

# One Day at a Time: Single-Parent Mothers In Academe<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This study offers an exploratory investigation into the lives of single-parent women who return to school in an effort to break the cycle of poverty in which they are caught. In-depth open-ended interviews were conducted with a purposively chosen sample of nine women who were attending university while acting as sole parent for one or more children. Results revealed that this additional status interacted with other elements of their lives in multiplicative fashion, creating an overwhelming burden for the women that manifest itself in physical and emotional deterioration notwithstanding the variety of adaptive strategies they employed. The women felt bureaucratic systems seemed designed to produce failure instead of success. Policy implications of their experiences are discussed.

## Introduction

Single parenthood is becoming increasingly pervasive in Canada. Statistics Canada (1984) reports that the number of lone-parent families increased by 10% in the preceding decade. Although some of these families are headed by males, the vast majority (82.6%) are headed by females. Indeed, as a demographic category, "single mothers" comprise 11.3% of the total population, and every indicator suggests this will continue. Until recently, very little was known or understood regarding the dynamics of their particular niche, but recent studies have enhanced our knowledge in a variety of areas.

Statistically speaking, the majority of single mothers in Canada live in poverty. Twenty per cent of all single mothers earn less than \$5,000 per year, while 37% earn less than \$15,000 per year, and these women have the lowest income growth rate in the country (Statistics Canada, 1984, p.5). Norton and Glick (1986) compared single and two parent families on a variety of social and economic variables, and were led to conclude that:

By most objective measures, the vast majority of these families hold a disadvantageous position in society relative to other family groups. They are characterized by a high rate of poverty, a high percentage of minority representation, relatively low education, and a high rate of mobility. In short, they generally have little equity or stature in society and constitute a group with unusually pressing social and economic needs. (p.16)

Other researchers have examined the economic pressures associated with single motherhood and have demonstrated that a number of factors, unique to today's economic environment, play a distinct role in perpetuating the poverty of these women. In most instances it is the woman who is least able to support the family, and yet, in eight out of ten cases it is the woman who assumes this responsibility. Inflation, high

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<sup>1</sup> *Note from Palys:* This article originally appeared in *Starting From Where You Are* (1989), a compendium of student research edited by Ted Palys and produced with financial assistance from Simon Fraser University and the School of Criminology. Ms. Ratel, a single-parent mother at the time, completed the research and write-up in a single semester while taking a research methods course from Palys. The dissemination of this article to a new generation of students is done with her permission.

unemployment, job discrimination, lack of prior job experience, rising costs of adequate childcare, and inconsistent or non-existent child support all contribute to the feminization of poverty<sup>2</sup> (Grief, 1986).

In many instances, single mothers are maintained solely by the state, and their existence is meager at best.<sup>3</sup> In other cases women seek employment and some degree of self-sufficiency. However, Pett and Vaughn-Cole (1986) suggest that most single mothers acquire low status positions because of socialization processes and are fearful of taking the risks associated with pursuit of an education, career opportunities, or non-traditional jobs that would prove more lucrative. The researchers highlight this as one of their most troubling findings as it implies a *cul-de-sac* of serious and continued economic deprivation. They argue for changes in both public policy and public attitudes to facilitate the development of educational training programs and the provision of adequate financial support and childcare systems for the economically insecure and depressed single mother (p.110).

Sanik and Maudlin (1986) have analyzed the role of work in the lives of single mothers – and particularly the impact of combined job and home life responsibilities – by comparing singles to marrieds, and parents to non-parents. They found that single mothers were particularly at risk for multiple role strain and reduced levels of emotional and physical well-being:

It comes as no surprise that employed single mothers have the least amount of time to spend on household tasks, child care, personal care, and volunteer work ... In order to meet the demands of the family it is the single employed mother alone who sacrifices time in personal care activities including rest and sleep. (p.56)

Burden (1986) examined the same issue and found identical results. She also found that despite the psychological and emotional strain experienced by these women, they nonetheless exhibited high levels of job satisfaction and did not incur higher rates of absenteeism. She suggests that an understanding of the varying time demands placed on women because of their marital status and employment could be of benefit to employers, and that such information should be utilized to improve the work environment for these employees.

Other researchers have focussed on a variety of psychological and human challenges that face single-parent families. For example, Hill (1986) examined structural differences between intact, widowed, and single-parent families, and noted that single-parent families lack the personnel to fill all the normally expected positions of a family. Therefore, extra burdens are placed on the remaining family members who must compensate with increased effort to accomplish tasks such as physical maintenance, social control, and tension management (p.28).

Wells Gladow and Ray (1986) found that positive adjustment to single parenthood was directly associated with the amount of social support received. Specifically, the authors found that friends and family contribute significantly to the emotional and physical well-being of single mothers. The 'network support' of friends eases emotional distress created by feelings of loneliness and isolation. They found this form of support to be of greater importance than the pursuit of love relationships, which the researchers suggest are over-emphasized in our culture, and can be detrimental to the adjustment process. Family support usually takes the forms of financial aid, assistance with housing, childcare and other tangible problems. The researchers conclude that a single parent with both forms of support will be better able to make the necessary emotional and physical adjustments associated with this life transition.

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<sup>2</sup> This term has been applied primarily to the economic plight of women in today's society. It also has been employed to elucidate the circumstances that contribute to the poverty of specific groups of women, notably single mothers.

<sup>3</sup> For example, a woman living in British Columbia with one child currently receives \$640 per month from welfare. This amount is reduced by \$50 after three months, to provide the women with incentive to seek employment.

Hanson (1986) undertook a multivariate analysis of factors associated with well-being among single mothers. Broad social support networks and communication skills were significantly correlated with stress management. The researcher noted particularly the inter-relatedness of physical and mental health, and that good health in the parent was associated with good health in the child. Hanson states,

While single parent families experience many problems they are not necessarily less able to manage them than other family configurations. Single parent families can be healthy environments in which to live. (p.131)

Not surprisingly, many researchers have focused on the effects of single parenting on the children. Heatherington, Cox, and Cox (1979), Kelly and Wallerstein (1980), and Blecham (1980) all have examined the emotional and behavioral problems associated with family dis-equilibrium following marital separation, and concluded that although these adjustments can be traumatic, they do not produce permanent disabilities for the children. Furthermore, the adjustments of children are closely associated with the adjustments of the mother. The pertinent factors associated with healthy readjustment include the general emotional availability of the parent, the ongoing level of family conflict, the ability of the parent to be warm and affectionate, the parent's personal support systems, financial stress, and the presence of additional stresses.

Finally, Duvall (1986) examined the impact of single-parent families on children to determine if these children “grew up a little faster” than other children. The findings indicated that this was the case to a certain extent, although the children did not have any more chores than the comparison group. However, more than half the children were “latch key kids” and it was felt that, because of this, the mothers were reluctant to allocate further responsibilities because of the intimate and confidante relationships that emanate from such circumstances. In this regard the children did “grow up a little faster.”

Although the research in this area offers insight to the phenomenon of single parenthood, an investigation of the unique experiences of single mothers attending university has apparently not been undertaken. The present research represented an attempt to remedy this shortcoming. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to undertake an exploratory examination of the single mother experience in the academic context, by investigating a sample of women's lives in terms of their financial situations, their physical and emotional well-being, their social support systems, their academic experience, and the effects of their circumstances upon their children.

## **Methodology**

### **The Women**

As the research undertaken was exploratory in nature, a purposive sampling technique was utilized. This proved to be advantageous for several reasons. First, I was able to interview women whom I knew and, as a relationship of trust had been previously established, the participants were willing to grant me access to their lives. As I share their status, I believe they felt comfortable discussing their situations with me. Knowing that I had similar experiences gave the women confidence in my ability to report on the phenomenon and encouraged open disclosure.

The second reason a purposive sampling method was chosen was to ensure some variation within such a small sample. The ages of the women ranged from twenty-four to forty-one. Three of the women had one child, two were rearing three children, and the remainder had two children. One of the women had just started her first semester at university, while another woman had been in attendance for six years; the other women had been pursuing their education between two and four years. Furthermore, the women represented a variety of faculties, including business, education, psychology, criminology, anthropology, and fine arts.

The experience of single motherhood also varied. One woman had been separated only a year; another had been on her own for twelve years.

A total of nine women were approached and agreed to be interviewed. One interview was deleted from the analysis as the process was treated lightly and the resulting responses were flippant and dubious at best. Another respondent was lost because of concerns with confidentiality and the possible repercussions of involvement in the study. The analysis below focuses on the remaining seven participants.

## **The Interviews**

Interviews were conducted within the women's homes, and each lasted between three and four hours. The interviews proved to be an emotionally turbulent process for the women. It is difficult to encapsulate, in a few brief lines, the underlying essence of the interviews except to state, without reservation, that the women who approached the exercise seriously were forthright and honest in their responses.

The women discussed personal and intimate aspects of their lives. Since some of the women spoke of involvement in criminal and deviant behavior, confidentiality was a significant concern. The women were fully informed of the nature of the research, who would have access to it, and how the information would be used. Anonymity was guaranteed by ensuring that there would be no means of identification incorporated in the paper. In some instances excerpts were deleted from the report to protect the participants from any possible reprisals.

The research took the form of open-ended interviews. The women were informed of the general area of inquiry and presented with the specific topic areas for discussion. Following an introductory explanation and the gathering of demographic details, the women were free to discuss the issues as they saw fit. Notes were taken virtually verbatim and interjections were made only when it was necessary to elicit more details or to ensure a thorough understanding of the comments. This method was adopted in an attempt to ensure that my influence on the reporting was minimal. I was aware that I held particular opinions and speculations that emanated from my own experiences, and felt it imperative to maintain a receptive but neutral stance while conducting the interviews.

## **Findings**

### **Financial Circumstances**

The women in this sample had returned to school for similar reasons. All had left poor and, in some cases, abusive relationships, and realized that they had to take sole responsibility for rearing their children. Every woman but one had some past experience with the welfare system and found it to be oppressive, degrading, and stigmatizing. Receiving social assistance placed the women in a state of complete dependence and subjected them to elements of social control they found intolerable. The assistance they received from the state maintained their families at a subsistence level, but effectively denied them any opportunity to improve their standard of living.

The women shared a common employment history of low paying, menial jobs which did not provide them with the financial means to maintain their families comfortably. Collectively, they felt unfulfilled and frustrated with their employment status; all, however, sensed their own potential, and sought some means of realizing it. For example, as Linda<sup>4</sup> stated:

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<sup>4</sup> All names are pseudonyms, in order to preserve confidentiality.

When I left my husband I had to go on welfare, but the state makes you so completely dependent. They make assumptions about your moral character and start dictating how you should live. I rebelled; I said "I don't want your fucking help," and I went to work on the fish boats with my son. During the off season I was collecting UIC and I decided that if I was ever going to have a chance to make it I'd better go back to school. So I packed up my son and moved and registered at SFU. Well, no sooner was I here than I got cut off UIC because I was unavailable for work. It doesn't make any sense because I could have stayed where I was and collected all winter. So, I was really broke and I got a part-time job, then the bastards denied me my daycare subsidies because my income, combined with my loan, which they consider to be income but which is actually a debt, put me just over the top financially. I appealed to the district supervisor and was told to quit my job. The district supervisor then told me that if my child wasn't in daycare he would have him apprehended. They just don't seem to understand, you're in a no win situation.

Each woman chose to discuss her financial situation first as this permeated every aspect of their lives. All of the women live below the poverty line and all have incurred large debts to pursue their education. Many of the women have already borrowed more than \$30,000, are still attending university, and thus are accumulating further debt. The money they receive from student loans is not enough to support their families, providing them with just enough to pay for tuition, housing, and food. The women have to work to provide their children with the necessities of school supplies, adequate clothing, dental checkups and the luxuries of extra-curricular activities, birthday parties, and Christmas presents. Ironically, the need for employment extends the length of time they have to attend the university, which means incurring even greater debt.

Employment has other ramifications that warrant discussion. The women are struggling to alter the dependent and destitute nature of their lives yet, as soon as the women start earning extra income, they can be denied some of the benefits available to them when they are in a completely indigent state. Their income is to be included in their loan applications, thereby possibly reducing the amount they will be given the following semester; this serves to perpetuate the necessity of maintaining employment. They can be denied reduced medical premiums and daycare subsidies, effectively negating any extra income they might be earning. The women find themselves in an economic Catch-22 and feel that their efforts are being thwarted by policies that are internally inconsistent and illogical.

In some instances their economic situation created a degree of frustration and desperation that motivated the women to certain acts of criminal behavior. Most of the women have left income undeclared; some have committed fraud and theft; one turned to selling illicit drugs to make ends meet; and others have maintained relationships with men for financial benefit. For example, Brenda stated,

My debt load is well over \$32,000, To make ends meet I've had to collect welfare illegally while I've been at school. I've worked under the table and collected UIC and I'm terrified Big Brother is going to charge me with fraud. I'm always lying to the state to get by ...The system's fucked; you try your best to get ahead and you have to fight every step of the way. The ironic thing is that I'm no better off than if I was on welfare and I take more risks. The only difference is that the stigma isn't there. It's OK to be a starving student, but you still starve. The really offensive thing is that the system will support you if you want to take a six week secretarial course, but not if you want a career and some options in your life. There's no social support in the system. Last summer, I was so broke, I seriously considered hooking. I was so desperate for money, I was stealing food, toilet paper ... and I've developed an amazing capacity for manipulating the phone company, the landlord, the loans department. ... It's a total con; after a while you begin to believe what you're saying. You feminize your poverty by saying yes I'm poor; it's a scam, or it's survival. You tap into your poverty and it stares you back in the face. So you tell yourself that you're not really an East End welfare mom; you're a student but it's a false consciousness. You cling to your goal, but at the same time you're aware that there may not be anything out there for you when you're finished. I go downtown and look

at the prostitutes and I don't see other women; I see myself and hope that I can stay out of it for another year.

## Physical and Emotional Stress

Initially an attempt was made to differentiate between the emotional and physical stresses experienced by the women in this study. This proved to be an impossibility as I quickly discovered that the physical and emotional burdens associated with the women's status were inextricably intertwined and served to exacerbate each other.

All the women interviewed stated emphatically that they were physically exhausted. The multi-faceted nature of their lives, the adoption of three separate and distinct roles (i.e., wage earner, student, and mother) created demands on their time and energy that were difficult to manage. Inevitably, the women sacrificed their own well-being to meet these demands. Collectively, they reported that they are in poor physical health and pointed to lack of sleep, lack of exercise, and inadequate diet as the key contributing factors. The women contend with some anxiety because of their financial situations, but also must face the pressures associated with the academic environment, as well as meeting the challenge of raising their children alone. There is a distinct cyclical element to this situation in which the inability to cope with the physical demands manifests itself in an inability to deal with the emotional stresses. This in turn takes a toll on their physical well-being. As Karen stated:

I was on anti-depressants for the first year I was in school. I came very close to having a nervous breakdown, twice actually. I have a prescription for Valium but I'm trying not to rely on the drugs any more. I live on coffee and cigarettes; I'm always exhausted. After I deal with the kids at night, cook and clean, read bedtime stories, you know ... I have to work until two or three in the morning because it's the only time I have to study. I get up at 5:30 in the morning so I can have a half an hour to myself before the kids get up and I start all over again. Occasionally, I force myself to back off and get some sleep. As soon as the semester starts, I'm counting down the weeks hoping I can make it through to the break. People tell me I don't deal with the stress appropriately, that I should get some exercise and get some more sleep. I know they're right but I have to laugh. Who's got the time? They just don't have a clue what I'm dealing with here.

The women readily admit that they do not cope with the stress well. In most cases they articulated an underlying feeling of panic and a realization that they were barely managing the demands placed upon them. In fact, it appears that any additional stress becomes overwhelming. In one case, a woman became pregnant and suffered an emotional collapse. In another instance, a woman took leave from the university because her ex-husband was attempting to take her children from her. A third woman found herself unable to carry on when her mother became seriously ill. Some of the women have experienced mental and physical breakdowns, and episodes of depression are not uncommon. A majority of the women have resorted at one time or another to various forms of substance use and abuse, including dependencies on alcohol, tranquilizers, cocaine, and marijuana, to temporarily alleviate their stress. Brenda stated:

I'm exhausted. I sleep four or maybe six hours a night, I'm totally unhealthy after two years of school. ... I have no energy. Your whole life, every aspect – emotional, physical, spiritual, and social – is ignored to get through. You tap into them occasionally to prevent yourself from going insane. Every minute of your day is scheduled. I keep telling myself that I have to get the damn degree; when I get it I can be a whole person again. I've had complete emotional and physical breakdowns ... You think you develop coping strategies, you think you're dealing with your stress, but you're just masking it because on a deep hurting emotional level ... you're not coping with it at all.

## The Children

In each case the women's children represented one of the primary motivations for pursuing an education. Every woman hoped to offer her children a better lifestyle. This goal incorporates more than financial or material gain; the women also seek a sense of security and a variety of options and opportunities for their children. They cope with their circumstances largely “for” their children; and yet, their circumstances generate a degree of emotional and physical neglect that produces feelings of anxiety, guilt, and remorse.

In reviewing the financial difficulties experienced by the women, it became apparent that the children had to do without most of the luxuries afforded other children. In some instances, it was the necessities that were omitted and this has compelled some women to take drastic measures.

The demands placed on the women often detracted from their parenting skills. Most of the women stated they did not have the time or energy to manage their children effectively, and that this resulted in a degree of emotional neglect. In two cases, this neglect had manifested itself in behavioral problems. For example, one child is a chronic bed wetter at the age of eight. Another woman reported that her children are completely undisciplined and difficult to control.

Another factor that directly affects the majority of children in this study is the lack of quality childcare. It has been previously noted that daycare is not readily affordable, and unavailable to the women for this reason. Most of the women cannot afford to hire babysitters in place of daycare, and those who have taken these steps have had negative experiences. One woman was robbed by a sitter. Another discovered that her sitter was being sexually promiscuous in front of her children. A third woman discovered that her son was being psychologically abused by her sitter.<sup>5</sup> The ramifications of these situations were that more than half of the children in this study were “latch key kids” who must care for themselves when their mothers are absent because of classes or work. The women collectively assert that their children are forced to “grow up fast.” The children have to assume domestic responsibilities and there is a demand for maturity and self-sufficiency placed upon them that is largely unavoidable. As Susan described,

I look at my kids and I have enormous guilt. Some time ago I discovered that they were being sexually abused by their babysitter. I came very close to having a nervous breakdown. I had to withdraw from school. My husband wanted to take my kids away from me. It was the hardest thing I've ever dealt with. They're OK now but I'm scared for them. I worry about them all the time. Even if I had the time and money or the opportunity to go out socially, I wouldn't because I will not leave them with a babysitter again. They're latch key kids. Sometimes they spend up to four hours a day by themselves. They have to cook their own dinner and look out for themselves. They've had to grow up very fast, but somehow they're OK. I think my kids are extraordinary. They're so supportive of what I'm doing, But the guilt bears pretty heavily on me.

Despite the apparent hardships, the women are generally optimistic that the experiences of their children will be beneficial in the long run. They maintain that their children are learning valuable lessons and are becoming strong and independent individuals. Many of the women assert that the experiences of their children are broadening their social consciousness and this may serve to better society for the next generation. One woman suggested, however, that this is a process of rationalizing pernicious situations and that the women have to believe this to carry on.

## Social Support

The previous discussions have outlined, albeit implicitly, some of the factors that affect the women's social support systems. In many instances, the breakdown of the family resulted in some loss of previously

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<sup>5</sup> The sitter kept threatening to cut off the boy's penis if he misbehaved.

established support networks. The rigorous conditions of their current situations results in further losses. The women state that they do not possess the resources – the time, the energy, or the financial means – to actively pursue companionship, and this further restricts their social outlets. The university setting fills the void to a certain degree as new acquaintances are made, but these relationships necessarily involve sporadic contact and do not provide substantial support for the women. There is an informal support network among single mothers at the university, but since all experience the same constraints and pressures, the support network is rendered weak and unstable. The women commonly experience a sense of solitude in their lives. And while their social support systems are deficient, their feelings of loneliness and isolation stem more directly from a lack of intimate personal relationships.

The women perceive the socialization processes of both men and women as playing a significant role in their common experiences with intimate relationships. Women are socialized to be nurturing and take an active, giving role in maintaining a relationship. The challenges they currently face demand a denial of this role, and the women report that men seem unable or reluctant to adjust to the complex and exacting nature of their lives. The women are unwilling to forsake their education, their goals, and/or their children to accommodate such a relationship, and view such sacrifices as a prerequisite for entering into an intimate relationship. The women assert that men, in general, are only superficially supportive of their endeavors, and that the negation of socially prescribed roles contributes to this phenomenon.

Some of the women accept that they will be alone until they have completed the tasks at hand. Others adopt a stance that permits some intimacy as long as it does not interfere with their lives. They acknowledge, in both instances, that their physical and emotional needs are neglected, and that this creates additional stress as they attempt to suppress their sensuality. Despite this, the women consider this area of their lives as one that can be readily sacrificed. Indeed, they state that it must be sacrificed if they are going to accomplish their goals. Paradoxically, this serves to further limit their social support networks, increase their feelings of isolation and loneliness, and minimize opportunities for reprieve from the stresses they encounter. Once again, the women state they are in a no-win situation. As Karen noted:

Relationships are difficult. I have no time for them. Most of my old friends have drifted away. I have new friends at school and socialize a little but even those relationships are hard to maintain. Men come third after my education and my kids. If I have a relationship it has to be scheduled. I have very little patience; if it disrupts my work or my kids, I get angry. And if they can't cope with the situation they can get lost. It doesn't work, you know it can't with everything else you're juggling. Intellectually, you can rationalize the situation but emotionally, the loneliness just eats away at you.

Lastly, the women commented extensively on the overall lack of support in contemporary society. Regardless of the fact that single mothers are an ever-increasing presence they are still regarded with a degree of contempt, and looked upon as failures. There is a stigma attached to the status of single mother that exists despite any efforts the women are making to improve themselves and their lives. Several women mentioned that although there are many women rearing children alone, they are considered as somehow deserving of their predicaments. In contrast, the few men that raise families by themselves are considered heroic and are often offered various forms of social support. While it is scandalous for a woman to leave her children, little is made of the men who abandon their families. Society simply expects women to assume responsibility for their children; and yet, even when they accept this responsibility fully, little support is offered by the state or society as a whole.

## **Academics**

Scholastically, the women in the sample reported doing well; most achieve above-average grades. The women feel they must work harder and more efficiently to perform well because of the constraints and pressures associated with their status. The women put forth the argument that their circumstances impede



their academic performance and, given more conducive lifestyles, they could improve their academic standing significantly. This may be a legitimate speculation, but it is important to note that the circumstances that hinder their capabilities also serve to compel the women to work as hard as they do. The women are highly motivated to succeed for two reasons. First, they view their education as the means by which they will alter their life chances. Second, it appears that the more they invest in this pursuit, and the more they sacrifice to achieve their goals, the more determined they are to succeed. If the women were not motivated to this extent, if their lives were utopian, it is conceivable that they might not perform as well as they do. As Susan indicated:

I really think that single mothers are extraordinary women. Not just because they deal with all of this, but ... I think, perhaps, they are more intelligent or have greater capabilities than the majority of students. ... I have much less time to do my work than other students and yet my grades are better than most of them. I manage to maintain a 3.5 GPA with about one fifth of the time allotted to other students. ... I try never to use my situation to gain advantage either. I don't want to be thought of as a struggling single mother. I don't want exceptions made for me. I want to be taken seriously as an academic, and stand or fall on my own merit. So, for the most part, I never raise the issue. I take a great deal of pride in what I'm doing; it's part of my persona. People ask me, "How do you manage it all?" I don't quite honestly know. The bottom line is I love what I'm doing, I really do.

It must be recounted that these women also seek to realize their own potential. The pursuit of personal fulfillment was one of the key motivations for returning to school in most cases. The frustrations expressed with regards to their academic experience are indicative of this factor, over and above the difficulties stemming from their single parent status. For example, the women frequently take correspondence courses to permit them time to work and care for their children. Often, courses in which they are interested are offered only at night, and they are unable to attend. Similarly, there are many university-sponsored events and activities in which the women cannot participate because of their familial responsibilities. The women spoke of having to cut corners academically, and felt depressed and angry because they had to make these concessions with their education.<sup>6</sup> Although these frustrations arose because of their status, they were aired because the women did not feel that they were deriving full benefit from the university environment. Their academic pursuits are intrinsically valued. The women enjoy the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge and often feel cheated in the academic arena. As Linda asserted,

I think that the university experience is probably very different for students without my responsibilities. It is supposed to be the best time of your life. ... Well, it's the *hardest* time of my life, but I love it, and I have to do this for my own sake and for my children.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The structural characteristics of Canadian society are changing rapidly, and the family unit has seen many transformations in the last twenty years. Nonetheless the traditional nuclear family still predominates, although any imaginable configuration can be found in contemporary society. One of the prevalent trends altering the face of Canadian families in the last two decades is the growing pervasiveness of the single parent. The majority of single-parent households are headed by women and, although we know something of them in the aggregate from statistical surveys, very little research has been done that shows the human face of this group. The purpose of this research was to do so by exploring the circumstances of a small and yet diverse sample of single mothers attending university, and examining some of the factors that shape their experiences.

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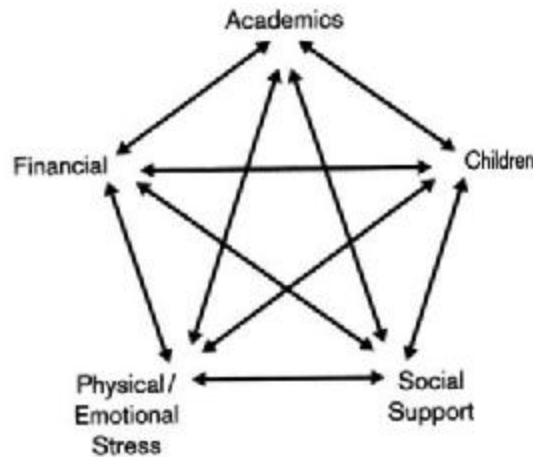
<sup>6</sup> The women reported that they never seem to have the time to thoroughly learn some material, thoroughly research a topic, or write several drafts until a paper is satisfactorily composed, and so forth. Their academic semester could be described as a period of crisis management more so than a period of quality education.

It is apparent that the women contend with a variety of problems that are unique to their status. The women live in or near poverty, accrue large debts to pursue their goals, and suffer debilitating physical and emotional stress as they attempt to maintain three separate and distinct life roles. They have a limited amount of social support, and their children are subjected to a number of pressures, including some dereliction. Their education is of paramount importance as their overriding goal is to better their life chances and remove themselves from the experiences common to most single mothers.

The literature revealed that the majority of single mothers are struggling financially. Those who adopt dual roles by entering the work force are subjected to elevated levels of stress. It was acknowledged that the well-being of single mothers is correlated to the amount of social support they receive. Furthermore, a distinct relationship was found between their physical and mental well-being. Generally, the children experience some temporary emotional and behavioral problems while adjusting to the breakup of the family, and the demands placed upon their mothers served to enhance the need for emotional independence.

Although there are a number of obvious similarities between single mothers generally and those in the academic setting, the pursuit of an education clearly aggravates the pressures and problems normally experienced by single mothers. The endeavors undertaken create a situation in which each factor plays upon and exacerbates the rest. This experiential dynamic is unique to the women in this study, and its comprehension necessary for a thorough understanding of the phenomenon in question. Figure 1 depicts the interaction between the five variables examined in this study and demonstrates the complexity created with the adoption of this status. The cross-impacts make more transparent that adding a single element – attending university, in this case – adds not just a single element or impact to one's life, but a whole new set of pressures that affect and are affected by every other element of one's life.

**Figure 1**  
Illustration of the complex web of interrelationships among the factors examined in this study.



The research unearthed a number of structural elements that contribute directly to the problems encountered by these women: a lack of financial support, a lack of affordable childcare, and provincial policies that are antagonistic to their endeavors. The most pertinent example is the absence of maintenance in the majority of cases. Only two women in this study received financial assistance from their estranged partners, and in both cases the support was minimal and sporadic. This situation exists despite the fact that these men have a legal responsibility to support their children; despite existing legislation, little enforcement takes place. As Lou so aptly stated, "It's as if they want you to fail, as if they'd like to see you end up back on welfare!" Indeed, some women would argue that an insidious patriarchal conspiracy is at work. I find this contention to be

excessive, although the general status of women in our society is not an irrelevant consideration. In the last two decades women have made some progress in altering their position in society, but substantive equality has not been realized. Motherhood is not a prestigious occupation; women who bear children are not generally honored and held in high esteem. Women with dependent children are a low-status and relatively powerless group and therefore, the ambivalence of legislators and policy makers is not unduly surprising. One cannot help but wonder how different the situation might be if it were reversed. Current indicators suggest that the trend of lone parenting will continue, and the plight of single mothers must be addressed. It is hoped that the current study will serve to enlighten readers and promote some understanding in this regard.

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