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Within the qualitative paradigm, the subjectivity of the researcher was acknowledged and indeed was understood as a positive contribution to the research findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Furthermore, the location of this study in feminism emphasizes young mothers' voices and the experiences of all parties involved, including the researcher. The researcher strongly believes that her subjectivity impacted on this research in numerous ways, as being a student mother herself she could relate to many experiences of the participants.

It is also noted that the common experiences shared by the researcher and the researched are considered by feminist theorists as the researcher's role of identification with the researched, and is a significant reflection leads to objective thought out. It allows researchers to proceed in the course of the study. As a result, both of their potentiality and objectivity of the researchers can be achieved by both the participant and the researcher. In other words, both parties are actively involved in the interview process.



In order to keep track of the reactions of the participants and their gestures as they express their experiences, a diary was used by the researcher. It is common practice for researchers to use research diaries to record all decisions taken during a particular study. As noted by Hall and Hall, (2004), it is common practice for researchers to write down ideas about conceptual insights, thus recording their feelings in their research diaries.

The researcher realized that she and the respondents shared both similarities and divergences of motherhood experiences. The researcher is a student and a mother of two children, which places her in a similar position to her respondents. The researcher thus

believes her position as a student mother enabled her to create a bond that ensured an interactive and smooth research process.

Initially, mothers in the study felt that young student mothers are generally regarded as promiscuous by society, since they have no husbands. The participants were keen to know the reasons why the present researcher was conducting this research. The researcher shared her intention or purpose for the study with the participants, in order to significantly facilitate the creation of a setting conducive for them to express their sentiments during the interview process. This process of interviews, which provided a comfortable platform for the participants to express their feelings, consequently elicited emotional responses.

More information about the relationship between participants and their babies was revealed through interviews. All the student mothers were grateful for participating in the research: they felt validated and fulfilled by the experience since it gave them an opportunity for their voices to be heard. Hence, they participants were very optimistic that other women would be empowered after they had read their transcripts.

The researcher played a significant role in the process of production and the interpretation of the data. In this regard, it has been a debate among feminists that women can best research on core factors related to their beliefs, values, racial identities and their subordination in society (Denscombe, 1998). As a student mother, the researcher managed to create a valuable bond between herself and participants. In addition, there were instances of shared mothering experiences between the researcher and the researched, in terms of being student and female in a heterosexual relationship. The data in this research is the outcome of the interaction between the researcher and the researched.

### **3.11 Conclusion**

This chapter presented the methodological framework for this research. The chapter makes it clear that this study is situated in a feminist and qualitative framework, in order to understand the participants' experiences of motherhood in educational institutions and, further, how they made sense of the world which acts upon them and on which they act in return. The following chapter focuses on the presentation and discussion of the themes that emerged from the data analysis.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES: BALANCING MOTHERHOOD AND ACADEMIC WORK**

### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents an analysis of participants' experiences of motherhood and their lives as conveyed during the interview process. The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis as outlined in the previous chapter. The themes have been interpreted and discussed with the aim of understanding how this group of female students construct and experience motherhood within their social and cultural contexts, with a particular focus on how they balance the demands of academic work and that of parenting.

The findings show that student mothers in this sample faced a number of challenges within the university environment, at home and with respect to balancing these two areas of their lives. Reflecting back on the literature review, it became evident that there are some similarities but also differences between local studies and global studies on young mothers. For example, some studies carried out in the United States display the possibility for young mothers to attend separate schools/colleges, with counselling readily available to these young mothers. In South Africa, the situation is different as there are no separate schools or colleges for young mothers, who may carry on with their studies only in normal institutions of higher education (Pillow, 2004). Additionally, access to counselling for the student mothers is subsidiary and not specifically dedicated to their particular needs. The resumption of the young mother's studies depends on the financial capability of her family (Kaufman et al, 2001; Hallman & Grant, 2006).

Within an identified all-encompassing theme of inequality, gender differences impact powerfully on the experiences of these young mothers. As argued earlier, it is women who are still expected to take primary responsibility for children. Hence mothers and fathers do not have the same precondition of parenting and assuming household and family obligations. Consequently, the burden of child-rearing and caring tends to fall on

student mothers. Given the prevalence of patriarchy, men are highly positioned in society and therefore continue with fewer parenting responsibilities (Elvin-Nowak & Thompson, 2001).

It should be noted that most of the experiences of each participant are based on the concept of gendered inequality, and the constructs of their subjective meanings. Hence, the sub-themes are underpinned by the cross-cutting theme of gender inequality as intrinsic in the construct of motherhood and the mothering experiences of this particular group of participants.

The data is presented in two main themes with sub-themes emerging from the analysis of the participants' experiences of motherhood on their lives: these include the social constructions of motherhood and the experiences of being both a parent and studying.

#### **4.2 Social constructions of motherhood**

Studies on the perception of motherhood focus on how women construct the concept of motherhood and how this impacts on their lives within the social, cultural and historical contexts in which they live (Everingham, 1994; Hattery, 2001; Miller, 2005; O'Reil, 2004). Motherhood is multilayered, diverse, and continuously shaped by the particular historical, cultural and political needs of the society in which women mother. The society informs us what it means to be a mother, how a woman should mother and what behaviours are appropriate. The dominant ideology put forward in Western culture espouses a universal truth about a natural, forever self-sacrificing, good, sensitive, caring and nurturing mother (Arendell, 2000; Hattery, 2001; O'Reil, 2004). Under the theme of social constructions of motherhood, a number of sub-themes including: *motherhood as self-actualisation*, *motherhood as identity*, *mothers as nurturers* and *motherhood as self-sacrificing* were identified.

#### 4.2.1 Motherhood as self-actualisation

Motherhood was in many instances expressed as a medium for achieving existential meaning and purpose in life. This sentiment was expressed through notions of children providing ultimate happiness and fulfilment for women. Motherhood in this sense becomes a pursuit in its own right, as achieving identity for a woman is 'self-actualised'. Through childbearing, children become an extension of one's self in the actualisation process. Nicole, one of the participants, emphasised the significance of motherhood as a mode of self-actualisation in the following extract:

*I think having my baby is important for me and being a mother as a woman is what life is all about (Nicole,<sup>3</sup> 25, married, postgraduate student).*

*I just think it is important for me to extend myself by having someone who is not exactly like me, and has a major part of me ... I just want my life to be more than about my studies and my dream career. I want my life to be more about something else, maybe my life is to be about someone else and my baby will just carry on the legacy. It is a great achievement to me and I am very happy (Gladys, 27, married, postgraduate student).*

*Having my baby is actually that defining moment in my life. Something that has contributed to my life was when I had my baby (Nina, 22, single, undergraduate student).*

The dominant theme evident in these quotes reveals a particular way of talking about and understanding the social construct of a mother. This understanding implicitly evokes an image of motherhood that is pure, idealized as a defining essence in any woman's life that is primarily fulfilling and meaningful. Ruddick (1989) elaborates on this

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<sup>3</sup>Due to ethical considerations, the real names of the participants were withheld. Therefore, pseudonyms were used in this regard.

identification in her use of the term ‘maternal thinking’ to describe the processes by which women are fundamentally empathetic and care-oriented. The participants indicated that motherhood is an awesome event in their lives. It had provided fulfilment and had given them a sense of purpose. In describing the experience as fulfilling, it implied that there had been emptiness before and that now their lives had become worthwhile. As mothers, they had acquired a new identity, one that is embraced and celebrated by society. The description of motherhood by the participants seems to equate their personhood as being intertwined with their role of motherhood. A way of understanding the intensity of this fulfilment of a woman’s life and how deeply embedded it is in the social and cultural construction of a woman’s identity, is to compare it with the feelings experienced by women who cannot have children. Studies on childlessness and infertility reveal that women who are unable to conceive express feelings of disappointment, loss of autonomy, identity and independence. In short, they do not feel that they have reached true womanhood as defined by society (Zucker, 1999; Sevon, 2005).

#### 4.2.2 Motherhood as identity

This ideology regards motherhood as a woman’s destiny, one that will provide the ultimate fulfilment; thereby creating unrealistic expectations. In the process of espousing a universal truth, this ideology engulfs a woman’s identity and femininity. Some participants indicated that the notion of motherhood as identity is viewed as an integral part of women. Society perceives women as ‘instruments’ created to give birth. The act of giving birth is celebrated as an essential aspect of being a woman, with the female body perceived as primarily functional for the creation of life and, thereby, an extension of herself.

*...I think motherhood is actually an integral part of a woman’s identity. I think that women were really created by God to give birth. It is the most wonderful aspect about a woman. She can bring a new life into the world. It is a wonderful gift from God Almighty (Nicole, 25, married, postgraduate student).*

On the other hand, this construct of motherhood was not always perceived to be the 'ideal' or essential goal for young women. The changing landscape of gendered subjectivities and experiences of many young women today has arguably influenced the projections and relations to the practice of mothering, so that not all the participants buy into this. Buying into this idealized image of motherhood may also make it very difficult for these young women, when they find themselves resisting mothering or challenges and then feel guilty that they 'should' be 'loving it' and feeling fulfilled. In other words, the idealized notion that motherhood should be fulfilling sets women up for failure and is a part of the social pressure on women to be mothers. Nicole is projecting essentialist notions of motherhood; however, while women's bodies are capacitated to give birth, this does not mean that they were created to give birth. Besides, all women are not mothers.

As Nayak and Kehily (2008, p. 59) observe: "... there are different ways of being a girl and femininity is no longer so rigidly defined or hinged to the domestic". The idea of varied resources that could be drawn on in creating an image of oneself as a successful woman was equally evident, with some participants expressing a wish to 'fulfil' their desires and identifications through experiences other than being a parent. More than this, an awareness of how such experience has traditionally been constructed as the ideal of women is questioned. Some participants were very assertive in rejecting the notion of motherhood as something natural or biological. In the discussion below, motherhood is seen as a social construct that needs to be critiqued and interrogated, as elaborated in the quotes that follow:

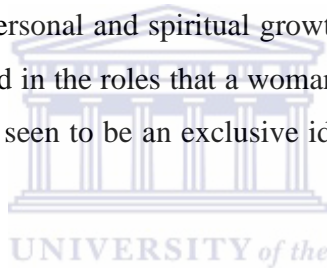
*There are many aspects to a woman's identity besides bearing a child (Gladys, 27 married, postgraduate student).*

*Nowadays, women have many others things to do besides bearing children (Sylvia, 25, single, postgraduate student).*

*You find many women who are very ambitious out there and motherhood is not their only identity (Nicole, 25, postgraduate student).*

At the same time, there is an implicit understanding of the social expectations of being a student mother and eventually a future career-driven individual, and how these different roles may be experienced in conflicting ways. There is no valorisation of the ideal mother in these expressions; instead there is a semblance of the student mother and eventually the career woman as caught between differing choices and social positions. These are difficult in themselves, but become even more so when conflicted with the mothering roles.

Motherhood, both as a role and ideological practice, was also seen to contribute in different ways to a woman's personal and spiritual growth (Kruger, 2006). In this sense, individual identity is constituted in the roles that a woman takes on, such as in mothering a child. However, this was not seen to be an exclusive identity or choice in her personal development.



Relating to an earlier theme of multiple and varied resources of identification available to young women, the abovementioned quotes highlight participants' attempts to separate roles from identity. In this sense, while women may embrace the experience of motherhood to be integral to personal development and fulfilment, this is not considered the sole purpose of meaning and personal fulfilment. If having children was considered essential for personal development by some participants, it is in the sense that it opens up new kinds of challenges and experiences that allow them to grow as individuals. However, this growth is perceived to be ideal and possible only when nurtured in a healthy manner. In this regard, some participants were critical of those who could not separate out their own identity and needs from their roles as mothers. They regarded mothers who choose to become part of their children's lives as hampering the children's growth and limiting their option to grow as people. This is evidenced in the subsequent quote:

*I think that once you have children, you incorporate them into what your life is and you grow with them. You don't stop growing when you have children; you don't stop having dreams. It just becomes a little bit harder to realise your dreams because you actually sacrifice most of your time and energy during the process of motherhood. However, if you are a strong enough woman who has ambitions and enough love to give your children, you can do anything you want to do (Gladys, 27, married, postgraduate student).*

While this is clearly an important argument to make and is indicative of critical thinking on the part of the participants, it also in part subscribes to a binaristic notion of 'good' and 'bad' mothering. What is interesting to note is that the ideal of what mothers should be and do is not completely discarded, but is re-ascribed to create different categories of what constitutes a good mother. In this instance, the 'stay-at-home' mothers are criticized for failing to nurture a separate identity from their children. This may be in part a way of legitimising these participants' inability to be stay-at-home mothers themselves and their possible guilt at being divided between their own studies and their care-giving. In constructing these mothers as overbearing and detrimental to their children's growth and independence, participants may be seeking legitimation for their own situation of parenting. Nadia's and Gladys's interviews emphasised a construct of motherhood characterized by balance, one that must be mastered by the 'good' student mother and that strongly rationalises their own choices to be both mothers and students.

#### 4.2.3 Mothers as nurturers

What is essentially implied within this theme is the combination of child-bearing and child-nurturing. Inherent in the interviews therefore are links to the theme of motherhood as being primarily about accessibility and sensitivity to children's needs. Most participants indicated that the responsibility for their children resided with them. They described this responsibility as encompassing the physical and emotional aspects of

nurturing. The physical aspects included bathing, ferrying to and from the crèche, cleaning, feeding, and spending time playing. The emotional aspects of nurturing were expressed as being constantly worried about their children, being overprotective, wanting to do everything and not wanting to leave their children and, especially, as concern about correct emotional development and having well-adjusted children.

*I am put in a responsibility of taking care of my baby by God and it is my responsibility to take care of my baby. I am his mother (Doris, 18, single, undergraduate).*

*I have to take care of my baby. She is my baby (Gladys, 27, married, postgraduate).*

*I am the one who is taking care of my baby. I am not complaining; it is my duty (Lynnsha, 28, married, postgraduate student).*

*I am the mommy and it is my duty to take care of my baby and my entire family. That is the role of a woman in a family. A man can just assist his wife but it the duty of the woman to assume all the household responsibilities (Nina, 22, single, undergraduate student).*

*After the birth of my child, my whole life changed, I couldn't even recognize myself anymore. I had to spend sleepless nights, breastfeeding, changing nappies, calming my baby not to cry, get up early in the morning, bath my baby, get him dressed, feed him, bath myself, take my baby to the crèche, and find my way to campus. At five PM, I must leave the campus and rush to the crèche to take my baby and the circle repeats itself (Nicole, 25, postgraduate student).*

In subscribing to these stereotypical male and female roles as prescribed by society, the participants were actively constructing and perpetuating the perception of the mother as

the nurturer within their social and cultural contexts. By upholding the notion that motherhood falls within their social and cultural contexts, mothering falls under the domain of women, with fathers potentially excluded from the mother-child relationship (Cowdery & Knudson-Martin, 2005). As Miller (2005) remarks, despite the shift in social relationships in terms of gender defined responsibilities, women are still defined by society in terms of their motherhood role and this, in turn, influences how they view themselves. This action perpetuates the unequal workload of parenting and gender divisions. However, a sense of ambivalence can be observed in the comments made by the participants. They want to be good mothers in terms of societal expectations, however, in trying to meet the societal expectations, they faced frustration, guilt and emotional and physical consequences. This created hesitancy, inconsistency and ambivalence among them. Their personal reality created their frustrations, while their social construction reflected the prescribed role of the mother as the nurturer. O'Reil (2005) suggests that if mothers do not perform their role correctly, they will be made to feel guilty or marginalized. In this regard, the extracts quoted above demonstrate mothers as central care givers, nurturers and selfless beings, who sacrifice all their time for the wellbeing of their babies (Hayes, in O'Reil, 1994; Choi et al., 2005).

#### 4.2.4 Motherhood as self-sacrificing

The theme of self-sacrifice or selflessness arises out of the theme of accessibility, which requires that a mother be available to her child and that her availability is proportional to her worth as a mother. The incontestable pre-eminence of the needs of the baby over the needs of the mother leads to the deprivation of the mother's own needs. Intrinsic in the notion of motherhood is the supposition that a mother acquires angelic qualities by only caring for, in this case, her child at the expense of neglecting herself. The following quotes demonstrate this theme. The participants in this study reflected throughout on the great effort that it took to cope with the demands of motherhood. They have very little or no time for themselves, and feel guilty when they spend time by themselves. Some indicated that they were suffering from emotional and physical tiredness. They

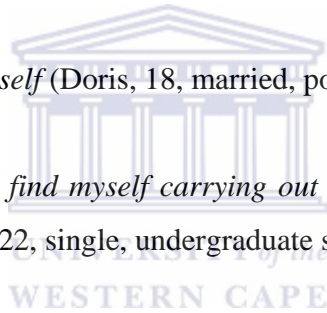
acknowledged that they required personal recreation time away from their motherhood roles and that they would have to consciously make this decision, but they found it difficult to implement. Even those mothers who managed to make time for themselves felt guilty about leaving their children behind, as the following quotes illustrate:

*Motherhood is quite a selfless act, and now there is going to be another person in the world that I am responsible for and I would sacrifice all my time on my child, so ... it's quite selfless I think* (Lynnsha, 28, married, postgraduate student).

*I think once a woman has children, her life stops. But I think that's also a very limited way of looking at motherhood and how it becomes a part of a woman's life* (Nadia, 20 single, undergraduate student).

*I wish I had time for myself* (Doris, 18, married, postgraduate student).

*Despite the tiredness, I find myself carrying out my motherhood responsibilities without noticing* (Nina, 22, single, undergraduate student).



Some participants reflected that the stress of both roles impacted on their physical health:

*My studies were very stressful and I applied pressure on myself. It was not good for my health* (Nicole, 25, postgraduate student).

*I often suffer from headaches and muscles spasms in my waist and back* (Gladys, 27, married, postgraduate student).

The above quotes highlight psychological stress and negative health consequences that mothers face, as a result of trying to meet the challenges posed by the gendered nature of the role of motherhood (Aliko, 2003; Wallis & Price, 2003). All the participants in this study indicated similar stresses, with many experiencing emotional and physical

tiredness, in addition to the physical health problems. Some employed various coping mechanisms like being organised or having a schedule, but found that trying to keep to this was stressful in itself. In applying extra effort in order to cope with their various responsibilities, it could be argued that they continue to view themselves first and foremost as mothers and wives.

In a sense, the participants were voicing and reflecting the tension that existed between their needs and the expectations of the traditional motherhood ideology. The participants were actually held captive by societal and cultural expectations of mothers, as well as by the potential judgment of their actions by others. These participants challenged societal expectations by questioning and challenging in their own various ways, even though they continued to reconstruct and perpetuate their gendered roles in society through their personal expectations and actions. This is emphasized in the following quotes:

*Whenever I am in a shop, I only think of buying my baby's stuffs. Most often I will leave home, get into a family supermarket with a list of my home needs be it foodstuff, toiletries and homecare needs. Mmm... (laughs). As soon as I get on the baby's range, I take diapers, baby's food, my entire baby's needs then I will have to come back the following day and purchase what I intended to buy. Ho, that's motherhood (Nina, 22, single, undergraduate student).*

Nina describes the need to subsume her needs for those of her baby. She illustrates how a selfless construction of motherhood is fraught with ambivalence and consequent guilt.

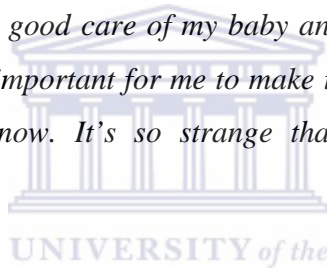
*I remember, sometimes I do not recognize myself anymore. My hair is usually not properly styled the way it used be before I had my baby. Almost no makeup on my face, I am extremely busy with school work, being a mother and a wife. I have got almost no time for my own self (Lynnsha, 28, married, postgraduate student).*

Lynnsha views the mothering role as unselfish when expressing her ambivalence about being a mother.

*Whenever I am shopping and I come across a beautiful jacket, or a dress, I will look at the price and immediately reflect that I should rather buy clothes for my baby and make a present for my husband rather than buying for myself ... (laughs)... It is a fight for my space with my baby and my husband (Gladys, 27, married, postgraduate student).*

Gladys expresses the clash of needs in her mothering role as a struggle to simultaneously manage time for her studies and look after her baby.

*It is only me who takes good care of my baby and my partner. They are my two babies....and it is very important for me to make them happy first before thinking of how I feel....you know. It's so strange that I survived this (Nicole, 25, postgraduate student).*



Nicole expresses the selfless and emotional components of being a mother, besides prioritizing the needs of others above her own needs.

#### **4.3 Subjective experiences of being a student and a mother**

Inherent in the word 'student' is the assumption of studies and of an institution of public learning, where studies are unrelated to the tasks of motherhood. The central point of this theme is combining motherhood and academic work. This relates to a social judgment that women should give priority to their motherhood obligation over any other activity, as women's desire for acquiring knowledge and developing a career may be realised only after she has fulfilled her mothering responsibilities. Inherent in the interviews therefore is guilt associated with studies, which links it to the theme of mothers balancing their studies with parenting. Under the theme of the subjective experiences of being a student

and a mother, balancing the load of parenting and studying, experiences at the institution, responses and support from the university and lecturers, experiences and support in relation to male partners, experiences of the single student mothers and financial challenges faced by student mothers were emphasized.

#### 4.3.1 Balancing the load of parenting and studying

All the participants indicated that it was necessary for them to study in order to have a better future with their babies, despite the fact that their studies interfered with their roles as mothers. Studies intruded on their lives at home and clashed with their motherhood roles. They often have a double day, coming home to fit in household chores and childcare responsibilities. Performing the combined roles of being a mother and a student were demanding and tiring. At times they brought their stress from campus home and it impacted negatively on their family relationships, resulting in even more feelings of guilt.

*I feel guilty leaving my baby behind when I am going to the university. But I must be sincere, it is hard work being a mother while studying and also playing the role of a wife simultaneously, it's quite challenging. Some days I am very tired, stressed up and I feel like crying and I actually cry. It is not easy at all (Doris, 18, married, postgraduate student).*

*I feel guilty about not coping with all my numerous roles. Combining motherhood responsibilities and studies without anyone to support is absolutely illusory. Being a first time mum and combining it with studies or work is extremely difficult (Nicole, 25, married, postgraduate student).*

*I feel like quitting my studies most often. If I have to choose between my studies and my baby without hesitation, I will choose my baby. I am just studying to improve myself, to have a better career and take good care of my baby... that is*

*why I am still studying. Everything I do is to make my baby happy (Marie, 26, single, postgraduate student).*

*Most often I think of my baby while I am on campus. I wonder if they take good care of him at the crèche. I wonder if he is crying especially when my nipples are tickling. I am always guilty of not being a good enough mother because my baby stays in the crèche the whole day and I am supposed to fulfil my obligations as a mother but I am studying as well. I don't know what to do (Nadia, 20, single, undergraduate student).*

The above quotations portray the ambivalence of being a mother and a student and of balancing the dual roles. Despite the fact that their studies were essential from the point of view of a successful future, the participants were of the view that the responsibilities of motherhood were more important than those of their studies. Hattery (2001) indicated in her study that, for many mothers, beliefs about motherhood comprise their biggest hurdle in their pursuit of studies and careers. This was also evident in the literature where women who were studying and economically active at the same time still perceived themselves as mothers and wives first (Milkie & Petola, 1999; Marks & Houston, 2002; Aliko, 2003; Vincent et al., 2004). The participants clearly struggled with meeting the demands of work and fulfilling the cultural expectations of the all-giving mother. When these roles clashed, they experienced feelings of guilt. Some participants express astonishment at their ambivalence, and consequently they prioritise their mothering responsibilities over their studies and career aspirations.

Even though this aspect of guilt was not singled out in the literature, it is a reflection of the deeper underlying traditional gendered perceptions that the participants hold about the role of women in society. As Kushner (2005) points out, it is the social and cultural perceptions that intensify the sense of responsibility of women as mothers, wives and caregivers by intensifying their sense of responsibility to their family over their personal expectations for themselves. Therefore, women generally tend to make more sacrifices

and tradeoffs to ensure the smooth running of the family (Milkie & Peltola, 1999). This study also demonstrates that being both a parent and a student has implications for academic performance. The load of parenting appears to impact negatively on both the attendance and success of participants. The majority of participants face problems of irregular lecture attendance and their academic performance is barely satisfactory, as they feel that average results are the best they can achieve given the demands of motherhood. Theron and Dunn (2006) argue that childbearing among young women may result in academic failure, as motherhood roles often disrupt lecture attendance. This is evidenced in the following quotes:

*My success rate is not high because I have lost the motivation. I just want a pass, 50%. With my baby around, I cannot cope. Really! I just cannot get down studying for long hours as I did some time ago before being a mother (Gladys, 27, married, postgraduate student).*

*The time I fell pregnant, I had to miss some classes. I failed most of my modules. The early stages of my pregnancy were not easy. I was always sick, always tired, feeling pains, wanting to sleep all the time. Sometimes when student mothers come back to study, they find a lot to deal with at the same time. Besides, being a mother is quite involving and at the same time to study makes the whole situation more complicated. It is quite a great challenge (Lynnsha, 28, married, postgraduate student).*

There are instances when the baby falls sick, and the student mother finds herself having to stay with the sick baby. Consequently, the student mother may not attend seminars, lectures and tutorials. However, lecturers and tutors will not go through those lectures or tutorials to assist the student mother to catch up. On this point, Nicole says:

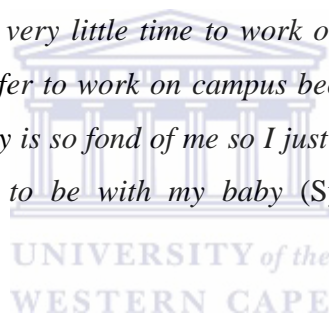
*From time to time, I feel like I am switching from the role of being a student to the role of being a mother and vice versa. Combining the two is always very difficult.*

*But I will never ever break away from my child because of my studies (Nicole, 25, married, postgraduate student).*

All the student mothers interviewed articulated that they struggle to have adequate time to focus on their studies. After a busy day at campus, their family members who always assist them in babysitting will need a break. Besides, their babies also need to be with their mothers. Some participants commented on this:

*I never really have enough time to work on my assignments ... after taking care of my baby and put her to bed, I am already tired (Nina, 22, single, postgraduate student).*

*Most often, I have just very little time to work on assignments and work on my thesis. Sometimes I prefer to work on campus because once I get home; there is no time for me. My baby is so fond of me so I just ignore my academic work for a while because I have to be with my baby (Sylvia, 25, single, postgraduate student).*



*When I think that I really wanted to have a baby and to be a mum and .... mmm...honestly it is really a shock to realise that I am ambivalent about it now. I've got no time for myself. I really struggle to create time for myself, to create time to study. Being a student and a mother is very challenging especially when the kids are still very young and tender, needing all the care and love all the time (Lynnsha, 28, postgraduate student).*

*Since I am the one looking after my baby at home, I struggle to find time to do my academic work (Sylvia, 25, single, postgraduate student).*

*My baby always cries at night and throughout the night I am only calming my baby down and breastfeeding him. Honestly, there is no time to study. I always*

*make sure I finish my assignment in the library on campus before I go home because once I am at home, I cannot do any academic work effectively. My baby needs me* (Marie, 26, single, postgraduate student).

South African researchers have highlighted that after young mothers have given birth, they find it hard to embark on their studies because of the difficulty in organising time to accommodate both academic work and mothering responsibilities (Kaufman et al., 2001). A similar concern was echoed in the United States, where it was noticed that student mothers face difficulties in simultaneously having to care for their babies and create adequate time to study (Arlington Public Schools, 2004). Although some participants had assistance with household chores, it did not -alleviate the demands that they experienced (Naidoo & Jano, 2002). They continued to experience the emotional and physical demands manifested and imposed by the perception of the mother as the primary caregiver. These demands manifested as responsibility, worrying, and the desire to give up their studies and not having enough time to spend with their children.

In meeting the demands of studies and motherhood, the participants reported that they had to make constant compromises. They expressed great difficulties in balancing the demands of motherhood with those of academic work, indicating that it was not possible to maintain a balance. Rather, the approach was to neglect one at the expense of the other, depending on which required urgent attention. Where participants had the support of their spouses or partners, they continued to carry the greater share of the responsibility for childcare, as evident in the following quotes:

*When there were certain deadlines of assignments that I have to meet at the university, I have to neglect my home* (Nadia, 20, single, undergraduate student).

*I have to take some time I was supposed to spend with my baby to do my assignments* (Lynnsha, 28, postgraduate student).

*I do neglect my studies sometimes; I suppose even my motherhood responsibilities I sometimes neglect. I don't understand my body anymore, I get so tired easily. Both studies and my duties as a mother suffer* (Gladys, 27, married, postgraduate student).

*I don't know if there is actually balance. I am more on campus* (Marie, 26, single postgraduate student).

According to Pillow (2007), the possibility of balancing the demands of work and motherhood is a myth. This is borne out by the experiences described by the participants, as mentioned above. They had to compromise and negotiate around meeting the expectations and demands of studies and motherhood, and were frustrated by not being able to accomplish their tasks in the available time (Wallis & Price, 2003; Kushner, 2005). For instance, taking their assignments home imposed on family time. This imposition created a conflict between studies and motherhood demands and manifested in feelings of guilt – not spending enough time on their work requirements, not spending time with their families and guilt about bringing their stress home.

*I am not balancing my life and my studies. I just can't. My studies are really draining. ...I am always very tired. Sometimes I have to focus on one and I find myself neglecting the other* (Gladys, 27, married, postgraduate student).

Little has been done to inform university policy-makers about the difficulties confronting student mothers on campus. It can be said that the university's approach towards student mothers is cause for concern, and its lack of support in terms of policy may well influence lecturers' attitudes towards student mothers. In this respect, Hallman and Grant (2004) affirm that the main inhibitor of females' academic performance is student motherhood. The following quotes illustrate this issue:

*I was asked to quit the residence when I was eight months pregnant. I was informed that student mothers were not allowed to live in the campus residences. Renting a flat out of the campus residences is very expensive (Sylvia, 25, single, postgraduate student).*

*I was asked to leave campus residence when I was seven months pregnant. It was not easy for us to look for a flat. Flats are very expensive (Marie, 26, single, postgraduate student).*

The excerpts above highlight the difficulties participants faced in looking for alternative accommodation, given that the university does not provide appropriate accommodation with all the facilities needed to take care of babies for student mothers.

Most student mothers resume their studies after childbirth without any counselling, and the effect is that these young mothers may be depressed due to their dual role of mother and student. As a result, they may fail to cope in performing one or both roles and consequently drop out of the university. Hence, a counselling session would have been vital to assist them with time management, coping with stigma and strategies to relieve stress, just to name a few. The following quotes express this issue:

*Nobody offered counselling to me when I came back to study (Sylvia, 25, single, postgraduate student).*

*When I was pregnant, I thought it was easy to just have my baby and proceed immediately. I wish I had some counselling to know how to deal my present situation. I did not know motherhood was this demanding. I think I would have waited, finished my studies before engaging into being a mother (Nadia, 20, single, undergraduate student).*

*I really wish I had some counselling. I am often stressed up. I did not know being a student and a mother was this difficult. I wish I knew (Sylvia, 25, single, postgraduate student).*

Young women who have become mothers while still at higher educational institutions and particularly those who are not married, may be stigmatised and experience low self-esteem as a result. Dealing with this necessitates support and, in particular, proper counselling. Without going through counselling to enable them to deal with stigma, student mothers often become depressed, dropping out of university.

*I am the only student mother in my class and my mates are very surprised that I have a baby. They ask me all sorts of questions, if I am still with my boy friend, and how I am coping? Is he supporting me and the baby? (Doris, 18, single, undergraduate student)*

*I think some of my mates always talk about me. They wonder if I will cope with my studies. I am determined to finish and I will no matter what (Nadia, 20, single, undergraduate student).*

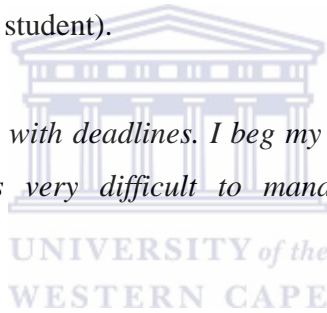
The excerpts above illustrate the situation faced by young mothers, who find themselves in a predicament that may lead to low self-esteem and may negatively affect their studies. It is noted that low self-esteem may result in poor academic performance, eventually increasing the drop out rates among young mothers (Kenway, 1990). For this reason, it is vital to employ some mechanisms to deal with this problem. In the United States, for example, there are a number of support systems in colleges and on campuses to help young student mothers cope, with adequate support provided so that they handle their challenges with ease (U.S. Department of Education, 1992; Taylor, 1997; Chevalier & Viitanen, 2001; Kaufman et al., 2001).

The participants of this study feel that the challenges of their situation are not taken into consideration, as lecturers and tutors are always complaining about their ‘unsatisfactory’ academic performance. The following quotes illustrate this:

*Two of my lecturers are complaining that I always submit my assignments late. It is very difficult to study while being a mother. Sometimes I sleep in the lectures because I was awake the whole night. My baby often cries at night (Nadia, 20, single, undergraduate student).*

*Most of my classmates always tell me they do not wish to be me. They wonder how I cope with my studies and take care of my baby. They are often surprised. I often plead with my lecturers to grant me extensions to submit my work (Sylvia, 25, single, postgraduate student).*

*I often struggle to meet with deadlines. I beg my lecturers to submit later due to time constraints. It is very difficult to manage both roles (Lynnsha, 28, postgraduate student).*



From the above, it seems that there is a need for academics to be guided by professionals, or given some form of training or sensitivity awareness, to enable them to better understand and deal with student mothers’ situations (Bloem, 2000; Olivier, 2000).

#### 4.3.2 Experiences and support in relation to male partner

While mothers are obliged to engage in mothering, most fathers are distant from fatherhood. Mothering necessitates both a physical and emotional obligation, sometimes to the detriment of women’s needs. If women want to be good enough mothers, they need to fulfil these above-mentioned obligations well. For many of these women, they share a common experience in terms of their respective partners’ lack of support for their young

children, although in some cases they received financial support. This situation impacted negatively on participants' experiences of childcare and of being a student:

*My partner is very supportive financially. I am only a student, and a mother. My partner is the one who works, he is the provider. He buys Pampers, food for our baby, he pays the rent and gives me pocket money....but if only he could also help me take care with our baby when I am busy with my assignments, I would be the happiest mom (Marie, 26, single, postgraduate student).*

*I wish my partner could at least help me in taking care of our baby. Especially when our baby is crying in the middle of the night, I am the only one who gets up to feed and to calm down calm the baby while my partner is dozing, and doesn't even bother to help. It is very frustrating (Doris, 18, single, undergraduate student).*

*I am the only one who takes care of our baby, and of all the house chores. I was brought up like this, that taking care of the baby and the cooking and all the domestic work is for women and not for men. My mother used to tell me we can never change that (Nina, 22, single, undergraduate student).*

Whereas Doris complains that her partner is not sufficiently proactive in the parenting of their child and she does not know if he will ever change, she nevertheless constructs fatherhood as a choice. It is clear from this excerpt that Doris, in employing fathering as a choice discourse, has different expectations of her partner in relation to his being a good parent from her own. Despite the financial support of her partner, the extent of a father's effective and instrumental involvement in parenting is measured against different standards from those applied to the mother. Thus Doris relays her frustration with this imbalance between mothering and fathering.

Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson (2001), in analyzing the interactions between mothers and fathers in the daily care of their children, found these to involve negotiations regarding responsibility for caretaking.

*When I analyse my situation, being a student mother and living with my partner, I am completely a housewife, a caregiver to both my partner and my baby, a mother while my partner is the provider. I have got no choice; such is life. I just have to accept even though it is difficult and very challenging (Doris, 18, single, undergraduate student).*

*My husband keeps on supporting in taking care of our son when I am busy with studies or cooking. Everybody admires him as being a good father. It is quite rare to find men like Gaby, he is awesome, so it is like he a strange type of father especially an African. More often in the African cultures, the woman does everything in the household while the man is just the provider and when both the woman and the man are providers women are just like slaves. I am really blessed to have a man like Gaby; he took after his father because his father is a very caring and loving man. His parents make a great couple (Nicole, 25, married, postgraduate student).*

Most of the biological fathers seem to be absent in this study and the load of the parenting role falls on women (Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001). According to the participants in the study, fathers who are deeply involved in their parenting roles are regarded as extraordinary men who assist their women. These fathers are viewed as 'angels' and are always being admired. Thus, other women inadvertently perpetuate the myth of the mothering role as being essentially a woman's duty. In the study, one woman who had a very engaged partner testifies that he helped her immensely. However, the quote also shows how he was idealized and admired for this, while women who are engaged in such work do so with no reward or acknowledgement.

When reflecting on how her husband's fathering abilities and involvement is received by her community, Nicole eulogises her husband, pointing out that her husband is regarded as an extraordinary or exceptional man since most men do not take care of children and regard motherhood as the domain, obligation and responsibility of only women. Most traditional communities in Africa regard caring fathers and husbands as men who deeply love and "spoil" their wives. The following illustrates this:

*The responsibility of nurturing is shared between my husband and I. We both take care of our baby. My husband is a lecturer at a renowned college in Cape Town. I must confess; he is a very good husband and a good father to our son. When I am busy with my academic work, he will take care of our baby, feed him, bath him, play with him and go to bed with him. He supported me throughout my pregnancy and I was an honours student. He will cook, does laundry, ironing, make sure I eat properly and he always reminds me to take my vitamins. I gave birth when I had many assignments and a mini-thesis that I was still working on. To be very honest with you, my husband helped in gathering material for my assignment and in collecting data for my thesis. Without him I would not have been able to make it (Nicole, 25, married, postgraduate student).*

*However, I think my partner is really awesome. When I compare myself with other friends of mine and other women, I honestly see myself to be blessed. Most of my friends who have children do not live in the same house with the father of their baby and most are not still involved with the father of their baby. You know men disappear when the woman is pregnant, running away from their responsibility and some are nowhere to be found. The women are left alone with their children and it is very hard for them to bring up the children alone especially nowadays with inflation, the cost of living is very high, and everything is expensive (Nina, 22, single, undergraduate student).*

Whereas Doris complains earlier that she feels her partner is not sufficiently involved in parenting, she nevertheless constructs fathering as a choice. She has different expectations of what it means for her partner to be a good parent and what it means for herself. It is more than sufficient for the father to provide financial support (“my partner is the provider”). Within this life history, therefore, the extent of the father’s affective and instrumental involvement is measured against different standards from those applied to the mother. Most importantly, student mothers seem to be in a powerless situation where they have no choice because of their financial disability, instability and dependence – as evidenced by the following statements: *“I am just a student.....he is working.....he is the provider.....I don’t have a choice.....Such is life.”* Student mothers look at their situation as the work of fate, a permanent destiny; yet, they still feel privileged in that they are students, hoping to have a better future, and with more advantages than other young women who are university drop outs, due to pregnancies and motherhood responsibilities. This perspective acts to motivate them.

#### 4.3.3 Experiences of single student mothers

Single mothers in this study appear to experience the added stigma of being unmarried and they face challenges with little or no support systems. These single student mothers solely perform the roles of care-giving and child rearing.

Out of the eight participants in the study, five were single and three were married student mothers. Three (Nina, Doris, Marie) out of the five single mothers were living with their partners, while two (Nadia and Sylvia) were with their parents. The three living with their partners faced less challenges than the two living with their parents. From the interviews, those mothers who were single parenting were facing more challenges than those who were married. Some of the student mothers, who are suffering from emotional impacts of the stress of parenting while studying, have eventually experienced panic attacks more than once during their motherhood experience. This is further evidenced in the following quotes:

*It's a terrible experience. I felt my entire body cold, and felt like I will die. Luckily I was at home. My family rushed me to the hospital and the doctor said had a panic attack caused by a lot of psychological stress. I knew it was true because I had broken with my ex boy friend when I was pregnant and he does not want to assume his responsibilities. He abandoned me and started dating another lady. Therefore, I was left alone with my baby (Nadia, 20, undergraduate student).*

*It's not easy to be a single student mother anyway. I didn't know being a mother was this tough until I experienced it myself. It makes me to be very moody, sometimes I just burst in tears, not even knowing why I 'm crying. It's hard ....It's quite hard. What makes my situation worse is that I am alone, no support from the father of my baby (Nina, 22, single, undergraduate student).*

Stress and disappointment in love relationships among some single young mothers may push some single student mothers to depression or contemplate suicide (Barnet et al., 1996). Some single mothers experienced rejection as they complained they did not receive love and affection from their partners during their pregnancy. This is illustrated in the following quotes:

*When I discovered I was pregnant, immediately I thought of abortion because I knew my parents would be very upset since I was at the university studying and living in the residence. I didn't know what to do but I love my boy friend. When I told my boy friend and he reacted positively, I changed my mind about the abortion I was planning to do. He told me he was happy to be a father. He is a business man and I knew there would be no financial difficulties in taking care of our baby. He even promised to marry me....but later, he was nowhere to be found, he abandoned me (Nadia, 22, single, undergraduate student).*

*One day I was in my room at the student residence, my baby was sleeping and I bought a lot of pain killer tablets and I took more than thirty I think. I was unconscious when my friend came in and found me lying on the floor and I was rushed to the hospital. I was not dead yet, when I gained consciousness, I saw my mother sitting next to me on the hospital bed. I did what I did because I could not take it anymore, when I see couples together with their baby and I am here dumped and abandoned by a man who deceived me with empty promises, it really hurts, it really hurts, it deeply hurts. My studies meant nothing to me at that stage. All I wanted was to get rid of my life (Nadia, 22, single, undergraduate student).*

Nadia's situation is one of numerous cases involving single mothers. Fortunately, she survived her suicide attempt and was connected with a campus psychologist for counselling. The outcome of their thrice weekly sessions was positive and, therefore, their meetings decreased eventually to once a week. Nadia's baby was at the crèche while she was attending classes and studying. She acknowledges that her mother, friends and classmates were extremely supportive throughout.

In Nadia's case, support from her mother, friends, classmates and a psychologist has impacted positively on her academic pursuit. For Nadia, motherhood has not been a hindrance to academic pursuit. But motherhood posed substantial challenges to her quest to achieve academic excellence, with the major source of challenge being the capacity for self-motivation and time management. She finds motivation is her determination to graduate despite the challenges she faces with in terms of time management in the context of motherhood and studentship.

#### 4.3.4 Financial challenges faced by student mothers

There is no doubt that the intersection of material disadvantage with parenting and studying exaggerates the challenges of participants. Due to financial difficulties, many students are unable to pay a crèche or a baby sitter to look after their babies. This affects

their studies negatively, as they struggle with time management and do not have sufficient time to devote to their assignments. The following quotes demonstrate this issue:

*When I do not have anybody to look after my baby, life seems so difficult for me. I wish I have a baby sitter (Marie, 26, single, postgraduate student).*

*Baby's food and clothes and diapers are very expensive. Now I am taking care of two people. My baby and I and the cost of living is very high. Most often I struggle financially and the stress of being broke even affects my studies (Nadia, 22, single, undergraduate student).*

From the above, it can be noted that access to socio-economic resources are a vital component for the ability of young mothers to resume studies. This should be viewed in the context that there is a high rate of early motherhood among young women from poor homes (Kaufman et al., 2001; Hallman & Grant, 2004). Thus financial constraint may hinder these student mothers' studies directly or indirectly.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the themes revealed the tensions and ambivalence experienced by the participants, as they negotiated the social and cultural expectations of motherhood with their reality in meeting the demands of motherhood as working mothers. In their struggle to meet the social and cultural expectations of motherhood, they placed tremendous emotional and physical stress upon themselves. Thus, in voicing their experiences, they were also making sense of it and, in this way, exposing the myths of motherhood.

When analysing the transcripts, it became evident that most of the themes reveal that gender inequality is intrinsic in experience of motherhood. It was also evident that there were discursive constructs that challenged and resisted these traditional constructs of

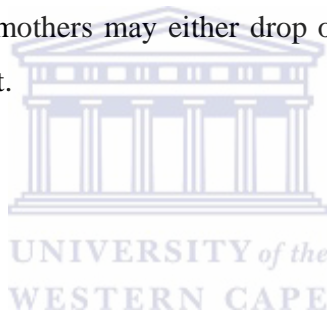
motherhood. Constructs of 'good' and 'bad' mothering were evident in the discussions on the development of the child and absent mothers. However, these constructs were often ambiguous and contradictory. Not only the demands of studying but also the deepened understanding arrived at of, for example, social constructs like idealised motherhood, seemed to create feelings of ambiguity and contradiction in how the participants positioned themselves. On the one hand, furthering one's studies and possibly looking forward to a career was considered desirable for personal development but, on the other hand, the possibility of pursuing one's studies and at the same time being a 'good' mother was deemed a challenge. The constructs indicate the need to explore further how young women are positioning themselves in an increasingly competitive global environment, and how they are negotiating ambiguous and at times contradictory gendered roles and practices.

Deducing from the outcome of the study, it can be concluded that merely allowing young mothers to resume their studies after childbirth is not by itself an adequate measure in terms of assisting them to complete their studies successfully. Hence, student mothers need further support to prepare and enable them for their mothering role before they resume their studies.

Moreover, it is disturbing that there should be an experience of stigma occurring on campus that further undermines the experience of in particular single mothers on campus. Drawing on societal norms, young students are stigmatised since they have become mothers before completing their studies and often before getting married. Thus it is evident that social responses to young mothers who are studying are a further challenge to ensuring support for their academic progress.

It is further evident that popularised psychological pressures on motherhood and notions of what constitute a successful mother also impact on student mothers in negative way. This context creates a gendered division of roles and, in so doing, legitimises the mother

as the primary caregiver. The inherent inferiority of women is illustrated by the prevalence of the 'good enough' mother. Despite the fact that the notion of motherhood being centred on women is debatable, participants feel they should embrace the role of mothering, even though this role renders them to be inferior their whole life. As a result, they express guilt if they do not adequately perform their mothering roles in line with popular expectations, as they endeavour to devote sufficient time to the mothering responsibilities. The theme of selflessness illustrates the great effort women put into their mothering roles, as mothers often surrender and sacrifice their own needs in order to fulfil their children's needs first. This striving to be a 'good enough' mother nevertheless leads to feelings of guilt on the part of the mothers, who can never be 'good enough' on account of the constant clash of needs. This conflict of needs usually arises from the baby's need for the mother's presence and the mother's need to study and develop a career. Consequently, student mothers may either drop out of university or pursue their studies at a huge emotional cost.



## CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a conclusion to this study, which looked at the various experiences of a group of student mothers at the University of the Western Cape. The objectives of the study were to identify the experience of student mothers, the various challenges they faced and to examine the impact of these experiences on their studies. To achieve the stated objectives, in-depth semi-structured interviews were used to collect primary data which was then analysed through thematic analysis. A summary of the research findings is presented below. Focus is on the implications of the conclusions for future studies and, indeed, for the way in which motherhood is currently constructed in South Africa. An exposition of the recommendations and perceived limitations emerging from the study is included, as is a final conclusion and a personal reflection on the research procedure.

### 5.2 Summary of research findings

The findings from interviewing eight female students from UWC revealed two major themes and eight sub-themes within these. The first main theme is the social constructions of motherhood under which the following key components of the way in which participants constructed motherhood were evident: motherhood as self-actualisation; motherhood as identity; mothers as nurturers; and motherhood as self-sacrificing. The second theme relates to the subjective experience of the student mother, which includes the following sub-themes: balancing the load of parenting and studying; experiences and support in relation to male partners; experiences of single student mothers; and the financial challenges faced by this group of student mothers.

This study examines the experiences of the participants through a social constructionist approach which holds that the way in which we interact with the world is shaped by our

beliefs and perceptions about it (Houston, 2001). In order to examine how participants viewed their world and made meaning of their experiences, the context in which their practice of motherhood occurred was explored in their reflections. These reflections revealed that the social and cultural contexts of participants embody a view of motherhood that is gendered, comprises ideals of a caring, nurturing and giving mother, and links motherhood to dominant constructions of womanhood and the female identity in the cultural contexts of the participants. The participants, situated in their social and cultural contexts, are affected by these traditional beliefs. Hence, the impact is twofold: their choices and behaviour in respect of how they perceived motherhood were directed by external social and cultural contexts. This, in turn, was influenced by their personal expectations which affected decisions made and actions taken, leading to their shift of consciousness. One of the key findings in this respect was that participants shared a similar personal dilemma of wanting to engage themselves wholeheartedly in childbearing and caring, in nurturing of the family, while at the same time engaging in their academic pursuit. However, these mothering responsibilities appeared not only to perpetuate motherhood ideologies including the stereotyping of women but also hampered the ability of these young mothers to be successful in the world, not just as females but as human beings free from gender barriers.

In addition to the fact that participants' social experiences of motherhood are intricate and inexorable, most mothers in the study seemed ambivalent and torn between their ideals as mothers and their personal career goals. These feelings of ambivalence are driven by both cultural representations of the mother and the social arrangements of motherhood. Given that motherhood requires great time and energy, participants are stuck between desperation to succeed academically and eventually to proceed in a career, and determination to succeed in their mothering roles and the social punishment that comes with not fulfilling the expected norms of mothering. Thus participants described the challenge of desiring their own self-actualisation while attempting to be 'good' mothers which is interpreted as a complete devotion to the child and family. However, most participants fought these feelings of "selfishness" (desiring self-actualization) since

they had become mothers. This raises the question of whether motherhood and feminist goals of women's empowerment and equality with men are mutually exclusive.

Almost none of the participants in the study were adequately prepared beforehand to face the challenging emotions and material conditions that come with motherhood. Drawing on women's accounts of their feelings and experiences of motherhood, young mothers tend to fear they are losing their sanity as their experiences involved emotions such as anger, guilt, resentment, fear of not performing their mothering roles adequately and, hence, an overwhelming sense of their own inadequacy. Motherhood responsibilities were experienced as inhibiting their independence, economic freedom and professional advancement. Most participants found motherhood as much a source of pain as of pleasure. Hence, this understanding of maternal ambivalence reflects a coexistence of love and hate which can stimulate and sharpen a mother's awareness of the relationship between mother and child. Drawing on interviews, there seem to be conflicts confronting young mothers at every stage of motherhood.

The participants' awareness of how the psychological, personal, intimate realm is linked to the social collective and academic realm can itself be a major shift of consciousness of what it means to be a mother, and of the multiple ways to be a good mother. Hence, student mothers in the study are coming to consciousness about their lives by sharing their experiences and by realising the commonalities of the shared stories and experiences.

During this process of shift of student mothers' consciousness, these young mothers acknowledge throughout history, the significance of women's major role and biological function as mothers and caretakers. Nevertheless, unlike many mothers nowadays, and in spite of their love for children, most of the participants are not of the opinion that acceptance of this mothering role and its expectations of nurture and care is liberating for women. From the findings, and according to all the participants (student mothers experiencing motherhood), motherhood responsibilities are almost unrivalled to any

other livelihood and leave little room or energy for other matters, especially academic work since motherhood encompasses the all-consuming focus – mentally, physically and emotionally. Over and above this, motherhood ideologies romanticise and personalise women's maternal instincts and feelings, thus promoting the perception that mothers should fulfill parenting roles and are literally hard-wired to do so, with optimised capacities. Such constructions and participants' clear buy-in to these further exacerbate the challenges they face.

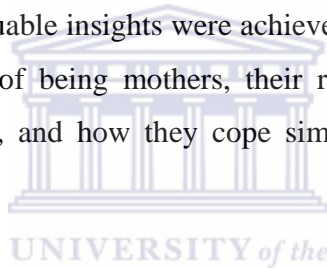
While for most participants continue to carry the primary load of childcare and are aware of the multiple roles they are playing as primary caregivers for their partners and children, the study shows that some positive constructions of the husband and father are evident in participants' experiences. Some men are reportedly becoming more emotionally responsive as fathers and husbands. One aspect of gender role strain that men were reportedly feeling was the conflict between their traditional dominant male role and the nurturing role in the childcare since the traditionally male role does not perceive fathers as being warm, caring and accessible fathers. Hence, the significance of the father has changed within some families, with the shifting involvement of fathers within their families and cultural conditions. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that those fathers who are described as playing a nurturant parenting role are constructed as 'exceptional' and 'strange type of father' (see Nicole, 25, married postgraduate. Page 86), highlighting that the dominant experience is still one of a double load for the mother, where the biological father is less responsible for childcare and domestic duties than the mother and wife/female partner is.

### **5.3 Key challenges identified**

The study highlights some aspects of the complexities of this group of women's lives, especially with regard to the push-pull between the demands of motherhood and those of academic study. All the participants in the study suffer from the conflicts emerging from the demands of motherhood and the demands of studies, both of which often conflict with

the student mothers' personal needs. Since motherhood is self-sacrificing, with mothers always putting their babies' needs above their own (including their need to study), there seems to be no way to alleviate this conflict. Due to social structures, student mothers in this study found it difficult to find personal ways to deal with or resolve these contradictions. These contradictions included problems of time constraint and time management, in relation to balancing their need to reflect and study, to fulfil their academic demands, with providing child care and to child rearing, apart from their personal needs for leisure and relaxation. In addition, these women were conflicted about their need to reflect on these problems, exposing their feeling to their families and peers, lest in the process they hurt their loved ones.

The study raised a number of issues in relation to needs, experiences and the perceptions of student mothers. Hence, valuable insights were achieved by gaining details concerning student mothers' experiences of being mothers, their relationship with their partners, families, friends and lecturers, and how they cope simultaneously with their roles of students and mothers.



The study also revealed that student mothers in the research were not adequately prepared to assume the responsibilities of motherhood, as some were suffering from feelings of hopelessness and depression. Interestingly, the few married student mothers who planned to have their babies did not foresee the huge challenges of motherhood.

While some married student mothers reported the enormous assistance of their husbands in their new mothering roles, the single mothers reported great dependence on their families in helping them in their dual role. It is notable, that most of the single student mothers reported the desertion and total absence of the fathers of their babies. These mothers were then compelled to assume their parenting role single-handedly and appeared to be under considerable emotional and financial strain. Hence, it became evident that there was a need for physical, emotional, financial and social support during the participants' pregnancy experiences, the birth experiences and after the birth

particularly for single parenting female students. It was evident that participants who were coping better were those with more support from their families or partners.

For these reasons, therefore, support remains an important issue in this study, with the nature of the support needed varying with each student mother. The findings revealed that married student mothers or those in long-standing relationships received childcare responsibility, financial and emotional support from their husbands and partners. It is conclusive from the research findings that unsupported motherhood may pose serious challenges that could impede the pursuit of effective academic studies by the participants in the study. From the findings, it emerged that some single mothers in the sample group faced more challenges than the married mothers. Among the challenges faced by single student mothers are lack of finances and the challenge of having to care for their children alone. Hence, it is deduced from the findings of the research that married student mothers receive greater support from their partners than do single student mothers, although some single student mothers confirmed receiving support from relatives and friends. Nevertheless, both categories of student mothers face serious challenges that may impede their progress in attaining their academic pursuits. The challenges ranged from self-motivation to time management.

The findings from the study also cite traditional constructions of motherhood and gender relations as a serious challenge, especially for married student mothers. In terms of many cultural traditions represented here, women are regarded as being only “good for” the raising and nurturing of children, whilst men are considered the breadwinners who provide the requisite finances and resources for home-keeping. Thus, there are still certain culturally related reservations about women who pursue studies and, eventually, careers over above their role as mothers.

In addition to the above challenges, this study notes the absence of any kind of support from the university and other institutions. The study reflects on student mothers’ experiences of not being supported and the evident lack of understanding of their

situation by lecturers. It can be concluded from the above that all student mothers face serious challenges in combining studentship and motherhood. These tend to have adverse repercussions on their potential to achieve academic excellence.

## **5.4 Recommendations and limitations**

### **5.4.1 Recommendations related to research findings**

From the data analysed in this study, it is apparent that particular challenges encountered during motherhood prevail for this group of young student mothers. A feminist framework was applied in this study and the data analysis reveals that the dominant construct of motherhood serves to undermine the experience of being a mother for this group of students. The study further presents the difficulties faced by young women who choose not to conform to the dominant motherhood ideologies, since the insinuations of the construct of motherhood are deeply ingrained in socio-cultural and political contexts. Moreover, it was evident that their experience was further exacerbated by stigma, lack of support from partners, stigma from their peers and a generally unsupportive culture on campus.

Drawing on societal norms, young students are stigmatised because they have become mothers before completing their studies and, often, before marrying. Thus, it is evident that social responses to young mothers who are studying are further challenges to ensuring support for their academic progress. Challenges to the normative social construction of motherhood with its assumptions of women as primarily mothers need to be made at the level of consciousness-raising and general social transformation.

Drawing on the inadequacy and absence of some fathers in the study, it becomes clear that it is imperative for men to understand their fathering consciousness as their involvement in parenting roles and that, as such; they play an extremely important role during the conception, gestation and birth of their children. Fathers and mothers need a better understanding of the importance of parental involvement, and deconstructing

assumptions that being nurturant makes them less of a man. Hence, it is argued that it is crucial to encourage men to be more involved in parenting, by helping them to understand how important parents are to their children and providing them with concrete steps on how they can improve their parenting roles.

Hopefully, this study will also serve to encourage those men who are caught in a stereotypically masculine role to step out of this snare and thus to reclaim their humanity as partners and as fathers. It is hoped that this study will empower men to grasp the important role of fatherhood during the childbearing years of their partners, such that they will become more emotionally responsive as fathers and husbands. This study may also assist men in examining their status as the primary “breadwinner” and their gender ideologies in shifting the breadwinning boundary.

This study may also go some way in enabling mothers around the world to strive in building on the strength and knowledge of the past, and to create a new platform in women’s consciousness. Hence, it is hoped that studies such as these may impact on the public consciousness to shift expectations of motherhood and the idealized, romanticized notions that equate successful femininity with motherhood, so that women who are attempting to both study and mother may not judge themselves as harshly as they currently do.

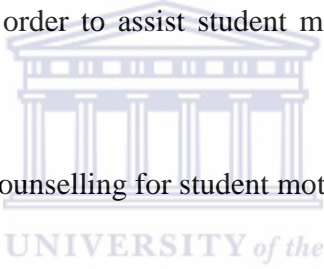
In order to challenge the social stigma and punitive discourses on young mothers who are studying, more work needs to be done around unpacking the social responses to them. Hence a particular programme could be outlined alongside legislation and education as an integral part of anti-stigma campaigns, in order to understand and challenge the social roots of stigma through the promotion of critical thinking.

Drawing on the findings, single student mothers’ experiences of stigma in particular may have adverse repercussions for these young mothers. Since stigmatisation may hinder student mothers’ education, and could have detrimental effects on the lives of these

young mothers, stigma reduction strategies should be implemented at the university. These could be aimed at both individual and group levels in order to be effective individual or intrapersonal strategies. These strategies could include counselling, cognitive-behavioural therapy advocacy, empowerment and group counselling. In addition, support groups should be designed to assist students to overcome the challenges they encounter.

From the above, it seems that there is a need for academics to be guided by professionals, or be given some form of training or sensitivity awareness in order to enable them to better understand and deal with student mothers' situations (Bloem, 2000; Olivier, 2000).

In light of the results of this study, the subsequent suggestions could be implemented in the university environment, in order to assist student mothers to be successful in their studies:

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- Make available proper counselling for student mothers before they resume their studies and during:
  - Ensure that lectures and tutorials for student mothers are made available at a time that is convenient for them;
  - Provide training to lecturers and tutors to enable them to be more sensitive to the needs of student parents and render support to student mothers in their studies;
  - Consider building more residences adequate for student mothers with babies' facilities, given that student mothers are currently not allowed to live in the residences at UWC due to the lack of babies' facilities and the unfavourable nature of the residences for student mothers.

#### **5.4.2 Recommendations for further studies**

The study raises an important issue that could be addressed in future studies. Considering the high rate of single motherhood among young female students in the South Africa, it would be appropriate for further research to explore their particular challenges, including the lack of their partners' engagement in parenting. More work on male parents at universities would complement and deepen the current findings.

Furthermore, a longitudinal study that explores shifts and changes over time and documents longer term challenges of being a student and a parent at all stages of child development could be conducted. In addition, further research is required to provide opportunities for women to reflect on their experiences, given that these are so complex and diverse. Also, in terms of their experiences of parenting, the voices of young women and young men should be heard, so that the complex and diverse parenting experiences can be explored. The construct of motherhood and the experiences of mothers should be examined more widely, taking into account different contexts and focusing on class, culture and the experiences of gender inequalities in South African society. Hence, more diverse accounts of mothering experiences would be captured presenting a more representative experience of motherhood among young mothers in South Africa.

#### **5.4.3 Recommendations for knowledge production**

According to feminists such as Burns (2000), alternative voices are essential to deal with the status quo, and a different construction of motherhood is required in order to facilitate adequate conditions for gender equality and justice. The literature on motherhood, both globally and locally in South Africa, essentially highlights the way in which women continue to confront gender inequality on a daily basis. Gender normative practices

regarding parenting do not appear to have shifted very much and women still appear to carry the load, even while at a university where gender is challenged intellectually. Based on the outcome of this study, it can be said that most women perform parenting obligations on their own, with little active support from men, and with little support or understanding from the society at large, and often punishment and stigmatisation instead, and that this reveals and promulgates gender inequality. Optimistically, young women would be better equipped to deal with these inequalities that are intrinsic and basically unnoticed, if more knowledge on the social construct of motherhood is produced. It is noted that feminist knowledge and human rights discourses have challenged gender inequalities and the subordination of women. Yet deeply ingrained ideologies and practices continue to persist. Therefore, by displaying the struggles faced by UWC student mothers, it is hoped that various ways to facilitate alternative constructions of motherhood and, hence, to facilitate academic excellence among student mothers will be opened up.

Further, in order to rebuild our assumptions of social norms, values and ideas surrounding the definition of motherhood, these young student mothers' stories are important as they bring to light the shifts (both material and in terms of consciousness) young female students have to go through when they become mothers. Support and balance are vital for student mothers who, forced into "survival" mode, have no peripheral vision and are generally unable to think beyond issues that are not linked to parenting, family, food, nappies, home and their studies. Hopefully, feminist research will assist young mothers to regain autonomy over their lives, and to share their experiences with others, thus enabling them to shift out of the isolation they feel their mothering role has constrained them to. It is hoped that the experiences of the young mothers in this study will lay a foundation of knowledge for other young mothers in South Africa in particular and worldwide in general.

Having achieved some noteworthy changes at the level of student participation, South Africa is now grappling with the question of how to achieve significant changes at the

level of academic staff and university leadership. In view of the overall analysis, the presentation suggests that while equity-related legislation and policies are necessary, there are insufficient mechanisms in place to bring about gender equality. Thus feminists are endeavouring to create a different concept of motherhood, one where mothers can tackle sexism and other forms of discrimination and challenge patriarchal, heteronormative, traditionally gendered norms and motherhood ideologies. In this way, based on the strength and knowledge of motherhood ideologies, a platform for women's consciousness will be built. To address the challenges of gender inequality and its changing nature, universities need to be progressively more proactive in the interventions that they undertake.



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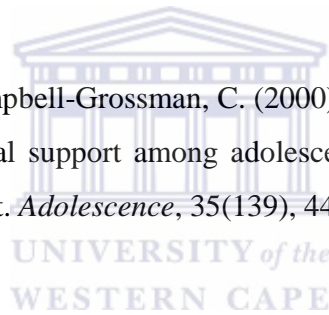
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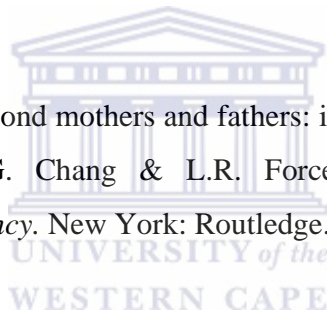
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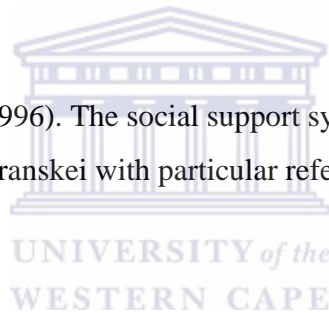
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## **APPENDIX ONE: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

1. What was the circumstance of your pregnancy and how did you feel about it?
2. How did you feel during the pregnancy and your transition into having a baby and into motherhood as a whole?
3. What were the first few days and weeks after birth like?
4. What did you understand about breast feeding and what was your decision regarding it and why?
5. What gendered experiences did you face regarding child rearing and parenting and what kind of assistance did you get from your partner and family?
6. What is the context of child care while at school and how do you feel about it?
7. How has your position of mother impacted on your studies?
8. How has motherhood impacted on your relationship with your partner?
9. Describe your awareness of being a mother among your classmates or just to Yourself.
10. What are your experiences as a student mother, and how do you cope with your studies?
11. How do you balance both academic work and motherhood? What kind of support do you get from the university as a student mother to undermine your academic development?

## **APPENDIX TWO: RESEARCH COVERING LETTER**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am conducting research on the experiences of motherhood and parenting among young female students at the University of the Western Cape.

I am carrying out this research towards my Masters Degree in Women and Gender Studies at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). My supervisor is Prof. Tamara Shefer.

I am at the stage of collecting data and would appreciate if you would agree to grant me an interview. All data collected will be strictly confidential and you will remain anonymous at all times.

The proposed way of collecting information from you with regard to your experiences will be through the means of semi-structured interviews and life history interviews. All interviews will be conducted by the researcher using a tape recorder. I will also transcribe and analyse all data collected to ensure confidentiality. Once tapes have been transcribed, they will be destroyed to protect the confidentiality of my participants. Transcripts will be kept on the file at the researcher's home, but will be destroyed if the respondents so request.

Participants may choose to be identified by a different name to avoid being recognized. Thus all personal information will be secured or will be concealed and will be made public only behind a shield of anonymity.

In case of any psychological or emotional problems that may arise during the interviews, I would offer referrals for counselling and the Student Counselling Service or elsewhere in the area.

I will commit myself to share with you the findings and to get your feedback before submitting the final thesis to the University.

Data will be published in a mini-thesis as a requirement towards my M. Phil. Degree in Women and Gender Studies at UWC.

I would appreciate it if you would inform me either by email or telephone whether you are prepared to partake in my research.

Thank you very much.

Ngum Funiba

Cell: 0793982700

Email: [funibamelvis@yahoo.com](mailto:funibamelvis@yahoo.com)



## **CONTRACT OF INFORMED CONSENT**

I hereby declare that I have negotiated with Funiba and have understood the present contract outline, the purpose and the outcome of Ngum Funiba's research, as well as my participation in it.

I understand that Ngum Funiba's research is conducted for her to complete her M.Phil at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). The research will be used for her final thesis and her final thesis will be available in the Main Library at UWC, both electronically and on hard copies. Her thesis will be written in English and it will be available to anyone who uses or gets access to the library.

I understand that Ngum Funiba is exploring the experiences of motherhood and parenting among the University's female students. I have agreed to grant the interviews about my own experiences on motherhood. I am aware that the interviews will be tape recorded but the tapes will be available to Ngum Funiba alone and her supervisor. I am also aware that tapes will be destroyed after transcribing.

Furthermore, I have agreed to the following:

That my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time and at any stage of the research process should I feel to do so.

That my participation will be anonymous and strictly confidential.

That before joining the research, I will be fully informed about the aims of the research and the research process.

That my participation will amount to three to four hours divided into two interview sessions.

That I am aware of the research topic and do not need to experience any trauma or emotional problems related to the topic.

That I will receive no money or other compensation for my participation.

That I am free to enquire about anything related to my participation.

That I will not be asked to divulge any information that might infringe on my constitutional right to privacy, or any other right, as within the South African constitution.

I am allowed to approve the interview transcript before and comment on the analysis.


That the research process aims to protect my dignity through not passing any judgment on my view points or experiences shared during the research process.

That any characteristics that could lead to my identification will be changed.

That this contract can be changed if necessary but with mutual consent between Ngum Funiba and me.

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Name of the participant	Name of the researcher
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The logo of the University of the Western Cape, featuring a classical building with columns and a pediment, with the text 'UNIVERSITY of the WESTERN CAPE' below it.

Signature    Signature

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Place

Date