

Title: BEING CALLED TO THE PHENOMENON AND RESPONDING TO THE VOICES OF THE “OTHERS”: SINGLE MOTHERS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The context for this qualitative study was a residential program for single mothers at Wilson College in Chambersburg Pennsylvania. Participants of this phenomenological study were students enrolled in the program. A hermeneutic phenomenological theoretical perspective guided the study. By researching, exploring, and reflecting how student mothers perceived their world and by analyzing the meaning of their experiences and lives the phenomenon was uncovered and discovered. A constructivism and constructionism epistemological viewpoint informed the methodology while the study investigated the ontology of single motherhood. Student mothers selected for the study ranged in age, ethnicity, class standing, number of children, academic major, and future aspirations. The research methods included several individual open-ended and unstructured conversations with five student mothers. A literature review from the fields of higher education, social sciences, qualitative research, adult education, philosophy, and women's studies enlightened the study. Findings from the literature and interviews indicated that many internal and external factors inhibit and/or enhance student success and opportunities for education and employment. Literature and interviews acknowledged that economic, political, educational, social, and personal aspects impact the lives of single mothers and their children. Therefore, the study's findings enabled a

greater understanding of the lives of these women by listening to their “voices” which have oftentimes been unheard and silenced. Themes discovered from listening to the chorus of voices indicated that these students are “motherful” women. They are faithful, encouraging, loving, caring, helping, and giving mothers committed to creating hopeful futures for their families.

The Problem: The Phenomenon of Single Motherhood a Societal Challenge for our Country

Single women and their children represent the largest and fastest growing population of the poor. During the past two decades, “the poverty rate for single mothers has increased by 150% and two-thirds of all adults living in poverty are women” (Huff & Thorpe, 1997, p. 289). Our country perpetuates systems that promote the deficiencies of single mothers and their children and we establish structures that contribute to the feminization of poverty. Single women live in the “Other” America and become “disenfranchised, disempowered, and with no civic voice” (Polakow, 1993, p. 172). Similarly, their children experience a marginalized existence and encounter a life of unmet expectations and limited opportunities. These families do not exercise nor fully enjoy the rights and freedoms of our country. Conditions are worsening for these families and wages are declining, government funding is being reduced, and women enter a labor market that is unequal and discriminatory. Simultaneously, a recent report released in May 2001 from the United States Census Bureau indicated that the number of families headed by single mothers has increased twenty-five percent since the 1990 census report. The 2000 report documents that the United States has over 7.5 million households that are headed by single mothers. In the past decade approximately one-third of all babies were born to unmarried women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). These statistics indicate a rapid and increasing trend in our country while two-thirds of government cutbacks in the 1980’s and 1990’s were serving poor women and their children. Additionally, the term single-parent family has become a euphemism for problem family, with single-parent families taking the blame for many social problems

(Schmitz, 1995). Therefore, the United States is challenged to become a country that values marginal groups, identifies the commonalities of all individuals, and bridges differences between the minority and the majority.

One of the many obstacles that single mothers encounter is that they are unable to pursue educational opportunities for which they have the requisite skills and talents. Instead of pursuing higher education, they are likely to become members of the working poor, tomorrow's homeless, and a burden upon government assistance programs.

Bolman and Deal (1995) cautioned that "disease of the spirit exacts a high price. Spiritual bankruptcy ultimately leads to economic failure. The deeper cost is a world where everything has a function yet nothing has any meaning" (p. 146). To prevent spiritual bankruptcy in these families and to promote self-sufficiency, critical actions by the government and bold interventions by educators are needed. The United States must strive to be a country that is fully committed to all children and all people. This point is no better illustrated than by a greeting used by Masai warriors in Africa: "How are the children?" The traditional response is, "All the children are well." Successful communities understand the power of this statement and take action to make it true (Morse, 1998, p. 235).

Higher Education: The Context to Find Possible Solutions to the Challenge

Higher education in the United States today reflects the values, challenges, controversies, and debates within our society. The following values have been identified as fundamental to the mission of higher education: "service, truth, freedom, individuation, equality, justice, and community" (Young, 1997, p. xiii). The purpose of

administrative work in higher education is “service and commitment to the ideal of general human betterment. The academy must serve if it is to fulfill its value to humanity” (Young, 1997, p. 19). Therefore, educators must create programs and services that respond to trends indicating 90% of families headed by single mothers who lack a high school degree are living in poverty; for children living with mothers having a college degree, the poverty rate is 16% (Huff & Thorpe, 1997).

Educational leader, Ernest L. Boyer urged higher educators to create the “New American College.”

This college would be a connected institution, committed to improving, in a very intentional way, the human condition. As clusters of such colleges form, a new model of excellence in higher education would emerge, one that would enrich the campus, renew communities, and give new dignity and status to the scholarship of service. (Boyer, 1994, p. A48)

The option of post-secondary education is such a good alternative, in terms of return on investment to the women, their children, and to society, that one wonders why it has received so little attention. Rich (1979) believed that higher education

should address itself to the microcosm of national problems and issues that exist locally, and that it should do so with the greatest possible sense that it will not simply be giving, but be receiving, because academe has a great deal to learn from women and from other underprivileged people. (p. 152)

Society’s efforts to keep the poor at a distance, to see them as different, to look for scapegoats, or to maintain traditional gender roles may be preventing workable solutions to the problems of poverty among single mothers. “Perhaps the intractable problem is not how to improve the lives of poor single mothers, but rather how to change society’s views about them so that opportunities with high payoffs can be in the forefront of consideration, not on the back burner” (Schein, 1995, p.127). Thus, continued research,

responsive programs, and supportive systems will develop and provide opportunities for single mothers to obtain a college education, create outcomes that model excellence, serve families, and benefit society.

Exploring the Phenomenon: A Brief Literature Review

In summary, the literature review identified and synthesized many topics addressed in the literature, discovered findings from studies relevant to single mothers and higher education, highlighted applicable theories, and demonstrated that there is limited research and scholarly knowledge on women learners, and single mothers and higher education. Some researchers such as Bing and Trotman Reid (1996) discussed that the literature is laden with problems and inaccuracies. They identify several factors that contribute to this situation: (1) the adoption of a narrow lens through which women and people of color are viewed; (2) a general lack of attention to differences among women, particularly differences based on class and race/ethnicity; and (3) psychologists' frequent use of inappropriate assumptions and strategies when studying women's differences. Other researchers recognize that there is limited scholarship and studies on single mothers. Schmitz (1995) explained that the lack of scholarship on single-parent families

as a diverse, long-term family option limits the ability of practitioners and policymakers to respond positively. Single-parent families are not the homogeneous group they are commonly portrayed to be. The diversity of family styles by race, ethnicity, economic condition, and actual circumstances is frequently unknown or ignored. (Schmitz, 1995, p. 438-439)

Although there is a lack of scholarship on single-parent families emergent issues and themes evolved from the literature review. Specifically, the literature categorized and

described single mothers pursuing a degree in higher education in the following ways: (1) as lacking and deficient in attributes and skills, such as self-esteem, social, and academic skills, (2) as non-traditional learners, (3) as women overcoming social, economic, political, cultural, and educational barriers, (4) as marginalized, oppressed, and disenfranchised society members, (5) as collaborative and connected learners, (6) as human capital striving for self-sufficiency, (7) as stigmatized and stereotyped citizens, (8) as individuals who are psychologically distressed, (9) as women lacking a “voice” and often times silenced, (10) as individuals lacking support systems, (11) as women without power, (12) as victims to blame, (13) as an oppressed group, (14) as mothers impacted by welfare reform policies, and (15) as mothers raising “fatherless” children. Intended outcomes of this study were to increase awareness and knowledge of single mothers in higher education, thereby expanding our understanding of the phenomenon of single motherhood and educational programs and services for single mothers.

The Methodology and Rationale: Being Called to the Epistemology, Theoretical Perspectives, Methodology, and Methods to Uncover, Discover, and Recover the Phenomenon

A qualitative design was employed to achieve an in-depth understanding of the experiences and lives of student single mothers enrolled in a full-time residential program that was designed to foster retention and attainment of a college degree. Student mothers selected for the study ranged in age, ethnicity, class standing, number of children, academic major, and future aspirations. The methodology of this qualitative study was guided by a hermeneutic phenomenological research perspective and approach. The study sought “to clarify, authenticate, uncover or bring to full human awareness, meaning

structures as expressed by persons in their everyday life-world experiences” (Hultgren & Coomer, 1989, p. xix). As Merriam (1998) explained the heuristic character of a phenomenological methodology will illuminate the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon under study. Therefore, this study illuminates, discovers and rediscovers new meanings. Relationships, themes, and influences emerged from this study and lead to a rethinking of the phenomenon of “Being” (Heidegger, 1962) a single mother pursuing a higher education. Heidegger (1962) believed that the essence of a “Being” has its own entity. Additionally, the study draws upon feminist theory and interpretive research orientations. This theoretical perspective emphasized the importance of understanding the meaning and essential qualities of the experiences and lives of single mothers pursuing a higher education and enhanced our knowledge of the phenomenon of single motherhood.

The qualitative research process of this study was a multi-layered, dynamic, and holistic approach that was comprised of the following elements:

Methods: the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyze data related to some research question or hypothesis [sampling, interview, theme identification, interpretive methods, and conversation analysis]

Methodology: the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes [phenomenological research and feminist standpoint research]

Theoretical perspective: the philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria [interpretivism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and feminism]

Epistemology: the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology [constructivism and constructionism]. (Crotty, 1998, pp. 3-5)

The bracketed information categorizes and identifies the epistemology, theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and methods utilized in the process of researching and discovering this phenomenon.

Discovering Motherful Women: Researching the Phenomenon of Single Mothers in Higher Education

Relationships, themes, constructs, and influences emerged from the research conducted for this study. This research led to a rethinking of the phenomenon of single motherhood and female-headed households. Specifically, the researcher found herself saying no to the concept of “fatherless America” (Blankenhorn, 1995) which is prevalent in the literature, media, and social discourse and realized that study’s findings indicated that the single mothers in the study did not believe that they were “less”, nor did they perceive their children as “fatherless”, but rather motherful. In fact, Crotty (1998) wrote that

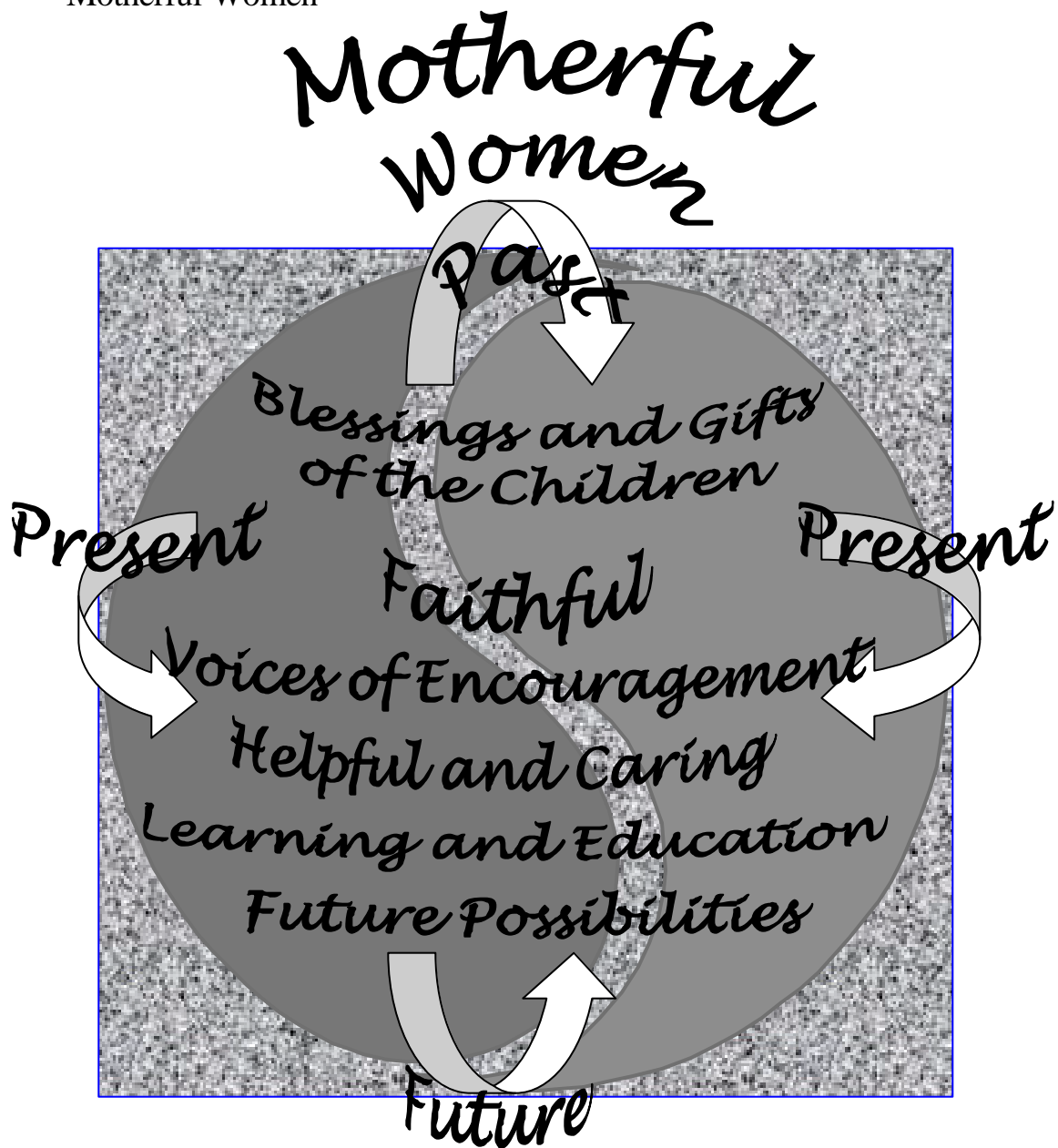
phenomenology is about saying ‘No!’ to the meaning system bequeathed to us. It is about setting that meaning system aside. Far from inviting us to explore our everyday meanings as they stand, it calls upon us to put them in abeyance and open ourselves to the phenomenon in there stark immediacy to see what emerges for us. (p. 82)

Themes discovered from listening to the chorus of voices indicated these women are faithful, encouraging, loving, caring, helping, and giving mothers committed to creating hopeful futures for their families. In fact, the study’s findings derived from the narratives of Jazzie, Grace, Chimere, Reni, and Delilah (participants of the study) challenged social constructs and highlighted the limitations of our symbol systems. Crotty (1998) defined America’s symbol system as

limiting; it is also a barrier. It stands for things but it also comes to stand between things and us, that is, between us and our immediate experience of objects. It tends to substitute itself for what we actually see, hear, feel, smell, taste or even imagine. (p. 82)

Additionally, the study established these women model past, present, and future motherfulness. Therefore, the study's findings contribute to understanding single motherhood from a motherful perspective and worldview. The components of motherful women are explained through the voices of study participants and illustrated by Figures 1.

Figure 1
Motherful Women



**Motherful
Women :
Creating
Hopeful Futures
For Their
Families**

Katherine M.
Houghton
(2001)

Motherful Women Giving Voice to Their Narratives, and Stories

All of the student mothers had a history of experiencing seasons, not moments, days or weeks of darkness and challenging times. These past dark times provided the historical framework of their stories. Each of mother's darkness emerged from being abandoned, abused, used, and harmed by loved ones. In all of the stories the father of the child was the primary source of significant hardship and in some cases family members contributed to this pervasive darkness. However, what is most significant is that Grace, Chimere, Jazzie, Reni, and Delilah expressed that from the adversity came the "gifts" and "blessings" of the children. In essence, the children saved their mothers from despair and discouragement and provided the gifts of survival, comfort, love, purpose, happiness, courage, motivation, calm, direction, beauty, hope, faith, and future. Jazzie explained, "I feel I'm blessed. When you're blessed with things like [children] you have to have faith." Reni also described the gifts of her child Lebrun. In fact Reni believed that Lebrun's autism is a "blessing." She stated, "Lebrun is definitely been a blessing to me."

The mothers remembered getting through the "dark" times by having the "blessings" of the children and faith. Delilah attributed "hard core faith" for having persevered when "no matter what would have happened." She explained, "no matter what anyone said, or no matter what would have happened to me I had this hard core faith. Knowing inside me that I had to make it." Jazzie echoed similar sentiments, "faith, I have faith.... That's what got me through. I said in order to get through the heartache, the pain I been through I just turn it over." In addition to the gifts of children and faith Reni, Grace, Chimere, Delilah, and Jazzie were encouraged and discouraged by

many individuals that voice positive and negative thoughts toward them throughout their lives. These women discovered that their survival and happiness was dependent on them silencing the past and present negative voices and listening to a collective chorus of positive harmonies that would cultivate hopeful futures.

On a daily basis the women described they worked to “hold on to” encouraging and positive voices while reaffirming their worth. For example, Chimere finds esteem and happiness in knowing that her family is proud of her accomplishments especially since she is “the first one to ever go to college.” She explained, “when I make it, I’ll be the first one to graduate from college, so every time I get frustrated and I want to stop. They say we understand, we’re proud of you.” While Reni, Grace, Chimere, Delilah, and Jazzie heard positive encouragement they also held a strong belief in helping and caring for others. They were raised, became, or always remembered being giving, caring, and helpful to others. Grace concluded that she has always had “the need to help people.” She described, “I just seem to be able to talk to anybody and they just sort of tend to tell me their story and then I try to help them.” Jazzie further emphasized, “It’s your obligation to try to help people. To pass it on that’s helping yourself and helping others.” In addition to a commitment to help others Delilah, Grace, Reni, Chimere, and Jazzie had individual and personal reasons for pursuing an education. However, they all gave voice to a chorus that spoke about the gifts of betterment, opportunities, and changes that would transform their lives as an outcome of achieving a higher education.

Delilah wrote in a journal to her daughter, “we’re going to college Clara and my dear child it’s been a long, long road. There is a light.” Delilah explained, “this is when

I think I came out of the darkness ... and then I got accepted to college, and it was, that's when the light came." Delilah reads, "oh, this road will be hard but it will shape up and ever secure us." Delilah firmly believed that the "darkness" of the past was enlightened by her acceptance into college. She further stated, "it [education] would secure us, we would no longer be considered White trash. And going nowhere. Something people told me I couldn't do and I was going to. It was a way out of the hole we were stuck in." Similarly, Grace described when she received her program acceptance letter she and Michelle danced with joy to the tune of "our lives are about to change!"

It is evident that Delilah, Chimere, Reni, Jazzie, and Grace derive meaning from life's struggles and circumstances. They not only hold beliefs that are a direct result of their perspectives and reasons, but they have evolved to be motherful women that demonstrated a dedication to betterment and commitment to future opportunities. They believed in the "journey" of life's possibilities. In fact, Delilah explained that although she traveled through a "dark forest" guided by inner "light and heart." She knew that the journey was to "go" forward. She emphasized, "so it was all lessons. And that changed my view on life. Life is experiences and I want to get as many experiences as possible." Underlying all of the meanings, actions, and beliefs of the student mothers is their love and devotion to their children and aspirations to build a happy and hopeful future for themselves and their children, Michelle, Shamar, Morris, Lily, Belle, Clara, and Lebrun.

Implications and Outcomes of Understanding the Voices, Experiences, and Lives of Motherful Women

The discovery of the description motherful and acknowledgment of nontraditional families challenges the social discourse about family values and traditional family

structures and provides opportunities for further research. From the discoveries of the study one is urged to reflect upon why America does not promote a worldview that is closer to a motherful America. Possibly Rich's (1990) concept of "re-visioning" literature needs to be considered when terms such as "fatherless" America are utilized. Rich explained that re-visioning is "how women can begin to see things differently, name things authentically for themselves, and so bring themselves to a new way of being and living" (Crotty, 1998, p. 182). In addition to the re-visioning process researchers, writers, policy makers, and educators need to be sensitive to the voices that are not being heard in social discourse and research. Therefore, the voices of single mothers must be included in present and future universal worldviews, social discourse, readings, and studies.

Educational leaders must consider expanding and "re-visioning" (Rich, 1990) institutional missions, visions, strategic planning goals, and programs to be reflective of societal needs and respond to the changing demographics of our country. This re-visioning process would result in initiating and integrating educational policies, procedures, programs, and services that hear, serve, and respond to the voices of single mothers. These changes would promote motherful environments and learning communities and improve educational opportunities that foster academic and personal growth as well as economic self-sufficiency for these mothers and children. Additionally, this enhanced understanding would facilitate leadership to support studies and research on single motherhood thereby contributing to the limited research on single motherhood and single mothers pursuing higher education.

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