

EXPLORING THE UNIQUE VOCATIONAL  
EXPERIENCES OF RACIAL AND ETHNIC MINORITY  
WORKING SINGLE MOTHERS

By

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Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate College of the  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
August, 2018

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the following individuals' support, help, and encouragement throughout the process. I am forever grateful to you.

To Hang-shim Lee; thank you for all that you do! You chose me as your first advisee and together we have been on a 3 year adventure cumulating in this project. Your guidance and support have been invaluable. Thank you for believing in me and encouraging me during the most difficult parts of this program.

To my research team: Natalie Singleton, Stephanie Adams, Allyson McMahon, Emily Goodwin, Irene Campbell, and Ade Bakare; thank you for your tireless work, feedback, and support during this process. This project would have never happened without you.

To my dissertation committee: Julie Koch, Tonya Hammer, Sue Jacobs, and Tamara Mix; thank you for the valuable feedback, guidance, and encouragement that helped to make this project the best it could be.

To the best cohort: Joe Currin, Colton Brown, Sam Farley, Brent Schneider, Sara Hills, Ashlee Jayne, and Kevin Richard; I can say with complete confidence that my relationships with you are one most valuable components of my time at OSU. I would not have thrived in Oklahoma and in this program without the laughs and your friendship. I am a stronger and better person for having you in my life.

To my family: my parents, Rob and Sarah Yavorski and my brother, Andrew Yavorski; you have loved and believed in me since day 1. I am the luckiest person in the world to be your daughter and sister. Thank you for pushing me to keep my "eye on the prize" and pursue my dream. I love you so much.

Lastly, to my husband, best friend, classmate, and biggest supporter, Kevin Richard; thank you for bringing out the best in me and believing in me. We embarked on this graduate school journey 5 years ago and there is no one I would rather do it with. You and our fur babies light up my life. I love you and cannot wait to see where the journey takes us.

\*Acknowledgements reflect the views of the author and are not endorsed by committee members or Oklahoma State University.

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Date of Degree: AUGUST, 2018

Title of Study: EXPLORING THE UNIQUE VOCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF  
RACIAL AND ETHNIC MINORITY WORKING SINGLE MOTHERS

Major Field: EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY- COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY

Abstract:

According to data from the United States Census Bureau, there are approximately 12 million single parent families in the United States, 80% of which are headed by single mothers (United States Census Bureau, 2014). Research suggests limited benefits of employment on the mental health and career satisfaction of single working mothers due to unique challenges they face. These include managing full time work and childcare with limited support and financial resources (Baker, North, & ALSPAC, 1999; Zabkiewicz, 2010). This qualitative study examined the unique career experiences of racial and ethnic minority working single mothers by exploring the intersectionality of identities in the workplace, unique challenges and social supports, and suggestions to improve the working lives of single mothers.

The study provided a review of previous research of women, ethnic minority, and mothers' career development, which identified specific challenges faced by working single mothers. Researchers employed a consensual qualitative research (CQR) methodology and developed the interview protocol using Cook, Heppner, and O'Brien's (2002) ecological career of women of color and White women. Data points included 15 semi-structured, one hour interviews, member checking, and researcher memos.

Results were analyzed using research teams that engaged in consensual domain coding and cross analysis. Findings included six major domains: (a) Job/Education Decision Making, (b) Challenges, (c), Characteristics of Self, (d), Resources, (e) Coping, and (f) Suggestions. Practical implications are discussed in the context of workplace interventions, diverse cultural considerations, and community resource development. Further research directions are presented based on the limitations in the present study.

*Keywords:* single mothers, racial minority, career development, and ecological model

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

According to data from the United States Census Bureau, there are approximately 12 million single parent families in the United States, 80% of which are headed by single mothers (United States Census Bureau, 2014). Within the public health body of literature, research suggests decreased levels of reported well-being and an increase in physical and mental health problems for single mother families as compared to partnered mothers. Weitoft, Haglund, and Rosen (2000) reported that single mothers experience more occupational difficulties than married or partnered mothers due to high stress levels associated with financial insecurity, discrimination at work, inflexible work policies that penalize parenting needs, lack of support systems, and economic and time constraints due to increased responsibilities at home. These findings remained consistent across other developed countries including England, Sweden and Italy (Witvleit, Kunst, Stronks, & Arah, 2013). For married or partnered mothers of majority racial groups, the relationship between increased mental health and employment is well documented (Dooley, Fielding & Levi, 1996; Ross & Mirowsky, 1995; Toch et. al., 2014). However, the impact of employment on the mental health of working single mothers is less clear with some studies indicating that single mothers may not experience the same mental health benefits of employment due to erratic work schedules, low wages, and increased stress both at work and at home (Baker, North, & ALSPAC, 1999).

Zabkiewicz (2010) highlighted that working single mothers disproportionately occupy the most transient, lowest paying jobs with significant instability in work schedules and wages. Women of color are disproportionately found in service industries and in jobs with limited wages and promotional opportunities, likely due to experiences of discrimination (Ortiz & Roscigno, 2009). Correll and Benard (2007) reported that mothers are often face penalties that are not faced by men. They explained that mothers are often viewed as less dependable, less promotable, and deserving of lower salaries and they are likely to face strong bias in working environments and are viewed as less capable and reliable to complete tasks and jobs (Correll & Benard, 2007).

There are numerous challenges with the structure of family leave policies and critics suggest these policies not only reinforce rigid societal norms, but also increase discrimination in hiring practices by not hiring women who may become pregnant (Hofferth & Curtin, 2006). In the United States, men continue to have higher average earnings than their female counterparts doing the same work. From a financial and family planning standpoint, women are often expected to take leave from work in order to allow the highest earning partner to remain actively earning a paycheck (Hofferth & Curtin, 2006).

Racial minority working single mothers represent a demographic of the workforce that is rapidly growing in the United States, yet experience disproportionately higher rates of unemployment and part time employment. According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014), “the unemployment rate for married mothers was substantially lower than for married or partnered mothers at 4.0 percent, compared with 10.3 percent” (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Additionally, “Black and Hispanic families remained more likely to have an unemployed family member in 2014 (14.1 percent and 10.8 percent,

respectively) than White and Asian families (7.0 percent and 7.5 percent, respectively)” (United States. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Approximately 30.6% of single mother-headed families live below the federal poverty line compared to 6.2% of married couples (United States Census Bureau, 2014). These statistics imply larger economic and systemic problems. To increase employment and decrease the number of challenges faced by racial and ethnic minority single mothers, additional research is needed to support employers and communities to address barriers related to support systems, wage and educational gaps, cultural sensitivity, and discrimination in the workplace.

Racial and ethnic minority working single mothers often struggle to remain gainfully employed and are at an increased risk for psychological issues and poverty (Brown & Moran, 1997; Cairney et. al., 2006; Weitoft, Haglund, & Rosen, 2000; Zabkiewicz, 2010). Previous studies focused on challenges facing working single mothers and barriers to their success professionally and personally (Buding & England, 2001; Marcus-Newhall, Halpern, & Tan, 2008; Tran & McInnis-Dittrich, 2001). Discrimination, work place barriers, and lack of support systems are topics that are highly cited, but provide little practical, vocational, or clinical application to the population of interest (Correll & Benard, 2007; Glass, 2004; Hofferth & Curtin, 2006; Mills & Hazarika, 2005; Padavic & Reskin, 2002).

Through examining the literature, there are a number of gaps related to the career experiences of ethnic minority single mothers. Most studies relating to career development and experiences have primarily focused on White women and men with limited information on ethnic minorities or intersections between multiple ethnic and cultural identities. Limited studies have been conducted on the intersectionality between multiple identities and their complex interactions within workplace environments. The current study aimed to add to the

literature on vocational experience of racial and ethnic minority single mothers by qualitatively exploring interactions between their intersectional identities at numerous environmental levels using an ecological theoretical framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002).

This study specifically investigated the unique contextual barriers and supports that racial/ethnic minority single mothers experience in their work environments and vocational decision-making. In addition, the study explored coping strategies and suggestions by participants to increase support for single mothers at the individual, workplace, and community/society levels. This study may provide practical information and future interventions for employers, supervisors, career counselors and mental health professionals who work with racial and ethnic minority single mothers to increase their vocational mobility and overall wellness.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The current study was conceptualized based on the career ecological model of women of White women and minority developed by Cook, Heppner, and O'Brien (2002). The developers of the model saw a need for a more diverse and culturally sensitive understanding of an individual's career needs outside of the traditional androcentric models of career counseling. The model challenges some assumptions of career counseling, which include an individualistic approach to success and tackling challenges. The model adapts an approach that focuses on the relational and cultural components of working women to identify career strengths, barriers and areas of growth. Additionally, it provides an awareness of working women's home and family roles as they relate to career choices and the societal stereotypes and gender roles that influence work choice (Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002). Similar to the relational cultural therapy/theory model (RCT), proposed initially by Jean Baker Miller, MD (1976), the model allows for a deeper understanding of a woman's desire for relationships and incorporating components of women's lived experiences with discrimination in the workplace (both racial and gender) to advocate for meaningful workplace and societal changes (Jordan, 2010). According to the model, career decisions and behaviors do not occur in a vacuum and environmental factors play an important role in career satisfaction of working women.

Levels of the model were borrowed from the ecological system theory model originally proposed by Uri Bronfenbrenner (1977). Bronfenbrenner (1977) initially proposed his ecological systems theory to draw attention to the numerous environmental and social factors that affect a child's development. His original model proposed five levels, which include the individual, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Combining the ecological framework with components from a relational cultural framework, Cook, Heppner, and O'Brien (2002) suggested ecological career interventions for work with White women and women of color. For example, career counselors can help women cope with gendered experiences such as sexual harassment in the workplace to increase autonomy and decrease victimization (Cook, Heppner & O'Brien, 2002). A social justice component is intertwined by encouraging action by mentors, employers and career counselors to work with individuals lacking resources and needing career support.

In studying this unique population, Cook, Heppner and O'Brien's (2002) model best captured the complex interaction between individual, environmental, and systemic factors in conjunction with multiple subsystems that influence single mothers' career development and experiences. For example, at the individual level, single mothers' experiences with intersectionality, or discriminatory experiences and oppression associated with endorsement of two or more "power down" identities are related to numerous aspects of their lives including work, leisure, and their physical and mental health (Browne & Misra 2003). At the microsystem level, a single mother's workplace creates additional challenges including stereotyping and discrimination through

workplace policies. Workplace discrimination includes perceptions that single mothers are less dependable, less promotable, and deserving of lower starting salaries (Correll & Benard, 2007). Lack of work and personal life balance may increase the challenges in effectively navigating multiple roles, leading to stress and burn out. At the mesosystem level, challenges related to work/life balance and juggling multiple roles present unique experiences for single mothers. Lastly, at the macrosystem level, systemic policies impacting racial and ethnic minority working single mothers such as maternity leave and hiring policies occur in the context of career development, economic empowerment, and career mobility. Opportunities for community and systemic support also fall into this category.

### **Career Identity and Development**

**Women.** O'Neill and Bilimoria (2005) suggested that women's career development should be considered differently than traditional models of career development as numerous societal and developmental factors are unique to women. Due to gender and societal norms, women largely remain the primary caregivers of children, which can affect advancement opportunities, educational trajectories, and ability to receive raises and promotions at work (O'Neill & Bilimoria, 2005). Some research supports different career trajectories for women differ as compared to men. Career women may find new interests, enjoyment and develop their career identities later in life following her child rearing years (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). In addition, a woman's minority status and marginalization in the working world remains a prominent issue that affects career development. Gender discrimination affects a woman's relationships with supervisors, coworkers-workers and peers. These factors contribute to limits in

employment opportunities, career growth and other opportunities (O'Neill & Bilimoria, 2005).

Phillips and Imhoff (1997) identified numerous factors that affect women's career outcomes including career stereotype threat, traditional gender roles for women in the workforce, child-rearing responsibilities, workforce participation, and barriers to maintaining employment due to work and life balance. According to King (1989), a woman's optimal career exploration and development is closely tied to family connectedness and valuing a woman's independent career decisions (cited in Phillips & Imhoff, 1997). Other unique components of women's career development include that many women occupy multiple co-occurring roles both as a professional and a caregiver. These factors impact career decision-making because women must consider additional factors of assuming primary care of children. Time constraints of balancing work and home life often require women to make career decisions that may be incongruent with their desired career goals in favor of achieving balance or attending to family needs.

**Racial and ethnic minorities.** Research on the career development of ethnic and racial minorities has increased over the past several decades with an overall increase in the diversity of the workforce. Career choice and outcomes are a combination of environmental and personal (cultural) factors according to Lent, Brown and Hackett's Social Cognitive Career Theory (1994). Racial and ethnic minorities likely experience career decisions differently due to numerous factors including discrimination and educational attainment. Racial and ethnic minorities tend to occupy lower level, unskilled positions in the work force, which influences career decision making in the context of available occupational opportunities (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

While there is movement towards more multicultural sensitivity in vocational counseling, there are no solidified theories of career development for racial and ethnic minorities (Fouad & Byers-Winston, 2005).

Previous research primarily focused on career experiences of African Americans with little focus on the career development of Native Americans, Asian Americans, and other groups (Flores et. al., 2006). In a meta-analysis conducted by Fouad and Byers-Winston (2005), there was no relationship between race/ethnicity and career aspirations; however, there were significant differences in racial/ethnic working individuals' perception of advancement opportunities in their respective fields. Discriminatory practices such as not hiring a person of color, previous experiences of discrimination, and wage discrepancies played into minority worker's perceptions of future career attainment (Fouad & Byers-Winston, 2005).

Many career-counseling theories assume that work is central to the lives of individuals and career choices arise from a combination of personality traits and skills. However, this may not be accurate for ethnic minorities who have faced compounding discrimination for generations (Leong, 1995). Levels of acculturation, level of racial identity development, communication, and language barriers are additional factors that affect career choice (Leong, 1995). Finally, in eastern and collectivist societies, traditional career counseling models valuing individualistic attainment may not fit with collectivist orientations that place more emphasis on family relationships, working for the benefit of the family and community, and more relational outlooks on work (Leong, 1995).

**Mothers.** Little research is available on specific career development models of partnered or single mothers. A unique component to the career development of mothers is the need to disrupt one's career on some level to begin a family and have children. Moore (2000) commented that traditional career development theories are androcentric, suggesting a linear career projection with limited or few disruptions. Career identity for mothers often changes, resulting in periods of disruption where focus on the family may be a higher priority than career development. Similarly, career self-concept may not be found in a specific career attainment (job), but rather a larger picture of incorporating multiple roles such as worker and parent (Moore, 2000). In a longitudinal study of working women and men conducted by Abele and Spurk (2011), findings showed that timing of parenthood had an impact on the level of career mobility. Due to role expectations, parenthood was shown to have a negative impact on women's working hours and women's perceived career success. Additionally, women who had their first child close to when they started their careers struggled more and had less vocational success. Men's career success and trajectories were independent of their parenting status (Abele & Spurk, 2011).

Partnered and single mothers face unique concerns related to work than career women with no children. In one study, mothers attributed differences in their perceived career mobility and career enhancement to family obligations and work discontinuity. Non-mothers attributed their career challenges to personality traits and lack of promotion opportunities (Metz, 2005). Further research and investigation is needed to more accurately describe the career development experiences of partnered and single mothers as distinct from women as a whole.

## **Intersectionality**

The intersection of one or more “power down” identities that leads to compounding discrimination and oppression is broadly referred to as intersectionality (Browne & Misra, 2003). Intersectionality arose from the Black/African American feminist movement in the late 1980’s as Black feminists began speaking out against discrimination that affected multiple levels of their identity that could not be teased apart (Browne & Misra, 2003; Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). There is much debate among researchers about the best methods to capture intersectionality and its impact on individuals in different environments. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) identified numerous points of contention in intersectionality research including how to differentiate between autonomous and interactive components of identity, static and fixed categories versus dynamic and contextual categories, and others. Many researchers argue for an additive model of disadvantage by which each “power down” identity systematically increases the level of marginalization or disadvantage. Others argue for a more interactive model where a person’s identification in numerous categories is experienced simultaneously and produces a single level of marginalization (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

Researchers often question if people who occupy multiple subordinate identities (i.e. Black/African American, women, non-heterosexual) are worse off than people who occupy single subordinate identities (i.e. White/Caucasian women) (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Brown and Misra (2003) referred to this phenomenon as the Multiple Jeopardy-Multiple Advantage Hypothesis, suggesting that individuals who occupy low positions in two or more power-down social categories will experience the highest level

of discrimination with the least amount of economic and social reward. Other researchers (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001) argued that intersectionality should be observed in the context of the greater social hierarchy.

Individuals who occupy multiple subordinate identities or categories often do not fit the prototypes of the “typical” subordinate category and experience what they coined as intersectional invisibility (Purdie-Vaughn & Eibach, 2008). Many researchers argue that virtually all individuals who identify with numerous identity categories experience some level of intersectional invisibility because historically, groups were formulated without considering these deep, interwoven identity connections. Purdie-Vaughn and Eibach (2008) argued that intersectional invisibility offers both positive and negative components; however, critics of the theory comment that some identities are less visible and “easy to hide” compared to others, which may mitigate any positive aspects of compounding marginalized identities.

The impact of intersectionality plays an important role in career experiences. However, current research on intersecting identities in the workplace lacks consideration of cultural and domestic obligations, life demands, and alternative family structures of working individuals (Ozbigin, Beauregard, Tatli, & Bell, 2011). Ozbigin and his colleagues (2011) commented that discussions of work/life balance often discount the life demands of individuals and the ways in which those roles and responsibilities impact their work lives. They suggested that work policies need to reflect social and organizational realities of workers, moving past gender as the sole measure of diversity to create policies that fit better with multiple intersecting identities.

Conceptualizing intersectionality in the workplace requires a broader understanding beyond just gender and race categories to explore dynamics of how groups are harmed or benefit from social constructions. For example, Browne and Misra (2003) discussed that intersectionality of Latino/a workers must consider how both social constructions of gender are racialized and social constructions of race are gendered to create specific discrimination experiences. In sum, examining the ways in which other social groups are impacted by discriminatory practices of individuals who hold multiple identities can provide more information to their social maintenance and potential work place changes.

### **Individual Challenges**

**Work and life balance.** Numerous studies have cited the challenges of achieving work and life balance for single mothers (Snow et. al., 2003). The concept of balancing multiple roles, referred to as “role strain,” is consistently linked with psychological wellness of women and mothers (O'Driscoll & Hildreth, 1992). Additionally, role conflict is associated with an increase in depressive symptoms and decreased life satisfaction among working women (Frone, Russell, & Barnes, 1996). Concerns related to role stress center around the concept of “role overload”, where working women hold multiple positions and roles, but may feel ill-equipped or unable to perform all of them to the best of their ability (Barnett & Baruch, 1985). The anxiety of not performing to optimum levels and normed expectations, such as pressure to be home with kids instead of at work, can lead to compounding anxiety and challenges developing work/life balance (Barnett & Baruch, 1985).

**Psychological stress.** Single mothers experience high levels of mental health problems compared to other women (Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000; McLanahan, 1985; Weisman, Leaf & Bruce, 1987). Factors such as work/family balance, financial insecurity due to loss of partner, lack of social supports, stress associated with marital or relationship separation and childcare issues contribute to compounding stress (Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000). The majority of literature focuses on single mothers with a lower socio-economic status (SES) background, which raises important questions and related to causes of psychological stress. Financial strain adds an additional layer of complexity and includes lack of resources, lack of access to health care providers, and limited educational and job opportunities. These stressors may lead limits in coping and productivity at work (Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000). One study noted that previously married mothers that are recently single were at increased risk for psychiatric symptoms and mental health illnesses when compared to never married single mothers and married mothers (Cairney et. al., 2006). These findings may also be explained by the psychological impact and stress associated with divorce and loss of partner support (Cairney et. al., 2006).

In a longitudinal study conducted by Brown and Moran (1997), researchers examined multiple factors that contributed to the onset of depression in 117 single mothers over the course of two years. Researchers evaluated “humiliating and entrapment events”, defined as severe and life changing events that reduce the individual's personal power in addition to mothers’ self-esteem, childhood adversity, childhood poverty, financial hardship, employment history, and support systems. Findings suggested that single mothers were twice as likely as married mothers to develop depression and be in financial hardship. These factors were based on events that reduced a single mother’s

self-efficacy, self-esteem, and increased financial burdens (Brown & Moran, 1997). Interestingly, the findings suggested the longer amount of time that a woman spends as a single mother, the less mental health symptoms were present (Brown & Moran, 1997). This decrease in symptoms may be a result of single mothers developing more coping strategies, social supports, employing resilience strategies, and acquiring more resources as time goes on. Newly single working mothers may feel increased levels of stress prior to development of strategies needed to manage multiple barriers and challenges (Brown & Moran, 1997).

**Vocational outcomes.** Single mothers experience numerous mental health benefits from employment. Employment is shown to be effective in increasing maternal well-being in single mother populations similar to married women (Smith et. al., 2000). However, the factors that contribute to wellness are likely different compared to married mothers. Previous literature suggested that the characteristics and longevity of employment are most important in determining the mental health outcomes of employment for single mothers (Zabkiewicz, 2010). Specifically, jobs that lasted 10-12 months out of the year and were full time jobs provided the most mental health benefits to single mothers. Single mothers who engaged in part-time work were shown to have no effect from working as if they were unemployed based on the results of this study (Zabkiewicz, 2010).

Additional factors that affect single mothers' vocational mobility and job security relate to the amount and quality of social supports and access to resources specifically in poorer populations of single mothers (Brown & Lichter, 2004). Some single mothers on welfare or from poorer families struggle with maintaining employment due to lack of

education and job training opportunities. According to Hanciouglu and Hartmann (2014), resources and career experiences including training experiences and early employment greatly influenced future career prospects and career mobility. In their sample, many single mothers had to stop working and decrease the number of hours worked due to family obligations. Successful re-entry into the labor market was partially determined by type of job (part time vs. full time), age of single motherhood (younger mothers had a more difficult time due to lack of employment history), number of benefits, and quantity and quality of their social supports (Hanciouglu & Hartmann, 2014).

### **Contextual Barriers and Supports**

**Discrimination.** Vocational issues for racial minorities and women are cited through four major channels: gender segregation and discrimination in division of labor, unequal pay and employment growth opportunities for women, parental status, and racial discrimination (Padavic & Reskin, 2002). Browne and Kennelly (1999) suggested that discrimination of women and ethnic minorities is in part due to employers using stereotypes as a filtering and hiring tool. Other stereotypes utilized by employers include the belief that women are not as committed to paid work as males, may not “need” paid work as much as males, or will become pregnant and leave the workforce. Considerable research has been conducted on what sociologists coin the “motherhood penalty” in the workplace where mothers are at a disadvantage in hiring and firing practices, earning fewer wages due to their status as a parent with dependent children. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as the “maternal wall” (Buding & England, 2001). The “maternal wall” represents a barrier faced by working mothers when applying for employment based on past history of pregnancies, taking parental leave, and previous requests for

more flexible schedules (Marcus-Newhall, Halpern, & Tan, 2008). From a racial minority perspective, White heterosexual males have traditionally held the power and decision making in vocational realms. Individuals who make hiring decisions may endorse stereotypical views of individuals in “power down” positions including that minority workers are lazy, late, and disrespectful. These harmful assumptions can diminish the opportunities for employment and fair hiring practices (Ortiz & Roscigno, 2009). Ortiz and Roscigno’s (2009) study found that African American/ Black women in lower socio-economic groups experienced more discrimination in the workplace due to low levels of power, arbitrary hiring and firing, low wages and others. This group was also more likely to be labeled as a single mother, which carried additional stereotypes including living in poverty, lacking intelligence, laziness, and relying on welfare for support (Ortiz & Roscigno, 2009).

**Lack of social support.** Given the large number of commitments and constraints placed on single mothers, lack of social support is cited in the literature as a pervasive problem. There are many avenues by which mothers lose spousal or partner support such as through divorce, separation, death of a partner, or by choice. Research using racially diverse samples of single mothers including Mexican-American and African-American mothers suggested that single mothers who perceive themselves or are physically isolated from friends and family show higher levels of depression and psychological distress (Schrag & Schmit-Tieszen, 2014; Wagner, 1993). Overall decreased wellness and mental health concerns may be related to the circumstances surrounding single motherhood such as through damaged family interactions and social supports that mothers once relied on. A challenge of researching single mothers is that many are working, middle class

individuals who have little to no contact with services or resources where information and support can be disseminated (Tran & McInnis-Dittrich, 2001).

The importance of social support on long-term success and development of self-efficacy shows mixed findings. One study found that parents who have social support experienced success in the short term defined by increased self-esteem and self-efficacy. However, single parents experienced little to no effect on long-lasting social support development and support with skills such as parenting in an 18-month follow-up (Lipman & Boyle, 2005). Maintaining social supports can be challenging for single mothers attempting to juggle multiple roles and lack of resources such as transportation (Nelson, 2000). Some potential ways to increase access to information for mothers may be through dissemination of information at schools, through medical providers, mental health counselors, gyms, and social support networks for single mothers to reach a larger demographic of single mothers (Tran & McInnis-Dittrich, 2001).

**Benefits of work and community support systems.** Some research supports increased self-efficacy and reduced work stress for employed single mothers as compared to unemployed single mothers. Findings of a study conducted by Turner (2007) suggested that employed rural single mothers experienced greater self-efficacy when individuals had greater access to resources, increased confidence to organize busy and challenging life schedules, and successful implementation of coping strategies to ward off chronic stress (Turner, 2007). Additionally, social support was shown to be effective at reducing role strain and anxiety experienced by working women and may have long-lasting effects including increased self-esteem, better work and job performance, and greater life satisfaction (Schrag & Schmit-Tieszen, 2014). In one study, a single mother's successful

re-entry into the labor market was determined by several factors including the type of job (part time versus full time); age of the mother when becoming single (younger mothers had a more difficult time due to lack of employment history); and number of benefits and social supports she had (Hancioglu & Hartmann, 2014). These findings stress the importance of providing supportive career counseling and workplace support to single mothers immediately following their entry or re-entry into the work force (Takata, 2011).

There are gaps in the literature exploring the vocational and contextual supports that aid single mothers in achieving more career flexibility and mobility. However, alternative and new forms of social support are developing through online networking systems. In a study conducted by Hudson and colleagues (2008), online message boards for low income Black/African American single mothers served as a place where mothers can connect and receive support. Thematic analyses on the content of the chats suggested themes relating to social support, loss, financial needs and concerns, work/life balance, career and educational goals, and many others. Although little research has been conducted on the outcomes of involvement with online social support or social support groups, this community of single mothers shows a need to provide greater community supports in a confidential and low cost way (Hudson et. al., 2008).

### **Present Study**

The purpose of the present study was to explore the career experiences of racial and ethnic minority single mothers using qualitative research. Information gathered from this study may provide the groundwork needed to enhance the lives of racial minority single working mothers through workplace changes, culturally sensitive vocational support and counseling, and dissemination of effective coping strategies and resilience

factors. Research questions include: 1) What is the experience of intersectionality for racial and ethnic minority single working mothers in the context of their careers or jobs? 2) What are the unique career barriers and supports that impact racial and ethnic minority working single mothers' career and mental health 3) What factors could be considered to enhance career satisfaction, career mobility and mental health outcomes among racial and ethnic minority single working mothers.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Research Design**

The study used CQR to capture the unique career experiences of ethnic minority working single mothers (Hill et. al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). Core assumptions of CQR include the use of inductive reasoning to find meaning in responses of participants through specific steps. An emic and ideographic approach was used, meaning that the method's purpose was to examine unique phenomena of a particular group and capture the subjective experiences of participants within that group (Morrow, 2005). The principles of CQR are to look for trends and themes in the experiences and individual perspectives of a small sample of individuals to determine overarching themes (Hill et. al., 2005). CQR was developed under a constructivist assumption whereby researchers and participants have close relationships and researchers attempt to gain a snapshot of participants "lived experience" with interviews and direction interaction (Hill, 2012). CQR acknowledges the use of post-positivism in the research process, which describes that it may be impossible to know the exact truth of what occurs in a specific phenomenon of interest; however, use of the scientific method, control of research biases and other factors may help to approximate participants' experiences as close as possible (Hill, 2012). Additionally, it is the belief that researchers and

participants interact with one another, but independence should be maintained as much as possible with considerable evaluation and insight into the research process and researcher's impact on data collection (Hill, 2012).

This design was chosen based on its use of open ended questions to elicit rich responses of interviewees, use of consensus among team group members to challenge and avoid biases of single researchers found in the data, CQR challenges biases and expectations throughout the research process including data collection, coding, and domain development (Hill, 2012). By using this method, a “snap shot” of the career experiences of racial minority working single mothers may be captured for potential further development into interventions and various systemic changes to enhance their working and personal lives.

### **Trustworthiness in CQR**

Trustworthiness refers to the credibility of a qualitative research inquiry. Several researchers have proposed standards to increase credibility. This study used trustworthiness standards proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985; 1986). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), there are four primary evaluative criteria for determining the trustworthiness of a qualitative study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Credibility refers to the confidence of themes in the findings. This is achieved through techniques such as data saturation, prolonged involvement with the data, member checking, triangulation, or, “capturing and respecting multiple perspectives” (Patton, 2002, p. 546), use of pilot data, and others (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). The researcher worked towards credibility of data through use of member checking, use of consensus among research team members and the use of an auditor to

provide an unbiased check errors and consistency in data analysis. Transferability refers to the applicability of the findings (external validity) to other environments, populations or contexts. This can be achieved through use of “thick data analysis”, which is described as detailed accounts of interviews and data from a number of different sources (Holloway, 1997). This proved to be difficult in the current study as there were limited community support groups catering to single mothers in the geographical region of the researcher. Hill (2012) additionally recommends reporting frequency of data in the sample to more accurately position findings. Labels used include, “general, (applies to all or all but one case in the sample); typical, (applies to more than half of the cases); and variant, (applies to less than half of the cases)” (Hill, 2012, p.179). The researcher and team members used these labels when determining frequency of categories through cross analysis of the data.

Dependability refers to the consistency of data and replicability of findings. Consistency of data collection refers to “a systematic process systematically followed” (Patton, 2002, p. 546). In CQR, auditors are used to increase dependability of the study and to ensure the research process is followed in a systematic way (Hill, 2012). To achieve dependability, a pilot study was conducted to verify the applicability and understanding of the interview question to participants. Feedback from the pilot interviewee was incorporated into the semi-structured interview questions asked to participants. To ensure all team members were comfortable utilizing effective semi-structured interview techniques, team members participated in a short training on CQR methods, which included effective, non-leading interview skills. Reflexivity statements were included to disclose potential researcher biases and positions (see Findings).

Finally, conformability refers to the objectivity the findings not influenced by researcher or method bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). There are several ways to control for bias and maintain the integrity of the data. Rennie (2004) suggested the concept of reflexivity, or the self-awareness of research participants. It is essential that researchers acknowledge and put aside their biases to limit its impact on the data collection and analysis (Fischer, 2009; Hill et. al., 2005). The researcher and team used memoing strategies following each interview. Team members were encouraged to journal their experiences interacting with participants and within the research team. Team members discussed biases and assumptions at multiple points during the study including prior to data collection, during the collection process, and throughout the data analysis process.

**Controlling bias.** Controlling bias and providing the most objective results possible is imperative to the soundness of a qualitative study. Hill (2012) further distinguishes bias as “personal issues that make it difficult for researchers to respond objectively to the data” (Hill et. al., 1997, p. 539). Expectations are defined as, “beliefs that researchers have formed based on reading the literature and thinking about and developing research questions (Hill et. al., 1997, p. 538).” Biases may be more difficult to report or detect because they are developed by the researcher’s schemas and core values while expectations are formulated through investment in the study and may be more easily detected and changed.

To reduce bias and expectation impact on the study, the researcher utilized recommendations proposed by Hill (2012) through every stage of the research process. These included selection of diverse research team members, encouraging team members write out their expectations and biases prior to the beginning of the study, and

continuously checking and revisiting biases throughout the research process (Fischer, 2009; Hill, 2012). During data analysis, team members rotated reading transcripts, asking questions, and posing opinions to avoid the bias of a single individual in the coding process (Hill, 2012).

### **Cultural and Ethical Considerations**

Due to the nature of the sample being studied, careful attention was paid to cultural considerations and ethical representation of the participant's worldview. All aspects of the research process considered the cultural context, values, biases and experiences of the participants (Yeh & Inman, 2007). In the present study, the explored population represents a group that differs from the researcher in numerous ways including race and ethnicity identification, parenting status, socio-economic status, and educational experiences. The researcher received feedback on the content of the semi-structured interview through a pilot study and advisor input to ensure the questions were meaningful, relevant, and culturally appropriate.

Given that data collection took place in person, via phone or by Skype, there were potential cultural barriers between participants and research team members. Cultural sensitivity was considered throughout the data collection process through use of communication patterns, language (i.e. using the terms career versus job) to develop a strong working relationship with participants (Ponterroto, 2010). In cases where there was potential confusion resulting from cultural differences, researchers asked clarification questions and team members to ensure participants felt heard and able to explain their point of view (Ponterroto, 2010). Cultural considerations of participants and research team member diversity were discussed in team meetings. Team members

represented diverse backgrounds including parenting status, education level, and racial/ethnic identification. Open dialogue between research team members occurred to discuss these differences and consider their impact on the study and analysis of data.

As part of the reflexivity process, the researcher chose the target population due to previous clinical counseling and work experiences with the population of interest, specifically within the Department of Human Services. These experiences may provide biases that are not transferrable to all individuals within the target population.

Additionally, the researcher identifies as a White woman and the recruited individuals in the study were racial minorities. These cultural differences and biases between the researcher and participants were considered and explored throughout the data collection and analysis process. There was a potential for interviewees to react differently to the researcher as a member of a majority racial group. To address potential power differentials between participants and the researcher, the researcher explained to participants that there were no expectations of their answers aside from sharing their authentic experiences. The semi-structured interview format allowed for follow up prompts to ensure participants could share as much information as they wanted without feeling “cut off” by interviewers. These strategies were used to respect cultural values and experiences of participants and to neutralize reduced power dynamics by individuals in perceived “power over” positions (Ponteroto, 2010).

From an ethical standpoint, Hill (2012) identified numerous ethical considerations in qualitative research studies including the competence of research team members, management of research team members, confidentiality, informed consent, and managing sensitive information disclosed during interviews. To address the competence of research

team members, each team member underwent formal CITI research training to receive IRB clearance on the project. Prior to conducting the interviews, participants signed an informed consent form detailing protection of their confidentiality and private information. Careful protection of confidentiality including storage of data and declassification of sensitive materials took place (see Appendix E and F). Transcriptions and other research materials used numbers in lieu of participant names and were stored in an online, password-protected folder on Dropbox. Only research participants, the researcher, and the auditor received access to the Dropbox account.

### **Procedure**

**Background of participants.** The target population for this study were racial and ethnic minority, single working mothers. For the purposes of this study, “racial minority” was defined as any racial group identified by the United States Census that does not include Caucasian, White, or individuals of European descent. The term “single mothers” was defined as women who assume the sole primary caregiving role of a minor child under the age of 18. Participants could be engaged in co-parenting; however, they needed to assume the primary, everyday responsibility of childcare. Additional requirements of the study included that the participants must currently hold a full time job, or at least 30 hours per week; be 18 years of age or older; reside in the state of Oklahoma; and earn less than \$48,000 per year. This number was chosen to approximate the Oklahoma median income reported in 2015 of \$48,568 (United States Census Bureau, 2015).

**Sample and recruitment.** A sample of 15 participants were recruited for the study as determined by the CQR research design (Hill, 2012). Hill and her colleagues (2005) recommend this sample size to provide consistency between the results among

homogenous samples. Due to the time commitment involved in qualitative studies, it is suggested that a combination of incentives for the participants in the form of gift cards and promoting the benefits of participating in the study are used. Participants received a \$20 gift card to Amazon, Target, or Walmart to compensate for their time. Recruitment took place through email contact, via social media, IRB approved flyers in community settings, and by word of mouth.

**Sampling method.** Purposive sampling and convenience sampling strategies were used to recruit participants from organizations serving single mothers including Arise Ministries and other organizations within the state of Oklahoma. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on specific criteria and inclusion characteristics previously discussed (Palinkas et. al., 2013). Based on the research questions and population of interest, this sampling strategy was most effective for identifying minority, single working mothers that fit within inclusion criteria previously described. The researcher used IRB approved recruitment strategies including a flyer and email correspondence.

### **Data Sources**

**Interviews.** Data from participants took place through one, one-hour interview with each participant in person, by phone or by Skype. Each participant filled out a written demographic survey prior to the interview. A semi-structured interview format was used to gain consistent information from participants regarding their career experiences; however, there were questions that allowed opportunities for participants to add additional information that was not explicitly prompted. For example, the final

question of the interview protocol stated, “Is there anything else you would like to add that I did not ask?”

**Transcription.** An additional data source came from the transcription of interviews, or a word for word typed replica of the encounter. The researcher and team members transcribed all of the interview data verbatim. Researchers sent out completed transcriptions to allow participants to check the accuracy of the interviews through member checks. This provided participants with the opportunity to clarify and add additional information that missed by interviewers.

**Reflective journals.** Outside of direct participant interaction and data collection, the researchers and research team engaged experiential data including memoing, reflecting on interviews, open dialogue in team meetings, individual coding, and consensus of final domains and categories (Hill et. al., 2005).

**Researchers.** As part of the CQR design, the researcher plays an important role as a data source. Hill and colleagues (2005) recommend that researchers do preliminary research and observation of the target population, asking explicit questions to the population of interest when formulating research questions. This took place through a pilot study and exploration of researcher biases, memoing, and open dialogue in research team meetings. The study used three teams of coders with six research team members. In the spring of 2017, one team member could no longer participate in the project, leaving five team members. Demographics of team members included two Hispanic/Latina Women, one African American/Black woman, two White/Caucasian Women, and one Multi-racial woman. All research team members were pursuing a Master’s degree in Counseling from Oklahoma State University- Stillwater and Tulsa campuses.

## **Data Collection**

Through the recruitment process, participants received email addresses and phone number of the primary researcher to express their interest in the study. Interested participants who contacted the primary researcher were sent a word document via email containing the informed consent document and a brief demographic survey. Participants were asked to return both completed documents by email, de-identifying the document with their initials. Once participants completed both the informed consent and demographic survey documents, the researcher contacted the participant via email or phone to schedule a one-hour interview. Thirteen interviews took place by phone and two were conducted in person. All interviews were audiotaped using audio recording devices, which were then uploaded and stored in Dropbox. Participants were each assigned a number and all of their information was stored under their assigned number rather than their name to de-identify the data. Participants received gift cards following the end of the interview by mail or email.

## **Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed individually by research team members. Following a member check, research team members worked to develop a mutually agreed upon initial domain codes. Team members discussed their memos and impressions based on CQR protocol (Hill, 2012). Research team members individually coded all 15 transcripts and came together to compare codes and reach consensus on final individual coding schemes. Once a final domain list was agreed upon, core ideas from each transcript were developed and agreed upon by the team. The core ideas were used to develop categories for comparison across transcripts (cross analysis). The primary researcher's advisor and

auditor reviewed both the core ideas and initial domain codes.

The audit process was used to detect biases, inconsistencies, or confusion in the domain and core idea development. The auditor reviewed coding process and category development to determine objectivity and remaining consistent with research design protocol (Hill et. al, 2005). The auditor provided feedback to the primary researcher, who discussed edits and changes with the research teams. The audited feedback provided information about consolidating domains into six major domains, discussed in the Findings section. The final stage of the data analysis included development of categories within each domain. Categories were chosen based on their relevance to research questions and the raw data from transcripts. Following research team changes to the categories, a final cross analysis of data took place to determine the frequency and depth of categories across all participants and in all domains (Hill, 2012). The auditor evaluated the cross analysis process one final time before researchers counted the frequency of categories across domains. According to CQR protocol, frequencies of data in categories are classified by the labels general, typical, variant. General refers to categories that applied to all or all but one participant in the sample, typical refers to categories that applied to at least half of the cases, and variant refers to categories that apply to at least two but fewer than half of cases (Hill et. al, 2005). These results were reported both in the Findings sections and in a comprehensive table (See Appendix G).

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

Six domains emerged across all participant interviews. Domains, categories, frequency, and frequency labels are located in Appendix G. Researchers followed CQR guidelines for labeling category frequencies (Hill et. al., 2005). Labels used include general, or categories endorsed by all or all but one participant; typical, or categories endorsed by more than half of participants (n=7); and variant, or categories endorsed by at least 2 participants and up to half of participants (Hill et. al., 2005). General domains included (1) Job/Education Decision Making Process; (2) Challenges; (3) Characteristics of Self; (4) Resources; (5) Coping, and (6) Suggestions. These domains were consensually agreed upon by research team members to reflect the original research questions.

#### **Job/Education Decision Making Process**

Job and education decision-making process describes the participants' personal and professional experiences and factors that contributed to their determination of specific career and educational attainments. Within this domain, five categories were identified including Benefits, Family Influence, Motivating Factors, Previous Work Experiences, and Career/Job Networking.

**Benefits.** Participants (n=10) discussed that the presence or lack of benefits impacted their career/job decision-making. Benefits described by participants not only

enhanced their current working environment, but a lack of benefits served as salient factors that encouraged participants to seek other employment opportunities. For example, some participants described that the lack of flexibility and time off to care for their children was a factor contributing to seeking other employment and switching jobs. Examples of benefits described by participants included pay raises, paid time off, proximity of workplace to home, time and scheduling flexibility, perceived positive work environment, work/life balance, and others. For example, one participant described weighing her decision to take a promotion to become a General Manager. Ultimately, she decided to take the job due to the increase in benefits,

And it's just, so when they offered me the position to be Assistant Manager, I had to really like weigh out my options, and, you know, one of the benefits is I do get three days off, and, you know, there was a pay raise. (Participant 14)

Some participants described the need to secure employment close to home to save on finances and be close to their families, “well Family Dollar, actually it’s something close to the house, more convenient for me, it’s really close, I can walk to work if I wanted to so it’s really more convenient for my whole household. And save a lot on gas and stuff like that so it was just something that in the neighborhood” (Participant 3).

Numerous participants stated their job/career decisions were based on opportunities for increased benefits such as insurance and greater pay to better financially support families as the sole provider. Two participants identified benefits as important factors in their decision to return to school and gain more educational experience,

And also the pay, that also, you know as a teacher you know what you get into for pay, but its a lot of hard work teaching and I feel like teachers definitely

are way underpaid and I wanted to make more money, so I made more money as a case manager and more money as a therapist than I did as a teacher.

(Participant 15)

**Family influence.** Eleven participants discussed the impact of family influence on their vocational and education decision-making. The data suggested that family influence played an important role in decision making for single mothers because of their family social and financial support. Many participants faced decisions that required them to forgo employment opportunities to allow for sufficient family time and resources

Some of these influencing family factors included the careers of family members and encouragement by family members to make specific job or educational decisions. Several participants described how their parents' careers and decisions influenced their desire to pursue specific education and career paths. For example, one participant, who emigrated from Honduras, described her desire to further her education and career aspirations to honor her family's sacrifices to give her a better life,

So, I've always just, I've always just been you know, maybe I need to do this for my mom um and then you know just kind of show her that you know her bringing me to the States was, was great and that it actually paid off for her. Um so I've always just wanted to do it for her. And then of course having a daughter now I'm more or less of, I need to do it for her. And also, myself.

(Participant 13)

Other participants discussed job and education decisions made due to family factors including spending more time with children and providing financially for the family. One participant described her desire to continue her education to provide better for her son,

“um when I got sober and especially when I found out I was pregnant, I knew I needed to further my education beyond a high school degree so that I could provide for my child” (Participant 11).

Another participant forewent higher paying job opportunities in order to achieve greater work and life balance, which included being home at night with her children.

So it wasn't a matter of my employer saying because you are a single mom, you can't do this but it was a matter of me going this doesn't work for my family. I can't work until late in the evening we need to have an evening routine its more ideal for my school age child for me to be present at night and just making a choice to not do that.... and several times I think 3-4 jobs I had I had to work into the evening and just thinking no not going to do it, (Participant 14)

**Motivating factors.** All but one participant (n=14) discussed motivating factors or an intrinsic drive leading to their choice of specific career paths or educational attainments. The unique motivating factors of each participant breathe life into their stories as working single mothers. Consistent values that were shared include a desire to provide for themselves and their families, independence, and determination to achieve their professional and personal goals. Examples of motivating factors included past and future goals, personal lived experiences, and values that influenced participant's job and education decision-making. One participant discussed the impact of her upbringing on her decision to enter the counseling field as a way to give back to her community and those less fortunate,

So well you know I really want to give back to this community so that's what um really inspired me to pursue my counseling because I'm really you know one

the people who came from an adverse background and some didn't have an opportunity to see and to know that they have to do that even though um they, they come from an adverse background because I came from an adverse background but I had great social skills, I had great um support and stuff you know but some people are not so lucky so um anyway so that's why I um, I started going through the counseling program so yeah that's it. (Participant 1)

Several participants described that their values closely align with their career goals. For example, one participant described her desire to support herself and be independent motivated her to return to get her master's degree,

...and I was like ok, I eventually want to move out of my parents' house. I want to be able to provide for my child, I don't want to you know try to find a husband or a boyfriend or whatever to provide for us. I want to be able to provide for my son and I and I already knew, like I have to get my masters, I have to get a Master's degree to do this. (Participant 7)

Participants described seeking job and educational opportunities to support their dreams and future goals. One participant described wanting to use the skills she gained through her current job to pursue her family's passion of opening her own restaurant,

I want to have my own business you know working with Taco Bueno for so long and showed me so many ropes and I'm a great cook and I grew up around cooks and they just my family never used that skill to open a restaurant. (Participant 12)

**Previous work experiences.** Only three participants discussed previous work experiences as factors related to their vocational and education decision-making process. In the current sample, previous work experiences played a small role in participants'

career and education decision-making process. Examples provided included negative, inflexible work environments, resulting in a need for change. Positive work environments that encouraged participants to continue in their chosen careers or seek additional education were also cited. One participant described working in the nursing field and her client experiences motivated her to return to nursing school,

So, but when I did have one client, uh XXX... Uh when I work... when I was taking care of disabled veterans, um he loved my kids. He loved them so much. And that made me feel good you know I'm... at least I'm at a place that where I can go to you know, that doesn't judge me for having kids you know? (Participant 5)

As described above, the participant felt empowered by a positive working experience where she did not face shame, stigma, or discrimination for being a single mother. Another individual described using her passion for helping others cultivated through her teaching experiences in a different role as a mental health therapist,

I just enjoyed being in the helping profession. Uh what I noticed about when I was teaching is that I enjoy even though I enjoyed being in the classroom, I really enjoyed the behavioral aspect of teaching...I like teaching them about caring, about good decisions and that's the things that I like teaching. So the opportunity came up to become um well it was called, before it was turned the position was called a case manager... and I just decided well, I am going to go back to school because I like this and I like counseling. And so, it was just me kind of discovering myself professionally and it just kind of one road lead to another to another. And so here I am as a therapist. (Participant 15)

**Career and job networking.** Finally, participants (n=5) described using career and job networking to obtain positions. Interviewees used their social connections to obtain employment and further their future goals, gain information about employment opportunities, or seeking needed employment to support their families. Participants who believed career/job networking played a factor in their decision making process commented that they found many employment opportunities via word of mouth and friends who believed they would be a good fit for specific jobs. One participant shared how she obtained a job at the apartment complex where she lives,

Well with based on being at the apartment complex I, I actually just had a friend who thought with my personality I would definitely work in the apartment community would be best for me so I knew that there was an, a position available so I kind of just went in just on a, on a whim and just, no experience and just thought you know why not. (Participant 13)

Another participant described finding employment by chance by spending a lot of time in her place of employment and was offered a position through her familiarity with the business,

So I'm in there all the time, and I just got lucky one day when the General Manager, she was like, "Do you want to work here? Do you want a job?" And I was just like - it couldn't have come at a better time. And I was like, "Yes."  
(Participant 14)

One participant described using her social connections to learn from their small business expertise in order to be successful at her future goals of opening her own restaurant,

And then um I have friends that have tattoo parlors I have people that have been on restaurants and boutiques so I'm taking notes on it all so that when I am ready to, I may even start out with a food truck haha you know you just, you never know. (Participant 12)

## **Challenges**

The Challenge domain comprises of difficulties and obstacles faced by interviewees with regard to their intersectional experiences as an ethnic/racial minority, working single mother in their professional and personal lives. Five categories were identified including Discrimination/Stigmatizing Experiences, Workplace Barriers, Resource Limitations, Balancing Multiple Roles, and Unique Health Stressors.

**Discrimination/stigmatizing experiences.** All but one participant (n=14) described experiencing discrimination and or stigmatizing experiences both personally and professionally. As an ethnic/racial minority, many mothers described differential treatment in the work place compared to other majority colleagues. Discrimination and stigmatizing experiences described by participants affected their everyday interactions and present unique career barriers to obtaining, maintaining, and advancing employment opportunities. One participant shared her perceptions of a work environment where she was paid less due to her minority status,

I would say um, as far as bosses I would probably say working at uh Red Cross, I had a everyone we all started and we all started in training you know they train you for a phlebotomist, you take a class there and everything...well, you know every so often you get a raise, and I- everyone got raise besides me and a couple

of other people which funny it was just us Blacks um didn't get a raise.

(Participant 3)

Another participant described stereotyping and discrimination experiences she faced in the entertainment industry. She shared that she was not cast for acting jobs due to her status as a Black woman in a market that values majority, White/Caucasian attributes,,

No matter how good I look, because I am a black woman there is not going to be more than one, or there maybe one.... it is almost like a quota thing, like I know that the odds of me getting certain roles are slimmer and it is very frustrating when I get an email saying, exactly the type cast that you want because most of the time it will say a woman, I am a woman, slim built, I am slim, long hair, I have long hair, but then it will say Caucasian and that is frustrating....

Unfortunately if I take a certain role, no matter how good I do the people who are buying it, if they don't want to see me in that role. Then guess what, I don't get the job. That is frustrating. (Participant 6)

On a personal level, several participants discussed experiencing racial and ethnic minority stereotyping, micro-aggressions and stigmatizing interactions with other people in their everyday interactions. The same participant quoted above described her discomfort with an interaction that highlighted her status as a Black woman and a single, pregnant mother when looking to purchase a car,

I walked in and I said, you know I have some issues, there were promises that had been made and I asked to see the manager. At this time I was still pregnant with my son so, and I'll never forget that one of the sales persons made a joke. He was like, whose baby mama is this? And he was kind of doing this...rolling his neck

and moving his finger...doing this whole black girl attitude thing. And I think he expected that I was going to laugh and say that it was funny and I said you know what, you a\*\*\*\*\* hat is just not funny. At the end of the day it is just not funny and I feel like that is just how a lot of black people, who are already pregnant or already a single mother without a ring on, on top of that ... they get treated like that. I know that it affects me; I am always self-conscious about that when I go places. (Participant 6)

Three participants identified their status as a woman in the workplace has been a challenge as it has impacted their workload, expectations, and opportunities for job promotions. Participants described differential treatment than their male counterparts. As single mothers, many participants felt they had to prove themselves to combat negative stereotypes. One participant described her experience of having to put in additional work above and beyond the work expected by her other colleagues in order to be taken seriously as a professional single working mother,

Okay, so I really think that the mine... that the challenges I've faced um, as a minority working single mom really would be, the biggest challenges that I'm seeing now. And so you're expected to put in, you're expected to put in more work. You have to work harder than your male counterparts. Um, in which case, I mean I've recently run into this issue quite a bit and it's really, it's been really kind of trying on me because I was going in to work early, working through my lunches, staying work, at work late. I mean, I was putting in well over forty hours at my full time job and it's wasn't getting recognized. And my male counterparts were taking you know one or two lunches and... And my case, my caseload has

doubled, it's doubled from theirs and I'm like, I, and I don't understand it and so um, so there's that. There's you know having to I guess kind of prove yourself a little bit because you're a female and some, and what not. (Participant 10)

Negative stereotypes and stigma of single working mothers were pervasive experiences among participants in their personal lives. Participants described feeling judged and stigmatized when taking their children out in public as a single mother. One participant described feeling stigmatized by society as a whole for having children without a partner or spouse,

Um for instance a person said made a comment that "How many kids do you have?", "I have 4" "whoa" you know "whoa, that's a lot" you know, "where is your baby's father?" "Aren't you married", how many kids you have, are you married? I know that feels like going into judging me, you know. Yeah I am not married, I have 4 kids, or they may ask me where is the baby's father you know they don't know my story you know like I said my first child's father got passed so I just feel like there is just a lot of judging I've dealt with that everywhere. How many kids you have? (Participant 3)

Several participants described stigmatizing experiences by acquaintances, community members, and even friends regarding their perception that single mothers received unearned resources and free "handouts",

I mean, friends that I've known in the past and then recently you know talked to, "Oh I'm sure you know you get that paid for..." and I'm like get what paid for? haha they are like oh your grocery cart is so full, must be nice to have food stamps

and I'm like well no I haven't had food stamps since I was 22 and I'm 31 now.

(Participant 13)

**Workplace barriers.** All but one participant (n=14) described challenges in their workplace. Workplace barriers were defined as employer/company policies or work environments that create unique challenges for ethnic and racial minority single mothers. Working barriers presenting large occupational consequences and difficulties to interviewees including the feasibility of maintaining employment, receive promotions, and advance their careers. Examples of this category included inflexible hours and scheduling, lack of paid time off, limited work related resources such as insurance and day care, lack of empathy and inflexibility by employers to accommodate unique circumstances of working single mothers, poor working environment specific to the job, and others.

Many participants described difficulties maintaining employment and providing for their families due to a lack of hours and inflexibility in scheduling work time. One participant described her frustration with losing hours due to having to take time off to take care of her children,

Right and its only so many times you be like, "ok look what's up with my hours?"  
haha I've got 4 children to you know take care of so...and then to hold it against me because I am the sole care taker of my children if I had you know my sick children you take hours away because of that, that don't make sense. (Participant 12)

Several participants described losing their jobs or having to quit jobs due to a lack of flexibility in scheduling and an inability to accommodate work hours set by employers.

Participants shared not receiving benefits or a reasonable way to make time up that is missed, often resulting in a negative financial impact. One interviewee described the culture of her place of work with regard to accommodating her unique circumstances,

You know as a single mom- that um has been difficult in my working career and my school career because I'm expected to take care of him and I have to work all of my son's appointments or anything that comes up on off times. I only work 32 hours per week, so like on the days that I work part time, I have to make sure to schedule all of his stuff during that time because I am not offered paid time off and so um and throughout all the jobs I have ever had, they are not willing to work with you have to leave unexpectedly and if that's the case um because that happens I mean you can't help it if a child gets hurt or gets sick at school. So I would say that's the challenges I have faced as a single mom in the working field.

(Participant 11)

Other participants described that their employer's lack of empathy towards their roles, caused them to have to choose between their families and maintaining employment. In many cases, participants reported having to leave or give up employment opportunities. One participant described feeling unappreciated and not understood in her working environment,

And I think they're trying to do that more often now but um, it's kind of hard especially if you're, maybe your boss doesn't have any children of their own, which in my case that's the case. So they don't really full-handedly understand what it's you know when you wake up and your child has you know a hundred fever. And you really wanted to be there at work because you know there's stuff

to be done but there is no one else that can pick up your slack at home. So I think that that you know, I feel like they don't have any empathy for that, for that end if they don't, if they don't understand because they've never been there. So I think that that kind of has, two challenges that I've had to deal with in the company with my current boss now. (Participant 13)

**Resource limitations.** All participants (n=15) interviewed reported experiencing challenges related to resource access and allocation. This included not having access to resources, being restricted from receiving resources and not having the knowledge of where to locate resources. Several interviewees discussed challenges in their existing social support groups, specifically relating to co-parenting. Few participants received sufficient emotional and financial resources from the fathers of their children. The large number of responses from participants with resource access challenges suggested that they are a major influence on the lives of ethnic and racial minority working single mothers. Examples of this category included financial limitations, limited social supports, challenges in existing social support groups, difficulty accessing childcare, and others.

The majority of participants identified financial limitations as a significant barrier. One participant described her difficulty making ends meet despite receiving state and federal resources, “Uh I still feel like it’s a struggle. It’s just a struggle every day haha. I mean I have bills, car payment, rent you know so it’s, it’s a struggle paycheck to paycheck” (Participant 3). Similarly, many participants described challenges with accessing affordable day care that is workable with the schedule of single mothers. Another participant described that despite receiving child care benefits through DHS, the

resource allocation was not sufficient to cover her working hours needed to support her family,

I know I am not the only single mom that has this problem but like day care, they will give you 8 hours and you are obviously trying to work 10-12 to make it, so let's say for instance they pay for 8 hours at day care and you still coming off with 100 or something for your day care because you work over the hours so you still get charged on top you know what I'm saying? I feel like they should pay for more than 8 hours sometimes for moms because some people don't have a choice but to work more than 8 hours. (Participant 12)

An interesting theme that emerged in the data was the loss of benefits and resources following small, incremental raises in participants' pay. Participants described a challenge of making just over the cut off qualifying income for some resources such as food stamps, health insurance, and housing. However, they were not making sufficient money to make ends meet or comfortably support their families. One participant shared that she was automatically cut off from resources without her knowledge due to a small increase in pay, leaving her in a financially difficult position,

Especially when they, especially when they terminate services. And then they really want nothing to do with you. Like, not only did they terminate his, his um, daycare, they also terminated his insurance because like I all of a sudden make too much money. So, and when I was like, and I didn't understand, I didn't, nobody explained to me that I was terminated because all of a sudden I got a raise and I made too much. I mean they wanted nothing to do with me. They wouldn't answer my calls... I thought well all she needed to really do is send a letter

saying, we're sorry you, you know, you no longer meet income requirements or whatever but that's not, that's not what happened with that. (Participant 10)

In addition to financial resources, participants described feeling a lack of social supports due to working commitments and parenting alone. One participant described losing her social support when she got a divorce from her husband, leaving her feeling isolated and lonely,

Uh let's see when I became divorced um I had done so much to try to build my marriage that I had basically eliminated a different group of friends that um you know. When I became single, a lot of my friends had either been married or off doing their own grown up thing and I wasn't a part of that because my married friends were my married friends and they didn't want to hang out anymore because I was no longer a unit. (Participant 9)

**Balancing multiple roles.** All but one participant (n=14) shared difficulties related to balancing multiple roles in their lives. This category was characterized by participants' experiences of assuming many different roles related to their intersecting identities. Challenges of achieving balance and feeling confident in multiple roles were common themes among participants. Many participants described experiences where they had to prioritize one role over another in order to remain employed or meet their expectations in their personal lives. Several participants reported that they felt their home lives, social connections, and time with their families were less of a priority compared to educational and career/ job obligations. Examples of this category include parenting and co-parenting, overall difficulties with work life balance, and time management. The majority of participants commented on challenging experiences of balancing working

with being a single parent. One participant described her consistent struggle with maintaining work life balance and giving equal time to her career and home life,

Um, I've found that you know as a working single mom, I feel like um balance has been very challenging for me. There's been times when you know having to put myself through school, I've had my son, he goes to school, he plays sports, and I'm also working, I was going to school and that was very challenging for me to try to find the balance. So I was challenged with trying to find how much time to I commit to spending time with him and doing homework or going to work or sometimes I felt like a guilt because I committed more time to going to work and then when I come home, I was so emotionally and physically drained, I didn't really have a lot of energy for him to just spend time with him or you know I just kind of wanted to be, to be to myself. I wanted that and he wanted more from me.  
(Participant 15)

Another participant described the sacrifices she has made in her career in order to balance her role of being a mother to her son and ensuring that she has a strong, visible relationship with him,

Sometimes it's a struggle because I want to, I want to go further in my career but I also don't want to miss out on my son as well too. I always want to be there for him and so um I have kind of come to terms with- I probably won't ever be like that big CEO but I'm ok with that because I don't want my son to be 20 saying "you know, I wish my mom would have been there" (Participant 11).

**Unique health stressors.** Eight participants described experiencing unique health stressors, or negative health factors that are directly related to the participant's status as

an ethnic/racial minority, single parent, a woman, or a combination of intersecting identities. Overall, participant's experiences with unique health stressors impacted not only their personal lives, but also their vocational experiences such as work productivity. One participant described experiencing anxiety related to her multiple power-down identities,

And then I think um, and I also have issues with um, anxiety sometimes. And I think that the only reason or I think that you know being a you know mom and uh minority and a female I think all three of those contribute to that...contribute to the anxiety. (Participant 10)

Many participants reported experiencing high levels of stress, depression and anxiety associated with parenting alone and balancing multiple roles as a parent with limited resources. Specifically, as self-identified Black woman, one participant described the persistent anxiety she felt to both provide for her son and raise him in a culture that often employs harmful stereotypes towards Black/African American men,

Ok so the worry and the anxiety like about raising a young black man in the world today, that affects me more than anything I stress a lot about that and I worry a lot and I think that contributes you know to my anxiety. You know if I have the smallest thing go wrong in my life, especially if I have a health problem you know it makes me more anxious because you know if something happens to me, because I've had some serious stuff you know kind of happen within the past year...And so you know and then what if I don't teach my son enough- you know what if I don't teach him enough about living in this world as a black man you know what if I don't teach him enough about you know surviving on his own you

know so the main thing that I deal with is I'm not embarrassed at all, I deal with anxiety quite a bit. (Participant 1)

This participant's account of her stressors and worries epitomizes some unique mental health stressors faced both professionally and personally by racial and ethnic minority single mothers. She describes her concern of not being able to care for her child if something happens, requiring her to maintain employment at all times with persistent worry and stress if she loses her job or is unable to work.

### **Characteristics of Self**

The Characteristics of Self domain represents individual characteristics used by participants to help navigate their intersectional identities in their personal and professional lives. In the context of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological model, these characteristics comprise of individual supports and resources that participants possess within their respective systems. Participants described their personal resource as both learned and innate assets used as a guide through their unique multiple roles and life circumstances. Three categories were identified including Personality Strengths, Adaptive Skills, and Values.

**Personality strengths.** All 15 participants endorsed specific personality traits and strengths used as motivation and resilience factors in accomplishing their personal and professional goals. Two participants additionally described strengths of their intersecting identities including career and personal benefits of being an ethnic/racial minority single mother. Participants' personality strengths provide unique assists that served as resilience factors to buffer against unique stressors, unique career barriers, and challenges faced by this population. Examples of personality strengths included determination, compassion,

resourcefulness, creativity, independence, and others. One participant described her determination and drive to provide the best possible life for her son despite previous setbacks,

and so I was determined I'm like we not going, we not going to be this stereotype you know we are going to live a great life regardless of me being divorced and your dad not being around and him not helping us, we are going to live a great life you know you are not going to really be able to show the effects of being a single, single parent.. that's my that's probably my main job is making sure my son has a good environment... like where he doesn't like experience some of the things that that most single mothers experience and stuff with like not being able to you know be self-sufficient you know, not being able to pull out food and not having clothes and stuff and all that, we've been through that now, we have- we've been through that but I was just determined not to stay there for him. (Participant 1)

Although each participant presented with unique characteristics and experiences, the majority of participants identified determination and perseverance as important personality strengths in their lives. One commented, “I have a lot of tenacity, I am a very resilient person. I would say that I am very resilient, umm pretty strong willed as far as being determined to get what I want...” (Participant 6). Another participant commented that her resolve to get things done helped her navigate her life even in the face of adversity,

I'm very determined.... if I feel that something is not right, I don't care how many people in the room don't agree, I am not going to budge because of it. That is

more my ... not my home life, but out in the world, that is. ... I am a get it done kind of person. (Participant 8)

**Adaptive skills.** All 15 participants identified learned adaptive skills to be successful both on the job and at home. Participants' adaptive skills suggested that these skills and talents are essential to be competitive in working environments that often present barriers that don't accommodate the unique needs of working single mothers. Examples included being a good writer, a fast learner, being bilingual, organizational skills, multi-tasking, money management, and communication skills. Each skill set was unique to the participant, making it difficult to identify commonalities and themes across cases.

Many participants endorsed the use of generalized skills applicable to success in many work environments including being on time and effective communication. One person commented that her skills include, "... just communicating with people and being professional at work. I'm a hard worker" (Participant 3). Another participant described how being bilingual helps her to understand her customers and make housing more accessible for them,

Um I think professionally I am a quick learner. Um I can multitask so I can um I'm able to learn things quicker than the average person um and of course being bilingual does help as I mentioned prior. So, I think being able to be a fast learner and quick on your feet and thinking but um it helps, it helps me quite a bit.

(Participant 13)

Other participants shared specific skills learned on the job,

Um being a people person, being quick, my customer service skills are A-1 and um that's kind of the reason you know so many people tell me.... I've been cross trained on everything. I literally know how to run a store you know because I watch and I learn through working with my district managers and my GMS and you know so I mean is that I can take an order, take a phone call, take money and expedite a phone order you be able to respectfully take care of them two things at once it's just I'm very great with cash, I never have short drawers you know it's just my thing is I have my skill set. (Participant 12)

**Values.** All 15 participants identified personal values related to the way they view their working roles and their worldview. Values are identified as entities and experiences that are most important and worth most to participants. These values represented participant's professional and personal beliefs. . Examples of this category include loyalty, faith, caring for others, hard work, contributing meaningfully to society, self-sufficiency, self-improvement, family, and others.

Many participants described that their values center on their families and serving as a positive example for their children through their actions,

Being a mom will always be number one, so, like I said, my kids come to my store all the time. So I, I don't want to, it really hasn't been a challenge to balance it, because I always know that they will always outweigh anything. Like, it doesn't matter what it is, so like, even when I'm at work, I'm still Mom first.

(Participant 14)

One participant described the importance of bettering her and her daughter's lives through valuing educational experiences,

Um so I've always just wanted to do it for her. And then of course having a daughter now I'm more or less of, I need to do it for her. And also, myself. You know I think education is pretty important and you know it doesn't hurt to show your child that you best. So, I definitely want to make sure that I do that for, for both of them as well. (Participant 13)

Some participants shared their values include contributing meaningfully to society through work. In response to stereotypes and stigma surrounding single mothers utilizing resources and aid, one participant described that she is not ashamed to use resources because she values using only what she needs,

I'll see stuff, I'll read stuff, "Oh we need to start drug testing people that are on welfare, and get this, this, and this." And I'm like, "That's fine. Please do it."

Because I don't, you know, I'll, I agree with that, I don't think that that people should receive the assistance that really don't need it. (Participant 14).

Only two participants commented specifically on their professional values. One described the importance of loyalty to her employer and professional supports, "I do find myself loyal like I am loyal to um to my boss... You know so I'm loyal to him just because he's loyal to me as far as you know making sure that I am ok" (Participant 2).

## **Resources**

The Resources domain is defined as support or aid received by participants to help accomplish their goals. This category included resources at all ecological levels including individual, professional, community, and state/government levels. Participants described the use of financial, material, and social supports. Five categories were

identified including Individual, Professional, Financial, Childcare, and Community Supports.

**Individual supports.** All 15 participants reported that they relied on individual supports, characterized primarily by social supports within the participant's inner circle. These social networks included family, friends and health care providers such as therapists working directly with the participant at the microsystem level.

All participants shared the importance of having relationships with family and or close friendships. One identified her support system as her "village" that helps her to be successful and supports her in all aspects of her life,

Um, haha, I mean I say that, but I also have a village. I have a huge support system in which it... allows for me to be able to do all of these things. Yes, I work hard for my kids but I wouldn't be able to have two jobs and go to school with... if I didn't have this support system. So, my in-laws are very active in my kids' lives and they are very supportive of them. Um, and, and me. And then also my mom, and my step-dad and my, you know my brother and my side of the family are also very supportive. So, when I say I'm a single mom, yes I'm a single mom, but I also have a huge group.... I always tell people, I utilize my village to help with my children. (Participant 10)

Three participants identified receiving support through individual counselors and caseworkers helping them to reach their goals and maintain their overall wellness. One described her close relationship with her caseworker, who helps her to stay on track with her personal and professional goals,

My support system in that like I said you know the caseworker I have uh organized her non-profit organization you know she, you know she's helps me give me the inside on the business perspective.... everything we do is confidential, you know when its business, its business when it's you know what I'm saying? So um she's been a great inspiration to me. (Participant 12)

Several participants described receiving referrals to financial resources by mentors and friends by word of mouth. One reported receiving information about numerous resources that she did not know of before,

I have a lot of mentors that have been resources for me. Not just like telling me stuff but like pointing me into the right direction because throughout this experience. I, you know, didn't know where to go or didn't know what to do, and they were able to say like "Hey you know at the Stillwater Hospital, they have X,Y, and Z you should go check it out" like oh ok I had no idea like you can get on WIC oh I had no idea, oh you know you can get Sooner Care for you while you are pregnant and for your son. (Participant 7)

**Professional supports.** Participants (n=11) discussed having professional supports in the form of co-workers, supportive bosses, mentors and employers. Interviewees who described strong professional support systems tended to appraise their work environments as generally positive despite other workplace barriers. Two participants described having positive work environments that were affirming and supported them as working single mothers. In addition, some described benefits and financial supports that were specifically acquired through their work including insurance, mental health counseling, and other benefits.

Several participants described having close work friends and co-workers where they can be authentically themselves and receive support. One participant described using coping skills through co-workers to work through challenges that arise in the workplace,

They kind of ground me you know? We kind of ground each other. 'Cause we all, we're, we all kind of face the same thing you know as far as the, the same um, comments about our work sometimes. And so you know we all remind each other hey, just breathe, pray about it and let it go. You know what you're doing is right so if it goes any further then we'll take action at that time. (Participant 10)

Another participant described having a close relationship with her boss and mentor, making her work environment and experience very positive as he is flexible, empathetic and values her work and life balance,

um the funny thing is my boss is an awesome support system for me. He has been nothing but great from day 1. We were in the same program together, he graduated um last May and became my boss right after that. (Participant 7)

One participant described receiving support and inspiration through mentors in her career and educational experiences,

I would also say um my I have a couple of mentors that I've kind of gained through my working profession um and through school um one of my professors I know at the drop of a hat I could go to her with anything and she, she'll be willing to like let me vent or bounce things off of her um people I really have a lot of respect for and I've seen how they operate with clients and others around them in a professional manner and I know that's how I want to be so there's I would say

three people that I would be able to go to with situations that I've met through school and through my career. (Participant 11)

**Financial supports.** All 15 participants described using financial aids to supplement their incomes to better support themselves and their families. Financial resources enabled participants to supplement their income and provide better for their families in cases where their salaries were not sufficient. Examples of financial supports included monetary resources from non-profit, state, tribal, and federal funding sources, educational grants and funding, housing resources, clothing resources and others. Many participants described receiving federal aid and resources from agencies such as the Department of Human Services for food stamps, utility bill payments, and housing supports,

Ok um I did have to get on uh assistance just for a little bit for food it was just right after uh it was like in March I had to get on assistance and it was only for a short time, but I felt like you know that the SNAP program was beneficial for my family. (Participant 2)

Likewise, several participants described receiving status funded health care benefits for themselves and their children including SoonerCare and Medicaid insurance. One participant reported receiving educational grants and scholarships to fund her graduate education, "and then um when, I knew that when I enrolled in TCC that I was eligible for Pell Grants because um the financial coordinator at TCC told me about those financial resources that I can access" (Participant 11).

Others shared that they received financial, food, housing and clothing support from nonprofit agencies including Salvation Army, Catholic Charities and others,

Uhm there is a place by my house called Catholic charities; sometimes we go over there when we really need it. But other than that no, I just knit... they do food, they have a food bank and they have a clothing bank as well. (Participant 4)

**Childcare supports.** Nine participants described benefitting from childcare supports, or resources specifically used for their children starting at pregnancy through early childhood. Childcare resources and availability were important for participants in the sample. Some relied on family support for childcare while others received subsidies for childcare through their work or the Department of Human Services. These resources enabled single mothers to work full time jobs to provide for their families, but often served as a challenge due to poor accessibility and high costs. Examples of this category included childcare services, pregnancy support resources (such as Planned Parenthood), early child resources including Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), early childhood education (HeadStart) and others.

Several participants sought out and received pregnancy support and early childhood resources through federal agencies. These agencies provided participants education and information about pregnancy, birth control, formula, diapers and additional resources. One participant described receiving nursing support through WIC as a young, first time mother of a child with special medical needs,

So I was like yeah I need her you know to come out. She was a nurse, whatever. So she started coming out before he was born. And then she would go over like circumcision, and other stuff that I needed to be prepared for before I had him. And then even whenever he was born, she came to the hospital and seen him and stuff. And, and I appreciated that you know? (Participant 5)

Others described using the “Baby Line”, a telephone service for individuals needing childcare resources,

Um, and uh I really, I really had no idea about resources. But there was um, I think it was called the baby line or something that once I found out I was pregnant um they told me to call that number... So they put me in contact with different resources. (Participant 10)

Two participants reported that they received childcare resources through their tribal affiliation, “Um Creek Nation for sure, um I am trying to think in my head yeah I get day care assistance through Creek Nation. I think that’s it yeah like a main resource would be Creek Nation right now” (Participant 7).

**Community supports.** Ten participants shared that they utilized community supports, more specifically, social connections through groups and community agencies at the macro level. Community resources offered participants a way to receive necessary financial supports while also making social connections. Examples of this category included church resources and involvement, support groups and networking opportunities, and others. Church financial resources were also included in this category.

Several participants described close community support through their faith and involvement in their church, “I grew up in this church since I was a baby so um you know they are a huge support system” (Participant 12). One participant described the importance of the support she receives from a women’s group she is involved with at her church,

Um I'm involved in a women's group at my church and the funny thing is I think, yeah all of us are minority women...we are all in a women's group and it started in

the spring and its lasted until this summer it's still going on and um and that has been a phenomenal support, phenomenal. Not just in the group but friendships outside of the group. (Participant 7)

Another participant described the importance of her relationships with a community of single mothers,

We wouldn't have made it if I didn't have a group of people that were pouring into my life and that I could depend on. For a season, that was a group of moms and if you were out of meat, I've got meat and if you're out of sugar, I've got sugar if your baby is home alone, I'll help you out. (Participant 9)

Participants utilized other types of community resources including resource hotlines. One participant described using community resources to help her become connected with other available resources,

Uh 2-1-1 it's just a phone number at least in the 405 area code but you just, it's like 9-1-1 but its 2-1-1 and you call them and you say "Hey I've got a child in size 3 shoes that needs a size 4, can you point me to the right resource and they will tell you exactly where to go." (Participant 9)

## **Coping**

The Coping domain includes various strategies used by racial and ethnic working single mothers to navigate unique challenges and increase their job satisfaction and wellness. Four main categories were identified including Active Strategies, Self-care, Budgeting, and Time Management.

**Active strategies.** Nine participants identified using active strategies to cope. Active strategies are defined as times when interviewees sought out solutions to

problems, engaged in effective problem solving or strategizing to generate specific solutions to dilemmas. Participants who engaged in active coping described feeling more autonomy and control over their lives, feeling more balanced, and more capable in handling difficulties that they encountered on a daily basis.

Examples of this category included using effective communication, setting professional and personal boundaries, job and resource seeking, and networking. The majority of participants described professional active strategies in a professional capacity used to address a workplace barrier. One participant described a situation where she was treated unfairly regarding breaks and receiving time off. To resolve the issue, she actively sought out a meeting with her supervisor to discuss the problem,

So I had a meeting with her and her supervisor. And like, her supervisor like set her strait... Like I told her everything what's going on. Like she cannot do this like I'm getting ready to quit.... Those are the strategies that I use though. I tried to talk to her personally one on one, nothing changed. So I got her supervisor and she was really mad I got her supervisor. But then she started like kind of being a little bit more flexible. (Participant 5)

Another participant described her need to constantly be seeking work and promotion opportunities in order to remain active in a marketing and entertainment business that stereotypes minorities,

Now I have to make ... at least two or three times a week, I have to make sure the talent agency I am working for, I can't wait on them to give me opportunities ... I have to almost hourly check my emails and look around for opportunities and call

them and say, “Hey, I need you to book me for this”. I have to be aggressive about what I need. (Participant 6)

Several participants described actively setting boundaries with co-workers and bosses in order to reduce stress and work towards greater work and life balance,

Like my students, I say this all the time to them, I am not going to respond to your emails after 5, I'm just not. I am not going to make that a habit, I told that to my co-workers and I've told that to my boss, and my boss's boss and say look my son is sick, that is like I can work from home, but I'm not doing it like you are just going to have to respect that. Um and I've made that known from the very beginning. And um that's really helped a lot too because I don't fake it like "Oh I can still come in" like no I can't. (Participant 7)

Participants used active strategies in their personal lives as well to help cope with financial and parenting stress. One participant described engaging in active coping strategies by communicating her needs and boundaries following years of being called disrespectful, inappropriate names related to her race and ethnicity,

Then I finally um decided you know what I am who I am and if people don't like that, then that's their problem and that's whenever I started telling people you won't talk to me like that um and I'm not ok with being called some of the things I was being called. (Participant 11)

**Self-care.** All 15 participants endorsed using self-care as a form of coping. Self-care was defined as steps used by participants to use their personal resources to optimize their mental and physical wellbeing. Participants who engaged in positive coping strategies reported overall increases in their wellness and balance. These strategies

included physical activity, spiritual and mindfulness practices such as deep breathing, meditation, and others. Examples of this category included faith and spirituality, physical and outdoor activities, reading, writing in journals, crying, engaging in mindfulness such as deep breathing, seeking a counselor, spending time with social supports, and others.

Many participants described having a close relationship with God and their faith. They shared that their faith was an important way for them to reconnect and feel grounded,

Um I love to talk about my faith and just to encourage women, minority, not you know single parent/pregnant that you can do this. So my faith has just grown each and every day from this and that helps me cope too. (Participant 7)

Some participants described engaging in physical activity, which they reported helps to increase mindfulness and clear their heads, “I exercise, I do a lot of meditating and um I do a lot of outdoor stuff because um nature is very therapeutic” (Participant 11). Others described using self-reflective strategies such as writing, journaling and crying. Three participants sought regular counseling services. One participant described counseling as her “lifeline” and a way for her to feel heard without being judged,

I see a therapist once a week... I feel like having a therapist is a lifeline. I know that once a week I can sit down and talk about, and have a safe place where I can vent about my life and about my kids and not be judged. (Participant 6)

Professionally, a few participants described specific self-care strategies that they used at work including taking breaks, walking around the office, talking to co-workers and supports, and others. One participant described taking time for herself at work between seeing clients so she is able to be more emotionally present while taking care of herself,

Um, to me the way that I named is the ways that I cope with stress, professional stress, personal stress. While I am dealing with a client like so when I'm having my sessions and back to back sessions and like Mondays are a long day for me. I know that I probably won't get home until 7:30 or 8, I take time in between those sessions and sometimes I need to take 30 minutes to myself...my way to cope with that is just to take time for myself and kind of detach from that and then just kind of attach to me. (Participant 15)

**Budgeting.** Participants (n=10) discussed using specific budgeting or money management strategies to cope with financial strain and resource access challenges. Budgeting strategies helped participants financially make ends meet and served as an adaptive way to stretch limited resources. Examples of this category included working multiple jobs, appropriating money to pay bills and engage in family activities, and saving money through use of cost effective alternatives and substitutions for less expensive items.

Several participants described saving money to spend time with kids and engage in family fun activities after bills are paid,

Well, I mean I get paid bi-weekly, so if I got bills that I know are due at the end of the month, I'll set some of my first pay check out to the side. Pay for other stuff first and then whatever is left, is to go have fun with, go have fun with my kid and take him places that he, that he wants to do. (Participant 4)

Other participants described working multiple jobs and relying on family and social supports to offset the cost of childcare to make their paychecks stretch. One participant,

who used few financial resources, stated that she worked multiple jobs to save money to afford bills and tuition,

Um, at the beginning I stayed at home for quite some time I didn't want to put her in daycare. So I saved a lot during work, I saved a lot prior to me here. Every summer um I went to Florida so I had a good saving's account because I worked so hard and at one point I worked three jobs before I had my daughter. And going to NOC when I was getting my Associates, I worked three jobs and was going to school full time.... so um I did help myself on that end to kind of save. Um so that helped me get a car and to have some money saved up when I couldn't work when I was, uh when I had her. So that helped me. (Participant 13)

Several participants reported that were creative not only with seeking resources, but also creating their own versions of more expensive items to save money. The same participant quoted above described her budgeting strategies of doing her own hair and nails to save money on salon costs and making her daughters dance costumes,

So you have you have to pay hundred dollars here and there for costumes and what not so I tend to anything myself that I can. I'm pretty handy and I think I'm pretty um you know easy at making things or you know when people say well you can take her to the hair salon and get her hair done, I just do it myself haha, to save pennies there so that way I can get the costume that she needs and get the shoes she needs. Um or I tend to go to you know kind of used shops to get her costumes that she needs for just practice or something. You know I don't spend a lot of money when I don't need to. (Participant 13)

**Time management.** Ten participants discussed using time management strategies, or strategies used to be more efficient, organized with schedules, and give equal weight to work and family obligations. Time management strategies served to help participants balance and juggle multiple roles. Given the struggles reported in achieving work and life balance in the sample, these strategies were essential for interviewees to maintain overall wellness. Examples of this category included scheduling work, activities, and events around children and family schedules, using organization and prioritization when addressing multiple obligations at once, establishing a routine and a schedule, and planning.

Several participants prioritized time with their families by reorganizing their schedules and working around their children's schedules. One participant discussed using time management strategies to work during the week and spending uninterrupted time with her son and social supports on the weekends,

On Saturday, I take well Friday evening I either take that time for me and my son, Saturday, I'll come over and spend some time with my son um and in the evening I typically try not to do any homework on Saturday evenings, I try to go out with my friends or do something to kind of relieve my stress. (Participant 1)

Despite having workplace barriers that limit the number of sick and vacation days available, one participant reported using time management strategies to bank all of her paid time off in case of unforeseen emergencies with her daughter,

Okay. So I have um, a certain amount of vacation, a certain amount of sick days um, and so I try to keep my vacation um on days that they're gonna be out of school. And I try to only use my sick days when they're sick because that, I

mean... It's, um... you know especially with two children. And, and obviously I think it probably gets more difficult with the more kids that you have as far as you know being able to take off sick days. (Participant 10)

On a personal level, several participants shared that they kept their children on a schedule in order to make their home lives more organized and workable with job scheduling. One participant described that she often orchestrates their schedules to be sure she is able to accommodate everything, “I would always plan for what, where my kids are gonna go before and after you know? Where I'm gonna go pick them up from daycare. Or my mom's gonna pick them up from daycare, if I have to work late” (Participant 5). Another participant described the importance of being organized as she is working full time as well as attending school part time,

Um and then that's something that I'm working on as well as organization. So I think being organized is very important especially when you are a single parent and working and going to school at the same time, I think it's important to be organized. And that, that's something that's been helping me a lot. Um but of course it's a work in progress you know I can always improve in that field as well but that's, I think that that's what's helped me not go crazy is um writing things down hah. And making sure I know what I'm doing the next day. (Participant 13)

### **Suggestions**

The Suggestions domain includes recommendations by participants to increase wellness in the working and personal lives of ethnic and racial minority single mothers. Advice and suggestions were solicited to brainstorm strategies aimed at increasing vocational outcomes for working single mothers including maintaining employment,

seeking financial security and others. Five main categories were identified including Widening Resource Accessibility, System Level Action, Workplace Improvements, Increasing Family Connections and Self Improvement Strategies.

**Widening resource accessibility.** Eight participants identified suggestions related to increasing the availability and access to resources to better support working single mothers. Overall, participants commented that greater access to culturally sensitive resources, information, and support would alleviate some of the unique challenges faced by this population. Examples of this category include increasing awareness and transmission of information about available resources, increasing educational opportunities, greater overall funding of resources including housing, food, insurance, and other financial benefits, increased availability of cost effective mental health and physical health resources and affordable, easier access to child care. Since all participants resided in the state of Oklahoma, several stated that a review of available resources in their community was important. One participant described the need for greater access of resources for low-SES and minority neighborhoods to change the culture of poverty in these groups,

Well, statistically racial minorities are in low income or lower socio-economic areas the schools in everything: schools, housing, all of that sucks. So um I mean sometimes I feel like we put money into the wrong areas and it just the cycle never gets broken and so if you want a child to succeed if they are not getting it from home- they should be getting it at school from somebody. Just one person telling them that they can better their lives. Um and I know that's maybe reaching

for the stars but I would say that would be one. Having child care available and more easily accessed would be another. (Participant 11)

Several participants described wishing they had more knowledge and awareness of resources available to them and suggested that efforts should be made to make pre-existing resources more known to individuals in the community. One participant commented that making resources available could help single mothers to gain autonomy and empowerment by seeking out help on their own,

I think that educating them on resources and community would be and those two can go in any specific order would be the first two things that have to happen.

That they need to recognize that they are not alone that they are capable and that there are resources in place if there, if they find themselves alone or feeling inadequate or incapable. There are resources in place that can help them so the tricky part becomes showing them where those are without you know without holding them instead of just holding their hand and setting them free to be able to go do it themselves and empower them. (Participant 9)

Given the unique experiences and cultural factors of racial and ethnic minorities, some participants suggested widening resources that are more culturally sensitive and cater to the needs of single mothers. One participant suggested increasing the number of women's clinics that allow children to be present and provide safe, judgment-free environments to seek support and health care,

Uh yeah just more resources on campus a women's clinic would be so amazing if we had that on campus. I know we probably won't just because of quote on quote "space" but a women's clinic um where we could go, we could bring our children

and we could grow ourselves we could see counselors, stress counselor something like that because it is stressful um just to have an environment where we know we are safe and people are going to listen to us and people are going to care.

(Participant 7)

**System level action.** Participants (n=11) discussed numerous community and societal level changes that could take place to increase vocational outcomes and overall well-being of this population. System level action refers to entities taking place in the exosystem and macrosystem levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1977). Examples of this category included changing cultural stereotypical and stigmatizing attitudes towards ethnic and racial minority single working mothers; increasing compassion, empathy, and understanding for this population; increasing the number of community single mother support groups; and others.

A common theme in this category was the belief that if societal attitudes shifted towards more acceptance and understanding, ethnic and racial minority working single mothers will be more successful and productive in their roles as workers and parents. Several participants described wanting to have a stronger sense of community and support as an ethnic/racial minority and as a mother. Many recommended that community members, especially mothers should come together better to support one another,

Uh the one thing we fail at is coming together. I believe just coming together, coming together. I mean one head, 5 heads beats one you know, being a nice neighbor a nice community neighbor, just not so much judging...maybe just a little more passionate. (Participant 3)

Participants noted a lack of knowledge of active support groups for single mothers and stated that they would like to see more community support. One participant commented that sharing experiences, challenges, and resources with other working single mothers would be helpful,

Yeah support groups, exactly, for single mothers. Maybe somewhere they could bring the kids. Maybe just even for an hour or two and we could all have a discussion.... share resources, share experiences. Um, share testimonies. You know? Anything that they've been going through. I think that'd be good.

(Participant 5)

Other participants shared that they believe that communities and societies need to re-evaluate their attitudes towards ethnic and racial minority single mothers by reducing stigma and discrimination. Many expressed wanting more acceptance as a working single mother and to feel understood. One participant shared that attitudes towards single parenthood held in more conservative areas, such as Oklahoma, should be reevaluated,

As [city] community, I think people, they need to be more open-minded. You know, sure, we're in the Bible Belt, and it's very frowned upon, to be single mother. Because it's kind of like, "Oh no," you know, "what happened? Why is she a single mother?" You know, and it's just one of those things where it's, people, they tend to assume the worst as to why you're a single mother... and I think if people were aware of like, "Okay," you know, "they're single moms and they have to work." And I think if a lot of people knew what it was like to be a single mother, and have to work, I think they would respect it more. (Participant 14)

A few participants shared their frustrations with the pervasiveness of racism and discrimination in their communities. They expressed wanting to see changes to address those aspects in their workplace and neighborhoods,

Oh I think racism needs to stop for sure. I think racism is a really big part. And I don't think you have to be white just to be racist. I think that's for everyone you know? I think everyone, there's racism going on everywhere in this world you know? I don't feel like, that's right. And I feel like that could be... That needs to be improved you know? That needs to be cut down. (Participant 5)

**Workplace improvements.** All but one participant (n=14) described potential workplace changes and improvements to better meet the unique needs of working single mothers. Examples of this category included increased flexibility of schedules (hours, time off, and emergency situations), more diversity and multicultural training at work, increased opportunities for mentorship with minority mentors, greater employer empathy and understanding, increased benefits (e.g., pay, insurance, availability of child care at work), and equal opportunities for promotions.

Given the complex roles, schedules, and experiences of working single mothers, many described a need for employers to promote greater work and life balance for their employees by being more culturally sensitive, empathetic, and understanding to the needs of this population,

Empathy, haha empathy um just being a little bit more understanding. I'm not asking you know for a different set of rules or different um like a different- no special treatment but you know be sympathetic uh because there are times where you know the kid falls sick while you are at work and you know you are going to

have to take off or something um like maybe he or she can recommend like a good babysitter you know something along those lines you know like have a go to person as far as like babysitting or transportation or something like that I mean just be a little bit more aware of you know their employee's situation.

(Participant 2)

Several participants described situations where their hours were taken away due to unforeseen circumstances and emergencies resulting in leaving work to attend to their children. Many suggested that policies such as leave time and paid time off should be re-evaluated so working single mothers are not punished for situations out of their control,

Um I think helping understand that things you know sometimes life throws us curve balls as far as um kids being involved um you never know when they are going to wake up and they are sick. So I think that they need to add a little bit of time maybe to you know, if you get like 10 hours of um PPT or something, I think they should add another 5. Um and to be a little bit more understanding that you know a child, you never know what is going to happen, you really don't. Um, they can get sick or all of the sudden have to go to the dentist and they have to do some work. You know and then you've gotta take more than 2 hours. (Participant 13)

Others described the need for greater benefits including insurance and childcare offered where they work to increase employee morale and worker productivity. The need for affordable, easily accessible childcare was expressed as a suggestion through all cases.

One participant described that being offered these benefits would help to reduce her stress and would help many working women, not just single parents. Due to her child

care schedule and sole provider of her son, she was only able to work 32 hours per week and is not offered benefits,

Having child care at work on site. Every single person, every single- I work with all women and every single one of them is a mom... Um, now I know full time employees you know you get all of the benefits package but I feel that that should be extended, something should be extended to part time employees too, especially if you are a single parent. (Participant 11)

In terms of work place improvements, one participant suggested an increase in diversity training to help employers and employees gain greater multicultural awareness and raise awareness of discrimination and stigma occurring at work,

I think um let's see making sure that they have the same opportunities is the other ethnicities' jobs...I think that we need to make sure you know that that we give people the same opportunities and stuff. Um and then I also think that to limit the stereotypes and create some kind of self-awareness so people can examine whether or not they are contributing to a stereotypical environment we need some real diversity training...it doesn't matter what minority they are from but bring in somebody that can really school and educate people about what diversity really is and what minorities go through you know because it may be able to help kill that stereotypical type of environment. (Participant 1)

**Increasing family connections.** Seven participants encouraged communities and single mothers to focus on developing strong family relationships and place more value on achieving work and life balance. Suggestions from this category arose from the belief that family relationships increase the amount of quality social support available to single

mothers, which in turn can also improve their working lives. Examples of this category included maintaining a stable environment for kids, working with the other parent to demonstrate effective co-parenting, increasing quality time with family, family planning, and others.

Some participants described focusing on family by using more family planning (birth control) and establishing strong relationships within marriages to decrease the number of divorces and loss of partner support for mothers. One participant described that she wished she would have waited to have kids and used family planning,

So I didn't have great marriages. I think it goes back to the value system in the home. More time spent on personal development and more time on values. Taking your time with getting married, really really really being proactive about not getting pregnant or taking it to the extreme and not having sex for a while...The first thing that came into my mind was get on birth control. I don't mean it in a sarcastic way you already have however many kids you have ... so it is already hard with however many kids you have. (Participant 6)

Several participants encouraged other mothers to develop relationships with their kids and spend time with them,

I feel like now-a-days moms aren't wanting to spend time with their kids, they are just wanting to leave them with the baby sitters, but I think it is, spend the time you have with them. I see that in my personal life so, with other friends who have kids, so I just say spend the time with the kids. Don't just leave them with the babysitters, but to me that is not right. (Participant 4)

**Self-improvement strategies.** All 15 participants provided individual self-improvement suggestions to other single mothers in similar life circumstances to use their pre-existing skills, resilience factors, and strengths to better themselves. Self-improvement strategies served as advice and words of wisdom to other single mothers. This information could be beneficial to share with single mothers through vocational support, mentorship and community support groups to foster a culture of empathy and understanding. Some examples of this category included taking time to focus on self, developing an identity through values, skills, and hobbies, increasing self-care, re-evaluating priorities, increasing determination and persistence, and seeking out resources and social support when needed.

Several participants encouraged other single mothers to remain strong, determined and unafraid to ask for help. One participant described the need to persevere even in circumstances that are difficult and in cultures and communities where asking for help is not necessarily valued,

Um, I would tell them to be determined and unafraid you know um I would tell them to you know have some kind of plan and goal for yourself, for the sake of your child first and then for your faith. You know have like, don't be afraid to develop a plan- don't be afraid to ask for help. Especially in the African American community, sometimes we are afraid to ask for help you know don't be afraid to let someone know what you are going through. You know, be proactive and seek out services yourself because there are not just going to be sitting there just calling to you know so ask questions, network, you know don't be afraid- be determined and stuff. If you need mental health services, don't be afraid to go and

ask for it you know um just try to be resourceful for yourself. You know learn how to be resourceful yourself and then build yourself up, build yourself up because if you build yourself up you know then you'll be able, you'll be better able to care and um for your child you know, you'll be able to be there for them more you know try to create an environment for them that's loving and um stable.

(Participant 1)

Other participants described the need for single mothers to engage in self-care and make sure they are valuing their needs in order to be present for their families, jobs and other social supports. One participant commented that single mothers are often forced to make hard decisions and choose jobs that make money in order to meet the financial needs of family; however, she encourages single mothers to work towards finding things that they are passionate about,

Sometimes you just need a job. You just need to know the electric bill is paid and you need to know that your child is going to have shoes because they have already outgrown the shoes they are wearing to school today. You just take whatever job you have to but that although that does pacify the moment it's not going to pacify you long term and if you can't keep yourself well emotionally, physically, mentally, then you won't be able to keep your children well.

(Participant 9)

Another participant shared similar sentiments about striving for work and life balance by prioritizing what is most important to the individual,

Work, work is important you know making your money is important but yourself and your mental health is everything and just spending that time with your

friends, your friends too and your family. I think all of that is important and just make sure that you prioritize that just as high as you do you know the important things or the responsible things that you have to do. (Participant 15)

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The findings of this study aimed to provide insight and qualitative exploration of the unique vocational experiences of ethnic and racial minority working single mothers. Results of the study presented a rich account of participants' vocational experiences and decision making process through the use of a semi-structured interview. This was achieved by using a multi-layered approach through Cook, Heppner, and O'Brien (2002)'s Career Ecological Model of Women of Color and White Women as a theoretical model. In addition, suggestions by participants for other single mothers, employers and the community at large were solicited to generate solutions and future directions. The data produced six main domains and 27 categories related to participants' vocational and personal experiences using a consensus qualitative research (CQR) methodology. The main domains identified were Job/Education Decision Making, Challenges, Characteristics of Self, Resources, Coping, and Suggestions.

This study added to the existing literature by incorporating the role of intersectionality in working single mothers' professional and personal roles, exploring mental health outcomes such as coping and stress, and generating solutions to better support working single mothers through the voices of participants. The lived vocational experiences of participants are better understood through an integrated, holistic view lens of career development. Career development models such as Hansen's (1997) Integrated

Life Planning theory help to contextualize diverse working experiences of this population and the findings of this study. Through a feminist, multicultural lens, the Integrative Life Planning theory identifies six developmental tasks which include: 1) contextualizing work in changing global contexts, 2) addressing physical, mental and emotional health, 3) making connections between family and work, 4) valuing inclusivity and diversity, 5) exploring spirituality and purpose, and 6) managing personal and organizational changes (Hansen, 1997). Participants highlighted strengths and challenges with each of these developmental tasks in the current study. Hansen's (1997) theory suggests that a broader knowledge of self and community is needed to have a richer understanding of vocational experiences. This is accomplished through closely examining an individual's roles, cultural identities, and life tasks within the context of their working experiences.

In general, the findings of the present study are consistent with previous studies. Participants described greater occupational challenges as a working single mother due to resource limitations, discrimination and stigmatizing experiences, inflexible working policies, lack of social supports and others (Weitoft, Haglund, & Rosen, 2000). Single mothers who reported positive working environments (i.e., higher wages, flexible policies, etc.) were more satisfied with their jobs and maintained employment for longer periods of time, consistent with previous research (Weitoft, Haglund & Rosen, 2000).

Related to our major findings, the majority of participants described facing numerous vocational challenges and barriers relating to stigma faced as a single parent and discrimination as an ethnic/racial minority, but few participants described challenges related to their gender identification exclusively. This speaks to the interconnected nature of identities that cannot be parceled out. The intersectional nature of participants'

identities suggests that they experienced numerous compounding stereotypes and discrimination described by Brown and Misra (2003). In addition, many participants expressed feeling stress, anxiety and depression as mental health consequences of their roles and identities. These findings are also consistent with Brown and Misra's (2003) Multiple Jeopardy-Multiple Advantage hypothesis, which described the compounding discrimination faced by people in multiple power-down categories (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Single parenthood appeared to be a more salient identity for many participants in their professional lives due to workplace barriers and policies that enhance a mother's role strain as the family's sole financial and emotional support (Barnett & Baruch, 1985). While discrimination experiences were shared, many participants felt that they were little to no consequences for employers to change hours or address their lack empathy towards single mothers, whereas racial and ethnic discrimination is more widely recognized and understood to be unacceptable.

It is clear that racial and ethnic minority working single mothers face unique career barriers that complicate their working lives, resulting in impacts on their wellness and family. Participants frequently discussed the barriers relating to their status as a single parent including not having affordable access to childcare, struggling to make schedules work with home responsibilities, and judgment for needing to take time off to be with children in emergency situations. These barriers are cited frequently in the literature as a "motherhood penalty", which greatly reduces opportunities for advancement and maintaining fulltime employment for working single mothers (Buding & England, 2001).

Some participants reported a lack of knowledge or access to some financial, tribal,

and community resources. The majority of the study's sample was recruited from larger cities in Oklahoma; however, two participants were from rural towns. They reported being unaware of resources with fewer social connections and word of mouth referrals. Participants from more urban settings described less difficulty accessing resources, which is consistent with previous studies (Mills & Hazarika, 2003). Although present rural sample was smaller, these participants described similar levels of stigma and judgment surrounding being an ethnic minority working single mother as their urban counterparts, a finding slightly different than what is stated in previous studies (Brown & Lichter, 2004). This may be a result of recruiting the sample within a largely socially conservative state. Another interesting finding was that many participants reported being cut off or losing benefits due to small increases in pay without being able to financially afford taking care of their families independently. Resource barriers shared by participants are consistent with the literature (Hancioglu & Hartmann, 2014).

Supports and strengths were also present in the findings, adding to the current body of literature that is lacking in research surrounding resilience and coping factors used by working single mothers. Participants reported relying significantly on individual supports including family and professional connections. Previous research highlights the importance of working single mothers' social support networks on mental health outcomes and overall wellbeing; the quality and presence of close social supports appeared to be more important than the quantity (Schrag & Schmit-Tiezen, 2014). Consistent with a previous study (Schrag & Schmit-Tieszen, 2014), participants reported that they were better able to attend to their roles as a worker and mother with strong social connections.

Despite the documented importance of these social groups and connections (Nelson, 2000), only two participants in the sample described being a part of a support group for women or single mothers. This lack of communal support for working single mothers is consistent with the literature, which suggests that single mother support groups are often difficult to create and maintain due to the parent's working schedule, lack of space and resources, and challenging accessing the population overall (Nelson, 2000). This information is particularly relevant for future directions, advocacy, and potential changes at the community level.

### **Implications for Clinical Practice and Advocacy**

Findings from this study can be used to help health care providers, career counselors and supervisors, who work with and serve this population. Implications for clinical practice are presented in a multi-layered format and consider improvements at the individual, company/employer, and community/society levels. From a health care and counseling perspective, participants identified unique health stressors including stress, anxiety, depression, and other negative health indicators related to their intersecting minority identities and unique roles. This information is consistent with previous research that single mothers experienced higher levels of mental health difficulties and psychological stressors (Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000). However, previous research (Brown & Moran, 1997) attributed this stress primarily to working barriers and a general lack of resources including financial and social support. The present findings suggest that focusing on strengths and adaptive skills are equally important factors to consider. Unique coping strategies and characteristics described by participants helped them to adapt, navigate and address challenges. Strategies such as budgeting, time management,

adaptive skills, and personality strengths can be fostered and used in individual clinical and outreach applications to better support this population personally and professionally. Findings from this study can be used by providers to focus on resilience and strengths based strategies to increase vocational outcomes.

Many of the clinical implications described above are also relevant for improved workplace and employee supports, such as through mentoring and diversity programs. Vocational psychologists and counselors can use the findings from this study to train employers on creating affirming workplace environments for ethnic and racial minority working single mothers. Greater multicultural awareness and policy adjustments that consider the unique experiences of this population may help to increase retention of working single mothers in the workforce, increase productivity, raise morale, and increase values of diversity and inclusion needed for positive working environments. This can be accomplished by increasing cultural awareness and advocating for flexible scheduling, empathy, opportunities for raises and promotions, and equal treatment in roles and responsibilities for all employees. Our findings suggested that companies should implement mentorship programs with diverse employees and conduct workshops or trainings to increase multicultural sensitivity. These interventions would likely create a stronger working climate and retain diverse employees in the workforce. At the community and society level, participants' suggestions included increased access and awareness of community support groups as well as outreach and educational opportunities. Although many participants identified wanting to have more accessible community support groups for single mothers, many reported not knowing of any groups outside of church environments. Benefits of community support on overall mental

wellness are supported by the literature (Nelson, 2000; Tran & McInnis-Dittrich, 2001). Increasing the number of community support groups for single mothers through non-profit agencies, churches, and community centers may increase social networks, self-esteem, and access to other resources through networking.

In the present study, individual, workplace, and community strengths were highlighted as coping strategies for participants as well as suggestions for how to improve systems across ecological levels. Many of the strengths and skills identified by individuals can be fostered through mentoring relationships, mental health support, and vocational support through a strengths-based lens. From a vocational and career counseling stance, previous research suggested that strengths based career counseling increased self-esteem and incorporation of strengths into everyday life (Littman-Ovadia, Lazar-Butbul, & Benjamin, 2014). Using the Strengths Based Career Counseling (SBCC) individual model, researchers found that participants self-reported that they had greater self-esteem, higher rates of employment, and greater job retention as compared to a control group not receiving SBCC (Littman-Ovadia, Lazar-Butbul, & Benjamin, 2014). Results from this study suggest the large impact that strengths based interventions have on increasing overall well-being, self-efficacy and self-esteem of workers, resulting in longer and more consistent employment.

In addition, strengths based interventions can be expanded for use with vocational community groups. Groups can look many different ways, but may incorporate strengths into traditional vocational skill building through utilizing strengths finders, developing coping strategies, highlighting adaptive and unique traits, and using vocational assessments to help clients highlight how their strengths can complement their

working styles and personalities to find the best suited job or career. As highlighted in Hansen's (1997) Integrative Life Planning theory, individuals are interwoven into their families and communities through work. With this understanding, it would be imperative to support a single mother's entire system within vocational support groups by providing childcare, addressing cultural and diversity concerns, sharing financial and social resources, and allowing time to foster social connections between group members. Providing community low cost vocational training and support groups may reduce barriers of accessing working single mothers.

Finally, our findings highlighted an important need for prevention and increased supports at an earlier age for low income and minority populations in their communities, families, and schools. Given that minority, low SES populations tend to have lower educational attainment and resources; these factors are directly related to job security, receiving full time employment with benefits, and retention in those positions (Hancioglu & Hartmann, 2014). Outreach and advocacy efforts in communities and schools that focus on vocational counseling, increasing educational opportunities and training needed for full time employment, diversity and discrimination training, and teaching vocational skills such as resume writing, interview skills, and salary negotiation would be beneficial to increase the vocational outcomes of this population.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Findings in the present study should be interpreted in light of its limitations. Purposive and convenience sampling strategies were used to recruit participants meeting specific criteria, which included being a sole provider of a minor. Possible culturally relevant family dynamics and institutions such as grandmothers raising children or

external family members or friends raising children were not included in the selection criteria for the ease and consistency of sampling. This strategy may have reduced the cultural applicability to some racial minority groups.

An additional limitation was the convenience sampling strategy used in the study. Several participants held jobs and careers in mental health fields due to connections between the primary researcher and research team members, who are all counselors or psychologists in training. This selection bias may have unduly influenced the findings, as four out of 15 participants were therapists or students seeking counseling related degrees. These individuals may have had greater intelligence, education, and vocabularies to speak to questions surrounding discrimination, intersectionality, and other complex topics compared to the general population.

The study recruited anyone who identified as a racial and/or ethnic minority, which may further limit the generalizability to specific groups. All participants were recruited within the primary researcher's location of Oklahoma, again potentially limiting the findings generalizability. Future research should be conducted in more diverse regions and perhaps with larger samples. Nine of the 15 participants identified as African American/Black. Previous research indicates that the majority of research conducted on racial and ethnic minority single mothers centers on African America/ Black populations (Flores et. al., 2006). Further research is needed to more closely explore the unique vocational experiences of Hispanic/Latina, Native American, Asian/ Asian American, and other minority groups of working single mothers to determine if their experiences differ based on their unique cultural factors. This speaks to a larger limitation encountered when exploring intersectionality due to the unique culture and experiences

of each participant within their multiple minority identification (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). Data sources included only one interview for each participant and a demographic survey. A second interview or triangulating data through a third source such as a community support group may have provided additional information, increased comfort of participants, and added additional thick data. The researcher was unable to make connections with a local single mother support group; however, additional data sources at the community level should be considered in future studies to best capture the multi-layered support systems accessed by working single mothers.

Finally, future research is needed to further explore the vocational experiences of other groups of minority working single mothers through qualitative and quantitative investigations. Quantitative inquiries focusing on single mother's working styles, mentoring experiences, career development of parents, and experiences of intersectionality would be helpful to capture a larger, more diverse population to inform employer and community public policies. To better understand the diverse experiences of single mothers at numerous ecological levels, future quantitative research should include working single mothers' participation and experiences in community support groups, as this was an area identified by participants as lacking in number.

Research linking working barriers, job satisfaction, and mental health outcomes are needed given the inconclusive findings in on the relationship between working and mental health benefits for single mothers (Baker, North, & ALSPAC, 1999). Further inquiry is also needed to determine what work place factors (e.g., mentorship, supports from supervisors or peer groups) contribute to job satisfaction and retention for minority single mothers in their working lives.

## **Conclusion**

The large number of racial and ethnic minority working single mothers in the United States workforce necessitates a better understanding of the unique supports and barriers that this population faces at different systemic levels. Findings from this study suggest numerous unique barriers and supports experienced by this population from multiple system levels. This study provided new information about how participant's intersecting identities as a woman, single mother, and ethnic/racial minority impacts decision making and overall working experience.

The study's findings extended the previous literature by exploring the positive role of individual factors to in participant's careers/jobs and personal lives. Examples of individual factors include personality strengths, adaptive skills, coping strategies, and values needed to navigate their complex roles and experiences. Our findings may contribute to the development of culturally sensitive, multi-layered support and practical interventions to increase vocational outcomes for racial and ethnic minority working single mothers.

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## APPENDIX A

### EXTENDED REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### **Theoretical Framework**

The current study was conceptualized based on the career ecological model of women of White women and minority developed by Cook, Heppner, and O'Brien (2002). The developers of the model saw a need for a more diverse and culturally sensitive understanding of an individual's career needs outside of the traditional androcentric models of career counseling. The model challenges some assumptions of career counseling, which include an individualistic approach to success and tackling challenges. The model adapts an approach that focuses on the relational and cultural components of working women to identify career strengths, barriers and areas of growth. Additionally, it provides an awareness of working women's home and family roles as they relate to career choices and the societal stereotypes and gender roles that influence work choice (Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002). Similar to the relational cultural therapy/theory model (RCT), proposed initially by Jean Baker Miller, MD (1976), this model allows for a deeper understanding of a woman's desire for relationships and incorporating components of women's lived experiences with discrimination in the workplace (both racial and gender) to advocate for meaningful workplace and societal changes (Jordan, 2010). According to the model, career decisions and behaviors do not occur in a vacuum and the environment plays an important role in career satisfaction of working women.

Levels of the model were borrowed from the ecological system theory model originally proposed by Uri Bronfenbrenner (1977). Bronfenbrenner (1977) initially proposed his ecological systems theory to draw attention to the numerous environmental and social factors that affect a child's development. His original model proposed five levels, which include the individual, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Combining the ecological framework with components from a relational cultural framework, Cook, Heppner, and O'Brien (2002) suggested ecological career interventions for work with White women and women of color. For example, career counselors can help women cope with gendered experiences such as sexual harassment in the workplace to increase autonomy and decrease victimization (Cook, Heppner & O'Brien, 2002). A social justice component is intertwined by encouraging action by mentors, employers and career counselors to work with individuals lacking resources and needing career support.

In studying this unique population, Cook, Heppner and O'Brien's (2002) model best captured the complex interaction between individual, environmental, and systemic factors in conjunction with multiple subsystems that influence single mothers' career development and experiences. For example, at the individual level, single mothers' experiences with intersectionality, or discriminatory experiences and oppression associated with endorsement of two or more "power down" identities are related to numerous aspects of their lives including work, leisure, and their physical and mental health (Browne & Misra 2003). At the microsystem level, a single mother's workplace creates additional challenges including stereotyping and discrimination through

workplace policies. Workplace discrimination includes perceptions that single mothers are less dependable, less promotable, and deserving of lower starting salaries (Correll & Benard, 2007). Lack of work and personal life balance may increase the challenges in effectively navigating multiple roles, leading to stress and burn out. At the mesosystem level, challenges related to work/life balance and juggling multiple roles present unique experiences for single mothers. Lastly, at the macrosystem level, systemic policies impacting racial and ethnic minority working single mothers such as maternity leave and hiring policies occur in the context of career development, economic empowerment, and career mobility. Opportunities for community and systemic support also fall into this category.

### **Career Development**

**Women.** O'Neill and Bilimoria (2005) suggested that women's careers should be examined separately from men's careers due to numerous societal and developmental factors unique to women's careers. These unique factors include impact of family responsibilities on the work and home life of women (Burke, 2002). Whether the result of personal choice, gender and societal expectations, or a combination of multiple factors, women remain the primary caregivers of children and assume lower level paying jobs. This affects advancement opportunities, educational trajectories, the ability to receive raises, promotions at work, and others (O'Neill & Bilimoria, 2005). The literature on women's career development has grown substantially, yet the carrier barriers for women remain consistent. Phillips and Imhoff (1997) identified numerous factors that affect women's career outcomes including career stereotype threat, traditional gender roles for women in the workforce, child-rearing responsibilities, workforce participation, and

barriers to maintaining employment due to work and life balance. According to King (1989), a woman's optimal career exploration and development is closely tied to family connectedness and valuing a woman's independent career decisions (cited in Phillips & Imhoff, 1997). Other unique components of women's career development include that many women occupy multiple co-occurring roles both as a professional and a caregiver. These factors impact career decision-making because women must consider additional factors of assuming primary care of children. Time constraints of balancing work and home life often require women to make career decisions that may be incongruent with their desired career goals in favor of achieving balance or attending to family needs.

The role of gender-related self-concept as a psychological, career and social category was shown to impact both women and men's working lives up to 10 years following their career entry (Abele & Spurk, 2011). Gender related self-concept holds both "outside" and "inside" perspectives, which represents women's experiences and expectations as a member of a binary group" (Abele & Spurk, 2011). Researchers argue that women's struggle to achieve comparable levels of career success as their male counterparts arises from discontinuity and disruptions in the career process and decisions influenced by gendered self-concept (Abele & Spurk, 2011; Betz, 1994). Gendered self-concept has a lasting impact on life-long career decision-making. Sullivan and Mahalik (2002), commented, "research evidence suggests that low career self-efficacy expectations constitute an important psychological barrier to women's choice, performance, and persistence in career decision making" (Sullivan & Mahalik, 2002, p. 55). Research shows that career trajectories of women are unique as many career women find their professional persona and career identity formation in middle adulthood

following her child rearing years (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). Finally, a woman's minority status and treatment as second class in the working world remains a prominent issue as evidenced by lack of upward mobility within jobs or companies, unequal pay and opportunities for promotions to higher-level positions, and others. Gender discrimination and policies affect not only employment opportunities but also work women's relationships with supervisors (O'Neill & Bilimoria, 2005).

Career theories, including Gottfriedson's (1996) theory of circumscription, compromise, and self-creation, suggested that from a young age, women and girls limit their career choices based on pre-determined "acceptable" careers for women, using gender as the most salient factor. In line with previous findings on self-concept, Gottfriedson (1996) suggested that the self-concept is directly linked with career choice and satisfaction. Similarly, Super (1990)'s theory of lifespan career development partially explained limitations of women's careers as compared to men's based on the experiences and roles played throughout the lifespan. Super (1990) suggested that women tend to be funneled into stereotypically female constructs including childcare, home making, and helping roles in careers. These roles are more salient and more likely to be chosen by women than more transitionally masculine careers and specialties. Gottfriedson (1996) and Super's (1990) developmental career theories suggested origins for how women's career development occurs from a very young age and can be increasingly challenging to break out of gendered, pre-conceived notions of success as time goes on.

Additional challenges for women's career development include a lack of mentoring and mentorship experiences. Although there are an increasing number of female supervisors and women in managerial roles; historically, female mentorship has

been limited and women have been reinforced in “power down” roles with male mentors and supervisors (Sosik & Godshalk, 2002). A benefit of female mentorship includes the ability to discuss difficulties with gender roles and norms within the work place, experience mutual empathy and understanding, and buffer against discriminatory practices such as sexual harassment (Sosik & Godshalk, 2002).

Given the unique experience of women in the work force, O’Neill and Bilimoria (2005) proposed three career development phases for women including 1) idealistic achievement; 2) pragmatic endurance and 3) re-inventive contribution. Idealistic achievement is a stage where women’s career choices reflect their interests and desires with the belief that they can “have it all” despite social barriers. Pragmatic endurance is a stage where women in mid-careers are juggling multiple roles, recognizing that some career achievement and advancement rests in the hands of employers, industries and systems. These women may experience more dissatisfaction in their working life. Finally, the re-inventive contribution stage occurs later in a woman’s career where the focus shifts towards contributing to the greater community and doing work that is meaningful to them (O’Neill & Bilimoria, 2005). These phases do not occur in a linear fashion and women can jump between stages throughout their careers.

**Racial and ethnic minorities.** Information on the career development of ethnic and racial minorities has increased over the past several decades with increased diversity found in the workforce. Career choice and outcomes are a combination of environmental and personal (cultural) factors according to Lent, Brown and Hackett’s Social Cognitive Career Theory (1994). ). Racial and ethnic minorities likely experience career decisions differently due to numerous factors including discrimination and educational attainment.

Racial and ethnic minorities tend to occupy lower level, unskilled positions in the work force, which influences career decision making in the context of available occupational opportunities (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). While there is movement towards more multicultural sensitivity in vocational counseling, there are no solidified theories of career development for racial and ethnic minorities (Fouad & Byers-Winston, 2005).

The available research focuses primarily on career experiences of low income African Americans. Little research has been conducted on career development of Native Americans, Asian Americans and other groups (Flores et. al., 2006). In a meta-analysis conducted by Fouad and Byers-Winston (2005), there was little to no relationship between race/ethnicity identification and career aspirations; however, there were significant differences in racial/ethnic working individuals and their perceived opportunities and advancement in their respective fields. Additionally, their individual discriminatory experiences played into worker's perceptions of growth, career attainment and upward mobility (Fouad & Byers-Winston, 2005).

A unique aspect of career development for racial and ethnic minorities is the concept of career choice. Many career counseling theories assume that work is central to the lives of individuals and that career choices arises from a combination of personality traits, interests, and skills. However, this may not be the case for ethnic minorities who have faced compounding discrimination and limited career options for generations (Leong, 1995). Limited career counseling support, information on occupations, and the role of family and cultural expectations are important considerations. Additionally, level of acculturation, immigration status, and level of racial identity development are factors

that affect career choice (Leong, 1995).

As seen in women's career development, racial minorities may adopt a different framework for understanding the role of their career in their lives deviated from traditional career counseling models. For example, the national ethos of the "American Dream" is described as moving up through the ranks in an individualistic way to reach goals. In general, career-counseling models are individualistic and place importance on finding the "best fit" between an individual's traits, personality, and skills (Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002). In eastern or more collectivist societies, these models do not fit with definitions of "success" which include focus on family and community relationships in work (Leong, 1995). There is a widespread perception that collectivist orientations are found in ethnic minority groups while individualistic orientations are found in White/Caucasian groups, however this is not the case (Carrero & Reichman, 2002). Research by Carrero and Reichman (2002) suggested that individuals who identify with a collectivist orientation tend to make career decisions in conjunction with their families and think more futuristically about the impact of those decisions on their families. Carrero and Reichman (2002) comment,

...individualism-collectivism did not have an effect on other areas of career behavior, such as the extent to which an individual is decisive and involved in their career decision making, the extent to which the individual is task- or pleasure oriented towards work and the extent to which the individual can compromise between needs and reality. Individualism-collectivism did not have an effect either on the degree to which a person follows their present feelings when making career decisions. (Abstract)

Differences in communication strategies and language barriers may also impact career choice among ethnic minority individuals. Traditionally, Americans value individuals who tend to be more outspoken, aggressive, and goal focused. These expectations may not fit the cultural background of ethnically diverse employees. In working with racially diverse individuals on career issues, it is generally accepted that a Social Cognitive Career Model based on social learning is one way to integrate social and cultural factors in the discussion of career development and identity (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Leong, 1995).

**Mothers.** Limited research is available on specific career development models of partnered or single mothers. Previous research focused on adolescent and teen mothers who complete school or community-based career readiness programs. The experience of motherhood in the workplace is highlighted in the literature by the experience of partnered mothers and stages of identity related to pregnancy, leaving the work force, changes in identity, time management during parenthood, and returning to working (Moore, 2000). Unique components of mothers' career development include the common experience of disrupting a career on some level to begin a family and have children. Moore (2000) discussed that traditional career development theories often focus on a linear career projection with limited or few disruptions associated with male workers making them less applicable to mothers.

Career identity for some mothers changes during periods of disruption where focus on the family may be a higher priority than career development. Similarly, mothers' career self-concept may not be found in a specific career attainment, but a larger picture of incorporating multiple roles (Moore, 2000). These experiences are not

effectively captured in career theory even within Super's lifespan developmental model (Super, 1990). The length of time mothers spend away from working shows increased challenges in re-entry into the workforce not faced by fathers. Occupational growth declines the longer a mother is not actively working and can slow or inhibit reentry into the workforce depending on educational attainment, skill level, position prior to exiting the workforce, and other factors (Moore, 2000). For some single mothers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, financial constraints and access to the needed certifications, degrees and training can cause numerous challenges. Single mothers may not have the financial or social support necessary to take time off and obtain training needed to advance their career while also caring for children (Takata, 2011).

In a longitudinal study of working women and men conducted by Abele and Spurk (2011), findings showed that timing of parenthood had an impact on the level of career mobility. They found that primarily due to role expectations,

    Parenthood had a negative direct influence on women's work hours and a negative indirect influence on women's objective career success. Women who had their first child around career entry were relatively least successful over the observation period. Men's career success was independent of parenthood. (Abele & Spurk, 2011, Abstract)

Partnered and single mothers face unique concerns related to work than career women with no children. In one study, mothers attributed differences in their perceived career mobility and enhancement as related to family obligations and work discontinuity. Non-mothers attributed career challenges to personality traits and lack of promotion opportunities (Metz, 2005). These findings only provided partial support for increased

barriers for partnered and single mothers. Researchers attributed the similarities between non-mothers and mothers career experiences as related to social role theory, whereby career breaks and family composition are attributed to all women, not just mothers. It is well accepted that single mothers face discrimination and differed perceptions by supervisors, employers and colleagues after having children (Metz, 2005). Further research and investigation is needed to more accurately describe the career development experiences of partnered and single mothers as distinct from women as a whole.

### **Intersectionality**

The intersection of one or more “power down” identities leading to compounding discrimination and oppression is broadly referred to as intersectionality (Browne & Misra, 2003). The concept of intersectionality arose from the Black/African American feminist movement in the late 1980’s as Black feminists began speaking out that their gender identification and racial identification were occurring simultaneously and thus could not be separated (Browne & Misra, 2003; Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). Given that interest in studying intersectionality arose out of a desire to explore power down identities and discrimination, there is much debate among intersectionality researchers about the best methods to capture the phenomenon and its impact on individuals in different environments. Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (2013) identified numerous points of contention in intersectionality research including how to differentiate between autonomous and interactive components of identity, static versus fixed categories, dynamic versus contextual categories, and others. Many researchers have argued over the merits of an additive model of disadvantage by which each “power down” identity systematically increases the level of marginalization or disadvantage. In

contract, some are in favor of an interactive model where a person's identification in categories are experienced simultaneously and produce a single level of marginalization (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) posed the question that is often confronted in intersectionality literature: Are people who occupy multiple subordinate identities (i.e. Black/African American, women, non-heterosexual) worse off than people who occupy single subordinate identities (i.e. White/Caucasian women)? Brown and Misra (2003) referred to this phenomenon as the Multiple Jeopardy-Multiple Advantage Hypothesis, which suggested that individuals who occupy positions in two or more power-down social categories will experience the highest level of discrimination with the least amount of economic and social reward. Other researchers including Sidanius and Pratto (2001) argued that intersectionality is not necessarily compounding and must be considered in the context of the greater social hierarchy. They argued that whoever is the greatest threat to the majority (White, heterosexual males) will experience the most amount of discrimination.

Individuals who occupy multiple subordinate identities or categories often do not fit the prototypes of the "typical" subordinate category and experience "intersectional invisibility" (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) explained that virtually all individuals who identify with numerous marginalized categories experience some level of intersectional invisibility because historically, subordinate groups were formulated without considering these deep, interwoven identity connections. They also suggested that intersectional invisibility can offer both positive and negative factors. Positively, individuals with intersecting identities may more easily elude

or escape blatant forms of discrimination by distancing that component of their identity. Critics of the theory comment that some identities are less visible and “easier to hide”, which may mitigate any positive aspects of compounding marginalized identities. Negatively, individuals with intersecting identities may be less likely to be accepted as a full member of the group, be silenced, and experience cultural, political and legal invisibility (Purdie Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

The impact of intersectionality plays an important role in an individual’s career and work/life experiences. Previous research that explored intersecting identities in the workplace often fails to consider cultural and domestic obligations, life demands, and alternative family structures outside of traditional, nuclear families (Ozbigın, Beauregard, Tatlı, & Bell, 2011). Intersectionality research primarily focuses on race and gender dynamics with little attention to other areas of diversity including ability, age, weight, sexual orientation, gender identification and others. Ozbigın, Beauregard, Tatlı and Bell (2011) commented that discussions of work/life balance often discount the life demands of individuals and how those roles and responsibilities impact their work lives. The researchers postulated that intersectionality occurs in all components of an individual’s life through work and personal roles that are not mutually exclusive. To work towards greater work/life balance and health of employees, an intersectional approach is needed to close the gap between outdated theories and the diverse roles of workers. Ozbigın, Beauregard, Tatlı and Bell (2011) suggested that work policies need to reflect social and organizational realities of workers, move past gender as the sole measure of diversity, and create policies that fit with multiple intersecting identities. Intersectionality is especially relevant to the diverse work and personal roles occupied by racial and ethnic

minority working single mothers, who assume many different roles outside of work that affects their work performance.

Conceptualization of intersectionality in the workplace requires a broader understanding outside of only gender and race categories to include how other groups are hurt or benefit from social constructions. For example, Browne and Misra (2003) discussed that the intersectionality of Latino/a workers must consider that social constructions of gender are racialized and social constructions of race are gendered to create specific discrimination experiences. In their study, White women were often viewed as more professional than minority women and in some cases, Latino/a workers worked for them or underneath them (Brown & Misra, 2003). In this case, White women were raised to a place of privilege despite holding a minority identity because other groups hold multiple, “power down” identities that carry more discriminatory consequences. In sum, examining the ways in which other social groups are impacted by discriminatory practices of individuals can provide more information to their social maintenance in career settings and society.

Brown and Misra (2003) identified intersectionality discrimination in the labor market occurs in three main categories: wage inequality, discrimination, and role of domestic work. Women of color are disproportionately found in service industries and in jobs with limited wages and promotional opportunities, which will be further explored in later sections (Ortiz & Roscigno, 2009). These discriminatory practices in the work place have been studied in different capacities by exploring differences between race and gender. McCall (2001)’s study of these dynamics found that race and gender “systems” are neither completely intertwined nor completed separate. She found that the general

labor structure accounted for the majority of Black/White wage inequality, but when there was more of a demographic mix in the labor market, including immigrants, the impact was greater on other ethnic groups including Asian and Latino/a. The majority of research explores the career experiences of low-income Black/ African-American women, while voices of other ethnic minorities including Latina/Hispanic women, Asian women or women from other races are largely absent. Future research is needed to increase the representation of diverse intersecting identities through the literature.

### **Individual Challenges**

**Work and life balance.** Numerous studies cite the challenges of achieving work and life balance for single mothers (Snow et. al., 2003). The unique position of working single mothers is in part due to their multiple roles as a caregiver, employee, and head of household. The concept of balancing multiple roles, referred to as “role strain,” is consistently linked with psychological well-being of women and mothers (O’Driscoll, Ilgen, & Hildreth, 1992). Additionally, role conflict is associated with an increase in depressive symptoms and decreased life satisfaction among working women (Frone, Russell, & Barnes, 1996). Concerns related to role strain center around the concept of “role overload” where working women hold multiple positions and functions, but may feel unable to perform all of them to the best of their ability (Barnett & Baruch, 1985). The anxiety of not performing to optimum levels and normed expectations, such as pressure to be home with kids instead of working, can lead to compounding anxiety and challenges maintaining work and life balance (Barnett & Baruch, 1985).

An important component of the work and life balance of mothers is the availability and utilization of childcare. In a study conducted by Ozer (1995), women

who bore responsibility for childcare with little resources and social support experienced reduced career self-efficacy and psychological wellbeing. Moderators of this effect were found if women could depend on social supports such as a spouse for division of labor. Erdwins and colleagues (2001) supported these findings that satisfaction with childcare reduced role strain and anxiety about separation from children. The above findings centered on married and partnered women. Single mothers often hold the majority of responsibility of childcare and due to reduced financial means, may not be able to afford childcare if not offered through their employer or through friends and family (Erdwins, Buffardi, Casper, & O'Brien, 2001).

**Psychological stressors.** There are a significant number of psychological stressors and vocational challenges that impact single mothers' career goals, wage earnings, potential for upward career mobility. Glass (2004) described challenges these challenges as a function of inadequate support from workplace policies, discrimination and other factors contribute to mothers occupying low-wage part time jobs with flexible hours to care for their children and meet the demands of home. Jayakody and Stauffer (2000) found that one in five women receiving welfare also have a co-occurring mental health disorder. The likelihood of single mothers maintaining employment is 25% lower in women experiencing mental health illness or challenges. Researchers additionally show the stress of working as a single mother promotes higher levels of mental health concerns than the general population, affecting productivity and coping strategies at work (Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000; Warren & Johnson, 1995). Numerous studies note that single mothers experience high levels of mental health problems compared to other groups (McLanahan, 1985; Weisman, Leaf & Bruce, 1987, cited in Jayakody & Stauffer,

2000). Their research primarily focused on single mothers in poverty, which raised another important point regarding the “cause” of psychological distress, workplace environment or the poverty itself.

Overall, individuals with lower socio-economic status tend to endorse more psychological symptoms; however, there are unique factors to single motherhood that must also be considered including marital or relationship separation and child birth issues (Kessler et. al., 1994 cited in Jayakody & Stauffer, 2000). In a study exploring stress in a population of rural single mothers, Turner (2007) found that parenting stress has the greatest relationship with psychological related issues including major depressive disorder than any other “type” of stress. The level of distress was partially mediated by financial stressors, but still produced significant associations even when controlling for previous diagnoses and other types of chronic stress (Turner, 2007).

In a longitudinal study conducted by Brown and Moran (1997), researchers examined multiple factors that contributed to the onset of depression in 117 single mothers over the course of two years. They explored “humiliating and entrapment events”, which were defined as severe and life changing events that reduced the individual’s perceived personal power such as reduced self-esteem, childhood adversity, childhood poverty, financial hardship, employment history, support systems, and others. Findings suggested that single mothers were twice as likely as married mothers to develop depression and experience financial hardship. These factors were based on events that reduced a single mother’s self-efficacy and self-esteem, while increasing financial burdens such as loss of partner’s income (Brown & Moran, 1997). Single mothers who experienced a decrease in symptoms may have developed coping strategies,

increased social supports, resilience, and acquired more resources as time went on.

Newly single working mothers may feel increased levels of stress prior to developing strategies needed to manage multiple barriers and challenges (Brown & Moran, 1997).

**Vocational outcomes for single mothers.** Research supports increased health, well-being, and self-efficacy associated with stable employment and supportive working environments (Dooley, Fielding & Levi, 1996; Ross & Mirowsky, 1995; Toch et. al., 2013). However, the impact of employment on the mental health of working single mothers is less clear with some studies indicating that single mothers may not experience the same mental health benefits of employment as male workers due to erratic work schedules, low wages, increased stress both at work and at home (Baker, North, & ALSPAC, 1999; Zabkiewicz, 2010). Weitoft, Haglund and Rosen (2000) reported that single mothers experienced more occupational difficulties than married or partnered mothers due to high stress levels associated with financial insecurity, discrimination at work, inflexible work policies that penalize parenting needs, lack of support system, and economic and time constraints due to increased responsibilities at home (McIntosh, McQuaid, Munro & Dabir-Alai, 2012).

In study that explored the impact of employment on racial minority single mothers on welfare, findings suggested that single mothers have mental health benefits from employment, but different factors might come into play compared to other populations. Employment was shown to be effective in increasing maternal well-being in single mother populations similar to married women (Smith, Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, & Lee, 2000). The characteristics and longevity of employment were most important in determining the long-term mental health benefits for single mothers (Zabkiewicz, 2010).

Specifically, full time jobs that lasted 10-12 months out of the year provided the most mental health benefits to single mothers. Single mothers who held part time jobs were shown to have little to no effect from working as if they were unemployed (Zabkiewicz, 2010).

Additional factors that affect single mothers' vocational mobility and job security relate to the amount and quality of social support and access to resources, specifically in poorer populations (Brown & Lichter, 2004). Some single mothers on welfare or from poorer families struggle with maintaining employment due to lack of education and job training opportunities (Hancioglu & Hartmann, 2014). According to Hancioglu and Hartmann (2014), early entry back into the workforce following having children affected career opportunities and mobility. Receiving welfare benefits appeared to decrease mothers' incentive to return to work following pregnancy or leave, despite single mothers' reported desire to work over exclusively receiving welfare benefits (Hancioglu & Hartmann, 2014; Taylor, 2001). It comes as no surprise that vocational outcomes for single mothers tend to be higher when wages are higher. Higher wages in stable jobs correlate with flexibility of jobs to take leave and return to similar positions following maternity leave (Hancioglu & Hartmann, 2014). Turner (2007) cautioned that experiences of financial stress while also employed might lead to feelings of hopelessness, lack of mobility and feelings of personal failure. These findings speak to a greater need for widespread policy reform allowing single mothers opportunities to earn a living wage when working full time.

Research supports the importance of demographic variables of single mothers when entering and leaving the work force on future career outcome (Hancioglu &

Hartmann, 2004; Zabkiewicz, 2010). These factors include the age of the mother when becoming a single parent, age of the child, and type of employment immediately acquired following becoming a single parent affected long term career and psychological outcomes. In a sample of 1,311 of Japanese single mothers, Takata (2011) posed that employment following childbirth or changing status to a single parent is highly crucial time given its impact on job opportunities. In some cases, single mothers had to stop working or decrease the number of hours worked due to family needs at home. Successful re-entry into the labor market was partially determined by type of job (part time vs. full time), age of single motherhood (younger mothers had a more difficult time due to lack of employment history), and number of benefits and social supports (Hanciouglu & Hartmann, 2014).

### **Contextual Barriers**

**Discrimination in the workplace.** Women and racial minorities struggle to gain employment equality with majority workers such as White men (Ortiz & Roscigno, 2009). Discrimination issues in career settings are cited along five major channels: gender segregation in division of labor, unequal pay and employment growth opportunities for women, gender discrimination, parental status, and race (Padavic & Reskin, 2002). Racial and ethnic minority women occupy all levels of socio-economic status, but a larger proportion of racial minority mothers are found in entry level, lower paying jobs. Studies show that women with lower SES may experience more discrimination in the workplace due to low levels of power, arbitrary hiring and firing and low skill levels (Ortiz & Roscigno, 2009). Mothers often face penalties not faced by men due to family and home responsibilities that may interfere with work performance

(Correll & Benard, 2007). The researchers note that women, particularly those who are mothers, tend to be seen as less dependable, less promotable, and deserving of lower starting salaries (Correll & Benard, 2007). Pregnant women also face strong bias in the work place and are consistently seen as less competent, reliable, and capable of completing jobs especially in male-dominated fields (Hebl et. al., 2007). These findings parallel the conclusions of Budig and England (2001), who found that mothers exclusively experience a wage penalty as a likely function of employer discrimination.

There has been considerable research conducted on the phenomenon of the “motherhood penalty”, also known as the “maternal wall” or “family responsibilities discrimination” in the workplace. Mothers are often at a disadvantage in hiring and firing practices due to their parenting status with dependent children (Budig & England, 2001). Perceptions of partnered and single mothers change following re-entry into the workforce (Metz, 2005). In developing the Career Mothers Inventory Scale (CMI), creator Boehm (2013) based her scale off of three main negative stereotypes towards working mothers, which include that career mothers are unable to be competitive in working environments; they are not as hard working, motivated to work or dependable; and career mothers expect special accommodations specifically relating to child care (Boehm, 2013). These stereotypes greatly influence wages, receiving high-level responsibilities and promotions within the company and other factors.

Working mothers face barriers when applying for employment based on their past history of pregnancies, using parental leave, and requests for flexible schedules (Marcus-Newhall, Halpern, & Tan, 2008). According to a study conducted by Waldfogel (1997),

Research focusing on the wage gap between mothers and non-mothers in the workplace found a 4% penalty for one child and a 12% penalty for two or more children, even after controlling for differences in education, work experience, and full-time versus part-time job status. (p. 215)

Given the date of this study, it is likely that the penalties have changed.

Explanations for the wage gap, motherhood penalty and the maternal wall have numerous origins, but can be attributed to gendered and stereotypical ideologies adopted by both society and work places. Working women experience sexual harassment at higher rates than their male counterparts from supervisors, internal members of the company, outside clients, and vendors (Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002). In many cases, women who file complaints are met with disciplinary action or are not believed that the harassment is taking place, further perpetuating a "power down" role. In studies conducted by Fitzgerald and Rounds (1994), 50% of women in their sample who filed complaints for sexual harassment were terminated from their positions. Another 25% of women resigned due to mistreatment and pressures from the company to avoid "making a scene." The discriminatory nature of sexual harassment and not being believed can have profound effects on women's self-efficacy within their career and desire to maintain employment (Fitzgerald & Rounds, 1994). Cook, Heppner, and O'Brien (2002) commented, "sexual harassment effectively translates systemic attitudes about gender-based power and women's appropriate roles into interpersonally mediated barriers to career satisfaction and personal well-being" (Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002, p. 295).

Browne and Kennelly (1999) suggested that discrimination of ethnic minority women may be a result of employers using stereotypes as a filtering and hiring tool.

Employers sometimes hold incorrect beliefs that mothers are not as committed to paid work as males, may not “need” paid work as much as males, or will become pregnant and leave the workforce. African American women are more likely to be labeled as a single mother with the harmful stereotypes previously mentioned (Ortiz & Roscigno, 2009). Often, individuals of the majority race (and often male) are in power and hold stereotypical views of “power down” positions and utilize incorrect stereotypes of ethnic minorities, for example that African Americans are lazy, late, and disrespectful (Ortiz & Roscigno, 2009).

According to findings by Anderson, Binder and Krause (2003), African American/Black women found their racial differences more salient than Caucasian/White women. They were more inclined to attribute discrimination experiences to their race rather than their gender or a combination of their race and gender. Ortiz and Roscigno (2009) noted similar findings in their study comparing Caucasian/White and African American/Black workers. Both groups were more likely to file complaints related to discriminatory firing than any other type of discrimination. The researchers noted a trend where Caucasian women were more likely to file complaints based on gender and maternity related discrimination rather than racially related issues. In contrast, African American women reported discriminatory firing as the principal injury and experienced a more generalized form of differential treatment. This differential treatment was more often rooted in their race status than their gender status. Individuals in sample reported racial discrimination escalated over time in their place of employment and ultimately lead to their firing. Their terminations were veiled by other explanations including not being a good fit for the agency or company (Ortiz & Roscigno, 2009).

**Urban versus rural settings.** There are differences in the type of stressors faced by urban and rural single mothers. According to Lichter and Jenson (2002), “42% of rural female-headed families also live in poverty, a rate higher than their urban counterparts” (cited in Turner, 2007, p. 181). Single mothers from rural areas have higher poverty levels, fewer resources, and lower family incomes compared to mothers from urban regions. The income-to-poverty ratio is lower in rural mother populations compared to urban mothers (Brown & Lichter, 2004). In a study conducted by Brown and Lichter (2004), correlations were found between race/ethnicity and living environment. Significant differences in ethnic and racial makeup of single mothers, specifically that there were more Caucasian single mothers in rural areas and more ethnic minority single mothers in urban areas (Brown & Lichter, 2004).

Cultural differences between regions affect expectations and norms of single mothers. For example, cohabitation with partners, family members or other individuals is more prevalent in urban populations. This allows for distribution of responsibilities, increased flexibility for working hours, and eased financial burdens on single mothers. Living arrangements reflect the cultural and social norms of the society and urban regions appear to be more accepting of unwed or unrelated partners raising children (Brown & Lichter, 2004). In addition, urban populations tend to have more resources that are more easily accessed for families including government funds such as Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF) or non-profit resources. Single mothers from rural environments often struggle with increased barriers including lower education levels, increased challenges finding childcare and other resources, and transportation barriers (Mills & Hazarika, 2003).

The increased availability of resources and support groups for urban mothers occurs with less frequency in rural populations, making it more challenging for rural single mothers to access needed group social support. Rural single mothers may experience more physical isolation, leaving fewer resources for social support, mental health support and relief outlets to manage stressful situations and children (Turner, 2007). According to a study conducted by Mills and Hazarika (2003), there were significant disadvantages for single mothers living in rural environments related to the costs of work-force participation and caring for children. Markets for low-skilled labor, which encompasses a large population of working single mothers, tended to be higher in urban environments and lower in rural environments. The lower cost of living in rural areas was often reflected in lower wages. Finally, rural environments tended to hire more males than females perhaps due to type of job (manual labor), social family structure, and gendered hiring (Mills & Hazarika, 2003).

Results of a study conducted by Turner (2007) suggested positive effects of employment for single mothers outside of traditional work benefits. These included increased social support, increased self-efficacy, and more access to resources relating to childcare and parenting. Employed rural single mothers reported lower levels of stress on a number of different measures including parenting stress as compared to their unemployed counterparts (Turner, 2007). Environmental circumstances and available resources add an additional layer of complexity and consideration from a career counseling perspective and impacts single mothers' level of participation and longevity in their jobs.

**Workplace policies and aid.** Increased career support for single mothers is necessary to increase work productivity, decrease turnover in positions, and increase wages (Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright, & Neuman, 1999, cited in Glass, 2004). Many beneficial resources and policies that aid single mothers involved increased flexibility in terms of scheduling, hours, telecommunicating, working from home, childcare, ability to take emergency leave, and others. These policies are intermittently administered and reinforced in work environments and receive a negative stigma as they are deemed to be “hand out” policies to compensate for the “motherhood penalty” (Misra, Buding & Moller, 2007). Examples of reconciliation policies include maternal and parental leave. In the United States, the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 allows for parents and women to take off up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave during the year for approved family or medical reasons including pregnancy and adoption (United States Department of Labor, 2007). The provisions of the law were intended to protect pregnant mothers and parents from losing their jobs as a result of family or medical obligations; however, they have hidden costs that may affect mothers and make maintaining work and employment difficult.

There are many critics to these policies. Some believe that maternal leave policies not only reinforce societal norms that women should be the primary caregivers of children, but also increase discrimination in hiring practices by not hiring women or mothers who may become pregnant and use maternity leave (Hofferth & Curtin, 2006). On average, men tend to earn more than women do, so from a financial and family planning standpoint; women are often expected to take leave from work in order to allow the highest earning partner to earn a paycheck (Hofferth & Curtin, 2006). Others argue

that workplace policies may not have their intended beneficial outcomes for mothers because of the stigma associated with using benefits and thus confirming stereotypes about mothers. These stereotypes include beliefs that mothers are less involved at work, are unreliable, lack responsibility at work, and place more importance on home life rather than work responsibilities (Glass, 2004). In a study conducted by Glass (2004), women who utilized work-family policy programs and incentives experienced slower wage growth and career advancement opportunities than non-mothers or mothers who did not use these programs when controlling for time taken off.

An additional barrier for single mothers includes access to federal, state, and local aid for themselves and their families. In some cases, the cost of workforce participation and minimal wages greatly limits their resources, forcing families to be dependent on welfare benefits for survival (Mills & Hazarika, 2005). In an effort to reduce single mothers' reliance on welfare, a reform act passed in 1996 called the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). The focus of this act was to increase the work requirements associated with receiving welfare in order to encourage full time employment rather than long-term reliance on federal aid (Turner, 2007). Although the reform aimed to decrease federal pay out of welfare and enhance lives of single mothers, many barriers for single mothers remain unaddressed. For example, in general, rural mothers have overall increased employment and less reliance on welfare as compared to urban mothers, yet still struggle to find jobs that pay a living wage. Lack of childcare and transportation remains a highly salient issue that hinders single mothers' ability to live off their paychecks (Turner, 2007).

Use of unpaid maternal leave may increase the chances of single mothers losing

their employment and face heightened financial difficulties. Single mothers are more likely to experience bankruptcy, loss of employment and psychological stress associated with job loss (Waldfogel, 1997). While many policies have good intentions to alleviate discrimination faced by mothers, unintended outcomes are often a reality where mothers are put in more difficult situations and forced to choose between employment and family. Strategies to support single mothers' employment should include equal use of family leave policies for men, protection of women's right not to disclose their pregnancy and family make up, and others.

**Lack of social support.** Given the large number of commitments and constraints placed on single mothers, lack of social support is pervasive problem. Previous research utilizing racially diverse samples of single mothers including Mexican-American and African-American/Black mothers suggested that single mothers who perceive to be or are physically isolated from friends and family showed higher levels of depression and psychological distress (Schrag & Schmit-Tieszen, 2014; Wagner, 1993). The circumstances by which mothers become single mothers may result in damaged family interactions and social supports once relied on. Tran and McInnis-Dittrich (2001) discussed a less investigated group of single mothers, which included the working middle class. This population may never come into contact government agencies such as social services or receive federal aid where information about resources can be disseminated. The composition and quality of social networks is more important than quantity of social supports as family connections do not necessarily make for supportive social networks for single mothers (Tran & McInnis-Dittrich, 2001).

The importance of social support on the long-term success and development of

single mothers' self-efficacy shows mix findings. One study (Lipman & Boyle, 2005) reported that social and parenting support helped parents experience success in the short term by increasing self-esteem and self-efficacy. However, the study showed little to no effect on long lasting social support development and skills development in an 18-month follow up. Maintaining social supports can be challenging for single mothers attempting to juggle multiple roles and lack of resources such as transportation (Nelson, 2000). Ways to increase access to resources or social service information for mothers include dissemination of information at schools, through medical providers, mental health counselors, gyms, and social support networks for single mothers to reach a larger demographic of single mothers (Tran & McInnis-Dittrich, 2001).

### **Contextual Support**

**Working benefits and financial support.** Turner's (2007) study supported increased self-efficacy and reduced stress with employment for rural single mothers when comparing both employed and unemployed single mothers. Her study argued that single mothers who were employed experienced greater self-efficacy, access to resources, confidence to organize busy life schedules, and implement effective coping strategies that ward off chronic stress (Turner, 2007). Successful re-entry into the labor market was partially determined by type of job (part time vs. full time), age of single motherhood (younger mothers had a more difficult time due to lack of employment history), and number of benefits and social supports (Hancioglu & Hartmann, 2014). These findings stress the importance of providing culturally sensitive career counseling and support to single mothers immediately following their entry or re-entry into the work force to increase vocational outcomes and potential for full time employment (Takata, 2011).

Single mothers in poverty face a strong economic impact and many developed countries are working to develop solutions to meet the unique needs of single mothers in the work force. In the United States, drastic changes to the welfare system and benefits for single mothers took place in 1996. These changes resulted in limiting the amount of welfare received and encouraging employment. In general, the reform policies had generally positive outcomes on increasing workforce participation in populations of single mothers (Moffitt, 2008). Norway and France reformed their welfare policies not only by looking at the number of mothers employed and the amount of money earned, but also the amount of disposable income and single mothers in poverty (Mogstad & Pronzato, 2012). This change in scope is a step in the right direction towards attention being placed on the cultural and societal position of single mothers. However, Mogstad and Pronzato (2012) found that while employment in this population has increased since the late 1990's, "...the desired effects of the workfare reform were associated with the side effects of income loss and increased poverty among a subgroup of lone mothers who were unable to offset the loss of out-of-work benefits with gains in earnings" (Mogstad & Pronzato, 2012, p. 1157)."

In an effort to address some of the unique employment barriers experienced by single mothers, some have proposed alternatives to strictly being employed or receiving welfare benefits. Blank (2007) and Gonzalez (2008) suggested reform acts that enable single working mothers the opportunity earn a paycheck and receive welfare benefits for a short period. This enables mothers to address barriers and access resources. Blank (2007)'s proposed reform, entitled the Temporary and Partial Work Waiver Program, allowed working mothers to have more flexibility needed to achieve longer term

employment and less reliance on welfare. These proposals provided important groundwork for change; however, few of them have been implemented on a large scale and there is limited data on their efficacy. Continued research and reform for this population is needed to find flexible solutions and reduce the cycle of poverty associated with ethnic minority single mothers.

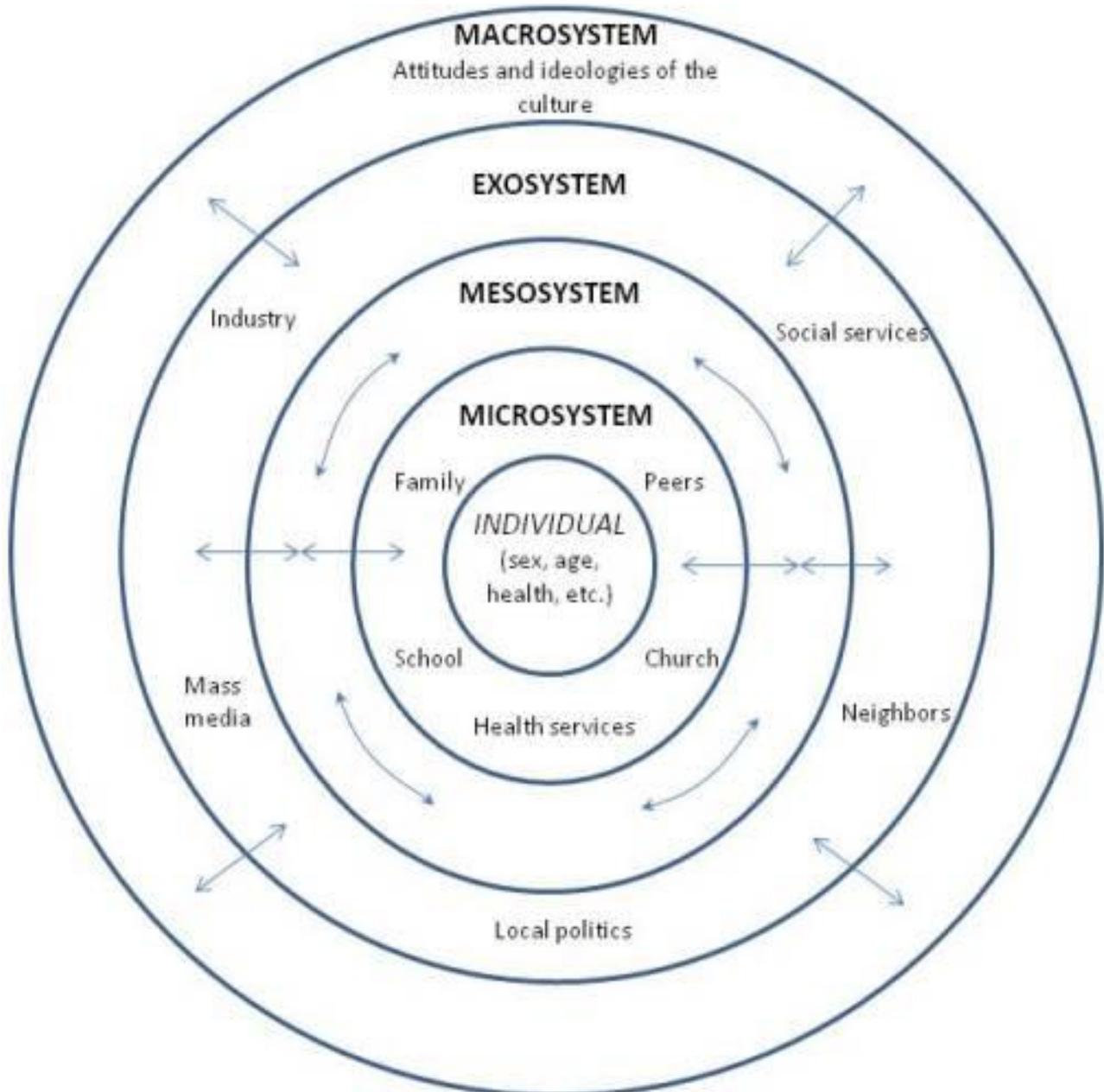
**Social support.** Social support is shown to be effective at reducing role strain and anxiety experienced by working woman and may have long lasting implications including increased self-efficacy, increase work and job performance, and greater life satisfaction (Schrag & Schmit-Tieszen, 2014). In one study, single mothers with higher incomes tended to have greater social supports, were older, had children later in life, and showed greater quality of life financially and mentally (Tran & McInnis-Dittrich, 2001). The quality of support appeared to be important in achieving these outcomes. Reciprocity and mutual respect are essential components towards positive social supports. These findings were supported by Nelson (2000), who suggested that some single mothers develop unique networks of social reciprocity where mothers can come together to share responsibilities (ride sharing, child care, etc.) in their sample of rural, close knit communities of single mothers.

Alternative and new forms of social supports are developing through online networking systems. In a study conducted by Hudson and colleagues (2008), thematic analysis was conducted via online messages boards for low income Black/African American single mothers. Results suggested that support sought online included themes relating to social support, loss, financial needs and concerns, work/life balance, career and educational goals. Although few research studies have been conducted on the

outcomes of involvement with online social support or social support groups, this community of single mothers shows promise to provide much needed support in a confidential and low cost manner (Hudson et. al., 2008). There is widespread consensus that development of social support networks for single mothers is extremely important for increased mental health wellbeing. It is also important to share information and resources regarding parenting, activities for children, job opportunities, childcare and others (Nelson, 2000; Schrag & Schmidt-Tieszen, 2014; Tran & McInnis-Dittrich, 2001). Given the lack of studies related to various support systems, additional studies on community support groups and resources are needed to enhance mental health and career development of ethnic minority single women.

APPENDIX B

BRONFENBRENNER (1977) ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS MODEL



## APPENDIX C

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) Tell me about yourself professionally and personally?
- 2) Describe what factors or experiences contributed to your current job?
  - Personal/family factors, system factors, upbringing, education, etc.
- 3) What challenges have you faced as a racial minority, working single mother?
  - Personally
  - Professionally
- 4) How does being a woman and an ethnic minority impact your job?
  - Your mental health?
- 5) What strategies have you used to cope with challenges at work?
- 6) Describe any resources (past or present) that have helped you
  - How are these resources impacted by where you live? (urban vs. rural)
- 7) Describe your social supports
- 8) What are your strengths?
  - Personally
  - Professionally
- 9) How do you balance motherhood and working? What does that look like?
- 10) What do you believe could be done to improve the lives and jobs of racial minority, single working mothers?
  - Individual level,
  - Company (job) level
  - Society
- 11) Is there anything else you would like for people to know about you or your experience?

APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

What is your gender? \_\_\_ Male \_\_\_ Female \_\_\_ Transgender

What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your current relationship status?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Single
- \_\_\_\_\_ Married
- \_\_\_\_\_ Domestic Partnership/ Committed Relationship
- \_\_\_\_\_ Widowed
- \_\_\_\_\_ Divorced

Please describe who lives with you at home including number of minor children (children under the age of 18).

\_\_\_\_\_

Where do you currently work? please list all jobs) \_\_\_\_\_

How many jobs have you had the past 3 years:

- \_\_\_\_\_ 0-1
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1-2
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2-4
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4-5
- \_\_\_\_\_ More than 5

How many hours per week do you currently work:

- \_\_\_\_\_ Less than 20 hours per week
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20 hours per week
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20-30 hours per week
- \_\_\_\_\_ 30-40 hours per week
- \_\_\_\_\_ 40 hours per week
- \_\_\_\_\_ 40-50 hours per week
- \_\_\_\_\_ 50-60 hours per week
- \_\_\_\_\_ More than 60 hours per week

What is your highest educational attainment?

- \_\_\_ Less than high school graduate
- \_\_\_ High school graduate or GED
- \_\_\_ Some college or technical school
- \_\_\_ Associates degree
- \_\_\_ College graduate
- \_\_\_ Currently pursuing a graduate degree
- \_\_\_ Master's degree

\_\_\_ PhD or professional degree (MD, JD, etc.)

What is your race/ethnicity? (Check all that apply)

\_\_\_ Caucasian/White/European American

\_\_\_ African American/ Black

\_\_\_ Hispanic/Latino

\_\_\_ Asian/ Asian American

\_\_\_ Native American/ Alaska Native

\_\_\_ Pacific Islander

\_\_\_ Multi-racial (two or more races) Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

What is your family's estimated annual income level?

\_\_\_ Less than \$10,000

\_\_\_ \$10,001 to \$15,000

\_\_\_ \$15,001 to \$20,000

\_\_\_ \$20,001 to \$25,000

\_\_\_ \$25,001 to \$30,000

\_\_\_ \$30,001 to \$40,000

\_\_\_ \$40,001 to \$50,000

\_\_\_ \$50,001 to \$60,000

\_\_\_ \$60,001 to \$70,000

\_\_\_ \$70,001 to \$80,000

\_\_\_ \$80,001 or more

Where do you currently live: \_\_\_\_\_

How would you prefer to be contacted for a follow up interview?

Phone:

Email:

How did you hear about this study? \_\_\_\_\_

Would you feel comfortable referring people you know who would be a good fit for this study? YES NO

## APPENDIX E

### INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

#### PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

#### OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

**PROJECT TITLE:** Exploring Unique Career Experiences of Racial and Ethnic Minority Working Single Mothers

**INVESTIGATORS:**

**1) Julianne Y. Richard, MA (Primary Investigator)**

Counseling Psychology Doctoral Student

Oklahoma State University

**2) Hang-Shim Lee, PhD (Research Advisor)**

Assistant Professor, Counseling Psychology

Oklahoma State University

**3) Natalie Singleton (Co-Investigator)**

Counseling Masters Student

Oklahoma State University

**4) Stephanie Adams (Co-Investigator)**

Counseling Masters Student

Oklahoma State University- Tulsa

**PURPOSE:**

According to data from the United States Census Bureau, there are approximately 12 million single parent families in the United States, 80% of which are headed by single mothers (United States Census Bureau, 2014). Research has shown that single mothers are at increased risk for physical and mental health outcomes due to higher levels of stress and decreased economic opportunities (Weitoft, Haglund, & Rosen, 2000). The current study aims to explore the unique career experiences of racial minority, single working mothers. Previous research identifies specific challenges faced by single mothers including difficulties in working climates, lack of social support, and the impact of gender and racial discrimination (intersectionality) in the workplace. This study aims to examine this population's unique challenges and support through a sociocultural perspective. The academic and practical implications of the study can be utilized to

enhance cultural sensitivity, work satisfaction and career outcomes of ethnic minority working single mothers.

Eligible participants need to meet the following criteria: (a) be least 18 years of age, (b) self-identify as an ethnic or racial minority single mother (assuming full-time care of a minor child living in the home) (c) be currently employed full time (30 or more hours per week, can have multiple jobs), (d) earn less than \$48,000 per year, and (e) reside in the State of Oklahoma.

**PROCEDURES:** You will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and a one on one interview in person, via phone or Skype that will be approximately one hour in length. You will be asked to check the validity and accuracy of your interview following its transcription.

**RISKS OF PARTICIPATION:** There are no known risks associated with this project, which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. If you have any reason you would like to withdraw from the study, you may at any time and your responses will not be used. Contact information for counseling services can be provided if you feel it is necessary.

**BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION:** Upon completion of the interview, you will be awarded a \$20.00 gift card to Amazon, Target, or Walmart. You will be asked to provide an email address to which this card may be mailed. If you do not provide an email address, the researchers may be unable to provide you with a gift card. In addition, this study may help to provide the groundwork needed to enhance the lives of racial minority single working mothers through work place changes, culturally sensitive vocational support and counseling, and dissemination of effective coping strategies and resilience factors utilized by working mothers for other working mothers.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Your identifying information will be kept confidential. In lieu of signatures on forms, you will be allowed to give verbal consent to participate in this study. All recorded interviews will be kept on a password-protected computer in a password protected storage system. All transcripts and data will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's advisor's office when not being used. Your demographic data will be stored separately from your transcripts.

**CONTACTS:** You may contact the primary investigator or her advisor with any questions about your rights as a participant. The primary researcher can be reached by e-mail at [julianne.yavorski@okstate.edu](mailto:julianne.yavorski@okstate.edu) or by phone at 704-609-5814. Her advisor can be reached by e-mail at [hangshim.lee@okstate.edu](mailto:hangshim.lee@okstate.edu) or by phone at 405-744-9454.

**PARTICIPANT RIGHTS:** I understand that my participation is voluntary; that there is no penalty for refusal to participate, and that I am free to withdraw my consent and participation in this project at any time, without penalty. I have been fully informed about the procedures listed here. I am aware of what I will be asked to do and of the benefits of my participation. I also understand the following statements: I affirm that I am 18 years

of age or older. I have read and fully understand this consent form. I agree freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form will be given to me. I hereby give permission for my participation in this study.

If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer, you may contact the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, Dr. Hugh Crethar at 223 Scott Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-3377 or irb@okstate.edu.

**CONSENT DOCUMENTATION:** I have been fully informed about the procedures listed here. I am aware of what I will be asked to do and of the benefits of my participation. I also understand the following statements:

**I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older.**

YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

**I have read and fully understand this consent form. I hereby give permission for my participation in this study.**

YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX F  
IRB APPROVAL FORMS

**Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board**

Date: Wednesday, October 05, 2016      Protocol Expires: 6/1/2019  
IRB Application No: ED16105  
Proposal Title: Exploring Unique Career Experiences of Ethnic and Racial Minority Working Single Mothers

Reviewed and Processed as: Exempt  
**Modification**

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s) **Approved**  
Principal Investigator(s):

Julianne Yavorski 406 Willard Hall Stillwater, OK 74078	Stephanie Adams Stillwater, OK 74078	Yewande A Bakare Stillwater, OK 74078
Irene A Campbell Stillwater, OK 74078	Emily Goodwin Stillwater, OK 74078	Allyson McMahan Stillwater, OK 74078

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The requested modification to this IRB protocol has been approved. Please note that the original expiration date of the protocol has not changed. The IRB office **MUST** be notified in writing when a project is complete. All approved projects are subject to monitoring by the IRB.

The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

The reviewer(s) had these comments:

Change title from "Exploring unique career barriers of ethnic minority single mothers" to "Exploring Unique Career Experiences of Ethnic and Racial Minority Working Single Mothers" and add the following graduate students as Co-PIs: Emily Goodwin, Irene Campbell, Allyson McMahan, and Yewande Bakare

Signature :



Hugh Crethar, Chair, Institutional Review Board

Wednesday, October 05, 2016  
Date



APPENDIX G

TABLES

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Information*

Participant Number	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Education	Income	Hours worked per week
1	African American/Black	34	College degree, in school	\$40,000-\$48,000	40-50
2	Native American	33	College degree	\$10,000-\$15,000	32-40
3	African American/Black	32	High School/GED	\$20,000-\$25,000	32
4	Native American, Hispanic/Latina	21	Some college	\$25,000-\$30,000	32-40
5	African American/Black, Native American, Caucasian	23	Some college	\$10,000-\$15,000	32
6	African American/Black	32	Some college	\$10,000-\$15,000	32+
7	African American/Black	27	College degree, in school	\$10,000-\$15,000	32+
8	Native American, Caucasian	34	College degree	\$10,000-\$15,000	32
9	African American/Black	39	Associates degree	\$25,000-\$30,000	40-50
10	Native American, Caucasian	31	College degree, in school	\$30,000-\$40,000	40-50
11	Native American, Caucasian	28	Associates degree	\$10,000-\$15,000	32-40
12	African American/Black	29	Some college	\$20,000-\$25,000	32
13	Hispanic/Latina	31	Some college	\$30,000-\$40,000	40
14	African American/Black	28	Some college	\$25,000-\$30,000	40-50
15	African American/Black	35	Master's degree	\$40,000-\$48,000	40-50

**Table 2**  
*Domains, Categories and Frequencies*

Domains	Categories	Frequency	Label	Coding Criteria
<b>Job and Education Decision Making Process</b>				Factors related to participant's career and educational decisions
	Benefits	10	Typical	Presence or lack of workplace benefits
	Family Influence	11	Typical	Family related factors or influence on decision making
	Motivating Factors	14	General	Goals, values, and previous experiences related to professional decision making
	Previous Work Experiences	3	Variant	Previous work experience and environments impact on job/career choice
<b>Challenges</b>	Career/Job Networking	5	Variant	Professional networking for careers and jobs
				Difficulties faced by participants in their professional/personal lives
	Discrimination /Stigmatizing Experiences	14	General	Stereotyping, stigma, and discrimination faced related to identities
	Workplace Barriers	14	General	Specific employer policies and barriers in working environments
	Resource Limitations	15	General	Limits in financial and social resources
	Balancing Multiple Roles	14	General	Challenges in balancing work and personal life roles
	Unique Health Stressors	8	Typical	Health stressors faced by participants based on identity
<b>Characteristics of Self</b>				Individual characteristics and traits
	Personality Strengths	15	General	Personality strengths used to accomplish goals
	Adaptive Skills	13	Typical	Specific work place skills acquired

	Values	15	General	Attitudes and beliefs held by participants
<b>Resources</b>				Support or financial aid received by participants
	Individual Supports	15	General	Individual social supports within microsystem
	Professional Supports	11	Typical	Professional social supports within work environment
	Financial Supports	15	General	Monetary supports from state and federal sources
	Childcare Supports	9	Typical	Pregnancy and early child resources
	Community Supports	10	Typical	Community social supports and information
<b>Coping</b>				Strategies used to address, manage, and solve challenges
	Active Strategies	9	Typical	Solution focused strategies to manage challenges
	Self- Care	15	General	Using own resources to optimize overall wellness
	Budgeting	15	General	Money management strategies
	Time Management	15	General	Organization and scheduling strategies to optimize time
<b>Suggestions</b>				Recommendations to enhance working lives of ethnic and racial minority single mothers
	Widening Resource Accessibility	8	Typical	Suggestions to increase availability and access to resources
	System Level Action	11	Typical	Changes in attitudes, values, and support of greater community/society
	Workplace Improvements	14	General	Specific changes to workplace and employer policies

Increasing Family Connections	7	Variant	Suggestions towards investment in family connections and children
Self-Improvement Strategies	15	General	Suggestions for single mothers at individual level

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VITA

Julianne Y. Richard

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: EXPLORING THE UNIQUE VOCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF RACIAL  
AND ETHNIC MINORITY WORKING SINGLE MOTHERS

Major Field: Educational Psychology- Counseling Psychology

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in your major at  
Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in July, 2018.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology-  
Clinical Mental Health Counseling at University of Denver, Denver, Colorado  
in June, 2013.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and History  
at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina  
in May, 2011