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## Great Expectations: Doctoral Student Mothers in Counselor Education

### Keywords

motherhood, doctoral students, women, counselor education

# Great Expectations: Doctoral Student Mothers in Counselor Education

Heather Trepal, Tracy Stinchfield, and Maria Haiyasoso

*This article presents a phenomenological study of the experiences of 10 female counselor education doctoral students who are also mothers. The interviews produced the overarching theme of expectations, with 3 subthemes: self, counselor education, and society. Implications for future research and doctoral program policy are discussed.*

*Keywords:* motherhood, doctoral students, women, counselor education

Across the life cycle, women are faced with many challenges. Arguably, one of the most profound is the developmental transition to motherhood, because this brings a new set of responsibilities and demands. Some have argued that the challenges related to motherhood, particularly regarding societal expectations about mothering, have become increasingly complex in the 21st century (Medina & Magnuson, 2009). Career development is also a developmental process in which many women participate. Women who are mothers have career trajectories that are unique in that they may struggle with competing demands for their time and attention. As such, career theorists acknowledge women's unique career trajectories. In a review of the literature on theories of women's career development, Powell and Mainiero (1992) concluded that there were two main themes: "(a) women's career and life development involve a complex panorama of choices and constraints; and (b) issues of balance, connectedness, and interdependence in addition to issues of achievement and individuation permeate women's lives" (p. 215). Given these developmental challenges and unique characteristics, it is important to consider mothers' career experiences. This article explores the unique perspectives of doctoral student mothers in counselor education.

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## WOMEN AND DOCTORAL STUDIES

Since the 1960s, women's participation in doctoral education in the United States has dramatically increased (Mason & Goulden, 2002). In fact, women currently hold the majority of baccalaureate and master's degrees, and they may ultimately hold the majority of doctoral and professional degrees if this trend continues (Mason & Goulden, 2004a). Despite these numbers, there is little counseling literature related to female doctoral students and even less related to those who are also mothers.

There has been some research on doctoral student mothers in general. For example, research has suggested that having children is a factor associated with attrition for female graduate students in the United States (Mason, Goulden, & Frasch, 2009). Moyer, Salovey, and Casy-Cannon (1999) found that female doctoral students and recent graduates in other disciplines are most concerned about practical issues, such as securing academic positions in an ever-tightening market and financial concerns, which may also be exacerbated for those students with a family to support. In fact, more recent research determined that financial concerns (e.g., financial aid, cost of child care, securing continuous health insurance) were paramount for doctoral student mothers (Lynch, 2008).

Another concern for doctoral student mothers may be related to their work and educational environments. When men and women have children, those in their work environments may perceive them differently. For example, women who have children may be perceived as being warm over being competent. Conversely, when men have children, they retain their perceived competence and gain perceived warmth; it is not a trade-off (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004). It has been reported that working moms are less desirable hires, and people are less interested in promoting and educating them in relation to working fathers and childless employees (Cuddy et al., 2004). Perceived competence also assists in the process of hiring and promoting, whereas perceived warmth does little to assist in the process (Cuddy et al., 2004). Thus, female doctoral student mothers may be affected because they are competing for resources and professional opportunities with their male and childless peers. Recent research supports that female doctoral students who are also mothers have been concerned about "mommy-tracking" (i.e., being mothers and not being taken seriously as students and professionals), as well as being denied access to additional academic funding and opportunities (Lynch, 2008). Additionally, Haynes et al. (2012) found that female doctoral students revealed a need for support to develop effective coping strategies and realistic goal setting, while keeping in mind that there is no ideal way to balance the multiple priorities that women have.

Furthermore, it has been suggested that female doctoral students who are parents may not seek out academic positions because of negative perceptions of academia in regards to work-life balance (van Anders, 2000). Once women are employed in academia, having children may be a hindrance for female

faculty members in making tenure, and they have been cited as a contributing factor to the higher numbers of women in non-tenure-track versus tenure-track positions (Mason & Goulden, 2004a; Young & Wright, 2001). Some women believe that child rearing will disrupt their careers, so they tend to seek more flexible employment options than their male counterparts; yet, they are also more likely to advocate for more women to be recruited in higher education (Singer, Cassin, & Dobson, 2005). Reasons for self-selecting out of academe include the perception of institutional barriers to parenthood (van Anders, 2000).

Trepal and Stinchfield's (2012) earlier work examined female counselor educators' experiences of motherhood and academia. Themes from interviews with 20 tenured and pretenured counselor educator mothers uncovered the existence of environmental influences (position flexibility, experienced discrimination, and support) and the choices and circumstances involved in being both a counselor educator and a mother (e.g., defining and establishing boundaries and accepting decisions). Although this research presented an interesting view of counselor education faculty mothers' experiences, there are no data illustrating the unique situation experienced by doctoral students who are also mothers in the field. Hence, the present study was designed to gain insight into these women's experiences and learn more about their personal and professional lives.

## **METHOD**

### **Phenomenology**

The focus of a phenomenological study is to thoroughly describe the experiences of participants' lived experiences of a given phenomenon. We were interested in "understand[ing] the individual and collective internal experience for a phenomenon of interest and how participants intentionally and consciously think about their experience" (Hays & Wood, 2011, p. 291). More specifically, we were interested in the experiences of motherhood and academia, in particular for doctoral students. For the purposes of this qualitative study, a phenomenological approach was selected for data collection and analysis because it was most in line with the research question: "What are counselor education doctoral students' experiences of being a mother and a doctoral student?"

### **Participants**

The 10 participants in this study were solicited from a previous quantitative, exploratory study (Stinchfield & Trepal, 2010) on motherhood and academia. At the end of a quantitative survey, participants were asked to provide their names and contact information if they were interested in participating in a qualitative study that explores motherhood and being a counselor education doctoral student. Identified participants were purposefully selected (Patton, 2002) to not be representative and generalize findings, but to access a diverse

group of women's experiences. Therefore, the only criterion for initial inclusion in the study was that the participant be a mother and a counselor education doctoral student.

Participants were selected to represent a variety of backgrounds and living situations (i.e., race, sexual orientation, age, single or married/partnered, number of children), not to generalize findings, but to offer as many experiences with the phenomenon as possible. They ranged in age from 30 to 43 years, with seven participants in their 30s and three in their 40s. Collectively, the participants had 17 children (individuals had between one and three children; ages of children ranged between 1 and 20 years). Regarding relationship status, seven of the participants described themselves as married/committed, two described themselves as divorced, and one described herself as single. The majority of the participants were White ( $n = 8$ , 80%), followed by Asian American ( $n = 1$ , 10%) and Latina ( $n = 1$ , 10%). The geography of participants was representative of the entire United States to include western, midwestern, southern, and northern colleges and universities. The institutions ranged from large universities to smaller institutions and those that were research intensive and extensive.

### Data Collection

Phenomenological inquiry, as developed by Husserl (1913/1970), employs the methodological stance that knowledge must “begin with a fresh and unbiased description of its subject matter,” known as *epoche* (Wertz, 2005, p. 167). The researcher suspends prior knowledge of and experiences with the phenomenon being studied to include theoretical explanations and hypotheses, as a way of bracketing out the researcher's experience; this allows the participants' lived experiences to freely emerge without influence (Wertz, 2005). *Epoche* allows the researcher to enter into the participants' *lebenswelt*, or life-world, as it exists and is lived by the participant every day and begin to understand it. The point of entry into the participants' *lebenswelt* was accessed through individual interviews.

To understand the *lebenswelt* of the participants, researchers use individual interviews as the method of data collection. Patton (2002) recommended using a standardized open-ended interview format when several persons are collecting data to reduce variation of questions and interviewers. Because a standardized interview format can also minimize interviewer flexibility, only three interview questions were asked, allowing the researchers flexibility within each of the questions. Specifically, because there were only three interview questions, researchers had the flexibility within those questions to follow the participants' articulation of their experience and ask further probing, more detailed questions. All participants were asked the same questions.

The grand interview question was: “What has your experience been of being a mother and a doctoral student?” Three subquestions included:

1. "How would you define balance and what does balance look like for you?"
2. "How has the age of your child(ren) impacted your role as a doctoral student?"
3. "How would you describe your identity as a counselor educator?"

A specific question about balance was asked because our previous survey research (Stinchfield & Trepal, 2010) found that participants provided comments, in a comments section, about "finding a balance" between personal and professional obligations, which they found to be an ongoing struggle. Our intention was to ask the question in a manner that allowed the participant to respond to an open-ended question. Participants also spoke of the obligations that children of different ages present and how this affects their professional work life. Thus, a specific question about the age of one's child, or children, was asked to further understand this entity. The final subquestion was an open-ended question that was asked to allow the participants to describe how they see themselves as a counselor education doctoral student, which we thought would assist in learning in detail who they were as professionals. The use of minimal encouragers, rather than paraphrasing, further assisted the participant in elaborating on her experience (Fassinger, 2005).

Triangulation in data collection was used to strengthen the research design through multiple data sources and researchers (i.e., the authors; Patton, 2002). Data triangulation allows data to be collected from many sources and/or by many investigators. Shank (2002) explained that collection of data from one source may not "be strong enough to support the findings" (p. 135). However, when multiple sources or investigators are used, support for the findings is strengthened. In addition, a third author was recruited during the data analysis phase (investigator triangulation) to further strengthen our study and its findings (Patton, 2002).

Member checks were conducted with all of the participants. The purpose of the member checks was to assess the accuracy of findings and determine whether the findings represented the participants' experiences. To assess for accuracy of identified themes, we provided the 10 participants with the working themes via e-mail attachment. Member-check feedback was included in the final narrative of the results, again using thick description of the participants' experiences. Finally, direct participant quotes from the individual interviews and member checks were used to add context to the themes, enhance meaning, and offer researcher transparency.

### **Research Lens**

Researcher bias was addressed prior to data collection. As previously mentioned, epoche involves the researchers bracketing their experiences with the phenomenon prior to engaging in data collection. The research lens we specifically brought to this study was that both researchers were/are mothers

and counselor educators. The first author was an assistant professor with three children. The second author was in a tenure-track counselor education faculty position for 3 years and was pregnant with her first child. The second author contacted the first author to inquire about her experience of being a mother and a faculty member. From this discussion forward, the authors decided to formally investigate counselor education and motherhood. The third author was a master's-level student in counselor education who was also a mother and interested in doctoral education. She joined the study in the data-analysis phase.

### **Data Analysis**

Analytical rigor occurs when the researcher shifts his or her thinking about a phenomenon to allow the participants' experience to emerge unfiltered. Bracketing (Husserl, 1913/1970) procedures were used to suspend our potential bias from the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon. More specifically, we documented our experiences on the transcripts to keep them separate from those of the participants. Each author individually coded the transcripts prior to making meaning units (Wertz, 2005). To further organize the data and meaning units, we developed categories and themes. A structural analysis of the themes occurred as we discussed the relationships among the themes and categories (Wertz, 2005). Emerging themes were shared with a colleague independent of this research who was not a parent to strengthen the credibility of our findings.

Using phenomenological epoche, we identified situations that stood out (e.g., expectations of self) in a reflective manner known as *idiographic analysis*, to further understand a participant's experience of her expectations of self prior to looking at how other participants perceived expectations of themselves. Each aspect of the situation was examined to determine any relationships aspects of the situation (Wertz, 2005). In using this process, we were able to structurally organize the participant's experience of being a doctoral student in counselor education and a mother. After this process was completed for each participant, individual experiences were compared, and themes were formed.

### **RESULTS**

The transcending theme that emerged from the interviews was that of expectations. Within the context of the study, *expectations* were defined as the predictions and projections from self and others related to being a doctoral student and a mother. Within the theme, there were three subthemes involving expectations of self and others (i.e., self, counselor education, and society). Each subtheme is described in the following sections, and participant quotes are used to exemplify the meaning. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to protect the clients' identities.



## Expectations: Self

The subtheme self involved participants' ideas about the course of their own lives related to career goals and parenthood, including both personal and professional expectations. Within this theme, participants reflected on their roles as parents and the meaning that they made of the role.

*Guilt.* The first subtheme that emerged regarding personal expectations was that of guilt. Traditionally, women have been heralded in the role of mother—and that role has carried some societal expectations (e.g., staying home and taking care of children). In particular, the aspects of doctoral study (e.g., course work, studying for exams, writing the dissertation) that physically or mentally took participants away from their children were frequently mentioned, as the following quotes illustrate:

I struggle with the guilt of having a child in daycare 40 hours a week. I'm incredibly liberal, socially and politically. I'm just incredibly liberal but I'm so very conservative about (breath) daycare. (Tina)

I have had a lot of guilt. Because doing the dissertation I would literally spend weekends, we have a basement, down in the basement typing and I could hear her upstairs crying, "I want my mommy." (Eve)

Other participants voiced an overwhelming double-edged feeling of guilt regarding not being fully present as either a mother or a doctoral student:

But I struggle with feeling like a bad mom, a horrible employee, and a debilitated student. I feel like I don't do anything well because I'm always thinking I'm in the wrong place whenever I'm there. (Tina)

Personally it's, it's kind of hard because I feel like I'm um, I guess I feel guilty a lot of times both ways. I feel like if I'm studying I feel guilty that I'm not doing things with my kids or for my kids and when I'm with my kids I'm feeling like oh, I need to study. (Mary)

*Professional goals.* The second subtheme under expectation of self was professional goals. For many of the participants, there was a hope and expectation that a career position in academia would afford them a lot of freedom and flexibility. They believed it was important to finish the doctoral degree:

It [faculty position] would lead us to a place where I can have a completely flexible life with her. I don't want to miss a thing this child will do. (Tina)

I want to research, I want to write, I want to you know . . . I want to speak at conferences and things like that because those are things that I can control in my own time. (Teresa)

Still, for others, their experience as a doctoral student mother influenced them to reevaluate their academic career goals:

I have this vision of myself as I would really want to work at this Research 1 institution and I really just want to publish and be all really into everything. I think here, again this stepping-stone [of being a doctoral student] has made me see but I can't do that and be the kind of mom I want to be. (Angelina)

Finally, participants voiced a clear expectation that there would be both a personal and a professional payoff for the time they spent on their doctoral studies.

They miss their mom, I know that, and I miss them too, but, they know this is not going to be forever and that it will afford some better opportunities for us later on. . . . I think it's important to try to instill in them the value of education and to help them to see that they're just as important, actually more important, than my education, but that there are things that I am doing this education for that is going to enable us all to have better things in life. (Marina)

### **Expectations: Counselor Education**

The second theme that emerged from the participants' interviews involved expectations regarding the field of counselor education and included subthemes about faculty response and parallels between parenting and the profession.

*Faculty response and messages about parenting.* From the beginning of their decision to enter doctoral studies, participants voiced a desire to investigate the culture of their educational program. The following quote illustrates one way in which one participant sought to verify a program's culture around motherhood during her doctoral interview:

The person who was kind of taking me around that day and giving me tours and telling me about it, I was able to ask her, "what is like trying to balance family and the doctoral studies?" "Have you had any doctoral students get pregnant while they were in the program?" and she really assured me that it was a very supportive place to be a parent or to become a parent and it turns out she was right. (Stella)

Once they were accepted into their programs, the participants in the study shared a variety of experiences they had with faculty members regarding the culture of parenting in the program. For some,

It seemed like most of the parents were men, there just weren't many moms in my program, very few in fact. So yeah, my assumption was that they would see me as being less dedicated to my program if I got pregnant, so I didn't tell them, thinking that would happen, but when I actually did get pregnant, the response was just overwhelmingly positive. (Stella)

My son was actually born during springtime and I came back and attended class 2 weeks later. And there wasn't like a whole—I can remember one male faculty member not really, not mentioning the fact [laughs] that I was back and I had a child and all that. (June)

Supervision class was run by my advisor who, like I said, was a single mom and, at that time, I think there were like four or five other women there and, and women regularly brought their young babies or whatever in the class so I was able to bring my son in the class. (Marina)

Whereas some participants had welcoming experiences in their department, others received both overt and covert messages about pregnancy and parenting. For example, one participant described the messages she received from a faculty member in the department who was also a mother:

There's one professor who had a toddler and I kind of got some mixed messages from her in terms of she actually said, don't use your children as an excuse when you can't do something . . . but I think she'd kind of been burned and she was trying to guide me to, you're going to be looked down upon as a woman with a family because the assumption will be made that you're not going to be fully invested in a department, so don't play that card or don't talk about your kids too much. (Angelina)

Finally, one participant discovered that faculty was often giving her platitudes about bringing her child around the department:

While people would say oh bring her by, they really just want to see them for 5 minutes and then go on and be adults and I totally understand that, so that was difficult the idea of being put in a position of, if for example if I attend this department meeting then it's good to be at, good to show your face and show that you're still serious and you're still invested, it's going to cost me money to find a day-care person. (Dolores)

Whereas some of the participants experienced a negative culture in the department regarding pregnancy and parenting experiences, other participants pointed out that faculty, particularly those who were mothers themselves, were supportive:

She was a single mom and, and she was, she was quite understanding about it. And then there were other people that weren't. So I think it really varied probably based upon their own, you know, their own experiences. I would say the women with children were the most understanding because they themselves had been in similar situations. (June)  
And bending over backwards helping me to, to get back into the program. And I think once again it's been the same sort of thing that if something had,

you know, with her having had the experience, she certainly asked about my kids every time I saw them and every time I saw her and all that and it, it was a part of who I was as a student. I was someone who had children and all that. And then to other committee members, I was a student. So really, she kind of embraced the whole package. (June)

*Parallels between parenting and the profession.* The second subtheme of the expectations: counselor education category involved parallels between parenting and the profession. For the participants in this study, there seemed to be an expectation that they were serving as role models to other female doctoral students. In addition, participants reported that their status as a mom gave them credibility when they were teaching, counseling, or supervising:

I guess sometimes when I'm reading about something, I think of them, like I feel like I have these real-life examples, when I'm learning about development or something. . . . For a while I struggled with do I kind of come out as a mom to people or not and I think I look young and I'm not old, I'm 30 and so in some ways I am young to have kids 5 and 8 by today's norm so sometimes I felt like it would be a good thing and sometimes I felt like it was a bad thing. That maybe it could give me a little bit of weight and credibility. (Angelina)

The following quote illustrates how one participant saw her parenting status as a form of credibility when she was counseling:

Because it's an interesting culture. We are living at the edge of the Appalachian mountains. They are not real trustful here, of outsiders at all. And so I think having a child actually made them a little more trustful than it would have been. (Eve)

The participants felt that the fact that they were mothers also enhanced their teaching, thus drawing another parallel between parenting and the profession. They felt that they were able to make connections with their students who were also moms. Their motherhood experiences also gave them the ability to connect counseling material (e.g., human development) with real-life examples:

The fact that I was a parent they listened to me more. It was really interesting. They could relate to me. All of our students work full time and go to school at night and most of them have family. Most of them tend to marry young and have children very young. So the fact that I waited was unusual to them. I think they could just relate to me. I was more human because I had a kid. (Eve)

I think that they connect, especially if you're teaching something like play therapy, their connecting because you actually have a sense for what you're talking about because you also have kids. So you can be realistic. (Tina)

### **Expectations: Society**

Societal expectations for females regarding parenting were evident in the theme of societal expectations and included the subthemes gender roles and messages: children as a barrier to degree completion.

*Gender roles.* Participants voiced an awareness of societal expectations regarding gender roles and parenting. For example, the following quote illustrates one participant's perception of the expectation that male doctoral students do not have to fulfill the role of the primary caretaker, thus freeing them in some way of a responsibility:

In fact a lot of the men in our program are dads and I think it's such a different issue for them because to a large extent they kind of have this assumption or they have this agreement with their wives that their wives are going to be the main caretaker of the children and I think that they've got a sort of freedom to be doctoral students or to do what they need to do with faculty that we don't have. (Stella)

In addition to the gender roles perceived in the doctoral program, participants reported seeing the gendered aspects of the work environment in higher education:

One of the reasons I decided to do this PhD and drag my husband around the country was because I thought it would be a better environment for a female to work and I'm seeing that some places where I'm going there is a female chair and a female dean and a female president but I'm sure not seeing that here. I guess I'm realizing that we are more behind in the times than I thought we were and that's frustrating for me because I think as counselors we should be beyond that. And I don't have a lot of patience with counselor/educators and chairs who don't take the human element into consideration. (Eve)

*Messages: Children as a barrier to degree completion.* Some participants reported both overt and covert messages about the culture of their department related to gender bias and children's role in degree completion. This covert gender bias was explained by one participant in that it "seems that males get a little bit more preference" when speaking of teaching assistantships (Anne). For other participants, the gender bias was directly related to being pregnant or being a woman who had children and the assumptions that parenting would affect one's doctoral program or completion. As one participant explained when talking

about a fellow friend in the program and a male professor: “When she had her child, when she got pregnant, he said, ‘Oh, that’s really disappointing. I thought she was serious’. . . it’s a tough department” (Dolores). Another participant reported that she had a general sense that “When they were young . . . I did feel like . . . certain professors were like, ‘Oh, why would she have kids right now?’” (June). Furthermore, one participant explained how, after she had her child, the opportunities that she was afforded in her program changed:

I felt really bad, to have been kind of told when I came in ‘yeah you’ll be moved, kind of groomed to move into that role’ and then when it came down to it and after I had the divorce it was kind of like I was judged by another mom who said, ‘no, you’re not going to be able to do this demanding kind of role’ and ultimately, I’m glad it worked out well, it worked out fine, but it hurt to feel that I was kind of judged that way, especially by another mom. (Angelina)

Even more damaging, one participant described having an experience where she was pregnant while completing her graduate assistantship within the department. She experienced a very negative reaction to her pregnancy when she asked for a leave of absence: “As a doctoral student with a graduate assistant that comes to mind is when I got pregnant I was basically told that I wasn’t allowed maternity leave” (Eve). This idea about children serving as a barrier to degree completion extended throughout their programs. During one participant’s defense, one of her committee members gave advice to other graduate students with regards to finishing their dissertation; she recalled, “One of my male committee members piped up and said, ‘yeah, don’t have kids’”(June).

Finally, several of the participants in the study had interviewed for counselor education faculty positions and reported noticing how their parenthood status intersected with the professional position. For example, according to one participant:

The other universities I interviewed at were very point blank: “Do you have kids?” I thought they were not supposed to ask that, but I just felt almost attacked by it and assumptions were made so from there I assumed that that probably wasn’t a good situation either. (Tina)

Another participant wanted to gauge the environment relative to parenting during her interviews.

Because I specifically told people that when I was interviewing that I wanted to have another child to see their reaction and if they didn’t have a good reaction I wouldn’t want to interview with them anymore and I was done. I interviewed at one place, I loved the town, I loved

the city I mean I was like my husband would love to live here and I said something to the dean when she was interviewing me about . . . I'm going to have another child and she said "You might not want to tell everyone on the committee that." (Eve)

## DISCUSSION

This study presented the experiences of 10 doctoral student mothers in counselor education. The participants voiced clear expectations of themselves. As others have noted in the literature (Haynes et al., 2012; Lynch, 2008), although these women held the belief that completing their doctoral degree would bring a better life for both themselves and their children, they also experienced guilt regarding time and energy spent away from the parenting role.

Furthermore, they reported experiencing both positive and limiting responses from the faculty in their departments regarding their status as a parent. These messages ranged from hopeful and supportive to discriminatory. These experiences echo Trepal and Stinchfield's (2012) earlier finding relative to the environmental influences related to being a mother in counselor education. These influences are powerful and include both positive (e.g., support) and limiting (e.g., discrimination and messages about children as barriers to degree completion) aspects.

Finally, participants reported perceiving the traditional and gendered work environment in counselor education regarding messages about gender roles and children as a barrier to degree completion. This finding echoes those of others regarding evidence of traditional gender roles in higher education, particularly for women (August & Waltman, 2004; Lynch, 2008; Mason & Goulden, 2004b; Stinchfield & Trepal, 2010; Trepal & Stinchfield, 2012).

Through the themes in this study, the participants also reflected on the complex developmental processes involved in both motherhood and career development. They framed their decisions to pursue their doctoral degrees around their children. As stated earlier, participants also reflected on their roles as parents and the meaning that they made of the role. They held expectations about the type of mother that they wanted to be and often felt a dissonance when they were not able to live up to those expectations. Participants also had an expectation that the investment in a doctoral degree would lead to a career that they would enjoy—a career that would also allow them more flexibility regarding time with their families as well as instill in them the value of education. Finally, the participants in the study described their experiences as doctoral student mothers as connecting them with other women in a number of ways. They were connected to their advisors, fellow female faculty mothers, and also their own students regarding parenting issues.

## LIMITATIONS

Although this study presents some revealing perceptions of doctoral students' experiences of being mothers in counselor education, there are some limitations. For example, the sample comprised volunteers drawn from a larger survey (Stinchfield & Trepal, 2010), was roughly 80% White, and may not be representative of all of the experiences of doctoral student mothers within the profession. A more diverse sample may yield different experiences. Henfield, Owens, and Witherspoon (2011) suggested that African American doctoral students in counselor education may have specific needs, and this might also be true for doctoral students from other minority groups. Another possible limitation is researcher bias. Although attempts were made to remain objective, it is possible that assumptions about doctoral student mothers may have affected the focus of the study. Finally, another perceived limitation of this study is that the participants were asked established questions that initially guided their responses. Although questions were guided by existing research, perhaps another approach would allow additional themes to emerge that were not initially guided by a semistructured interview format as applied in this study.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The goal of this study was to examine the experiences of counselor education doctoral students who were mothers. Overall, it appears that these women constitute a diverse group. Among our participants, most indicated a desire to become a counselor educator. This is particularly important considering the previous literature about the perceived institutional barriers for academic mothers. If the goal of these female doctoral student mothers is to aspire to tenure-track faculty positions in counselor education, then the next question becomes one of support.

Research has suggested that good support systems and mentoring during higher education provide opportunities for growth in different domains, including academic areas, such as research skills and professional identities (Koro-Ljungberg & Hayes, 2006), as well as interpersonal areas, including self-awareness and identity (Jacobi, 1991). In particular, women may need a support system that reinforces their goals and creates a space for reflection and processing (Shakeshaft, 1987). There is little research available about meeting the needs of female doctoral students in counselor education (Hazler & Carney, 1993).

Previous studies have found that academic mothers perceive a lack of support from colleagues (Young & Wright, 2001). Female doctoral students in our study described various and conflicting messages from faculty regarding support for themselves as parents and doctoral students. In terms of colleagues or support from cohorts, it may be important to examine some of the research on working mothers in relation to these groups.



In addition, our participants reported several things that might lend to a discussion of the departmental climate toward children and motherhood—or at least our participants’ perceptions of the climate. For example, some of the participants heard faculty talk about parenting and having children in positive ways. However, others heard (and experienced) very clear statements regarding the perceived negative place of parenthood in a doctoral program. This is important to note. It would seem that small changes, such as not scheduling important mandatory meetings on important school days (e.g., the first day of the school year), and sending out brief e-mails of encouragement might be simple steps that a department could take to communicate support and a family-friendly culture. However, mentorship is also needed.

It has been suggested that early preparation for the professorate is important (Warnke, Bethany, & Hedstrom, 1999). Part of this preparation may include mentoring from faculty within the department. Mentoring can consist of many roles, including role modeling, professional development, and support (Bruce, 1995). Many of the participants in our study indicated that they had at least one faculty member who was also a mother. This suggests that this person might become an involuntary role model for the student, because she might be observed negotiating the balance between her personal and professional lives. Bruce (1995) indicated that female counselor education doctoral students were most influenced by role modeling from women faculty and peer interaction. This supports the crucial role and relationship of mentoring in counselor education. Existing supports, such as the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision New Faculty Interest Network, are available for doctoral candidates.

This study presented the experiences of counselor education doctoral student mothers. In light of the experiences presented here, further research on diverse counselor education doctoral student mothers is warranted. In addition, research on other students who are also parents (e.g., doctoral students who are fathers, master’s-level students) is also needed to help educators best understand the experiences and needs of this unique student population. As parents and as future professionals, these students have some needs that counselor education programs can anticipate. Key indicators such as goals, support, and mentoring can help us to help them realize their goals.

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