THE FEMALE GRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

A doctoral research study presented
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Abstract

Female students outnumber their male counterparts at both the undergraduate and graduate level in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). In addition to her graduate work, many female graduate students are juggling multiple professional, family, civic, religious and social responsibilities. The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study was to investigate how women, with children, who are employed full-time, made sense of their experience of pursuing a graduate degree. University administrators would benefit from an increased understanding of what these additional responsibilities are and how they may impact a female student’s matriculation as they work to develop plans to maintain the student population they worked so hard to recruit. The theoretical framework utilized was Role Theory, which is founded on the concept that people hold specific social positions, and that those positions have associated expectations and behaviors assigned to them, both by self and by others (Biddle, 1966; Biddle, 1986).

The findings reflected several of the concepts found in previous research. The participants felt pulled between the obligations of their multiple roles, and often felt that the result was that they were not fully meeting the responsibilities of any one role. For many, they had concerns around the ability to appropriately parent, and expressed guilt and concern over the impact this academic endeavor would have on their children. The participants rely on their various support systems to overcome these challenges. This study resulted in finding which were contrary to previous work regarding inequality on campuses. The participants did not describe any experiences of feeling marginalized on campus because of their gender.

Key words: interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), qualitative research, role theory, female graduate students, female graduate student retention.
Acknowledgement Page

As I complete this nearly five year journey toward my doctorate, I am forced to reflect on why I started all of this and what has kept me going. A big part of my decision to begin this journey was to show my children the value of education, the results of working hard, and that moms can do lots of different things. They have been supportive all along, through their post-it notes that said things like “Keep up the good work, Mommy!” to the quick hug or rub on the back as I feverishly typed away on my laptop. I know I have missed lacrosse games, softball tournaments, and movie nights, but they were never anything but understanding in what I was trying to accomplish. Jack and Sydney- I hope that I have made you proud. To my husband, Doug, I hope you see this as our accomplishment. You asked questions, pushed me on deadlines, and helped me see the finish line during those moments when I didn’t think I had anything left in the tank- thank you. To my family, friends and TGS family- thank you. There have been rough patches in these years, and all of you have kept me inspired to keep moving ahead. Your hugs, smiles and genuine interest is part of what has kept me going.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Female students are the majority in the graduate sector in the United States and graduate at the same, if not higher, rate as their male counterparts. However, many report feelings of mistreatment and/or role strain when attempting to navigate all of the responsibilities in one’s life, and perceptions of inequality on campus (Wong & Sanders, 1983; Jacobs, 1996; Seagram, Gould & Pyke, 1998; Home, 1998). The purpose of this study was to investigate how women with children, who are employed full-time, experience the complexities of pursuing a graduate degree. A thorough understanding of the challenges faced by female graduate students, the perceptions of inequality they may have, and the services they believe they require to maintain their matriculation status, will provide an opportunity to present the shared experiences of these women, and allow for a more informed understanding when working to build retention policies that will improve enrollment numbers and time to degree rates for an institution.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research related to women’s experiences in their graduate programs to provide context and background for the study. The rationale and significance of the study is discussed, drawing connections to potential beneficiaries of the work. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions are presented to focus and ground the study. Finally, the theoretical framework that serves as a lens for the study is introduced and explained.

Context and Background

The Council of Graduate Schools reports that little is known about completion and attrition rates in master’s programs, nor about factors that contribute to graduate student success (The Council of Graduate Schools, 2015). Seagram, Gould and Pyke (1998) surveyed doctoral students to examine the extent to which male and female doctoral graduates from York
University experienced their programs differently, and any impacts those perceived differences may have had on time to completion. The female survey respondents in this study reported less supervisor interest in their work, more conflict among their dissertation committee members, lengthy delays in obtaining feedback on their work, and ultimately, that their gender affected their progress to degree (Seagram et al, 1998). The analysis of the time to completion numbers, however, showed that even with these perceived negative experiences, the women did not take longer than men to graduate.

Tinto’s (1975) widely accepted retention model was designed for traditional aged residential undergraduate students. In 1985, Bean and Metzner expanded upon that foundation to create a retention model inclusive of non-traditional age students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora and Hengstler (1992) married the two models to combine Tinto’s student integration theories with Bean’s student attrition model. In 1999, Linda Hagedorn initiated research with the belief a model needed to be created to specifically address female graduate students over the age of thirty (Hagedorn, 1999). Hagedorn’s research did report factors that contributed to the success of her specific research population, but the study is not current and reflects thoughts and perspectives of female students nearly fifteen years ago. Additional research needs to be conducted to determine if the same factors exist among this age group. The deficiencies identified in the retention literature and the omission of any real analysis on the retention of graduate students, combined with the existing literature on perceived inequalities by female graduate students, are the impetus for this research. The purpose of this research was to understand the experience of female graduate students and the challenges they face in maintaining their enrollment status and their personal responsibilities.
The evolution of the female student in U.S. higher education shows the steady growth in enrollment of women to the current state of general equality in admission and enrollment numbers, if not higher numbers of female students in many disciplines and at many institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). These enrollment statistics can allow a university to claim gender diversity, but diversity does not always mean equality within an institution (Mehta, Keener & Shrier, 2013), but instead should mean that an institution has a complete understanding of its constituents and is providing the services required by that group to insure their success. The results of this qualitative study of female graduate students’ experiences and their needs for support in completing their graduate programs will provide university administrators with the data necessary to create and implement support services for this population. This study seeks to understand how women with children, who are employed full-time, experience the complexities of pursuing a graduate degree.

**Rationale and Significance**

The rationale for this study is the researcher’s interest in expanding research on the experience of female graduate students who are also balancing the complexities of working full-time and caring for children. Master’s level graduate students, at many institutions, represent a source of revenue for the institution, a mechanism for creating more opportunities for undergraduate student research, and often aid in attracting research-driven faculty. In the state of New Jersey, where the economy has not yet fully recovered, there is a high demand for master’s level programs that can provide career changers with new opportunities or create the possibility of advancement for those already working in a particular field. Well-educated citizens provide a benefit to society as a whole, and for many residents of New Jersey, a master’s degree is often the key to employment. Graduate enrollment is a top priority at Montclair State University.
MSU), where this study will be conducted. The President has put forward very aggressive enrollment goals in the strategic plan, requiring the addition of nearly 1,000 graduate students in the coming years. Female students represent the majority of graduate students at MSU, comprising roughly 71% of the total graduate population. It is critical that the university retain these students for enrollment management purposes, but more importantly, an institution that prides itself on meeting the needs of a diverse population needs a full understanding of the experiences of any marginalized population in order to facilitate change on campus.

Female students are the majority population in both undergraduate and graduate education in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), yet many report feelings of marginalization (Wong & Sanders, 1983; Jacobs, 1996; Seagram, Gould & Pyke, 1998). The significance of this study is that the increased understanding of the experience of all female graduate students will assist university administrators in the creation of policies to support these students, inform graduate faculty of the potential for unintentionally unequal policies, and provide university personnel with additional information when dealing with these students. The results may increase awareness of how this population is experiencing graduate work, and encourage change on campuses across the country in the way faculty members view and interact with their female graduate students. Additionally, the study results may increase awareness around potential differences between male and female graduate students, allowing faculty to be more mindful of departmental or classroom policies which might favor male students, or, penalize female students. University personnel charged with working to retain this population may also benefit, not only from the results of this particular study, but from the general concepts introduced. Most importantly, it may provide female students with a voice in
documenting their shared experiences and, for some, validating the experiences they might have thought were specific to them.

**Research Problem and Research Question**

Many institutions value healthy graduate programs and rely on their success for the financial benefits, the research opportunities and the academic elevation associated with master’s and doctoral level education and research. Undergraduate student retention theories generally focus on the same basic concepts: resident students, commuter students, athletes, and other factors. “Graduate” education can refer to doctoral students, master’s students and students in professional or other terminal degree programs. The retention literature on graduate students is sparse, and the work that does exist focuses on one particular population which may not be useful to those looking for a resource to drive practices at their own institution.

The purpose of this study with female graduate students at Montclair State University is to understand the experiences of those students as they navigate the pursuit of a master’s degree while working and raising a family. This qualitative study, based on in-depth interviews with members of the identified student population, is guided by the following overarching question:

How do women with children, who are employed full-time, experience the complexities of pursuing a master’s degree?

The focus on female students stems from existing research that has documented female perceptions of inequality in graduate education, and from the literature on role conflict in females who are juggling multiple responsibilities. The research on perceived inequalities by female students is interesting because although the perception of unfairness existed, there was no documented delay in graduation or increase in attrition. My interests in my own campus are to
determine if our female students have similar feelings to those who have been studied before, or how we might differ. I am particularly interested in gaining a better understanding of how women manage multiple responsibilities in their lives, and any impact it may have on their graduate education. In consideration of the fact that 88% of leave of absence requests originated from female graduate students, I am interested in how these competing requirements of student life and home life impact enrollment. Existing literature on role conflict tends to focus on the professional woman juggling a career and commitments to family, community, and other factors. A goal of this research is to determine the consequences that may arise when adding another variable, specifically, the role of student.

**Definition of Key Terminology**

There are several key terms referenced in this study. This section provides definitions, drawing from other works when appropriate, as a reference for the reader.

**Children** - For the purposes of this study, “children” will be defined as dependent children, ages 0-18.

**Employed Full-time** - For the purposes of this study, “full-time” employment will be considered as any professional position that requires work outside the home for at least 35 hours per week.

**Adult** - The term “adult learner” is referenced in this study when discussing previous work on retention of students who are older than 23 years of age.

The following section of this chapter will include a description and discussion of role theory, which will serve as the theoretical lens for this study.
Theoretical Framework

The foundational concept of role theory is the understanding that people hold specific social positions, and that those positions have associated expectations and behaviors assigned to them, both by self and by others (Biddle, 1966; Biddle, 1986). The earliest proponents of using role theory to analyze and understand human interactions and responses to particular situations originated in the early 1930s (Mead, 1934; Linton, 1936). The definition of role varied at that time, and continued to be a source of disagreement as the theory evolved. Biddle (1986) described this difference by noting that some researchers use the term to describe characteristics and behaviors (Biddle, 1979; Burt, 1982), while others connect roles to the social parts individuals play (Winship & Mandel, 1983), and others envision roles to be our scripts for social conduct (Bates & Harvey, 1975). These differences can lead to confusion when attempting to define the basic concepts of the theory, but the underpinning is the same for all. “Most versions of role theory presume that expectations are the major generators of roles, that expectations are learned through experience, and that persons are aware of the expectations they hold” (Biddle, 1986, p. 69). This belief that humans are aware of the roles they play and the impact on their lives lend this theory to research that allows participants to report their thoughts on role issues in their lives.

Many adults live with multiple roles as part of their daily lives, and varying descriptors are used to chronicle the resulting impact on one’s life. In Biddle’s (1986) synthesis of the literature revolving around role theory, he described a number of approaches that have been used to describe this accumulation of roles. Role conflict can exist when the expectations of behaviors associated with two or more occupied positions are incompatible. Role overload describes the totality of demands stemming from multiple roles and the situation in which an
individual is not able to meet the combination of those demands. Role malintegration is a term used when roles “do not fit well together” (p. 83).

Role conflict literature begins with Parsons (1961) and the perspective that role conflict “is caused by the simultaneous occupancy of conflicting structural positions” (Stryker & Macke, 1978). Parsons based much of his research on the assumption that the norms and role expectations assigned to these positions are not easily modified due to their importance. Parsons’ work is grounded in a structural-functional base, and posits that the only resolutions will come from widespread systems restructuring (Parsons, 1961). Alternatively, interactionists began to explore the individual’s experience of these conflicting positions and the associated expectations, with less emphasis on the structure (Stryker, 1973; Turner, 1956; Turner, 1962). Goode’s (1960) work on role strain incorporated structural theories of role conflict with the power of the individual, and introduced the concept of role bargaining, where new expectations for self and for the role within a structure can be established. Goode explains that role relations are a “continuing process of selection among alternative role behaviors, in which each individual seeks to reduce his role strain” (p. 483).

Research on role conflict continued into the 1970s with a strong focus on women and the conflict faced when joining the professional world and attempting to mesh those new, professional expectations with the traditional role expectations in the home (Hall, 1972; Harrison & Minor, 1978; Stryker & Macke, 1978). Simultaneously, research began to emerge that explored the idea of role strain and the processes for navigating multiple roles. Marks’ (1977) work centered on multiple roles related to human energy, time and commitment, and the general idea that these resources are flexible and can “…expand and contract, depending on very particular systems of commitment that determine their availability” (p. 935). More recently,
research has included the benefits of occupying multiple roles, including the idea of a “role enhancement theory”. Reid & Hardy (1999) examined midlife women and their experiences of living with multiple roles and, in particular, symptoms of depression in women occupying roles as wife, mother, paid worker and informal caregiver to aging parents. This work found that while, for some, the multiple expectations associated with these varying roles may be incompatible and cause symptoms of depression, others may find the successful navigation of these to be rewarding and lead to increased well-being.

The trajectory of the study of the impact of multiple roles has evolved from an automatic assumption that multiple roles must conflict with one another, to a concept that within multiple roles, there may be some that, when combined, cause strain, but in others, may enhance the sense of self (Reid & Hardy, 1999).

**Critics of Role Theory**

Biddle is a seminal author in role theory, but his work in 1986 raised several criticisms of role theory, in general, and in some of the specific ideas and definitions. Role concepts have been woven into many different perspectives, and Biddle notes that a possible result is that “role theory” can now be viewed by some as a combination of a variety of other perspectives, losing the true meaning as it was originally envisioned. He argues that the successful continued evolution of role theory depends on maintaining it as its own distinctive theoretical orientation (Biddle, 1986). While varying theoretical orientation and perspectives have adopted pieces of role theory, some researchers are using these ideas to further their own research, not suggesting that the fundamental concepts of the theory should be changed.
Biddle (1986) also highlights a particular concept within role theory, *consensus*, which is often criticized, and occasionally by role theorists, themselves. Consensus, as it relates to role theory, refers to the agreement among various persons, within a particular group, of what is expected of each role. Supporters of this concept believe that successful functioning of a group relies on each member carrying out the behaviors expected by each member. Critics question the usage of consensus as the sole predictor of social order. This sort of application does not allow for the establishment of social order through negotiation, role bargaining or social exchange. Similarly, Biddle (1986) criticizes role conflict theory, specifically, because it can be seen as “an activity that diverts our attention from concern for the real conflicts that appear in social systems or from the possibility that persons might cope by changing those systems” (p. 82).

An additional criticism Biddle (1986) raises is that there is a lack of clarity as to whether or not role theorists should focus on the person as an individual or as the representative of that particular social position. Structuralists and functionalists would see roles as patterns of behaviors and characteristics assumed to be typical of all persons who hold similar positions. Cognitive theorists, among others, would see a role as the “evolving, coping strategies that are adopted by the person” (p. 86). Neither position is more correct than the other, but researchers must be careful to be clear on which position should be attributed to an individual compared to those which one would want to assign to a particular social position.

Barnett & Hyde (2001) suggest that earlier work involving the lives and relationships of men and women is too old and does not reflect a modern understanding of gender and roles. The researchers wrote that “the facts underlying the assumptions of the classical theories of gender and multiple roles have changed so radically as to make the theories obsolete” (p. 781). Parsons (1949), and other functionalists, established in the 1940s and 1950s that gender symmetry in a
marriage, and in a family, was key to its stability and success. These theorists believed that the biological limitations which prevent males from bearing children make them more suited for the workplace while women occupy the role of primary caregiver and homemaker. A more modern study revealed that, beginning in the 1990s, both men and women ranked the roles of parent and partner higher than the role of employee (Thoits, 1992). Barnett & Hyde (2001) suggest an expansionist theory to bridge the gap between the classical role theory and modern phenomena.

The expansionist theory is the result of contemporary empirical studies of gender, work and family, and contains four, empirically tested, principles which better reflect today’s realities. The first three principles deliver a different perspective on the impact of occupying multiple roles. Barnett & Hyde (2001) maintain that: multiple roles are, generally, beneficial to men and women as it relates to mental, physical and relationship health; the beneficial effects of occupying multiple roles can be attributed to a number of processes, including opportunities to experience success, similarity of experiences and added income; and, there are limitations to the conditions under which multiple roles are beneficial. The final principle of the expansionist theory is that gender differences are not as significant in the modern social structure as they might have been understood to be previously, and should no longer be seen as the deciding factor in placing men and women into highly differentiated roles. This theory provides an opportunity for researchers whose work includes an analysis of roles to begin from some place other than the assumption that multiple roles must cause conflict, or strain, in one’s life. This theory allows for a more modern assumption that, for many families, two parents must work for financial stability, and additional research is needed to understand in which contexts and under which circumstances are their beneficial side effects to the group’s functioning, and when there are detrimental results.
Rationale

Role theory is grounded in the idea that individuals hold specific social positions, and that those positions have associated expectations and behaviors assigned to them, both by self and others (Biddle, 1966; Biddle, 1986). Critics of role theory assert that the theory has become watered down and has been cannibalized by others who have taken specific pieces or components of the theory and applied them in a different way or in new situations. The changing ways in which this theory is being used should not be seen as the destruction of the original concept, but instead, the continued evolution. The utilization of this theory in a modern study of women in higher education is an opportunity to add to the existing literature.

An additional criticism of role theory has been the confusion related to the focus on the person as an individual or as the representative of a particular social position (Biddle, 1986). This particular criticism is easy to remedy as a researcher need only identify, at the outset of the research, where the focus will reside. There is danger in the assumption that representing findings of a particular group is indicative of characteristics and behaviors of all members of that group, but that issue would exist in any research, using any theoretical framework.

Critics of theory assert that much of the existing literature examines roles and relationships in a time that is very different from the current understanding of those same roles. This criticism is not a reason to cease using this framework, but instead, should be seen as a call to conduct new research. Role theory, in and of itself, is not an irrelevant concept, but the behaviors and expectations of particular roles have, as they should, changed over the course of time and should be explored with modern interpretations of role theory.
Application of Role Theory to this Research

The application of role theory as a theoretical framework for this study is appropriate for several reasons. First, role theory lends itself to studies using phenomenological methods to collect and analyze data (Biddle, 1986). Second, the need exists for increased modern research utilizing role theory in a time when many “traditional” male/female roles have changed from what existed when the theory was first developed. Lastly, the application of a modern role theory approach, in the context of higher education, is needed. Research has occurred that focused on roles and the workplace, but the need exists to expand by adding the role of “student” to the examination.

Biddle is a seminal author within role theory, but decades after his first work, was critical of how the theory was being applied by some researchers (Biddle, 1986). He did note, however, that while each researcher’s application may have differed, they were similar in both their philosophic orientation and in the methods used for their research. Biddle (1986) wrote:

“…This means that role theory presumes a thoughtful, socially aware human actor. As a result, role theorists tend to be sympathetic to other orientations that presume human awareness - for example, cognitive and field theories in social psychology or exchange theory and phenomenological approaches in sociology. And because of this sympathy, role theorists also tend to adopt the methods of research prevalent in these orientations, particularly methods for observing roles and those that require research subjects to report their own or others’ expectations.” (p.69)
This research will employ a phenomenological approach, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) specifically, and will provide the participants with an opportunity to examine both their own understanding of the expectations of each of their roles, but also how those expectations have impacted their pursuit of a graduate degree.

The roles of men and women within a family dynamic have changed since the inception of role theory. Working women spend less time completing household tasks than they did 40 years ago, and working men spend more time on these tasks (Bond, Galinsky & Swanberg, 1998). There is still a gap between the amount of time working women and men spend on child care and household tasks, but that gap has decreased (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). Barnett and Hyde (2001) argue that these shifts in relationships between gender, family and work make the application of role theory difficult because it was developed in a time of such different views of the roles and expectations of working women. Instead of assuming that the age of role theory negates its modern day applicability, this research will examine participants’ understanding of the expectations placed on women with multiple roles to determine if conflict still exists between what is expected of someone and what they are able to do. The expectation is that women in 2016 experience different challenges and burdens than those in the 1960s or 1970s, but that serves as more of a reason for continued research utilizing this framework instead of the elimination of it.

Recent research by Bakar and Salleh (2015) utilized role theory to examine work-family conflict, specifically as it impacts workplace motivation. This research addresses the critics who argue that the gender politics that served as the context under which the theory was created make it obsolete today by focusing more on the navigation of multiple roles for the modern adult. They assume the position that anyone who possesses more than one role has the potential to find themselves in a position where, at any given time, the demands of those roles are in opposition to
each other (Bakar & Salleh, 2015). The conflicting pressures of dealing with two roles, employee and family member, are examined, and the work-family conflict framework is applied. This research project will provide an opportunity for women to explain, through their own experiences, their current status in the navigation of multiple roles, but unlike the work of Bakar and Salleh (2015), will layer on another level of complexity by adding the role of graduate student.

The literature review in Chapter 2 provides an overview of how female graduate student experiences have been studied and documented in the existing literature to provide a better understanding of these students and the choices they make which may impact their enrollment in a graduate program.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Female students are the majority in both the undergraduate and graduate sectors in the United States’ education system, outnumbering their male counterparts by nearly .5 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). In many areas of the country, graduate enrollments, which typically serve as a revenue source for larger institutions, have remained flat or seen a slight decrease in the past several years (Council of Graduate Schools), creating the need for graduate enrollment professionals to develop new ways to recruit, but also retain, graduate students.

In addition to her graduate work, the average female graduate student may be juggling multiple professional, family, civic, religious and social responsibilities. University administrators would benefit from an increased understanding of what these additional responsibilities are and how they may impact a female student’s matriculation as they work to develop plans to maintain the student population they worked so hard to recruit.

The purpose of this literature review is to establish an idea of how female graduate student experiences have been studied and documented in the existing literature to provide a better understanding of these students and the choices they make which may impact their enrollment in a graduate program. The first section will review the literature that exists on graduate student retention and then, specifically, how a graduate student’s status as an adult student might impact their continued enrollment in a graduate program. The second section will examine the history of women’s role in higher education and the changing ways women have been viewed, and how women have viewed the value of education. Lastly, the existing literature on female student experiences is presented, including the connection between retention and home life.
Graduate Students

This section provides an overview of the research on graduate student retention and on the concept of adult learning. The circumstances which have shaped the need for graduate retention models are presented, and next, how the existing research on adult students can inform policies geared toward that group.

Retention of Graduate Students

Graduate student retention is a mixed picture, as the term “graduate student” can be generally used to describe master’s students, doctoral students, professional students and all others in post-baccalaureate work. The varied definition of graduate student, combined with the uniqueness of each institution, presents a situation that is more complicated than addressing the issue of undergraduate student retention. Tinto’s (1975) widely accepted retention model was designed for traditional-aged, residential undergraduate students. In 1985, Bean and Metzner expanded upon that foundation to create a retention model inclusive of non-traditional aged students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora and Hengstler (1992) married the two models to combine Tinto’s student integration theories with Bean’s student attrition model. In 1999, Linda Hagedorn initiated research with the belief a model needed to be created to specifically address female graduate students over the age of thirty (Hagedorn, 1999). This was an exploratory study with the goal to discover which factors contributed to the successful retention of this population of student. The results of the work with this group indicated that the “factor most predictive of persistence is being unmarried” (Hagedorn, 1999), and that financial issues, in contrast to previous research, were not a significant contributor to attrition. This study consisted of a small group and limited to one university, and the author indicated the need for further research on this particular group.
Cohen and Greenberg (2011) embarked on a study at a 4,000 student (3,000 undergraduate and 1,000 graduate) public institution to explore institutional and external factors that might contribute to the successful retention of part-time master’s students. While the majority of the respondents were female, this was not a study focused solely on that population. The results, which acknowledged that while undergraduates and graduates are different students likely to be at different life stages, they both need support to survive, are useful in a generalized way, but do not provide guidance as to the retention of female students.

A review of the literature revealed that studies have been done to better understand retention of adult students, but they have focused on either adult undergraduate students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Brown, 2002; Alhassan, 2012) or on doctoral programs or professional schools (de Valero, 2001; Most, 2008). While Bean and Metzner’s (1985) work focused on the undergraduate academic career, it contained useful data related to non-traditional age students. They posited that gender must be a factor in any retention strategy, as “gender is likely to have indirect effects on attrition through the family responsibilities” (p. 498). Similarly, research focused on completion rates of doctoral students with results segmented by gender could prove useful in gaining a better understanding of the needs of female master’s students (Most, 2008). In 1969, Baird released a foundational work in the area of retaining graduate students that documented the need for strong relationships with other graduate students and the need for support in maintaining one’s commitment to graduate education.

**Graduate Students as Adult Learners**

Knowles (1968), operating under the literal interpretation of the word pedagogy from the original Greek word of “the art and science of teaching children”, has written on the concept of andragogy, or the teaching of adults (Knowles, 1968, 1984). Subsequent to Knowles, research
has been done on adult learning and methods of instruction for adults, but for the purposes of this review, literature was sought that focused on the needs of adult students as it relates to their retention.

An initial review of the literature revealed that although significant research exists on the needs to retain adult undergraduate students (Mancuso, 2001; Alhassan, 2012; Brown, 2002), little has been done to focus on the retention of adult female graduate students. Alhassan (2012) conducted a review of adult learning theory to aid in the identification of factors that influence their persistence in higher education. This examination resulted in several conclusions about this group, including the idea that student is only one of the many roles an adult learner may occupy; support from family is crucial to the adult student’s success; and, participation in campus activities is rare, and not seen as a strong indicator of persistence (Alhassan, 2012). Alhassan (2012) introduced a retention model subsequent to Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora and Hengstler (1992), and wrote about the research of Donaldson and Graham (1999) and their intent to identify key components affecting adult students and their undergraduate experiences.

Brown (2002) presented a profile of nontraditional students and their persistence patterns, and then identified four variables that impact retention and seven strategies to contribute to the development and retention of this population. Brown’s research explored the concept of “academic integration” (p. 70), or degree utility, and posited that adult undergraduate students are more intentional in their plans and therefore have a stronger commitment to their studies (Brown, 2002).

In the realm of adult education, it appears that there often exists a blurred line between undergraduate, graduate and non-degree post-baccalaureate students, but it is important to note that while this population may share certain characteristics as adults, they are not completely
similar as students (Kasworm, Sandmann & Sissel, 2000). Fairchild (2003) posited that adult students are unique, but are likely to have many common traits. Their lives can be characterized by older age, employment and the additional role of spouse and/or parent. The stress of “trying to make ends meet” can be stressful in a way that traditionally aged students might not understand. The researchers concluded that for undergraduate adult students, multiple roles may actually be beneficial to them as the increased number of tasks may draw more focused attention to their studies. As this work focused only on adult undergraduate students, there was no analysis on how the increased academic requirements of a graduate program might impact the benefit adult students found on the undergraduate side (Fairchild, 2003). Similarly, Astin (1984) established a new theory of student development, student involvement theory, which refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience. The research involved only undergraduate students, leaving the open question of the importance of connection to the institution via involvement as it relates to adult graduate students.

Adult students who are not following the traditional path through higher education may find themselves with classmates who are much younger than they are, with very different life experiences. McClusky and Jensen (1959), although in a much older study, sought to better understand how the feelings of being “on, ahead or behind schedule” in one’s life affected attitude toward education and towards oneself. This research did not provide specific focus on graduate students and how their concept of station in life or completion of life goals might impact one’s concept of self.

Deggs, Grover and Kacirek (2010) did focus specifically on adult graduate students, but did so in the context of the expectations of adult graduate students in an online master of
Their results indicated that these students entered the graduate program with an expectation of positive experiences with student support services, academic experience and technical support. There was not, however, a conclusive statement that these expectations existed because of the age of the students. Further research in the area would need to specifically examine if the age of a student altered their expectations of their academic program. Many practitioners have already identified the need for differential programming for these students, and Polson (2003) has written that the increased number of non-traditionally aged graduate students calls for a revision and extension of our traditional student services plans.

Conclusion

The primary focus of retention literature and adult learning literature revolves around the undergraduate student. The work that does exist in understanding graduate students can be old, population specific, or so narrowly focused on one profession or delivery modality that it is likely not applicable to a general graduate student population.

Female Students in Higher Education

The previous section provided an analysis of how graduate students differ from their undergraduate counterparts and identified a need for more research into the unique needs of that population. Similarly, many female students have different support needs than their male classmates, particularly at the graduate level where students tend to be older and have increased responsibilities compare to traditionally-aged undergraduate students. This section provides a high level overview of the history of female students in higher education, as well as a review of the existing literature on female student perceptions and experiences. Lastly, an analysis of the research on female student retention and the connection to home life is presented.
History of Female Students in Higher Education

In the Post- American Revolution era, the education of women became a priority, but not for the purposes that we educate both genders equally today. As early as 1790, the concept of “Republican Motherhood” (Schwager, 1987, p. 337) was established on the belief that women, in their role as wife and mother, would help reinforce the beliefs of the new nation. It was believed that “Republican women were to be rational, self-reliant, literate, and immune to the vagaries of fashion” (p. 337), while educating their sons and supporting their husbands in upholding the nation’s civic virtues. Those opposed to this notion feared the result of this effort to create educated women who would support their dominant husbands, might instead provide women with “the skills, the insights, and the desire to advance nontraditional values, and, in some cases, even radical change” (p. 343).

Female students remained as a dominant population in education into the 19th century. Research shows that as early as 1850 in the U.S., the rate of 5-19 year old women enrolled in school far exceeded the men, with 60 percent of high school students in 1920 being women (Jacobs, 1996). In fact, the median years of schooling for women exceeded that of men up until the years immediately following World War II, when the GI Bill aided in the increased number of males completing higher levels of education (Jacobs, 1996). In this post- World War II era of increased men entering higher education, the collegiate goals of many women were also changing.

The generation of college-aged U.S. women in the 1950s had a different purpose for pursuing higher education than those who preceded them. In 1960, 64 percent of women between the ages of 30-39, with 16 or more years of schooling, married college educated men (Goldin, 1995). Many women in the 1950s were drawn to college more for the “Mrs.” degree (p.
166) than for academic achievement or professional rewards. More specifically, 57 percent of female graduates in this era married before or during their final year of college (Goldin, 1995). This short-term variance in female students’ collegiate goals was only temporary, and perhaps in response to the end of the war. By 1960, career aspirations and personal financial success became more important in the decision to attend college than marital aspirations.

Beginning in the early 1960s, many of these new, college educated housewives began to question their role in society, and in their households. In 1962, the now famous book, *The Feminine Mystique*, was released and in so doing, made very public the frustration so many educated women were feeling as they started to question the existing societal structures and gender inequality in their homes, and more generally, in society. This book, and these feelings, can be said to have contributed to a second wave of the feminist movement. This new movement brought freedoms and new opportunities to women, in general, and brought changes that indicated a new respect and understanding for women and the life issues they faced. These changes also altered the experiences of female students and faculty on college campuses (Callan, 2014). This important step in the evolution of women’s roles on college campuses was marked by new policies to address childbirth-related absences for university students, and more generally in the country, the acceptance of delay in marriage due to the education of women (Callan, 2014). Additionally, programs and policies encouraging respect for diversity began to develop, with many universities establishing policies surrounding understanding and respect of multiculturalism and tolerance on their campuses.
Current State of Female Students in Higher Education

The National Center for Education Statistics examined the rate of degree conferral for women in the 1999-2000 academic year and the 2009-2010 academic year, and found that while the number of associate’s and bachelor’s degrees earned by female students remain roughly the same in this ten year period, the percentage of master’s and doctoral degrees earned by women in that same time span increased (NCES, 2014). Women were the majority of master’s degree earners, comprising 60% of the conferral population in 2000, and 62.6% in 2010, and the majority of doctoral degree conferrals in the 2009-2010 cycle, with 53.3% of doctoral degrees conferred upon women in that year.

The literature around women and education, however, is still ripe with documented difficulties women encounter in the course of their education pursuits. In her review of women in the academy, Luke (1994) summarized these difficulties as including women’s positioning as “outsider”, of feeling less valuable to their professors than their male counterparts, and the juggling of multiple roles that men tend not experience in the same way. Luke declared that “The wall of obstacles that many women students at university face is incomparable to men’s experiences at university” (p.213).

Female Student Experiences and Perceptions

The adult female student experience has been examined at the undergraduate, graduate and professional school levels. While the studies have all examined experiences and perceptions of similarly aged women, the level of degree they seek may lead to inherent differences in their experiences.
Research on the connection between academic success and support systems for adult female students in an undergraduate program has been mixed (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). Mallinckrodt & Leong (1992) found that flexibility of curriculum, robust departmental support services and positive relationships with other students decreased the effects of stressors in female students. Carney-Crompton & Tan’s (2002) research produced opposing results, finding that the psychological and academic well-being of the student was unrelated to the quality of their support system. Carney-Crompton & Tan did suggest that, when looking at adult female students, the age of any children in their family may explain differences in their need for, and reliance on, various support systems as they complete their undergraduate degree.

The academic rigor of professional school education, which includes medical and law school, can be a source of stress for all students engaged in that pursuit. Female students’ experiences, however, can vary from that of the male students. Davidson’s (1978) early work on the stressors for female medical students documents the role strain felt by women and the “built-in conflict that results from the woman’s having to choose between the demands placed on her by her profession and those that stem from her obligations as a woman/mother/wife and from her identity as a female” (Davidson, in Clark & Rieker, 1986, p. 33). A study of first year medical students at the University of Texas Medical School at Houston found that female students entered the program as mentally healthy as the male students, but by mid-year, expressed feelings of anxiety and lack of satisfaction with lives, more so than the male students (Lloyd & Gartrell, 1981). Clark & Rieker (1986) expanded the research to include law students and conducted a study of medical and law students at a large state university to measure the levels of self-reported stress and its consequences on male and female students in the two professional
schools within the same university. The women did report higher levels of stress than the men, and reported that they perceived their interactions with faculty to be more stressful than the male students reported. The researchers stressed the importance of this perception of negative student-faculty interaction as this may decrease female students’ attempts at engaging with their faculty, thereby decreasing their academic opportunities (Clark & Rieker, 1986).

Female and male students’ experiences in graduate programs, which include both master’s and doctoral programs, also vary. A 2013 study of master’s level psychology and social sciences students focused on female graduate students in the United States and United Kingdom, and their perceived advantages and disadvantages of being a female student (Mehta, Keener & Shrier, 2013). The participants from both nations expressed that their gender did play a role in their graduate experience, both positively and negatively. Students expressed the belief that when faculty members were lenient with them it was because of their gender (positive). In contrast, the students believed they were viewed in stereotypical gender roles and received unwanted sexual attention (Mehta, Keener, & Shrier, 2013). The women in the group acknowledged that their gender sometimes made their academic life easier, but also caused difficulties. Similarly, Wong & Sanders’ (1983) work provided insight into how doctoral students’ perceive their gender as impacting their interactions with faculty members. Their research showed equal admission rates and equal rates of financial support, but reflected a general negative feeling among women and that their professors did not deal as seriously with the female students as they did with the males. This study focused on PhD graduates from the University of California- Santa Barbara (1972-1978), and considered several variables of student performance and personal situation compared to scholarly production at the end of the doctoral program. The results of the analysis indicated that women who entered these programs with
comparable backgrounds, accumulated less human capital (defined in article as skills one acquires that can lead to future success) than the males. It was also noted that previous performance and graduate grade point average were positively linked to working with prestigious professors for males, but not females (Wong & Sanders, 1983). Seagram (1998) sought to determine not just how male and female students experience their doctoral programs differently, but also measured how those perceived differences may impact time to completion. In order to ascertain this, the survey measured a number of factors: gender, discipline, financial support and the nature of the supervisory relationship in the dissertation phase. The simple results were that women did not take longer than men to complete their degrees. The details of the results were that women reported that their supervisor had less interest in their topic, reported more conflict within their committee, experienced lengthy delays in receiving feedback, and most interestingly, reported that they believed their gender affected their progress.

Female students, at various academic levels, perceive their gender as having an impact on their academic work, or as a variable for receiving differing treatment from faculty members, or as a potential reason for delayed degree completion (Davidson, 1978; Lloyd & Gartrell, 1981; Wong & Sanders, 1983; Clark & Rieker, 1986; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Seagram, 1998; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Mehta, Keener, & Shrier, 2013).

Retention and the Connection to Home Life

Graduate school deans and retention professionals often begin new student orientation programs with a description of how the undergraduate workload differs from that of the graduate student workload. Graduate work is often more intense, requires a more critical analysis and tends to be higher in volume than that experienced as an undergraduate. This high level of commitment, when coupled with the responsibilities of one’s “home life”, can lead to higher
levels of attrition. A graduate student’s home life may include family responsibilities, the requirements of working full-time, and other community or religious commitments. Additionally, the concept of role conflict, or role strain, in women is relevant to understanding the demands placed on female graduate students.

Golde (1998) interviewed former doctoral students, from both the sciences and the humanities, who left their programs in their first year at a major research university. The researcher had identified four phases of the transition to graduate student, and sought to determine where in this process these students encountered a barrier which led to their attrition. One of the phases included the process of learning about the realities of what being a graduate student meant for your life. Across the four departments examined, a common reason for leaving was explained as a realization of the requirement for a drastic imbalance in one’s life to accomplish the degree requirements (Golde, 1998). As many of these students weighed the substantial time and energy commitment against their own individual lives, they decided to withdraw from their programs. Additionally, many also considered the effect on family, both those who had a family at the point of acceptance and those with future plans for a family. One student who was interviewed explained that he had made an individual choice to enter a doctoral program, and expected the rigorous pace and expectations, but didn’t want to get married and have a family that would be subjected to it (Golde, 1998).

The financial stress associated with maintaining one’s home finances in addition to funding a graduate education has been documented by several studies (Hyun, 2006; Toews et al. 1997; Nogueira-Martins, Fagnani Neto, Macedo, Citero & Mari, 2004). The results of a study of graduate student mental health at a large university in the western United States showed that half of the students in the research group were suffering from financial related stresses that
significantly affected their emotional and academic well-being (Hyun, 2006). This study did not include data on any possible attrition from these students, but instead documented visits to mental health professionals and the nature of the symptoms that spurred those visits. Nearly half of the student surveyed reported feelings of exhaustion and of being overwhelmed by all that they were trying to manage while in their program.

Engineering professionals returning to professional programs to earn their masters or doctorates in the field were compared to classmates who took a “direct pathway” to graduate school in the context of their expectations of academic success, their perceive value of the graduate degree and plans to manage the costs associated with returning to graduate school (Peters & Daly, 2013). The researchers found that the returning students were more likely to have significant financial obligations related to family, mortgages and prior educational debt, among other things. The research was not intended to measure program completion, but instead to provide a better understanding as to how these students navigated these additional financial burdens and to what extent the value of a master’s degree made the temporary financial strain worthwhile. Similar to previous findings (Hyun, 2006), these returning students reported a thought process prior to admission where they acknowledged the financial burden of returning to school, and determined if there was enough value in the dividends of earning a degree to warrant proceeding (Peters & Daly, 2013).

Greenhaus and Powell’s (2012) work on the family relatedness of work decisions is relative to this literature review in its consideration of how one’s family circumstances may affect their choices in a work environment. They define family relatedness of work decisions (FRWD) as “…the extent to which an individual’s decision-making process and choice of course of action in the work domain are influenced by a family situation in order to foster a
positive outcome for the family.” (p. 247, 2012). The researchers’ intention was to explore the
concept of FRWD and provide a framework by which FRWD can be studied. Additionally, they
provide a lengthy agenda for future research on this concept with the idea that this is a general
phenomenon whose boundaries should be tested. The concept of family relatedness of academic
decisions and how it might pertain to female graduate students could be a fruitful next step in
this research.

Conclusion

The evolution of educating women at the baccalaureate level began with the interest to
create wives who could appropriately support their husbands and raise intelligent sons
(Schwager, 1987). The next phase in the evolution is described by many as the desire, for many
women, to go to college to meet a future spouse. The 1960s saw the societal change of women
questioning the traditional role they had occupied for many years, and the exploration of new
opportunities.

Women did change the landscape of higher education as it relates to the sheer number of
degree earners, but documentation of unequal or unfair treatment in higher education require a
closer look beyond the number of degree conferrals. Female students, as participants in several
studies, expressed perceptions of gender inequality and differing treatment from faculty (Wong
& Sanders, 1983; Seagram, 1998; Mehta, Keener & Shrier, 2013). The combination of these
perceptions and the stresses of maintaining one’s home life (Golde, 1998; Hyun, 2006; Peters &
Daly, 2013) while pursuing a graduate degree, make the female graduate student’s experience a
unique one.
Role Conflict and Role Strain for Female Students

Biddle (1979, 1986) is a seminal author within the role theory literature, and conducted extensive research into the various impacts that the accumulation of multiple roles can have on an individual, including feelings of role conflict and role strain. This section provides an overview of the literature on role conflict and role strain, and the benefits or detriments to occupying multiple roles.

Role Conflict

Studies on role conflict or role overload of women in the workplace have found similar results (Cron, 2001; Pearson, 2008). Cron’s (2001) analysis of the connection between satisfaction with one’s home life and work satisfaction as a working woman progressed through family life cycle stages found that a woman’s level of job satisfaction was impacted by her relationship with, and support from, her spouse. The results of the study led the researcher to suggest that employers seeking to increase female employees’ performance at work might benefit from providing the employee with counseling to assist in the improvement of the home situation (Cron, 2001). Similarly, Pearson (2008) found that role overload was negatively correlated to both psychological health and job satisfaction. That analysis also revealed that women’s perceptions of their roles were more important in predicting psychological health than the number of roles they possessed. As professional women who are balancing professional and home lives are faced with conflicting messages regarding which role is the most important (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2011), and are perhaps considering the battle between “leaning in” and “leaning out”, the addition of a graduate program would add yet another role to this complexity.
Home (1998) worked with a group of women who maintained jobs and had families, and were pursuing an education. Her intent was to uncover the importance of particular life events for these women and how the university could better support them, and to gain a better understanding of the women’s perceptions of the demands on their time (1998). Although this research was not limited to just a graduate population, insight into the psyche of adult female students can be gained. Home found that role conflict arises in these multiple role women when they are forced to “deal simultaneously with several urgent, incompatible demands”, and that the perceived burden of competing demands can be more stressful than the actual experience (Home, 1998).

Shortly thereafter, Anderson and Swazey (1998) released a new analysis of a 1989 survey given to nearly 2,000 doctoral students to document the prevalence of distress among these students. The researchers chose to examine the prevalence and impact of role conflict as one of the variables that might lead to increased levels of stress. Substantial percentages reported being troubled by role conflict, with roughly 25% reporting thoughts that they could not satisfy conflicting demands of various people surrounding them, 33% reporting that the amount of work they had to do resulted in them not doing any one thing well, and more than 40% reported the belief that doctoral work interfered with their personal life (Anderson & Swazey, 1998). The researchers acknowledged that doctoral work is intended to be challenging, both academically and personally, but that attention paid to the experiences of graduate students as they navigate these multiple roles could lead to improved quality of life for the students, and perhaps to improved retention numbers. A similar study of medical and science graduate students also reported female students as struggling with multiple demands of their time and attention (Toews
et al., 1997), with the additional component of reporting that male students in these same programs did not report these role struggles, and had lower levels of stress, overall.

Higher levels of stress in female graduate students compared to their male counterparts have been documented in several studies (Toews et al., 1997; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Nelson, Dell’Oliver, Koch & Buckler, 2001). Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) sought, specifically, to examine the gender differences in stress among graduate students and to identify variances in the levels of support received. The female graduate students reported more stress than their male counterparts, exhibited more symptoms of stress, and expressed feelings of role strain. Additionally, the male graduate students reported higher levels of support from their spouses than the female students reported. This support is critical, as the researchers found that when the same life events occur in the personal lives of male students and female students, the female students are more affected, perhaps because of their increased feelings of responsibility in the event as an aspect of gender role socialization (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). The results of the study led to the assertion that when one of the student’s stressors is negative, it makes everything else appear to be worse, while positive experiences tend to negate other stressors and give the appearance of balance. The work of Nelson et al. (2001) showed that increased social support was correlated with decreased psychological stress. The research population in this study consisted of doctoral students in clinical psychology, where the female students reported feelings of role strain in balancing academic and family demands.

The prevalence of role conflict among female graduate students has been well documented, both in the professional life of women (Cron, 2001; Pearson, 2008; Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2011) and in the academic life of women (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Toews et al., 1997; Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Home, 1998; Nelson, Dell’Oliver, Koch & Buckler, 2001).
Scott, Burns and Cooney (1998) found similar results in their study of female graduate students, but found that women with difficult personal situations that put increased demands on their roles outside of the classroom often use that difficulty as a motivator to complete their program. For others in the study, an issue of that magnitude became the biggest barrier to their continued enrollment in the graduate program.

**Role Strain**

By definition, role conflict assumes that two, or more, incompatible roles are at play in a particular situation (role conflict, n.d.). Role strain, however, is described by Goode (1960) as the “felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations” (p. 483). Role strain, therefore, acknowledges the competing interests of occupying multiple roles, but does not see those multiple interests with the finality of declaring them unmanageable or incompatible.

Goode’s (1960) early work on role strain depicts the managements of multiple roles as a system of “role bargaining” (p. 483) whereby an individual is in constant navigation among alternative role behaviors to reduce the strain of multiple obligations. Goode’s discussion of role strain is not gender specific, but instead, explains that most members of society occupy several roles, and that most are “likely to face a wide, distracting, and sometimes conflicting array of role obligations” (1960, p. 485). His work suggests techniques for reducing role strain, namely, the participants’ ability to determine when she/he will enter or leave a role, and, the concept of role bargaining to determine where one’s focus lies.

Marks’ (1977) work on role strain and the scarcity approach to human energy provides a new approach toward multiple roles that posits that “spending” and “drain” need not be the only terms associated with occupying multiple roles, but rather, an energy-creation approach suggests
the possible invigoration from navigating multiple roles and responsibilities. Marks analyzes various “commitment systems” to suggest that differing levels and types of commitments dictate the level of flexibility one has in fulfilling those obligations at a particular time or in a specific way.

Twenty years after Marks’ work, Reid and Hardy (1999) engaged in research to test role strain and role enhancement theories. This work in the late 1990s no longer debates if women occupy multiple roles in their daily lives, but instead, seeks to understand how they handle these responsibilities and what impact it has on their mental well-being, specifically in the form of measurable depressive symptomatology. The results of that work included the concept that, for these participants, participation in multiple roles is not consistently detrimental to a woman’s mental health. The researchers found that “…role occupancy alone does not fully reflect the complexity of the relationship of both demand levels and satisfaction to well-being” (1999, p. 337).

Role strain occurs at two levels (Goode, 1960; Edwards, 2014). First, it occurs when an individual is unable to meet the expectations of him/her from those in his or her social network. The second level occurs on an individual psychological level when the individual, herself, has personal care and concern that she cannot meet all that is expected of her. Role negotiating and bargaining are techniques used for the successful negotiation of multiple roles.

Conclusion

The obligations felt from occupying multiple roles may be incompatible and result in the inability to live up to one’s own expectations or the expectations and needs of others. The occupation of multiple roles may also be rewarding and lead to enhanced well-being. The role
enhancement perspective suggests that the occupation of multiple roles increases one’s social integration and can lead to an increase in “power, prestige, resources, and emotional gratification, including social recognition and a heightened sense of identity” (Moen, 1995, p. 260, as cited in Reid & Hardy, 1999).

Summary

The limitations of the existing literature provide justification for a study on the experiences of part-time female master’s students. Graduate students, as a whole, tend to have different, and often increased, external responsibilities when compared to their undergraduate counterparts (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011). The term “graduate student” can refer to describe various types of students, as well: master’s level, doctoral students, professional school students, or any other post-baccalaureate work. Each of these varying types of students face differences within their own programs in terms of part-time or full-time participation, have differing workloads or lab requirements, and more generally, possess varying levels of academic rigor. Additionally, while these students can likely all be considered adult students, the variants listed above make it difficult to apply a one-size-fits-all retention model.

Female graduate students have the additional challenge of maintaining their matriculation while battling potential issues of role strain or role conflict (Alhassan, 2012; Fairchild, 2013; Kasworm, Sandman & Sissel, 2000), navigating perceived disadvantages of treatment within their academic department (Wong & Sanders, 1983; Seagram, 1998; Mehta, Keener & Shrier, 2013) and managing higher levels of stress than their male counterparts (Toews et al., 1997; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Nelson et al., 2001). Several conclusions regarding the female graduate student experience can be drawn from the review of the literature. First, the evolution of the female student in U.S. higher education shows the steady growth in enrollment of women
to the current state of general equality in admission and enrollment numbers, if not higher numbers of female students in many disciplines and at many institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). The review of the literature on equality for female students also documents a shift in policy to encourage respect for the diversity of outside-of-classroom roles and responsibilities of women (Callan, 2014). Female students, however, have reported that their gender did have an impact on their graduate experience (Wong & Sanders, 1983; Seagram, 1998; Mehta, Keener & Shrier, 2013), and that women in professional graduate programs self-reported higher levels of stress than their male classmates (Clark & Rieker, 1986). Role conflict and role strain can occur in any individual who attempts to juggle the multiple complexities of adult life. Female students have, in other studies, expressed higher instances of feeling the effects of role strain (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Nelson, 2001).

The Council of Graduate Schools reports that little is known about completion and attrition rates in master’s programs, or about factors that contribute to graduate student success (The Council of Graduate Schools, 2015), without mention of the differences for male students and female students. Hagedorn (1999) initiated the call for further research into the needs of female graduate students to create a retention model that could address potential issues specific to that population, and while studies have occurred subsequent to that call, many included only small groups of students and were contained to specific institutions. A true graduate student retention model that is specific to the needs of both genders would, inevitably, have variances within institutions based on region, demographic of student, etc. Societal changes in the way female role strain is viewed may have changed the female graduate student experience from those previously documented. Additionally, regional or cultural differences in the ways women view their external responsibilities may also present different findings. Vanderlinde and van
Braak (2010), in their analysis of the gap between research and practice, found that “practitioners expressed an appreciation for design-based research or research that leads to practical applications” (p. 312). Further research in the area of female graduate student experiences, and how those experiences affect enrollment, will guide practitioners charged with the retention of these students in the creation of new policies and procedures which might remove or ease the burdens these students face.

Universities, which demand gender “equality” on their campuses, where equality is only defined by number of students, are not creating an equal campus. An improved understanding of the female graduate student experience will allow university administrators to make more informed decisions related to male/female enrollment and the services needed to support both populations. This study is intended to investigate how women with children, who are employed full-time, experience the complexities of pursuing a master’s degree.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Female students are the majority in the graduate sector in the United States and graduate at the same, if not higher, rate as their male counterparts, yet many report feelings of mistreatment, role strain when attempting to navigate all of the responsibilities in one’s life, and perceptions of inequality on campus (Wong & Sanders, 1983; Jacobs, 1996; Seagram, Gould & Pyke, 1998; Home, 1998). This qualitative study, based on in-depth interviews with members of the identified student population, is guided by the following overarching question: How do women with children, who are employed full-time, experience the complexities of pursuing a master’s degree? This research topic lends itself to a qualitative study, and in particular, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. This approach will allow for an examination and comparison of the experiences of the research population, providing the researcher with the opportunity to present implications for practice and highlight opportunities for program development in colleges and universities to aid this population.

Qualitative Research Approach

Qualitative research is grounded in an interpretive and naturalistic approach intended to explore a particular area of interest, describing the problem from the point of view of those who are experiencing it (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research methods “describe the lived experiences [erlebnis] of participants in their own words rather than attempting to categorize and quantify experiences on pre-established quantitative scales” (Ponterotto, 2002). The researcher works to gain a better understanding of the phenomena through interactions with the research participants. Unlike the deductive qualities of quantitative research set to test a particular concept or theory, qualitative research follows an inductive process focusing on hypotheses and theory generation. For the purposes of this study, qualitative research methods are the most
effective mechanism to generate useful results. Creswell (2013) provides a number of instances where researchers would be best served to use qualitative research, including: when a “problem or issue needs to be explored”, “when we want to empower individuals to share their stories”, and when we “need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue” (p. 48). The research indicates that while female master’s students do not appear to have difficulty in their graduate programs, via their graduation rates and time to degree data, there are underlying issues. This notion requires further exploration of a potentially complex issue and includes a research group whose members may have feelings of disempowerment.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

A paradigm is a “set of interrelated assumptions about the social world which provides a philosophical and conceptual framework for the organized study of the world” (Filstead, 1979, p. 34). There are four major research paradigms (positivism, postpositivism, constructivism-interpretivism and critical-ideological), and the selection of a research paradigm governs many facets on a researcher’s study (Ponterortto, 2005).

Positivism is cause and effect oriented, focusing on verification of prior hypotheses and serves as the primary framework for quantitative research. Constructivism-interpretivism arose as an alternative to positivism. While positivism has one reality, constructivism assumes multiple valid realities. The beginning of the constructivism-interpretivism schema has been attributed to cultural anthropology in the early twentieth century, with the belief that “an interpretivist perspective assumes that the world is not simply ‘out there’ to be discovered, but an ongoing story told and refashioned by the particular individuals, groups and cultures involved” (Butin, 2010, p. 60). While positivists believe in the existence of a single, objective external reality, constructivists believe that reality is constructed in the mind of the individual (Hansen, 2004)
and that meaning is “hidden and must be brought to the surface through deep reflection” (Schwandt, 2000; Sciarra, 1999).

Constructivism-interpretivism and qualitative research have been traced back to Kant’s (1881/1966) *Critique of Pure Reason*, where one of his main positions was that “human claims about nature cannot be independent of inside-the-head processes of the knowing subject” – you cannot separate the reality from the person who is experiencing it (Ponterotto, p. 129). Several years later, Dilthey (1894/1977) wrote on the important distinction between Naturwissenschaft (natural science) and Geisteswissenschaft (human science), stating that the goal of natural science is to provide scientific explanation, while the contrasting goal of human science is understanding of the meaning of social phenomenon (Schwandt, 1994, 2000). Dilthey (1894/1977) also introduced the concept of “lived experiences” and the importance of understanding these experiences from the point of view of those who are living them on a daily basis (Ponterotto, p.129). The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm is the anchor for qualitative research methods.

Constructivists, then, believe multiple, subjective realities exist. They believe the relationship between the researcher and the participant should be transactional and subjective, and that this dynamic interaction is key to capturing, and ultimately describing, the “lived experience” of the research participant(s). A constructivist acknowledges that her values cannot be divorced from the research process, but works to identify and “bracket” her own values as she moves through the project. The rhetoric of a constructivist study is typically in the first person and often personalized. Often, a reflection of the researcher’s emotional and intellectual life is openly discussed, and the researcher will utilize naturalistic designs in their methodology, often
immersing themselves in the community and the daily lives of the research participants
(Ponterotto, p. 130-132).

A constructivist-interpretivist approach to the current study allows for focus on the details
of each student’s life experiences. This information would be gathered by lengthy one-on-one
interviews with each student and following the mechanisms connected with an Interpretative
Phenomenological Analysis approach. The outcome of this constructivist approach would be the
story of female master’s students, told through the lives of my particular research group.

Methodology

Phenomenology

Phenomenology originated in the philosophical writings of Husserl before its use in
phenomenological research. There are now a number of schools of phenomenology with some
commonalities, but also some clear distinctions. A complete examination of the evolution of this
methodology would exceed the limitation of this assignment, but an overview follows.

Husserl’s approach to understanding experiences stems from the work of Brentano’s
“descriptive psychology or descriptive phenomenology” (Dowling 2007, p. 132). The aim of
phenomenology, for Husserl, was the “rigorous and unbiased study of things as they appear in
order to arrive at an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience” (p. 132).
This view requires that the participants’ account be captured before being reflected on.
Heidegger also valued the study of human experience, but saw the study as more of an
interpretive process. Heidegger sees a connection between the researcher and the participants
where “the social world of the participants is fused with that of the researcher in an attempt to
coco-construct reality” (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010, p. 17). Heidegger’s method rejects the notion of
bracketing as it is suggested by Husserl, with the belief that a research cannot be detached from the work. Heidegger’s approach to phenomenology is seen in IPA where emphasis is placed on both the participant and the research in the process of investigation.

IPA, then, has roots in Husserl’s phenomenology as evidenced in its goal of understanding the individual’s experience, but also incorporates Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology where it calls for interpretation and a dynamic research relationship between the researcher and the research participant (Clarke, 2009). IPA acknowledges that it is not possible for a researcher to have access to an individual’s life world because of the influences of the researcher’s own experiences and beliefs. This process where “the participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (Smith, 2004, p.40) is known as the double hermeneutic. This process is what differentiates IPA from a phenomenological study that would only seek to describe experiences of a particular research group.

The current study is well-suited to the IPA method because of the nature of the issue explored. The research questions best suited to this form of research are ones in which the researcher seeks to understand the shared experiences of a particular group in an identified phenomenon, where the resulting understanding of these shared experiences can help shape policies or practices related to the identified phenomenon as it pertains to the selected group (Creswell, 2013).

Participants

The participants in this study were 8 adults who are female master’s students at Montclair State University, attending part-time, while working full-time and raising children. This sample size is commensurate with current studies that have used IPA (Seamark, Blake, Seamark &
Halpin, 2004; Cope, 2011; Osborn & Smith, 2015). Sample size does vary within IPA research, but all are in agreement that the sample size should be small (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Clarke, 2008; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Baker & Edwards, 2012). The analysis of a larger data set could lead to the loss of the nuances of each participant’s experience (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

**Sample characteristics.** The homogeneity of this research group is that they are all students at the same level (master’s), at the same institution, working full-time and raising children. The researcher did not limit participation based on race or ethnicity, as the selected participants provided perspective on a particular phenomenon, and do not represent a particular population. The age of the participants did not affect the ability to participate, as the more important factors were familial and work situations.

**Sampling procedures.** IPA research tends to focus on homogeneous samples to allow for in-depth understanding of an issue particular to one specific population (Chapman & Smith, 2002; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA researchers, then, use purposive sampling for participant recruitment, with the possibility of the additional usage of snowballing, whereby selected research participants assist in the recruitment of additional participants (Seamark, Blake, Seamark & Halpin, 2004; Cope, 2011; Osborn & Smith, 2015).

**Research site.** The research site selected for this study is a public university located in the Northeast region of the United States, designated by the Carnegie Classification as a research doctoral institution and ranked within *US News & World Report* (2016) as a top tier institution.
**Procedures**

The selection of methodology dictates the manner in which a researcher plans, conducts and presents their study. IPA research requires a complex combination of both a deep understanding of the guiding principles of the methodology and an ability to apply flexibility in that same process. This need for flexibility in the process calls more for research guidelines than a prescribed set of unchangeable steps. Guidelines related to the execution of an IPA study require a formalized plan of action, but also acknowledge the need to engage with the research participant and make modifications, as needed (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The following sub-sections will address data collection, analytic methods and the presentation of findings in this IPA study.

**Data Collection**

The most frequent method of data collection within IPA research is semi-structured interviews (Clarke, 2008; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Semi-structured interviews call for the researcher to establish an interview schedule, rather than compile, and closely follow, a predetermined list of questions. The semi-structured interview schedule serves more as a road map where the researcher begins with initial questions, but can probe into participants’ answers as areas of interest arise. The “IPA interview is led by the participant but guided by the researcher, who is both empathic and questioning” (Clarke, 2008, p. 38). This method allows participants the opportunity to tell their story in the way in which they want to tell it, and allows them to speak freely on any particular topic. Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) explain this as coming at your research questions “sideways” (p. 58). The semi-structured interview schedule requires that the researcher set out the questions she would like to have answered in the order she would assume the conversation would flow in. The researcher also needs to be prepared for the interview to stray
from that original plan, where “initial questions are modified in the light of participants’ responses and the investigator is able to probe interesting and important areas which arise” (Chapman & Smith, 2002, p.127).

The semi-structured interview schedule should be designed to ask open-ended questions that will allow the respondent to speak, at length, about a particular topic. When creating the schedule, it is important to not directly ask the research question at hand. Instead, “you will need to look at your research questions, and then try to come up with a set of interviews questions which, when answered by the participants, will provide you with an opportunity to answer your research questions” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, p. 61).

Data Analysis

Data analysis within IPA research is not dictated by one formulaic approach. IPA studies have shown flexibility in the steps of the analytic process (Chapman & Smith, 2002; Smith, 2004; Clarke, 2009), but all have the same basic goal in examining participant responses. The process of analyzing the data in IPA is inductive, and calls for the emergence of themes directly from the participants’ experiences, rather than artificially inserting themes or imposing a theory created by the researcher (Clarke, 2009).

The analysis of the results of this study followed six steps laid out by Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009).

Step 1. Reading and re-reading (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This first step is where the researcher will begin the deep dive into the participant’s story. Reading and re-reading the interview transcript, and listening and re-listening to the audio recording, provides the opportunity to hear things that may have been overlooked during the actual interview, and allows for analysis regarding how a question was answered and where the participant tended to speak more or less.
Step 2. Initial noting (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The first and second steps often occur simultaneously, as the researcher will likely begin to make notes as part of the first reading of the transcript. As the researcher makes comments on the data, these will become key to the extraction of themes. Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) describe three types of comments made by the researcher: descriptive, linguistic and conceptual. Descriptive comments are the most basic form of commenting and involve “highlighting the objects which structure the participant’s thoughts and experiences” (p. 84). Linguistic comments focus on the language choices made by the participant in the conveyance of their story, and conceptual comments begin to shift the commenting focus to interpretation of what was said. This level of commenting is where the introduction of the researcher’s interpretation occurs: “Conceptual annotating will usually involve a shift in your focus, towards the participant’s overarching understanding of the matters that they are discussing” (p. 88).

Step 3. Developing emergent themes (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). At this stage, the researcher begins to focus on the commenting described in Step 2 to identify emerging themes in the data. This layer of analysis is a reflection of both the participant’s words and the researcher’s analysis, a “synergistic process of description and interpretation” (p. 92).

Step 4. Searching for connections across emergent themes (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The third step will result in a list of themes that emerged through the initial analysis. In the fourth step, the researcher must determine how she or he believes the themes fit together, where “connections are forged between themes until a coherent and organized thematic account of the case is produced” (Chapman & Smith, 2002, p. 127). The expectation is that researchers will be able to tie all themes back to the actual transcript, so care should be taken to ensure that in the process of researcher interpretation, the participant’s words are not lost (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).
Step 5. Moving to the next case (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The first four steps are repeated for each subsequent case which is reviewed, with care taken to treat each case with respect for its own story. The researcher should bracket what was gleaned from the previous analyses while analyzing any subsequent cases.

Step 6. Looking for patterns across cases (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The final stage of data analysis in an IPA study is to identify commonalities and patterns across multiple cases. This analysis leads to the creation of a list of superordinate themes that represent the stories of all of the participants. Chapman & Smith (2002) explain that “each superordinate theme is connected to the underlying themes which in turn, are connected to the original annotations and extracts from the participant” (p. 127). These patterns and superordinate themes shape the final narrative account of the study results, which include quotations from the participants.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher was mindful of ethical considerations throughout the entire process of the study. As part of the process to obtain approval to conduct research at the site institution, the researcher followed all required Institutional Review Board steps at both the site university and at Northeastern University. The recruitment phase of the study included an informed consent form that provided information to prospective participants on the purpose of the study, as well as the fact that participation was voluntary. Participants were given a gift card of nominal value as a token of appreciation for their participation in the study. The researcher was mindful of her positionality in the analysis of data, a concept that is more fully explored later in this chapter. As the report of findings was written, the participants’ names, as well as any other identifying information, were changed to preserve their anonymity and guarantee confidentiality. All
collected data were stored in a locked, portable filing cabinet in the researcher’s home and were destroyed at the completion of the study to protect the identity of the participants.

**Trustworthiness**

Critics of early qualitative work expressed doubt that research of this type had the same level of rigor as quantitative work (Yardley, 2000; Shenton, 2004). The criteria for a high quality quantitative study are both well-established and well-known: internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Yardley, 2000). Qualitative researchers cannot employ the same standards when evaluating their work, but a comparable method for ensuring trustworthiness can be utilized. Lincoln and Guba (1986) established criteria that would parallel those found in the quantitative, conventional paradigm. In their schema, they see “credibility as an analog to internal validity, transferability as an analog to external validity, dependability as an analog to reliability, and confirmability as an analog to objectivity” (p.18).

The purpose of this study was to explore the subjective experiences of the participants. Lincoln and Guba’s (1986) criteria of trustworthiness will be explained below, as well as details of how this study has met those expectations.

**Credibility**

The researcher engaged in several steps to ensure credibility of the study and the accuracy of the recorded phenomenon. First, research methods well-utilized within this methodological approach, IPA, were used. The data collection and analysis steps identified earlier in this chapter follow procedures put forth by previous IPA researchers. Additionally, the researcher engaged the participants in the validation of themes identified by the researcher in the analysis stage (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999; Brocki & Wearden,
2006; Creswell, 2013). As part of the member checking phase, once each participant account was analyzed by the researcher, a conversation was scheduled to review findings. The researcher provided the participant with an over of the analysis, and the specific findings, and invited feedback from the participant.

**Transferability**

An IPA research study, by its nature, seeks to explore the experiences of a specific population, in a specific location at a specific time. The results of such a study, then, are not applicable to other populations’ experiences of a different, or the same, phenomenon. This is addressed by providing an account of the research that is descriptive enough to allow a reader to determine if the findings are relevant to their own work. Lincoln and Guba (1986) describe this as a “narrative developed about the context so that judgments about the degree of fit or similarity may be made by others who may wish to apply all or part of the findings elsewhere” (p. 19).

**Dependability**

Credibility and dependability are often linked together (Lincoln & Guba, 1986), and require that similar expectations be met in a high quality qualitative study. An IPA researcher is required to document the processes of the study, in great detail, to allow future researchers to replicate the study (Shenton, 2004). The researcher established a clear and descriptive audit trail which included: notes on the preparation of the problem of practice statement and subsequent research question, the research proposal, the interview schedule, tapes and transcripts of interviews, researcher field notes, initial drafts of documents around themes, all drafts of analyses, and the final analysis. Lincoln and Guba (1986) assert that the portions of this audit trail that addresses the research process will assist in the determination of dependability, and those that address the creation of the final product assist in the determination of confirmability.
Confirmability

The concept of confirmability in qualitative research requires the researcher to confirm that steps were taken to ensure that the presented findings represent the experiences of the participants and not the beliefs of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). The researcher took three steps toward ensuring confirmability in the present study. The first was the establishment of the audit trail described above to allow readers to follow the path the researcher took in reaching the final conclusions. Additionally, the presentation of findings include verbatim extracts from the transcribed interviews to support the themes and connections made by the researcher. This will allow the reader to determine the accuracy of any interpretations made. Finally, the researcher acknowledged her own predisposition and positionality on the population and phenomenon studied.

Potential Research Bias

Graduate enrollment at Montclair State University is a top priority, and one of my primary responsibilities in at the University is to ensure healthy master’s enrollment. From a professional perspective, it can be asserted that I have a very selfish interest in my proposed research topic, in that gaining an increased understanding of potential challenges a portion of my student population face will, ideally, help me to enroll more students. The selection of a topic related to one’s work seems logical in a scholar-practitioner program. In fact, Maxwell (2005) was critical of student research proposals that seemed to ignore the perspective the author brought to the research based on my previous experiences. My professional perspective of this topic did not bring any biases to the research, but was a consideration in how I viewed results of the research or in how I will present them. I am an enrollment management professional with a
primary concern to admit, continuously register and graduate master’s students with a vested
interest in identifying any barriers and creating ways to remove them.

On a personal level, I am a female student pursuing a graduate degree while working full-
time and raising my family- a situation closely aligned to my research population. Briscoe’s
(2005) analysis of the other encourages thought on how my own “horizons of meaning” (p. 26)
could influence how I view the research problem at hand, and how it may sway my
understanding of my findings. As I have embarked on my own studies, I have created a list of
priorities, some of which are non-negotiable, and others that I have given myself permission to
ease off on while pursuing my degree. I can’t assume that those involved in my research would
have the same values and priorities as they earn their degrees. When conducting my research, I
must not project my values onto my subjects, nor should I give more weight to respondents
whose views and lives I more closely identify with. A common concern when dealing with
researchers who identify with the research population is the potential impact it could have on
presenting results. Previous studies have found that a researcher who is a member of the group
can exhibit tendencies toward representing the group in a way that preserves the group’s interests
and needs (Briscoe, 2005). I worked to remain aware of my own perceptions and beliefs in the
research process, and how they may have shaped my understanding and approach to analysis.
This process of bracketing my own belief system occurred through reflection and journaling.

IPA researchers are encouraged to include consideration and explanation of the extent to
which they can relate to the experiences of the research participants (Smith, Flowers & Larkin,
2009). The challenge I faced as I explored this topic was to set aside and/or suspend my
personal associations with the pursuit of a graduate degree as a female who is employed full-time
and raising a family. My own reasons for study, the stresses I encounter and my personal needs
from a university could not trump the voice of my research population. I acknowledge the
differences between myself and various members of my research group, and give close
examination to my personal biases- both toward the individuals themselves, and the opinions
they put forward. Briscoe (2005) summarized her analysis with the conclusion that “an author’s
demographic positionings is a cause for suspicion, but not the grounds for indictment” (p. 38).

Limitations

A potential limitation of this study, as with any other IPA study, was that it would not
provide a “causal explanation of a particular phenomenon” (Clarke, 2009, p. 39). However, as
was argued in the previous discussion of trustworthiness in qualitative research, that type of
explanation is not the goal of a study of this type. Instead, the intention here was only to provide
an analysis of a particular phenomenon as it was experienced by a specific population.
Additionally, participants will likely vary in their desire to speak freely about their experiences.
Although anonymity was explained and strictly adhered to, there were variances in the depth with
which each participant was comfortable exploring their experience, creating a potential difficulty
in identifying common themes among the participants. The final limitation or constraint is the
ability of a novice IPA researcher to apply the analytical and interpretative skills needed to produce
a high quality IPA study.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to investigate how women, with children, who are employed full-time, experience the complexities of pursuing a graduate degree. The analysis of the interview data yielded two super-ordinate themes and ten corresponding subthemes. The super-ordinate themes and their subthemes were: 1) The Juggling Act (1.1 Time Management, 1.2 Cross-Contamination 1.3 Support, 1.4 Prioritization, 1.5 Guilt); and 2) Motivation (2.1 Academic, 2.2 Professional, 2.3 Personal, 2.4 Role Model, 2.5 Financial). The review of interview transcripts, field notes and researcher’s journal entries revealed the super-ordinate themes as occurring in each participant’s account of their lived experience. The identified subthemes were found to occur in at least half of the eight accounts. Table 1 provides a listing of the superordinate and sub-themes that manifested during the analysis process, as well as the recurrence of each theme across participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Identification of Recurring Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Super-Ordinate Themes</td>
<td>Lisa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.) The Juggling Act</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Time Management</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Cross-contamination</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Support</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Prioritization</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Guilt</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.) Motivation</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Academic</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Professional</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Personal</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Role Model</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Financial</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Juggling Act

Women who are working full-time, raising children, and pursuing a graduate degree have multiple responsibilities as they navigate these three roles. Many also occupy other, simultaneous roles such as partner, daughter, sister, or community/religious leader. For the purposes of this study, those additional roles were not specifically addressed, although many participants are likely to also have these other components to their lives. The first super-ordinate theme that emerged in this study captured the participants’ view of how they navigate these roles, and how they juggle these multiple responsibilities. Each participant framed their perception of this juggling act within their own experiences and specific life circumstances, but the researcher found five areas of convergence across participants related to their navigation of multiple roles. All participants expressed a clear understanding of the need for time management skills in these circumstances, and the importance of maintaining a support system, in whatever form that existed for each participant. Further, most participants identified a cross-contamination of roles, where the thoughts and stress of one role bleed into the other role(s). Additionally, many of the participants verbalized their understanding of how they prioritize their multiple roles, and, finally, a large number of participants expressed feelings of guilt about their current situation and perceived impact on one’s family.

Time Management

All of the participants discussed time management as a primary component of their experience in juggling multiple roles. Some discussed practical strategies for keeping themselves, and their families, organized and on track, while others shared thoughts of feeling that there just isn’t enough time in any given day, or how the constant pull on their time impacts them, and their families.
Marie, when talking about how she handles the balance of student, employee and mother, shared her experience of the birth of her child in the middle of the academic semester:

When I was pregnant last semester and was due any day, my professor said, ‘You get one absence’. And I was like, ‘I'm going to have a baby, like you can see I'm clearly not lying, I'm eight and a half months pregnant’. So when my son was going to be born, he was late and so my doctor said to me, ‘So judging by his size, we're going to have to do a C-section. He's not in position.’ And, um, so it was a Wednesday, I had class Thursday with that professor. So she [the doctor] was like ‘Let's do the C-section Thursday’, and I said ‘No, let's do it Friday, cause I have class’. [laughter] And so she looked at me and she was like, ‘That's probably the weirdest answer that I've ever heard, and I've never heard that before and I've heard a lot in my career.’ And so, you know, I talked about it with my fiancé and we were like, we can wait one more day, that way I don't miss the class if I get one [absence], and then as I was bending down to put my shoes on that Thursday night, my water broke. [laughter] Um, of course. And so I sent her an email and I was like ‘Please understand, I had this scheduled for tomorrow, this isn't how it was supposed to be’. Um, and in the end, she did come around. She had, she was more understanding, she did let me have like, the extra week that I needed. But initially I felt kind of discouraged, by her response.

Marie relayed this story with humor, as hindsight tends to allow these things to be lighter than when we first experience them, but there was genuine disappointment in her voice when describing how she wished her professor was more understanding of the magnitude of what she was trying to do- give birth to a child. Marie is a mature, responsible graduate student who
understands the demands of a graduate level course, but also would have wanted a touch more understanding of her situation.

Lisa described more of a typical day for a student in her circumstances, and while the details may differ, each participant had a similar type of description of their day. Lisa described how she balances her roles each day in this way:

I mean, when I'm at work, I try to do everything that I need to do during that workday. So I try not to bring any work home. So I try to get there early. I don't get there late because in the morning the way it works is, I go to work early. So I leave at 7 o'clock. I leave all their clothes out, I leave everything done. My husband then, doesn't go to work till 9 o'clock. So he gets the kids dressed and he takes them to school. So then um, I will you know, go to work a little bit earlier, if I know I have to work on a project or have to get anything done. But then at 3 o'clock, or 3:30 usually when I leave, then most of the things are done for the following day. So work, I leave at work. And then I get home and I focus on home things. So then it's picking up the kids from aftercare, cooking dinner, getting a little bit cleaned. My housework is really left for Friday, Friday and Saturday. So Saturday is our cleaning day. Um, I'm trying a new routine, which I've heard is start Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and then nothing is left for Saturday, but it's not working. And then my schoolwork is left for when the kids go to sleep. So, you know, besides the day that I go [to class] in the evenings, the children, you know, I'm with them basically. But you know what it is? I'm with them, but I'm not with them, because I'm really cooking, I'm cooking, I'm cleaning.
Lisa’s description of her typical day provides insight into what her thought process is each day, what she needs to accomplish, and how she gets it done. This description is as significant as Marie’s, because while it is not a significant day with life-changing consequences, it is an example of a typical day. This description provides insight into what Lisa thinks and experiences every day as she navigates her multiple roles. When asked how that kind of constant navigation between these three things impacts her, Lisa replied, “I do feel overwhelmed. I feel like I can’t do it, but I continue to push through. And you know, I think I juggle a lot. I know I juggle a lot.”

Lisa’s account of her typical day provides glimpses of her strategies for balancing her time as she works to accomplish her daily goals. Each participant had their own toolbox of strategies for managing their daily lives. Some of these strategies overlapped, but some were unique to that specific participant and her individual family and work situation.

Each participant addressed her specific strategies for managing her time, and all agreed that organization was key. Lorelaiza referenced the color-coded calendar app on her phone which contains all of her home, school and work commitments, allowing her to see, at any given time, what her day, week and month look like. She also shared her strategies for keeping her kids’ activities manageable. Each child in Lorelaiza’s household knows that in a particular season, he or she is allowed to pick a certain number of activities, and all the schedules have to work together. She explained, “Like right now, we just canceled dance… I have my classes now and they both wanted to do soccer, and my son is still going to do baseball, so dance is just not going to fit in.” While her daughter may have been disappointed, Lorelaiza’s children all understand the effort it takes to keep the family balanced and moving forward, and accept their mom’s decision to limit participation in activities to preserve that balance.
Deborah, Jessica and Alexa all spoke about viewing their time in chunks, and being sure to “maximize time in each area”. Jessica described her experience:

I stay at work when I’m done. I'll stay at my desk, and then, I'll do my reading, or I'll get my statistics homework done then, or, you know, write my outline for this child advocacy class I'm taking, so like, I kind of manage my time in chunks, you know, so like that's like a Tuesday, Thursday, and then, I'll go to class, and I'll be home by nine o'clock or so. Usually, a little earlier than that, and then, it's like an hour of TV, talk with the husband, and go to sleep. The other nights where I can come home, it's sort of like I leave work as soon as I possibly can, contractually, like 2:45, I'm out the door, that's it. Go home, the kids are still in after care till like five o'clock, so I can at least like get dinner ready, sometimes, I'll sit on the couch for ten minutes, I'll just turn on my phone timer, just a power nap, ten minutes, or read, or something for myself, and then, pick them up. And then, the night starts, so the night is: eat, Xbox, 6:30 electronics are off, bath time, book, bed, and hopefully, they're asleep by eight o'clock, so then, I can get up, and, you know, do whatever I didn't get done, which is usually mountains of laundry, and maybe some reading, or, you know, just time to myself.

Alexa shared a similar understanding in how she views her days, in particular chunks or blocks of time (i.e. home, work, home, school). She described a level of daily intentionality in what she, and her husband, need to do to keep everything on track. Alexa explained, “We try to have a conversation every morning where we talk about what our individual goals are for the day. Um, you know, he has things that he needs to do whether it's home repair projects, or things like that,
Deborah’s time management strategies showed the level of flexibility she possesses that others may not, in that she has a certain amount of flexibility in her professional work. She explained how she often “works on the train on the way home” and “oftentimes, it’s just about shifting my work schedule, so, like, working early in the morning or late at night to make up for any missed time [because of school obligations].”

While each participant shared her tools and strategies for efficient use of her time, many felt that it still wasn’t enough. Lisa, Veronica, Mariah and Alexa all shared that they didn’t believe they had the time to get everything done that needed to be done. Alexa, who approaches time management with a high level of intentionality and partners closely with her husband to accomplish family goals explained, “I still don’t feel like everything’s getting done (laughs), but we do our best.” Mariah expressed that on days when everything goes according to plan, she feels comfortable and knows that she can get most things done. However, a slight wrinkle in the plan can cause everything to crumble. She explained, “Because…it feels like everything will be going good, everything’s all ‘Yeah- school is all done, work is going good, kids are good’. And then one kid- something happens. And then the other kid- something happens. And I’m suddenly like, ‘I can’t do it’.”

Each participant, then, is making daily decisions on how to prioritize the responsibilities associated with the roles of mother, student and employee, and more than half of the group described this prioritization as part of their account of their current experience.
Each participant was asked to reflect on how they prioritize the roles of mother, student and employee. Almost all of the participants put the role of mother as their top priority, with only Veronica as an outlier. Although it was said with a tone of resignation, Veronica explained, “I kind of tended to do this all my life, is to put my job first a lot of times. I’m trying to find a better balance.” Jessica and Lorelaiza both see the role of “mom” as the top priority, but Lorelaiza explained her perception of her family’s needs very different than the others did. While others made blanket statements of how the kids’ needs came before anything else, Lorelaiza was very clear in saying that she is the determiner of what is important to her kids. She said, “I think it’s from my perspective because to the kids, this is all important, right? They have no idea [what else needs to get done].”

A divergence exists between Lisa and Mariah in how they view work commitments and school obligations. Lisa described a scenario where she missed class for a work commitment:

I felt like work is my job, and work is the money, the bread, that we bring home.
And I felt we, I did, I had back to school night and I emailed the professor and I said, "Look, I'm sorry, I'm not going to be able to make it to Tuesday's class." I said, "Because I have to go to back to school night.

In contrast, Mariah has chosen school over her work with no remorse because she placed the value of an assignment over the value of her pay, describing her recollection of that choice, “…but I didn’t feel guilty. Because it was like ‘This has to be due, this is worth forty five percent compared to one day of pay. I’m OK with that.” Marie also sees the value in prioritizing her work, but describes it in less black and white terms:
You know, you need money to survive but I love my son so much so he is always my first priority. Um, and then I think that there's an ebb and flow between the prioritization of grad school and work. Um, it really depends on the immediate need, I guess, they would fluctuate depending on, you know, what's more pressing at the time. So you know, during finals or big papers or big projects, I would say that graduate school's first. Um, but during the general weekday, obviously my career is first cause I do need to make money to survive.

Deborah and Alexa both also see that “ebb and flow” that Marie described between work and school, allowing for busy times at work where that takes precedence, and more intense periods in a semester where that needs the focus and attention. Alexa sees work and school as two things that can be navigated, with proper preparation, instead of issuing a hard prioritization. She believes that it’s possible to work with the faculty to find the best way to navigate work and school obligations, describing how she anticipates a conversation going for an upcoming conflict she sees between her work calendar and her school obligations:

I would say, ‘I'm really slammed at work this week. Can I have a few more days to finish this paper?’ Or you know and, and I find when you, when you are able to see where, look ahead and see where your challenges are going to be, and communicate about them and have a responsible solution then people are willing to work with you.

While each participant identified how they prioritize their daily roles and responsibilities, many described situations where one role bled into another.
Cross-contamination

Each participant, in her own description of how she prioritizes her responsibilities each day, and how she goes about acting on those priorities, acknowledged that there are times when the physical or mental work from one area seeps into another area. Although Veronica and Lorelaiza did not expand on their feelings about that kind of seeping, they both reflected on times when it occurred. Veronica recalled the time when she left a long work meeting to return to her cell phone at her desk and see fifteen text messages from her son who forgot his house key and was standing outside in the cold, locked out of the house. Lorelaiza described bringing articles from class to her kids’ basketball games to try to sneak in some reading so she’d be ready to write a response as soon as the kids went to bed later that night.

Alexa and Marie both spoke about work bleeding into home life, but had different feelings on how that should be handled. Alexa acknowledged that modern technology makes it so one is always expected to be available and ready to work, but draws a clear line between when work shuts off. She explained, “I try to leave work at work um, like the nature of our, the nature of our business doesn't always make that possible and everyone has your cellphone number, right, so you're getting text messages. I try to stop looking at work emails at around 7:00 with the, you know, unless I know that there's a possibility of a crisis.” Marie however, a teacher in an affluent private school, feels compelled to respond saying, “So typically it's eight in the morning to 4:30 are my work hours, but then I come home and I'm doing additional work at home and work on the weekends including lesson planning or getting back to parents, uh, because it is a private school, the parents do demand more, they demand your presence more.” Jessica is also a teacher, but after twelve years of experience, feels work is not something that invades her home or graduate school time, as things now “run pretty well” in her classroom.
Jessica did express, though, that she often has moments when thoughts of her graduate school work invade her home time, and how that makes her feel:

They're like, they're little, and they're not gonna be little forever, and this program is going to come and go, and I'll grow from it, but then, you know, there's this time that I'm thinking, like ‘I should be doing my stats homework’, or ‘maybe I should be reading more of chapter two. I don't really understand this concept’, and they're just like, ‘Mom, we wanna go. Help me. Do this, let's read, let's play Xbox together,’ and I have to kind of push it away. I should be more present with the kids.

Alexa expressed similar thinking on being more present and engaged in the task at hand. She explained:

Well, it's interesting. You know that my, my children are getting older. They can sense it more. So it, it makes, it's, it's not a great feeling. It's, it's a little sad. Um, so I try and be a little more intentional just about where my focus is when I'm doing certain things, right? So if I'm doing my school work, I’m going to try and place my focus there. But it's funny, like in, in the last couple of months, you know my son will be like ‘Why are you looking at your phone? Can you play checkers with me?’ And, um, having that active observation from him has made me try to work harder on being there when I'm there.

Although Alexa and Jessica have identified an issue with this cross-contamination of roles, they both talked about working to control these intruding thoughts, and described how they consciously act in opposition to them by re-centering their focus, or working towards re-
centering their focus. Mariah’s description sounded like one with less control, even when she want to free her mind of these competing priorities. She spoke of her recent attempt at self-care, where she scheduled a massage to allow herself some time to reboot and recharge. She explained, “Even when I'm getting a massage I'm still thinking about ‘Alright, I've got to pick up the kids. I have to do this, I have to do that, there’s basketball…’ and then, like, I silence my phone but I'm thinking, like, ‘I want to get up’. When the person gets out I want to check my phone. But I've been good, I haven't, but like mentally I am… I'm just always worried.” Conversely, Deborah seemed to engage these blurred lines, at times, and described how she sometimes sees the need to allow for fluidity between work, school and home, describing how she sometimes manages her time, “…in class sometimes, checking up on work email or family situations, or whatever it is that needs to be done.”

For many of the participants, the inability to focus entirely on one area of their life at any given time has given rise to feelings of sadness and guilt.

Guilt

All but two participants, Deborah and Alexa, expressed varying levels of guilt when describing their current circumstances. Marie’s description of her guilt stems from her work, and from the addition of graduate school. As a teacher, Marie feels conflicted about the amount of time she spends with children who are not her own. She explained, “It still is emotionally struggling to be a mom and a teacher and you feel like you’re spending more time with other people’s children and not your own.” When asked about how the addition of graduate school impacted that already existing emotional struggle, Marie shared:
Um, I feel like, tremendous guilt for all of them. I don't feel like I do one really well. Um, as a mom I feel like my dad spends more time raising my son than I do. Um, you know, I am very lucky that I have family watching him so I get like, pictures and text messages, um, to see what he's doing throughout the day which is very nice. But it's not the same as being there. So I feel like on the weekends, I just like, gobble him up whenever I can.

Similarly, Jessica and Veronica expressed guilt around their parenting during this period, and the concern that the juggling of multiple roles may have an impact on their children. In response to a query around the challenges of managing guilt related to parenting, Veronica explained:

I think feeling like I have the time to parent my kids and help them with their homework. Last semester, I had so much of my own homework that I kind of left them to their devices. Like I said, I'd go upstairs and they'd still be up. I'm like, ‘You guys need to get to bed!’ I think it's really hard. I think women think they can find a balance, and I think sometimes there's just not. Sometimes it is hard and it's messy. It is what it is, and you kind of get through it the best that you can. And...you hope that you don't do anything damaging to your family along the way.

Lisa’s description of her guilt differs from the others in that it is often sparked by her children who directly challenge her on her choices. She shared a story of missing a child’s school concert and remembered it this way,

So you know, when I came home that night it was like, ‘Mom, you know, you didn't make it to my concert.’ I said, ‘I told you honey, I wasn't going to be able to make it because Mom had something for school.’ And my kids have made me feel guilty
where they have said to me, ‘You're going to school too much. You're doing too much in school.’

One of Lisa’s strategies for managing both her kids’ feelings and her own internal conflict is to arrange one-on-one time with the child who feels they were neglected by mom’s absence. That child gets a dinner alone with Lisa, or an ice cream trip, or anything they can do together without the other children and without any added distractions. In addition to the guilt Lisa feels when she disappoints one child, she has concern around the impact her graduate education is having on her entire family, and how the disruption and change of routine makes them feel. She shared that she feels “really bad” that things like Family Game Night and Taco Tuesday have fallen to the wayside as she struggles to quickly get dinner on the table most nights before heading into a long list of other things that need to get done.

Lorelaiza didn’t focus as much as others on her description of feelings of guilt, but when she did discuss it, she was able to quickly dismiss it. She said, “I feel guilty. I do. But, at the same time I think of the long run and why I’m doing it.” Mariah’s description of her feelings of guilt differed from the others because hers was more widespread, and not entirely focused on parenting. She expressed guilt over her belief that she was unable to do all things well. Mariah explained:

It's like you're trying to split your - trying to split one person in five places, and honestly it isn't possible. You know, one is lacking and one is getting everything from you, or (pause) two are getting and then two are lacking. I think that's something difficult and no matter how I try to rearrange and (pause) try to talk to myself it just - it just never seems to be (pause) that clear, or perfect.
Support

Each participant described the support that they feel as they shared their account of their experience. These women feel supported in varying levels at work, from their families, and from the faculty.

The support of one’s family or loved ones was evident in all but one research conversation. Several participants discussed how the support of their husbands was part of their success in navigating multiple roles. Lisa shared that her husband became more helpful after she approached him when she received a grade she wasn’t satisfied with. Lisa explained:

And I think he's realized that last semester took a big burden on me. I had the two classes, one online and one as well, on campus. And I think because I was very disappointed in my grades and I wanted to do better I'm a perfectionist. And it was one of those things where I said to him, ‘I need your help because I need to do better in this.’

Alexa also describes her husband as supportive in the way they view themselves as a team to get everything done, and in his willingness to occupy the kids when she needs time to get school work done. Jessica’s husband provided support in a very practical way by hiring a person to come in and help with the cleaning responsibilities once per month. Veronica feels her husband’s support in the pride he takes toward her current endeavors:

I think he's proud of me. He saw me really happy, so I think for him, it's like, ‘If you're happy, then that's great, because that's what I want for you. If it gives you what you need professionally to do something else that'll make you happy, then that's terrific. Go for it.’ He's very supportive. I have a good husband.
Alexa and Marie both spoke highly of the support they receive from their parents. Alexa’s parents come and stay for a day or two each week to help out with the kids, and Marie attributes much of her success to her parents and her mother-in-law. She reflected:

    I would feel sorry for people that don't have the family or the partnership, um, because without that, I would never be able to get this done. So I think that, you know, knowing that I have the supports that when I want to cry, I can cry. And when I need someone to motivate me, I have it all so, um, I couldn't imagine how it would feel for someone who didn't have, you know, a strong, uh, relationship with their parents. Or their in-laws. Or a support system at home. I think that's probably, I guess, what I would say is the most important, um, uh, to help me succeed. You know, is knowing that I have that support.

Mariah and Lorelaiza both spoke of family support and how it has been critical to their success. Mariah’s sister is emotionally supportive and always encouraging Mariah to keep pushing. She also supports the family by attending events for the kids when Mariah can’t make it. Lorelaiza’s family support is seen in her mother, and in her children. Her mother lives with them and is able to help with daily tasks, but the kids are also instrumental. Lorelaiza’s kids understand the daily pressures she encounters, and contribute to household chores in various ways, including getting themselves ready for school each day without her direction, and making their own lunches.

    Jessica and Lisa both reported that while they may not have felt direct support from their employers, their colleagues were very supportive. As a teacher, Jessica was able to call on English teachers in her building to give feedback on her papers and other work. Lisa described a scenario where colleagues would work to give her quiet time at work to get school things done
because they understood how much she had on her plate. Veronica also feels supported by her colleagues, but as a higher education professional, wondered if people just see her current endeavor as “this is just what we do here.”

Similarities exist between Jessica’s and Deborah’s description of support in the workplace. Both described indirect support because of the flexibility they have in their professional roles. In discussing her flexibilities at work, Deborah explained:

I know that I am very lucky in my circumstances at home and at work. I have a lot of flexibility, and I have a good job. Um, I know that I had a much easier time than a lot of other people, and I don't know, um, you know ... It's just, it's got to be a really, really difficult thing, uh, to try and manage, and I, I can imagine that it would be, for a lot of people, not even feasible.

Jessica, when reflecting on her work in a public school, also identified how occupational differences might impact someone working to navigate these roles. Jessica shared:

You know, what, if your employer isn't supportive of that decision, or if you're brand new to a company, or somewhere in corporate America, like they might let you go, if they see you're running out at five o'clock, four o'clock every day. so like, that's really important. I didn't think about that before. I feel so fortunate that my day ends, you know, technically, the bell rings at 2:33, but it doesn't really end, so like I have that time, to kind of take for myself, to do my work, to eat, and then, come back to school, where, you know, some people don't, so that would be a big factor too.
The majority of participants, when asked about faculty support, reported that they believed faculty were no more or less supportive of them than they were of other graduate students. Mariah and Marie, however, shared very personal accounts of when they felt supported by their professors. Marie had a childcare issue on the night of her research class, a critical course in her program. She remembered her professor’s response in this way:

One time my babysitter canceled and I messaged her and I was like, my babysitter canceled, I can't come to class. She goes, "ah, bring him." So I picked him up from daycare and I brought him to class. Um, and she had toys in her office... cause I wasn't expecting um, to bring him. She had toys in her office and she brought them, and you know, he sat in the class with her and the rest of my classmates. And then this semester I took another class with her and um, she said "I can't wait to see your son again." Like, "he's my little mascot.

Mariah spoke of the support of a particular faculty member several times in her account, but as she reflected on the difficulty of managing stress in her personal life with the requirements of a graduate program, she shared:

When I went back it was like, the hardest. It was like trying to put oil on a rusty bike, and it's like okay, almost, I need some more. So I said even if I'm taking one class, cause I'm taking six credits now. Last semester I tried to do to two, but it just killed me, because all the papers were due at the same time. But I was like ‘I need to keep trying’. And I've had awesome professors. Like one professor, he is like, on me. He's like, ‘No, you're gonna stay’. Because when I was taking his class I was going through the divorce, and constantly in court, so I was missing. Cause
court, you know, people think that it ends at three, you could be there till six o’clock. And I would be running late, and I'm crying, I'm like ‘I'm tired’. I couldn't, you know, handle the stress, and everything. But I've been lucky that professors that I've had are like ‘No, you're staying. Even if I need to accommodate you’. So that's why I keep pushing.

Conclusions

The participants’ accounts of the strain on their time because of their multiple roles were similar in that all have multiple responsibilities each day and work to accomplish as much as possible to the highest quality possible. The divergence exists in how they approach that feeling of being pulled in multiple directions. Deborah and Alexa were most similar, in that their description of how they respond to this constant pull was intentional and methodical. Alexa laid out the strategies she employs each day to plan out how she will accomplish what she needs to get done, and Deborah sees this as a need for her to further “multi-task”, something she has done for many years as a successful professional. While Deborah’s children are older (freshman in college and sophomore in high school), Alexa’s children are much younger (4 and 6). This approach, then, to how they deal with strains on their time is not connected to age of children, necessarily, but may be a function of how an individual deals with stress and pulls on their time more generally. Both of these participants exude confidence, and it appears that this calm, methodical approach may be their generalized response for dealing with complex situations, and not a response specific to this one examined experience. Meaning, this is likely not a designed response to the current navigation of multiple roles, but an automatic response that might be seen in professionally stressful situations, or in other complex experiences which may have occurred prior to the enrollment in a graduate degree.
Each research participants’ account painted a picture of a mindset where one is always conscious of what needs to be done, and is never free from the pull of responsibility. These women awake to a mental list of all that needs to be accomplished that day, and lay their heads down thinking about which tasks didn’t get done and need to be carried over to tomorrow. That description of days filled with constant fear that something won’t get done or didn’t get done, was a source of stress for the participants. The feeling of always have something that needs to be done puts the participants in a position where it is hard to relax or find a few minutes to let the brain shut down. Participants manage this constant pull on their time with various time management strategies. Many break their days up into chunks of time where they intend to be singularly focused during each particular block, but each experienced varying levels of success in that endeavor. They continue with this strategy, though, as it appear to give them comfort to allocate portions of every day toward focusing on each role and the associated expectations.

The participants varied in their description of cross-contamination, or, the seeping of one area into another. Some described this occurrence as a mental intrusion they were unable to fight, while others strategically allowed for cross-over as a means to accomplish more. Lorelaiza’s decision to catch up on reading while at her child’s basketball game, or Deborah checking work or personal emails while in a lull during class, were intentional strategies to balance the multiple responsibilities they face. Both participants allow for multi-tasking of sorts, and when they see openings in their time, find some other way to be productive. Mariah’s description of being unable to enjoy a massage because of constant invading thoughts of what else needs to be done that day is not productive, nor conducive to her getting things done. The acknowledgement that thoughts associated with one role appear when engaging in tasks of a different role was troublesome to some of the participants. This is not a unique circumstance to
this population, as many adults today find themselves relying on modern technologies which allow them to respond to work email while on line at a grocery store, or send a text message to a child’s teacher while waiting for a meeting to start during the work day. These women, however, often see these as competing roles instead of simultaneous roles. Any parent’s mind can wander while playing a board game with their kids, drifting to thoughts about work or what’s for dinner tonight. The women in this group who were able to see these mental intrusions as a normal course of adult life when dealing with multiple responsibilities presented themselves in a much less harsh way than those who felt ashamed by this cross-contamination.

All but two participants spent a significant amount of time discussing their feelings of guilt surrounding the perceived impact their decision to enter a graduate program has on their children. Many described the process they use to combat this guilt by focusing on the importance of the graduate work and the benefits, whether personal or for the family as a whole. Those who described feelings of guilt over their current situation were somewhat extreme in their descriptions of the current situation and the possible impact. These participants are concerned that their actions are going to traumatize their children or have a severe negative impact on their relationships. In addition to the severity of the guilt, it’s important to note the frequency of these feelings, as many described daily feelings of guilt, or at least, guilt each time they left for class or missed an event for their child. The guilt related to parenting was only one component, as several described a generalized sense of guilt related to all of their roles. There were multiple descriptions of feeling as if one was not achieving success in any of the roles undertaken. All of the participants work full-time and are performing well in their jobs, have healthy, functioning families and are successfully progressing through their graduate programs. Yet, many describe overwhelming feelings of doubt, insecurity and guilt. The guilt is not strong
enough to cause any of the participants to make a change in their current situation, but does nag
at them and cause them to question if what they are doing is worth the potential harm it may
cause to their families. For many of the participants, then, they have daily concerns over their
ability to accomplish all that needs to be done, and, are plagued, sometimes daily, with feelings
of guilt.

Age of children did seem to matter with prioritization, as those with older children only
were able to prioritize their work differently, as their home responsibilities related to childcare
differed from those with younger children or babies. Checking in with older children via text, or
the usage of cell phone tracking applications provided comfort to those with older children,
while those with younger children worried more about who was caring for them and what the
children may be missing out on by not spending their days with their mother. An additional
insight into the participants’ account of their prioritization of their multiple roles is the relation to
job satisfaction. Those women who were pleased with their current professional situation and
enjoyed positive working relationships with their employers were more inclined to express
internal conflict over the competition between work and their personal or school life. The
participants who were less satisfied with their current work experience appeared to be more firm
in their belief that home and school should come before work responsibilities.

These participants all acknowledge that juggling these multiple roles has had some
impact on them in one way or another, yet all persist in the graduate education. The following
section will address how participants recall their motivation to start their graduate program, and
what now motivates them to continue.
Motivation

Graduate work is rigorous, time-consuming and requires a high level of dedication to the goal one is trying to achieve. For women who are working full-time and raising children, the decision to begin a graduate program, and to maintain continuous enrollment through completion, is a serious one. The addition of graduate work to an already complex life adds another role for the women to juggle, with all of the added responsibilities connected to that new role. Research participants in this study described what motivated them to begin their current graduate programs, and also, what motivated them to continue in their programs.

Academic Motivation

Lorelaiza and Mariah had similarities in their academic motivation to begin graduate level work. Both women expressed a love of their discipline and an interest to learn more in that particular area. Lorelaiza has had an interest in accounting that originated in her undergraduate career, and described an insatiable desire to learn as much as possible in her field. Her academic plan has been in place for some time, with her description of her academic goals as:

So I said, ‘Okay, I need my undergrad. I need an MBA, Middle States accreditation changed, so you need an MBA in the field you want to teach. I need a doctorate if I'm going to teach master’s students,’ and that's why I'm doing my MBA right now. I wanna learn, I wanna ... you know, learn as much as possible.

Similarly, Mariah has an academic and personal interest in the law and started this particular master’s program to increase her knowledge base in that area. This passion for discipline-specific knowledge, combined with her general interest in learning, led her to explain her decision to start in this way:
'cause I – I will know the system better, I will understand more legal terms compared to what I know now, and I'm always willing to - that's one thing with me, I'm always willing to learn. If someone corrects me, I'm actually happy about it, so it's ... and I never want to stop growing.

Alexa was also motivated to begin her current program by an academic goal she has had in place for some time. Alexa described herself as always being “a really good student” and shared her academic goals in this way:

You know I'm, I'm in my early 40s, I have always wanted a secondary degree. I, I always really thrived in an educational environment, and my original plan was like ‘I'm going to get my master's, I'm going to get my PhD’, and I was on an art history track at the time. But like, I, like I'm just, I've always been like a, a really good student.

Veronica and Lisa both connected their academic motivation to the idea that they just enjoy the learning process and feeling academic work gives them. Lisa identified herself several times in the research process as a “lifelong learner” who always saw graduate education as part of her plan. Veronica felt the same and shared, “I love learning. I just love that feeling of learning something new and being involved and questioning and looking at things in a deeper way that you don't normally do in your day-to-day life, at least in my day-to-day life.”

Three participants described how the academic benefits of graduate work motivate them to continue in their program. Jessica is a high school history teacher, and believes that being a student and being on the other side of the educator-learner dynamic has made her think about her teaching differently. She also believes that her academic work and the act of research and
writing has made her a better educator, and that her general academic work connected to her program have benefitted her as a professional. Jessica explained:

    Academically, I know how to access my resources better. I have all these articles that I've read and can kind of apply to different parts of my history classes now, so, you know, for the graduate program to kind of like melt in, or bleed into my profession, I couldn't ask for anything more. You know, that's been really helpful.

    Veronica and Deborah both described the rewards of the academic experience, and how it motivates them to continue in their program. Veronica expressed that she feels continuously enriched by her interaction with her classmates, and enjoys the feeling of being intellectually challenged and stimulated. Similarly, while Deborah acknowledges that she sees no immediate professional application for her graduate experience, she appreciates, and enjoys, how her graduate work challenges her to “just think about things differently.”

**Personal Motivation**

    The research participants had various personal motivations that inspired them to start their graduate programs, and keep them motivated to continue through their programs. Veronica described her motivation to start as being connected to the feelings she had being surrounded, professionally, by many people with multiple degrees. She said, “I always felt a little bit like I’m not good enough and I don’t belong in this environment.” Alexa did not compare herself to others as much, but rather, expressed personal motivation to start connected to her feelings of being stuck. Alexa explained that “feeling professionally and personally kind of stuck in a level or stuck in a place for some time” was one of the motivating factors for her decision to start her MBA program.
Deborah is pursuing a graduate degree in a field that is not directly connected to her line of work, but described her thought process before making the decision to apply to graduate school in this way:

I had been interested in psychology for a long time, and never worried- I had spent about five years not applying to school because I didn't know what I would do with it at the end. I finally just decided that maybe, uh, if I were in school and talking with colleagues and, uh, classmates about the field that, uh, maybe I would figure out what I want to do with it- with my interest. So, I guess if you could say, like, ‘why did I apply?’- for personal interest.

Lisa is motivated by her passion to become a counselor and, ultimately, to open her own center for providing counseling services for children in the foster care system. This passion drove Lisa to apply to graduate school, but also serves as a motivator for her to continue because she knows she has “a really big vision”, and is aware that she needs this degree to accomplish the goal she has set for herself.

Deborah and Alexa both indicated that part of their personal motivation to continue in their program is the idea that this step was an important self-investment that should be honored. Deborah reflected by saying that is there is something that is important to you, one should, “…invest in yourself. So if there is something that important, than find a way to make it work”.

Similarly, Alexa explained, “I’m just so proud of myself for, for doing this. Like saying ‘I’m going to make myself- I see this as an investment in myself. In making myself better.”

Jessica and Veronica both enjoy the feeling of personal accomplishment connected to their ongoing graduate work and described how that motivated them to continue. Jessica shared,
“I’ve learned so much. And, I feel stronger, more confident”, and Veronica had similar feelings. Veronica shared:

I think even just doing my graduate work, I feel like I can walk a little taller. I feel like I am smart. I got As in both of my classes that I took last semester, and I feel like wow, okay, I'm on the right track. I really love the program. I feel really proud of myself that I've done this, even though it's a struggle. It's something that I really, really enjoy. Even as hard as it was last semester, I absolutely loved every minute of it.

**Professional Motivation**

A majority of the research participants described some sort of professional motivation to either begin or continue in their master’s program as they provided their account of their experience. Marie, Mariah and Lorelaiza all had very clear, and very direct, explanations of their professional motivations to begin graduate work. Lorelaiza saw the MBA degree as the gateway to teaching accounting, her professional aspiration for some time. Marie identified that teachers who earn a master’s degree are immediately more marketable, while Mariah was motivated by a professional future. She believes that a master’s degree will lead to a better job within the legal system, and ultimately, a position with a good retirement plan.

Veronica believes that the pursuit of her intended degree will help her explore other professional opportunities within higher education. Veronica explained:

You know, the goal for me is to move out of [this area] at some point and do something else. I'm not sure what that is, but I feel like this is the time to explore that. As I'm taking these courses, to really figure out where my interest lies and
where my strengths would be a good match within another setting in higher education.

Alexa also works in a university position, and while she doesn’t see the pursuit of a graduate degree as an exploration exercise for changing fields, she did express how working in higher education motivated her to begin this endeavor:

I'm not really looking to move or to take another job elsewhere but I feel that having a graduate degree and working in the higher ed environment just gives me a little more credence. Um, I've been, you know, every year I found myself engaging a little bit more with students and very strong relationships with people in the academic departments that we work with. And you know, part of, part of the reason was that like okay, I'm going to have these letters after my name and, and that's going to elevate me a little bit especially with people who don't know me very well. And I also feel like in this, this world is just changing so much, I think you need to keep expanding your toolkit, right, to be valuable.

Jessica described a similar experience of comparing herself to those around her who possessed advanced degrees:

It seems so stupid and silly now, but, everyone in my office had their masters, and, you know, I felt like I'm this new teacher, and I'm young. I don't know what I'm doing, these people are so smart and intelligent, and I'm like, just a page ahead of the kids in the textbook, you know, and, I'd come home, feeling really bad, like I should go get my masters, I should, so I can keep up with my colleagues, and appear to be intelligent.
Lisa and Jessica both spoke about the impact their graduate education has on their professional roles, and how that adds additional motivation to keep progressing. Lisa’s pursuit of her counseling degree has given her the skills she needs to incorporate what she is learning into her daily interactions with students. Jessica also spoke of incorporating what she is learning in her graduate program into her teaching responsibilities, and shared that some of her graduate research has led to her creating new electives within her high school.

**Role Model as Motivation**

Each research participant, when talking about their motivation to either begin or continue in their program, spoke of the concept of role models. Some began their graduate work because of a strong role model in their life, and some push through the difficulties in this experience because they see themselves as a role model.

Deborah attributes a portion of her decision to begin graduate work to the fact that she had friends who had done it, or were in the process of earning a graduate degree. Alexa and Marie both shared that their mothers were an inspiration to them, and provided them with strong examples of women who could accomplish lofty goals. Alexa shared, “One of the reasons that I’m doing this is because I saw my mother do it. And, I saw the value, I saw how hard she worked but how important it was to her.” Marie identified similarities she sees between her life and her mother’s, and several times spoke of how her mom motivates her. She explained:

My family situation is very similar to my parent's. So my mom had me in her undergraduate, um, the last semester of her undergraduate year. And so I kind of, kind of, saw my mom go through, um, both her Master's and then her PhD recently. Um, so she's really inspired me.
All of the participants identified at least one person for whom they see themselves as a role model to, and how that helps them to focus on accomplishing their own goal of earning a master’s degree. Both Mariah and Lorelaiza believe they can be role models to colleagues, and shared examples of how they have motivated others to further their education. Mariah spoke of how her colleagues often ask how she manages work, school and family, and how they have doubts of their own abilities to do something similar. She encourages them to just start a program and just “keep pushing” their way through. Lorelaiza shared a recent story where a colleague shared that she was going to abandon her goal of obtaining a bachelor’s degree. She used herself as an example of constant learning and constant growing, and convinced the colleague to apply and enroll in an undergraduate program for the next fall.

Many participants, when reflecting on the significance of what they are doing, spoke of the example they believe they are setting for their children. Deborah and Veronica both have the belief that modeling good study habits will have an impact on their older kids. Jessica’s boys are younger, but she identifies one of her successes in this way:

That's been great, and kinda like being a good, well, maybe "good" is not the word, but a better role model for my kids, to see like, you know, you can go back to school, even when you're older. You can accomplish this goal, even when it's really hard, and they're little, and they probably don't get it now, but maybe, one day, they will.

Alexa’s children are also young, so while they may not truly grasp the details of what she is currently doing, she believes that she is providing a healthy example of what a “mom” is, and that both her children now see her as “a more complete person for them.” Marie’s son is an infant, but
she still believes that this will serve as an inspiration to him, while also inspiring adults around her. She shared:

I would say I think that I'm leaving my son, like, a good, like, legacy. Um, I'm, I hope that I inspire him as much as my mom inspired me. Um, she really motivated me, um, so I, I think that's probably my biggest success, is really just making sure that he's inspired to go to school. You know, um, when I first met my fiancé, he didn't finish high school. And so, you know, I pushed him to go back for a diploma so he didn't get a GED, he got a diploma.

Mariah reflected on her accomplishments in the framework of being a woman and the example she hopes to set for her daughters. Mariah explained:

And especially my daughters, I always tell them--my little one doesn't understand--but I said ‘You're my push’. All my kids are my push but for my daughters, I just don't want my daughter to live the way I did, you know, very dependent on their dad. So I just tell them like, ‘You just keep pushing’. And I never want my daughters to ever say like ‘Well mom was the statistic mom, and she didn't graduate and, you know, she's a government statistic, you know’, and that's why I keep pushing.

Lisa described feeling encouraged when her oldest son validated her efforts and how she is a role model to her other children. She recalled the conversation in this way:

And I'm like, I'm hopefully making an impact in their lives for the better. But I did feel guilty about them, you know, noticing that Mom's away. And then my oldest, again, sometimes I think my wis- wisest says, ‘Mom you're teaching them to go to
college. You're teaching them go to school. They're seeing you struggle and they're seeing you go to school. So what, they're, you, you're giving them a model, an example.’ So I'm hoping it's going to make me a better mom to give them more to look forward to.

**Financial Motivation**

Half of the research participants spoke of financial benefits as a motivating factor to begin a graduate program. Lisa spoke about the financial benefits of her degree and her future plans, and how it would impact her family, saying, “It’s going to help, you know, our situation in the future.” Jessica, like Lisa, is in the public school system, and describes her graduate degree as something that will bump her up in the salary ladder in her district. Jessica stated that teachers are not paid well and “even though I’ve been teaching for twelve years, I’m still at bachelor’s level, so, yeah, that helps.”

In addition to her academic and professional motivation, Lorelaiza was open about the financial motivation behind her graduate pursuit. She said:

Yes, for me in the sense that I have the education, I can pursue my dreams of, of being whatever I want to be eventually one day, but more because my bracket moves. Right? So you have more degrees, you have more money. A simple fact. Well, more money, and I’m better able to provide, especially as a single mom. I’m a better provider.

Mariah is also a single parent, and shared that her kids are aware of the financial benefits of an advanced degree. She described a conversation she had with her children where they were questioning why the value of a graduate degree was worth the strain it was putting on Mariah
and her family. She reflected, “My kids were kinda like okay, but always ‘Why? Why?’ I said, ‘Well, with a master’s you get more money’. My son is like, ‘Go for it, Mommy! Yes, we can go more places, Mommy!’”

Conclusions

This research group is comprised of eight motivated, goal-driven women who value education and the impact it has on one’s life. Divergences exist in where each woman saw the impact of an advanced degree, but each articulated why they started this and where they thought it would take them.

The strong similarity across all of the participants was their identification as someone who enjoys learning and appreciates the learning process, and point to an academic motivation behind the decision to begin graduate school. Participants, who described their graduate work as something that has altered their thinking and how they approach situations, value that experience. This change to a more analytical thought process is an accomplishment for these women, and exercising this new skill in the classroom will be something they will miss at the completion of their degree. This change to more elevated level of thinking serves as a motivator to continue with the process and validates the decision to begin a graduate program. None of the participants were surprised by the work load or caught off guard by the academic requirements of their program, and all seemed to enter the program with an understanding of the academic rigor connected to a master’s program, but also a desire to achieve that level of learning. None of the participants suggested that they thought this endeavor would be easy, and instead, enjoy the challenge of it. These are competitive, high-achieving women who are looking to prove to themselves, and those around them, that they can accomplish this goal. Two participants went beyond the simple explanation of saying they were motivated by their desire to learn, and
instead, expressed a discipline-specific passion that compelled them to go beyond the bachelor’s level. These women spoke less of a change in their thought process, and put less value on changes to analytic ability. Instead, they took a more practical approach regarding what they would value in a graduate degree, with more of an emphasis on the understanding of terminology, best practices, etc. This practical approach to one’s interest in graduate education is likely connected to these particular fields of study, as both are professional in nature and have less of a theoretical component than others. Academic motivation, then, may have individual differences for each student, but may also vary according to the area of study.

For many, their employment fields are such that obtaining a master’s degree leads to an automatic salary increase. Mariah, Lisa, Jessica, Marie and Lorelaiza all spoke about the immediate, and long-term, financial benefits of earning a graduate degree. For those in the public school system in New Jersey, obtaining a master’s degree typically increases their salary within their district’s pay scale. Those who described a sense of financial motivation used that motivation as fuel to continue when faced with challenges, and used financial motivation to assuage guilt. For some participants, the belief existed that their children may not be able to see the value of education as a justification for missing time with mom, but the promise of increased pay and resulting family vacations or activities was something that kids could understand. Participants who reported financial motivation as a factor in beginning a graduate program did not list that as the primary reason for starting, and placed it after academic and personal motivations. Those who reflected on the financial motivation were quick to point out that it was not the primary motivating factor, and all seemed to circle back to remind the researcher of the primary academic goal. It seemed the discussion of the financial benefit was a practical reality, but not one that many wanted to expand on for fear of losing sight over the larger reasons for
beginning, and completing, a program. The remaining three participants (Alexa, Deborah and Veronica) did not make any mention of financial motivation in their decision to pursue a graduate degree, and instead, attributed the decision more to personal and academic interests.

Deborah and Veronica, both more senior in their work experience than others, explained their pursuits in an exploratory way. Deborah has a successful professional job in New York City, but will soon earn her master’s degree in an unrelated field. Although she has a strong academic interest in this new discipline, she has no clear idea of where the degree will take her upon completion. Deborah’s motivations were purely personal and academic, as her lack of a concrete plan related to where this will lead removes any idea of financial or professional motivation. Veronica also saw her graduate pursuit as a way to explore other professional opportunities, although within the same field she currently works in. Both women were comfortable discussing the exploratory nature of their academic pursuit, and with the idea that completion may, or may not, lead to some type of professional change. They both acknowledged that they were aware of this unknown outcome at the onset of the program, and were hopeful regarding where it may take them upon completion. This security with the unknown is likely connected to the fact that neither of these two participants enrolled in a graduate program for immediate financial or professional benefits.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was to explore how women, with children, who are employed full-time, experience the complexities of pursuing a graduate degree. The data gained from interviews with participants indicated that these women interpret their current graduate experience based on how they are navigating their multiple roles
and the responsibilities connected to them, and, through what motivated them to start, and continue, in their graduate program.

All but one woman described the graduate student experience as a difficult one. That one participant has older children, who of course have needs, but are more self-sufficient than younger children. She interpreted her unflappable response to navigating the multiple roles as being connected to her strong multi-tasking skills. As a working adult with a family, she already had multiple, competing priorities, and the addition of graduate school was just one more component of that experience. This particular participant was also one who did not focus on any feelings of guilt about her current situation. This could be connected to her own view of her endeavor, and the idea that if she doesn't see this as incredibly taxing on her or her family, there is no situation to feel guilty about. Some participants did have children who verbalized displeasure with the current situation, and that act seemed to validate and magnify any feelings of guilt which were already present. Children are often displeased with various choices parents make for them, and are typically not left to be the deciders in what best serves them, or the family unit. The women who were most comfortable with the path that earning a graduate degree would lead them down, both professionally and financially, were most likely to acknowledge that children being upset is not a reason to lose track of one’s goals. While many of the participants had thoughts regarding their feelings of guilt, an analysis of the data reveals that there is no mention in any of the interviews of the word “regret”. Additionally, none of the participants gave any indication in the course of the study that they were overwhelmed enough, either by the juggling act or the guilt, to contemplate withdrawing from their program.

A factor that did appear to be a critical factor for success was support. Each participant had their own experience of who their support system consisted of and what they needed from
that support system, but all agreed that the support was crucial. Several made clear that they doubted their own ability to succeed were it not for people around them encouraging them and supporting them when needed.

The group’s primary motivation, both to start a graduate program and to continue in one, is academic in nature. The participants describe themselves as lifelong learners, a person with a passion for a particular discipline, or as someone with a genuine curiosity for a new field. As they progress through their degrees, the group feels empowered, more intelligent and more confident. Each participant described an enriching classroom experience that, while challenging because of the time commitments it adds to one’s life, also invigorates them. These students all appreciate the breaks that happen throughout an academic year, but all are genuinely excited to begin a new course and get back into the classroom environment. Participants, when recalling their classroom experiences, often had the same enthusiasm in their voices as they did when talking about their children. They were all able to articulate their goals, and knew exactly while courses they still needed to take, when they would take them, and when they would graduate. The conferral of a master’s degree will be a very proud moment for each of the participants.

Participants who were motivated by others to begin a graduate program see successful completion of the program as an homage to that person. Those who see themselves as a role model understand that “sticking it out” and working to degree completion is the ultimate lesson for those who view them as the role model. The women who see themselves as role models to their children, their children’s friends, or the students in their classrooms stressed the importance of showing the value of education and that hard work and dedication are the keys to accomplishing your goals.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate how women, with children, who are employed full-time, experience the complexities of pursuing a graduate degree. The theoretical framework used for this particular study is Role Theory. The foundational concept of role theory is the understanding that individuals hold specific social positions, and that those positions have associated expectations and behaviors assigned to them, both by self and by others (Biddle, 1966; Biddle, 1986). The utilization of Role Theory, and the application of various strains within Role Theory, allows for an examination of the participants’ experiences as they navigate the multiple roles they possess. The methodology utilized in this study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), utilizing semi-structured, in-depth interviews to gather data from participants. IPA provides participants with the opportunity to examine their own understanding of their experience, and provides the researcher with the opportunity to interpret those understandings using a double hermeneutic approach.

An analysis of the data revealed two super-ordinate themes and ten corresponding subthemes. The first was the generalized idea of juggling multiple roles and responsibilities, and the emotional, practical and logistical needs around that juggling act. In particular, the research participants focused on: time management, cross-contamination of roles, prioritization of roles, support in navigating these roles, and the guilt associated with occupying multiple roles. The second super-ordinate theme was motivation and the reflections of the group on what motivated them to start their graduate program, and/or, what motivates them to continue with their work.

The findings from each of these themes will be discussed in this chapter, as well as situating these findings within the extant literature. The implications of these findings will
follow, as well as specific examples of how these findings can impact the practice setting.

Finally, areas of potential future investigation will be suggested.

**Feelings of Being Pulled in Too Many Directions**

Women with children, who are working full-time and enrolled in a master’s program, have consistent feelings of being pulled in multiple directions. They spend time each day thinking about how they will navigate all of their responsibilities, and experience feelings of stress over what may not get done today, or didn’t get done yesterday. Many feel as if they are not meeting their own expectations of self, nor are they fully living up to the expectations of those in their social system. These feelings of not meeting expectations of others are their own inferences, as much of the feeling of inadequacy is self-generated. The result from this constant push and pull of the individual has left the women feeling as if they are not able to perform at a high level in any one of the roles, as each just gets a portion of their time and focus.

The foundational concept of role theory is the understanding that people hold specific social positions, and that those positions have associated expectations and behaviors assigned to them, both by self and by others (Biddle, 1966; Biddle, 1986). Research in this area increased in the 1960s and 1970s as women began entering the professional workforce in higher numbers. The terminology popular during that time make apparent the notion that this accumulation of roles would have a negative impact. Phrases like role strain, role conflict and role malintegration were the primary terms related to role theory research, and the assumptions that norms and role expectations were not easily modified permeated much of the research. Goode’s (1960) work was the first to look at the power of the individual in this negotiation, introducing the concept of role bargaining where the individual seeks to reduce role strain by a “continuing process of selection among alternative role behaviors” (p. 483). The participants in this study described a
daily process of role bargaining as they made decisions on where to focus time and energy, and, as they shaped their expectations of themselves for each of those roles. There are two components to examine when looking at role strain, or, when attempting to understand how an individual frames the navigation of multiple roles. The first is to understand if the individual believes he or she is meeting the expectations of those in her network, and the second is to understand, on an individual psychological level, if the individual has concern that she cannot meet all that is expected of her (Goode, 1960; Edwards, 2014). Much of the conflict described by the participants in this study is self-generated. While children may have complained about the participants missing a particular event, none of the participants described any situation where another member of the social network described a severe incompatibility with the existing multiple roles. Following the two-pronged test above, the majority of the participants in this study do not believe they are meeting the expectations connected to their roles, and specifically, the role of mother. Those who believed they were not meeting expectations did express serious concern over the impact that inability to perform as expected would have on the family system.

Goode’s (1960) early work introduced the concept that any person navigating multiple roles would experience feelings of not doing any one things well. Goode wrote that “the individual is thus likely to face a wide, distracting, and sometimes conflicting array of role obligations. If he conforms fully or adequately in one direction, fulfillment will be difficult in another” (p. 485). Anderson & Swazey’s (1998) study of the doctoral student experience included both genders and found a similar result when looking at the effect of the accumulation of multiple roles. One quarter of that group felt they were not meeting the demands of those in their social network, and more than one third felt that the volume of things they had to do impacted their ability to do all of those things well. The participants of this study all shared
feelings of how they constant push and pull between multiple roles resulted in the inability to perform at 100% in any of those roles. For many, they often feel that they can never be fully present in one role while the demands of the others remain in their thoughts. The participants experience also supported Bakkar & Salleh’s (2015) work examining work-family conflict. They also found that anyone in a position where they possess more than one role can find themselves in a circumstance where the demands of those roles are in opposition to each other. This study’s participants did not describe situation where the roles, in totality, act in opposition to each other, but did recall several particular situations where two competing demands forced them to choose one role over another.

The general concept of experiencing difficulty when navigating multiple roles has been seen in both genders (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Bakkar & Salleh, 2015), but those studies did not compare how that struggle impacted each gender, and if there are differences. Other studies have documented higher levels of stress in female graduate students with multiple roles compared to those of their male counterparts (Toews et al., 1997; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Nelson, Dell’Oliver, Koch & Buckler, 2001). Mallinckrodt & Leong (1992) examined gender differences in role strain among graduate students and found that female students have more symptoms of stress related to role strain. Specifically, the researchers found that when a major life event occurred, the female students were more affected than their male counterparts. They asserted that this difference was a result of gender role socialization, and the feelings of responsibility the female students felt. The participants of this study expressed feelings of primary ownership of many aspects of their home lives, and saw their role of mother as something of primary importance to the successful functioning of their family unit.
Existing literature, when attempting to identify criterion for determining if role strain exists, identified two key questions. The first is to determine if the individual believes that she is meeting the expectations of those around her, and then, to understand if she is concerned that she is not meeting those expectations. The women in the current study fall securely in this realm as they identify as not meeting all expectations, and expressed concern over that. The participants’ responses also support findings that role bargaining is a key factor in the successful navigation of multiple roles, as each participant described their own system for examining competing priorities and making selections of what takes primary importance. Additionally, the participants description of being pulled in multiple directions aligns with previous research on multiple roles related to academic endeavors, and role accumulation related to work-family conflict. The participants in this study have various professional positions, and are enrolled in different master’s programs across several colleges within the university. The role they all share is “Mom”.

The Role of Mom

Slight variations exist within each woman’s understanding of the societal construct of “Mom”, but each spends time actively thinking about mothering and how their academic choices impact their ability to mother in a socially acceptable way. This aligns with Davidson’s (1978) work examining the stressors of female medical students as they navigated their professional demands and the “obligations as a woman/mother/wife.” (p. 33). Davidson references a 1922 article in a medical journal that discussed the role of women in the medical field, and while it is said that women are equally capable of becoming doctors from an academic standpoint, their social position, and related expectations as mother, outweigh any benefit they might have as physicians. The study of medical students in 1978 no longer painted a picture of women who had to choose
between a medical education and a family, but did still highlight the difficulties female medical students with families face. Davidson’s work and findings are compatible with the current study in a general sense, namely, because it acknowledges the difficulties of female students as they navigate multiple roles. The preparation of medical doctors, however, differs from the preparation the current participants are experiencing, as this is not indicative of a major upcoming life change. The female medical students in Davidson’s (1978) work experienced stress in navigating the role of medical student, but also, when learning more of the stresses they will face after graduation and enter the medical field as a working mother. Additionally, Davidson’s participants were not simultaneously working full time, like the participants in the current study.

The participants’ experience of feeling highest levels of stress when incompatibility existed in the form of two commitments occurring at the same time, is also consistent with existing literature. Home (1998) found women experienced the highest levels of stress when simultaneously dealing with “several urgent, incompatible demands.” Home also found that students’ perceptions of their demands dictate the feelings of role strain. The women in this study believe their roles are overlapping and incompatible at times, which heightens their stress levels and their own sense of non-accomplishment. While competing demands plagued the participant group, they all placed their role as mom higher than employee or student, reinforcing Thoits’ (1992) findings that both women and men ranked the role of parent higher than the role of employee. That study, though, found that when a stressor or negative event is associated with the role we hold most dear or in the highest regard, the larger the negative psychological impact. The women in this study value their role as mother above all other roles, which explains why many feel the strong emotions around their sense that they are not fulfilling the obligations associate with that role. Thoits’ (1992) work is also relevant to the current study in that the results indicated
that the number of roles, or identities, didn’t matter as much as the combination did, and the individual psychological impact had on each participant. The impact most often cited by the participants in the current study was the feeling of guilt connected to their current academic endeavor, and the perceived impact it is having on their family, and in particular, their children.

**Guilt**

Many female graduate students who are raising children and working full-time have feelings of guilt about not being constantly accessible to their children. These feelings are deep, and emotionally charged for many. For those who experience feelings of guilt, they can come with something as simple as missing a family dinner to attend class, or missing a child’s band concert because of a group presentation. Each participant described their own strategies for dealing with the guilt, but the residual feelings were emotionally taxing. Previous studies have examined the concept of guilt and working mothers (Elvin-Nowak, 1999; Guendouzi, 2006), but did not include the addition of graduate education as a factor. Elvin-Nowak (1999) conducted a phenomenological study that examined the guilt phenomenon of working mothers. Although the participants vary somewhat from the current research group, similarities exist in the descriptions of guilt. As was seen in the current study, those participants felt guilt related to a sense of failure of responsibility related to one’s children, and in the failure to have control over multiple demands from multiple sources. Elvin-Nowak (1999) distinguished her work from others studies on working mothers and guilt by distinguishing between intermittent, or event-driven, feelings of guilt and constant guilt. Much like the women in that study, the current participants who experience feelings of guilt describe the feeling as constant and a near-daily trouble.

The women in Guendouzi’s (2006) work were also balancing only professional and family roles, but the resulting findings on guilt are relevant to the current study. Those results
were connected to the societal construct of mothering, and the associated guilt felt by women who believe that they have not, or are not, meeting those expectations. The current study did not focus on what, exactly, the participants see as part of their role as mother, but they were able to convey that they didn’t believe they were meeting all that they expected of themselves, and in some instances, what others, in particular their children, expected of them.

**And Yet, She Persisted**

The participants of this study describe an experience that is challenging, and sometimes makes them feel inadequate and less than capable of succeeding. None of the participants, however, have considered dropping out of their program as an option, and instead, focus on the satisfaction that will come with degree completion. Golde’s (1998) work examined the reasons graduate students withdraw from their programs, with a primary reason of incompatibility between personal and academic responsibilities. That investigation was fundamentally different than the current study as it examined graduate students who *had* withdrawn from their program because of the imbalance caused by adding an academic endeavor to their lives. It also examined doctoral students instead of master’s students, which is a significant difference. The current study complements Golde’s (1998) work as it provides accounts of graduate students who chose to persist in their graduate programs, even in the face of imbalance and struggle between roles.

The students in the current study all attribute much of their ability to persist to the support systems they have in place. This finding lends further support to Baird’s (1969) foundational work documenting graduate students’ need for support in order to maintain the commitment to graduate work, and Cohen and Greenberg’s (2011) more recent work finding part-time students’ need for support to succeed. Baird (1969) did not focus specifically on female students, but did
focus on role relations of graduate students, as it relates to fellow classmates, faculty, spouses and employers. Although the age of this study makes it less applicable to the current status of graduate students, the general idea that students benefit from peer support aligns with the descriptions from the present study. Cohen and Greenberg’s (2011) more recent work looked specifically at part-time master’s students, and the factors associated with persistence. More than 75% of that population were female master’s students, and more than half had children still in the home. The findings indicated a strong need for support as the students navigated their graduate programs, and are similar to the experiences of the current group.

The participants in this study who had older children discussed their feelings that this endeavor is a bit easier on them because their children are older and more capable of caring for themselves in certain ways. They described feeling better able to push through as their children got older and were more self-sufficient. This aligns with Carney-Crompton & Tan’s (2002) work that showed how the age of a woman’s children impacts her need for support in this kind of endeavor, and that those with younger children needed more assistance from their support system. Further, Carney-Crompton & Tan (2002) posit that women who begin their graduate work when their children are older might have done that intentionally to deliberately decrease the potential for strain between academic and personal commitments. Participants in the current study did not indicate an intentionality between the age of their children and the decision to begin their graduate programs, but those with older children did reflect on their parenting obligations when their children were younger, and expressed the belief that the current endeavor was easier because of the increased age of their children. This aligns with Home’s (1998) work, which resulted in the finding that mothers of children under the age of thirteen felt more overloaded and reported higher levels of role conflict.
Also, many of the women in this study expressed feelings of primary ownership over many responsibilities and events in the family, even with supportive partners. Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) found that female students are more affected by life events as they likely have increased feelings of responsibility for the event as a result of gender role socialization. Additionally, they found that female students tended to take on the additional role of student, while not rearranging or removing any of the other responsibilities. The majority of respondents in the current study did not recall any significant lessening of their home or child care responsibilities, nor were any given any kind of relief at work. Instead, the addition of the graduate program was just that- an addition of a new role on top of all of the pre-existing roles and responsibilities.

Inequality on Campus

The literature documents several instances where female students perceived that they were being treated differently on their campus because of their gender (Wong & Sanders, 1983; Luke, 1994; Seagram et al, 1998; Mehta, Keener & Shrier, 2013). The participants of this study did not perceive any differences in treatment, neither positively or negatively. None felt that they received special treatment because of their gender or life situation, nor did they feel as if they were penalized. The women of this study did not perceive any inequalities on their campus, nor did they see their gender as factor in their relationship with the faculty.

A study of female and male doctoral students, conducted to examine any differences in how they experienced their programs, showed that while there was no real difference in time to completion, female students described a number of feelings related to perceived inequality related to their gender (Seagram et al, 1998). Wong & Sanders’ (1983) study of doctoral graduates did find that male students were treated differently than female students in relation to
the accumulation of human capital while in the program, and in who was connected with more prestigious research opportunities and key faculty members. The description of the experience of the current participants did not generate any comparisons on gender, and all participants felt that they had never been treated differently by any faculty or staff member because of their current situation.

**Conclusion**

The research question that this study answered was: how do women with children, who are employed full-time, experience the complexities of pursuing a master’s degree? Based on the data collected for this study, it appears these women progress through their graduate programs with a general sense of being pulled in many different directions, without the ability to focus 100% on any one thing at any one time. Much of how they experience their graduate program is connected to the way it impacts their ability to mother in the way they believe is the most appropriate. Connected with the concept of mothering, for many, is resulting guilt stemming from the choices made in role navigation and the selection of one priority over another in any given moment. The experience described by the women of this study is a challenging, daily battle to accomplish one’s daily tasks while striving to meet a long term goal. But the challenges they experience have not deterred them, and instead, provided fuel to keep moving forward. In general, the group is satisfied with their campus experience, and described no indication of inequality or unfair practices or policies at the institution.

This is consistent with previous work documenting the description of being overwhelmed when juggling multiple roles with competing interests (Goode, 1960; Anderson & Swazey, 1998). While progress has been made in the evolution of women in higher education, and in
society more generally, inequality in the home can still exist, with women often feeling primary ownership and responsibility over much of what happens in the family household.

Women continue to see their role of mother as one of primary importance to the successful functioning of the family unit, often discounting, or not seeing, the positive impact their other endeavors can have on their children. It is almost as if we have evolved to a point where women can build a family, work and seek higher education, but women have stopped short of validating those choices and still have not found a way to normalize new conceptions of “mom” without any associated guilt. Female students who work, have children and are in graduate programs get stuck in this vicious, self-imposed, cycle where they believe the choices they have made will benefit their family and serve as a positive example for their children, but then switch to feeling guilty, believing they are slacking in an area, and worrying about traumatizing their children. The next step in the evolution of working women is to move beyond choice shaming, and celebrate victories wherever they may occur.

Female students on this campus, in this particular study, have not experienced unfair or unequal treatment by faculty or staff in their programs. The literature has documented several instance of perceived inequalities, but that was not a finding of the current study.

Graduate program faculty and staff need to be aware of the multiple pressures facing students in this situation, and must be prepared to provide guidance and support as they balance these multiple roles and responsibilities. The following recommendations are based on the research conducted in this study, and the incorporated supporting literature.
Recommendations for Practice

There are many ways that a university’s administration could improve the experience of female graduate students who are raising children and working full-time. Below are recommendations based on the results of this study. The researcher will share the results of this study with the staff of The Graduate School, the deans’ offices in each of the colleges and schools within the university, and any other offices or departments on campus that might benefit from this information. The researcher would also like to share these findings with the Graduate Student Organization and any other student organizations which may provide programming in support of graduate students. Lastly, the researcher will look to present these findings at conferences where the information would be beneficial.

Create peer mentoring programs for adult students within each college or department. All graduate students benefit from support as they move through their program. Female students who are working full-time while raising children face issues that others students may not. Finding a “buddy”, or mentor, who has navigated some of the same challenges would be helpful, as they could offer insight related to the juggling of multiple responsibilities, as well as the more typical guidance which can only be provided by someone who has already completed something. A mentor would be able to offer suggestions in terms of course planning and the logistics of completing the specific program, but could also serve as a support system in the form of someone who has already struggled with potentially similar issues, and developed their own strategies for success. Students would benefit if departments with graduate programs would begin by surveying their students to determine if this type of arrangement would be helpful to the students. Should the responses demonstrate a need, the next step is to find students who meet this description (female, working full-time, raising children) and are either in the last
semester of their program, or have recently completed, to serve as the mentors to more junior students. The mentors will then be matched with the students who have self-identified as having an interest in this type of relationship. The department may choose to suggest a particular type of communication or relationship, or, the two women can decide the best way to communicate and stay in touch. Students who are connected with mentors at the start of their graduate program should then be tapped to serve in a similar capacity when they have completed their graduate work. A successful program will create a positive environment for the students, and one in which they feel supported.

**Include female students who work and are raising children in recruitment initiatives.** Marketing professionals work diligently to be sure that all prospective students feel as if they can see themselves in advertisement and print materials distributed by the university. Women who are already working and building a family may doubt their ability to add a third component to their lives, and may stop themselves from pursuing a graduate degree because of these fears. University administrators should be mindful of this group of students, and, in an interest to recruit this population, should represent their interests in marketing materials. A better representation of graduate students would be to display both full-time and part-time students, across multiple age groups, and where possible, in varying situations. Institutions that offer distance learning opportunities include consistent imagery of students switching between parenting and student responsibilities, and position themselves as the only option when working to find that balance. Traditional, on-ground institutions who wish to reclaim some of that market share should work to include imagery working parents can relate to. Additionally, faculty or staff who interact with prospective students should be able to address concerns such as these, and have current students on hand with whom they can connect the prospective student to.
**Offer workshops for these students.** Female graduate students who are working full-time and raising children require some form of support to successfully navigate their master’s work. This support could come from partners, parents, faculty, friends or children, but it is needed. In order to retain this large population of graduate students, the university will need to offer a workshop, or a series of workshops, to help this group of students. The New Graduate Student Orientation is the best place for an initial introduction, and for acknowledgement of the leap these women have taken. If a mentoring program is already in place, the mentors should be present and available to answer questions. Orientation activities typically include a Current Student Panel to answer questions about graduate student life, and to offer tips for succeeding. This panel should include a working parent, and they should feel comfortable discussing both the challenges they have faced, and how they have overcome them. Additionally, students would benefit if the office of Counseling and Psychological Services added group sessions or workshops specific to the needs of this group. Workshops such as “Combatting Stress as a Graduate Student” are already in place, but the stressors and guilt experienced by working mothers who are in a graduate program necessitate a distinct set of programming options for this group.

**Establish support groups, virtually or in-person.** In addition to any formalized sessions offered by on-campus mental health professionals, students would benefit from the creation of virtual communities for these students. Many express an interest in connecting with students in similar situations, but may not have the time in their schedule to come to campus for an additional night to meet as a group. A canvas site or a group social media page will accomplish this goal, is very easy to set-up, and will provide an environment for students to connect. If the traffic on an online page is heavy enough, consideration should be given to
offering in-person sessions for discussion. The group should be surveyed to determine the most opportune time for meeting, as weekend mornings may work for some, or late night snacks before the drive home may work for others.

**Examine the campus facilities to determine if this group’s needs are being met.**

Each student will have her own method of accomplishing all that she needs to get done in a day, but the campus facilities should not be a barrier to that accomplishment. Some students will want to come to campus for class, quickly leave, and then get back home to continue with the rest of their responsibilities. Others may need to remain on campus a bit longer for a quiet place to read before heading home for the night. Some may want to grab a snack and get some work done either right before or right after evening classes. While a university cannot be expected to meet each individual’s needs, students would benefit if the department worked with students to determine if needs are being met, and if not, determine if a more localized solution can occur. If three or four students need a quiet place to study early Saturday mornings before their kids wake up, break-out rooms can be reserved, or study lounges can be utilized. Each department could provide a list each semester of the formal campus scheduled of locations and hours of operations, but also a more informal list of quiet areas on campus that they are sure are open and accessible. Part-time graduate students may not be very familiar with the campus if they come to campus once or twice per week and are always in the same building. These students will need assistance in identifying other places on campus where they can go to accomplish their goals.

Students would benefit if universities that offer on-site childcare options to faculty, staff and local families investigated the possibility of drop-off hours for students. Many have had, or will have, childcare issues during their scheduled class time, and a drop-off system would allow them to not miss valuable class time. Additionally, Saturday or Sunday drop-off hours could
allow working parents to drop their children off in a safe environment while they meet classmates on campus for group work, or grab a few hours to prepare for the week’s assignments.

**Proudly show these students.** The courage and fortitude these women embody as they work toward their goal is something to recognize. These are the students that should be used in recruitment campaigns, as part of Current Student Panels, and should serve as mentors in departments who can build that programming. Their work should be celebrated campus-wide to show younger female students what they are doing, and to encourage others who may be considering graduate work. Students in this population should be given a voice on campus, by including them in various campus committees and activities. Publicity of graduation ceremonies should include imagery of graduating mothers with their children, and spotlights should be done on women who graduated while continuing to build their families and leading fulfilling professional lives.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study informs the understanding of female graduate students, who are working full-time and raising children, on one campus in a particular region of the United States. Additional quantitative studies could be done on the same campus to survey larger groups of women to determine if the experiences of this smaller group align with the larger population. An examination of male graduate students, at the same institution, who are working full-time and parenting children would provide an interesting comparison for the results of this study. Do all parents feel guilt when they are away from their children, or, do women experience higher levels of guilt? As guilt was a primary finding in this study, a potential study could examine the existing levels of guilt in newly admitted graduate students (who are working full-time and
raising children) before they begin graduate work and are only working and parenting. It may result that women feel guilty when occupying any additional role other than mother, whether that be in a professional capacity or an academic capacity. Conducting a baseline study before the program, and then reconvening the same women one year into their program to assess guilt levels, may help better understand where the guilt stems from.

Further research could include replicating this study at another institution to determine any campus or regional differences, in addition to examining where differences exist, if any, across graduate program disciplines. Also, this study focused only on the experience of the women who participated, and as such, presents only their story of this experience. Additional research could be done to assess the impact of a mother’s occupation of multiple roles on a child, or, if the addition of a graduate program impacts the professional work of a working mother.
Appendix A

Internal Audit

Alexa: We try to have a conversation every morning where we talk about what our individual goals are for the day…and talk about ‘OK, this is what I need to get done, this is what I need to get done, what are our priorities today?’

Marie: Knowing that I have the supports that when I want to cry, I can cry. And when I need someone to motivate me, I have it all so, I couldn't imagine how it would feel for someone who didn't have, you know, a strong, relationship with their parents. Or their in-laws. Or a support system at home. I think that's probably, I guess, what I would say is the most important to help me succeed.

Veronica: I always felt a little bit like I’m not good enough and I don’t belong in this [higher education] environment. I think even just doing my graduate work, I feel like I can walk a little taller.

Jessica: …and kinda like being a good, well, maybe ‘good’ is not the word, but a better role model for my kids to see like, you know, you can go back to school, even when you’re older. You can accomplish this goal, even when it’s really hard, and they’re little, and they probably don’t’ get it now, but maybe, one day, they will.

Takes a very intentional, organized approach to managing a competing list of priorities.

The family support system is critical to the participant’s perception of their own ability to succeed. Acknowledged that lack of support might have made the task impossible.

Participant works in higher education and saw her lack of an advanced degree as something to be embarrassed of.

There is a potential for a positive impact to be made on the children who see their mom working hard to achieve an educational goal.

Effective time management is integral to the successful juggling of multiples roles.

The participant partially credits her ability to succeed to the support of her family and fiancé.

Personal motivation to further one’s education to improve self-confidence.

Serving as a role model for their children is an important motivator for the participants.
References


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