A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE PERSISTENCE OF

SINGLE-PARENT NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

IN HIGHER EDUCATION AS SEEN THROUGH

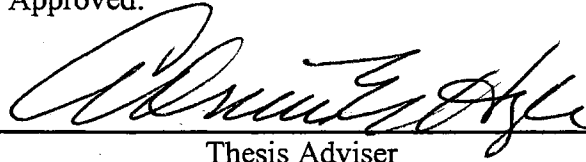THE LENS OF POSSIBLE SELVES THEORY

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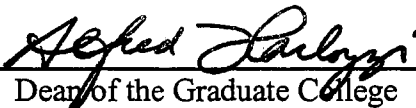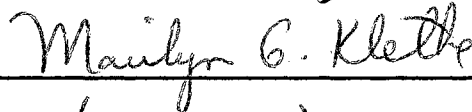Texas A&M University
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CHAPTER I

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Background

As the American population ages, there are fewer people of traditional college age

(18-23) than there have been in past generations (Bureau of the Census, 1990). To higher

education planners, this translates as a shrinking pool of traditional college-bound

students, those that move directly from high school into college. This problem may

persist, as future generations of traditional college-age students are also shrinking in

numbers as evidenced by the high number of elementary school closings nationwide

(Altbach, 1992). Higher education researchers have been studying this phenomenon and

its effects on college populations, reaching the conclusion that the face of the college

student is changing—becoming older, engaging in simultaneous work/school behavior,

and carrying responsibilities such as parenting that are not typical of the traditional 18-23

year-old student (see Altbach, 1992, 1998; Astin, 1998; Chandler, 1997; Horowitz, 1989;

Richardson & King, 1998; Tucker, 1993; Warren, 1989).

Expenses of colleges and universities in general have not declined to match this

decline in numbers of traditional students (Massey & Wilger, 1995). In fact, the costs of

attending college have increased due in part to the declining student base (Adams &

Palmer, 1993). Additionally, some legislators have argued that federal student aid

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awarded to universities and colleges should be tied to institutions' student retention and graduation rates (Burd, 1997). Colleges and universities therefore have a vested interest in keeping every student in school to completion of her degree, normally four to five years from the student's initial enrollment date. Colleges and universities may also be interested in expanding their customer bases to reach other market niches, to use business phraseology, to make up for the declining numbers of traditional students. Bowen (1980) suggests that the nontraditional student may be an alternative customer base for colleges and universities which can help to keep classrooms filled, faculty employed, and higher education expenses down.

The "nontraditional student" may be defined as any student other than the "traditional" student. The traditional student typically is a never-married, nonparent, 18-year-old high school graduate entering college in the fall of her high school graduating year with the intention of continuously attending college until graduation. The demographic profile of the traditional student is predominantly white, male, between the ages of 18 and 23, and, in most institutions of higher education, drawn from the home state (Altbach, 1992; Bureau of the Census, 1990). The nontraditional student, therefore, may be of either gender; belong to any minority ethnic group; may be single, married, or divorced; may be the parent of one or more children; may be between the ages of 18 and 23, but is likelier older; and may be either starting college for the first time or may be returning to an interrupted college career (Dougherty, 1994). A subcategory of the nontraditional student, the single-parent student may be male or female, but in keeping with the gender pronoun use of "she" and "her" in the rest of the paper will be referred to as female.

The single-parent student who has custody of minor children may be a subgroup of nontraditional students of particular research interest. This type of student may have the greatest obstacles to overcome in continuing her education due to limited time and financial resources, and yet may be the most motivated of all students to pursue a college degree through a desire to change her current circumstances. According to 1990 U.S. Bureau of Census data, 46.8% of children living with a single mother lived below the poverty level, and 32.7% of children living with a single father lived below the poverty level, as opposed to 9% of children living in two-parent families. The single-parent student may be the student most motivated to stay in college and earn her degree due to the sense of responsibility she feels toward providing a higher standard of living for her children—such standard available to them only through increased earnings potential derived from a higher education level.

According to 1990 U.S. census statistics compiled by the Marriage and Family Statistics Branch of the Population Division of the Bureau of the Census, 24% of all children live in single-parent homes. In 1990, the total proportion of children with one parent or no parent in the home was 20% for non-Hispanic Whites, 63% for non-Hispanic Blacks, and 36% for Hispanics. More than four out of every five children living with one parent in 1980 and in 1990 lived with their mothers. Among children living with their mothers, the proportion with a mother who either worked full-time, attended school, or worked and attended school increased from 60% in 1980 to 72% in 1990.

What these statistics tell us is that the majority of single mothers are either working, going to school, or doing both at the same time. The same statistics showed a greater increase in these children's mothers' educational levels: mothers with a high

school diploma increased from 74% in 1980 to 80% in 1990. Mothers having a bachelor's degree rose from 11% to 18% from 1980 to 1990. Non-Hispanic White children were twice as likely as non-Hispanic Black children in 1990 to have a mother with a bachelor's degree, and Hispanic mothers were even less likely to have a bachelor's degree in 1990 (6%) (Hernandez, Saluter, & O'Brien, 1994). These statistics point to an increasing involvement of mothers in higher education, although not at the same levels across ethnic lines. The single-parent student, therefore, whether White, Black, or Hispanic, seems to demonstrate a high level of motivation to earn a college degree by overcoming obstacles not faced by the traditional student. A study of how single-parent students overcome obstacles and persist in the pursuit of their degrees may contribute to an understanding and improvement in retention of this group of nontraditional students in higher education.

To assess the attractiveness of the nontraditional student market to higher education, college and university planners must ascertain the access of these students to higher education opportunities as well as levels of commitment of these students to completing their education once they have been afforded access (Richardson & King, 1998). Nontraditional students, particularly the single-parent student, may face different barriers to access to higher education and remaining in college than may traditional students. A study of these barriers may provide useful information that would benefit both the nontraditional students seeking college degrees as well as the colleges and universities seeking to maintain or expand their enrollments.

Statement of the Problem

The focus of most retention studies such as those carried out by the ACT National Center for the Advancement of Educational Practices and reported in "Increasing Student Completion and Persistence: The Best Case for General Education" (1982) has been traditional first-time college freshmen, those who have recently graduated high school at an average age of 18, and are proceeding in an uninterrupted manner toward college graduation (see also Clagett, 1997; Martinez, 1996; Tinto, 1987). Important factors in retaining traditional students have been shown to be academic support such as tutoring, social support as may be found in groups, counseling, financial support, mentoring by faculty and older students, and goal orientation (Eppler & Harju, 1997; Johnson, 1996; Sadler, Cohen, & Kockesen, 1997).

These students, however, are declining in number (Bureau of the Census, 1990), and a "new" nontraditional student population has emerged. These new students are those over the age of 23, who may have never attended college or are returning to an interrupted college career. They may be married, divorced, or never married, and have a family and a job. They are men as well as women, and comprise all ethnic groups. They are usually described as the "adult" or "nontraditional" student, and are increasing in number (Beachler, 1997; Richardson & King, 1998; Simpson, 1993).

Although census data shows the demographically-defined traditional student diminishing in numbers and the demographically-defined nontraditional student increasing in higher education, the nontraditional students are typically not the subject of retention studies. Aside from studies on retention of minority students in higher

education there have been few focused studies on the retention of other groups of nontraditional students such as older students, returning students, and/or single-parent students. Colleges and universities may not recognize barriers to retention for these nontraditional students and thus may be losing significant numbers of students who are not afforded help and support by their institutions in overcoming these barriers (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989; Tinto, 1987). If it is true that nontraditional students are growing as a proportion of the college population, it seems that institutions of higher education should direct their efforts toward identifying those students and supporting their efforts to complete their educations.

Colleges and universities therefore, seem to be lagging in their attention to retention of nontraditional students other than ethnic minorities. This may be because such students have not taken an activist approach to demanding attention as did ethnic minorities in the late 1960s and early 1970s, thus maintaining a low profile and low awareness of their existence (Altbach, 1990). Single-parent students in particular have a low campus profile. It seems that this new group of students is typically overlooked and has little "voice" in the higher education arena. Retention of this group of students has not been well studied nor given importance, therefore these students may feel less important than traditional students, which may decrease their motivation and efforts to stay in school. Because they have different needs and motivations, single-parent students should be viewed and treated differently. As one study concludes:

> Increasing traditional-age and adult students' commitment to their college
> may require policies and procedures developed in consideration for the
> differences between the two [traditional and nontraditional] age groups.
> (Cini & Fritz, 1996, p. 25)

Using "Possible Selves Theory" (hereinafter referred to as PST), voice can be given to this understudied population of students. PST provides a way to examine cognitive factors impacting the academic and personal lives of the nontraditional student population which may motivate them to either persist in college or drop out. It explains how the individual perceives her current self, the self she is afraid of becoming, and the self she would like to become—cognitive factors (Markus & Nurius, 1986). These perceptions, or cognitions, according to PST, may act as motivators for performance in higher education by leading to the adaptation of positive behaviors which may help the nontraditional student to complete a college program (Chalk, 1996; Cini & Fritz, 1996; Leondari, Syngollitou, & Kiosseoglou, 1998b; Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995).

Purpose of the Study and Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of, and thus give voice to, the unstudied single-parent nontraditional students in order to better understand their persistence in higher education. Possible Selves Theory will be used as the test to explain and possibly predict why these students persist in pursuit of a college degree. Specifically, this study attempted to meet the following objectives:

Objective One

Give voice to the single-parent, nontraditional students through an identification and description of their lives in higher education. It is expected that subjects will provide, through long interviews, data which will be the basis of the kind of "thick description" which leads the reader to insight and understanding of this group.

<u>Objective Two</u>

Analyze the voices or stories of single-parent, nontraditional students and their

persistence in higher education using the cognitive lens provided by Possible Selves

Theory to explain their motivation to stay in school and obtain a college degree.

<u>Objective Three</u>

Report what was not explained by PST. It is expected that there will arise from

the data a description of the elements of these single-parent students' lives that do *not* fit

PST.

<u>Objective Four</u>

Test the usefulness of PST for providing voice for this group of nontraditional

students and their persistence in higher education.

Orienting Theoretical Framework

This study is concerned with reaching holistic understanding of the phenomenon

of being a single-parent student. An *a priori* working theory may be helpful in developing

interview questions and providing a frame for this type of study.

The concept of "possible selves" was introduced in 1986 to complement

conceptions of self-knowledge and to explain how an individual thinks about her

potential and about her future. Possible selves are representative of an individual's ideas

of what she might become, what she would like to become, and what she is afraid of

becoming. The utility of this theory lies in its provision of a conceptual link between cognition and motivation, that is, providing an explanation for the ways in which an individual perceives herself (cognition) and how those perceptions affect her behavior (motivation). Possible selves are the cognitive components of hopes, fears, goals, and threats; and "they give the specific self-relevant form [or self] meaning, organization, and direction to these dynamics" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). It is speculated in this study that the single-parent student may consciously and cognitively contrast her perception of her current self with her perception of her hoped-for future self to motivate her to stay in college and obtain a degree if her current self does not provide the resources for herself and her children that she believes her future self can provide.

For the purposes of this study cognition shall be defined as both a process and contextually as "the act or process of knowing; perception," and "something known or perceived" (The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, [College Edition], 1968, p. 261). The multiple perceptions the individual holds about herself "are the direct result of previous social comparisons in which the individual's own thoughts, feelings, characteristics, and behaviors have been contrasted to those of salient others" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). Put another way, to arrive at a perception of a current or future self (a contextual cognition) requires cognitive processing on the part of the individual. Once the cognitive current self and possible self have been conceived, they may be used to motivate behaviors. Although contemplated future possible selves may never have been verified or confirmed by experience, Markus and Nurius (1986) were the first to propose and test the importance of possible selves as incentives/motivations for future behavior.

They also proposed that an understanding of possible selves was important in providing a context of additional meaning for the individual's current behavior.

This theory may help to explain why single-parent students of either gender, who might possibly have the greatest obstacles to overcome in gaining an advanced degree, are motivated to persist in pursuit of that goal. PST explains that a goal will have an impact on behavior to the extent that the individual can personalize it by building a bridge of self-representations between one's current state and one's desired or hoped-for state (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989). One's current state might represent the self that the single parent is afraid of becoming or might become, for example, a welfare parent. The current self, thus, can be a prime motivator toward attaining the goal of becoming the self she would like to become, for example, financially, physically, and emotionally secure and independent custodial parent and career person. The goal attainment of the "self" that the single-parent student would like to become is dependent on earning an advanced degree, and is thus hypothesized to be a powerful motivator to staying in college.

<center>Procedures</center>

In conformance with the axioms of the naturalistic, or postpositivist, paradigm and its related characteristics as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985, pp. 36-43), this study followed an explanatory, qualitative design to explore the multiple, constructed realities of single-parents students who were pursuing higher education degrees. It is important to use a qualitative methodology to adequately probe the perceptions this group of students holds about themselves, their educational processes, and their futures. Yin

and Gwaltney (1982) concluded that this method is advantageous in dealing with the entire knowledge utilization process in an explanatory manner.

Using a qualitative methodology to guide data collection through long interviews allowed the subjects to tell their stories in their own voices. This process and methodology merges data collection and data analysis, as patterns and themes naturally emerge as interviews are listened to and later transcribed (Yin, 1994). From this collection and analysis arose the "voice" of the single-parent students, embedded in the thick description of their lives.

<u>Researcher and Methodological Implications</u>

As the researcher conducting this naturalistic study, I was the research tool. This approach is in accordance with Lincoln and Guba's Characteristic 4:

> "N" elects qualitative methods over quantitative . . . because they are more adaptable to dealing with multiple (and less aggregatable) realities; because such methods expose more directly the nature of the transaction between investigator and respondent (or object) hence makes easier an assessment of the extent to which the phenomenon is described in terms of (is biased by) the investigator's own posture; and because qualitative methods are more sensitive to and adaptable to the many mutually shaping influences and value patterns that may be encountered. (1986, p. 40)

I am a 46-year-old, white, divorced female and mother of two children. I have been trained in both quantitative and qualitative research methods, having spent two years as a doctoral student enrolled in the Management Ph.D. program at Oklahoma State University and a subsequent two years in the Ed.D. program at the same institution. The change from the Management program to the "College Teaching" major in the Ed.D. program came about as a result of my desire to pursue qualitative research with the goal

of applying research findings to real-life situations in both the business and academic arenas.

I have been financially supported for the five years that I have been a doctoral student by child support, graduate teaching assistantships, student loans, and a salary (in the last year of my studies). At the time of my divorce the semester before I enrolled in a doctoral program, my then-current self was motivated by fear of becoming a future self which is statistically supported in our country: the below-poverty level family headed by a single mother. My hoped-for future self is an empowered, financially secure and independent person who has gained control of hers and her family's circumstances through attainment of an advanced degree.

My story is not the same as those of my research subjects, just as each of their stories differs in some ways from each other's. The stories do, however, contain similarities. The qualitative method as described earlier by Lincoln and Guba will expose more directly the nature of the transaction between my subjects and me, making it easier to assess the extent to which the phenomenon is described in terms of (is biased by) my own position. Through this process, I have bracketed my own experiences in order to understand those of the my subjects (Nieswiadomy, 1993), making it easier to know the right questions to ask as well as easier to interpret the data. I believe that the similarities between researcher and researched have contributed to "thicker description" and greater depth of the study than if researcher and researched held no common ground. On the other hand, our differing and multiple realities will hopefully contribute insights and discoveries that would not be possible if we were completely alike. Given our common

life situations, however, I was cautious to cast the data against the literature and not base my interpretations upon my perspective, preferences, and assumptions.

Data Needs

Given the problem of lack of voice and recognition of single-parent students and the purpose of this study in bringing recognition and voice to the plight of such students, the best-perceived source of data is the single-parent students themselves. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted for this study on April 28, 1999 (Appendix A).

An underlying purpose was to find out from individuals those things that cannot be directly observed or even stated (for example, insights, assumptions, and beliefs); that is, much information is transmitted through body language, tone of voice, pauses, inflections, and even what is not said such as when the subject is changed. Long, in-depth, exploratory interviews with these students was therefore the primary means of data collection. This method has aided in generating a thick description of their cognitions, motivations, and behaviors related to their lives in simultaneous roles of parents and students. "The long interview gives us the opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves" (McCracken, 1988, p. 9). Because this was a qualitative study utilizing long, in-depth interviews, only a small number of respondents comprised my sample (Dukes, 1984; Oiler, 1986). Six female, single-parent students were interviewed. It was determined that the correct sample size had been attained when no significantly new responses were elicited and when responses became repetitive and reinforcing in each subsequent interview (Oiler, 1986). Each interview lasted from 60 to 90 minutes, with the average interview lasting 60 minutes.

Throughout the interview, I was able to continuously assess and evaluate the data being collected, allowing me to redirect, probe, and review the line of inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

There were very few pauses in the conversation aside from reflective pauses, and the students required very little prompting to talk about their lives. The interviews were structured only to the extent that I was sure to ask the three interview questions described in this study. Other than ensuring the presentation of those questions, the interview followed an open-ended format, allowing both the subject and I to respond to each other. This format was used to ensure that study objectives were met while avoiding biasing or influencing the subjects in any way. The students were extremely forthcoming, resulting in interviews that when transcribed filled from eight to 18, single-spaced, typewritten pages.

To further develop the objectives of this study, it would have been helpful to collect data from single-parent students who did not persist in their pursuit of a college degree. As mentioned in the "Limitations" section of this document, although attempts were made to locate and interview these individuals, none were discovered.

Data Sources

Because my education, work and teaching experience, and the bulk of my doctoral training has been in the business discipline, I drew my sample mostly from students majoring in Business, with one majoring in Education. Males and females of all backgrounds were solicited. Five of the students were undergraduates and one was a doctoral student. Educational level was not an issue in this study; the only requirements

for subjects was that they be simultaneously a single parent and a student. Five of the students were drawn a large, southwestern state university and one student from a small, private northeastern college. Three of the students were personally known to me, having been enrolled in Business courses I had taught; one student was a referral from another student in this study; one student was referred by Dr. Adrienne Hyle; and one student was a fellow doctoral student (in the Economics Ph.D. program) at the same institution in which I was enrolled as a doctoral student. Students were solicited through posted notices in classroom buildings at both institutions (Appendix B), announcements in classes I taught at both institutions, word-of-mouth, a community college solicitation, and radio broadcast (Appendix D). Few students responded to these methods, providing some support for the supposition that the single-parent is both in the minority and is a silent minority. No "fail to persist" single-parent students were located, even though the radio broadcast offered payment for the interview.

Data Collection

An attempt was made to find the environment most comfortable to the respondent in order to elicit natural, flowing conversations and responses to interview questions (McCracken, 1988). Toward that end, respondents were invited to choose the times, dates, and places most convenient to them for the interviews. Three of the interviews took place at an upper-scale restaurant serving American cuisine including fresh seafood dishes daily and homemade breads. All respondents were informed ahead of time that the cost of the lunch would be assumed under a research budget. Although these interviews took place in a public setting and were tape-recorded, the three subjects were the most

relaxed and talkative of the group. This might have been due to the fact that a meal was shared with the researcher who also ate lunch, making the event seem more like "going out to lunch" than a formal interview. One interview took place as a long-distance telephone call with both the researcher and respondent speaking from their own homes. This was necessary because the respondent had already been required to move away to fulfill an active-duty military obligation. The cost of the telephone call was assumed by the researcher. One interview took place in the respondent's workplace where she was the manager at a state university; she was able to have student workers run the office in her absence. The interview took place in a back office where no interruptions occurred. The researcher had provided donuts and coffee. One interview took place in the researcher's faculty office. The door was closed, and no interruptions were allowed. Refreshments were offered at this meeting.

Each interview began with an invitation to start eating and become relaxed. As the respondent was eating, I would explain the purpose of the study, the recording procedure, the IRB approval form, the consent form (Appendix C), and the expected length of the interview. Subjects were told that the interview would last approximately an hour but could be extended if they so desired. Five of the six interviews went beyond one hour. I would then ask the participant to read the consent form and sign two copies, retaining one for herself. Next, I would ask if there were any questions and then ask permission to record the interview. By this time the participant had had something to eat and drink and was fairly relaxed. I would start the tape recorder and begin the interview. A unidirectional microphone was attached to the portable tape recorder and positioned within 24 inches of the speaker. This equipment worked very well in recording subjects'

responses in every environment in which it was used. The quality of the equipment ensured that no valuable responses were lost.

Interviews were begun with the first interview question "What is your life as a single-parent student like?" This question always elicited a lengthy response. Toward the middle of the interview another structured question was asked, "How would you describe your future life?" All subjects drew comparisons between their possible future lives both with and without a college degree. Some asked for clarification as to whether I meant a future in which they had graduated from college or one where they had dropped out. My response was to ask for descriptions of both scenarios. At the end of the interview I asked the last structured question, "If you could design all aspects of your life to fit your needs as a single-parent student, how would you design them?" For some who were graduating in the semester of the interview and for the one subject who had already graduated, this proved to be a reflective question, i.e., "I would have. . ." I asked about numbers and ages of children living with them but not children's names. I did not ask marital status, and several of the respondents did not reveal whether they had been married and divorced, or had never been married to the fathers of their children.

These questions were designed to meet the objectives of the study. Objective 1, allowing the respondents "voice," was met by respondents revealing details of their lives as single-parent students through Questions 1 and 3. Objectives 2-4 were met through the attempt of the questions to elicit different selves: current perceived self (Question 1), and feared future self and hoped-for future self (Question 2) in order to test the explanatory and predictive powers of Possible Selves Theory as well as failure of PST to explain single-parent students' motivation to persist in higher education.

The interviews ended with me thanking the subjects for their participation and promising them a copy of the interview to read and correct when it had been transcribed. This input helped establish credibility of the study through member checks. Member checks are necessary to offer all the respondents the opportunity to challenge interpretations or modify factual mistakes (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). None of the respondents returned the transcripts to me with corrections. Following the sixth interview of the study, it was determined that no new categories were emerging and that a saturation of data had been achieved.

Interviews were transcribed as soon as possible after administration, usually taking eight hours per interview to transcribe in a verbatim manner. They were then returned to the subjects as described above for member checks, with a copy remaining with the respondents.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by *a priori* assumptions to determine in what ways the stories of the subjects could be explained by PST. Because a naturalistic inquiry allows the data itself to tell a story, the steps for data analysis are less structured and more open to alternative procedures than are other methodologies (Creswell, 1994).

Data was analyzed concurrently with data collection, data interpretation, and narrative reporting in order to begin early recognition of emergent patterns. This simultaneous data collection, transcription, and analysis meant that I recorded my observations directly on the transcripts as I was typing them. For example, if a

respondent had made a statement with a great deal of vehemence, in the transcription I typed "she spoke loudly, and tears came to her eyes."

Even before transcription took place, analysis was taking place *as* data was collected, because

> one does not know . . . what to ask, or where to look next without
> analyzing data as they are collected. Hunches, working hypotheses, and
> educated guesses direct the investigator's attention to certain data and then
> to refining and/or verifying one's hunches. (Merriam, 1988, p. 123)

Collecting the data through interviews, responding to subjects' responses, and engaging in verbatim transcription myself allowed me to identify emerging patterns. These patterns began to enable me to identify structural invariants of particular types of experience that gave meaning to the study. The identified patterns were examined to determine in what ways PST explained the stories of the subjects. Once identified, these patterns were submitted to different researchers for confirmation in order to bring validity to the study (Dukes, 1984).

In accordance with one objective of the study, the data were also analyzed with a view toward uncovering the elements of single-parent students' lives that did not fit PST. This is a necessary step in a qualitative study when using an *a priori* theory because data gathered subsequent to erection of the theoretical framework might not fit the frame. An explanation of the failure of data to fit the frame is necessary in order to evaluate the usefulness of the theory and to seek other explanations. If a significant portion of the data does not fit the *a priori* theoretical framework, it may be necessary to conclude that the theory is not supported by the data, or, that the data is not explained by the theory.

Throughout the data analysis process I reviewed the literature to compare it with the data I was collecting. The lens that I was using to view the data, PST, was well supported in the literature and raised more questions that guided further investigation. Each subsequent interview that was analyzed fed into this recursive loop of comparison and development of more questions as findings from the investigations were compared to the original categories. Analytical categories began to emerge through the constant comparison of data from each interview. Any data that challenged established or original conceptualizations was more closely examined (Goodman, 1984). Recurring regularities, or repetitions in key words or phrases, served as the basis for defining categories. The categories reflected both the major elements of PST, that is, recognition of different states of "selves" as well as the state of giving "voice" to the single-parent student.

Research Criteria

Qualitative research must follow certain criteria to be deemed trustworthy and "scientific." These criteria have been determined to be: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the relationship between the constructed realities generated by the respondents and the interpretation and transmittance of those realities by the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). A credible outcome of the research would be one that "adequately represents both the areas in which these realities converge and the points on which they diverge" (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 30). Credibility for this study was

established by my conscious efforts to separate myself and my experiences from the data and my attempts to accurately depict what the research subject had submitted (Erlandson et al., 1993). I transcribed the interviews myself so that I could totally immerse myself in the data. The transcriptions were verbatim, omitting nothing. Nonverbal communication such as hand gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and tears were recorded.

Peer debriefing and member checks were also used to establish credibility. Peer debriefing allowed outside professionals to analyze the study and provide feedback about the findings and conclusions in order to challenge, refine and redirect the process of the study as necessary. Doctoral students in the disciplines of Accounting, Economics, and Marketing as well as faculty members at Keuka College were invited to read and critique the study. Member checks were carried out by the subjects themselves through the reading and correcting of the typed transcripts of their interviews. This allowed them to test categories, interpretations, and conclusions of the inquiry throughout and upon completion of the study (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which a study's findings can be applied in other situations or with other respondents (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A study is transferable if there are similarities between the original context and the new context. In a qualitative study, a thick—full bodied, detail laden—description allows observers from other situations to determine the relevance of certain observations for their contexts and to form "working hypotheses" to guide their line of inquiry (Erlandson et al., 1993). Thick descriptions of contextual data were provided in this study with enough detail and

accuracy to allow the reader to recreate the scenes in their minds. To provide a thick description I have provided an accurate depiction of the context to allow the readers to put themselves in the place of the researcher (Erlandson et al., 1993).

This study took advantage of purposive sampling, which permits the researcher to select the sample to fit the purpose of the study. I chose individuals based on their abilities to provide insights and understanding of the phenomenon under study as well as provide typical and divergent data (Erlandson et al., 1993). The only criteria the respondents needed to fulfill was their status as a single-parent while they were enrolled in a degree program. They could have been of either gender, any race or socioeconomic background, and at any level in college at any college. Both the specificity and broadness of the criteria contributed to the transferability of the study.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency of the results. If the study were replicated under the same conditions with the same subjects, dependability would be impaired if methodological changes and shifts in construction did not produce the same results. In a qualitative study, dependability refers to the reliability and verification of the data collection process, verified by an "audit trail" that provides a detailed record of the process of the study (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Using a computer spreadsheet and daily planner, I kept a reflexive journal to provide a detailed record of interview times, dates, places, real names and pseudonyms, lengths of interviews, and notes on the interviews themselves (for example, in the category of "overall tone of interview." I may have recorded "open and friendly," or

"reserved"). Each audiotape was labeled with the pseudonym and date of interview as was the written transcription of the tape. These tapes and transcripts will remain locked in Dr. Hyle's office for a period of three years. My journal entries were constantly reviewed as I analyzed the data (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Confirmability

Confirmability is the degree to which the results are the product of the focus of inquiry and not the biases of the researcher. There was a danger of compassionate contamination of the data and results because of the similarity of the researcher's and respondents' background and resulting empathy. The advantage of qualitative research, however, is that "the naturalistic researcher does not attempt to ensure that observations are free from contamination by the researcher but rather to trust in the 'confirmability' of the data themselves" (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 34).

As with dependability, confirmability is relayed through the audit trail. I developed an audit trail of interview audiotapes, interview transcripts, notes, journal material and spreadsheets, materials that will be stored in a locked cabinet in Dr. Hyle's office for three years. This audit trail enables the auditor to ascertain that the conclusions, interpretations, and recommendations can be traced to their sources and that they are supported by the inquiry (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Significance of the Study

This study holds significance for several segments of the population, from the individual level to the policy level. The significance to the subjects themselves is that

they are allowed to tell their stories to an unbiased observer from outside their circle of family and friends, thus giving them "voice." This opportunity affirmed to them that their situations have been noticed and are worthy of study. A hoped-for outcome of this study is that the voice of these students will be heard, noted, and responded to by those in positions of decision-making authority. At the very least, these students may be motivated to continue, knowing that their struggles have been recognized.

Research

The nontraditional student segment of higher education populations has been under-researched in relation to the issue of retention of college students. Because census data point to the increase in college populations coming from nontraditional students, it would seem that studying the cognition and motivation of this segment of college students would be a positive direction to take for research in higher education. Additionally, whatever emerges from this study may be transferable to other segments of the college population and thus become a useful tool for future research.

Practice

College and university administrators at all levels of higher education may benefit from the results of this study. It is common knowledge that administrators are concerned with the issue of retention. This study brings recognition and gives voice to a previously underrepresented group of college students, albeit a group of highly motivated, yet challenged group. If administrators learn what factors help single-parent students stay in school and earn their degrees, they may be able to better assist this group and improve

retention. They may also be able to transfer these results to other groups, thus enhancing

retention of all groups of students.

Theory

The theory of possible selves as an explanation for the motivation and persistence

of nontraditional, single-parent students will enhance its theoretical contribution to

motivation theories as a bridge between cognition and performance. Further support for

PST may broaden its application to other disciplines as well as enhance its usefulness in

education and industry.

Society

The obvious benefit to society of finding ways to improve college retention of the

single-parent student is in keeping their families above the poverty level and off welfare

rolls. This is a generational benefit, as parents who have attended college themselves are

commonly recognized as more likely to raise children who also attend college. As the

most likely candidate in our society for welfare is the single mother, it would seem that

public policy would concern itself with access and retention issues in higher education for

single-parent students.

Summary

This chapter introduced and defined the problem of the persistence of a

heretofore-neglected group of students in higher education. It narrowed the study to one

subpopulation of interest: the single-parent student, and gave evidence to support the

need for such a study. The purpose of this study is to examine the life of the single-parent student, give voice to such a student, and explore whether Possible Selves Theory explains cognitive and motivational factors that contribute to the persistence of such a student in pursuit of a higher education degree.

Reporting

Chapter II reviews the literature. Chapter III introduces the respondents and presents the data from transcribed interviews with respondents. themselves. Chapter IV provides the analysis of the data, developing the "thick description" necessary in a qualitative study and demonstrating emerging patterns which provide the foundation for data analysis. Chapter V includes the summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A useful examination of the literature for this dissertation includes a review of studies conducted on the retention of students in colleges and universities to determine the etiology, effects, importance, and shortcomings of such studies in the current higher education environment. Because this study is concerned with a special group of nontraditional higher education students, the single-parent student, a review of the literature of nontraditional students is necessary to determine what coverage has been given to the subjects of interest in this study. Possible Selves Theory, as the *a priori* theory for this work, will be reviewed to explore past uses and usefulness in social science studies and to determine the appropriateness of its application for this and future studies. There are three categories for literature review: persistence, nontraditional students, and Possible Selves Theory.

Persistence

The subject of persistence (also termed retention and continuance, and conversely, dropping out, discontinuance, and student departure) in higher education has been a popular topic for study since Vincent Tinto began his 20-plus year study of retention in the 1970s, attempting to link persistence of college students with the actual learning

27

experience (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). Tinto has continued the studies into the 1990s, expanding his theme of the link between persistence and learning by focusing on the college experience as a community learning, fully participative experience for both students and faculty (Tinto, 1993). A synthesis of Tinto's work may be summarized as describing an organizational and institutional redesign of the higher education learning experience itself (for example, classes as cohort groups, outside small group work, interdisciplinary studies, thematic courses, and calendar changes) which he feels will cause students to feel more involved in their own education, thus more committed to completing their degrees (see, for example, Tinto, 1975, 1982, 1990, 1993, 1994, 1998; Tinto & Cullen, 1973; Tinto & Sherman, 1974). Tinto's theory of student retention posits that individual and contextual factors affecting students are not as important a contributor to their continuance in school as are organizational and institutional factors (Tinto, 1975, 1982).

Some researchers of student persistence have conducted empirical studies or developed theories which are either different from or contradict Tinto's findings. Alexander Astin's theory of student retention is based on student involvement from an individual, rather than an organizational perspective, referring to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy students invest in their college experience (1984). Astin has exhaustively studied the American college student and the issue of persistence, tying individual and institutional factors of persistence together with statistical findings, resulting in Astin's theory of student retention and producing formulas for estimating any institution's expected retention rate (Astin, 1972, 1984, 1987, 1996, 1997, 1998; Dey & Astin, 1993).

Researchers have applied both Astin's and Tinto's theories of student retention with mixed results. One study supported Astin's proposals that working off-campus less than two hours a week and receiving financial aid (individual factors) were major components of student persistence, but contradicted Tinto's assertion that finances are not a major factor in degree completion (Janes, 1997). Other than the assumptions regarding financial aid, however, the findings of the study corroborated Tinto's theory. A dissertation study failed to completely support Tinto's theory, finding that retention is clearly related to a multitude of individual factors such as socioeconomic status, family background, and race as well as institutional factors such as counseling, advising, and mentoring programs (Fries-Britt, 1994). Using Chicanos as subjects, another study challenged Tinto's theory, finding that the normative implications of institutional factors were no more important than Chicano student characteristics in their persistence in higher education (Velasquez, 1998).

A decline in enrollment and budget crises of the 1980s stimulated further interest in the issue of student retention (Adams & Palmer, 1993; Bowen, 1980). In comparing the huge growth in student enrollments of the 1960's with the decline of the 1980s, Kerr notes that the percentage of all enrollments in Research Universities I fell from nearly 20 to under 10 percent (1995, p. 116). The difference between the explosive increases in total student enrollment in higher education from 1960 to 1970 (221%) and from 1970 to 1980 (70%), the 13% increase in the entire decade between 1980 and 1990 signaled a need for attention to recruitment and retention efforts (Kerr, 1995, p. 143).

Both early and later studies have approached the issue of persistence with a goal of identifying factors which contribute to either retention or dropping out of college, such

as financial status, family support, child care, race, gender, age, and institutional type

(Astin, 1996; Borden, Burton, Evenbeck, & Williams, 1997; Ford, 1997; Johnson, 1996;

Sadler, Cohen, & Kockesen, 1997; Wallace & Abel, 1997; Wilson, Mason, & Ewing,

1997). Many studies aim to develop strategies designed to keep students in school such

as financial support, counseling, and mentoring programs (Borden, et al., 1997; Martinez,

1996; Nerad & Miller, 1996; Parker, 1996). Some studies, especially those

commissioned by states' boards of higher education, seem to be designed solely for

statistical purposes—to identify and count those students who continue to degree

completion and those who do not (*AASCU/Salli Mae National Retention Project: 1993

Survey Results*, 1994; Astin, 1996; Beachler & La, 1997; Clagett, 1997; *Retention and

Graduation Rates at Maryland Four-Year Public Institutions,* 1998; *Student Retention and

Graduation Rates: 1986-1996 Entering Students,* 1998). Other studies have attempted to

target the productivity concerns that some key constituencies hold about the costs of

higher education and the need to either justify those costs or show the associated

benefits—state legislatures and the public in particular (Burd, 1997; Van Dusen, 1997).

Further attesting to the importance of persistence as a critical issue in higher education is

the devotion of a serial journal to the subject—*Journal of College Student Retention:

Research, Theory & Practice*, published four times a year in Amityville, New York by

Baywood Publishing Company, Inc.

Nontraditional Students

Early persistence studies of students other than the traditional 18-to-23 year old,

straight-from-high school, unmarried, predominately male and predominately white

student usually defined nontraditional students as those holding "minority" classification. This may have been due to the 1960s and 1970s decades of great social change as evidenced by student activism against racial injustice on university campuses, leading to the focus of many early persistence studies on minority students, primarily African-American, Hispanic, and Asian students—a focus which has continued into the 1990s (Altbach, 1990; Astin, 1998; Carter & Wilson, 1995; Janes, 1997; Kerr, 1995; Nora, Kraemer, & Itzen, 1997). The Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and subsequent affirmative action requirements led colleges and universities such as the University of California at Berkeley, University of Virginia, Pennsylvania State University, Florida colleges and universities, Earlham College in Indiana, and the University of Nebraska to devote resources to recruiting minority, especially African-American, students to campuses (D'Souza, 1992). These efforts took the form of different admission standards for minority students and offering financial incentives to minority groups (D'Souza, 1992).

Attracting minority students and keeping them in the university until degree attainment, however, did not seem to occur. The University of California at Berkeley commissioned a retention study of what they termed "special action" students (those admitted under affirmative action policies) between 1978 and 1982. According to the Office of Student Research, Office of Admissions, UC-Berkeley, 1988, the study showed that 31% of the special action students graduated in five years, compared with 61% of the regularly-admitted students (D'Souza, 1992). In D'Souza's interviews for his book, a Berkeley admissions officer describes the imbalance between recruitment and retention:

> Former admissions officer Travers said that the black dropout rate at
> Berkeley shows that "the admissions process is not perfect." Berkeley

admissions director Robert Bailey says "Our retention problem shows that we still have a long ways to go." (1992, p. 39)

The American Council on Education sponsors annual studies which continue to provide evidence of problems in retaining minority students (see, for example Carter & Wilson, 1995). States' boards of higher education also continue to monitor retention problems of minorities, showing that persistence studies of minority nontraditional students are ongoing because graduation rates for minority students are still below desirable levels (see, for example, *Report on the Representation of Women and Minorities in Texas Public Institutions of Higher Education, 1994-1996,* 1997; *Oklahoma Higher Education Standards: Admission/Retention Assessment: Reasons Standards Were Strengthened. Enhancing Student Preparation for College. Improving College Student Performance. Indicators of Positive Student Performance,* 1998).

Basing his findings on National Center for Education Statistics (1995), Van Dusen found that campus demographic patterns were changing to reflect a range of student characteristics other than minority status either not represented, or represented in different proportions in previous decades. These characteristics included gender, with women in higher education increasing from slightly under 50% in 1978 to over 55% by the mid-1990s, and the number of students over the age of 25 steadily rising to a peak of 44% of total enrollments in 1991 (1997, p. 6).

Compared with retention studies of minorities and women (as a gender classification), older and returning students have received little attention in persistence studies of nontraditional students. This lack of attention is puzzling in view of the fact that student demographics are changing toward an increase in older students and those

returning to school after an interruption for either child raising or working (Altbach, 1998; Astin, 1998; Beachler, 1997; Bureau of the Census, 1990).

Recent studies are beginning to examine those who have not typically been the focus of either traditional-student or nontraditional-student (such as minorities) retention studies. Some are focusing on women returning to school after interrupting college to raise families (Lamb, 1998) and other factors such as student's parental status (Crum, 1994) and age (Colletta-Fasullo, 1998; Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1994; Martinez, 1996). One study, commissioned by the American Association of University Women Educational foundation, found that a large number of women enter and leave school in a noncontinuous time frame because of factors such as parental responsibilities, academic anxieties, burdensome credit-card debt, and insufficient knowledge about available financial aid (Haag, 1999). The same study found that although adult students comprise nearly half of all college enrollment now, significantly more women (18%) than men (3%) felt that their age posed a barrier to college.

Large urban areas which are attempting to reduce welfare rolls by government sponsorship of higher education have stimulated studies of the dual-parent and single-parent nontraditional students. These studies have found the availability of child care to be a major factor in the retention of these nontraditional students (Beachler, 1997; Keyes, 1995; Ritze, 1996). A study on role conflict, overload and contagion in adult women university students with families and jobs (a combination of nontraditional characteristics) showed that lower income increased their vulnerability to role conflict because of the perceived intensity of student demands (Home, 1998). This study concluded that conflict and overload could be eased by distance education.

Very few persistence studies have focused on parental status as a factor in student retention. There are almost no theory-driven, empirical studies of cognitive factors that influence the single-parent student's motivation to stay in school and obtain a college degree. Studies of cognitive factors contributing to the persistence of nontraditional students in higher education usually choose the generic "adult students" as their "nontraditional" subjects. One such study concluded that adult students enrolled in a Saturday College Program designed for older adults wishing to complete their baccalaureate degrees by attending classes at a midsize private university in the Northeast did engage in cognitive evaluations (of rewards, investments of time and money, investments represented by potential losses upon leaving, and few perceived acceptable alternatives). The study determined that such cognitive evaluation was a significant predictor of commitment for adult students (Cini & Fritz, 1996).

Possible Selves Theory

When an individual knows why she wants to do something a certain way, can visualize herself following through with that knowledge to a desired state, and then behaves in such a manner as to attempt to achieve that state, a link or bridge has been formed between cognition and motivation. "Motivational attention" can refer to the allocation of cognitive resources to a possible self, to the pathways leading to that end, and to the consequences of arriving there (Schwarz, 1990). "Possible Selves Theory" (PST) further refines the cognitive-motivation pathway by specifying actual possible self states that can be visualized.

Research in the area of self-concept within the disciplines of psychology and sociology first gave rise to the conceptualization of "possible selves" theory as a link between cognition and motivation in driving behavior, with "feelings" as moderator in the relationship (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The self-concept/possible self model has been helpful in explaining student persistence in several studies where students were asked to visualize themselves in the future both with and without a college degree (Heath, 1994; McClain, 1997; Megerian, 1994; Sandler, 1998).

Markus and Nurius defined possible selves as "individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming" (1986, p. 954). Although intimately connected to a current or now self, a possible self is defined as different and separable.

PST differs from role theory in that the individual actually perceives herself as different and separate persons, whereas in role theory the individual sees herself as one person experiencing conflict among the multiple roles in his or her life (Nelson & Quick, 1994). PST offers an explanation of an individual's behavior by studying the actual manifestations of different selves through identification and observation. Specific behaviors are related to specific selves in a causal manner, that is, the manifestations of a specific persona (possible self) results in behaviors congruent with the needs of that persona. A difference between role theory and PST is that role theory deals more with the perceptual while PST deals more with the actual behavioral manifestations of perceived selves.

Goal attainment was later added to PST as a necessary component in the construction of a "possible self" in which one is different from the now self and in which

one realizes the goal (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989). Curry, Trew, Turner, and Hunter found

that possible selves have a very concrete impact on how actions are initiated and

structured, both to realize possible selves or to prevent the actuation of negative possible

selves. As they state, "possible selves cause the person to focus on the activities

necessary to achieve the desired goal, and to persevere in pursuit of the goal" (1994, p.

134). The goal is an effective regulator of behavior only when an appropriate

representation of a possible self exists—the chosen possible self drives motivation and

goal attainment. Motivation, especially in goal attainment, was the central concern of the

early possible selves models proposed by Markus and her colleagues (Markus & Nurius,

1986; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). This link between PST and

goal attainment in retention of nontraditional students in higher education was supported

by a study of 262 undergraduates which found that nontraditional students strongly

endorsed learning goals; the goal orientation was found to be related to academic

performance and academic performance to persistence (Eppler & Harju, 1997).

A link between self and performance was given by Markus and Ruvolo's model of

the role of the self-system in goal-directed behavior (1989). As an individual approaches

a goal, positive possible selves which represent the individual in the desired state may

dominate the working self-concept (Markus & Nurius, 1986)—that is, the current self-

concept as shaped by past self-conceptions, the social or work/school environment, and

the individual's response in similar circumstances. If the positive possible selves (selves

the individual wants to be or become, such as college graduate) can be maintained, and

conflicting possible selves can be suppressed, the individual's actions may be energized,

active, and organized by this possible self, resulting in effective performance.

On the other hand, when negative possible selves (those that an individual either

does not want to attend to or fears becoming, such as college dropout or welfare mother)

dominate the working self-concept, performance may become disorganized and

counterproductive unless or until a positive possible self can be recruited that will counter

the negative self. It is possible to link PST to persistence of the single-parent student in

higher education using Markus and Ruvolo's model below (Figure 1). The model helps

to explain the effect that different possible selves may have on performance (that is

continuance toward a college degree).
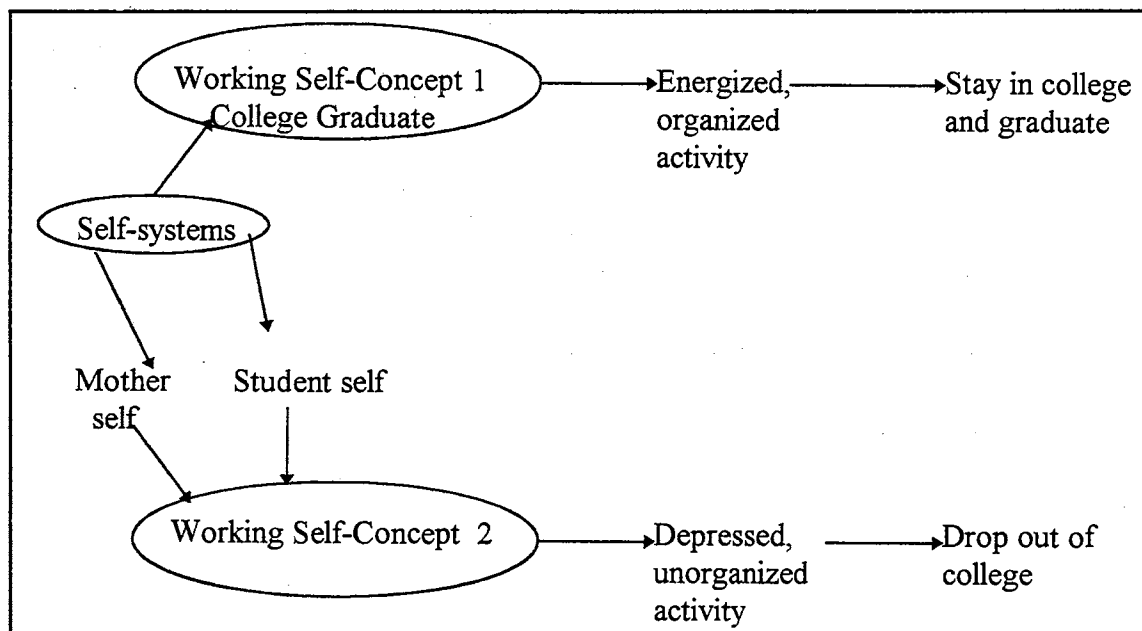
Figure 1. The Role of the Self-System in Goal-Directed Behavior.
Adapted from Markus and Ruvolo, 1989.

Markus and Nurius developed the possible selves concept through an examination of what they alternately termed self-concept, self-view, self-knowledge, and the self-system (1986, p. 961). Their theory on possible selves was developed to address the theories of motivation which have not adequately examined the importance of self-knowledge in the relationship between the cognitively perceived self and motivation. According to Markus and Nurius, possible selves provide the self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction to these dynamics, thus providing the link between self-concept (cognition) and motivation.

Support for PST was established by early empirical studies. A number of empirical studies were carried out to test the existence of possible selves and their effects on motivation. Significant results showed that individuals can reflect on their possible selves, that these selves are not identical with descriptions of their current or now selves, and that positive possible selves may motivate students to persist in college (Curry, Trew, Turner, & Hunter, 1994; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995). These studies were important in demonstrating that different possible selves exist which may conflict with each other and which have a motivational effect on behavioral outcomes.

Evidence of a linkage between possible selves and college performance and persistence was provided through a series of studies of a total of 217 undergraduate students at the University of Michigan (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). Methodologies of these studies involved imagery manipulations and tasks involving effort and persistence. The results of those studies suggest an important role for future-oriented (what the self would like to become) representations of the self in performance.

Employment choice and performance in college as influenced by possible selves perceptions were demonstrated in a study of adolescent girls taking advanced level subjects (Curry, Trew, Turner, & Hunter, 1994). This study is important to single-parent student retention studies as it provides evidence of the serious conflict between the student self and the parent self. Although many of the young women were taking advanced-level academic courses in preparation for higher education and careers, in this study they actively chose marriage and family as a central life domain, with employment a secondary domain. This would indicate that although some women may enter college or return to college strictly in the student self, their motivation may easily shift to the parent self when child-care issues conflict with school requirements, which could possibly result in lowered college performance and perhaps dropping out altogether.

Evidence that PST can explain the motivation to obtain a college degree is provided by a dissertation study of college women who completed exercises to visualize their future occupational paths both with and without a college degree. The study showed that a visualization of a positive future occupational self made possible by obtaining a college degree enhanced motivation to continue in college. Positive motivation (to continue) also was obtained by the visualization of a negative, or feared future possible selfCone who dropped out of college (Chalk, 1996). Further support for a link between academic achievement, motivation, and future selves is provided by a study of 289 high-school students of both sexes. The statistical analysis of the tests used (the Rosenberg Self-esteem Inventory and the Achievement Motivation Questionnaire) revealed that those who endorsed specific, elaborated positive selves outperformed the other groups in

academic achievement. There was also indication that this group of students showed more persistence on task (Leondari, Syngollitou, & Kiosseoglou, 1998).

The link between possible selves, self-esteem, and motivation was tested in 254 male and female Japanese undergraduate students to find that there were clearly-discerned selves (like-to-be self, probable self, and important-to-become self) selves which contributed to motivation (Miyamoto, Nakada, & Horino, 1994). This and other studies are important in providing support for the role PST plays in retention of students in higher education (see also Belz, 1993).

Summary

Demonstrating the presence of possible selves and their effects on behavior will lend support to PST. This study speculates that there are separate and clearly identifiable possible selves in single-parent college students that motivate them to persist in degree attainment: the feared future self without the college degree and the hoped-for future self with the college degree. The literature to date supports links between cognitively-conceived possible selves, motivation, and performance in college students. What has not been examined is the effect of these cognitions and motivations in the single-parent student and the resultant effect on persistence.

CHAPTER III

DATA PRESENTATION

The purpose of this study is to examine the life of the single-parent student, give voice to such a student, and explore whether Possible Selves Theory explains cognitive and motivational factors that contribute to the persistence of such a student in pursuit of a higher education degree. A qualitative methodology, using the long interview as the research tool, was selected to perform this study due to its ability to explore the multiple, constructed realities of the subjects and deal with the entire knowledge utilization process in an explanatory manner using Possible Selves Theory (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin & Gwaltney, 1982). The long interview as a research tool was utilized because of its ability to uncover realities that are multiple, constructed, and holistic by giving respondents the freedom and opportunity to express their life's experiences in their own words and manners (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McCracken, 1988). These interviews were tape recorded on audiotape and transcribed verbatim by the researcher as soon as possible after the interview. The advantage of the researcher transcribing as well as taping the interviews was the constant and repeated immersion in the data which gave rise to greater understanding as well as new insights. It also allowed the researcher to document not only the words that were said as data results, but also the manner and tone in which the words were spoken, a feat not possible through the collection of quantitative data alone.

Presentation of the data in this chapter occurs in two parts, the first of which consists of profiles of the respondents. It was deemed necessary to present background information of the respondents before presenting their answers in order to give context to their responses to interview questions (Neuman, 2000). The second part of this chapter organizes the data into categories that fulfilled the objectives of the study:

1.   Self as Mother: data which provides the thick description of the single-parent students' lives who identified their current and future primary selves as "mother" (Objectives 1, 2, and 4; Interview Questions 1, 2; and 3);

2.   Self as Primary: data that provides the thick description of the subjects who identified their current and future selves as striving toward self-actualization (Objectives 1, 2, and 4; Interview Questions 1 and 2); and,

3.   Differences: Data that is different from what the majority of the respondents seem to be saying (Objective 3, all interview questions).

Reporting

Data are presented in two parts: 1) respondents' profiles, and, 2) categorical representations of the objectives of the study. The categories which emerged from the data to represent the objectives of the study are: 1) Self as Mother; 2) Self as Primary; and, 3) differences between respondents.

Respondent Profiles

Socioeconomically, based on their incomes, all of the respondents lived below the poverty level while attending college, even though at least two of the single-parent students received child support. One of the students lived with her parent or parents the entire time while attending college, two others had lived with their mothers some of the time. All received some form of financial aid, mostly government loans administered through the financial aid offices of their colleges. Four of the six respondents relied on a parent for some amount of child care, whether it be for a weekend, a few hours a week, or the entire time the single-parent student was at work or in school. All of the respondents also utilized non-relative baby-sitters.

One respondent had graduated with a baccalaureate degree in Business Administration five months before the interview, two respondents were in the last semester of their baccalaureate degree programs in Business Administration, one respondent was at the A.B.D. stage of her Economics Ph.D. program, one respondent was one semester away from completing her Business baccalaureate degree, and one respondent was in her second year of her undergraduate Education program. All names are pseudonyms, used to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Table I summarizes the demographic data of the respondents.

TABLE I

DEMOGRAPHIC STATISTICS OF RESPONDENTS
AT TIME OF INTERVIEW

Name[1]	Age[2]	No. & Age[3]	Race	Socio-Economic[4]	Fin. Aid	Held Job	Hours Worked[5]	Avg Credit Hours[6]	Lived with parent[7]
Alex	28	1 - 4	White	Poverty level	Yes	Yes	35	15	No
Karen	40	1 - 15	White	Poverty level	Yes	Yes	30-35	15	No
Rebecca	29	1 -3	White	Poverty level	Yes	Yes	12	18	No
Felicity	40	2 - 9, 12	Middle Eastern	Poverty level	Yes	Yes	20	12	No
Annie	28	2 - 2, 3	White	Poverty level	Yes	No	–	9	Yes
Susan	27	1 - 4	White	Poverty level	Yes	No	–	21	Yes

Note: 1=Name is the pseudonym of the respondent, 2=Age refers to the respondent's age at time of the interview, 3=Number and age refers to the number of children the respondent had living with her while attending college and the ages of the children at the time of the interview, 4=Socioeconomic status counts income earned by the respondent herself and does not include financial aid, 5=Hrs. worked counts hours worked per week, 6=Avg. credit hours refers to average number of credit hours taken per semester, 7=Lived with parent refers to having lived full-time with a parent or parents while attending school.

Alex

At the time of our 90 minute interview, held over lunch at a local restaurant, Alex was a 28-year-old divorced mother of an almost four-year-old daughter. Alex was in her last semester of her undergraduate program in Business Administration. Her daughter was born to Alex and her husband at the beginning of Alex's sophomore year. At the end of that semester, when the baby was four months old, Alex divorced her husband. She and her daughter had moved in and out of her mother's home several times during Alex' college years and relied heavily on her mother for child care. Alex had worked two jobs

over the years she had been in school: waitressing three nights a week and working in an office two days a week for a total of 30-35 hours a week. She usually carried 15 credit hours per semester of coursework and commuted one hour each way to school. Alex characterized her years as a single-parent student by this summary comment: "I just think you're supposed to set things up and go on. It really does make you stronger if you don't die. There are days you wish you would, but I have always balanced things really well" (5-4-99, 3). Alex had accepted a full-time job with the company she had been working part-time for and would be moving to Texas at semester's end.

Karen

At the time of our two-hour interview Karen was a 40-year-old white woman, divorced for three years after 15 years of marriage, moving from the small Southern town where she had lived with her husband (a retired military man) to the midsized state university town. She had four children, one of whom chose to live with her when she became a freshman in college, enrolling in a baccalaureate degree program in Business Administration. Karen graduated with a B.B.A. in December of 1998, five months before this interview took place. When this interview took place she was working as the manager of Technical Support Services at the state university from which she had graduated.

When Karen had returned to college she had attempted to remain the custodial parent of her son, but after struggling with his behavior and school problems for three years she allowed him to move in with his father, living in a town approximately one hour's drive from her university. While Karen was going to college full-time (more than

12 credit hours per semester), she was working 30-40 hours a week, first at a convenience store, then as a student worker at her university. During her last two years of college, Karen and her son moved in with another woman and her children to share child care and expenses. When Karen spoke of the years she was a student and custodial parent of her son, she often got tears in her eyes, and spoke very quietly and hesitantly. Due to work demands, school demands, and difficulties her son was having, she made a decision in her third year of college to send her son to live with his father, one hour away. When asked how she felt when she had to make that decision, she replied, with tears in her eyes, "It was terrible." She had no difficulty answering the Questions 1 and 3 (What is your life as a single-parent student like?, and How would you describe your future life?) but could not give an articulate answer to Question 2 ("If you could design all aspects of your life to fit your needs as a single-parent student, how would you design them?). Karen's overall demeanor was reserved, hesitant, and quiet, although she was expressed her desire to "do whatever I can to help you out" (5-19-99, 1). When asked to choose a pseudonym for this study, she demurred, saying it was fine to use her name. I chose the pseudonym for her.

Rebecca

Rebecca was a 29-year-old white woman who was completing her last semester of college at the time of the interview. Even before completion of her B.B.A. in Management, her National Guard status had changed to active duty, and she had been transferred to Ft. Hood in Killeen, Texas. Our interview took place via a long distance telephone call and lasted about one hour.

Rebecca had begun college as a freshman and the mother of a newborn baby. She and the baby lived by themselves, with Rebecca relying on a series of baby-sitters to provide child care. When required to fulfill Guard duty obligations, Rebecca took her son to her mother's home, one hour away from where she was living. Other than her enrollment in the National Guard, Rebecca worked off campus at a minimum wage job an average of 12 hours a week. She was enrolled an average of 18 hours a semester during her four years at a midsized state university. She received financial aid, distributed as loans through the university's financial aid office, and complained that the total package was reduced when she received scholarship awards by the scholarship award amount. Rebecca's responses to all questions were soft-spoken, calm, and matter-of-fact. She did not speak of the father of her child nor complain of her life's situation other than to mention financial concerns during her single-parent years. She fully answered each interview question.

Felicity

The only graduate student in the survey, Felicity was a 40-year-old recently divorced woman with two male children, ages nine and 12 at the time of this interview. Felicity had begun her graduate work while married and commuted one hour to the state university where she was enrolled. She had kept the house after the divorce and continued to commute for six months, then moved to the university town, then moved back again into the original family home. She gave custody of her two boys to their father to avoid a threatened custody battle, but the children lived with her every other week, alternate weekends, and half the summer. Felicity's job consisted of teaching six

credit hours of undergraduate courses in her discipline, requiring a total time investment of about 20 hours a week. She usually took nine graduate credit hours per semester. She was on schedule toward anticipated graduation in May 2000, having completed her graduate course work, taken qualifying exams, and presented her dissertation proposal.

Felicity was born and raised in a Middle East country and had moved to the United States to go to an American university. She received her undergraduate degree and married at that time. She returned to school to begin work on a graduate degree (MBA) when her children were one and three years old. Her husband was American-born. He was the only father in the group who was actively involved and spent significant time with his children.

Felicity made contradictory statements several times when describing the times her children are living with her and how she reconciles getting work done and spending time with the children. For example:

> But that period, I basically devote myself to them because I know it's temporary and they're going to go to their dad's the next week or whatever. I don't get a whole lot done when they are around. I still can get things done because they have their own activities. When they are with me, it's not like they are with me all the time in the house, so I do have. . .but I want to enjoy them. So, it's being between a rock and a hard place, because I know they're going to be gone next weekend, so I don't really want to work. (6-7-99, 1)

These contradictory remarks were characteristic of the entire interview.

Annie

Annie was a 28-year-old divorced woman who had finished one semester of college before her marriage and was returning to college in another state after she left her

husband of three years. At the time of her return to college at the state university where her father taught, she was the custodial parent of a 16-month-old boy and a three-month-old boy. Her divorce became final the semester before her return to college. The children's father never paid child support and Annie had his parental rights legally terminated. Annie and the children had lived with Annie's parents since she left her husband. Annie did not work outside the home and began her return to school taking six hours per semester. In the last two years of college, she averaged ten credit hours per semester. Annie's "agreement" with her parents was

> Part of our deal was that they would help me with child care, because my biggest thing was I didn't want to stick them in daycare. Knowing that my mom had agreed to watch them, and as long as I'm in school and doing well she has no problem with that. I said I wanted to always be able to work my schedules to where she wasn't with them all day, but that I could do it and not have to put them in daycare. That's what we had agreed to. Knowing that I could do it that way really made it easier for me. When I came here I knew I was either going to have to get a job or go back to school. My biggest fear was, what am I going to do with the kids. (6-21-99, 5)

Susan

Susan, a 26-year-old white woman had begun her college career in the traditional way: going to college directly from high school. She went to a community college for two years before becoming pregnant with her son while unmarried. Susan moved back into her parents' home in the most economically disadvantaged county of a northeastern state. Before Susan's son was born, her father died, and her mother took elderly residents into the home as her livelihood. Susan's son was born with birth defects, and at 10 months old went into a coma, requiring hospitalization from September to December and

subsequent corrective surgery at Boston Children's Hospital. The child continues therapy

and special schooling. In the child's second year, Susan returned to college at a four-year,

private liberal arts college in her county, relying solely on college financial aid,

government support, and her mother (although she paid her mother $125 a month rent) to

support her and her son. At the time of the interview Susan was in the last year of her

undergraduate program in Business Administration. I was her adviser and taught one of

her courses. I became aware that she was a single-parent student after I polled my classes

to find out which students had children. I invited Susan to become a part of this study

and she willingly accepted.

Susan's interview lasted two hours. She required very little prompting, but spoke

freely about her son's disabilities, her life as a single-parent student, and her hopes for the

future. Susan accepted herself as what she called a person of poverty but expressed her

desire to change that image:

> POP, the poverty person, the welfare person, the single parent . . .I mean a
> lot of people have ideologies about. . .and when you put all of those words
> together you don't picture a pretty woman, a very intelligent woman. . .I'm
> well kept. People are very surprised to find out that my son and I are very
> . . . poverty. There is no way I could work and go to school and be a mom
> and therapist [for her son] also. I plan to graduate this spring, and I am
> going to be working for a company in Geneva for financial consulting
> training. The company is training me. They've provided me with the
> books, and I go through so many of their classes. They'll help me get my
> SEC license, I'll finish college this spring, then I'll get my master's because
> I want to teach. Teaching college is my ultimate goal. (9-14-99, 6, 8)

Data Categories

Five of the six respondents made clear distinctions between the self they

perceived themselves to be while a single-parent student (the current self), the self they

were afraid they might become if they did not persist in pursuing their college degrees (the feared future self), and the self they hoped to become once they had attained their college degrees (the hoped-for future self) (Alex, Annie, Karen, Rebecca, and Susan). Only Felicity did not distinguish between separate and identifiable selves and did not describe her current and future situations entirely within the context of her life with her children.

When data were reviewed, they appeared to cluster into two predominating categories of possible selves: a "mother self" and a "self as primary." Those respondents with a strongly-identified mother self perceived their identities to be defined by their responsibilities toward their children for all possible selves: current (single-parent student self), hoped-for future (college degree holder, empowered, financially stable self), and feared future (degree-less, poverty-stricken self). When respondents spoke of persistence difficulties, the majority of these difficulties were experienced by the mother self in the child-parent-school-work relationship. Self as primary emerged from strong descriptions of respondents' needs to see themselves as separate from their children, their families, and anyone else. Examples came from Felicity and Susan: ". . .my own person and that is what identity is all about. I don't think I should be forgotten. I love being a mom, but that's not all I am" (Felicity, 6-7-99, 4); and, ". . .self happiness. . .always trying to reach self-actualization. I can't be the 100% perfect person to be here with my son all the time anymore" (Susan, 9-14-99, 6).

<u>Self as Mother</u>

The predominant view of "current self" (four of the six respondents) of single-parent student life was one identified as "mother self" (Alex, Annie, Karen, Rebecca). Mother self also predominated as primary self in descriptions of the feared future self and the hoped-for future self for these four respondents. This predominant view of single-parent student life was negative in tone and description, portraying this lifestyle as a means to end, the end being greater career opportunities.

Strong evidence of the "mother" primary identification of the current self was given by several respondents (Alex, Annie, Karen, and Rebecca). Alex and Annie were the most forthright in identifying themselves as mothers:

> I'd rather have a big old stamp on the front of my [college] file that says 'MOTHER—Three-Year-Old Child'. When I walk in there, he [instructor] knows it. He doesn't have to hear it from me, he just has to understand. You've heard it before—they think I don't have a life, all I have to do is come to this class and do this work—they don't see all of it. Maybe you don't see exceptions because you're a mother, because other kids are working, and it all balances out. But it doesn't, because when you're a mother, it never shuts off. (Alex, 5-4-99, 12)

Annie also described the perceptions of others regarding her student status:

> A lot of people think that I like school and I find it interesting; and I'm happy that I do well, but I'm doing this all more because I have to. Not so much because I want to, because ideally I would be. . .I mean if it would. . .I almost said this about the fantasy, but. . .it didn't include being in school because a fantasy to me would be having a husband that wanted to work. . .I mean my ex-husband didn't want to work. He was in and out of jobs. I want a husband that wanted to work, and I could stay home with my kids when they're little. People used to tease me and say, you just want the white picket fence, and I was like, yeah, I do. I don't think that's bad. I really think that a lot of women probably do want that, maybe just can't admit it. . .I think maybe it's what we're called to do. I think that would be a wonderful situation. I'm happy with what I'm doing, I mean I'm not unhappy. I just. . .when I was 15 and 16, and I looked at what my life

would be it wasn't that I would be working a full time job and stuff like that, it was that I would stay home with my kids. (6-21-99, 12-13)

Rebecca answered many questions in the context of her "mother" self, using her son's name with frequency. One example was in response to the question "What kept you going through college?" She unhesitatingly gave a one-word reply "Michael" (6-4-99, 3). Even when describing her "student" self, she superimposed her obligations as a mother:

> . . .so I'd even have to do homework in that hour that we spent together, and I didn't like doing that because I'd prefer to do homework when he was in bed asleep. . .One thing that would have been kind of neat if he had gone there [campus daycare center] would have been to pick him up between classes and then take him back, just to be able to spend more time with him. . .it was difficult, especially when the classes were required, and especially when they were at night, because it wasn't always easy to get someone to take care of Michael, and sometimes you feel like you should take him with you. . .Sometimes I would have them [group members from classes] come over to my house just to make it easier to take care of Michael. Sometimes I would take Michael to the computer lab at night, so it was helpful that they had late hours. I wonder how hard it has been on Michael, I'll try to explain to him what I did, and did for him. (6-4-99, 1,5,6, 7, 8)

Four of the six respondents talked about "time with" their children in identifying themselves as a parent, usually in the words, "I never got enough time with [my child]" (Alex, Annie, Karen, and Rebecca). These comments always occurred in the context of discussions of their roles as mothers. "Every minute I'm away from her costs me something" was one typical comment (Alex, 5-4-99, 1). Another comment was "I probably did not get enough time with Jeremy. . .there's a lot of guilt about that" (Karen, 5-19-99, 3).

Hoped-for Future Self. In describing a positive, or hoped-for future self, the

respondents with primary (Alex, Annie, Karen, Rebecca) and strong (Susan)

identifications as mother self were unanimous in their descriptions of a future based on

having earned a college degree. Alex' hoped-for future self was based on both reality and

wishful thinking. She had been offered a full time job by a major oil company before she

graduated, and she already knew some details of her life after graduation.

> And then I'm going to a finance program at Conoco, and they're going to
> house me and tell me where I need to be for nine weeks. And I am ready
> for someone to do that for me because I'm tired of having to make all the
> decisions and to sit and pull everything together all the time, and this is
> going to be it. Somebody is finally going to take it away, and that's going
> to give me nine weeks to regroup and get everything back together" (5-4-
> 99, 3).

In speaking of her hoped-for future in terms of money and respect, Alex also

mentioned the difference in jobs at Conoco between those who have college degrees and

those who don't:

> I started to go on full time at Conoco, what they call a nonexempt
> employee, what that means is basically no college education. The
> beginning salary for that is $1400 a month. When you start as an exempt,
> the minimum is $2700, so that's a $1300 swing. Also, when you work for
> the company [while you are getting] a college degree, they pretty much
> don't care. You already have a stigma attached to you. You may have
> gone back and gotten it, but it's not like you came into the company with a
> degree. If I had gone in as a nonexempt, it would have taken six years to
> get to the salary point of an exempt and maybe never to the respect point
> without the degree (5-4-99, 10).

Annie's hoped-for future as a kindergarten teacher required a specific college

degree.

> I want to teach kindergarten, because it's such a good job. I remember my
> kindergarten teacher. But teaching, because I want to be able to be on
> their—my kid's—schedule, and I think it's ideal for that, because it all

goes back to me not wanting to stick them in daycare and let other people take care of them. (6-21-99, 11)

The other respondents spoke more in terms of money they would be able to earn and benefits they would receive in their hoped-for futures rather than any specific professions (Alex, Karen, Rebecca, and Susan). "More than minimum wage" (Karen, 5-19-99, 5), "more than $6 an hour" (Rebecca, 6-4-99, 3), "more than $7 an hour" (Susan, 9-14-99, 5) were comments describing their hopes for future earnings with a college degree. Health and medical benefits, dental benefits, retirement plans, and job security were other descriptors of the hoped-for futures when the college degree had been earned. As Karen described it: "So I thought, okay, I'll go to school, get a real job that has benefits and retirement and something to look forward to" (5-19-99, 6).

Another aspect of the hoped-for future self in which the respondent had persisted to attainment of the college degree was the impact on the respondents' children's lives.

> I want things set up where she will always be taken care of. And I don't
> want her to go through the struggles and hardships that I've gone through
> . . . I'll have merit raises, and I'll take different jobs, and she's going to get
> exposed to different things because we'll start out in Houston, but I want
> to move around the country. I want her to have a bigger base growing up
> than I did growing up. (Alex, 5-4-99, 5, 9)

Annie's hopes in getting a college degree focused on her children's short-term future: "it all goes back to me not wanting to stick them in daycare and let other people take care of them" (6-21-99, 11).

Other respondents (Karen, Susan, and Felicity) spoke from their mother self when considering the effects of what they had done in persisting to earn a college degree on their hopes for their children's long-term futures. About her fifteen-year-old daughter and her other three children, Karen said

I think she's going to be some kind of professional person. I think she's going to seek out what she wants to be, and not have any responsibilities, and then wait for that single one. I think she's going to take care of herself first. She's seen how hard it is. They realize how much work I put into it. (5-19-99, 6)

Rebecca was already making plans for her four-year-old son's future college attendance:

[This all] definitely emphasizes the importance of college even now for him. I'm starting to plan for his education, save for his college because I do see that as important for him, and talk to him about how important it is. Having a degree seems almost a must now. I will [emphasize the importance of it] with Michael because he'll have a better future. And at least now I have a degree, I've accomplished something important for us now and in the future. (6-4-99, 7-8)

Feared Future Self. This strong identification of the single-parent student self as mother colored five of the six respondents' remarks about what they thought might happen if they did not persist in earning the college degree (Alex, Annie, Karen, Rebecca, and Susan). Felicity was the only respondent who did not describe a feared future self.

After answering the question "What is your life like as a single-parent student?" respondents were asked what motivated them to stay in the mostly-negative situations they had described. Five of the six respondents answered in terms of theirs and their children's future lives. The description that emerged was that of a feared-future self in a career consisting of minimum-wage jobs with no medical benefits, no retirement plan, no job security, long hours, and a less-than desirable life for the respondent and her children. Alex typified this response by her remarks: "I don't have any health insurance, I don't have any medical insurance, I don't have any retirement, and I can't do this forever, and my daughter has to have some kind of security" (5-4-99, 4). Karen had worked as a

convenience store clerk before returning to school and projected that experience into her

feared-future self, even once her children had left home:

> I wasn't qualified for anything, and I was almost forty years old. So I
> could do this for twenty years, and then what—have no retirement? I'd
> have nothing, and only have progressed a far as assistant manager, maybe
> manager, with still no money but working over forty hours a week,
> spending no quality time with my family. And I needed to be able to help
> even the children who were not living with me. I kept thinking, now there
> are things I'm going to want to be able to do for them, to help them if
> something comes up for them, money or health. I couldn't do that because
> I lived from paycheck to paycheck. (5-19-99, 5-6)
> While Karen described her feared future self, one without a college degree, as

working at a convenience store, Annie described hers as a clerical worker "sitting behind

a desk, typing, while somebody else is taking care of my children. . .every penny would

have to go to daycare, and it just would have been this, you know, you don't get out from

underneath forever" (6-21-99, 5). Alex saw her future self without a college degree as

continuing to waitress three nights a week and work part-time at a major oil company in a

nearby city two days a week (5-4-99, 5). Without a college degree, Rebecca saw herself

working at a $6 per hour job, "barely paying my bills, living with my grandmother,

basically mooching off my grandmother. . .my bills killing me. . .plugging away" (6-4-99,

3, 4). Susan's picture of her future self without a college degree was described in grim

terms: "I'm not going to be able to really survive and provide for my son, for myself,

working for $7 an hour to pay rent, to do all of that" (9-14-99, 3). So was Karen's:

"Without the degree, you're not going anywhere, you're standing there doing the same

thing for twenty years" (5-19-99, 6).

All of the respondents drew parallels between their futures with and without

college degrees and their children's futures, but Susan drew the starkest picture of her

son's future in her description of her feared future self without the college degree: "Jail or college: that's two extremes, but no kidding" (9-14-99, 15). She noted that his chances for going to college would be improved if she completed college because

> he can see that it's been done, most likely. He might see that my friends are poor, from a poor area, but as you make more money your friends change, and people become your companions, also. So he will probably have friends in both worlds, and he will be able to see where we're at, and, 'this is where my mom and I used to be at,' so I think most definitely he'll want to go to school (9-14-99, 15).

Persistence Difficulties. Most, if not all of the difficulties the subjects described in persisting towards completion of their degrees stemmed from some facet of their identification of the mother self. The difficulties described by the two respondents who identified "self as primary" also experienced difficulties stemming from their parental obligations (Felicity and Susan). The predominant view of life of a single-parent student was portrayed as stressful by most of the respondents, leading three of the six respondents to their college counselors at some point in their college careers for depression (Karen, 5-19-99, 3; Rebecca, 5-19-99, 3; and Susan, 9-14-99, 2). One respondent said she used food as a stress reliever (Karen, 5-19-99, 2), two respondents took antidepressants (Karen, 5-19-99, 3; Rebecca, 6-4-99, 8), and one respondent said she used smoking as a stress reliever:

> Well, everybody gets on to me because I smoke, but my stress level is so high, I'm thinking that this is by no way something that makes it worse. If anything, it makes it better, it's a crutch, yeah, a stress-reliever. (Alex, 5-4-99, 8)

Negative phrases and terms used to describe the life of a single-parent student were: busy, frustrating at times, depressing (Rebecca, 6-4-99, 1); not really easy,

overwhelming, depressing, guilt-provoking, sacrificing (Karen, 5-19-99, 1, 3, 6, 8);

awful, totally out of control, exhausting, the toughest time of my life, willing to accept a

"D" (Alex, 5-4-99, 1, 2, 4); worse than many, depressed, stressed, poverty stricken, grim,

very hard, behind in studying, a struggle (Susan, 9-14-99, 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8); difficult year,

never enough hours in the day, exhausted, burned out, (Annie, 6-21-99, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8);

and, kind of difficult, a period battle, being between a rock and a hard place (Felicity, 6-7-

99, 1). "It's crazy, just crazy, to sum it all up" responded Annie (6-21-99, 12).

"Everything I do, if I had to go another month, I would probably not finish . . . I know it

cannot be any worse. This is probably going to be the toughest time in my life" (Alex, 5-

4-99, 4). "I think the best way to describe it is that there's never enough hours in the day

to do everything" (Annie, 6-21-99, 6).

    Sleeping patterns were discussed by all of the respondents. Four of the

respondents said they get up between five and six o'clock in the mornings (Annie, 6-21-

99, 5; Felicity, 6-7-99, 2; Karen, 5-19-99, 3; Susan, 9-14-99, 14). Bedtime for the

single-parent student was described as "hopefully around midnight" (Rebecca, 6-4-99, 1)

and anywhere between three and five a.m. (Susan, 9-14-99, 14). Annie described her

bedtimes as dependent upon her children's' bedtimes: "the 3-year-old is up until 11:00"

(6-21-99, 6). Alex worked as a waitress three nights a week (5-4-99, 2), and Karen often

worked the five-to-midnight shift (5-19-99, 2). Exhaustion and being exhausted were

mentioned by several students, either explicitly (Alex, 5-4-99, 4; Annie, 6-21-99, 6;) or

descriptively: "I didn't get any sleep most of the time that I was in school . . . It was a

killer to do the midnight shift" (Karen, 5-19-99, 5, 8). Susan described the most unusual

sleep pattern:

Anywhere between three and five a.m. I'll go to sleep. I start at six a.m. studying. Where it's finals or papers, I do all-nighters a couple of nights in a row, and then I'll crash for a night where I can get six hours in, then I can go a couple of more days. Many times I've told my mother, I'm just going to lay down for an hour, go to bed at seven a.m., wake me up at eight so I can just hop in the shower and walk out the door . . . I just need an hour's sleep. That's how my life gets toward finals, and papers, and four days on an hour's sleep, then I'll try to sleep all night, take a catnap when I get home from school, because that will help to rejuvenate my mind, if I can get my son to take a nap with me. (9-14-99, 14)

On the subject of studying and homework, all of the respondents tailored their homework and study time around their children and/or their work schedules, with most of them scheduling studying and homework during the hours their children were sleeping (Annie, 6-21-99; Felicity, 6-7-99; Karen, 5-19-99; Rebecca, 6-4-99, Susan 9-14-99, 14, 15). Three respondents reported conflict between choosing time with their children and studying. Annie described it this way:

These classes that I'm taking require a lot more time than I'm being able to give them right now. I come home, especially Tuesdays and Thursdays when I get home at almost 4:00, and it's not very fair to them [children] to say, no, I'm going to study now. . . Days like that, when would you study? A lot of times I'll get up at 5:00 and do what I had to do for class that starts at 8:40 like read the chapter that we were supposed to read or something like that. (6-21-99, 6)

Rebecca was torn between the desire to spend time with her son and to pursue her responsibilities as a student:

Once I got him [son] into bed, that's usually when I would do my schoolwork. Except for, not this last semester, but the fall semester was my hardest semester even just because I had a load of harder classes, so I'd even have to do my homework in that hour that we spent together, and I didn't like doing that because I'd prefer to do homework when he was in bed asleep. (6-4-99, 1)

Susan recognized the conflict but had reached a sort of compromise:

Usually he falls asleep around nine. It takes me about an hour to get him
to sleep, I lay down with him. That's kind of meditation time. It's wasted
time for studying, but it's mental relaxation time, and I've learned to make
use of it rather than say, okay, looking at my watch. (9-14-99, 14)

Group projects and group work were noted as events which caused conflict

between spending time with children and spending time on schoolwork by three

respondents (Annie, 6-21-99, 7; Alex, 5-4-99, 1; Rebecca, 6-4-99), with the single-parent

student ending up either taking the child to the group meetings with her or inviting the

group to her home so she would not have to leave the child. Alex's family and school life

were further complicated by an out-of-town commute:

The last month every-absolute-one of my group projects hit, and so not
only was I commuting down here to classes, but I was commuting also in
the evening back again for other stuff . . . it cost a lot of me, and I took
Cassie to several of my group meetings . . . because every minute I'm
away from her costs me something. (5-4-99, 1)

Although Annie's group work was just beginning, she still recognized the potential for

conflict:

. . .there have been a couple of times where we worked in groups. I've
been lucky in that the people I worked with have known that I have
children and have said, "We can come to your house." (6-21-99, 7)

Rebecca's apparent abilities as a student leader interfered with her desire to be a more

involved mother:

And then there were group meetings. One semester I was in three groups,
as either president or team leader, and that was hard . . . Sometimes I
would have them come over to my house just to make it easier to take care
of Michael. But other students had more flexibility in making group
meetings than I did. (6-21-99, 6).

Several respondents mentioned the toll that this lifestyle was taking on their

grades, even though they cared very much about their grades, in comments like "I got my

first C" (Annie, 6-21-99, 6), and, "bad grades . . . made me feel like giving up" (Rebecca,

6-4-99, 4). Karen admitted that

> I could see that I couldn't do it all, I couldn't make straight A's and do a perfect job and have a perfect life, and something was going to have to give. So I ended up doing probably the minimum work that needed to be done to get through classes.(5-19-99, 3)

Alex also admitted giving up on grades in her last semester, knowing that she had

maintained the necessary minimum grades and had a job waiting upon graduation:

> At this point in my life, it's to get the degree, and I don't care if that's a D . . . that's all it's going to take to graduate and maintain a 3.0 which is what Conoco required of me when I took this position. . .in finance, there's no way to get my "A" back, I don't even have that option, I just need to graduate. My life is totally out of control. (5-4-99, 2, 3)

> External difficulties, that is, difficulties outside of the single-parent student's

family unit, that also contributed to difficulty in persisting in college were: scheduling of

courses (all six respondents mentioned this difficulty), and attitudes of faculty and

administrators (Alex, 5-4-99, 3, 12, 13, 14,15, 16; Annie, 6-21-99, 8; Felicity, 6-7-99, 7;

Karen, 5-19-99, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11). Respondents expressed desires for more evening and

early morning courses, as well as more course offerings in the summer, although one

respondent expressed the desire that all courses be scheduled to parallel the public school

schedule—from eight a.m. to three p.m. daily—so she could have the same schedule as

her son (Karen, 5-19-99, 7). Alex attributed the negative attitudes of faculty and

administrators to prejudice against nontraditional students:

> It's kind of like the old racist concept–the business world, everybody's white males. And that's just how they [college administrators] view everybody: everybody is 18 to 20, and living off their parents, and that's how they walk in and teach their classes. (5-4-99, 16)

Karen echoed this feeling:

In this college I see too much of the good old boy thing–the College of Business. There are just too many men in charge here that still see women as not being in charge of anything. Even though we have female faculty that are tenured professors, they still don't seem to get the respect that men get. So I think if they don't respect their own, I don't see them looking upon the female nontraditional student any differently. (5-19-99, 11)

All four respondents who had identified mother self as primary mentioned the desire to not persist in their pursuit of a college degree (Alex, 5-4-99; Annie, 6-21-99; Karen, 5-19-99; and Rebecca, 6-4-99). Annie called it being "burned out" (6-21-99, 6); Alex said "if I had to go another month, I would probably not finish" (5-4-99, 4); Karen said that at one point "what I was fixing to give up was going to be school" (5-19-99, 3); and Rebecca said "At times I felt like just giving up–frustration, bad grades, not wanting to study, not wanting to clean my apartment, not having any support" (6-4-99, 4).

The interview question "If you could design all aspects of your life to fit your needs as a single-parent student, how would you design them?" was used to accomplish the research objective of gaining insight and understanding of this group of nontraditional students' determination to persist in spite of difficulties by allowing them to fantasize about their ideal experiences in college. The most commonly-occurring response to this question revolved around money and work (Alex, Karen, Rebecca, and Susan). Not having to work while going to school was mentioned by Alex, Karen, and Rebecca as the major change they would like to make in their single-parent student lives. Susan did not work, subsisting on her son's Social Security benefits to live and financial aid to pay her tuition, but she also noted having no financial difficulties in her fantasy of going through school as a single parent.

Another fantasy dealt with the whole college system. The respondents generally indicated that they would like to see a system which identifies them as a single parent so that instructors and administrators are aware of their status and how that might affect their performance, but that they did not want to call their status to the attention of anyone for fear of being termed a "whiner" (Alex, Annie, Felicity, Karen, Rebecca). The respondents were all very clear in stating that they did not want or expect special treatment or consideration, just understanding of what they were going through, especially that they were adults with problems different from traditional students.

Better child care options was another response to this question. The majority of the respondents noted major problems with child care arrangements and baby-sitters at some time, or even the whole period of their college careers (Alex, Annie, Karen, Rebecca, and Susan).

Classes scheduled at more convenient times and places was another fantasy reported by all of the respondents. For example, Karen would have liked classes scheduled the hours her son was in school (between eight and three); Annie would have liked more evening, early morning, and summer classes; and Alex, Felicity, and Susan would have liked more class offerings available in their latter semesters. Other fantasies included having more hours available in the day (Annie) and having help with housework and laundry (Annie and Rebecca).

Of the six respondents, Susan was the only mother with a special-needs child. Susan's words indicated her commitment, as a single-parent student, to her obligations as a mother: ". . .it's taken every bit of me, every fiber in my body to be able to be the mother that I needed to be for my son" (9-14-99, 3). The task was greater for Susan

because of her son's medical and emotional problems, leading to her identification of other roles for herself:

> I love him very much, and, being his therapist, doctor, nurse, mom, it was just a lot of stress, and not having anybody there. . .no one wanted to really watch him after his surgeries to help out. . .and he required so much patience, he had ADHD with rage, high compulsivity, so he requires a lot of extra attention. We had a lot of problems with baby-sitters due to all that. My first year of college I went through five of them, and with what I can afford to pay, which is pretty much nothing, you're not going to get quality. (9-14-99, 3-4)

Self as Primary

Susan was one of the two respondents (Felicity and Susan) who indicated the possible domination of self-identity over parent-identity. Even though having a child who required much more attention and special care than the other respondents, Susan indicated the greatest interest in grades and achievement of all the respondents. She described her background and her philosophy of learning to explain the development of her self-identity and separation between her self-identity and parent-identity:

> I'm a very intelligent person. I was always smart as a child. I used to prefer to read the dictionary. I'd tell my mom, pick a word, any word, and I'll tell you the definition and how to spell it. So, it was just a realization that this is the time. I can't be the 100% perfect person to be here with my son all the time anymore. . .Physical therapy, you know, all day with my son. . .you know, it's just. . . I lost who I was through all of that. I was no longer—I didn't know who I was. I was referred to as my son's mom. (9-14-99, 2)

and,

> Now if I don't want to be that quality of parent, and I don't want to be that "A" student which I am—I've made the dean's list every semester, took honor courses at MCC [her previous community college]—if I wanted to sacrifice that, I could probably swing a part time job, a few hours here and there. Then, I'm not going to be that "A" student, and I'm not going to

comprehend it as much, and therefore I'm not going to be as effective in the field when I get done with my degree. And I don't want to go out there being a mediocre person doing a job and only remembering half of it, like, I've got my degree, but I just skimmed by. I don't want to be that kind of employee. (9-14-99, 17-18)

Felicity also made a clear distinction between her self-identity and her mother-identity:

School has always been important to me in my life, ever since grade school. I think the thing is that I never saw my identity in somebody else—regardless of my kids, or my husband, or my nothing. My identity is my own. I want to be my own person, and that is what identity is all about. I will do everything I can for my kids' success or my husband's if I am married, but I don't think I should be forgotten. And I don't expect anything from anybody else, but I want to be allowed to do anything I want to do, and I always have been. . .I don't think I could have lived without something that was really mine (6-7-99, 4, 5).

The only positive portrayals of the single-parent student life came from Felicity and Susan even though these two respondents were different from each other in every way counted in this study. Felicity was the oldest respondent at 40, Susan was the youngest respondent at 27. Felicity had the oldest children in the group—ages nine and 12; Susan's child was four years old. Felicity was a naturalized American citizen originally from a Middle East country. Susan came from generations of poor, rural dwellers in a northeastern state. Felicity was close to finishing her Ph.D. in Economics, Susan was soon to graduate with a BS in Marketing. Felicity attended a large, southwestern state university, Susan attended a small, private college in a northeast state. Felicity had been married ten years, Susan had never been married. Felicity did not have pressing financial difficulties, Susan lived below the poverty level. Felicity worked while going to school, Susan did not. What Felicity and Susan had in common was their

description of college as a positive experience in that it provided self-identity and self-actualization apart from their parent identities.

Apart from multiple differences, they were the only ones that described the experience, at least some of the time, as enjoyable. "For me, I guess it's just something that I do enjoy—school, marketing, business, I love to learn about it. I always have, and. . .always trying to reach self-actualization" (Susan, 9-14-99, 6). Felicity was married and had a one-year-old and three-year-old child when she began her Master's degree, so the continuation of the doctorate with older children was not a new experience for her, other than her now-single status. "I don't think you should sacrifice your family for your education, but I think you can have a very nice balance without having to sacrifice. I chose the way I chose to go to school." (Felicity, 6-7-99, 4)

There was only one description of a future self without having finished the current degree that was not a feared self, however that future was also not the desired, hoped-for future self (Felicity, 6-7-99). Even Felicity's hoped-for future self was based on finishing her current degree plan:

> I know I could have a job that I could make much more money than a college professor—before I even started my Ph.D. I had a bachelor's in accounting—but I decided what I want, and I have no desire for things like that, and this is the way to get it. (6-7-99, 9)

Felicity pointed out not only tangible benefits to her children's futures through attainment of her current degree, but also a philosophy a life that would be different:

> Everybody else is going to benefit from it, the kids by having a mother who can have a broader understanding of life in general, because I don't think school just makes you, you know, smart in that way, it just gives you a broader understanding of what life is all about. They understand that education is really important because it is, to me it is extremely important, and they can be proud of their mother. I'll also be in a better position to

help them in different areas, not, I don't mean money, but it feels good
when my older son who is in seventh grade comes to me with his algebra
questions and he actually knows that his mother. . .he respects me. . .the
other day somebody was telling him how smart he is, and he said 'well
sure, what do you expect, I have the two smartest parents. Well, yeah, my
mother is getting a doctorate.' He was so proud. I never knew that he was
so proud of it. That really made me feel good. Absolutely, there is a
better chance of them going on to college because I've gotten these
degrees. I also see them looking at women a certain way. And that is
really important, especially having two boys. It is extremely important for
them to respect women for what they are, not for, say doing the laundry
and doing all of that. (6-7-99, 5-6)

Differences

Two major categories of differences emerged from the data. The first major

difference is that five of the respondents generally described their lives as single-parent

students as extremely difficult and stressful, even painful and depressing (Alex, Annie,

Karen, Rebecca, and Susan). On the other hand, Felicity described it as easier than when

she was married, "It's working really well," "I returned, my kids are very happy with me,"

"I wouldn't change anything," ". . .being a single parent and going to school, it is

difficult, it is not as difficult as everyone portrays," "I have absolutely no complaints . . . I

love it" (6-7-99,1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 9).

Another major difference that emerged from the data distinguished Felicity and

Susan's self view from the self views of the other four respondents. The other four

respondents, as described in the categories above, saw themselves primarily as mothers in

their current, hoped-for future, and feared future selves. They attributed their motivations

to persist in pursuit of their college degrees to the desire to make a better future for

themselves and their children. Susan and Felicity both described very strong self-

identities and the ways in which these self-perceptions motivated them to pursue college degrees.

> As far as I understand, I want to be my own person, and that is what identity is all about. And I think by people having their own identity you would actually be a better mother and a better person, to have your own identity. I never thought I'd be a . . . I love being a mom, but that's not all I am. I've never been. I don't think you should sacrifice your family for your education, but I think you can have a very nice balance without having to sacrifice . . . If you have the motivation, this is where it comes in–that won't stop you. In other words, if you don't have the motivation, don't use the kids and being a single parent as an excuse. (Felicity, 6-7-99, 4, 9)

Susan experienced problems of a different nature:

> Physical therapy, you know, all day with my son, speech therapists . . . you know, it's just. . .I lost who I was through all of that. I was no longer. . . I didn't know who I was. I was referred to as my son's mom. A lot of people gave me a hard time about coming back to school, you know: 'how could you leave him, he needs you so much right now?' But if I don't get a break right now I'm not going to be able to be the parent that everybody expects me to live up to. So that's what brought me back to school . . . happiness, self happiness. For me, I guess it's just something that I do enjoy—school, marketing, business, I love to learn about it. I always have, and other than. . .always trying to reach self-actualization. Also, I think it's within people, you always try to further yourself, you always try to do better, try to learn more, and that is what I'm trying to do. I've had some obstacles, and some of the obstacles have helped to bring me here—my son's surgery . . . for everything to be happy, to be closer to that self-actualization, that is my long term goal, and what comes along with it is for himself, and he is a part of my goal. (9-14-99, 2, 6, 12)

Summary

This section provided data results in two general parts: general profiles of each of the respondents, and a reporting of the data in three categories. The three reporting categories were: mother self, self as primary, and differences. The two general parts of this report are necessary for a complete data results picture as neither one of them alone

provides enough information to fully inform this study. The data itself was comprised totally of answers given by respondents to questions asked during long interviews which were tape recorded and later transcribed by the researcher in a verbatim fashion.

Alex, Annie, Karen, and Rebecca saw themselves primarily as the mother self for all possible selves and experienced medium to high levels of difficulty in persisting in college. Susan saw self as primary but expressed very strong fears for her child as well as herself if she did not get a college degree as well as very strong hopes for her child and herself if she did get the college degree. Susan experienced extremely high levels of difficulty in persisting in college. Felicity saw self as primary, gave no evidence of a feared future self, and expressed a relatively strong desire to attain her hoped-for future self. Felicity experienced a low level of difficulty in persisting. The results of the data are summarized in Table II.

TABLE II

DATA CATEGORIES

Categories	Respondents					
	Alex	Annie	Felicity	Karen	Rebecca	Susan
Self as Mother	x	x		x	x	
Feared Future Self	x	x		x	x	x
Hoped-for Future Self	x	x	x	x	x	x
Persistence Difficulties	high	medium	low	high	high	high
Self as Primary			x			x

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

This study is embedded in the framework of the motivations of college students to

persist toward completion of their college degrees and the cognitions, if any, which

precede those motivations. The focus of this study is the nontraditional student called the

single-parent student, a student who is going to college while simultaneously raising one

or more children. The study attempted to provide evidence to meet the following

objectives: to give voice to the single-parent student, to analyze the stories of the single-

parent student through the lens of Possible Selves Theory, to reveal data that is not

explained by PST, and to evaluate the usefulness of PST as a research theory.

Analysis of the data presented in Chapter IV proceeds topically and collectively.

The topical categories are: persistence, nontraditional students, and Possible Selves

Theory. Within the topical categories, analysis is performed at the aggregate and

individual levels, whichever is necessary to best inform the analysis. The collective

analysis examines the aggregate data and is conducted under the framework of the

research objectives. The data were analyzed through the lens of the Markus and Nurius

model of Possible Selves Theory, defining possible selves as "individuals' ideas of what

they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of

becoming" (1986, p. 954). PST hypothesizes that although intimately connected to a

current or now self, a possible self is defined as different and separable. An analysis of the data from Chapter II provided evidence of possible selves and at least three conceptualizations of possible selves.

Persistence

From the literature, Possible Selves Theory posits that an individual, upon cognitive recognition of a current, undesirable state and fearing a future, undesirable state will be motivated to make deliberate, cognitive changes to reach a hoped-for future state instead (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989). Applied to the framework of this study, the single-parent student was examined for evidence of such cognitions and motivations. In this study, cognition is defined as "the act or process of knowing; perception" (*The Random House Dictionary of the English Language: College Edition*, 1968, p. 261). In examining whether cognitions led to motivation of the single-parent student to persist in college, the data must provide identifiable motives. In this study, a motive is defined as "something that prompts a person to act in a certain way or that determines volition; incentive" (*The Random House Dictionary of the English Language: College Edition*, 1968, p. 871).

The literature provides evidence that persistence is a problem with college students. The fact that Tinto and Astin conduct ongoing research that was begun 20 years ago on the subject supports this contention. Astin, Tinto, and others, however, have not studied the persistence of the single-parent student in higher education. The literature, therefore, does not provide evidence of the persistence or non-persistence of the single-parent student.

The data provided in this study provides evidence that supports the persistence of the single-parent student. All of the respondents either had persisted to completion of their degrees (Karen), were in the last semester of their degree programs (Alex and Rebecca), were in the last year of their degree programs (Felicity and Susan), or had stated intentions of completing their degrees (Annie).

That their persistence was a cognitive decision on their parts was evidenced by comments made about the choice between non-persistence and persistence. Alex had clearly calculated the cost of getting the college degree: she described her schedule of working two jobs, 30 to 35 hours a week, taking 15 hours of classes, commuting an hour-and-a-half a day, for a total of 60 hours a week away from her daughter. She had also calculated the benefits of getting the college degree: a greater income, medical benefits, a secure future for her daughter and herself, and greater opportunities for her daughter. She summarized her cognitive process leading to her motivation to persist as "I don't have any choice" (Alex, 5-4-99, 2). This evaluation of her current undesirable situation and her future hoped-for situation fit the Markus and Ruvolo model (1989).

Annie had also carefully thought out her choices, beginning with the her decision to move back into her parents' home upon leaving her husband, taking with her a ten-month-old child and one yet unborn. She and her father made a "deal."

> My dad really wanted me to go back to school. Part of our deal was that they would help me with child care. Knowing that my mom had agreed to watch them and as long as I'm in school and doing well she has no problem with that. (6-21-99, 5)

She stated several times that she saw her choices as clearly defined by the ownership of a college degree: eight-to-five, clerical positions entailing all-day child care if she had no

college degree; or, kindergarten teacher on much the same schedule as her own children if she earned a college degree in an education discipline. Annie was in her second year of college and had now experienced life as a single-parent student for two years. She commented that she felt "burned out" but she had no intention of dropping out. Of the group, Annie demonstrated the strongest sense of possible self as mother self for all possible selves: current, hoped-for future, and feared future.

Felicity had developed a pattern of persistence in college since her children were young. She had experienced life as a married student while earning a Master's degree in Business Administration. She was working on her third college degree, a Ph.D. in Economics. To persist in college seemed to be her primary goal. Going through a divorce while in the first year of her doctoral program, Felicity gave legal custody of her children to her husband. This decision provides evidence of her deliberate choice to continue in her studies. Felicity had the strongest self-identity of the group, with this self dominating all other possible selves.

Karen had graduated from college with a baccalaureate degree in Business Administration the semester before our interview. From the perspective of hindsight, she admitted that there was a time she thought about dropping out of college. She was having trouble with the child who was living with her; she was not getting the grades she wanted to get in her classes; she was exhausted from working, going to school, and taking care of her son; and she was depressed. She knew she couldn't give up her job which supported her family, "so what I was fixing to give up was going to be school, the classes, because I was about to get so far down" (5-19-99, 3). Upon evaluating this choice and reviewing her options, however, she took advantage of the university's free counseling and decided

to continue. Retrospectively, she affirmed that it was a correct decision, even though her son went to live with his father in Karen's last year of school. Karen's primary self-conceptualization seemed to the her mother self, but in conflict with her feared future self.

Rebecca's decision to pursue and persist unto the completion of a college degree crystallized when she discovered she was pregnant.

> When I found out I was pregnant, I never thought I'd have to do it all by myself. When I found out I was going to have to do it by myself, I had to decide quickly what I was going to do. I didn't want to work for $6 an hour and try to support a child and myself, there was just no way . . . and I knew it would be great, "hey, why don't I go get a degree and make more money and be able to support myself and my son!" (6-4-99, 3)

Rebecca's intentions to persist were embodied in her son, even though she admits she would have considered not persisting if it had been her alone. "At times I felt like just giving up. But then, there was Michael, and I had to support him" (6-4-99, 4). Rebecca displayed strong conceptualizations of mother self, hoped-for future self, and feared future self.

From a socioeconomic standpoint Susan had the strongest motivation of anyone in the group to persist in earning her college degree. She lived in the poorest county of the State of New York with her handicapped child and her mother, whom Susan described as manic-depressive. Her father had died several years before, and her mother took in elderly people to make her living. They all lived in a more than 100-year-old farmhouse in the country, often experiencing lack of water due to the well drying up. At those times Susan would take her child to a friend's house for evening showers and to wash clothes. At times when Susan was not getting along with her mother or there was a lack of water, she and her son lived an almost nomadic existence. Once Susan returned to college,

however, she never wavered in her determination to persist. Her class attendance, class performance, and grades were exemplary. Susan understood and articulated very well her futures both with and without a college degree. In Susan's mind, there was no choice for either her or her son, but to go on to earn her degree. Her stark comment on her son's future, based on whether Susan had earned the degree and been able to get them out of their present circumstances revealed her motivation to continue. When asked what effect Susan's going to college or not would have on her son, she replied "Jail or college" (9-14-99, 15). Susan's feared future self was the strongest of the group, i.e., no one else seemed to have quite as much to fear as did Susan if she did not get a college degree.

In summary, the data provided strong evidence of the cognitive process engaged in by the single-parent student which provided the motivation to persist in pursuit of the college degree. All of the respondents had clearly and consciously envisioned their futures both with and without the college degree and compared it with their current lives. These cognitions motivated them to persist in attainment of the degree, with two of them having already met that goal (Felicity and Karen), three of them in the last year or semester of reaching the goal (Alex, Rebecca, and Susan), and one of them well established in meeting the goal (Annie).

Nontraditional StudentS

The literature establishes that the single-parent student is a different breed from the traditional student because it has studied almost every type of student except the single-parent student: the traditional student, African-American students, Hispanic-American students, Asian-American students, and adult returning students. Throughout

the literature, the traditional student is typically described as 18-23 years old, entering college directly from high school and proceeding in a continuous manner toward college graduation, and primarily dependent upon parents for support during the college years. Further, the predominating college student is white and male and from the state within which the college or university is located.

Even though the literature has provided studies of the nontraditional student, these studies have focused on either "adult" students (those 24-25 years of age or older), or on minority students, usually African-American or Hispanic-American. Even the most recent studies on persistence fail to consider the single-parent student as an independent category of the nontraditional student and worthy of research attention. A few studies on the link between motivation and persistence have used sex as a variable based on past research that had demonstrated differential patterns when comparing males and females (Allen, 1999; Cardoza, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983); but this is not entirely relevant to study of the single-parent student who may be of either sex. According to 1990 Census Bureau data, however, sex as a variable in persistence may be useful since the vast majority of single parents are the mothers with custody of their children. The Allen study, one of the most recent on persistence in higher education, offers little help in explaining the persistence of the single-parent student although the study was valuable in demonstrating an empirical link between motivation and persistence in minority students (1999).

Partly because of this dearth in the literature, the single-parent student seems to be the most "nontraditional" of the nontraditional students. The data verifies this, as the respondents expressed puzzlement, frustration, and bitterness that they are not recognized as different from other students by college personnel although they see themselves as

clearly different from the traditional student. Rebecca presented two comparisons that illustrated this frustration: her life as a single parent and the traditional student's life, and her life as single parent in college and a single parent in the military:

> Oh, yeah! They were free to do whatever they wanted whenever they wanted. If they wanted to work, they could work at nine o'clock at night until two in the morning or whatever hours they wanted to work. And if they wanted to go eat at whatever time, they could go do that. Just, freedom. They had their freedom and I didn't. . . Comparing the military with school, the military experience was easier. The military is more of a community, and they make it their business to keep everybody informed, and there are other single parents. They're concerned. The school doesn't do that, let you know what services are available for single-parent students and so on. (6-4-99, 4, 8)

Karen also articulated her frustration about attitudes toward the single-parent student:

> I think just the fact that I am a single parent. I don't think they knew that. I don't think they cared to know that. Everyone looks at you as a "nontraditional student." That's the term. They say 'Oh, you're a nontraditional student' which means you're an older student, you're an older person. They never look at you as, I think they look at you as an older woman, but not necessarily as a mother or a single parent, or they think your children are already grown and gone or that you don't keep them at all. For a long time no one knew I had children. No, I wasn't afraid to tell them, but it didn't seem, no one seemed to care. And nobody bothers to ask "Do you have a family" or "Is there anything I can do to help," or "would it be more convenient if we offered classes at such and such time? Or would it be more convenient if we offered Saturday classes?" (5-19-99, 4)

Other respondents echoed these feelings of invisibility and isolation with varying degrees of acceptance and puzzlement. Alex expressed a desire for more recognition of students who have children:

> I wish there were other things on campus—there's not. I don't know why they don't do more for kids. Because everybody on that campus has a kid in one shape or form, whether it's a niece or a sister, and those are the kinds of things that are going to bring people with kids together. (5-4-99, 7)

Another theme that emerged from the data on the nontraditional student is that although the single-parent students do feel different from all other students, and they do want college officials to be aware of their status, they do not want to call attention to their status themselves for fear of being seen as "whiny" or using their children as an excuse or a crutch. Alex pointed out that many college instructors and administrators are not aware of a student's parental status, whereas the fact of a student's race or age is usually evident. Over half the respondents voiced the desire that college personnel would be apprised of their status, although they did not wish to reveal it themselves for fear of being thought a "slacker" or a "whiner" (Alex, Annie, Felicity, Karen).

> I think it's not a crutch, but if you bring it up first or make it known,
> they'll think you're using it as a crutch or you're making excuses. That's
> why almost none of my instructors even know I have a child or that I even
> have the work schedule I have . . . I know that there are situations where
> somebody might have to be more lenient with a mother, but for the most
> part I try not to use that as an excuse not to do well, or 'I couldn't study as
> long because of this' because it happens. It's a situation I chose to be in,
> so at this point . . . I don't ever want to sound whiny. (Alex, 5-4-99, 9, 13)

Felicity also displayed discomfort with identification of the mother self: "If you don't have the motivation, don't use the kids and being a single parent as an excuse. Do you see what I'm saying? Everybody that whines, everybody can use that" (6-7-99, 9).

Karen said that she never told her instructors that she was a single mother because "it would have been seen as whining" (5-19-99, 7), although "you would think that they would just know that" an older student would have different responsibilities from the traditional student,

> or at least expect it. It seems like it would be better for them to expect it
> and then that not be the case than to just assume that you are on your own
> with no other responsibilities than yourself, because all of the people, all
> of the department chairs, faculty, etc. are responsible for children,

grandchildren, but none of them seem to be aware that other people of the
same age have the same responsibilities. It's like they're in their own little
world. They're just that way. I don't know why they are. They seem to
care a lot about the traditional students. (5-19-99, 5)

The single-parent students' desires were not that things be made any easier for them than

for traditional students, but simply that instructors would understand there was a valid

reason (such as a child's illness) for being late with an assignment. Annie affirmed that

she didn't see herself as different from the traditional student as far as academic

requirements were concerned, but that she had

to find time to study based on different reasons. I think the same should
be expected of me. . .I know that different things would come up if I had to
miss a class because of a child sick or something. Things like that make it
different. . . (6-21-99, 8)

I would have trouble scheduling sometimes because I think for the most
part the schedules are made according to 18 to 21 year-olds who are in
school full time and can go between 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. or whatever it
is. (Annie, 6-21-99, 10)

In summary, both the literature and the data support the differences between the

single-parent student and the nontraditional student. Further, both the lack of attention in

the literature and the data itself indicate that the single-parent student is an unstudied

phenomenon in higher education.

Possible Selves Theory

The early work of the sociologist Hazel Markus laid the foundation for the Theory

of Possible Selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989). One empirical

study has applied PST to college women (Chalk, 1996). Providing support for PST, the

Chalk study presented evidence that college women do have different and distinct self-

perceptions and that these perceptions affected their occupational choices. The purpose of this study was not to provide empirical evidence in support of PST but to, in a sense, bring to life the reality of PST through vivid descriptions, in respondents' own words, their self-perceptions and how these perceptions motivate them to persist in college. In order to provide further support for PST and its explanatory and predictive power, two questions must be answered in the affirmative by the data: 1) Did the respondents cognitively (using the definition of cognition as knowing and perceiving) recognize separate and identifiable selves? And, 2) Did these cognitions act as a motive (using the definition of motive as something that prompts a person to act in a certain way or that determines volition) to cause the single-parent student to persist in pursuit of the college degree? If the data give an affirmative answer to the first question, further support for PST will be provided. An affirmative answer to the second question as provided by the data will accomplish the research Objective 2, that: analysis of the voices or stories of single-parent students and their persistence in higher education using the cognitive lens of PST will explain their motivation to stay in school and obtain a college degree. To that end, the data needed to provide clear evidence of separate, identifiable selves which acted to motivate the respondents to stay in school.

Current Self

Five of the six respondents clearly identified themselves separately as "mother" and "student" while they were going to school. Alex described her identity as a mother as an integral part of her being:

> I was ready for that "mom" so she [her four-year-old daughter] kind of represents and embodies all of that. It's not just that she's my child, and I take care of her . . . I'd rather have a big old stamp on the front of my file that says "MOTHER—Three-Year-Old Child." When you're a mother, it never shuts off. (5-4-99, 4, 12)

She also saw herself separately as a dedicated student:

> I've always gone to class, I'm just one of those people. I can remember I would never miss a day, it would just kill me. I used to be an overachiever, I never missed a day, I always did all my homework, I studied for my tests, I did all that. (5-4-99, 8)

Annie's admission that her adolescent fantasies of being a housewife with a husband who went to work while she stayed home taking care of the children have stayed with her provide strong evidence of her self-identification as a mother: "I always thought that I would be a stay-at-home mom" (6-21-99, 5,13). Circumstances of her life caused her to return to school, developing a new identity of self:

> I was out of school for seven years when I started back. And it's totally different. You come back with a totally different view . . . I'm more mature in some ways . . . and really I've done so much better now. (6-21-99, 5)

Her true identification of a student self is demonstrated by her distress over grades, "I got my first C!" (6-21-99, 6). Annie saw herself as different from most students in that she had children, but she also saw herself as a student like others, with many common responsibilities:

> I was taking ten hours last semester, and yes, I had more time off where I was doing different things, and a lot of times I would get stressed out, but I would feel bad about complaining about being stressed because she [her sister] was taking 18 hours. So, it's just in a different way; it would be totally different. I just . . . I don't consider myself different in that aspect. I think the same should be expected of me. I know that different things would come up if I had to miss a class because a child was sick or something. Things like that make it different, but I've always tried to not think of myself as different because I had kids, because I could have very

easily stayed in school and done all the things that the people in my classes are doing. I could have been taking 13 or 15 hours, not working, still supported by my parents. I just took a different route, I guess. But I don't see myself as different as far as what should be expected. I have to find the time to study based on different reasons. (6-21-99, 7-8)

Annie's comments provide evidence of separate, identifiable selves, but they also point to the conflicting demands of these selves and their effect on Annie. The last few sentences above especially seem to describe guilt Annie has over not being a different kind of student, but her first comments show her wistful desire to be nothing more than a mother. The above comments by Annie also provide support for question number two: do these separately-identified selves motivate the single-parent student to persist in college? Her last comment that she has to find time to study based on different reasons shows that she recognizes a different motivation to persist than do students who do not have children.

Karen also demonstrated a clear recognition of and conflict between her mother self and her student self. In describing her daily schedule of classes, work, and home responsibilities, she was emotionally more committed to the mother self, but conflicted by the college student self. Many of her comments reflected an almost-dislike of the student self due to its interference with the mother self, leading to the ultimate giving-up of the mother self in allowing her son to return to live with his father. When describing her life as a single-parent student, she often had tears in her eyes and her voice would become very quiet and hesitant. She admitted to lingering sadness and guilt over the years she spent as a single-parent student.

. . .but that worked since my classes were mostly in the daytime, and I worked mostly in the evening, but that still took time away from Jeremy, although he had adult supervision at the time. But it was not the same as

having his own mom in the house. And my kids all loved my roommate, but it was not the same as having mom at home. And he knew where I was, and he could walk up here after school, and we could have a Coke or go to the student union, but it was not the same as being at home, helping with homework, and making sure I knew the friends. (Karen, 5-19-99, 1-2)

There were two respondents who talked more about their own identities than their identities as a mother—Felicity and Susan. "I think the thing is that I never saw my identity in somebody else—regardless of my kids or my husband or my nothing" (Felicity, 6-7-99, 4). Both of them discussed their formative years, their love of learning, and desire for achievement that formed their current identities. The descriptions of their "self-identities" seemed to be inextricably tied to their "student" self-identifications.

[I'm] always trying to reach self-actualization. Also, I think it's within people, you always try to further yourself, you always try to do better, try to learn more, and that is what I am trying to do. (Susan, 9-14-99, 6)

Felicity and Susan each clearly separated their self-identities from their parent selves and acknowledged the existence and strength of other selves. "I love being a mom, but that's not all I am" (Felicity, 6-7-99, 4).

Different from the other four respondents and in support of PST which postulates that suppression of some selves allows successful performance of a positive possible self, Susan and Felicity were aware of student and parent selves, but saw the student and parent selves merging to produce the self-actualized identity that motivated them to persist. "I can't be the 100% perfect person to be here with my son all the time anymore. I need adult conversation, I need to go back to adult thoughts" (Susan, 9-14-99, 3). "I think by people having their own identity you would actually be a better mother and a better person—to have your own identity" (Felicity, 6-7-99, 4). In describing her goals, Susan put the student self first as a way of attaining the parent's goals: "Finish school.

My son comes first. He has learned some things. That is my ultimate goal. To do my best as a mother" (9-14-99, 12). Felicity also gave priority to her student self's goals by allowing her husband to take custody of her children in the divorce. Karen, the respondent who expressed the strongest sense of parent self and the most guilt and sadness over her single-parent student life, also allowed the student self to take priority by continuing in school and allowing her children to live with their father.

In summarizing this section, these data provide clear evidence of identifications of separate selves while the respondents operated in the role of single-parent student, the "current" self.

Hoped-for Future Self

None of the respondents had difficulty describing a hoped-for future self. Generally, while they were living the life of the single-parent student, they all envisioned secure employment, more money (except Felicity), health and retirement benefits, and better futures for their children. Five of the six respondents prefaced many of their descriptions of their hoped-for future self with the remarks "With the college degree. . ." (Alex, Annie, Karen, Rebecca, Susan). Conforming to PST, these respondents made very clear distinctions between their perceptions of their current selves, their feared future selves, and their hoped-for future selves by the contrasts they drew with their descriptions of their hoped-for future selves and the feared future selves: the ones who had persisted in getting the college degree and the ones who had not gotten a college degree.

Feared Future Self

Five of the six respondents easily identified a feared future self as one who did not get a college degree. Many of them prefaced descriptions of their futures with the words "Without a college degree, I . . ." The exception was Felicity, who already possessed two college degrees. Although not explicitly stated, the feared future selves were described as having very much the same characteristics of the current self: struggling at a part time job or a minimum-wage full time job with no medical or dental benefits and no retirement package, offering nothing better to their own children. Susan saw a continuation of the poverty cycle for her son, or worse, jail. Karen thought that if her children did not see her succeed in college, they probably would not go to college either. Rebecca had already declared bankruptcy and could foresee that happening again if she did not get a college degree. Although Markus and Nurius described the feared future self as "that which the individual fears becoming" (1989, p. 56), the feared future self for these respondents seemed to be no more than a continuation of their current lives. The data analysis reveals, however, that their current lives are probably worse than their past lives or their feared future lives because they have taken on the additional demands of the college student life. As Alex put it "It's awful. . .my life is totally out of control. . .I am exhausted. . .I know it cannot be any worse. This is probably going to be the toughest time in my life" (5-4-99, 2, 4). The current self of each respondent is typically working at a part time job, usually earning minimum wage, with no benefits and no job security, taking college courses, and spending a lot of time away from her children.

The feared future self was described in almost exactly the same way by five of the six respondents. The only difference between their current selves and their feared future selves seems to be student status and the hopes that they held for their children's futures. The current, single-parent student self was hopeful that what she was doing would make a difference in her child's future; the feared, college dropout future self feared for her child's future as well as her own.

The only respondent who technically did not have a "feared" future self was Felicity. The major differences between Felicity and the other five respondents were that Felicity already possessed two college degrees, and her children lived with their father as much of, if not more than, the time they lived with their mother. Felicity's feared future self, the one who did not finish her Ph.D. in Economics, was deprived of the career opportunity of college professor. Salaries and benefits did not enter into the picture of her future self, neither did the effect on her children of Felicity not continuing to completion of her doctorate. She seemed quite comfortable with her future even without the Ph.D.: "I know I could have a job that I could make much more money than a college professor, before I even started my Ph.D., because I have a bachelor's in accounting" (6-7-99, 9).

Summary

The data seem to support PST by revealing the conflicts between perceived "selves"—not just the "parent self" and "student self", but also, and apparently unrealized to the respondents themselves, the "parent self" and the "current self" and the "hoped-for future self." Possible selves theory posits that there are clearly identifiable and separate selves whose desires are sometimes in conflict with each other (Markus & Nurius, 1986,

62). The data does show that four of the six single-parent students saw themselves as separate, identifiable selves in conflict with each other: "mother" and "student" (Alex, Annie, Karen, Rebecca), but none of them gave any evidence that they expected the parent self to conflict with the hoped-for future self who would still be a parent. Those respondents used the parent self-identification in describing their "current self," but they did not make the same distinctions when they described their "hoped-for future self." One of the extreme difficulties these single-parent students described was the balance between student life and family life, yet not one of them mentioned the balance between work life and family life that would be required, with or without the degree, in both the feared future self and the hoped-for future self. The mothers would still be mothers in the hoped-for future; in a sense, they would simply be trading school for a full time job, and demands on their time would continue. None in this group of respondents seemed to have considered this in contrasting their current selves with their hoped-for future selves.

The data show a clear concern on the part of the single-parent students as the parent self for their children's futures through their descriptions of their feared and hoped-for future selves, but not as clear a concern for the child in their current lives. The data also show that respondents could distinguish between a "current self," a "feared future self," and a "hoped-for future self," but did not realize that the current self and the feared future self they were describing were one and the same.

What is not clear from the data is why the single-parent student in her current life as a student accepts even greater time constraints on her family, less money, and greater stress than she has in the past, when she will have the same responsibilities by a different name (job instead of school) in the future. Her current life is miserable, the data indicate,

but she expects her future life to be great if she gets a college degree. If the parent self is a primary self in motivating behavior, and at least four of the six respondents say it is, then the parent self should continue to be the strongest regardless of future circumstances. If this is true, then getting a college degree or lack of college degree should make no difference to these respondents. What should make the difference to them is how much time they spend with their children. The data show that a major complaint of the single-parent students is how little time they have to spend with their children, but school was the primary reason they didn't spend more time with them.

These four respondents who gave a primary current self-description of "mother" described their current lives as compared with their past lives in much more negative terms than did Susan and Felicity who gave a primary current self-description as "my own identity." "Out of control" was Alex's description for her current life (5-4-99). The one respondent who had graduated, Karen, seemed to have an inkling that her single-parent self was her feared self because she displayed such grief and guilt over those years and losing her son to his father. She had described an extremely strong parent self and "hoped-for future self," yet she ended up with a college degree and no children in the home.

Collective Analysis

In this section the aggregate will be analyzed within the framework of the research objectives to determine whether or not the objectives have been met.

<u>Research Objective One</u>

This objective of the study was to give voice to single-parent students through an identification and description of their lives in higher education. It was expected of the data that a thick description would be provided that would lead the reader to insight and understanding of the group.

Analysis of the data shows that enough evidence of the single-parent student's life through the student's perspective has been provided to allow a thick description of the student's life. This evidence allows the reader to develop her own perception of the student's life. Data has been aggregated to develop the following composite of a single-parent student's life.

A single-parent student's day usually begins at dawn. The student rises before the children are awake in order to study, finish homework, or read the chapter that has been assigned for class that day. She grabs a shower if she can beat the kids to the bathroom. Once they're up, they need to be dressed, fed, various paraphernalia gathered, and taken to their school. If there's time before her classes begin, she stops at the computer lab to finish an Internet assignment. Between classes she studies.

When classes are over she works a few hours at her part time job. Then she rushes off to pick the kids up and take them to the baby-sitter. She returns to her job and tries to get some studying in at work if the job allows and she has an understanding boss. After work she picks the kids up from the baby-sitter, takes them home and feeds them. She grabs something to eat from what's left of what she has prepared for the children, eating while she's standing up. She cleans the youngest child up before getting him down

from the table. Then she cleans up the kitchen. She throws some clothes into the washing machine after removing yesterday's load and putting it in the dryer after removing yesterday's load and throwing it into the already-full laundry basket.

The single-parent student then gives the younger children their baths and tries to get them to bed before the baby-sitter gets there. It doesn't happen, but she has to leave for her group meeting at the college, so the baby-sitter will have to put them to bed. She kisses them goodnight and leaves to the sound of crying.

She is only one of three people who show up for the group meeting. The other three members have made few of the meetings. The meeting lasts only an hour, but then she stops by the library to get some reference material for a paper due the next week. On her way home, she stops at the grocery store to pick up milk for tomorrow's breakfast. She also stops at the automatic teller machine to get cash for next day's baby-sitter and for the older child's zoo field trip. She withdraws $20, carefully noting the balance on the receipt and writing it in her checkbook. The single-parent student finally gets home around 10:00 p.m.

One of the children is still up, and he stays up until 11:00 p.m. The mother finally gets him to sleep after reading every book in his room to him. She's afraid he feels a little feverish and panics at the thought of having to miss class the next day to take him to the doctor. The only Medicaid-approved pediatrician is in a town forty-five minutes away. She would miss a whole day of classes. A test is coming up later in the week, and she needs to be there for the review. She has missed very few classes in her two years of college. She puts that worry out of her mind and tries to work on a paper, but realizes she's starving, having only eaten scraps at dinner that night. She eats a snack, a textbook

propped in front of her, studying. When the snack is finished, she tries to work on a paper, but her thoughts are fuzzy and disorganized. Finally, at midnight she gives up and goes to bed, the sound of the dryer humming, soothing her to sleep. Only once in the night does she have to get up with a child. Remembering that the next day is pre-registration for the next semester, she has trouble getting back to sleep, worrying that she won't be able to schedule classes around her job and baby-sitters.

The next morning the single-parent student gets up at the crack of dawn.

Research Objective Two

As stated earlier, when an individual knows why she wants to do something a certain way, she can visualize herself following through with that knowledge to a desired state, and then behaves in such a manner as to attempt to achieve that state, thus forming a link or bridge between cognition and motivation. Research Objective 2 expects that the data, viewed through the lens of Possible Selves Theory, will provide the cognitive link to explain why the single-parent student is motivated to persist in obtaining a college degree. The literature states that "motivational attention" can refer to the allocation of cognitive resources to a possible self, to the pathways leading to that end, and to the consequences of arriving there (Schwarz, 1990). PST refines the cognitive-motivation pathway by specifying actual possible self states that can be visualized.

To achieve this research objective it was necessary that certain cognitions, or self-perceptions be recognized by the subjects under study. The actual possible self states that were chosen for this study from the literature but defined by each respondent were "current self"—the single-parent student while in college and raising children, "feared

future self"—the single-parent student who had dropped out of college, and "hoped-for future self"—the single-parent student who had completed her college degree. The literature has shown that this self-concept/possible self model has been helpful in explaining student persistence in several studies where students were asked to visualize themselves in the future both with and without a college degree (Heath, 1994; McClain, 1997; Megerian, 1994; Sandler, 1998).

In support of PST, what emerged from the data were clear perceptions or cognitions developed by the single-parent students about separate and identifiable current, feared future, and hoped-for future selves. The single-parent students generally described their current selves as struggling with difficult lives, their feared future selves as suffering in poverty and hopelessness due to the lack of a college degree, and their hoped-for future selves as having earned a college degree leading to an above-minimum wage job with benefits. This was in keeping with the Markus & Nurius definition of possible selves as "individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming" (1986, p. 954).

The single-parent students were able to use their cognitive resources to direct their motivational attention to a pathway leading to their most-desired perception of self. All of them were able to articulate unequivocally their belief that their cognitively derived-hoped-for self was attainable only through a college degree, and their cognitively-derived feared future self would become a reality if they did not get a college degree. In this study, those two selves provided the same motivation to persist in college. This result is supported by another study that found that possible selves have a very concrete impact on

how actions are initiated and structured, both to realize possible selves or to prevent the actuation of negative possible selves (Curry, Trew, Turner, & Hunter, 1994).

The motive that the majority of the respondents gave for persisting to the completion of their college degrees was their children—that they were doing it to make a better life for their children. In this study, I termed that particular cognitive-motivation link leading to performance (persistence in college) the parent self (or the mother self if the respondent articulated a particularly strong mother identification). Upon analysis, however, this parent self which I had thought to be the strongest motivator in the single-parent student's life, causing her to persist, was a confounding factor. Analysis revealed that the single-parent student was actually providing a worse home environment for the children because of the extra demands and stresses of college than if she had not been attending college. The five respondents who exhibited the strongest "mother self" described their current lives in the most negative terms, three of those had sought counseling, two took antidepressants, and four of them had had serious thoughts about dropping out. According to the Markus and Ruvolo model (see Chapter II, p. 37) the single-parent student with a strong identification of "mother self" conflicting with "student self" should have dropped out of college.

Under normal circumstances, an individual will not voluntarily subject herself and her children to constant stress, poverty, and constant demands on her attention, if she has a choice. That an individual would willingly do so requires explanation. The single-parent students of this study saw themselves in such a light as described above. They had almost nothing positive to say about their current situations, describing their "current self" as stressed-out, burned out, exhausted, and depressed. Yet these students were

committed not only to completing college, but to doing as well as they possibly could while in college. PST provides the explanation here again. As an individual approaches a goal, e.g., an earned college degree, positive possible selves which represent the individual in the desired state (hoped-for future degree-holding self) may dominate the working self-concept—that is, the current self-concept (Markus & Nurius, 1986). If the positive possible self (hoped-for future self, college graduate) can be maintained and conflicting possible selves can be suppressed, *even the mother self,* the individual's actions may be energized, active, and organized by this possible self, resulting in effective performance—the energized, organized activity of the model above—causing the single-parent student to stay in college and graduate. The times that the single-parent students were at their most depressed, thinking about dropping out, were the times when their mother self-concept was dominating. It had become a negative possible self (I'm a bad mother); and in the PST model if negative possible selves cannot be suppressed they may cause performance to become disorganized and counterproductive unless or until a positive possible self can be recruited that will counter the negative self. In all cases, the single-parent student was able to recruit her hoped-for future self as the positive possible self which enabled her to continue her studies.

The two single-parent students with the strongest sense of self-identity never wavered in their determination to obtain their degrees (Felicity and Susan). They identified one positive, predominant self—"my own identity"—and used that possible self to define their entire working self-concept. They seemed to be little influenced by the hoped-for future self. Felicity knew she could be an accountant, and Susan did not have materialistic aspirations. Susan was, however, influenced by the negative, feared future

self of welfare mother, but her overriding motivator seemed to be her cognitively-defined desire for self-actualization. Felicity and Susan both made statements to the effect that "I love my child/children, but. . ."; for Felicity, it was "I want to be my own person" (6-7-99, 4) and for Susan it was "I lost who I was. I can't be the 100% perfect person to be here with my son all the time anymore. I need adult conversation, I need to go back to adult thoughts" (9-14-99, 2, 3). Their positive self-conceptualizations allowed them to operate from one working self-concept system, and, as in the PST model, led them to organized activity and persistence in college.

In summary, the analysis of this data supports Objective 2 of this study in that the cognitive lens provided by PST explained the single-parent students' motivations to stay in school and obtain a college degree, with the deliberately-derived (cognitively processed) hoped-for future self providing the motive to persist in college.

Research Objective Three

This objective expects the data to produce a description of elements of the single-parent students' lives that do not fit PST. This research began with a hidden assumption that children, or put another way, the "parent self," was the primary motivator in the persistence of the single-parent student in higher education because it was the most obvious factor distinguishing the single-parent student from the traditional student. In seeming violation of PST, the data gave evidence to the contrary in two ways. The fact that two of the six respondents denied that their children were the most important reason they were getting their college degrees did not seem to fit the theory or the assumptions of the study; and, the fact that the remaining four respondents described their current lives as

single-parent students as worse than if they were not going to school also seemed to violate PST if the "parent self" was actually the motivating self.

As explained above, however, both of these seeming anomalies can be explained by the Markus and Ruvolo model. The single-parent student deliberately chooses a self-representation that leads to an organized performance that allows her to persist in pursuit of her degree. Which possible self the single-parent student chooses is not as important as the fact that she chooses a positive possible self and suppresses all conflicting and negative possible selves. The hoped-for future self that emerged from this study provided the most powerful cognitive-motivation bridge to performance of the single-parent student.

In summary, because even very different single-parent students' motivations were explained by the PST model, there was no evidence of elements of single-parent students' lives that do not fit PST.

Research Objective Four

This objective expected the data and design of this study to provide a test of the usefulness of PST in giving voice to this group of nontraditional students and explaining their persistence in higher education. The long interview format allowed the single-parent student to tell her story in her own words, words which provided the data for analysis. This format also allowed the interviewer to gather data through the tone of voice, inflection, pauses, and nonverbal communication provided by the respondent. The subjects themselves provided the operationalizations of the study: the current self, the hoped-for future self, the feared future self, the parent self, the self-actualized self, the nontraditional student, and persistence.

Possible Selves Theory and the Markus and Ruvolo model provided useful mechanisms to explain how the single-parent student engaged in the cognitive process (formulation of possible selves) that led to motivation, which in turn led to positive performance, that is, persistence in pursuit of the college degree. PST also displayed its usefulness in providing voice for this group of nontraditional students by allowing them to identify possible selves which are unique to them because their children are so intertwined in their own self-conceptions. In five of the six respondents, one important component of PST, the hoped-for future self, emerged as the most powerful motivator in these students' persistence. In one respondent the feared future self provided an excellent explanation of why she persisted in school despite great difficulties. Susan had experienced life with a child at the lowest socioeconomic rung of society and knew that she did not want this for her future—the feared future. She saw a college degree as her and her son's salvation—the hoped-for future.

PST provides broad categories of possible selves (current self, future self) making it useful to this study because it gives the respondent the ability to define her own possible self and identify it as a motivator. This proves a valuable research tool, as it helps the researcher avoid biasing the respondent with preconceived operationalizations of constructs. It also gives the respondent the freedom to tell her story in her own voice.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

In summary PST was a very useful tool for providing voice for this group because it gave structure to the study without biasing or stifling the respondents. Conceptually, PST accurately portrayed respondents' perspectives.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter includes a summary, conclusions, limitations, suggestions for practice and policy, and suggestions for future research gleaned from the data compiled in this study.

Summary

The principal proposition in the stated purpose of this study was that persistence, also called retention, of college students is a topic of great interest among researchers and administrators in higher education. A review of the literature, as provided by Chapter II, supported the extensive interest in retention topics. An interacting proposition, however, revealed that despite this interest in persistence of college students, there is a growing segment of the student population that has been virtually unstudied—the nontraditional, single-parent student—even though this group of students struggles to overcome great difficulties to stay in school. Again, a review of the literature revealed great interest in the subject of persistence, but virtually nothing about persistence of the single-parent student. It was speculated in this study that the reason for this oversight is that this segment of the college student population has no "voice," no visibility, no mode of representation in higher education realms. The purpose of this study was to give such

voice to this group of students and to examine their motivations to persist in the pursuit of their college degrees. The single-parent students' "ways of knowing," or cognitions, leading to their motivations to stay in school were examined through the lens of Possible Selves Theory (PST). This study was also used as a test to determine whether PST is useful in giving voice to the single-parent student and explaining their persistence in higher education. The purpose of this study was accomplished by:

- Data collection from six single-parent students at various stages of completion of their degrees using the long interview method;

- Data presentation in the form of individual profiles of respondents and categorical representations of the objectives of the study. Categories were: single-parent student life; perceptions of selves (current, feared future, and hoped-for future); idealizations of single-parent student life; and differences between respondents; and

- Data analysis by constructs: persistence, nontraditional student, PST; and analysis within the frame of the research objectives; with the analysis conducted through the lens of Possible Selves Theory using the Markus and Ruvolo model (1989).

Data Needs, Sources, Collection, and Presentation

Primary data collection was required for the purposes of this study for two reasons: 1) there is very little published material about the single-parent student, and, 2) to give "voice" to the single-parent student, literal voices must be heard—their words, their inflections, their tones, their volume. The long interview method using three

structured interview questions and many probing questions designed to clarify responses was eminently suitable to meet the purposes of this study as it enabled the respondents to speak freely, emotionally, and elaborately on subjects that mattered to them, thus giving them "voice."

Most of the subjects in the study were reached through in-class announcements of the search for research subjects, although posted solicitations were displayed throughout the campus. All subjects were personally approached by the researcher and asked if they would participate in the study. I was led to one subject by two other interviewees, and one subject was identified through someone else who was aware of this study and knew of a single-parent student. There was also a solicitation attempt to locate non-persisting single-parent students through a public notice on a local radio station and through word of mouth, but those attempts did not produce any responses. This lack of response to a well-publicized search was puzzling until an analysis of the data revealed that single-parent students are very reticent in discussing their lives. They repeatedly said that they do not inform people of their single-parent status, not wishing to be seen as using their children as a "crutch" or an excuse to perform at standards below the average traditional student. In other words, they keep a low profile. This very lack of response, however, supports one of the objectives of the study, that a study is needed to give the single-parent student a voice in the academic community.

The actual settings in which the interviews took place contributed to a relaxed feeling in which respondents were induced to talk about the most personal details of their lives. Food helped. The restaurant interviews were the most relaxed and friendly-feeling, but they produced a lot of background noise on the tapes which made them very difficult

and time-consuming to transcribe. A unidirectional microphone helped solve this problem, but it also picked up some background noise. Those respondents were delighted to be treated to a meal at a nice restaurant. The most formal interview took place in my faculty office, with me sitting across the desk from a respondent who was also a student. She did not fully relax until an hour into the interview; and I would not use this setting again. The interview that took place in the respondent's office at work worked well because we were in a back room with no telephone and no interruptions. The donuts I brought seemed to break the ice.

Prior to collecting the data, a literature review was completed. Data was continuously cast against the PST literature as it was being used as the lens to give voice to the subjects and to explain their persistence in higher education. Data analysis was conducted within the framework of the objectives of the study and led to conclusions in three areas: that this was a very determined group of students intent on earning college degrees; this group felt themselves to be different from "traditional" students; and, as explained by Possible Selves Theory, this group was motivated to persist by the hopes of a better future that would be significantly different from both their past and current situations (called the "hoped-for future self" in PST). Data analysis revealed that the objectives of the study had been met: giving voice to this group of students, explaining their motivations through the lens of PST, and evaluating the usefulness of PST to examine cognitions and motivations of persistence. There was no discovery of elements of the data in this study that could not be explained by PST.

Findings

Objective One – Give Voice to the Single-Parent, Nontraditional Students

Through an Identification and Description of Their Lives in Higher Education. These

students did not feel that they had a voice in higher education, either in the classroom, at

administrative levels, or at the institutional level. They complained of unsympathetic

instructors, rigid department rules, and punitive financial aid practices. At the same time,

they stated that they themselves were partly to blame because they did not like to make it

known that they were single-parent students. The fact that a researcher was interested

enough in their lives to ask these students to tell their stories for research purposes gives

them voice. The fact that their words were recorded, transcribed, written, and published

also gives them voice. The fact that others will read their words gives them voice. Thick

description of the respondents' lives was made possible by the forthrightness and

willingness of those interviewed to share personal details of their lives with a stranger. A

reading of these words can bring insight and understanding of this group.

Objective Two – Analyze the Voices or Stories of Single-Parent, Nontraditional

Students and Their Persistence in Higher Education Using the Cognitive Lens Provided

by Possible Selves Theory to Explain Their Motivation to Stay in School and Obtain a

College Degree. What these students said most loudly in their voices was that they had

more difficult lives than most, but that they were determined to get their college degrees.

The difficulties of their lives drove three of them to counseling to relieve their stress and

depression. Even though most of the respondents said their motivation to persist was

their child or children, upon analysis this did not make sense. Using the cognitive lens

provided by PST, if the students were truly motivated by their cognitively-perceived "parent self," they would have dropped out of school according to Markus and Ruvolo's PST model (1989). Their current lives and their children's were made terribly difficult by going to college, and a parent operating solely from the parent self would not allow her children to experience such a lifestyle if she had it within her power to change that lifestyle. Examination of the data through the cognitive lens of PST allowed identifications of possible selves and their placement in the PST model, thus leading to the discovery that the theory did very clearly explain the single-parent student's motivation to persist. Contrary to what they said, the students were actually motivated by a possible self other than the parent self—the students were motivated by a perceived, and very clearly articulated, future hoped-for self (Alex, Annie, Felicity, Karen, and Rebecca) and a very clearly articulated feared future self (Susan).

The Markus and Ruvolo model of self-systems displays the effects of conflicting selves and their effects on performance, showing that if the single-parent student is truly motivated by the parent self—in this study, the mother self—then the conflict with the student self would be so great as to result in disorganized activity leading to poor performance and nonpersistence. This is exactly what happened with those respondents who most strongly identified themselves as "mother" self. When the conflict between mother self and student self became extreme, they became depressed, disorganized, stressed, and ready to drop out (Alex, Annie, Karen, Rebecca). When they continued on, it was because they consciously told themselves that things would be much better if they only could get through and get the degree. At that point, the single-parent student had suppressed the negative parent self who knew this was not a good situation for her and her

children, and had allowed the positive hoped-for future self to predominate, motivating

her to persist despite circumstances where she could not be the kind of mother she wanted

to be. In some cases, the result of suppressing the parent self in order to let the hoped-for

future self motivate the student to graduate was the loss of the children themselves.

Felicity's children lived with their father over half the time. Karen surrendered her son to

his father in her last year of college. All of the respondents' children spent little waking

time with their mothers. These results are explained by PST, which states that as an

individual approaches a goal, positive possible selves which represent the individual in the

desired state may dominate the working self-concept (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As the

single-parent student moved closer to graduation, it was necessary that a positive possible

self (the hoped-for future self) dominate the working self-concept in order to persist.

Objective Three – Report What Was Not Explained by PST. This objective was

not met, as the analysis of the data of this study did not reveal any elements of the single-

parent students' lives that could not be explained by PST.

Objective Four – Test the Usefulness of PST for Providing Voice for this Group

of Nontraditional Students and Their Persistence in Higher Education. This study allowed

a thorough test of the usefulness of PST for providing voice for the single-parent student by

identifying the different conceptions of possible selves, arrived at by the cognitions of the

students themselves. It allowed the respondents themselves to examine their own possible

self perceptions and to tie their chosen possible self to their motivations to persist in

pursuit of their college degrees. It remained for the researcher only to listen carefully to

what the respondents said, to assign PST labels to the respondents' identifications of

possible selves, and finally, to place those possible selves into the PST model. If the researcher correctly labeled the possible self, the model predicted how the respondent would be motivated and what kind of performance would result. Although some of the respondents thought they were motivated by the parent self to stay in college and get a degree, the PST model identified the hoped-for future self (five respondents) and the feared future self (one respondent) as the true motivators to persistence. This study joins others in its support of PST as a useful tool for evaluating motivation and performance in college students (Belz, 1993; Chalk, 1996; Leonardi, et al., 1998; Miyamoto, et al., 1994; Ruvolo & Markus, 1992).

Conclusions

Conclusions center around the method, the population, and the frame (answers to research questions developed to guide this study).

The Method

A qualitative methodology using the long interview as the research tool is most appropriately utilized when it matches the purpose of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). One purpose of this study was to give "voice" to the single-parent student. To generate meaning, this voice must come from the words, expressions, and experiences of the respondents themselves which establish meaning inferentially (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The postpositivist approach to interviewing employed by this study was the method most suited to bringing out this voice from the respondents. Features of the postpositivist interview that make it conducive to developing the voice of the respondent are:

- respondent-oriented direction, not researcher oriented or questionnaire oriented;

- encouragement of respondents to express themselves in ways they are most comfortable—for example, by telling stories or following digressions;

- careful listening, interviewers become emotionally engaged with respondents;

- a preference for an unstructured and open-ended format (Neuman, 2000, p. 282)

The above points taken in aggregate encourage an interview method that encourages the interviewee to "open up" and to trust the interviewer with revelations that might not occur if a different method were used. I believe these respondents were candid with me because of this trust. This trust probably also had a lot to do with their identification with me as a woman, as a student, and as a single mother myself—factors that made my use of the long, face-to-face interview a natural choice and led to a richness of data that could not have been generated through quantitative methods, with a more structured, objective type of interview, or with a different kind of interviewer. This methodology worked for this study's purpose.

The Population and the Sample

This population holds important information for decision makers as it relates to the relevant issue of persistence in higher education and the societal concern for single parents and their children. The population of interest to this study was that group of students who were raising children while simultaneously pursuing a college degree, whether they

graduated or not. The only requirements of inclusion in the group were those two: that they were raising children and going to college at the same time. There were no gender, race, age, college classification, geographical, or socioeconomic restrictions on the population of interest. Solicitations were made publicly through posted announcements at two colleges in different states, through announcements in eight different classes that I taught in one year, and through a public service announcement on a local radio station in a northeastern state.

The sample that resulted was comprised of six females with the following characteristics: five white Americans, one naturalized American of Middle East descent, four divorced women, two women who had never been married, four respondents who maintained some degree of reliance on her own parents (ranging from occasional baby-sitting to actually living with the parents), three respondents whose ex-husbands took some responsibility for the children (ranging from every-other weekend visitation, to every other week living arrangement), three respondents whose children had no contact with their fathers, and a range of socioeconomic backgrounds from poverty-stricken to well off. Ages of the respondents ranged from 26 to 40. College classifications ranged from sophomore to doctoral student. For all their differences, the respondents said remarkably the same things.

The theme that emerged from the first interview was continued throughout the rest of the interviews: that of a financially struggling, stressed-out, frustrated student trying to maintain diligence in both her studies and her child rearing. Five of the six respondents told basically the same story, but sometimes in radically different ways.

Alex talked fast, in an aggressive tone, almost argumentative. Karen spoke hesitantly, quietly, in an almost apologetic, but defensive way. Susan, the most poverty-stricken of the group, spoke very matter-of-factly, but in a very restrained manner. Annie, the single-parent student with the greatest support system (she and her children lived with her parents) was the most relaxed respondent, sometimes making jokes of her life and laughing as she described the two-year-old throwing plates at dinner.

Felicity was the most markedly different of the group both in what she said and the way she said it. Felicity had not contested her ex-husband's desire to take custody of the children in the divorce, so she had them slightly less time than her husband. Felicity spoke very aggressively, denying that the single-parent student life was difficult. She was very disdainful of other single-parent students, claiming it was easy to get other people to help out with your children, that child care issues such as cost and availability were fairly trivial. Felicity expressed the strongest sense of self-identity of the group, but she often contradicted herself. The impression given was that she was trying to justify not fighting for custody of her children. She did note that while married with children and going to college, her husband expressed resentment of her and complained of her not doing enough at home. I believed that she was motivated by her own self identity to pursue a college degree, but I did not believe that she was as comfortable with her custody agreement as she said she was. Her constant contradictions and denials of difficulties seemed to tell a different story.

It is difficult to know if this sample is representative of the entire single-parent student population. Given that the only characteristics necessary to be included in the group are having children live with you while you go to college, it may be that a small

sample is representative of the group. The methodology employed in this qualitative study does place a limit on sample size due to the extreme amount of time it takes both to interview participants and then to transcribe those interviews. A one-hour interview usually took eight hours to transcribe. Analysis of the data was also time consuming because the transcriptions had to be read over and over, seeking certain words, phrases, and patterns. It would be interesting to conduct a quantitative study to determine the prevalence of characteristics of the single-parent student as well as their proportion of the general student population.

An interesting and perhaps puzzling phenomenon was the lack of response to the solicitations for subjects, even when payment was offered for interviews. One can only speculate as to the reasons for this lack of response. An obvious response would be that single-parent students are so motivated to continue that there are simply not very many nonpersisters. There is some anecdotal evidence to support that view. A personal interview with a community college transfer director at one of the largest community colleges in upstate New York verified that very few single-parent students drop out of that college, although they had a very large and growing population of this type of student (Personal interview with Gloria Battaglia, Director of Transfers, Onandaga Community College, Syracuse, New York, April 13, 2000). A likelier explanation is that single parents are busy working and taking care of children and simply were not reached by the solicitations. Posted announcements at daycare centers may have produced more respondents.

<u>Conceptual Frame</u>

This study was framed by the constructs of persistence, the nontraditional student, and the theory of possible selves. Out of that frame grew the objectives of the study. Those objectives revolved around identifying a particular type of nontraditional student, examining the motivation behind this student's persistence in college from a theoretical perspective, and evaluating that theory to determine its usefulness. The conclusions in this section are drawn from the literature and the data.

<u>Objective One – Give Voice to the Single-Parent, Nontraditional Student Through an Identification and Description of Their Lives in Higher Education.</u> The literature on persistence (often termed retention) clearly defines several distinct classes of college students. Major distinctions are between traditional and nontraditional students. Categories of nontraditional students that have received the greatest attention in the literature have been minorities, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and adult students. Traditional and nontraditional student retention has been carefully tracked and documented for twenty to thirty years through several longitudinal studies (Astin, 1996; Astin, 1998; Tinto, 1988; Tinto, 1998). The persistence literature generally does not differentiate the single-parent student from the nontraditional student. That omission raises the question, "Is the single-parent student a special category of the nontraditional student, and if so, why hasn't this student been studied?" That question led to an assumption of this study that the single-parent student has no "voice," is not a recognizable entity.

This lack of voice may be explained in two possible ways at two different levels: the individual and the societal. As individuals, this study provided data that demonstrated

the repugnance of the single-parent student in making her plight known. Again and again, I heard the words "excuse" and "whiner." In essence, the single-parent student sucks it up and goes on. If she falls into depression, then she either gets counseling or plods along, coping. She desires understanding on the part of college officials, but she doesn't want to be the one to publicize her plight. She has no voice.

At the societal level, there is no group identity for the single-parent student the way there was developed in the 1960s and 1970s the group identity for minority students, e.g., "Black Power" for African-American students, and "Brown Power" and "La Raza Unida" for Hispanic students, even "Gay Power" for homosexual students. Those developing group identities garnered publicity and political power (Altbach, 1990). They demanded recognition on college campuses. The single-parent student has never coalesced or organized, therefore remains virtually unrecognized, i.e., has no voice.

Hopefully, this will change as more researchers concern themselves with this group of student. This and any subsequent studies can serve to bring voice to the single-parent student. Some students have now been heard by virtue of this research process. Now one researcher and at least four university professionals have heard the story. Like ripples in a pond, this voice may spread into other research agendas. As the first stone cast into the pond, this study has been instrumental in making the voice of the single-parent student known.

Objective Two – Analyze the Voices or Stories of Single-Parent Nontraditional Students and Their Persistence in Higher Education Using the Cognitive Lens Provided by Possible Selves Theory to Explain Their Motivation to Stay in School and Obtain a

Degree. The literature on persistence did support one of the findings of this study, that counseling seemed to help students persist (Borden, et al., 1997; Martinez, 1996; Nerad & Miller, 1996; Parker, 1997). Three of the six respondents took advantage of their university's counseling services and credited the experience with helping them continue. This did not fully explain their motivation to persist, however, as not all of the respondents took advantage of counseling.

Because the major differentiating factor between the single-parent student and other students was children, I had expected the major motivating factor for the respondents to be their desire to be a good parent. Indeed, four of the six respondents identified chose "mother" as their dominate possible self. What's more, the current self and life described by this category of respondent was miserable: not enough time spent with children, stressful, fatiguing, financially challenging, and depressing. According to the Markus and Ruvolo self-concept model, if this possible self truly did dominate and was in conflict with other possible selves (e.g., the student self), then the result should be disorganized activity leading to dropping out of school (1989). At first I thought the model or theory was not supported, but on further analysis, I realized *all* of the single-parent students had actually suppressed what had become a negative possible self (the inadequate mother) and selected a positive possible self (the hoped-for future self who had graduated from college) in order to motivate herself to persist. Only one respondent came close to admitting it. Karen confessed to a lot of guilt over the years she was raising her son and going to school and his ultimate departure to live with his father.

The PST model also explained Felicity's words and behaviors. Felicity repeatedly denied that single-parent studenting was difficult and made very derogatory remarks

about single-parent students. However, she constantly contradicted herself, to the point where I even wrote in my notes comments such as "She just said the opposite. What does she mean here?" Felicity had given legal custody of their children to her ex-husband in the divorce proceedings which occurred while Felicity was pursuing her doctorate. It could appear that she had to deny her parent self in order to justify those actions.

Although none of these respondents realized they had begun to perceive the parent self as a negative self and had thus chosen a different, positive self (hoped-for future self) to motivate them to persist, denial of the parent self is explained by PST. Curry et al. (1994) found that possible selves have a very concrete impact on how actions are initiated and structured, both to realize possible selves or to prevent the actuation of negative possible selves. If the single-parent student's overriding goal is to obtain a college degree, PST effectively explains that she must deliberately choose a positive possible self to motivate her to persist in that pursuit. Unfortunately, the effect of the suppression of the parent self had residual effects: guilt and denial. Several respondents wondered out loud if this time in their lives would be remembered by their children, and *how* it would be remembered.

Without the lens of the theory of possible selves and the Markus and Ruvolo PST model, I would not have reached the same conclusions. This objective was well-met by PST.

Objective Three – Report What is Not Explained by PST. Again, the data analysis surprised me. I had fully expected Objective 3 to be realized, especially in the early stages of data analysis. The two respondents who identified a strong, positive self identity, seemed to be very different from the four respondents who identified what they

thought was a primary and overriding parent identity. At first I thought those two

respondents violated the tenets of PST, thus providing elements that do not fit PST.

Upon further analysis, I revised my opinion as described above in Objective 2. This

objective, therefore, was not realized, which serves to provide further support of PST.

Objective Four – Test the Usefulness of PST for Providing Voice for this Group

of Nontraditional Students and Their Persistence in Higher Education. In my opinion,

this study provided a sufficient test of the usefulness of PST for providing voice for

single-parent students and explaining their persistence in higher education. I base that

conclusion, in part, on my surprise at the results. It seemed so obvious to me that since

"children" were the differentiating factor between this and other types of students, that a

"parent self" must be the reason they persisted. PST demonstrated otherwise. Despite

that surprising result, PST still provided value in allowing the single-parent student to

fully describe different possible selves, one of which was the parent self. Even though

the hoped-for future self was not recognized by most respondents as the dominant

possible self, a full discussion of life as a parent self competing with a student self

allowed, through this study, the single-parent student to give voice to their feelings.

Thus, Objective 4 objective was fully met.

Implications and Recommendations

The results produced by this study reveal important implications for researchers

and practitioners in higher education relating to a critical higher education issue:

persistence of the college student. The study should also be viewed as important to

society and public policymakers because the success of the single-parent student has an economic impact in both the short and long term futures. Possible Selves Theory has emerged as a useful vehicle to explain the cognitive-motivation link to performance in one population, possibly in others. Another important result of this study is to give the single-parent student a voice in higher education.

Research

It is exciting to see the development of Possible Selves Theory as useful for new research purposes. This study applied the theory to a previously-unstudied phenomenon: the life of the single-parent student. It turned a superficial analysis into a revelation. The power of PST should be further tested through other research studies. An interesting application of PST to the single-parent student could occur through a longitudinal study that identifies possible selves early in the college career and tracks any changes in possible selves and motivation to graduation. Some years subsequent to graduation, a retrospective view of these students might provide greater insight into their past possible selves and how they made use of them to persist in college. Quantitative studies would also be useful in several areas; statistical t-tests for example, would be useful in determining if there are real differences between the single-parent student population and other student populations.

Practice

The knowledge about PST and single-parent students provided through this study could be very useful to college counselors. Counselors using PST could help students

understand their current situations and the necessity to deliberately motivate themselves

to continue, thus relieving some of the stress, frustration, and guilt that result in depression.

Admissions counselors could also use this information to caution potential single-parent

students that theirs will be a very hard road to travel. As cold-hearted as it may sound,

admissions counselors should inform students that they may have to put aside their

perceptions of themselves as good parents for a while because they simply will not be able

to be the parent they want to be while going to school and raising children at the same time.

College and university support services should identify these students once admitted, and

make them fully aware of counseling and other services. College officials, if interested in

retaining this type of student, should seriously explore support services such as on-

campus daycare and "Kid's Day" types of activities for days the public school system is

closed. Academic departments and instructors should make attempts to identify these

students and make it known that they have been so identified. This will relieve the

single-parent student of feeling that she has to bring up her children as an excuse every

time she needs to miss class, turn in a paper late, etc.

Theory

Objective 4 established that PST is a useful theory for explaining the motivation of

the single-parent student to persist in higher education. PST could be used in persistence

studies for all groups of students, as it allows any self-conception or possible self to be

placed into the model. It is a simple, useful model to explain how certain cognitions

stimulate motivation, leading to certain levels of performance. This model could be just

as useful in explaining employee behavior in the business realm as it is in explaining student behavior in the academic world.

Another implication of using this theory in this study is that those college officials and instructors who have perceived single-parent students as whiners can more fully understand the lives and motivations of these students through a scientific model.

Society

For society, this study should garner public support for the single-parent student. These members of society have deliberately turned their backs on the welfare and Medicaid options, choosing instead to brave extreme difficulties in order to become productive members of society. Not only do they pull themselves to higher socioeconomic strata through completion of a college degree, but they break the vicious cycle of poverty and crime faced by their children and improve their children's chances of going to college. It would seem that it would behoove policy makers at the institutional and governmental levels to provide support for the single-parent student. It seems self-evident that a self-supporting, college-educated single parent of one or more children would be more valuable to society than would a poverty-level, college dropout subsisting on government handouts. If society can do anything to change a single-parent's possible self perception as negative parent to positive parent and thus make persisting in college an easier task, it seems incumbent upon society to do so.

Limitations

There were two major limitations of this study. One is that only single-parent students who persisted in obtaining their college degrees were studied. It would have been interesting and useful to compare possible selves of these students with non-persisters to see if PST could still explain the cognitive-motivation link to performance. It would also have been useful to have males and different races represented in the study to determine if there were gender or cultural differences affecting possible selves and motivation.

Another major limitation of the study is that because it was a qualitative study using the long interview method, sample size was necessarily small. What this study does not answer is how representative is this sample of the general population? This study does not allow us to draw a conclusion that a majority of single-parent students will arrive at the same possible self-perceptions or be motivated in the same manner. Since a major objective of this study was simply to give voice to a particular group of students, this limitation was not a critical one. Concluding that PST was useful in explaining motivation of these students, however would have been strengthened by a larger sample size.

Concluding Comments

For me, both the content and the process of this research study were a journey of emotion and discovery. True to the epistemological beliefs of the postpositivist qualitative paradigm, I was involved with the subjects. I cried when they cried, I sympathized and empathized. I came to believe that they needed the voice this study attempted to provide.

I also came to a greater appreciation of the research process as a true process of discovery. Possible Selves Theory fulfilled my earliest excitement and hopes for its application. I hope that this study sparks in another researcher the desire to take PST and the single-parent student population to greater depths of exploration.

For future researchers, this study has provided theoretical and conceptual links between persistence, nontraditional students, and Possible Selves Theory. The study has demonstrated the predictive usefulness and power of PST. PST has proven robust and useful. This usefulness applies at the policy level institutionally: if we accept that PST drives motivation, we must accept that people have different views of their multiple realities, but that their concerns for their multiple realities can be problematic individually and institutionally. The institution should take the responsibility of helping the individual to identify a focused self—one which leads to organized, productive activity that will help the student to persist to degree completion. This benefits the institution through increased retention, and it benefits the individual in obtaining a college degree.

Institutional changes required to help nontraditional students identify a single, productive possible self fall into the categories of counseling/advising and services such as child care. Nontraditional students could be identified at admission and earmarked for inclusion in special counseling sessions which help them to identify a positive self that can motivate them to continue throughout college. Tangible services that help support the parent self, such as child care, should be provided to alleviate the guilt over conflicting selves which can lead to depression and thoughts of dropping out of school.

As institutions adopt PST in counseling and advising, follow-up studies of nontraditional students who have succeeded and are one to two years beyond their

degrees could be valuable in providing retrospective evidence of the cognition-motivation process that led to successful completion of college. Further, it would be interesting to see if subjects had adopted new possible selves to motivate them in their professional lives. Once institutions recognize the power that PST holds in improving retention of nontraditional students, there is no reason why this theory could not be used with traditional students as well.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

APPROVAL FORM
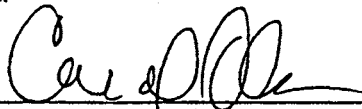
OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Date: April 28, 1999   IRB #:   ED-99-121

Proposal Title: "RETENTION OF THE SINGLE-PARENT STUDENT IN HIGHER
                   EDUCATION"

Principal   Adrienne Hyle
Investigator(s):   Cindy Gibson

Reviewed and
Processed as: Exempt

Approval Status Recommended by Reviewer(s):   Approved

Signature:

_____   ____April 28, 1999____
Carol Olson, Director of University Research Compliance   Date

Approvals are valid for one calendar year, after which time a request for continuation must be submitted. Any
modification to the research project approved by the IRB must be submitted for approval. Approved projects are
subject to monitoring by the IRB. Expedited and exempt projects may be reviewed by the full Institutional Review
Board.

APPENDIX B

SOLICITATION OF SUBJECTS NOTICE

ARE YOU THE SINGLE PARENT OF A
MINOR CHILD OR CHILDREN WHO IS
TRYING TO GET A COLLEGE DEGREE?
WOULD YOU LIKE TO PARTICIPATE
IN A DISSERTATION STUDY WHERE
YOU COULD DESCRIBE YOUR LIFE?

DOCTORAL STUDENT IS SEEKING
SUBJECTS FOR INTERVIEWS TO
PROVIDE DATA FOR A DISSERTATION
STUDY. INTERVIEWS WOULD BE AT
YOUR CONVENIENCE, LASTING
ABOUT AN HOUR, TO TAKE PLACE
BEFORE THE END OF THIS SEMESTER
OR THE BEGINNING OF THE SUMMER.

PLEASE CONTACT CINDY GIBSON AT
744-5045 OR 624-5811 ANYTIME TO
MAKE ARRANGEMENTS. ALL
INFORMATION WOULD BE
COMPLETELY CONFIDENTIAL.

IRB Approval #: ED-99-121

APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM

"I, _____,hereby authorize or direct

Cindy Gibson, or associates or assistants of her choosing, to perform the following treatment or procedure.

1. **Procedure** -Cindy Gibson will interview me about my life as a single-parent student, using a tape recorder to tape the interview. She will transcribe the taped interview, send me a copy of the written interview for my inspection, correction. and approval, and I will return it to her with my written comments and approval.

2. **Duration of subject's participation**-I understand that the interview will last one hour, or more if I would like to speak longer. At the end of one hour. Cindy Gibson will inform me that one hour has elapsed and ask if I would like to continue the interview. I may refuse, thus the interview will end. or I may agree. I am free to stop the interview at any time, even if one hour has not elapsed.

3. **Extent, if any, to which confidentiality of records identifying the subject will be maintained**-I understand that my name will be changed and my identity will be protected in the transcription of the interview. Further, that no one other than Cindy Gibson will ever know my identity or of my participation in the study. I understand that all records will be kept in the office of Adrienne Hyle, Ph.D. in the College of Education at Oklahoma State University, and that these records will be destroyed after three years.

4. **Possible discomforts or risks**-I understand that I may refuse to answer any interview question which makes me uncomfortable, and I may stop the interview at any time if I feel uncomfortable. with no adverse effects or consequences to me.

5. **Possible benefits for subjects/society**-I understand that my participation in this study will help to give "voice" to a relatively unknown group of students whose college careers are more of a struggle than the "traditional" college students because of the dual and demanding roles of parent and student. Through this study, administrators may change policies and make services available to single-parent students that were formerly not available. I know there is no guarantee of this. but at least my life will be formally recognized."

This is done as part of an investigation entitled "Retention of the Single-Parent Student in Higher Education."

The purpose of the procedure is. through personal interviews with the students themselves, to identify the plight of single-parent students in their attempts to stay in school and obtain an advanced degree. The study will apply "Possible Selves Theory" to

determine if the desire to change "selves" (a non-degree holder to a college degree-holder) motivates single-parent students to persist in higher education. Another purpose is to give voice to these students as a group deserving of administrative consideration in overcoming obstacles to their continued presence on college and university campuses.

"I understand that 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 after notifying the project director."

I may contact Cindy Gibson at telephone number 744-5045 or 624-5811. I may also contact Sharon Bacher, IRB Executive Secretary, 305 Whitehurst, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078; telephone number (405) 744-5700.

I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

Date:_____ Time_____ (a.m./p.m.)

Signed:_____
                         Signature of Subject

I certify that I have personally explained all elements of this form to the subject or his/her representative before requesting the subject or his/her representative to sign it.

Signed:_____
                      Project Director or his/her authorized representative

APPENDIX D

FAX FOR SOLICITATION OF

NON-PERSISTERS

TO: DON RADIGAN, General Manager, WYLF Radio, Penn Yan, New York

FROM: CINDY GIBSON, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF MARKETING, KEUKA COLLEGE and CANDIDATE FOR ED.D. DEGREE AT OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

DATE: TUESDAY, MARCH 7, 2000

RE: SUBJECTS FOR DISSERTATION RESEARCH

I am writing a dissertation to fulfill the final requirements for my Doctorate of Education at Oklahoma State University. The title of the dissertation is "Retention of the Single-Parent Student in Higher Education." I have already interviewed six people, complying with all regulations of the Institutional Review Board for interviewing human subjects (I have that approval document on file). I need at least two more interviews with people who were single parents while they were attending college (community or junior college is fine), but who did NOT complete their college education. The single parent may be male or female. I will pay $25 for a one hour interview, scheduled at the convenience of the subject. The subject will receive a copy of the interview once it has been transcribed. This important research may help educate college and university administrators about the difficulties single parents face in trying to balance the demands of raising children and getting a college education.

Thank you so much for your offer to put this information on the radio as a public service announcement. I hope it will be beneficial to both the community and my research.

I may be reached at 315-531-5616 in the Business and Management Division at Keuka College. Email is cgibson@mail.keuka.edu.

THANKS a ton for your help. I especially love your morning show.

VITA

Cindy Moore Gibson

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Thesis: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE PERSISTENCE OF SINGLE-PARENT
NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AS SEEN
THROUGH THE LENS OF POSSIBLE SELVES THEORY

Major Field: Educational Administration

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Cocoa Beach, Florida.

Education: Graduated from Topeka High School, Topeka, Kansas in May, 1971;
received Bachelor of Science degree in Biomedical Science from Texas
A&M University, College Station, Texas, in May, 1980; received a Master
of Business Administration degree majoring in Management from Texas
A&M University, College Station, Texas in December, 1981; completed
the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree at Oklahoma State
University in July, 2000.

Experience: Customer service manager at American Scientific Products,
Houston, Texas, 1982-1983; Pharmaceutical Sales Representative for
Mead Johnson Pharmaceuticals, San Antonio, Texas, 1983-1985; Business
Instructor at Southwest Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas, 1985-
1987; taught Management courses at Oklahoma State University,
Stillwater, Oklahoma, 1996-1999; Assistant Professor of Marketing at
Keuka College, Keuka Park, New York, 1999-present.

Professional Memberships: Certified Professional in Human Resources, Society
for Human Resource Management; American Marketing Association; Sam
Walton Fellow, Students in Free Enterprise.