and present implications of the study for social change within the boundaries of the study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this quantitative study was to understand the lives of single mothers and compare two groups, single mothers versus mothers who were not single, by comparing their levels of stress, coping strategies, and social support. I conducted the study to evaluate how stress theory explains the relationship between stress and social support among single and mothers who were not single; how coping theory explains the relationship between stress and coping strategies; and whether the coping and stress theories explain the moderating effects of social support in the relationship between stress and coping strategies as a function of the status of the mothers.

In this chapter, I summarize key findings, and I address the results of the study in comparison with related published studies. I also address limitations of the study. Last, I present recommendations, implications describing the potential for positive social change, and conclusions.

### **Summary and Interpretation of Findings**

I measured the levels of stress, coping strategies, and social support through the daily experiences of single mothers and mothers who were not single to determine the differences among the two groups. Although general topics about single parenting have been examined extensively, fewer studies have focused on the views that society and individuals hold about single parents (DeJean et al., 2012). Previous studies have focused on barriers and struggles that single mothers face but have not delved into how single mothers raise children in a single-parent household. Insufficient research

examines the experience of stress and social support among single mothers. The current study added to the knowledge on parenting and identified the factors that influence stress, social support, and coping among single mothers compared with mothers who were not single.

Previous researchers have found that never-married mothers, for example, have been typically ignored and their status combined with previously married women (Turner, 2006). Various studies have mainly focused on single mothers and married mothers but have not specified the types of categories related to marital status. In this study, participants included mothers who were married, single, never married; separated; divorced; single, but in a committed relationship; and widowed. Characteristics of single and married statuses were compared. The single mothers ( $n = 75$ ) included the following categories: never married; separated; divorced; single, but in a committed relationship; and widowed; and were compared with married mothers ( $n = 98$ ) in this study. I identified the factors that influenced stress, coping strategies, and social support among mothers were determined by using three instruments for this study which were: Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-14), Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WOCQ), and Social Support Scale (SSS). Based on the results of this study, the findings indicated that stress theory explained the relationship between stress and social support among single mothers and mothers who were not single. I used an independent samples  $t$  test to determine that married mothers had higher social support than a single mothers, whereas single mothers had higher perceived stress than that of married mothers. Second, I used an independent sample  $t$  test to determine that no significant differences existed among single mothers

and mothers who were not single regarding measures of coping. Third, an analysis of covariance indicated that the moderating effect of social support in the relationship between stress and coping strategies revealed no significant differences among single and married mothers when social support was held constant. Levels of stress and coping were approximately the same.

### **Perceived Stress and Social Support as a Function of Marital Status**

I chose stress theories for this study in efforts to understand and further identify the stressful situations in the lives of mothers and the factors that contribute to their stress. In this study, results indicated that there were significant differences on perceived stress and social support as a function of marital status. Results of social support indicated that married mothers had higher social support than single mothers in the five categories of social support emotional, social support socializing, social support practical assistance, social support financial, and social support advice. These results contradict the findings of Copeland and Harbaugh (2010) who used a cross-sectional comparative design comparing the psychosocial factors, self-esteem, sense of mastery, life stress, and social support among first-time married and single mothers in early parenthood using the Support System Checklist and Life Stress Subscale. The results of social support had no significant differences between social support among single and married mothers. When compared to single mothers, married mothers did not report higher levels of social support. In this particular study, life stress analyses indicated that there were no differences between single and married mothers regardless of the demographic significant differences. Copeland and Harbaugh (2010) indicated “married mothers, who were older,

better educated and better off financially did not report statistically lower levels of life stress than single mothers, suggesting that married mothers were not immune from life stress events, particularly those occurring around the time of early parenthood” (p. 141). The previous study showed that there were no substantial differences in social support and stress between the married mothers and single mothers. The current study indicated that married mothers had higher social support than single mothers, while single mothers had higher stress levels than married mothers. This is due to demographical representation, the age range of the children, support system of the mothers and the age range of the mothers. There is a stark difference in these categories because of the different climate of each mother’s day-to-day activity. The current study was not based on first time married mothers and single mothers in early childhood but rather based on a mix demographic of mothers both married and single.

### **Stress and Coping Strategies Among Single and Mothers Who Were Not Single**

In this current study, single mothers had higher perceived stress than married mothers. There were however insignificant differences among mothers on measures of coping. Coping was broken into eight categories for comparison as the second variable. The categories were confronting, distancing, self-controlling, seeing social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, planful problems, and positive reappraisal. Lazarus (1993) conducted a study using *ways of coping* and adopted the ideas of using other scales demonstrating related viewpoint and methods. In the research, Lazarus found that some coping strategies were somewhat consistent, and others were very consistent across stressful encounters. For an example, "seeking social support was very

inconsistent, whereas positive reappraisal was modestly—but insignificant statistically—consistent" (Lazarus, p. 238). Avison, Ali, and Walters (2007) conducted cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses to compare the difference in vulnerability to stressors that involved variations in psychological distress among single and married mothers. Avison et al. (2007) found that the pattern of results identified in the random-effects models was the same as in the cross-sectional analysis. The study revealed a significant difference in distress between married and single mothers which was largely attributable to the effects of the measures of stressors. "For both the fixed-effects and random-effects models, the interaction between caregiving strain and family structure is significant, suggesting that single mothers are slightly more vulnerable to caregiving strain than are married mothers. On the other hand, the interactions from the cross-sectional analysis suggest that married mothers are slightly more vulnerable to stress involving personal life events and maternal psychopathology" (p. 311).

### **Moderating Effect of Social Support in the Relationship between Stress and Coping**

An analysis of covariance was conducted to test whether social support moderates the relationship between stress and coping strategies by status of mothers with social support as the covariate, and status of the mothers as the factor; stress and coping as the dependent variable. Level of stress and coping was about the same. Results indicated that there were no significant difference between stress and coping strategies among single and married mothers when social support was held constant. Therefore, social support played a major moderating effect between stress and coping: confrontive; coping: distancing; coping: self-controlling; coping: seeing social support; coping: accepting

responsibility; coping: escape-avoidance; coping: planful problems; and coping positive reappraisal when social support was present varied by status of mothers. In a previous study, Turner (2006) indicated that demographic regions had impacted the relationship between stress, social support and coping among individuals based on ethnicity, marital status and socioeconomic status. Social environment, family structure transitioning, and changes in resources affected divorced custodial mothers and never married mothers. Information regards to coping strategies related to how they were able to manage stress as single parents was not determined. However, for this current study, single mothers and mothers who were not single presented insignificant differences between stress and coping when social support was controlled. Social support was responsible for the differences. Regardless of demographical location, socioeconomic status, age, status of mothers, and background, coping and the levels of stress was about the same for both married and single mothers due to the substantial amount of social support that was provided to the mothers from family and friends on the day to day basis.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was limited to only participants who were single mothers and mothers (a) who were raising at least one child ages 18 years and younger who lived in the home and (b) who were between the ages of 20 and 55 years with a 12th-grade education or greater. The sample was drawn from Internet survey and administered online. The participants were students from Walden University who signed up voluntarily through Walden University On-Line Research Participation System. SurveyMonkey was also used to recruit additional participants from Facebook to reach audiences outside of



Walden University in order to increase results for this study. Single mothers and married mothers who were not raising at least one child ages 18 years and younger who lived in the home did not qualify for this study. Mothers who were under the ages 20 and over the age 56 years old were also automatically excluded. Mothers ages 20-55 was chosen for this study because ages 19 below and 55 above are considered outliers. Majority of women in childbearing falls in the range of 20-55 are representative samples that have had some kind of college education background and/or working. Typically ages younger than 19 years below and 55 years and older above may experience different stressors that are not as typical as representative population. The cross-sectional survey design consisted of survey questionnaires using an internet survey that compared the levels of stress, coping strategies and social support (dependent variables) among single and married mothers (independent variables) by administering it online. The survey method process allowed the researcher to develop an idea view of the study because the participants provided their input of experience to help increase the knowledge of the study to understand the relationship between stress, coping strategies, and social support among single mothers. Although surveys are very useful in many studies there are drawbacks of using online surveys as a limitation. Participants in this study responded to surveys of self-rated reports and were not examined nor observed; therefore, their actual responses may include some response biases.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, it is important to recognize the relationships between the levels of stress, coping strategies, and social support among single mothers.

In this study, single mothers included those mothers who were single, never married; separated; divorced; single, but in a committed relationship; and widowed. Future researchers may consider how each of the subcategories in the marital statuses may relate to perceived stress, coping, and social support among mothers.

There were significant differences on perceived stress and social support as a function of marital status in this study. The importance of stress and social support knowledge are not recognized in studies on single mothers. Skill building programs and interventions may be implemented in future studies that are specific for single mothers that focus on self-improvement, developing confidence and building social support in the community to help identify ways to manage stress, which allows longevity of stability.

Many stigmas placed on single mothers tend to show more struggle than married mothers. Previous studies have shown that single mothers tend to handle coping differently from married mothers. However, in this study, there were no significant differences between mothers on measures of coping. Single mothers are able to cope with stressors in the same manner as married mothers. Social support differed among the two groups which resulted in the differences in perceived stress. It is important to build social support networks for single mothers to help them cope with stress.

### **Implications**

The results of this study have positive social change implications for single mothers. This research provides awareness and understanding of the daily lives of single mothers compared to married mothers. Furthermore, the findings will benefit researchers by replicating the concept of a quantitative approach in studying the relationship between

stress, coping strategies and social support among female-headed households for similar population group in other demographic regions.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, I explained the levels of stress, coping strategies, and social support among single and mothers who are not single. Although there is profuse literature on single mothers and stress, there is lack of research that explores the experiences of stress, social support, and coping strategies among single mothers. This study helped clarify how social support played a major moderating effect between stress and coping among single and mothers who were not single. Understanding the factors that play an important role in the lives of mothers, is the first step towards helping those combat perceptions and management of stress.

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## Appendix A: General Demographic Questionnaire

### Demographic Questionnaire for Single Mothers and Mothers who are not single with Children Ages 18 under.

#### **Q. Age**

*Are you a mother between the ages of 20 and 55 and have children under 18 currently living with you? Yes or No. If yes, Please indicate your age \_\_\_\_\_*

#### **Q. Marital Status**

*What is your marital status?*

- Married with children under age of 18
- Widowed with children under age of 18
- Divorced with children under age of 18
- Separated with children under age of 18
- Single never married with children under age of 18
- Single, but in a committed relationship with children under age 18

#### **Q. Custody**

*If you are single, divorced, or separated with children under the age 18, is there custody arrangement involved? If so, what is your status?*

- Verbal Agreement arranged
- Court ordered
- Shared custody

*If court ordered or arranged, how often do you have your child or child is with you?*

- Every other weekend
- 50% of the time
- More than 50%

#### **Q. Financial Arrangement**

*Are there any financial arrangement between you and the child's father?*

- Child support court ordered
- Voluntary child support agreement without courts involved
- Receive no support at all

#### **Q. Education**

*What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? If currently enrolled, mark the previous grade or highest degree received?*

- High school graduate - high school diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED)
- Some college
- Associate degree (for example: AA, AS)

- Bachelor's degree (for example: BA, AB, BS)
- Master's degree (for example: MA, MS, MEng, MEd, MSW, MBA)
- Professional degree (for example: MD, DDS, DVM, LLB, JD)
- Doctorate degree (for example: PhD, EdD)

**Q. Employment Status**

*Are you currently...?*

- 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

**Q. Ethnicity**

*Please specify your ethnicity.*

- Hispanic or Latino
- Not Hispanic or Latino

**Q. Race**

*Please specify your race.*

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White

## Appendix B: Perceived Stress Questionnaire

**PSS-14:**

**The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during THE LAST MONTH. In each case, you will be asked to indicate your response by clicking over the circle representing HOW OFTEN you felt or thought a certain way. Although some of the questions are similar, there are differences between them and you should treat each one as a separate question. The best approach is to answer fairly quickly. That is, don't try to count up the number of times you felt a particular way, but rather indicate the alternative that seems like a reasonable estimate.**

- 1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?**

Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
0	1	2	3	4

- 2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?**

Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
0	1	2	3	4

- 3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?**

Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
0	1	2	3	4

**PSS-14:**

- 4. In the last month, how often have you dealt successfully with day to day problems and annoyances?**

Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
0	1	2	3	4

- 5. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were effectively coping with important changes that were occurring in your life?**

Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
0	1	2	3	4

- 6. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?**

Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
0	1	2	3	4

- 7. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?**

Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
0	1	2	3	4

## PSS-14:

8. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?

Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
0	1	2	3	4

9. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?

Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
0	1	2	3	4

10. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?

Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
0	1	2	3	4

11. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that happened that were outside of your control?

Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
0	1	2	3	4

12. In the last month, how often have you found yourself thinking about things that you have to accomplish?

Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Fairly Often	Very Often
0	1	2	3	4

**PSS-14:**

**13. In the last month, how often have you been able to control the way you spend your time?**

<b>Never</b>	<b>Almost Never</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Fairly Often</b>	<b>Very Often</b>
<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>

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**14. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?**

<b>Never</b>	<b>Almost Never</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Fairly Often</b>	<b>Very Often</b>
<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>

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## Appendix D: Social Support Behavior Scale

**Social Support Behavior Scale**

People help each other out in a lot of different ways. Suppose you had some kind of problem (were upset about something, needed help with a practical problem, were broke, or needed some advice or guidance), *how likely* would (a) members of *your family*, and (b) *your friends* be to help you out in each of the specific ways listed below. We realize you may rarely need this kind of help, but *if you did* would family and friends help in the ways indicated. Try to base your answers on your past experience with these people.

Use the scale below, and click one number under family, and one number under friends, in each row.

1 *no one* would do this

2 *someone might* do this

3 *some family member/friend would probably* do this

4 *some family member/friend would certainly* do this

5 *most family members/friends would certainly* do this

	(a) Family	(b) Friends
1. Would suggest doing something, just to take my mind off my problems . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
2. Would visit with me, or invite me over	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
3. Would comfort me if I was upset . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
4. Would give me a ride if I needed one.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
5. Would have lunch or dinner with me.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
6. Would look after my belongings (house, pets, etc.) for a while . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
7. Would loan me a car if I needed one.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
8. Would joke around or suggest doing something to cheer me up . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
9. Would go to a movie or concert with me . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
10. Would suggest how I could find out more about a situation . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5

- 1 *no one* would do this  
 2 *someone might* do this  
 3 *some* family member/friend would *probably* do this  
 4 *some* family member/friend would *certainly* do this  
 5 *most* family members/friends would *certainly* do this

	(a) Family	(b) Friends
11. Would help me out with a move or other big chore . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
12. Would listen if I needed to talk about my feelings . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
13. Would have a good time with me . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
14. Would pay for my lunch if I was broke	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
15. Would suggest a way I might do something. . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
16. Would give me encouragement to do something difficult . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
17. Would give me advice about what to do . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
18. Would chat with me . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
19. Would help me figure out what I wanted to do . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
20. Would show me that they understood how I was feeling . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
21. Would buy me a drink if I was short of money	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
22. Would help me decide what to do . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5

1 *no one* would do this

2 *someone might* do this

3 *some* family member/friend would *probably* do this

4 *some* family member/friend would *certainly* do this

5 *most* family members/friends would *certainly* do this

	(a) Family	(b) Friends
23. Would give me a hug, or otherwise show me I was cared about . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
24. Would call me just to see how I was doing . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
25. Would help me figure out what was going . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
26. Would help me out with some necessary purchase . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
27. Would not pass judgment on me . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
28. Would tell me who to talk to for help..	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
29. Would loan me money for an indefinite period . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
30. Would be sympathetic if I was upset...	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
31. Would stick by me in a crunch . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
32. Would buy me clothes if I was short of money . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
33. Would tell me about the available choices and options . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
34. Would loan me tools, equipment, or appliances if I needed them . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
35. Would give me reasons why I should or should not do something . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
36. Would show affection for me . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5

- 1 *no one* would do this  
 2 *someone might* do this  
 3 *some family member/friend would probably* do this  
 4 *some family member/friend would certainly* do this  
 5 *most family members/friends would certainly* do this

	(a) Family	(b) Friends
37. Would show me how to do something I didn't know how to do . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
38. Would bring me little presents of things I needed . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
39. Would tell me the best way to get something done . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
40. Would talk to other people, to arrange something for me . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
41. Would loan me money and want to "forget about it" . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
42. Would tell me what to do . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
43. Would offer me a place to stay for awhile.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
44. Would help me think about a problem.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
45. Would loan me a fairly large sum of money (say the equivalent of a month's rent or mortgage) . . . . .	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5