“ON A TIGHTROPE”: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FIRST-GENERATION DOCTORAL MOTHERS

By Maria M. Martin

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

in Educational Leadership

Northern Arizona University

May 2023

Approval:

Frances J. Riemer, Ph.D., Co-Chair

Jennifer M. Blaney, Ph.D., Co-Chair

Yvonne M. Luna, Ph.D.

Yoon Ha Choi, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

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MARIA M. MARTIN

While doctoral training can be a challenge for a student of any background, there are specific challenges that face first-generation doctoral students. In addition, over the last decade, the number of women completing doctoral degrees has continued to increase. Many women in doctoral programs also have children at home and professional responsibilities. Together, this prompts the need for additional scholarly research to study the intersection of these identities. The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of first-generation college graduates who are pursing doctoral training in addition to being working mothers.

In this study, I used a phenomenological design with feminist standpoint theory and role conflict theory to seek a better understanding of the lived experiences of first-generation women doctoral students. This qualitative study included thirteen women in doctoral programs at the time of the interviews. Their experiences were nuanced, but using phenomenological analysis strategies, I provide textural descriptions of the essence of their experiences. From there, I explored the findings of three major themes. The women in this study experienced (1) unattainable work-life balance for doctoral students, (2) (problematizing) stories of grit and resilience, and (3) the women use agency to create community. Considering these findings, this study revealed how these thirteen first-generation women doctoral students attempted to balance their academic, professional, and mothering responsibilities and the importance of their relationships with advisors and peers. This study also revealed the challenges that the women in this study faced. More specifically, they faced challenges surrounding insufficient pay,

conflicting demands on their time, and navigating an unknown process. These findings point to implications for practice and future research to reimagine doctoral training and encourage doctoral programs to embrace necessary accommodations to better support these women.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I am grateful for the thirteen women who willingly shared their stories with me. Without each of you, this research would not have been possible. Thank you for your candor, humor, and thoughtfulness. It was a joy to meet each of you.

I would also like to thank my dissertation committee starting with my co-chairs, Dr. Frances Riemer and Dr. Jennifer Blaney. Thank you for your patience, unwavering support, expert guidance, and encouragement throughout the dissertation. I'm most grateful for your profound mentorship. I'm also grateful to Dr. Yvonne Luna and Dr. Yoon Ha Choi for willingly sharing their expertise. I am honored to have worked with the four of you throughout this process.

I have been fortunate to have support and guidance from many professionals throughout my career. Dr. Karen Pugliesi has supported me since I was an undergraduate, and she has continued through this doctoral program. I'd also like to specifically acknowledge Dr. Wendy Bruun, Dr. Dylan Rust, and Dr. Emily Borthwick Wong. They shared their experiences as students in the NAU EdD program before I began. I want to thank them for sharing their experiences and inspiring words. To Jim Hensley and the Dorrance Foundation for Education thank you for funding my first two years of coursework.

To the NAU Department of Educational Leadership faculty, especially Dr. Kris Ewing, Dr. Wally Delecki, Dr. Blue Brazelton, Dr. Mary Dereshiwsky, Dr. Sue Kater, Dr. Rose Ylimaki, Dr. Ijeoma Ononuju, Dr. Robyn Conrad Hansen, and Dr. Karyn Blair for creating such an outstanding department culture for us as doctoral students. This program was so inclusive with such an overt emphasis on the importance of equity. It was a wonderfully supportive way to

complete this degree in higher education. Thank you for being shining examples of professionalism, continued learning, expertise, and inclusion.

Additionally, I have been so lucky to have the support of very understanding friends who are fellow doctoral mothers. Thank you to those who helped me throughout the dissertation journey. Thank you, Jennifer Miller and Melanie Dean from my cohort, for regularly meeting throughout our dissertation process. Chrystale Fulayter, thank you for your immense understanding and unconditional friendship year after year. Your support was unparalleled. The phone calls, encouragement, and friendship from all three of you were invaluable. Your journeys have inspired me.

To my family, both that I was born into and married into, thank you all for the encouragement and support on this journey. Thanks for checking in on me and asking for updates. Thanks for cheering for me at every phase of this process. I especially want to thank my four siblings, Carla Monzingo, Anita Bubany, Dominic Timpani, and Lisa Timpani. Your friendship and love were encouraging on my most challenging days.

To my parents, Mark and Gina Timpani, thank you for supporting my dreams and encouraging me to continue learning. Thank you for teaching me the value of education and the importance of improving the world. Our conversations empowered me as a young girl; you gave me a dream to one day be a leader and a changemaker.

I want to thank my husband, Jesse Martin, who has been with me through my graduate degrees. Thanks for listening to me process so many new topics, sharing your vocabulary when I was searching to find the right word, talking through each stage of the dissertation process, and understanding how much time I needed to commit to this degree. Most of all – thank you for

helping me find joy in this process. It is remarkable to have someone who supports my endless desire to learn. I'm so grateful to you and to have you as a partner in life.

I'd like to thank my daughter Emilia Martin. Thank you for the art you made to decorate my workspace and for so cheerily helping me celebrate every milestone, big or small. Thanks for your patience as I read and wrote. Jesse and Emilia added such joy to this process.

To all of you who have taught me the importance of living a life that centers on gratitude, humility, authenticity, and benevolence. Thank you for being part of this journey with me.

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DEDICATION

This body of work is dedicated to my daughter Emilia Marie Martin. I hope you dream big, find joy in reading, and know you can reach any goal.

CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

I took the family calendar off the wall, opened my planner, grabbed my colored pens, and turned on my laptop. It was the beginning of another semester, so it was time to sit down and consolidate our schedules. I aimed to get a complete view of all pertinent dates for my family in one place. I did this task three times a year. First came my work schedule. I added all the weekends I would be working and the weeknights when I would not make it home before dinner. Then, I opened my daughter's school calendar. I noted her half days and school breaks. I even made a note to email the teacher to ask if she would be willing to schedule our parent-teacher conference two months in advance. Her school holidays do not line up with my work holidays. I started a running list of days to take off from work. This organization is not a stress-inducing task; this is necessary to reduce anxiety day to day and week to week. Knowing the weekly plan will allow for adjustments when unanticipated events arise.

In addition to my role as a professional in higher education and a mother, I am a doctoral student. As a first-generation college student with an insatiable curiosity for education, this degree has been a dream since I was eight. I chose a program for working professionals to make this dream a reality. Some classes were offered in-person after business hours, and others were offered online. As much as I enjoyed the classes, the time and energy I dedicated to this degree cannot be overstated. Once I received the syllabi for the semester coursework, I took the calendar back off the wall, reopened my planner, and retrieved my colored pens once again. I was enrolled in three classes, so I added the dates of classes, assignment due dates, and chunks of time that I needed to set aside to read and write. I saw a couple of class presentations on the syllabus. I knew this meant I would have to work with my peers to find time to collaborate in the evenings, knowing that their day-to-day schedule was just as full as mine. After I added my

classes to the calendar, I thought about the various appointments on my list. I needed to schedule dental appointments, get the dog to the vet, and get weekly appointments on my therapist's calendar. With my responsibilities at work and school, my time was at capacity, and I had limited time to help with household responsibilities. Since my doctoral program began, my partner stepped in as the lead parent and took on all the logistics around our daughter's schooling. He also did all the meal planning and cooking. I had mixed emotions about everything my partner took on due to my schooling, deep gratitude, and guilt. I felt guilty as a mom choosing to commit my time and energy away from my daughter. I constantly felt inadequate as a partner, employee, and student because I have taken on many roles simultaneously. Even with an endlessly supportive family, I could not help but mourn some of the activities that did not make it on the calendar.

I would have loved to sign up for a race, register my daughter for an extracurricular, plan a night out with friends, spend another weekend with my parents, or present at a conference, but this was not the semester to add another commitment to my schedule. I chose to put these activities off for another semester. Negotiating conflicting commitments did not end with putting together a calendar. The next step was to ask for days off from work to accommodate my daughter's school schedule and my class conflicts. Then there would be ongoing conversations throughout the semester with my colleagues about meetings and events that I could not make due to my classes.

I seek balance in my week, peace in my daily schedule, and intentional presence in my daughter's life, so it is important not to overcommit my time. The reality of being a doctoral student and working professional is arduous. I am the first in my family to complete a bachelor's

degree, which means this is genuinely new territory. Is the overwhelmed weekly schedule normal? Are there strategies other doctoral students use to promote balance in their life?

Through my network of higher education professionals, my cohort, and connections with doctoral mothers nationwide, I have watched women take leaves of absence or choose not to continue their degrees. I feel their exhaustion. Has anyone figured out how to juggle these roles? I am saddened and concerned when I hear about someone not continuing toward their doctoral degree. These are the stories over which I lose sleep. How can I better support these women as they complete their doctorates? What can we do as higher education professionals to ensure these women have the support to succeed in rigorous academic programs while meeting their personal needs? I understand the desire to pursue a doctoral degree, and I know just how challenging it is to complete all my responsibilities well.

The stories, particularly of women and first-generation college students struggling in doctoral programs, tug at my heart just a bit harder because I know they have both been underserved populations in higher education. I can feel the urgency and desire to propel their professional careers forward by furthering their education. I celebrate their success, and I lean on their successes in the moments when I need encouragement. With my counseling training, I observe how individuals take care of themselves. Coupling this training with my career as a higher education professional, I care deeply about student wellness. Beyond organizing a chaotic calendar, I am more curious how first-generation women integrate each of their roles as they pursue a doctoral degree.

Introduction to the Study

Historically there has been a disparity in the representation of first-generation college students and women in higher education. In this chapter, I provide statistics about the representation of these groups in doctoral programs. I then move into the purpose of this study, the research questions, the significance of this research, my positionality, the methodology, the conceptual framework, and the critical terminology necessary to define.

An extensive body of research examines first-generation college students and their undergraduate experience since the early 2000s. Research shows that students whose parents have not attended college face significant challenges in accessing higher education and completing a degree (e.g., Engle & Tinto, 2008; Grodsky & Jackson, 2009; Ishitani, 2006). The lack of information about expectations on college campuses increases attrition rates among first-generation college students (Cataldi et al., 2018). This study uses the National Science Foundation's definition of first-generation, that is, students whose parents do not have a bachelor's degree or higher (National Science Foundation, 2021). Using this definition, 29% of doctoral recipients in 2020 were first-generation college students (National Science Foundation, 2021). At the same time, just 5% of first-generation college graduates continue their education to enroll in a doctoral or professional program (Cataldi et al., 2018).

When looking at a student population (e.g., first-generation college students), it is important to acknowledge that their race, gender, and socioeconomic status intersect with that identity (Crenshaw, 1999). Crenshaw (1999) stated that the "intersections of race and gender only highlight the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (p. 1245). I use a lens acknowledging multiple identities to frame this study (Crenshaw, 1999). The enrollment of women students has been steadily growing

across all levels of education, and 2010 was the first time that women surpassed men as doctoral degree recipients (Jaschik, 2010). More recently, in 2020, 46% of the total 55,283 doctorates were awarded to women (NSF, 2021). According to the National Science Foundation (2021) survey, women earn under half of all doctorates in education, social sciences, humanities, and other non-science or engineering fields. While the representation of women among doctoral recipients has improved in recent decades, there is still an imbalance across disciplines. Women comprise about a third of doctoral recipients in physical sciences and a quarter of those in engineering, math, and computer science (NSF, 2021). These statistics point out the urgency in better understanding how women who are first-generation college students experience doctoral programs.

This study examines the phenomenon of women doctoral students who are first-generation college graduates. First-generation women who understand how adversity affects degree completion have a unique perspective on the obstacles and successes they have faced throughout their doctoral journey. I strongly believe exploring the lived experience of doctoral students managing multiple personal, professional, and academic roles is helpful to understand and better their ability to persist in these programs.

Purpose of this Study

I selected a hermeneutic phenomenological research design, which allows me to investigate participants' lived experiences (Peoples, 2021). This hermeneutic phenomenological study documents the lived experiences of first-generation women doctoral students. This study explores the essence of their experiences, centering on their own academic and personal perspectives. It provides insight into the lives of current doctoral students who also manage professional and personal roles. It allows these women to describe how their experiences

influenced their ability to develop various roles and maintain their well-being while balancing multiple roles.

This project is a source for identifying experiences hindering and supporting degree completion. By conducting in-depth interviews, I describe the phenomenon of first-generation women students' experiences of pursuing a doctoral degree. In Chapter Three, I detail the exact number of participants based on the phenomenological research design. The investigative nature of hermeneutic phenomenological research design supports exploring the lived experiences of women doctoral students as they describe personal accounts of their experience. As a result of this study, anecdotally, graduate program administrators will better explain how their women students might experience the programs.

A literature review (as discussed in Chapter Two) reveals a gap in research about the lived experience of first-generation women doctoral students and their process for managing multiple roles. Contributing to this body of research promises (a) insight to normalize the experience of women students and (b) the essence of their experience as it relates to personal fulfillment, satisfaction, and completion of their academic program. Those in leadership for doctoral programs can draw on this research to inform their support initiatives to help doctoral students succeed. First-generation women, doctoral students can benefit from this study because the lived experiences shared by participants may be relatable and may provide insight into the experiences of others. I aim to provide even more depth and direction to fellow doctoral students as they decide to pursue or continue completing a doctoral program.

Research Question

Peoples (2021) notes that the most central role in writing a phenomenological research question is to inquire about the experience. To that end, I was interested in focusing on the lived

experiences of these individuals, free of any assumptions. I have one primary research question that distills the essence of first-generation women doctoral students. This project asks the following question: **What are the lived experiences of first-generation women doctoral students persisting in their doctoral program, including classes, advising meetings, research, and the dissertation process?**

Guided by an understanding of continued education as a modern necessity for professional advancement, this study explores the participant's perceptions of the following areas: (a) conceptualization of the process; (b) significant events within the process; (c) significant thoughts or feelings engendered by the process; (d) liminality; and (e) growth or fulfillment from continuing their education.

Significance of Research

While graduate school is challenging for a student from any background, Gardner (2013) has noted specific challenges for the first-generation student population. Many universities have begun targeting support initiatives for this undergraduate student population; however, graduate students still tend to have college-educated parents (Gardner, 2013). This means that most doctoral students are continuous-generation students, providing them with access to familial history and knowledge informing their graduate school experience (Gardner, 2013). The trend of increased enrollment for women in doctoral programs has only been the case in the last decade (Zhou & Gao, 2020). As the number of women doctoral students increases, so should the empirical research about this trend. I found a large body of research about the barriers first-generation college students face during their undergraduate years (e.g., Collier & Morgan, 2008; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004). First-generation college and continuing-generation students have different expectations about the doctoral experience (Wofford et al., 2021). In

these examples, first-generation college students expected more direct guidance, while continuing-generation students expected more independence in their program (Wofford et al., 2021).

This project uses an intersectional approach to better understand the lived experiences of doctoral students by acknowledging the intersection of race, class, and gender. Interviews can provide deep insight into the nuance of lived experience (Peoples, 2021). Husserl (1931) and Moustakas (1994) define the purpose of phenomenology as exploring the lived experience to reveal the essence of a phenomenon. Using this definition, I assert that a phenomenological investigation is best suited to exploring and describing the issues faced by first-generation women doctoral students. Understanding the lived experiences of these women can help universities create better chances of student success by accurately understanding this population's individual experiences. By illuminating specific issues women doctoral students face, this phenomenological study could also add rich information for future applicants and the creation of support initiatives.

Conceptual Framework

A few overarching theories provide a framework for this study. I employ a hermeneutic phenomenological study using feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2004) to approach this qualitative analysis. Feminist researchers recognize that "scientific research has been deeply gender-biased" (Crawford & Marecek, 1989, p. 478). bell hooks (1994) writes about the necessity of using a marginalized individual's voice and location to understand their experience truly. Given this history, feminists aim to reexamine the traditional knowledge of social science by using women participants exclusively. Acknowledging the role that gender plays in higher education is especially relevant in a study that discusses the relationship of one's identity to the

reality she experiences (Harding, 2004). Feminist standpoint theory provides a lens that centers on women, challenging how academia has privileged men's perspectives while omitting women's experiences and overgeneralizing men's experiences (Gurung, 2020). It also acknowledges that knowledge is socially situated and provides a framework to correct prior research that fails to represent women's experiences (Harding, 2004). This theory requires us to be critical of information by using "strong reflexivity" to account for the belief systems within a culture (Harding, 2004, p. 136). To maximize objectivity, research using feminist standpoint theory must center on its marginalized members (Harding, 2004).

In addition to standpoint theory, another theory provides a framework for this study. Ward and Wolf-Wendel's (2004) role conflict theory provides a framework for how women balance the demands of multiple roles (e.g., doctoral student, professional, parent) and the time and commitment that comes with each role. This study is not just feminist, just looking at doctoral students, nor just looking at first-generation college students. As a result, it is important to draw on two theories in tandem. These two theories highlight the social construction of knowledge to center voices historically underrepresented in knowledge production. With those similarities, they dove-tail well to best guide this study. This dissertation integrates theories from gender studies and sociology to understand the phenomenon of this student population experiencing doctoral programs. Throughout the study, these theories guide the research questions, developing the research design, analyzing the data, and understanding the findings. The literature review contains more information about these theories.

Positionality

I am a doctoral student who began my academic career as a first-generation college student. I sought mentors and support systems when I arrived on campus to begin a bachelor’s

degree. It was up to me to learn the content taught while navigating a setting without prior knowledge of the processes or practices. While I was much less aware of this process as an undergraduate, I can see that I was comfortable asking questions and walking into campus offices to figure out what resources were available to me. When I applied to graduate school and doctoral programs, I was drawn to a cohort model program because I knew that peer support would be vital to me. I was excited to surround myself with peers pursuing the same subject.

When I began my doctoral studies, I understood I would have to manage my time and sacrifice various aspects of my life to pursue this degree. However, I was less prepared for the complexities and obstacles I would face during my program. I considered my commitment to each role and how I would seek balance throughout the program. The cohort model of my doctoral program allowed me to develop friendships grounded in this shared experience. It also allowed me to observe various examples of my peers navigating the program. Talking with other doctoral students in my program helped me see that my peers often shared my experiences. Many of us attempted to balance the coursework with our roles as professionals in higher education and mothering responsibilities. In our cohort, we spoke openly about the demands we faced at work and in classes. We discussed our academic concerns, dissertation research, promotions at work, supervisory roles, and our aim to be present parents and successful students. Our varied experiences affected us as individuals and related to our shared doctoral program.

I became intrigued by how we each navigated these roles in different ways. Some took promotions, others took demotions and some negotiated time to work on coursework in their professional roles. Some did homework all weekend, while others aimed to have homework-free weekends. I became curious about other women in doctoral programs throughout the first two years. How did they navigate the sometimes-conflicting demands of multiple responsibilities?

Ultimately what is the phenomenon of first-generation women doctoral students? My experience navigating this space led to these questions, which led to this project.

As an undergraduate, I studied Sociology, then in graduate school, I studied Mental Health Counseling, and as a doctoral student, I studied educational leadership in higher education. With the combination of these three areas of study, I understand people individually, as groups, and I also look at institutions as a whole (e.g., how people navigate the institution of higher education). With a background in counseling, I have academic training and professional experience with facilitating conversations with people I do not yet know. I have skills to build rapport quickly, keep the conversation dynamic and fruitful, gauge comfort levels, and listen. This experience is valuable as this study relies on semi-structured interviews for data collection. As I shared in this positionality statement, I meet the criteria to be a participant in this study. In this sense, I am an insider with my experience navigating a doctoral program as a first-generation woman. This experience provides me with insight, perspective, and the ability to understand the participants working towards their doctoral degrees. One limitation posed by my positionality is that I am still a student and have not yet completed my degree, so I can only speak to my experience in the program thus far. Throughout the study, I plan to disclose pieces of my own experiences; however, the findings of this study are based on the data analysis of the conversations I have with the women in this study.

Methodology

Phenomenological studies describe a common essence for several individuals experiencing the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). "Phenomenological research is the study of lived experience" (Van Manen, 2016, p. 9). It aims to understand the meaning of everyday experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Van Manen (2016) states that phenomenology is

the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning of lived experience" (p. 10). Feminist standpoint theory also guides my phenomenological approach. Hermeneutic phenomenologists attempt to understand the phenomenon through personal accounts described by individuals who experienced the phenomenon. At the same time, feminist standpoint theory centers the study on women to locate the knowledge in their experiences and voices. Integrating phenomenology and feminist standpoint theory positions me to center both participants lived experiences and my positionality as a feminist.

Ultimately, phenomenology aims to analyze semi-structured interview responses, find shared experiences, and report the shared experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Based on Creswell, the interviews consist of open-ended questions intended to "provide an understanding of the common experiences of the participants" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79). The semi-structured interviews allow the participant's response to guide the discussion, leading to a more natural conversation.

Critical Terminology

Defining key concepts is intended to offer a critical understanding of this study. The following is a list of definitions of the key terminology essential in this study. This section includes the terminology used throughout this project.

- **First-generation college students** – the students enrolled in postsecondary education "whose parents had not attended college" (Cataldi et al., 2018).
- **Parental educational attainment** – the highest level of education attained by either parent of guardian (NSF, 2021).
- **Phenomenological interview** – an interview that is conversational, semi-structured, and relies on open-ended questions. The first interview focuses on the participant's history,

the second is for the participant to reconstruct the experience, and the follow-up is for the participant to reflect on the meaning of their experience (Lauterbach, 2018).

- **Strong objectivity –** specifies strategies to detect social assumptions (Harding, 1992).
- **Feminist Standpoint Theory –** a research approach framed in oppressed voices, aiming to correct prior research by centering women's voices (Harding, 2004).

Outline of this Study

First-generation college students and women students–including first-generation women–face unique challenges in navigating higher education (Gardner & Mendoza, 2010). As both student populations gain momentum in their presence in doctoral programs, the relevance of understanding their experiences and beliefs is more apparent. Exploring their experiences may make it possible to understand how women persist in these programs and the potential challenges that may jeopardize their success. From there, university leadership can evaluate their program retention and use the findings of this study to support their first-generation women doctoral students better. The present study investigates the lived experiences of these students. This investigation includes experiences that are obstacles to their success and experiences that contribute to their success. I focus on the intersecting identities of doctoral students as women persist through various doctoral programs. Understanding their lived experience in doctoral programs is important because doctoral training prepares scholars to conduct research and create knowledge. Ensuring we support first-generation women doctoral students is ensuring that we support their scholarly contributions. In order to have comprehensive and inclusive voices in the literature, we must support marginalized students in doctoral training.

Next, I will review related literature on first-generation scholars, women students in higher education, and doctoral training in Chapter Two. I will then focus on first-generation

women in doctoral programs. In Chapter Three, I describe the methodology used in this study, the population, and the sample. In Chapter Four, I introduce the participants and themes that emerge. This chapter describes the essence of the phenomenon of first-generation women doctoral students. Finally, in Chapter Five, I summarize significant findings, discussions, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study focuses on gender and lived experiences within the context of doctoral programs. More specifically, this study examines how first-generation women conceptualize their experiences as doctoral students, experience significant events during the program, and experience growth and fulfillment from continuing their education. This chapter synthesizes literature, including the state of women's participation and first-generation students in doctoral programs. It then focuses on the state of first-generation women in doctoral programs using feminist standpoint theory to provide a framework for the present study.

In this chapter, I provide an in-depth look at the state of the literature on first-generation women doctoral students, including information on the broader contexts that guide this work. First, I provide a brief history of doctoral education. In the second and third sections, I look more closely at studies considering women and first-generation college students in doctoral programs separately. From there, I synthesize the existing research that specifically considers first-generation women students in doctoral programs. The final section of this chapter draws upon two guiding theories to provide a conceptual framing of the study.

Scholarly researchers have been interested in first-generation undergraduate students over the last two decades (e.g., Cataldi et al., 2018; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Le, 2021; Wildhagen, 2015). This research is often about college readiness, the transition to college, or undergraduate experiences (Cataldi et al., 2018; Ishitani, 2006; Terenzini et al., 2018), and in some cases the research explores first-generation students' intersecting identities (e.g., gender; Gardner & Holley, 2011). Across the country, universities have initiatives specifically to help their first-generation student populations persist through undergraduate programs (Lee & Harris, 2020). I also explored research about the first-generation experience in doctoral programs (e.g., Gardner,

2013; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Roksa et al., 2018). Separately, I found a growing body of research on women in doctoral programs (e.g., Sallee, 2011; Wofford & Blaney, 2021). Less often, researchers have considered experiences among first-generation women in doctoral programs (e.g., Taylor, 2021), which motivates this study. I explore these bodies of literature below.

Part 1: Relevant Background History

History of Doctoral Education

By design, doctoral education serves multiple purposes. One primary purpose is preparing faculty for institutions across the country and worldwide; doctoral students contribute to research across fields, and, in some cases, they teach undergraduate courses (Austin & Miller, 2020). While programs vary widely, most doctoral programs in the United States consist of coursework, a comprehensive exam, and a dissertation that requires original work by the candidate (Austin & Miller, 2020; Gardner, 2010). Throughout these stages of doctoral training, programs socialize[1] students into a scholarly profession (e.g., formal coursework, informal interactions, advising sessions; see Gardner, 2010; Weidman, 2010). Gardner (2010) sees this socialization take place in three ways "(a) knowledge acquisition, or the knowledge and skills needed for the profession; (b) investment, or a commitment of time, energy, or status to the profession; and (c) involvement, including interaction with more advanced professionals" (Gardner, 2010, p. 40). The institution and academic departments set norms and expectations for doctoral students, which vary by discipline (Weidman, 2010). Historically doctoral degrees prepare students for academic careers; however, doctoral graduates may choose to pursue careers in industry, government, and the social sector (Austin & Miller, 2020).

[1] Socialization processes vary for doctoral students. Practical strategies must recognize individual variables and experiences (Gardner & Mendoza, 2010). Processes of socialization can also be highly gendered (Sallee, 2011).

Although doctoral programs vary by institution and discipline, they share the value of graduate education today (Gardner & Mendoza, 2010). Doctoral programs help students develop professional skills and acquire knowledge (Velardo & Elliott, 2018). Furthermore, as a result, students often become scholars, leaders, and educators (Walker et al., 2008). Given the societal and global importance of doctoral programs from that perspective, scholars and institutions have begun to focus on attrition rates. As a result, the scholarship for doctoral students has grown over the past few decades (Gardner & Mendoza, 2010). We must retain doctoral students, especially those with marginalized identities, so they complete their terminal degrees and have the opportunity to become scholars and leaders in their fields. In the following section, I will explore two factors contributing to student doctoral student persistence: identity development and well-being.

Identity Development in Doctoral Programs

Completing a doctorate is complex and often not linear for many students. There are two themes around academic identity development in the literature. First is a theme of vulnerability as students work through the new course material and embark on conducting their research (Gardner et al., 2017; Rayner et al., 2015). A second theme is how these women carefully consider using their voices when communicating with external reviewers, campus colleagues, and tenure discussions (Gardner et al., 2017). The research clearly outlines how doctoral students navigate their doctoral programs as they aim to develop an academic identity and prioritize their well-being. As doctoral students develop their own academic identities, they are "balancing or integrating all of these selves [which] will require dexterity, alertness, and commitment" (Gardner et al., 2017, p. 106). The following section explores how students balance their well-being as they navigate a doctoral program while developing their academic identity.

Well-being in Doctoral Programs

Students in doctoral programs manage a high workload and are involved in current scholarship (Janta et al., 2012; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). This complex environment can challenge students to maintain a healthy work-life balance and emotional well-being. As a result of these stressors, across programs, students may experience uncertainty, anxiety, loneliness, and social isolation (Janta et al., 2012; Posselt, 2018). Posselt (2018) attributes some of these challenges to the complex levels of cognition doctoral students strive for while reducing their reliance on department faculty. Symptoms of anxiety and depression are common among doctoral students (Evans et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2019). Evans et al. (2018) reported that "graduate students are six times more likely to experience depression and anxiety than the general population. 41% of graduate students scored as having moderate to severe anxiety… as compared to 6% of the general population" (p. 282). Evans also found that most respondents reported not having a good work-life balance.

Researchers have increasingly considered student well-being within studies of doctoral student success (e.g., Beasy et al., 2020; Jackman et al., 2021; Velardo & Elliott, 2018), a historically relevant topic under-researched for these students (Jackman et al., 2021). Doctoral student well-being is especially important in this study, as their emotions and ability to manage them impact their doctoral work and degree progress (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). To ensure that doctoral students develop professional and academic skills in their program, Velardo and Elliott (2018) proposed that a series of workshops could complement the degree program. These workshops could provide insight into working with vulnerable populations, regulating their emotions during qualitative work, and navigating the blurred lines between ethical responsibility and mandated reporting.

Feminist Scholarship in the United States

Beyond the history of doctoral education, this study focuses specifically on gender and women's experiences. I must include a brief overview of relevant feminist ideologies in the United States and related research. Feminist theory is a perspective that centers on the social construction of gender and the needs of women in research (Creswell & Poth, 2018) because feminists view gender as central to the distribution of power and privilege in institutions, including higher education (Lather, 1988). The ideological goal of feminist research is to make the female experience visible and end unequal social positions based on gender (Lather, 1988). Research using feminist theory is critical, intending to create change and give women an opportunity to voice their experiences. Feminist theory intends to describe the experiences of women and use this research to make positive changes for women; it is transformative. For example, by examining women's experiences in doctoral programs, I hope to recommend supportive procedures to encourage their persistence toward graduation. In this study, I will use feminist standpoint theory, a specific lens of feminist theory that is useful for exploring women's experiences. I will detail feminist standpoint theory in a later section within this chapter.

Intersectionality

For decades, Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1999; Crenshaw, 2015; Crenshaw & Peller, 1992) has shown a light on racial and gender oppression through her work on intersectionality, which provides an important lens for this study. According to Crenshaw (2015), the importance of intersectionality goes beyond an individual's identity. It is about the ways institutions use these identities to privilege some and exclude others, pointing to the importance of considering the intersection of power, privilege, and oppression for historically minoritized groups. Multiple authors referenced the definitions of intersectionality (e.g., May, Collins, Lorde) (Collins, 2015;

Duran & Jones, 2019). This project draws on Crenshaw's definition because she originally put a name to the concept and reminds us to consider multiple aspects of identity when considering society's social construction. Crenshaw also uses intersectionality to think about visible and invisible identities and how they relate to power and oppression. Therefore, in this study, I aim to acknowledge individuals' "multidimensional matrix" and how their identities relate to power in the institution of higher education.

Recent scholarship builds on Crenshaw's work to similarly emphasize the intersecting identities within studies of first-generation college students. For example, Whitley et al. (2018) notes the importance of considering 'first-gen plus' (e.g., first-gen plus minority; first-gen plus LGBTQIA, first-gen plus immigrant; first-gen plus low-income). This perspective highlights the fact that many students hold multiple identities. "Intersectional identity can increase campus-wide engagement; it can also unintentionally lead to misconceptions and gaps in services" (Whitley et al., 2018, p. 7). While first-generation college students may be low-income, housing first-generation support initiatives within a financial aid office may reinforce the belief that first-generation status equals low-income (Whitley et al., 2018).

Intersectionality also refers to women doctoral students in terms of their socialization in the program (Sallee, 2011; Wofford & Blaney, 2021). While doctoral programs vary by field, two recent studies looked at the role of gender in the doctoral socialization process. These studies explore the ways gender disparities are prevalent for women doctoral students in science-based programs. There may be disparities in how women students experience their programs and pieces of training. For example, Wofford and Blaney (2021) noted how women chose training labs based on management styles and lab climate rather than prestige. Similarly, Sallee's (2011) findings suggest that doctoral programs may privilege masculine values such as competition and

hierarchy. In this study, I will use Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality to better understand the multifaceted experiences of the research participants.

Part 2: Women in Doctoral Programs

More women are participating in higher education than ever (NSF, 2021). In 2020, women received 46% of all doctorates awarded (NSF, 2021). Given this shift in higher education nationwide, researchers can increase feminist scholarship written for women in higher education (Hart, 2006). Guided by intersectionality and using feminist standpoint theory as a lens (discussed further in the final section of this chapter), I am most interested in how a woman's identities play a role in her doctoral experience (e.g., being a woman and a first-generation college student). While women's representation has increased, men's experiences still shape the academy (Hart, 2006), and gender disparities persist in science, technology, engineering, and math (Wofford & Blaney, 2021). While this study does not focus on science, technology, engineering, or math fields, looking at the existing research on women in doctoral programs is essential to understanding the treatment of women in this aspect of the academy. I wonder about women's experiences in fields that are predominately women, such as psychology and education. The remainder of this section will 1) broadly explore the literature on women in academia, 2) present literature that more specifically considers women in doctoral programs, and 3) review studies that explore the lived experiences of subgroups of women in doctoral programs.

Gender Norms in Academia

Critical scholarship has explored women's experiences in academia, including studies of graduate student and faculty interactions. A body of research focuses on women faculty in academia (e.g., Sallee et al., 2016; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006). For example, Rosser (2018) found that faculty responded more positively to mentor requests

from men students, gendered differences in lab roles, and gendered differences when estimating their peer's knowledge. This is just one example that a gender disparity still exists in higher education. A couple of recent dissertations look at motherhood in doctoral programs and the experiences of Black women in doctoral programs (e.g., Cohen Miller, 2014; Taylor, 2021). Researchers have also considered outcomes related to wellness (Beasy et al., 2020; Jackman et al., 2021; Le, 2021) and identity (González, 2006; Rayner et al., 2015). These findings show that the research on well-being and identity may not be generalizable because every individual responds to the challenges of a doctoral program in their way, leading to the non-linear path of an individual's identity development (Rayner et al., 2015).

By investigating scholarly research around women and feminism, I look at how higher education has responded to the increase of women participants. It is important to note that researchers may look at women as the focus of their study; however, if the article did not refer to women, feminism, or another gendered code in the title, it was likely not captured in my review of the literature. Sallee (2011) looked at a predominately male-dominated engineering program where faculty suggested that the program was gender-neutral. However, the program socialized doctoral students by reinforcing explicit and implicit gender norms by privileging masculine values (e.g., competition, hierarchy, and individualization). Overall, this work highlights the need to consider how gender shapes doctoral training in often implicit ways.

While women and men experience gendered norms around work, family, and academic pursuits, there is a disparity in how this plays out in higher education. Working men most often indicated a sense of pride, while working women indicated a sense of guilt regarding their ability to balance academic pursuits and responsibilities at home (Sallee, 2011; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). For women who are mothering, this balance of working and mothering can lead to guilt

among women when they need to prioritize their children and feel the need to overcompensate at work to ensure that those around them see that they take their academic careers seriously (Sallee et al., 2016; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). Institutional accommodations likely affect women's productivity, satisfaction, and retention (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). The following section will focus specifically on women in doctoral programs.

Women in Doctoral Programs

Women doctoral students in the United States have been an interest of higher education researchers since the 1960s (Astin, 1969). Back in the 1960's women doctoral students tended to come from upper-middle-class families and had highly educated parents (Astin, 1969). While that research was decades ago, Astin highlighted themes that continue to emerge in more contemporary research that looks at the same student population. One theme that continues to emerge among research looking at women doctoral students is the imposter phenomenon. The imposter phenomenon is an inability to internalize success (Clance & Imes, 1978). Research shows this phenomenon is more common among women than men (Acker & Armenti, 2004). Acker and Armenti (2004) found that "people who have been achievers all their lives, who are already highly committed to excellence and productivity, [are] risking their health and happiness to arrive at ever higher and ever more mystified performance standards" (p. 20). When these performance standards become unattainable, the imposter phenomenon can lead to self-doubt.

While students may experience self-doubt on an individual level, these feelings of self-doubt are likely a result of more significant messages in academia, where there are trends toward competition and individual success (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Clance & Imes, 1978; Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010). Historically, higher education discourse included a gendered norm where "boys would enter higher education, and girls would become teachers, nurses, wives, and

mothers. Parallel to this concept is the patriarchal notion that women stayed home as primary caretakers of the family and the children" (Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010, p. 3). Acker and Armenti (2004) refer to these as 'the old norms,' which still support academic discourse and covertly lead to women experiencing the imposter phenomenon. While these gendered norms are socially produced and relevant in various contexts, Feldon et al. (2017) found that men spent less time in supervised research and published at a higher rate in doctoral programs. For these reasons, I see it important to center gender in my present study. While this section looked at the research on women in doctoral programs, the following section details first-generation college students in doctoral programs.

Part 3: First-Generation Students in Doctoral Programs

First-Generation Students

In the research on first-generation college students, the definitions of the term vary across studies (Ishitani, 2006; Jehangir, 2010). The most shared definition of a first-generation college student is that they are from a family where no parent or guardian has earned a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Jehangir, 2010). While the number varies across universities and colleges, using this definition, approximately 56% of undergraduates are first-generation college students (RTI International, 2019), and approximately 29% of doctoral students are first-generation college students (NSF, 2021). Despite being the majority of undergraduate college students, inequities persist, such that first-generation students may be less likely to be retained and eventually graduate. For example, Cataldi et al. (2018) reported that among students who graduated from high school in 2002, 72% of first-generation students had pursued a bachelor's degree by 2012, compared to 93% of continuing-generation students. Some evidence suggests that just 21% of first-generation students from low-income backgrounds graduate in six years

with a bachelor's degree (The Pell Institute, 2020), relative to 66% of continuing-generation students who did not have financial need (The Pell Institute, 2020). This statistic is relevant because first-generation students are likelier to be low-income (Choy, 2001). While being first-generation and possibly also low-income comes with challenges, there are also several strengths that this student population brings to their experience in higher education.

Whitley et al. (2018) calls for higher education institutions to shift from a negative narrative to one that celebrates the strengths of first-generation college students (e.g., ambition and feeling empowered to ask for help). Somers et al. (2004) and Ishitani (2006) studied the persistence of first-generation students. Somers et al. studied the impact of achievement, aspiration, and background on the persistence of first-generation students at 4-year universities (2004). Ishitani focused on first-generation students who often did not complete their degrees (2006). Both studies reported similar findings. Somers et al. found that when first-generation students had a low GPA, they were more likely to be discouraged by the low GPA and more likely to drop out (2004). Another finding of his research was that first-generation students tended to be debt-averse due to limited information about student loans (Ishitani, 2006). These first-generation students would not continue their education when they saw debt accumulating. Ishitani shared that universities often focused on first-year retention and supporting students, so they returned for the sophomore year (2006). When looking specifically at the first-generation population, Ishitani found, "compared to students whose parents graduated from college, [first-generation students] were 8.5 times more likely to drop out" (2006, p. 873). First-generation students faced the "highest risk period of departure during the second year of college" (Ishitani, 2006, p. 873). These three findings are relevant to understanding persistence toward degrees and the opportunity to continue their degree at the graduate and doctoral levels.

First-Generation Students in Doctoral Programs

More relevant to this study, some research has considered first-generation college student experiences as they matriculate into doctoral programs. Across studies on this topic, scholars highlight the importance of a sense of belonging, documenting how learning environments often fail to foster belonging among first-generation doctoral students (Gardner, 2013; Gardner & Holley, 2011). One notable difference between first-generation doctoral students and their peers is that they may be less likely to publish within the first two years of their doctoral program (Roksa et al., 2018). In some cases, their perceived lack of belonging may reflect this discrepancy in publishing or financial concerns about pursuing this degree; however, most attributed their feelings of not belonging to their invisible identity of being a first-generation college student. These findings are similar across studies. Gardner offered strategies to support current first-generation students trying to find their place in doctoral programs. Some of Gardner's strategies include peer mentoring programs, encouraging faculty who are first-generation college graduates to self-disclose their experience with students, and ensuring that all students have access to the same information. These initiatives would help eliminate the sense of some students having access to more information than others (Gardner, 2013).

In addition to the students' sense of belonging, and necessary skill development, researchers have looked at the hidden curriculum of doctoral programs as an additional hurdle that first-generation college students may face. Roksa et al. (2018) examined skill development during doctoral programs among first-generation students finding that as "students progress through the educational system, the association between parental education and student outcomes becomes weaker" (Roksa et al., 2018, p. 744). The only notable difference was that "first-generation students were much less likely to have a scholarly publication during their second

year" than continuing-generation peers (p. 744). Feldon et al. (2019) looked at Ph.D. students involved in laboratories or research groups. They use the "cascading mentorship" model to describe their finding that the engagement of postdoc and other senior students significantly predicts the skill development of younger doctoral students (Feldon et al., 2019).

The Hidden Curriculum

While doctoral courses can feel like an extension of ungraduated courses, the additional self-directed expectations in doctoral programs are part of a "hidden curriculum" (Calarco, 2020). Many first-generation doctoral students feel that "the pathway to a doctoral degree was initially elusive" (Gardner & Holley, 2011, p. 87). Many students credited a connection with someone on campus for their interest in a graduate degree and their comfort in pursuing it. However, these connections were neither formal nor deliberate strategies to help these students. Calarco (2020) created a field guide to uncover the hidden curriculum for graduate students. In this guide, she shared that navigating the hidden curriculum can

> feel as though everyone else solved the puzzle while you're still finding the pieces. Essentially, the hidden curriculum contributes to "imposter syndrome" –that feeling that you're not good enough or smart enough to be in your program, that maybe you got into grad school by mistake (p. 16).

This hidden curriculum is amplified later in the doctoral program. After coursework, many programs require comprehensive exams, and completing a dissertation process is significantly more complex than earlier coursework (Jackman et al., 2021; Sverdlik & Hall, 2020). Beyond the adjustment to doctoral coursework, "another expectation of doctoral education is that student scholarship will push the frontiers of disciplinary knowledge" (Posselt, 2018, p. 3). The coursework, comprehensive exams, and dissertation processes are all opportunities for increased

imposter risk appears higher among first-generation women and underrepresented-minority doctoral students (Holley & Gardner, 2012; Posselt, 2018). This finding is relevant to this research as it focuses on first-generation women students.

Part 4: Synthesis of Women First-Generation Students

First-Generation Women in College and Doctoral Programs

While the previous two sections presented an overview of women in higher education and first-generation college students in particular, this section will continue to narrow in scope and explore the experiences of first-generation women to identify the challenges and experiences unique to this group. When research only focuses on first-generation status, the researchers potentially overlook other aspects of their identity (Armstrong, 2021; Pascarella et al., 2004). Women are more likely to be first-generation than not (Kim et al., 2021), and those women first-generation college students are more likely to drop out of college than their first-generation male peers (Ishitani, 2006; Kim et al., 2021). When the intersection of first-generation status and gender is acknowledged, researchers have found that first-generation women students face challenges navigating role expectations and accessing support systems (Armstrong, 2021; Kim et al., 2021).

While these women pursue higher education to improve options for their future, it can be challenging for them to commit time to their continued education when they are also a mother or a caretaker at home (Kim et al., 2021; Leyva, 2011). Scholars looking at this student population also continuously referenced the importance of these women surrounding themselves with supportive faculty and college peers (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Kim et al., 2021). These relationships motivate women to persist. In addition to informal support systems, several studies found that having a mentor was a key to the student's success (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014;

Green, 2015; Kim et al., 2021). Perhaps it is the example the students see in their mentors, but more likely, it is the encouragement and continuous emotional support the women find most helpful.

In findings across research, students reported a weak sense of belonging in their doctoral programs (Gardner, 2013; Gardner & Holley, 2011) due to being first-generation college students. While institutions of higher education should not assume that students at the graduate level have figured out how to best navigate the institution, as individuals, these students demonstrate individual direction and motivation that supports academic success (Holley & Gardner, 2012).

Women Doctoral Students and Their Intersecting Identities

Research on first-generation doctoral women shows the complexity of individual characteristics within a larger social context. Women across races and SES reported feeling unworthy and inferior to their classmates (Frantellizzi, 2021; Taylor, 2021; Underwood, 2020). While these negative feelings are documented across studies, some women mentioned self-efficacy as a way they stay motivated to continue their doctoral journeys (Taylor, 2021; Underwood, 2020). Across studies, women expressed varying levels of support when their families were reluctant to support their educational endeavors (Holley & Gardner, 2012; Underwood, 2020).

Because I use an intersectional framing, I am also guided by prior studies that consider the intersection of gender, race, first-generation status, and other identities within the context of women's doctoral training experiences. Particularly relevant to this study, the literature specifically considers first-generation Latina and Black women in doctoral programs. This body of literature primarily focuses on their academic voice development, supportive mentors' role,

and their drive to persist through graduation. When I looked at literature that accounted for race, their cultural norms informed how they navigated through the doctoral program (e.g., Huber, 2010; Sánchez-Connally, 2018; Taylor, 2021; Underwood, 2020). I organized this into three sections, the first-generation doctoral experience for Latina women, then for Black women, and then for women who are mothering. I will not select participants from one race or ethnicity in this study. However, I will aim to be as inclusive of multiple races and ethnicities as the sample allows. I plan to maximize diversity during the recruitment phase by asking prospective participants about race and ethnicity on the demographic survey. I anticipate recruiting Latina women, Black women, and mothers for this study and have added the following sections to provide context to their experience. While this is not an exhaustive list of intersecting identities, these three sections capture the participants' experiences within the scope of this study.

First-Generation Doctoral Experience for Latina Women

First, Holley and Gardner saw the intersection of race, socioeconomic status, and gender when "several women in the study describe how their [low-income, Latino] fathers resisted the idea of daughters pursuing higher education" (2012, p. 117). The first-generation doctoral students spoke of their families' expectations based on gender norms. Being of lower SES, many did not come from communities where doctoral degree holders were prevalent or part of their circle (González, 2006; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Sánchez-Connally, 2018). These participants also spoke of the dichotomy of their life at home compared to their academic life, and they recalled feeling "indebted to their significant others" (González, 2006; Holley & Gardner, 2012, p. 119). While it was helpful for them to have supportive significant others, Latina doctoral students reported family members who were resistant to the various ideas of higher education and graduate programs.

Latinx Critical Race Theory looks more closely at intersectionality in higher education among low-income, Latinx, first-generation college students (Huber, 2010; Sánchez-Connally, 2018). Across authors, there were references to the multidimensionality of Latina consciousness, allowing many of these women to analyze the world from multiple perspectives (González, 2006; Huber, 2010; Sánchez-Connally, 2018). Latina culture has space between the inner and outer worlds due to its history as a non-dominant culture (Anzaldúa, 1987). This is reminiscent of Anzaldúa's (1987) borderland metaphor.

Across research studies, authors explored the challenges and strengths of first-generation Latina women as they experienced institutionally embedded racism. The challenges the authors found were the participants' lack of openness to academic socialization, the need to develop an academic voice, and their lack of a sense of belonging on campus (González, 2006; Sánchez-Connally, 2018). I also found a few strengths that the authors included in their articles. The strengths that first-generation Latina women bring to their studies are the ability to develop as scholars, a vision for improving their community, and an ability to form connections on campus to network, build community, and support one another (González, 2006; Huber, 2010; Sánchez-Connally, 2018). Women who overcame these challenges gained intellectual and social confidence (González, 2006; Sánchez-Connally, 2018).

First-Generation Doctoral Experience for Black Women

In recent years two dissertations looked at the motivations and experiences of Black women who are first-generation students in doctoral programs (e.g., Taylor, 2021; Underwood, 2020). These dissertations are relevant to show the recent interest in this topic and include the voices of another marginalized group of women in doctoral programs in the United States. Like my current study, Taylor and Underwood both used phenomenological methods paired with a

feminist lens to center their voices as authors and their women participants' voices. While the authors had varied research questions and participant pools, their findings were consistent. Taylor (2021) found (i) a lack of confidence among her participants that caused them to delay applying and beginning their doctoral journey and (ii) a determination and ability to persist even when they wanted to quit. Underwood (2020) found that most participants had positive experiences in their doctoral program, which they attributed to their ability to deal with discrimination, strong cultural connections, and intrinsic motivation. Lastly, they found that participants persisted in their doctoral programs, were happy to discuss their journey as Black women in doctoral programs, and sought opportunities to empower those in their community (Taylor, 2021; Underwood, 2020).

First-Generation Doctoral Experience for Women who are Mothering

Another theme in this body of research is the shared experience of holding invisible identities, one of those identities being a first-generation college student and another being a parent. This invisibility is often present for first-generation women of color doctoral students until they connect with a supportive faculty mentor. This invisibility of parenting can lead to isolation and loneliness (Phu, 2020; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). Concerning mothering doctoral students, themes across research mention the women managing conflicting roles and time commitments, the importance of family stability, and the importance of peer support (Giles, 1983; Phu, 2020). For those women who give birth during their doctoral work, they have experienced an unspoken pressure to demonstrate their commitment to work (or their program) by returning as quickly as possible after giving birth (Phu, 2020; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). While some universities have accommodations for parents, the accommodations are only accessible if the student is open about being a parent and asks for help. While being a mother is

not an eligibility criterion for this research study, if the sample allows I hope to investigate the experiences of women who are mothering because it will provide an additional layer of context for the realities for a subset of women doctoral students. This background knowledge of prior research looking at mothering doctoral students will provide me with informed insight into some previously documented experiences if this comes up in the current research study.

Part 5: Guiding Theories

The conceptual framework of this study uses two perspectives about gender and professional commitments, pulled from sociological and feminist theories: feminist standpoint theory and role conflict theory. Given the population of this study, it was important to me to select a guiding theory that accounts for the social construction of experiences. In contrast to prior research on women in higher education with various frameworks, this study leans on feminist standpoint theory to situate my understanding. At the same time, role conflict theory explores the doctoral student experience. Given that this study includes participants who self-identify as women students, with priority not focused on one aspect of their identity over another, it was necessary to pull from both theories to guide this study. The following section explores feminist standpoint theory and role conflict theory as possible ways doctoral students persist as they pursue doctoral degrees.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2009) is fundamental to understanding feminist inquiry and women's experiences (Gurung, 2020). In thirty years of existence, a common component of this theory is that people on the margins of culture bring unique perspectives about their experience and that of the dominant culture. In this research, I seek out these unique perspectives of eligible participants to produce insight into their unique experiences. Feminist

researchers have documented that, historically, the perspective of men guides discourse in the social sciences, which inherently minimizes those who were omitted (Gurung, 2020). Harding found that research disciplines needed a framework to look at women as "groups located in a different class, racial, ethnic, and sexual locations in local, national, and global social relations – became the subjects – the authors – of knowledge" (Harding, 2009, p. 4). The distinctive insights that Harding seeks using feminist standpoint theory provide a more comprehensive interpretation of their reality than basing knowledge on men's experiences in dominant positions.

Feminist standpoint theory "highlights the importance of power relationships in the process of knowledge production that aims at liberating women virtually from all forms of discrimination" (Gurung, 2020, p. 113). Harding (2004) explains that knowledge is socially situated. By using strong objectivity to understand the experiences of oppressed groups, research can help overturn the knowledge previously rooted in men's experiences. Through these unique and valued experiences, I seek to respectfully listen to the women I interview and have a dialogue as I make meaning of these conversations. Asking women who experience doctoral programs to describe their experiences will lead to more effective change than if administrators assume they know the intricacies of these experiences. I will do this by using feminist standpoint theory as a feminist methodology.

Wylie (2004) defines this methodology as a way to "approach inquiry from the perspective of insiders rather than impose on them the external categories of professional social science" (p. 340). As a higher education professional, I am interested in the policies and practices promoting student success. As a feminist researcher, I ask the participants questions rather than assuming I know their policies or how they may define their success in their doctoral experience. A feminist standpoint allows me to do this research by valuing the individual experiences of

first-generation women as they experience the phenomena of persisting through doctoral programs.

Role Conflict Theory

Role conflict theory (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004) assumes a gender-based stereotypical idea of how men and women should act within their family and workplace systems. This is relevant to doctoral programs because most doctoral students hold concurrent personal and professional roles. They may be a mother and likely have a professional role and an additional role as a student. Often these women experience an expectation that they are students with the same amount of time and energy, including a commitment to coursework, degree progression, classes, and research. Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2004) explained that role conflict theory suggests that individuals have limited time and energy, so the "commitment to multiple roles can lead to incompatible and/or excessive role expectations," which may lead to imbalance (p. 237). This role imbalance can translate into the construction of ideal worker norms when looking at doctoral students. Acker (1990) suggests that the ideal worker theory is prevalent in individuals who adopt gendered norms. For example, they may commit all their time to work, not leaving time for outside obligations such as family obligations. In academic programs, this can mean contributing time to academic pursuits and needing to work constantly while minimizing family obligations (Sallee et al., 2016).

While role conflict theory focuses on the challenges facing socially constructed gender roles regarding work and family, Barnett and Hyde (2001) have found that "multiple roles are, in general, beneficial for both women and men, as reflected in mental health, physical health, and relationship health" (p. 784). They have found that adding a new role does not necessarily lessen one's commitment to another role. However, multiple roles can contribute to added: "social

support, opportunities to experience success, expanded frame of reference, increased self-complexity…" (Barnett & Hyde, 2001, p. 784).

Conclusion

This review of the literature frames this phenomenological study on the lived experiences of women in doctoral programs who are first-generation students. Specifically, this chapter traced the history of doctoral education, feminist scholarship, women in doctoral programs, and first-generation students in doctoral programs. The existing literature in this chapter led to the research questions that guided the current study. While the studies in this literature review include research on first-generation women doctoral students, this project contributes to that literature by focusing on the lived experiences of first-generation women enrolled in doctoral programs. In addition, this study provides multiple perspectives using a conceptual framework that aims to understand their experiences, ideas, and beliefs and the various ways these students persist in their programs.

I recognize the importance of locating knowledge and scholarly research within the lived experience of women. In this chapter, I explored scholarly research examining how women may experience their doctoral journey by exploring women in academia. The body of research references those that center on women in higher education; however, there is a need for continued research that further explores the experiences of these women as it relates to all the other identities with which they may identify (Hart, 2006). As women continue pursuing doctoral degrees, I appreciate the research that centers on women's lived experiences. This scholarship serves other women pursuing doctoral degrees and graduate programs as they aim to recruit and retain women in doctoral programs across the university and the country.

This chapter demonstrates that researchers have built a body of literature examining women and first-generation students in academia. However, there is limited empirical evidence exploring their lived experience and identity development during their doctoral work. This study aims to contribute to the study of higher education by ensuring that I center women's voices as they persist toward their doctoral degrees. In Chapter Three, I discuss the methodology I use in this study, including a discussion and rationale for using a phenomenological approach for examining this topic, the research design, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction and Research Question

In this study, I aim to identify factors influencing first-generation college students' persistence toward a doctoral degree. Specifically, I explore first-generation women's lived experience of balancing multiple roles in this study. I seek to explore the experience of pursuing a doctoral degree for these students. A phenomenological approach allows me to address the depth of individual experiences while providing the perspective of a collective experience (Moustakas, 1994).

My methodological approach aligns with my research question. A research question regarding a phenomenon's lived experience lends itself to hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry (Moustakas, 1994). Building on the conceptual framework described in Chapter Two, in Chapter Three, I discuss the selection of participants and instrumentation along with the research procedure. I organized this chapter into three sections. In part 1, I describe the overarching research design. In part 2, I discuss the data collection procedures. In part 3, I explore the data analysis and steps I take to ensure trustworthiness in the interpretation process. I conclude the chapter with an introduction to Chapter Four.

Part 1: Research Design

Phenomenological investigations typically use in-depth, semi-structured interviews to collect data on the phenomenon of focus (Moustakas, 1994). These studies describe the shared experiences as these individuals experience this phenomenon. This design aims to capture the essence of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological methodology allows me to gain a rich understanding of personal experience to identify themes across participants to understand how they make meaning of the phenomenon. There are multiple

reasons for using a phenomenological approach. I explain the rationale for using this approach in the following section.

Rationale for Phenomenology

My phenomenological research design allows me to understand how these women make meaning of their experiences in doctoral programs. "Being in this world" is a phenomenological phrase acknowledging that people live in their worlds as they are, with the things, people, and situations around them (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, while many people may experience the same phenomenon, their experiences are individual but likely more generalizable. As a researcher, I hope to analyze multiple experiences and generalize shared experiences within this phenomenon.

One of the challenges of phenomenology is that the researcher relies on each participant to recall and share their experience accurately (Husserl, 1931). The researcher must recognize how perceptions and emotions affect a person's response. A participant may want to be perceived in a particular way or alter their response to appeal to me as a feminist researcher who is also a doctoral student. To ensure accuracy, I will ask follow-up questions that place those perceptions and feelings within an experience (Peoples, 2021). This is a challenge that I anticipate in phenomenological research. Having this insight prior to the start of the study allows me to anticipate potential responses, knowing that I may need to redirect or focus on some conversations to collect the data of interest better.

There are multiple types of phenomenology, including transcendental phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology. In transcendental phenomenology, researchers are asked to bracket their assumptions and preconceived ideas (Husserl, 1931); however, "in hermeneutic phenomenology, the understanding is that biases cannot be set aside or bracketed, and therefore, they need to be recognized and later revised as new information is discovered" (Peoples, 2021, p.

35). This lack of bracketing aligns with the conceptual framework, notably the feminist standpoint theory. This is also the best approach, given that I am a first-generation female doctoral student. I bring my experience to this research, and with the help of the participants, I continue to adjust my understanding through the data analysis process. Researchers bring their own experience to their work, which leads to their current understanding of the phenomenon (Peoples, 2021). Through this data collection and study, my understanding would continue to shift.

Researcher Role

Heidegger et al. (1962) views understanding as one of constant revision. When analyzing data, Heidegger et al. suggests that "understanding increases by moving from the understanding of parts to the whole and back again to parts, continually changing as new data are introduced" (Peoples, 2021, p. 33). Hermeneutic phenomenology does not involve bracketing because the researcher analyzing the data brings their preconceived notions of the phenomenon to the process. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher and participants bring their assumptions and experience with the phenomenon to the study. Those assumptions are understood and embraced through this method and the implementation of the hermeneutic circle. The process continuously moves from the data to the researcher's comprehension, back to the data, and so on.

In addition to phenomenology as a methodology, this study employs the methods outlined by feminist standpoint theory. It is important to note that my application of phenomenology is very much in line with standpoint theory. Standpoint theory asserts that we should begin inquiry from the participants' perspective. Central to standpoint theory are the tenets of strong objectivity and knowledge situated in the participants' voices, using their voices as much as possible (Gurung, 2020; Harding, 2004). This theory guides my phenomenological

approach, allowing participants to have their truths as women who experienced the phenomenon of being doctoral students. I then analyze the data retrieved during the interviews so that the women's voices frame my interpretation of the data. A second way that hermeneutic phenomenology and standpoint theory align is in the role of the researcher; both emphasize the importance of including the researcher in the analysis. I center women's voices in this study while making my positionality known.

Part 2: Procedure

Criterion

Participants are selected based on the phenomenological approach of criterion sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary criterion for selecting participants in phenomenological research is that they experienced the phenomena. Participants for this study must meet the overarching criteria of experiencing the phenomenon, articulate their experiences, and be willing to participate. For this study, the shared phenomenon is that every participant will self-identify as a first-generation college student, self-identify as a woman, and be enrolled in a doctoral program at the time of this study. Participants are women, are currently enrolled in a doctoral program, and have completed at least two terms of doctoral coursework. To align with ethical principles surrounding research involving human subjects, I discuss agreements with each participant to ensure informed consent.

Sample Size

Phenomenological research aims to provide rich data to address the research question and "uncover the necessary structural invariants of an experience" (Dukes, 1984, p. 200). Phenomenological research has the potential to produce a large volume of data surrounding the research question, so only a small number of participants are necessary (Peoples, 2021). Across

researchers, the number of participants necessary for phenomenological studies has varied. For example, some phenomenological studies utilize samples of one (e.g., Padilla, 2003). However, recommended sample sizes often range from three to fifteen (Dukes, 1984; Englander, 2012). The aim in determining size is to sample until reaching saturation (Check & Schutt, 2012; Dukes, 1984; Englander, 2012). In preparing for this study, I reviewed recent dissertations that used phenomenology to explore the numbers of participants they selected (e.g., Baker, 2020 – 17; Cohen Miller, 2014 – 4; Maniss, 1997 – 7; McDonald, 2016 – 7; McVanner, 2021 – 8; Taylor, 2021 – 10; Underwood, 2020 – 12). Some of these studies aimed for more participants or began their studies with more participants. However, this was the final number of participants in each study where each author found saturation. As demonstrated, there is a debate about the number of participants in phenomenology. Using Dukes (1984), Englander (2012), Creswell and Poth (2018), and similar dissertations as a guide, I aim to have ten participants. However, due to attrition throughout the study, I expect seven to ten women to complete all components of this study. By selecting participants from various disciplines, I aim to understand better what it means to be a woman and a first-generation doctoral student. I included my specific recruitment materials in the appendices. Specifically, the recruitment flyer is Appendix A. The participants' screening criteria is Appendix B. Participation in this study is voluntary. Interview transcripts and research results are available to participants upon request.

Recruitment

In an attempt to recruit mothers who meet the criteria of the phenomenon for this study, I will use groups that support women who are doctoral students and mothers. Using the recruitment flyer shown in Appendix A, I recruit participants from online forums where doctoral students actively support each other on the doctoral journey and frequently post recruitment

flyers to spread the word about recruiting participants for research studies. I am a member of five active social media groups with members who will likely meet the criteria to participate in this research. The groups and the size of each group are specified: Doctoral Mom Life (7.4k members); Doctoral Mom Group (9.2k members); Working Folks Guide to a Ph.D./Ed.D. (7.5k members); Chicanx/Latinx Ph.D. & Ed.D. Scholars of Education (2.6k members); Latinas Completing Doctoral Degrees (8.9k members). Some of these groups include men, members completing degrees at institutions outside the United States, and many members who have already conferred degrees. However, with the size and engagement across groups, this is a way to locate potential participants who meet the criteria specified earlier in this section.

The recruitment flyer includes a link so that, with one click, potential participants can complete an eligibility screening survey (Appendix C) or contact me directly with questions about the study. When I review the survey responses, I review responses to maximize participant diversity. I reach out to each participant individually to explain the project with an invitation to participate. I also send each participant a confirmation letter reiterating the purpose of the study, their role as a participant, confirmation of the appointment, and gratitude for their willingness to participate. Attached to the confirmation email, I send each participant a research information sheet (Appendix D). The information sheet details the research study process and any foreseeable risks. It also includes a description of how I ensure confidentiality. Once confirmed, I schedule interviews at a mutually agreed-upon time for the individuals who respond to the email invitation and agree to participate. All interviews are facilitated over Zoom to maximize participation regardless of geographical location, ensure confidentiality and aid in the recording and transcription. I will invite eligible participants to a Zoom interview using the instrumentation detailed in the following section.

Data Collection

Collecting information in a phenomenological study primarily relies on in-depth interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). I will provide each qualifying participant with a $25 gift card for each interview. At the start of the first interview with each participant, I ask them for consent to participate in the study, to record their interview, and to provide a pseudonym that I can use throughout the interviews to maintain their confidentiality. All interviews are transcribed verbatim.

In preparation for each interview, I have prewritten questions that aim to comprehensively retell the participant's experience (Moustakas, 1994). These questions, however, may be altered, adjusted, or not used as determined by the conversation in the moment. The sequence of questions and the questions I ask may change from one interview to another. The responses guide the conversation, and the unstructured format allows for flexibility in the conversation. While conversations vary, thoroughness is consistent (Check & Schutt, 2012). I will listen to the responses and asks follow-up questions based on the responses. These conversations allow me to ask about the meaning behind responses. The shared context, in addition to the responses, provides insight and depth.

The interviews begin with explaining what the participant can expect during the interview. I then begin with a social conversation to build a relaxed atmosphere and begin the conversation in a trusting place (Moustakas, 1994). At that point, I prompt the participant to take a moment to focus on their experience as doctoral students and then describe their experience fully (Moustakas, 1994). Next, grand tour questions prompt a lengthier response about their experience with the phenomenon (Check & Schutt, 2012). I have additional open-ended questions in case they are necessary to continue the conversation; however, I aim to follow the

lead of the interviewee's responses to create the most authentic interview experience. The interviewee's responses and experiences guide the remainder of the conversation. The interview protocol can be referenced in Appendix E. Here are some prompts to encourage participants to re-engage with the phenomenon.

1. Tell me about deciding to enroll in a doctoral program.
    a. What were you experiencing the moment you decided to apply? At the moment you were accepted? What did that look like? With whom did you consult?
2. What significant moments stand out for you? (program orientation, meeting classmates, selecting a chair, independent research). Can you tell me more about this?
3. If you took a leave of absence (or considered one), can you share more about your experience?
    a. Can you tell me about those conversations?
    b. What were the motivating factors for you to continue in the program?
4. Can you share a moment when the doctoral-level work was especially challenging?
5. Is there an example of when being a first-generation student was most salient for you? Can you tell me about that?
6. Is there an example of a time when being a woman was most salient for you? Can you tell me what that was like for you?
7. Tell me about the first time you felt you belonged in the program.

I interview every participant two times. I build in time for transcription and analysis before scheduling the second interview. While this time is important for me to process and understand the information, I also need to schedule second interviews to ensure the participants

are still engaged. Ideally, I will schedule three to four weeks between interviews one and two. Beyond those two meetings, I will share the interview transcript with each participant for their review and approval. This review may prompt the women to request an additional follow-up interview to correct, clarify, or share additional information. This digital platform on Zoom allows me to record the interview and transcribe the data in a timely and secure way. Within 14 days of the interview, the transcripts of the interviews are sent to each participant to allow them to share and add any additional thoughts, elaborate, or adjust their responses. Having an opportunity to meet with every participant at least two times allows for member checking (i.e., the second interview will include a discussion of emergent themes, allowing for participant feedback). This process is true to the hermeneutic circle, where I continuously analyze and adjust my understanding throughout the data collection process, as detailed in the following section.

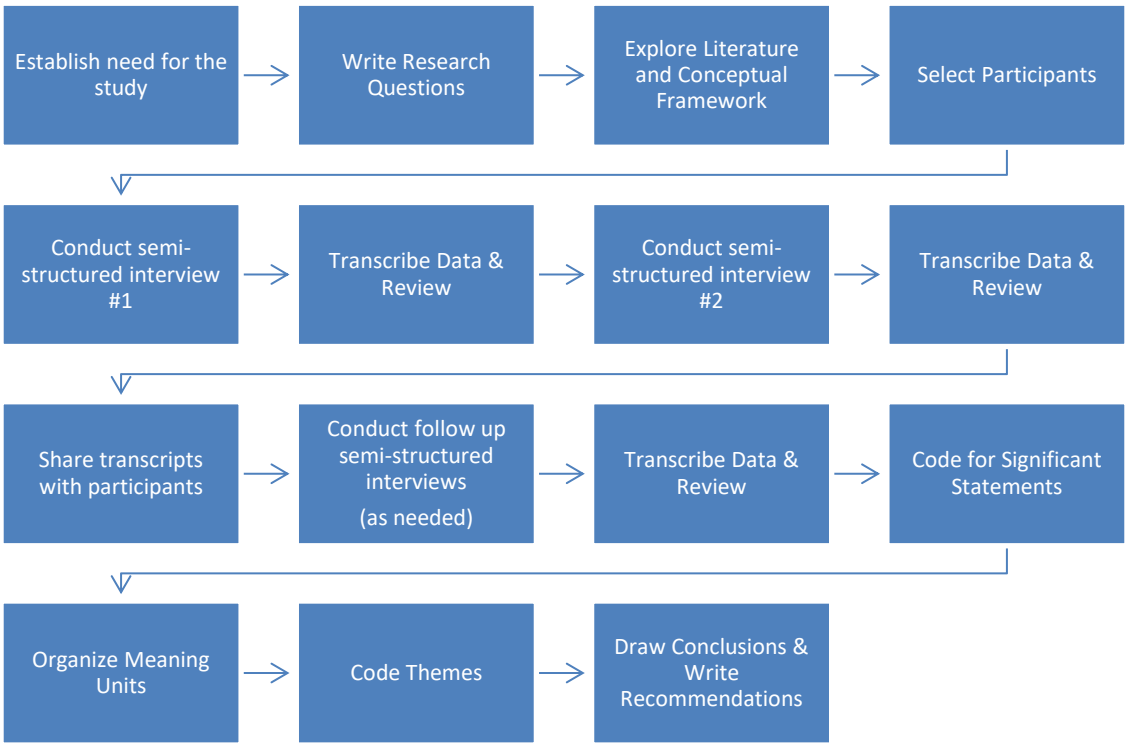
Part 3: Data Analysis

In a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach, data is collected and read to understand participants' experiences (Peoples, 2021). When analyzing data, I look at the entire transcript and make meaning of smaller parts of the transcript. Those smaller parts then inform the understanding of the larger transcript in a cyclical process to synthesize data across participants (Peoples, 2021). As the data analyst, I read through the data collected thoroughly. Then I examine the data from all participants in a detailed data coding process. I used the qualitative coding software Atlas.ti to keep the data organized as I analyzed the text and found codes. Phenomenology aims to discuss the essence of how individuals experience a phenomenon. "The essence is the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 77).

The data analysis process is illustrated in Figure 1, demonstrating continuous analysis throughout the data collection process. "Analysis is not a linear process; it is circular, or a better explanation is that it is a spiral since circular would mean that one's understanding does not change since a circle returns to the same point" (Peoples, 2021, p. 33). Throughout the analysis, I aim to understand what the participants experienced and how they experienced it. (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 77). Moustakas (1994) refers to this as horizontalization, as the researcher looks at data collected from various participants horizontally. Once the data is collected, I read the interview transcriptions and note any significant statements that provide insight into how participants may have experienced being doctoral students. I develop ways to cluster these quotes into themes to extrapolate shared meaning further.

Figure 1

An Overview of the Research Process



Note: Adapted from the Data Analysis Flowchart in Peoples, 2021

Trustworthiness & Validity

When looking at the trustworthiness of this research, I looked to Creswell and Poth's (2018) eight recommendations for validation in qualitative research. Given the timeframe and aim of the current study, I use four strategies to ensure validity in this project: member checking, corroborating evidence through triangulation, generating thick descriptions, continuously referencing interview transcripts, and offering counterexamples to emergent themes as relevant. As the researcher, one of the most important ways I can ensure trustworthiness in phenomenology is by not viewing an experience as solitary or individual but by looking at the shared experiences between participants to understand the phenomenon truly (Moustakas, 1994). Participants assist with validating the data by sharing their feedback on my initial findings. Through follow-up interviews, I ask participants to "reflect on the accuracy of the account," allowing for member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 261). Details emerge from this data, which the readers can read and draw conclusions about transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) shares that through continuous dialogue, validity occurs as participants share and describe their experiences. This conversation invites a "reciprocal correcting of reality," so a true essence can emerge after multiple conversations with multiple participants (p. 57).

Ethical Treatment of Participants & Data

In this study, I collect authentic data to explore the lived experience of doctoral student participants. The ethical treatment of the participants and the data collected is a top priority throughout this process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I critically look at the participant recruitment and data collection plan. I have identified times when a possible ethical issue could arise (e.g., collecting, recording, and securely storing data). I ensure that each participant is intentionally

selected based on meeting the criteria. I check in with participants during each interview to ensure they are comfortable sharing their experiences. I confirm confidentiality by asking each participant to select a pseudonym that omits identified information about the individual (Peoples, 2021). Only the participants and I can identify the pseudonym they choose. To ensure data security, I save all interview transcripts in a folder on my password-protected laptop for the duration of the research. In a research memo, I will note my responses to the interview protocol and my emergent understanding through the data collection process. Noting my own experiences and understanding will allow me to ensure that I am centering the analysis and findings of the women's voices in this study. This list of ethical considerations is not exhaustive and is continuously updated.

Summary

This study uses a hermeneutic phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of doctoral students. I designed this study to construct meaning from these experiences and help understand their ability and desire to participate. Within the methodology, I then explained the rationale for using hermeneutic phenomenology and how I will use feminist standpoint theory. Beyond that, I outlined the alignment in the research design, the procedure (e.g., eligibility criteria, recruitment, phenomenological interviews, data collection), and data analysis (e.g., trustworthiness and ethical considerations). In Chapter Four, I present the research findings and data analysis.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experience of doctoral students who self-identify as women and first-generation college graduates, with particular attention paid to mothers. To get to the essence of this phenomenon, I utilize phenomenological methods (Moustakas, 1994) and feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2004). In doing so, I aim to highlight the complexities women face in doctoral programs while mothering and how these difficulties shape their journey. In this chapter, I present an analysis of the collected data from thirteen women who met the eligibility criteria using the methods described in Chapter Three. This chapter begins with a review of the research question used to guide the study. Then I organize the chapter into three parts: (1) a brief overview of the data collection process, (2) an introduction to each woman as an individual, followed by (3) an analysis of the stories they shared about their experiences.

In this study, I ask one overarching research question: What are the lived experiences of first-generation women doctoral students persisting in their doctoral program, including classes, advising meetings, research, and the dissertation process? As I shared in earlier chapters, I always intended to focus on women who are also mothers if the sample allowed. Every participant is a mother, so I was able to focus my research question further to ask: what are the lived experiences of first-generation women doctoral students [who are mothers] persisting in their doctoral program? In my research, I sought out women currently enrolled in doctoral programs to tell their stories. I combined their experiences, my own, and existing literature to best situate this knowledge. Specifically, this research uses a phenomenological approach with feminist standpoint theory to understand women's experiences working on doctoral coursework

or writing dissertations. As I will discuss below, I found three emergent themes: (1) unattainable work-life balance for doctoral students; (2) (problematizing) stories of grit and resilience, and (3) women use agency to create community. The culmination of these three themes results in how women make meaning of their experience regarding their doctoral journey.

Part 1: Data Collection

I conducted interviews with thirteen women doctoral students to explore my research question. When I set the eligibility criteria, I understood the potential differences that could emerge from interviewing doctoral students in various fields at various universities across the country. However, with a phenomenological study, the idea is to determine shared experiences. Thus, while there are differences in university and fields of study, all the women still share the experience of being first-generation college students and mothers enrolled in a doctoral program. Beyond eligibility criteria, they shared a candidness to share their story, passion for their field, a desire to continue fulfilling work, and excitement for the potential careers beyond this degree. From these commonalities, I understood that there would be a shared essence. It is that common essence that I sought to find through this study – the phenomenon of first-generation college students who are mothers and current doctoral students.

Using standpoint theory guided me to approach my questions and my study from the insider's perspective rather than imposing what exists in higher education literature. I need to have inside participants to guide my inquiry. The data collection process for this study took place over eight weeks, with thirteen current doctoral students participating. I found these women using three Facebook pages supporting women doctoral students: #DoctoralMomLife, The Doctoral Mom Group, and the Latinas Completing Doctoral Degrees. I initially asked those interested in participating to complete a demographic questionnaire to capture eligibility. Fifty-six

women completed the survey. Of those women, ten were not full-time students, and fourteen were not parents. That left thirty-two remaining eligible participants. Once I determined who was eligible, I selected ten women to participate. I aimed to maximize racial and ethnic diversity in this sample while selecting participants who had shared professional responsibilities and were from similar fields (i.e., all in education or psychology). I wanted the diversity of ethnicities represented in this study to be inclusive of multiple perspectives. I emailed each woman the Research Information Sheet as an email attachment. On this sheet, I detailed the purpose of the study, their role as a participant, and the risks and benefits of participating, and I also encouraged them to reach out if they had any questions. After they reviewed the Research Information Sheet, I scheduled our first interview. Upon agreeing to participate, each woman selected a pseudonym and joined me for two semi-structured interviews that I held from November 2022 through January 2023.

After the third interview, I saw such variety in their experiences that I wondered if ten participants would be sufficient to reach saturation, so I expanded the pool to include three additional women. After interviewing the thirteenth woman, I heard consistent experiences, so I did not need to recruit anyone else. Ultimately thirteen eligible women completed all aspects of this study. The second interview with each woman was an opportunity for member checking. I shared emerging themes with the women to discuss the extent to which the themes resonated with or contradicted their experiences. This member checking helped validate my findings. After transcribing every interview, I sent the transcript to each woman. At that point, they had the opportunity to review the transcript and add additional notes before I moved forward to analysis.

Throughout the entire data collection process, I utilized researcher memos. I began this before conducting the first interview and consistently created a memo after every interview. I

noted general takeaways, exciting findings, and my developing understanding in this journal. As I shared in my positionality, I meet the eligibility criteria of this study, and I have had my own doctoral journey. I will share my narrative within the analysis section of this chapter. First, here is an introduction to the thirteen women who shared their stories.

Part 2: Meeting Thirteen Doctoral Mothers

The eligibility criteria to participate in this study included self-identifying as a woman, being a first-generation college student, being a full-time doctoral student in a program in the US and being willing to participate in interviews. The sample included thirteen women who qualified based on these criteria. I collected background information at the beginning of each interview, including the year they began their doctoral program, anticipated graduation, the number of children, age, and employment status. Table 1 shows the year each woman began their doctoral degree, anticipated graduation, the field of study, and the type of doctorate (Ph.D., Ed.D., or Psy.D.). In this sample, seven are pursuing a Ph.D., five are pursuing an Ed.D., and one is pursuing a Psy.D. Ten women are in education, and three are in psychology. At the time of the interview, six women continued coursework, two worked on their dissertation proposals, and five worked on their dissertations.

Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2015) use the term *academic mother* to describe a woman who has a faculty role and is a mother. There is no similar term for doctoral students who are mothering, and academic mother is the closest term in the literature. For the remainder of this study, I will refer to these women as *doctoral mothers*. I was most interested in doctoral mothers, regardless of the child's age. While I did not limit the ages of children in this study, comparing mothing young children to mothering older children is worth exploring but is beyond this study's scope. Similar research looked at academic mothers of *young* children because of the physical

demands and family obligations of mothering young children (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006). Collecting this basic information about their household composition and children's ages helped me understand the ongoing disparity in which working mothers have a ‘second shift’ with their mothering role at home (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). The women range from twenty-five to fifty-three years old, and six out of thirteen identify as women of color.

Table 1

A Summary of Study Participants

Pseudo-nym	Age	Ethnicity	Degree	Field	Program Phase	Began	Ant. Grad	Number of Children (Ages in years)
CM	37	Asian	Ph.D.	Ed	Diss.	2018	2024	2 (11, 9)
Josephine	53	White	Psy.D.	Psy	Diss.	2019	2024	2 (21, 19)
Lucy	36	White	Ph.D.	Ed	Year 3	2020	2024	1 (6)
Luisa	25	Indigenous Latina	Ph.D.	Psy	Year 4	2019	2025	1 (5 weeks)
Camille	36	White	Ph.D.	Ed	Year 2	2021	2026	2 (10, 6)
Patricia	33	Salvadoran	Ed.D.	Ed	Year 2	2021	2024	2 (10, 8)
Maya	30	Multiracial - Black/African American and White	Ph.D.	Ed	Year 2	2021	2024	2 (6, 3)
Laney	42	Caucasian	Ed.D.	Ed	Diss.	2020	2023	2 (16, 13)
Estrella	44	Hispanic	Ed.D.	Ed	Year 2	2022	2025	2 (15, 13)
Kirby	30	Non-Hispanic white	Ph.D.	Psy	Diss.	2018	2023	1 (2)
Ruthie	49	White	Ed.D.	Ed	Diss.	2019	2023	2 (21, 18)
Damia	39	Non-Hispanic white	Ph.D.	Ed	Prop.	2018	2023	3 (21, 15, 12)
Brianna	43	African American	Ed.D.	Ed	Prop.	2014	2023	7 (22, 13, 13, 8, 11, 6, 2)

Note: Data collected on the eligibility questionnaire: ethnicity (women self-identified via an open textbox) and field of study. Data collected during Interview #1: pseudonym, number of children and their ages, degree type, degree progress, the year began, year to graduate, and support at home. Data collected during Interview #2: women's age.

As I explored in Chapter Two, Crenshaw uses intersectionality to conceptualize the visible and invisible identities and the multiple aspects of one's "multidimensional matrix" (1999) and associated systems of power and oppression. According to Harding (2009), standpoint is always intersectional. Each of the women in this study brings their own experiences and identities beyond the data shared in Table 1. They each shared unique stories about their

doctoral experiences. In keeping with the phenomenological method and to acknowledge each woman's intersecting identities, I will share a brief profile of each woman to contextualize their experiences. The following profiles contextualize each woman's unique attributes and worldviews, given that standpoint theory is about a collective standpoint from multiple perspectives rather than an individual standpoint (Harding, 2009). Through these narrative profiles, I hope to convey the variety of experiences and perspectives among this admirable group of women.

CM

CM was 37 years old at the time of the interview and she identified as Asian. She is an international student and mom of two young children. Prior to beginning the doctoral program, CM “taught Chinese to middle school and high school students in a public school,” she “taught at Chinese at a summer camp,” and she is a “volunteer teacher, teaching new immigrants in our community.” CM watched her husband complete his Ph.D., and when her visa renewal became complicated, she saw the Ph.D. as a path to extend her visa so that she could continue teaching and not need to move her young children out of the country. At the beginning of her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction, CM thought, “this should be really challenging for me because my native language is Chinese.” However, as she approached graduation, she reflected on how this degree resulted in an increased skillset, professional confidence, and the desire to continue her profession as a literacy scholar training pre-service teachers. At the time of the interview, she was completing her dissertation. CM pursued her doctorate, "when it comes to the situation that my visa expired, and I have to keep legal status in the United States, I applied for the program… in my city." Pursuing a doctoral degree successfully extended her visa and shifted her opinion

about staying in the United States. Nearing the conclusion of her degree, she said, “I don’t worry about my status anymore… I can go anywhere in the world and be a teacher.”

Josephine

Josephine was 53 years old at the time of the interview and she identified as White. She is the mother of two adult children who completed high school while she worked on her doctorate. After completing her master's, she challenged herself to a “year of yes” to embrace new opportunities. She “opened a private practice… did some psychological testing… taught a class at a community college,” and said she embraced every “opportunity that terrified [her].” During this “year of yes,” she considered a doctorate, so true to her commitment for the year, she applied. At the time of the interviews, Josephine was completing her dissertation in Clinical Psychology at a humanist Psy.D. program. She needed to know that it was a practitioner-based Psy.D., and she felt lucky that such a program existed conveniently in her town. Josephine discussed her background as a therapist. She also discussed how her person-centered program supports doctoral students, “it’s all very collaborative… we’re very cooperative and inclusionary.” She and her husband had "a little bit of extra cash that we were talking about investing; I said, ‘how about we invest in me.’" She recalled that she "fell in love with psychology in the ninth grade and always thought I'd become a doctor someday, my big pipe dream."

Lucy

Lucy was 37 years old at the time of the interview and she identified as White. She is the mom of a young daughter. Before beginning this program, Lucy was a classroom teacher looking for a path out of a marriage that was no longer safe for her or her daughter. She knew that a fully funded Ph.D. program with on-campus housing would allow her to be self-sufficient and create

the stability to leave her marriage. Her divorce was finalized between our two interviews together, so she had the unique perspective of needing to navigate her doctoral journey in a very new single-adult household. She detailed the logistical challenges of mothering a young child, providing childcare, and attending virtual synchronous classes. As a high-achieving student, she said, “it’s definitely trying… sometimes assignments just need to be good enough. That’s a big brain shift because I don’t do satisfactory work, but sometimes I just have to get it done because I need to be there for [her daughter].” Lucy attends her undergraduate alma mater in the city where she lives. She is in year three of her Educational Studies coursework and plans to continue researching children's safety. Lucy decided to apply for the program when she realized she "needed a different path for my daughter and me…. that way I would have a safe space for her and me to move into. I would have an income, and I would have my loans continue to be on hold… I could take care of us. That's what I did."

Luisa

Luisa was 25 years old at the time of the interview and she identified as Indigenous Latina. She is the child of immigrant parents and was raised in New England. When she was admitted to a Ph.D. program in Counseling Psychology, Luisa and her husband relocated out of state. At the time of the interview, she was in year four, her final year of coursework. She sought a faculty mentor in line with her research interest, who identified as Latino and spoke Spanish. Luisa experienced a miscarriage in year three and had a child during year four. At the time of the interviews, Luisa was on a leave of absence from her program with a five-week-old child. She is a new mom, therapist, and doctoral student and works in a research lab. “I’ve always said I need to be seen as a person first. I don’t want to be seen as a student. I don’t want to be seen as a therapist first. I want to be seen as a person.” As an honors student in her undergraduate, she

always planned to complete her master's. Luisa was involved with community-based research, which led her to consider a Ph.D., "I really jumped into it." Her mentors encouraged her to "just apply and see what happens." Since then, one of her biggest takeaways was “giving myself grace to feel that it’s okay to slow down” she also spoke about authenticity “I don’t have to be anything other than me. Why am I showing up to my school and in academic settings and not being me? That’s not the kind of person I am.”

Camille

Camille was 36 years old at the time of the interview and she identified as White. She worked at the university and was in the second year of coursework for a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. Camille discussed the importance of setting boundaries to prioritize her work, immediate family, and Ph.D. program. With so many roles, Camille discussed the challenges of feeling like she has not connected with peers in her program because she had so many demands on her time. She also tried to help her extended family understand her doctoral experience, “they don’t understand intellectual work, they don’t get that thinking is part of work, reading is part of work, writing is part of work.” She began taking on student teachers as a classroom teacher and enjoyed teaching future teachers. This experience reminded her of her time as an undergraduate when she initially considered being a university instructor. "Finding out what a professor is and what they do. And then figuring out …. For me, what's going to be the path to get there." After her masters, she "just said, you know what? I'm going all the way. I'm going to do a Ph.D. as soon as both of my kids are in school."

Patricia

Patricia was 33 years old at the time of the interview and she identified as Salvadoran. She works as an Associate Vice President of Student Success and is in her second year as a

doctoral student in Learning and Organizational Change. Patricia sought out an established program in her home state to conveniently complete the residential requirements. The program also offered coursework to fit into her weekly schedule after working hours. She has two young children and a supportive partner. She shared why she pursued a doctoral degree and said, "I just love school. I love learning. I work in higher education so professionally; it is the next logical step." Aside from professional reasons, she also shared that it's something she "always really wanted to achieve. It's kind of the end goal of schooling… I'm first-gen, that's why I'm here." Sitting in on her mentor's dissertation defense encouraged her to apply to a program for herself. “It’s a journey I’m still on. I end up in situations where I don’t feel like I can contribute in quite the right way or that I have the right words to contribute to a discussion.” But even in those challenges, she said, “I really enjoy it [research]. Being able to work within a field that I love and feel is important has endless opportunities for growth. I feel privileged to be able to do that.”

Maya

Maya was 30 years old at the time of the interview and she identified as Multiracial Black/African American and White. She is a rural student, and her “adopted family is completely white, so [she] actually never really had much experience with other black people really in [her] entire life until I got here [her Ph.D. program].” Maya worked in higher education at her alma mater but chose to pursue a Ph.D. at a different institution to push her beyond her comfort and diversify her CV. She relocated her entire family out of state to pursue this program, and with that, she left behind her extended family and her entire support system. At the time of the interviews, she was in the second year of her Ph.D. program. She began studying equity but has since switched to the Education Psychology program. “I’m still confused about these two programs, equity and psych, like I’m still bouncing back and forth because my ideas are really in

the middle of them, so I need you to normalize this for me or tell me that it's not normal." She discussed the challenges and personal growth that came with her program's "overt emphasis on equity and inclusion" and her meaningful mentoring connections with faculty in the program. After completing her master's degree, she was working on campus in enrollment management when she realized, "I'm either going to stay in these types of roles that I'm in, or I can progress into a more administrative or faculty role… and to do that I need a Ph.D."

Laney

Laney was 42 years old at the time of the interview and she identified as Caucasian. She has two teenage children. Pursuing a doctorate has been her dream for decades, "I've said since I was sixteen years old that before I leave this planet, I'm going to be a doctor." She sought out an affordable, prestigious, and online program because she was a K-12 teacher at the time. Laney completed coursework and was working on her action research paper at the time of the interviews, which was the culminating project of her Ed.D. in Educational Administration. During the pandemic, she left the classroom to work full-time on a grant-funded education program that often takes her to the field. She discussed the challenges of traveling for work, meeting course deadlines, and being a present parent. She has a supportive group of friends who encourage her. "They are like, I don't know how you do it, you're super woman." Laney recalled her when her 16-year-old daughter publicly wished her a "happy birthday to the best mom. I'm so proud of everything you've done and accomplished, and you're working on your doctorate and taking care of us at the same time. You're almost done. You can do this." This was emotionally moving for Laney because she was excited to see this process through her daughter's eyes.

Estrella

Estrella was 44 years old at the time of the interview and she identified as Hispanic. She has two teenage daughters. She works as the Director of Student Success at a Hispanic Serving Institution. Her professional goal is to continue supporting students by centering their marginalized backgrounds. She completed a doctoral certificate in higher education leadership five years before beginning her doctorate. Then more recently, her institution announced that they would cover the cost of doctoral courses for employees. She applied the certification courses toward her Ed.D., so she was in the second year of her program at the time of the interview. “I work Monday through Friday. Saturday, I will do counseling. And then on Sunday, I would do professional development [training for her student workers].” After completing her master's, she knew she "wanted a Ph.D. Maybe in educational psychology, but you would have to be a full-time student, so that program wasn't for a working professional." Ultimately, she chose to attend her university because of the access to instructors for support. She was motivated to pursue an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership in higher education to obtain the credential's validity. She told me that she shared with her daughter why she was pursuing a doctoral degree, "it’s not the same for a woman. It’s not the same for Hispanic women…and sometimes it’s unfortunate, but we have to have the letters in front of our names to give us credibility.”

Kirby

Kirby was 30 years old at the time of the interview and she identified as Non-Hispanic White. She became a mom as a Ph.D. student and had a two-year-old at the time of the interviews. She teaches undergraduate courses where she is a Ph.D. student in Psychology. After a trying relationship with her first advisor where “he was abusive and intolerable… he would berate us during lab meetings… he made me cry during class,” she now has a supportive advisor,

and she is working on her dissertation. She discussed the lasting effects of working with her first advisor and her invisible identities of being first-generation and queer. Kirby's professional aspirations are to continue doing qualitative research in psychology. "It's not that I really wanted to be a professor. I just want to do research, but the odds of getting hired just to do research are very low." She looks forward to the financial stability of having a career as an academic. Since being a master's student, she liked the appeal of "the title and the prestige that comes with" having a doctoral degree. Ultimately, she concluded that to secure "any kind of job in psychology and research, I have to get a Ph.D." As a new mom during her doctoral program, Kirby appreciated that her daughter is so young while Kirby is committing so much time to her Ph.D. "A lot of the time I'm spending away from her hurts me and not as much her. She comes into my office [while Kirby is writing], of course, I'm gonna pick her up and play with her… but I have one minute, right. Go see what dad is doing." Even at two years old Kirby's daughter "would go up to the laptop and pretend to be on keyboard working." This left Kirby feeling "wholesome and sad," grateful for the example she is setting and sad about the time her daughter saw her prioritizing school.

Ruthie

Ruthie was 49 years old at the time of the interview and she identified as White. She is the mother of two adult children, and after being a K-12 teacher for 25 years, she now teaches methods courses for graduate and undergraduate courses for pre-service teachers. She has proposed her dissertation in Education. During our conversations, she discussed inter-cohort dynamics, the importance of inclusion and belonging, and social capital as a first-generation college student. Tearing up, she shared why she is a doctoral student, "my total personal vulnerable reason is that I was told I was stupid my entire childhood and that I would amount to

nothing. So, it's my own personal journey, with zero professional reasons. It's just for me." As a university employee, she could complete courses "at five dollars a credit…So that decision was kind of made. It [the price] was a push." Ruthie finds her career fulfilling, she has a dissertation topic that she enjoys, and she is close with her partner and two daughters. "I cultivated this family, and I've done all these things very purposefully to live out of extreme poverty and mental illness. So, they [her classmates and colleagues] look at me and see that I seem put together and have it all. But you don't know that I'm sitting on this ledge all the time." For Ruthie, the ledge refers to the poverty she experienced as a homeless teenager. She said, "I've worked really hard to get here. This didn't just happen, and so I feel the need to justify that this wasn't handed to me." As a doctoral student, she is working on breaking the habit of justifying her existence to others, and her smile glowed when she said, "I'm a fucking rockstar."

Damia

Damia was 39 years old at the time of the interview and she identified as White. She completed her coursework in Learning Sciences and Educational Psychology. She shared stories of being a high school dropout, a divorced parent, a university instructor, an Army veteran, and a special needs mom. She was diagnosed with Autism during her Ph.D., which has enhanced her ability to connect with her advisor and peers. However, it also brought the challenges of understanding neurodivergence for herself. She relocated her family out of state to begin this Ph.D. program, and her mom was able to relocate with her. At the time of the interview, Damia had an assistantship and was working on her prospectus in preparation for her dissertation proposal. Damia's motivators are professional "I really want to be a professor, and I really liked the idea of understanding education at a much deeper level than I could when it came to getting a master's degree." One of the many strengths Damia brings as a university instructor is her

awareness that “identity and explicit exposure to people who are like you is important.” So she is herself when teaching without masking her neurodivergence.

Brianna

Brianna was 43 years old at the time of the interview and she self-identified as a Black; she has been a doctoral student for eight years in an online Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership. Brianna referenced appreciating the residency requirement early in her coursework. She has “two master's and a bachelor’s. So, school, education, writing… that’s my thing.” Brianna is a single mom of four biological children and is adopting three young children. She is a business owner and was working with her fourth dissertation chair at the time of the interview to complete her dissertation this year. Brianna discussed the added benefit at work because her colleagues appreciated that she is a doctoral student and the challenges of being a doctoral student during the pandemic. She has a very supportive extended family, and she mentioned her uncle saying, “this is our degree… go get that doctorate for us.” Then she laughed when she said, “they don’t really understand it, but they are supportive of it.” Brianna discussed the isolation of her online doctoral program and approaching the program deadline of completing it in nine years. Brianna initially viewed this degree as a personal outlet to focus on coursework instead of being consumed by her divorce. Professionally, she is passionate about women's empowerment and motivated by being “considered a subject matter expert” and a changemaker for women in education.

A Summary of the Contributing Doctoral Mothers

Ambitious, successful, extraordinary, remarkable, self-actualizing, helpful, curious, full of life, and quick to smile when talking about their children. These words come to mind when I think about this group of women. I feel immense admiration for every single participant. After

the interviews, I was in awe of each woman and their willingness to share their stories openly. I agree with Ruthie that they are "rockstars" and with Laney's friends that they are "super [women]." Their careers alone are impressive, but their ambition to dismantle biases and further contribute to their field as they conduct their research is even more exciting.

In summary, the women have varied professional and academic experiences as they are university students across the United States. Two of them relocated their families out of state to pursue this degree, and 11 applied to programs local to where they lived. There are various doctoral program modalities – some attend in-person programs, some attend hybrid programs with residency requirements, and some attend entirely online. While this variation offers varied experiences, they also have commonalities. They all began doctoral programs from 2014 to 2022, and their programs were all altered due to the pandemic. About half of the women worked in higher education and held positions such as instructor, pre-service teacher trainer, student affairs professional, or university leader. The other half worked in research and university-affiliated fellowship assistantships. All thirteen have children at home, and two mentioned wanting to have another child before graduation. With these individual narratives, I will share the discoveries as they relate to the research question of this study.

Part 3: The Findings

As I described in the previous chapters, I considered my research question and the definitions of theories informing my framework (feminist standpoint theory and role conflict theory). I intentionally kept these visible to me as I continuously reviewed the transcripts. From the codes, I extrapolated themes that spoke to the essence of the shared phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Saldaña, 2021). I organized the findings into three themes, which I discuss individually below. First, I will explore how these women encounter the complexities of managing multiple

roles as students, moms, and professionals pursuing work-life balance. Second, I will discuss how the women in this study leverage their self-belief to navigate the doctoral process, mainly when they use language such as grit and resilience. Third, I will share how they use their agency to create a community. I have organized these themes as distinct concepts; however, these themes are connected inextricably.

"Me on a Tight Rope Trying to Balance It All": Unattainable Work-Life Balance for Doctoral Mothers

One of the most consistent concepts in the interviews relates to how women try to manage their roles. Recalling Sverdlik and Hall (2020), who found that over 50% of doctoral students reported work-life balance as a significant stressor of graduate school, it makes sense that this balance was one of the most challenging aspects of being a doctoral student for women in this study. Participants sought out programs that would lessen this stress. Some opted for programs in the city they lived in, so they would have their support system nearby and less of a commute, while others opted for online programs designed for working professionals. This imbalance is not a new phenomenon. Hochschild (2011) shared that when she entered graduate school in 1962, she considered dropping out of the program because she was considering the incompatibility of her potential career and her family. Unfortunately, this means that women anticipate this disparity in balance in their careers beyond graduate school, and it means that women in graduate programs have been juggling this imbalance for at least the last 60 years. In this study, the women I interviewed consistently discussed how their roles (e.g., student, mom, partner, employee) are each intrinsically gratifying yet challenging to maintain together. Every woman had their metaphor for how they balanced the roles of being a student, a mother, and a professional. Lucy said, "at the same time [as being a student], I'm juggling all of this other

stuff." Brianna described how she felt like she was "on a boat, but you gotta make sure nobody falls into the ocean and gets washed away. You have to maintain all these things." Ruthie said, "I'm on a tightrope while juggling." These metaphors—juggling, a boat, a tightrope—became predictable and were a meaningful part of each conversation. Less predictable was how women made meaning of these multiple roles. This was a burden and a constant source of imbalance for some women, while for others, it was a positive experience. As shown below, this theme echoes the literature discussed in Chapter Two by exploring five subthemes around the way women experience role conflict (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004), the ways they attempt to find balance, the guilt they may experience by prioritizing school before their family (Sallee et al., 2016), the value of taking on an addition role (Barnett & Hyde, 2001), and the way women lean on their partners for support (Holley & Gardner, 2012).

Unattainable Balance: "I'm a Busy Lady"

To best capture how each woman sees themselves, I asked them to sketch themselves as a doctoral mother and then to describe the sketch. The drawings prompted the women to describe themselves in a way that was not necessarily vocalized earlier in the interview. These sketches remind me of Hochschild's metaphor about full-time jobs as "first shift" and then "second shift," where working mothers are continuously trying to find a balance between the constant tasks at home and with their families (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). This metaphor was then expanded by Kramarae (2001) to include the educational pursuits of women as the "third-shift." These sketches show how the women in this study make sense of all three "shifts." CM drew a self-portrait, but there was a stark difference between the left and right sides. She drew herself as a professional on the left with styled hair and a mom on the right with messy hair. She noted the notable grey hair in recent years and surrounding her head were six speaking bubbles with things

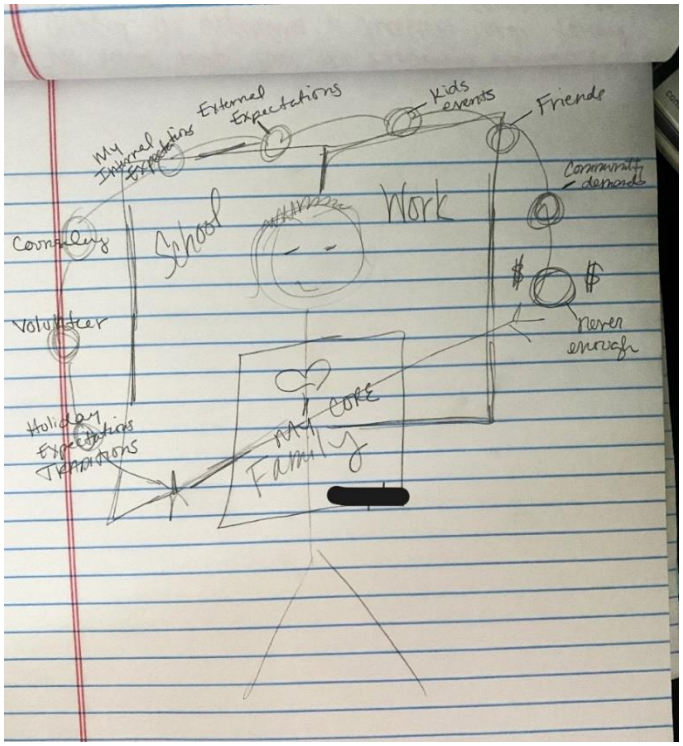
people needed from her: her daughter asks a question, her other daughter says they are hungry, her advisor asks if she will meet deadlines, and her husband asks her to clean up after the pet. Kirby drew bags under her eyes to indicate she was "very tired." Estrella drew herself with a laptop in her hand, sharing that she always had her laptop, even on day trips with her family. She also drew thought bubbles to show various thoughts continually on her mind. Camille sketched the various roles as spheres in her head for work, mom, student, wife, sister, daughter, and aunt to represent "how I have to carry all these things, all the time, and there really is no turning off one thing and turning on another thing." The women used the sketches to share the priorities on their minds, tasks that need to be completed today, and projects and assignments that are on their minds for the upcoming days and weeks.

The way the women talked about their sketches led to an additional conversation about their well-being and how they see their ability to maintain these roles. I present four examples highlighting how women see themselves as doctoral mothers to provide further insight. I selected these four because they are each distinct in their representation, and they also represent sketches that were similar to other women. For example, a couple of women sketched a juggling analogy, so I included only one sketch of a woman juggling. These four sketches get to the essence of what it means to be a doctoral mother as they perceive themselves.

Ruthie's sketch (Figure 2) shows her family at her core, then she added school and work and included a juggling ball for each task that did not fit into school or work. Some of these were internal and external expectations, attending counseling, making time to volunteer, holiday traditions, her kids' events, friends, community demands, and feeling like there was never enough money. When Ruthie described her sketch, she said the prominent emotions are that she feels "frantic" with everything and said, "I would add like 15 balls in the air."

Figure 2

Ruthie's Sketch of Herself as a Doctoral Mother

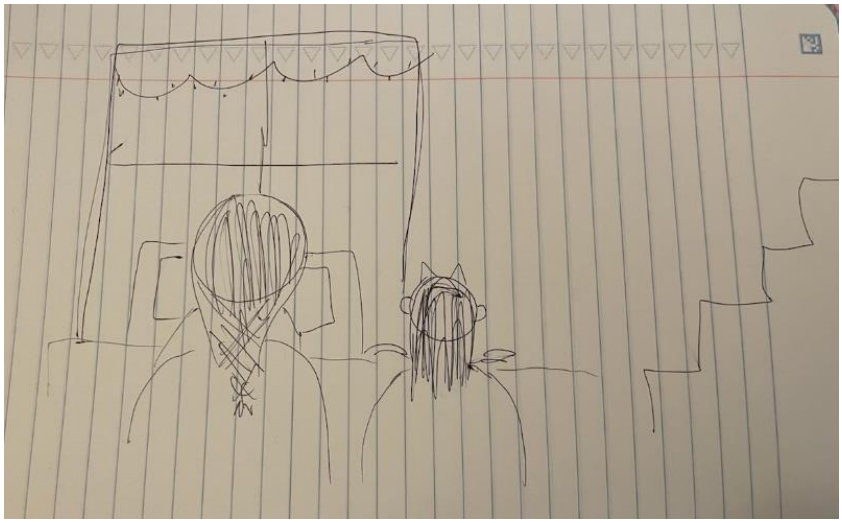


Lucy (Figure 3) vividly discussed her second week of classes during her first semester, having just moved into an old, small, on-campus apartment. She joined class via Zoom from her new living room, and just off-screen, she was nursing her daughter and staring and piles of unpacked boxes. This sketch is a glimpse into her life further in the program. One hundred percent of the childcare happened by Lucy even while she was in live Zoom classes every week. "When I was in class, I would put together activities for my daughter… and she's got her binder of stuff in front of her, and she's sitting right next to me. That's what class looked like a lot." This sketch shows the life Lucy has fought to provide for her daughter. When I see the sketch, it is easy to see the loving mother-daughter relationship and the warm Christmas lights hanging in the window. She also told me that "in the first two years of my Ph.D. I was in complete chaos

and dread and panic. What is the next crisis going to be? How do I keep my kid safe?" She spoke about her daughter's custody stressors, a prolonged divorce, and limited finances. For Lucy, parenting, running a home, and schoolwork meant she could not get everything done.

Figure 3

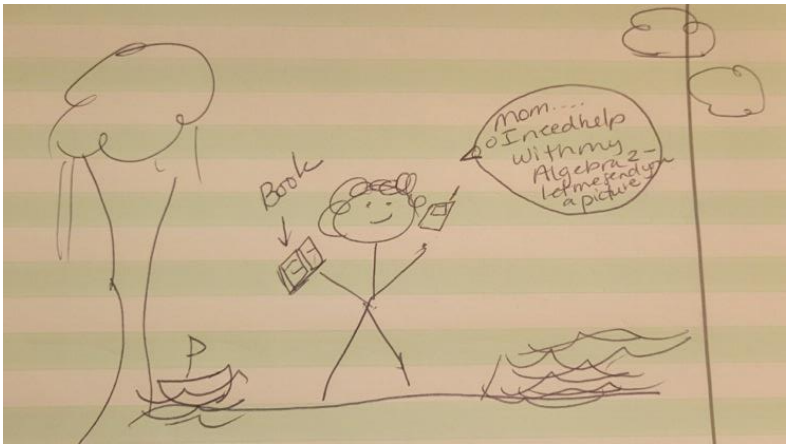
Lucy's Sketch of Herself as a Doctoral Mother



Laney discussed the logistical challenge of meeting her daughter's needs while working and in school. During our conversation about her roles, she asked herself, "How the hell did I do it? … How did I physically do this and still maintain sanity?" This sketch (Figure 4) shows Laney in the swamp on an island for work. She brought her textbooks and laptop to join her online class while she was out there. At the same time, her high school-aged daughter called her and started asking for help with algebra homework. Then her daughter texted photos of the homework questions. This example is the epitome of Laney's daily life as a doctoral student, she said it always feels like someone needs something from her.

Figure 4

Laney's Sketch of Herself as a Doctoral Mother

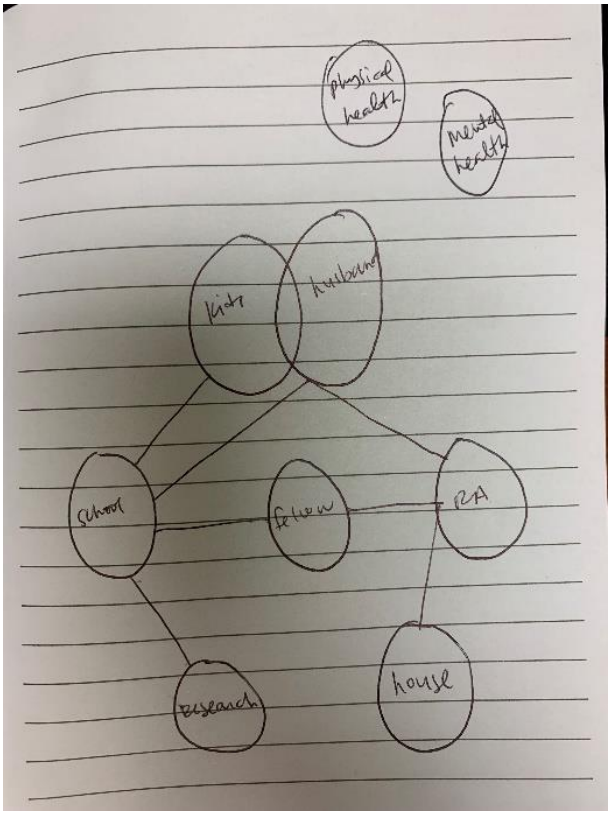


Maya described her sketch (Figure 5), "I see it almost as a network…. and they really overlap, but they're all affected by the school, the fellowship, the research assistantship. I see it kind of as this big, complicated web of things I have to navigate." Interestingly she placed her physical and mental health isolated by themselves. This is not to say that they are disconnected from the web, but more so that she has not prioritized her health because she had so many other urgent priorities. Maya shared that,

> Every time I feel like we find a good balance…a new semester happens, or somebody gets sick…or I suddenly have to travel, or I have a manuscript in progress, or I have to submit for a conference. There's always something to make the scales imbalance. I feel like I can never catch up.

Figure 5

Maya's Sketch of Herself as a Doctoral Mother



The sketches added another dimension to the interviews. It prompted the women to reflect, draw, and then share how they see themselves—the moments in silence when they drew translated into thoughtful and vulnerable responses. In most cases, I saw added depth to how they balance the expectations they have for themselves. As the women described their sketches, there was a consistent tone of chaos, feeling frantic, overwhelmed, and imbalanced. The women each described a responsibility for their academic and professional roles which was amplified when they spoke of their roles. Ruthie said it feels like she is "holding the world together" (Ruthie). No woman in this study had figured out how to manage these roles or was excelling. All thirteen of them were actively trying to figure out how to make it work daily. They

continuously adjusted their schedules and expectations. Some days they were more successful than others, which led to guilt as an overwhelmingly prevalent emotion.

Unattainable Balance: "There's A Lot of Guilt That Goes Around"

In continuing the conversation about having multiple roles simultaneously, the women in this study mentioned the challenge of choosing one task over another. These may be minor daily decisions or more significant decisions such as taking an additional class one semester or choosing to accept a promotion. Prioritizing one task or role over another has led to guilt. Guilt and fear of failure are themes across the literature about first-generation doctoral students and literature about women in academia (e.g., Gardner & Holley, 2011; House et al., 2020; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). In some cases, this can stem from the guilt of having more educational success and capital than their extended family (House et al., 2020), which Camille said is a challenge she experiences. However, the more frequently discussed guilt was continuously deciding how to spend their time. The need to constantly compromise made women feel inadequate as mothers and students. Maya shared,

> I always feel like I'm failing something or someone. I will never have enough time to do everything I want to do. It is hard to feel like there are some nights I'm not home for bedtime. I am very often so mentally overtaxed that I don't want to play with my kids and that feels terrible as a mother.

Camille echoed this sentiment, explaining that "there's a lot of guilt that goes around." She shared the example of separating herself from her family in the evenings and asking them to pretend she was not at home so she could be undistracted when she did homework. One of Patricia's priorities was never missing one of her children's sporting events. She was careful to select sports that met opposite her evening class schedule so that she could attend both every

week. Patricia shared a story of her son's baseball schedule changing mid-semester without notice. This adjustment meant she missed every single baseball game that season. It happened about a year before I interviewed Patricia, and she was visibly heartbroken that she was not there for her son the way she wanted to be. She was willing to make personal sacrifices because of her doctoral program, but she never wanted it to affect her ability to be present for her children.

Like many women in this study, Estrella rattled off a long list of responsibilities she has chosen for herself and found gratifying, even though they require a lot of her time. She mentioned that she started to see signs of burnout in her teenage daughter. "I always have mom guilt. Is she keeping herself so busy because I keep myself busy? I don't want her to think that's the norm." Estrella made it a point to share with her daughter that she did not do this as a teenager, and she shared all the ways she takes care of herself that may have gone unnoticed. Even with those conversations, Estrella was worried that her daughters might be overly ambitious because they were striving to be like her. She would prefer that her daughters enjoy their time in high school and not put so much pressure on themselves.

For Josephine and CM, the guilt was about spending less time with their children, and their fields of study amplified it. Josephine said, "lots of mom guilt. Especially starting the program at what age my children were [teenagers] and then going through all of these lifetime development classes…. And I'm like oh man, I'm a really shitty mom." She said this with humor. She knew her kids were well cared for, but there was guilt about what she was learning and realizing that there were things she wished she could have done differently. CM said her guilt came from being a literacy scholar, and the program has taken time away from her reading with her daughters. She spends her workday training teachers to teach children to read, and she researches the same scholarship. However, she received her daughters' standardized test results

for reading the week of our interview. She noted that their reading levels have dropped since she began her Ph.D. program, and she worried that this program has taken away time they used to read together in the evenings at the expense of her daughter's reading levels.

Three women said they feel guilty for the increased work their family members have picked up while in the doctoral program. Ruthie shared that she has not experienced mom guilt. Her daughters are old enough to understand her time commitments, and they vocalize their support. At the same time, she said she often feels like she is holding the world together for her family with "duct tape and bubble gum." She said, "I probably have more spousal guilt because my husband picked up a lot of slack, but he is also like – who cares? He doesn't care." Estrella said one of her biggest fears is that she will complete this degree at the expense of her family,

> I'm not enough. I'm not the typical Hispanic wife. In the back of my mind, that is always going to be an insecurity of mine. My house isn't always clean. I don't cook. My biggest fear is that I'm going to graduate with this doctorate, but I'm going to be alone. I'm not going to have my husband.

Estrella has made an effort to have challenging discussions with her family, so they know how important they are to her, especially when she spends so much time on school and work. Damia's mom lives with her, and her mom has taken on homeschooling and caregiving for Damia's daughter with special needs. Damia said that this support from her mom is invaluable and that, at the same time, "I get a lot of mom guilt that I'm not the one here doing it all, and I get a lot of guilt as a daughter because my mom is the one at home doing it all." Each of these women shared that their partners were supportive. Partners and older children were helpful and happy to meet the family's needs. This guilt came from them constantly worrying about making a mistake with their children, being insufficient in their caregiving, or not measuring up to an unrealistic

ideal of perfection in mothering. This remorse also extended to how their decision to be a doctoral student has shifted their family members' roles.

Unattainable Balance: "I Work Really, Really Hard at Juggling All the Things"

The women shared numerous examples of the ways their roles conflict with each other. They all discussed the limited time and energy and their awareness of their numerous responsibilities. As Kramarae (2001) found, the "third-shift" student roles usually occur early in the morning or late at night. This finding was similar to what the women in this study shared. Ruthie explained, "all of my doctoral work is from five to seven in the morning," Lucy said she stays up late at night "I'm working until 11 pm on a goodnight or 4 am on a bad night," and CM said that overall "most of the time I just sacrifice sleep." Lucy explained, "there's definitely some ways that being a student, and being a mom at the same time means I'm not able to give 100 percent to either of them." She also shared that it is a constant challenge to decide how to spend her time because she cannot be both the student she wants to be and the mom she wants to be,

> I care very, very much about the quality of [school] work…. If I'm going to do less than my best, I would ultimately rather do less than my best in my schoolwork than in my mothering. As hard as it would be to see a grade I don't want in the grade book, it would be harder to know that I had left one of my daughter's needs unmet. So yeah, there are definitely times when I'm not able to be as good in my professional work or in my schoolwork as I would like, because the role of mom is at the very core of me. I'm a mother.

Lucy did not want to submit anything less than her best for a course. But more than that, she was unwilling to sacrifice in her mothering. The conflicting pressure was shared across women, and

as a result, they chose to make concessions as they attempted to meet the needs of their children and their course assignments. For Lucy, the concessions she made were at the expense of her assignments. However, other women chose to complete assignments at the expense of their mothering roles. Regardless, these decisions were a shared challenge.

Kirby and Luisa shared an additional unique challenge. They both became mothers for the first time while they were doctoral students. Both women started their doctoral programs in their twenties and knew that with the length of their programs, they did not want to wait until completing their doctorate to have a family. They were both excited to have children. Luisa shared that she thoughtfully plans and focuses on logistics in multiple aspects of her life, including planning the timing of the birth of her child. She said,

> I like to plan things out, and so with the first pregnancy, I would have given birth in April, and the semester ended in May, so I was like that's perfect. I'll have the summer off. And then this baby was at the end of October. That's right in the middle of the semester. This is not my plan, and motherhood doesn't really follow a plan.

At the time of the interview, Luisa was grieving the loss of her first baby, celebrating the birth of her second baby, trying to be flexible with the timing of her delivery, and establishing boundaries around work and school as a new mom taking a leave of absence. Kirby talked about the joy she found in her daughter's language development, and Luisa shared that both her mother and mother-in-law stayed with her to provide additional support for her and the baby. Both of these women shared that they were not quite sure what the demands of mothering a newborn would look like for them or how they would make it work as there were already so many demands on their time.

CM shared that, for her, the conflict is simply about the amount of time she has. Even when she has an upcoming deadline, she is locked into a schedule based on her children's school schedule. Without exception, she has to step away from school to drop off and pick up her children. She also mentioned that she schedules all supervision meetings around her children's daily school schedule. CM, Josephine, and Brianna shared that they needed to step back from their roles as a mom to be a student. CM said that when she has large deadlines that are important for her degree progress, she makes sure to meet them, and sometimes it means quick microwave meals for her family "the kids and the husband can survive without you. We don't cook or clean house during finals week." Josephine said, "my parenting took a hit for sure. I just didn't have the energy… I don't know what's going on with you [her children]." While she spoke about her limited energy, she also shared that she misses the role of having her clients. "If I have that added to the roles I currently have right now I can see it being a value add not only for classwork, but truly for my own mental health." For Brianna, she mentioned that she no longer does a leisurely bedtime routine with her children as she did before becoming a doctoral student. "That's non-existent; once we do baths, you guys go to bed so I can get to school, so I can start reading. I got to work. It's totally taken away my time with them… my leisure time is school time." There was no shortage of examples of scheduling conflicts, concurrent demands of their time and energy, or feeling rushed trying to meet school deadlines, work deadlines, and parent. However, with probing, they shared the benefits of being a doctoral student.

Unattainable Balance: "Every Role I Have Adds Value to The Others"

While so many women shared the conflicts they face regularly, there were stories about how having multiple roles has added value to their lives and even improved their other roles. This speaks to the expansionist theory, where multiple roles are valuable for women (Barnett &

Hyde, 2001). Multiple women alluded to this value, and Damia expressed it very well. Regarding the day-to-day management of her various tasks, “having multiple roles can be a challenge just in finding the time to balance it all.” However, reflecting on the overall outcomes, she said, “every role I have adds value to the others.” Stepping back and seeing the doctoral journey from a growth perspective could shift how women experience the day-to-day management of their tasks.

Brianna shared that she began this program because she saw school as a way to “self-therapize” after her divorce. Having an academic outlet provided solace. Josephine and Lucy shared that they chose topics about mothering for various class assignments to investigate their role as a mother intellectually. Luisa said that early in her doctoral program, she experienced conflict “because I didn’t know how to show up as one person all the time.” With time she has learned, “I don’t have to switch. I don’t have to leave things at the door.” Taking on the role of a doctoral student has served her other roles because now she can show up as her whole self “I am a student. I am a clinician. I am a researcher. I am a mother. I am a wife. I am a daughter – all of these things at the same time.” Each in their way, Brianna, Josephine, Lucy, and Luisa found ways to blend their roles. They used the tasks required of one role to serve another. These are examples of how women expanded their frames of reference and increased their self-complexity in ways that positively benefited their lives (Barnett & Hyde, 2001).

Reflecting on how Ruthie’s roles interact, she shared that the doctoral “program has only added value to my life.” She has two teenage daughters who need social and emotional support. Without the doctoral program, Ruthie said she would have hovered and been overinvolved in their lives. Before the doctoral program, she was constantly thinking about her children, but this program has given her other things to think about, such as reading for class or her research. Ruthie said the doctoral program “allowed space for me to let them [her daughters] breathe. It’s

forced me to let them grow on their own. So, it's forced me to be a better mom." Patricia also felt that taking on the role of a doctoral student has made her a better mom. She used to say yes to every request and invitation to a fault, "but now that I have this academic role that I'm paying attention to, I'm realizing that I can say no… to serve my academic side or to serve my family, and so I think that's a positive." As very attentive moms, Ruthie and Patricia value their relationships with their children. They see their doctoral work as a way to focus on their development, which serves their mothering.

Maya and Laney shared ways their other roles have added value to their role as doctoral students. Laney shared that her professional role has added value to being a doctoral student because a couple of her assignments (grant writing and writing a white paper) are tasks she does professionally. She felt these course assignments were more manageable because she was actively doing the same things at work. For Maya, she said that compared to her classmates, she sees herself as quite efficient as a reader and writer; because of the expectations of her other roles, she can focus on school assignments and complete them quickly. In summary, Damia shared,

> The things I have learned about myself as a neurodivergent person have helped me as a teacher and as a parent. The things I have learned as a teacher have helped me as a neurodivergent person and as a parent. All of these things have balanced each other and added value in so many ways. I have different kinds of support systems now, and because of them, I have different perspectives. I have learned so much about myself and about the way the world works, and about my kids and my students.

I empathized with each woman as they discussed the conflicts and values of their various roles. The day-to-day task management was a challenge for me, but I felt like a better supervisor

after taking courses in leadership and theory. My conversations at work were better informed than before I was a doctoral student. As Damia shared, the doctoral program also provided an additional support system for me. I had an entire cohort of professionals working at various institutions across my home state who were in the same field as me and collectively had decades of experience. Personally and professionally, I saw immediate value in my various roles by becoming a doctoral student engaging in class discussions, reading seminal and contemporary texts, and connecting with peers and faculty in my program. In my researcher memo after the 24th interview, I wrote, "having multiple roles is valuable even if it means managing a little more." In these conversations, they discussed the importance of a supportive partner to help manage responsibilities at home, as I will discuss next.

Unattainable Balance: "I Don't Think I Could Have Done This Without My [Partner]"

Everyone discussed the importance of their family support system as they focus so much time and energy on coursework. For many women in this study, this support (balancing their roles) was from their partners. The women in this study saw their partners as fundamental to their success. They shared stories about how they relied on their partners for emotional support and support in sharing the parenting workload at home. However, the most emergent partner support across women was financial. There was a shared belief (from the nine women with partners) that they could not have pursued a doctoral degree without their partners' financial support. In the case of my study, the partners to whom the women were referring were all men; thus, this finding may also speak to patriarchal structures within heterosexual partnerships, in that women relied on men's financial resources to gain access to doctoral training. As I will discuss next, this finding also speaks to the inadequate funding provided to doctoral students.

The financial situations varied quite a bit across women. Estrella, Laney, Patricia, and Ruthie held full-time jobs. Camille reduced her work hours and income to 80% to accommodate coursework, and Maya, Lucy, Damia, Luisa, and Kirby lived off a stipend for their assistantship. Some women had tuition fully covered, others were paying tuition out of pocket, and others were taking out loans. Across these various situations, they leaned on their partners for financial support, knowing they could not cover living expenses, childcare, and tuition on their one income, especially those living on a graduate student stipend.

Over half of the women noted the financial strain of pursuing this degree. Maya shared, "I left a well-paying job to do this doctoral program full-time." Kirby similarly shared that being a doctoral student has decreased income and increased marital strain, "being in the program means I could be working an actual job and I'm not. So that's lost money." Kirby discussed her reliance on her husband's income.

> We do not get paid enough. My stipend was very small. And I get paid very little to teach and I have to take out student loans in order to afford the more expensive things like my car breaking down… I'm gonna take out a spring loans to put towards a new car because my job won't let me do that.

Kirby shared a sentiment she had discussed with her peers in her cohort. "We all knew that we were being paid shit, and the only reason we could live off of it is because we all had partners." From her experience, her partner's income and her supplemental income are insufficient to afford their frugal lifestyle as a couple with a two-year-old daughter. They must rely on loans for routine car repairs and a mattress. Maya shared that her frustration with graduate student pay is that the system seems as if it were set up for doctoral students who are "24 [years old] and fresh out of a master's program with no professional or life experience. We are 30 plus years old in my

cohort, most of us with kids." However, her university had no grants or scholarships to help cover childcare costs. She asked, "how can I afford full-time childcare on $20k a year? I work 50-plus hours a week… from classes to my assistantship to homework. And yet I get paid as if I am part-time." This inability to afford childcare leaves her to manage all of her doctoral work with her youngest daughter at home. If she were not married to a partner with a decent income and her kids were not in elementary school, she could not support herself as a doctoral student. Maya shared,

> It's hard because the graduate student stipend really doesn't allow for full-time childcare financially, so I have to choose between being time crunched and being in debt to pay for childcare. So far, we have chosen to not take on more debt, but I wonder every day if it is worth the added stress to not have enough time in the 'workday' to get my stuff for school and work done. I have considered going back to work full-time and just doing my Ph.D. part-time. None of it makes sense, and the financial anxiety has added a ton of stress to myself and my marriage. It's a really unhealthy balance.

Camille echoed Maya's need for support with childcare costs and was excited to learn that her university had an application process for a childcare grant. However, her application was denied. She tried to appeal the decision by letting them know she took a pay cut at work to pursue the Ph.D. and she had the added expense of paying tuition, but once again, she was denied because, as a household, she and her partner "made too much money." Camille found that many people eligible for the university childcare grant also qualified for state assistance with childcare. She supported them receiving both but concluded by wondering about the families who made too much yet still had the justified need. I could feel the stress as these women

discussed their finances. It is easy to imagine that this is often at the front of their mind, distracting them from the work they want to do.

Several women in this study felt that the university leaders allocating these funds (e.g., childcare grants or graduate student stipends) did not understand how far students were stretching their pay or how precarious they felt trying to live off these small stipends. Lucy applied for emergency funding through her college, and the college dean told her, "millennials spend all their money on brunch and avocado toast. If [you] would just stop going to Starbucks, it would all be better." This assumption did not reflect Lucy's reality when her on-campus housing was demolished, resulting in tripling her rent cost and her lack of summer work at the university. She felt that her financial "difficulties haven't been taken seriously" and that there was an assumption of financial privilege and frivolous spending for doctoral students in her college. She was frugal and did not have the funds for housing. Gardner and Holley (2011) found that many students on assistantships need to find supplemental income, and this additional job can often delay their graduation. Lucy discussed needing to prolong her degree an additional year because she was looking for a job besides her assistantship. The varied differences in each situation makes finances challenging to summarize, but there is a clear need for graduate students to be paid a living wage.

These conversations left me with the implication that without supportive partners to help with logistics and finances, it would be nearly impossible for women to pursue doctoral degrees. At the same time, I found myself thinking about the single women who consider (or will not even let themselves consider) returning to school for a doctoral degree. While I am grateful these women had supportive partners whom they lean on for support, it is troubling to hear that so many of these women do not feel that they could have pursued this program without that

additional support from a partner or that if something happened to their partner's income mid-program, it would become a barrier to their graduation. In the next section, I will explore potential barriers as women discuss their perceived ability to persist.

"Pushing forward": (Problematizing) Stories of Grit and Resilience

The second emerging theme concerns women's awareness of the larger dialogue about persistence in doctoral programs. Though not always the case, most women I interviewed viewed completing a doctoral degree as "intimidating." This theme includes context for their experience applying to their programs and how they describe themselves persisting through their degree program. In this theme, I discuss how the women in this study seemed to primarily use affirming language when they spoke of their experiences as first-generation doctoral mothers. After this theme, I share the way I use my feminist lens to critically explore the language the women used to describe their own perceived ability to persist.

As I shared in the narrative profiles, each woman shared their reason for pursuing a terminal degree. Damia, Kirby, Josephine, and Maya discussed professional aspirations; Patricia attributed it to her love of learning; and Ruthie, Camille, Lucy, and Luisa had the personal goal of completing a doctorate. Regardless of the original reason they applied, it took confidence and prior competence to apply to the program and pursue a terminal degree. The women consistently mentioned an awareness of being a first-generation college student and how this awareness stayed with them as graduate students. They were excited to understand their content area more deeply. With this unknown experience comes new occurrences, beginning with the application process through coursework and independent research (Gardner, 2013; Gardner & Holley, 2011). While their doctoral programs varied, they each applied to doctoral programs knowing the courses would push them intellectually. In recalling the moment when women decided to apply

to their doctoral program, almost all of them shared that they felt confident they would be admitted to the program and would successfully graduate.

CM shared that when initially considering applying, she sent a note to the department chair to begin the conversation. From those early discussions CM shared that she never doubted her admission "it's a smooth process for me, because at the beginning I already have direct contact with my advisor, and she kind of knows my experience and my educational background, and my passion." Lucy also felt sure she would be admitted to the program, stating: "I was pretty confident it was going to happen. I mean, the person who told me you need to go into this Ph.D. program was one of the people who helped create the Ph.D. program." Ruthie shared that it is not competitive to get into her Ph.D. program "if you want to get it, you can get in. It's a matter of meeting minimum requirements." Brianna also shared that she "never had a doubt that [she] would be successful at it." While some were so certain about their admissions, others were less certain about their acceptance, but they were sure that they would continue applying even if they were not admitted to a program the first time they applied.

Josephine shared that she was working in her private practice, embracing every professional opportunity that year. She said, "it was a year of yes, so I had to apply…. If I don't get in absolutely great. I love what I'm doing. If I do get in, great." Estrella worked professionally at the university where she applied, and she knew the program faculty and the admissions office. There were delays in her application process, and she took it upon herself to reach out to those departments to make sure they resolved the mistake promptly. Even with those delays, she shared, "I knew I was going to get in." Luisa was the only woman in this study who shared that she did not believe she would even be invited to interview at programs, let alone admitted because she was still an undergraduate when filling out applications. Nevertheless, even

Luisa shared that her backup plan was a competitive accelerated master's so she could reapply to the Ph.D. program the following year. There was no doubt that they would each complete a terminal degree.

Each of these women talked about the application process as a necessary step for admissions, but not as a gatekeeper to their education. They believed they were capable, qualified, and ready for the challenge. I could hear the excitement and hope in the voices as they shared the stories of finding out they were admitted to the program. Luisa said she received a phone call shortly after visiting the campus for an interview. She recalled the moment on the phone as surreal "This is not real… wow, I did it… I was just so shocked." Camille said, "my husband and my kids were super excited. They got me a cake. We had a little party and a celebration." Patricia shared the story of being with her entire family when she found out she was accepted, "I was actually in the car, and we were driving. It was my husband and two kids… As we were leaving [for a family vacation] that's when I got the phone call" She shared that it was especially exciting because they were traveling with extended family, so she was able to celebrate with everyone, and they were able to enjoy a family vacation together right before the fall courses began.

Damia was also surprised by her admissions offer in the car with her son. "The email came through, and I just saw a bit of it on my watch. Wait… what did that say?? And so, I scrambled for my phone trying to find it in my bag, and I pull it out, and read congratulations you've been accepted." I could see Camille on a road trip jumping up and down with her family, I could taste the celebratory cake that Patricia's kids had for her to celebrate, and I could not sit still as Damia was searching for her phone to read the official offer. These were some of the first

crystalized moments for each woman. They recalled vivid details of sharing this excitement with their loved ones on this journey.

Perceived Ability: "I'm Very Persistent"

Regardless of this journey being an unknown process for each woman, they were persisting toward their doctoral degree at the point of the interview. They persisted through the points of confusion. They may have people encouraging them along the way, but all thirteen women stated that their motivation to continue persisting towards this degree comes from within themselves. This finding is similar to Gardner and Holley's (2011) finding that self-reliance and internal motivation were both essential to the success of doctoral students. They were self-determined and did not deviate from this internal core belief. During some of the interviews, the women explicitly talked about how they believe in themselves; in other interviews, I implicitly identified the role of self-belief by how they spoke about their discipline to work towards a goal. These discussions suggested that they saw their inner value and worth and were self-determined to persist. While this motivation looked different for each of them, they consistently articulated how their desire to continue in their programs was inherent. For example, CM was motivated by the fact that she was close to completing her degree and excited about her area of research.

> So, I think one big thing is having to find my own motivation other than some outside motivator. So, for example, I know I have to graduate. But I know the finish line is right there, and I have to do it by myself. I have to find a passion to do my research, to go back to my topic, and then I can continue writing.

Lucy echoed CM's sentiment that she is motivated because she is approaching graduation, "at this point, some of it comes from the fact that I'm so close to being done." Luisa and Maya shared that they were inclined to see it through when they started something. Luisa

said, “I’m very motivated to do things… I’m very persistent,” and Maya said, “I feel like I’m pretty resilient… I’ve started this, and I will do it if I want to finish.” Ruthie described herself as having grit “that’s the number one because I know as hard as things get… I can do hard things; it just takes me longer. I suppose discipline is the word I would use. I put it on my calendar, so I was going to do it.” Patricia said, “it’s a lot of grit, and you keep your head down, and you keep pushing forward.” Damia echoed these women, “one of the things I have brought into this is the level of grit I have. I have always been that person that no matter what, I’m going to pick myself up. I’m going to keep going. I’m going to find a way.” Whether a woman was currently in coursework, working on their proposal, or writing their dissertation, their conceptions of persistence endorsed this idea of grit and resilience; even if they chose not to use one of those words, they used the other. In other words, they tended to articulate ways that they persevered through this challenge whether regardless of being early in coursework or at the dissertation phase.

Other times, students described how their motivation was maintained through peer relationships. For Josephine,

> Quitting wasn’t an option… my cohort was so strong that we really lean on each other. And so, when one of us is having that bad time, there are five others behind you propping you up and saying—no, you’ve got this. Show me your draft. I’ll go through it. I’ll give you some pointers.

When Josephine talked about how she appreciates having peers in the program and the enjoyment she gets from helping to motivate them, she said, “it’s been a dream.” Josephine began this degree assuming it would be an isolating experience. She did not expect to find

encouragement from her peers in the program. For Josephine, the peer support was reciprocal; it was unexpected yet invaluable.

While some women spoke about persistence as the big picture to graduation, Camille and Patricia spoke more narrowly about how they persist weekly through the course assignments. They both discussed the way they stay driven to do homework. They shared that logistically they do not have the time in their weekly schedule to procrastinate on an assignment. Camille shared that feeling the momentum on a class assignment or degree progress encourages her to continue moving forward, "I think another is imagining the opposite… I can't procrastinate because I don't know what will happen when I have all of these plates spinning…. If I put something [an assignment] off, my kids could get sick." She would then spend her time caring for a sick child and, quite realistically, not have the time to complete the assignment. This reality was just one example of her need to complete assignments in case something else would need her time and focus.

Patricia similarly shared, "this is where being a mom really is helpful for me because if I don't set the time to do something [homework]. Then that means I'm going to have to sacrifice time with my kids…. That's enough motivation for me." These findings are consistent with the sketches earlier in this chapter. That is, the sketches showed that they have a lot of demands on their time. A full schedule with various time constraints helps them stay on track with course assignments. Perhaps how they each conceptualize their role as a mom takes priority, so they ensure they meet academic deadlines and have uninterrupted time with their children. If this is the case being a mom could serve as an asset in completing academic assignments, though more research would need to be done to determine the extent to which this might be the case for doctoral mothers.

While the women in this study broadly emphasized the value of discipline and self-belief, my feminist lens and positionality led me to critically reflect on their use of phrases like "grit" and "resilience" to describe how they see their motivation to persist. These phrases contradicted their language when describing their confidence in applying to programs. While this doctoral degree is an unknown process, words like grit and resilience imply that the women in this study feel the degree was not built for them. At the same time, this language focuses on individual attributes that lead to persistence rather than addressing larger systems of inequity that exclude individuals and constrain their success. Indeed, Slater (2022) identifies how higher education has historically marginalized first-generation students. Rather than focusing on one individual who uniquely has the skills to navigate the process and graduate through their "grit," we must focus on exploring how these institutions could better serve all students. Using this language obscures students' collective struggle, which is often necessary for larger change (Slater, 2022). This language perpetuates the individualized narrative of perseverance for the women in this study, contributing to the idea that first-generation students must "prove themselves," as Camille stated. As I listened to how the women navigated through this unknown process, I wrote in my researcher memo that "grit is a word people used when the system was not built for them."

During my second conversation with Maya, I began with member-checking some of the emerging themes, including those related to perceptions of grit and resilience. Maya, too pointed out "the problematic nature of the words grit and resilience regarding schooling." She saw some situations she has experienced as unjust (e.g., lack of advising, low graduate assistant pay, lack of support for parents, and the lack of sick leave structure in assistantship roles) with a need to be addressed by higher education as a system. After all twenty-six interviews, when a woman talked about what motivated them to continue persisting, there was an underlying and troubling

understanding that a doctoral degree was a system they needed to overcome. As a result, it was up to the women to create the community they needed.

"We Need Each Other": Women Use Agency to Create Community

The final theme captures how women create community as a support system for themselves; this looks different across women. The women varied widely in how they felt a sense of belonging to their program (or lack thereof). For some, it is a connection with their advisor or peers, and for some, perhaps fellow doctoral students outside their department. However, regardless of whom they formed a relationship with, all the women used their agency to create the community they needed.

According to Gardner's (2013) research, a sense of belonging is vital for first-generation doctoral students, and a perceived lack of belonging can be detrimental. Some women felt they belonged most with their peers, while others felt they belonged most with department faculty, and a few felt alone. Beyond belonging, women discussed the importance of a community of practice (Wenger, 2011). This community of shared competence fostered a sense of belonging and promoted continued growth.

The women in this study shared that building relationships and personal growth was vital to their success in their doctoral programs. As I pondered how the participants discussed their experience with personal growth, I recalled Gordon's idea of "complex personhood," where people remember and forget, live in contradiction, and transform themselves (2008). In that sense, these women are generating their own stories about the value of this doctoral degree, even though it is different for each of them in their varied life experiences. This value is quite individualized because it differs for each of them and where they are in the program – according to Gordon's complex personhood, it makes sense that this transformative personal growth feels

slightly ambiguous (2008). Whether formal or informal community-building practices were in place from their department, the women in this study sought out community using their ability to form relationships. I will discuss this as three subthemes: beginning with the perceived lack of access to information the women noted prompting the need for community, then the role of their advisor, and fellow doctoral students as they built their communities of support.

Support: "If I would have known that"

In keeping with the literature on the hidden curriculum in doctoral training (Calarco, 2020), the women in this study were looking for a combination of logistical information about requirements, department policies, faculty research interests, and norms for doctoral students. This lack of access to transparent information amplified confusion and frustration about the doctoral experience and their ability to navigate this unknown process. Damia shared that she "came into the Ph.D. [program] feeling like I knew exactly what I was getting myself into and was very quickly smacked in the face with the fact that I knew nothing about how to be a professional at this level." CM shared, "I want a comprehensive blueprint of the doctorate… other than coursework, I know nothing about what the doctoral students should do or what a real scholar does." From this confusion, she shared, "I don't see any lights [at the end of the tunnel] because I really don't know how to design my own research… So, I even think about quitting my program." This statement highlights the frustration of not having information and how this could lead to someone not completing their degree.

Similarly, Laney shared that she wished she had a handbook and that her department is in the process of writing one for incoming cohorts. One of the pieces of information she did not have was about comprehensive exams. "Nobody told us that we were going to have to take comprehensive exams. We just happened to accidentally find out last semester… nobody even

knows when we take it." CM and Laney are not talking about minor processes. In these two examples, CM and Laney had completed coursework and proposed their research. They still had no direction about significant program milestones, suggesting that with a lack of information, women are at greater risk of not completing these unknown program requirements.

Lucy and Estrella alluded to the need for social capital and challenges to develop professional networks. Lucy said her most significant challenge in the program was forming her dissertation committee. She wanted guidance about who in the department might be a good fit. Ruthie also shared that this was a challenge for her first-gen peers in the program. Estrella shared that after being admitted to the program but before courses began, she attended an event hosted for women in leadership on campus. While attending an event supporting equity for women, she shared that she was beginning the Ed.D. program in the fall and was discouraged by a woman within her department.

> And she was like, "do you have kids? Oh, well then you probably want to wait till they're out of high school." And I was like, "that sucks, that's not what I would have wanted to hear." And so, it really bothered me. It really stuck with me.

Lucy and Estrella were looking for people in the department who understood the process and would support and guide them on their journey.

Some women encountered other challenges at later stages of student programs. For example, Ruthie recalled going through her university IRB process and finding out she would need IRB approval from every local school district as she has multiple research sites, "I was frustrated… How would I know that? Where does it say that anywhere? And I literally looked everywhere." For Ruthie to go through this process, she said it "feels like it's the goal of being an ivory tower, and you have to climb through these ridiculous steps in order to feel like what

you are doing is legitimate." Camille expressed a need for her doctoral program to host an orientation for new students. She thought someone could have explained "norms around speaking and talking in class, and the kind of writing you're going to do." For Ruthie and Camille, these are examples of times the student felt alone in figuring out these processes when department faculty could have provided this guidance.

Patricia said her program had set information they shared with students at specific progress points. While they had an orientation, it was not until the first immersive experience the following summer that she learned about the dissertation process. Patricia said, "I just feel like I would have benefited a lot from learning about that previously. Especially because of the way that they structure the program…. If I had known that from the beginning, I probably would have tried to keep track." If she had known the process earlier, she could have been more intentional in ensuring that coursework could benefit her dissertation research. However, that was not explicitly explained early enough for the students to be strategic.

Josephine had a unique perspective when thinking about needing all of the answers. She knew there was information she did not know, but she did not mind. "My biggest protective factor in this graduate school journey has been my utter ignorance of it. Just going in stupid and assuming that you know things will be as things are… But not having an expectation or not knowing." While this works for Josephine, I empathized with the women who felt like they did not have the answers they needed or were left in the dark regarding policies or degree milestones. While an orientation or handbook might not answer every specific process like some examples I shared in this section, it might have started the conversation and provided a place to learn from the experiences of program faculty or other doctoral students. The women in this study wanted to know whom to ask and where to find policies; understandably, they wanted to

know major program milestones. During these conversations, I could feel the defeat of these women when they shared that they sought clarity and felt their journey was unnecessarily confusing. They shared numerous stories about the hidden curriculum in doctoral training. In many situations, this frustration prompted the women to seek information and build a community to support them better. The following two subthemes explore the community they built.

Support: "Most Significant Is My Advisor"

The women are enrolled in various doctoral programs with varying structures. Thus, they varied quite a bit in their relationships with advisors and used various terms to refer to their advisors (e.g., chair, faculty mentor). For the sake of this research, I will use the term advisor to discuss the faculty contact who helps guide the student through their dissertation research. Some of the women in this study began building relationships with their prospective advisors when applying to the doctoral programs to ensure that their research interests aligned and to secure funding from the department. Others had an advisor assigned to them, and others were responsible for seeking out their advisors when they were nearing the dissertation phase. Three women said they have no significant relationship with their advisor. The relationship with their advisor was significant because this support meant someone could advocate and offer academic support and encouragement. Expectations of an advisor relationship are one of the areas where first-generation students differ from continuing-generation students at the doctoral level. Wofford et al. (2021) found that first-generation doctoral students often expect direct communication, confirmation about the "right" way to progress, and skill-based development. This finding was the expectation of the women in this study. They shared wanting more guidance and wanted to know that they were "on the right track." This contrasts the relationship continuing-generation students expect, which is one of independence and support as needed.

Of the three who reported not having a meaningful connection with their advisor, Patricia and Estrella attributed it to the fact that they are still early on in coursework and have not yet built an individual relationship with their advisor. Patricia said her program assigns an advisor when students are close to conducting research, so she does not yet know who it will be. Her program has success coaches who help with registration and regularly check in on the students. So, she has a point of contact for various questions, but she will eventually have an advisor for her research. Estrella said her program is so tiny that once a student figures out their research, it will be evident which of the five faculty in the program will become their advisor. Laney said her program is set up so that the course instructor of that semester is the point of contact for all research. She said the benefit is that she sees the instructor regularly in class but noted more frustrations with this model.

> I wish it was just one person because now… going into the third one [research course], and I have a third person, I'm going to have to explain everything all over again. Everybody's expectations and writing styles are different… It [her current research proposal] is how the previous person wanted it.

The rest of the women had meaningful relationships with their advisors. However, for Brianna, the match took a while. At the time of the interview, Brianna was uniquely working with her fourth advisor. One switch was due to departmental shifts, but she initiated the other three. Just the switches between her chairs have been trying for her. Brianna explained how her advisor would harshly tell her, "that's wrong, go fix it," without guiding her on what to do differently, leaving her unsure of how to respond or what to do next. She felt the most discredited when one of her advisors encouraged her to withdraw from the doctoral program and opt for a master's degree. Brianna wanted support and guidance on her independent research, but

the advisor advocated for her to leave the doctoral program. After several tumultuous years, at the time of the interview, she worked with an advisor she found supportive. She appreciates that her current advisor has a supportive approach, "like a coach. Think about it this way. Here's an article I found…." As important as common research interests are, Brianna felt most supported when she connected with her advisor personally; they had a similar way of working.

Luisa and Maya have working relationships with their advisors, but both mentioned that they would not approach their advisors with anything beyond the scope of their research. Luisa said that her relationship with her advisor is complicated. She sought him out because it was essential to her to have an advisor whom she identified with on multiple levels (e.g., identifying as Latino, from an immigrant family, Spanish speaking). Four years into her program, she appreciates their commonalities, but their relationship was strained with limited contact and working in different locations during the pandemic. She has connected with women faculty in her department to bolster the research support from her advisor. "After having a child, I was relying on other mentors who are also mothers. Those folks have been instrumental. My advisor I see simply as my advisor, but my mentorship I receive elsewhere." Similarly, Maya selected her Ph.D. program specifically for her advisor, but then shortly after beginning her doctoral work, her advisor was recruited out of state. Since then, she has found someone in the department to step into that advisor role. Maya said,

> I have learned a lot about the mentorship/advising part of doctoral work. During all this, an advisor cannot check all your boxes. Grad students really need to be told to think about what is important to them before they enter. I feel like that would have helped me a lot. I have high hopes for this relationship, though.

Maya referred to her search for an advisor. She had a checklist of attributes she was looking for in an advisor. She had conversations with people she connected with on research, but not personally. Ultimately, she concluded that she needed an advisor to help her with the dissertation process. Everyone else in the department with whom she formed connections would continue to see as her mentors. She did not need one person to meet all of these needs; she values the mentorship from faculty beyond her advisor.

Multiple women enjoyed working with their advisors, felt supported, and admired their advisors for various professional and personal reasons. Camille and CM were in touch with their advisors before beginning their programs. Camille appreciated the direction she received from her advisor,

> So, my advisor is really great. Since before I applied and was accepted, he was already kind of coaching me to think through how to funnel everything I do. Every class I take, every project I work on, into this very specific place where we both agree my footprint is going to be. So, he helped me identify first where there's a gap in the field…. That overlaps with what I'm really interested in. He helped me funnel all of the different components of doing a Ph.D. into really purposeful and useful ways.

CM said that before applying to the program, her advisor was always quick to respond to emails, invited CM to meet with her, and was very responsive and always willing to help. CM said she was surprised to have an advisor who willingly supported her. This mentorship and work ethic is something CM admires in her advisor, and it is now something she emulates with her students. She saw the difference this made for her, so she picked up these habits and integrated them into her work. Not only does she feel lucky to have her advisor, but she also feels supported and aspires to be like her. Ruthie also really admires her advisor. She shared that he is the most

significant support to her on this journey, “I chose him because he is in a similar field of my work, but also for his understated compassion for students” She appreciates his focus on “learning” and “equity.” This relationship let Ruthie ask questions, seek out his guidance, and want to spend time learning from him.

When Josephine spoke about her relationship with her advisor, she used positive statements such as “my favorite human being,” “he’s been great,” and “I’m so fortunate to have him.” I probed further to ask for a specific example of his support. She shared, “…he’s made the dissertation like t-ball for me. He makes sure that it’s perfectly set up on the post, so I can just take a bat and hit.” Hands-on guidance like this from an advisor translates into confident progress through the program. For Damia, developing a relationship with her advisor took longer. She recalled connecting professionally early on, but Damia always wondered if her advisor liked her personally. This doubt was always on Damia’s mind when they met. After an emotionally charged meeting that left Damia in tears, they candidly discussed their relationship. Damia recalled,

> I went, oh. Oh, she likes me. She likes me as a person. Wait. Okay, hold on… and I reframed the way I was looking at things. And then, we continued to have conversations over the next several months of that year. It came out that she was a first-generation student. She had come from a lower-income family. She was a single mother, and we started making all of these personal connections where I realized all these things, I had been sharing she had been hearing and going, yep, I’m just like that. But she just hadn’t been sharing that back to me…. This woman really understands me, where I’m coming from, and the things I need to develop to be a good professional, not just to graduate from the program.

This personal disclosure helped Damia feel connected and helped her advisor guide her in ways that may not have been possible otherwise. Whether it was guidance on research, having a person to ask questions, or just feeling like they had someone in the department, the women spoke about their relationships with their advisors with gratitude and admiration. Across women in this study, they shared that they look forward to conversations with their advisors. They see these conversations as a time to problem solve, talk through their research, and make progress. The women saw these relationships and the continued conversations as a productive part of their dissertation journey.

Support: "We're Going to Do This Together"

In addition to support from advisors, women also mentioned that their relationships with peers were meaningful. This finding expands beyond collaborating on a group project. A couple of women mentioned that they leaned on their peers for help with a particular subject or were helping their peers. This is more about the friendship and support they found to be critical to their success—someone who was also in a doctoral program and could understand the shared challenges. Sverdlik et al. (2018) found that for some doctoral students' peer interactions were the most important way to feel that they belong. Maya, Camille, Brianna, and Patricia mentioned they had not made close friendships in their program. However, the other nine had moving stories about how their peers were supportive when they needed someone who understood their struggles.

Many women found these peers within their program, some with other doctoral students at their university. CM moves through her doctoral program individually but found support through a doctoral student community organization at her university. She connected with people who are on a similar pace in their programs. Numerous women mentioned that they lean on their

peers for support with logistical pieces such as course registration, sharing program information, brainstorming for class assignments, emotional support, and friendship. Many of them mentioned that they most appreciated the constant communication via text, regularly checking in on each other, discussing frustrations, and having friends with whom they could share the journey. Lucy mentioned that she felt alone early in the program, but after a couple of semesters, she has found friends whom she connects with outside of class,

> There's about four of us who will often be checking on each other during class "you look worn out, are you okay?" "Yes, this semester is insane, no it's not just you." "Yeah, I'm way behind too." I wouldn't say it's cliquey. I wouldn't use that word. I have found my circle.

Ruthie said that the raw course discussions with people who already had their profession in common helped her bond with two classmates. After thought-provoking course discussions, she shared,

> All of a sudden, we were this really connected, vulnerable group. That's what connected Mary and I… It's what connected Dan and I. Both of them I view as extremely brilliant humans. When they share and when they talk, I listen to the words because they're going to say something really magical. I'm gonna have to write it down. I like that kind of energy, and when they started to be vulnerable, I'll just tell you my world.

Kirby mentioned that she connected most with the five women in her cohort, and Luisa mentioned that she connected most with other moms in the program. Josephine said she feels she belongs in the program because of

> having solid peer relationships, and I think particularly as women, we have a leg up in that. We know that we need each other's support, and that we seek it, and that we willingly give it. It's just kind of a natural part of our identity to some degree.

The women who found peers that reciprocally cared and supported one another shared how meaningful those friendships were to them. They helped make the journey easier to navigate and more enjoyable. They all have varied ideas about whose responsibility it is to help doctoral students make these connections with their peers. Maya and Brianna thought advisors should bring students together with similar interests. Patricia shared that she longed for this type of connection but "I'm not going to create a peer group on my own. I will join one, and I will ask for help." Maya shared the same sentiment "I kind of feel like sometimes I'm floating a little bit, and not having a core group of people" she continued to share that her peers feel the same way "could I set up something with them? Sure. I'm not going to do that, though, because it's just more work." On the other hand, Damia is part of a program that students move through individually, and "the only reason I have a cohort is because I created it. So four of us started at the same time, and I looked at them and went, okay, cool. We're going to do this together." Now even faculty in the department refer to her group as a cohort. Damia wanted the same connections every woman wanted, and she initiated that community for her group. While they discussed their experiences, they highlighted their ability to be successful as doctoral students.

Balance, Self-Belief, and Community Empower Success

The previous three themes explored the experiences of the thirteen women in this study and their challenges as doctoral mothers. Across the women who participated in my study, there was a shared experience of increased confidence and empowerment during their doctoral journey. As an important context for interpreting these findings, some women began their

doctoral journey during the pandemic and shared that those years were incredibly challenging. Brianna said, “when it was the rough and dangerous COVID, I was in an ICU, so I was down for like six months… when I had COVID, they actually changed the format of the proposal.” Not only was she hospitalized, but when she returned to school, she had to reformat her entire proposal. Kirby began her dissertation proposal in January 2020 with in-person data collection, “I had to completely change my whole dissertation because of COVID, and it took me a year and a half to really nail down an idea… that’s doable with COVID, and that’s okay to do for a dissertation.” Damia said the culture of her doctoral program shifted “after COVID that attitude [being solely a doctoral student] changed significantly. Now she [her advisor] will outright tell the new students family comes first… we need to support the whole person.” Brianna, Kirby, and Damia all began their doctoral programs before the pandemic and were able to speak to the additional challenges that this meant for them as doctoral students.

Women gave birth, grieved the loss of loved ones, changed professional roles, changed doctoral programs, moved states, gained additional funding, and lost funding. While there is no way to attribute specific pieces of personal growth to the doctoral program, specifically, there was no doubt that these women have grown throughout this journey. Without question, they experienced growth as researchers and as content experts. Nevertheless, they also experienced personal growth along the way.

For some women, their self-reflection was facilitated by their program or formal therapy, or they initiated it for themself. Camille spoke of a doctoral student who was a couple of years ahead of her, and this woman encouraged Camille to begin therapy alongside the Ph.D. program. “I highly recommend it because you’re a parent and a woman, and all of these things are gonna come up even if you don’t realize it.” Camille shared that she was so grateful for the opportunity

to talk through "a lot of family stuff because I was spending so much intellectual time thinking and reading." The advice to have support along the way and to prompt self-reflection helped Camille make meaning of her experience.

Josephine said that in the first year of her program, "they really put a huge emphasis on figuring yourself out." She said that as a person, this self-reflection has, "helped me to be much more comfortable in my own authentic presentation. In not feeling like I have to be a certain way in front of people." She also shared that through this program, she has learned, "I don't have to be moving at a fast rate of speed all day every day to do what I need to get done." This idea of slowing down was shared among women during the interviews. Luisa also mentioned that she has learned to slow down and show up authentically. Through this doctoral journey, they sought ways to live authentically as one person who can show up personally and professionally. Ruthie shared,

> I realized I wasn't willing to change—I'm still who I am. And I'm growing, but I'm not gonna pretend to use words that I would never use in a regular conversation. That's not who I am. I am Ruthie, and I grew up in [rural town], and neither of my parents graduated eighth grade. So, I'm just going to be who I am because, at some point, that little girl is still sitting in there. So, we're gonna move forward with that.

Damia has taken this self-reflection and already applied it to her professional life. She said her doctoral program amplified the importance of her authenticity.

> The whole process of changing as an individual, and becoming aware of my [autism] diagnosis, made me very aware of the fact that identity and explicit exposure to people who are like you is important, right? And so now I don't mask while I'm teaching. I explicitly tell students on the very first day of class – you know I have autism, I have

> ADHD, I'm a neurodivergent person, and I'm not going to sit here and hide this from you. You need to see what this looks like and how you can still be those things and be successful and professional.

Ruthie and Damia's comments exemplify how women learn, grow, and change through their journey as doctoral students. This growth expands beyond being a student when they apply what they learn to other facets of their lives. While Ruthie and Damia are further along in their programs, they both mentioned regularly attending counseling sessions to prompt reflection and make meaning of the experiences. In addition to the personal fulfillment they experienced, they also noted their increased confidence as professionals and researchers which I will discuss next. Other women had not yet experienced this insight or growth, making them doubt and question their abilities. These findings highlight the importance of self-reflection and support from qualified mental health professionals to help students understand how they make meaning of their doctoral experience.

Success: "I Can Learn That"

While some women in this study shared tangible examples of the value of their doctoral degree, others spoke about the value they anticipate in the future. Through the experience of being doctoral students, they are on a trajectory of continued growth. There are numerous examples of ways they hope this degree will continue to add value upon their graduation. CM has found that she gained many transferrable skills through her Ph.D. training. Now she has "already built the confidence to promote herself." She is comfortable telling a potential employer, "I don't know, but give me some time. I can learn that." This Ph.D. helped CM learn something new and realize she likes learning new things. Rather than feeling she gained the skills for a job. She gained self-belief and the ability to learn any new position or field. Just like

CM, Luisa shared that the most significant value for her is professional freedom, “Essentially, I don’t have to pick. I could have a private practice, and I could be a professor, I could be an adjunct, I could go into public policy… I will be fine. My family will be fine.” Many women shared Luisa’s vision of professional freedom, which means pursuing meaningful work and financial stability.

Patricia is a higher education professional, so in her position, she works with university faculty daily. She credits that her doctoral program “has opened up a different world conversationally.” She can converse with them with another layer of shared experience and understanding. Perhaps Patricia is engaging in conversations because she really does have a new level of understanding, or maybe she feels more confident to participate because she is legitimized by her degree in progress. Either way, she is comfortable participating in conversations at a broader university level. As illustrated in the quotes above, many women shared the professional opportunities they hoped for beyond graduation.

In some cases, the women discussed the value of their degrees regarding their children. They see themselves as an example in their family. Their children see them setting an academic goal and working towards it. Lucy shared that she likes that her daughter sees women in leadership roles throughout this process. Lucy’s daughter met so many women professors that she assumed all women were called “doctor”. So many of the women I interviewed want their children to see graduate programs as a possibility as they search for the work that they find interesting. Camille said it is her greatest hope to be an example to her children. She wants them to see this as a possibility for themselves. She is modeling what it looks like to be committed to her education and passionate about something. Damia also shared that so much of the value is

that she wants to show her children who are neurodivergent like her, “we’re all struggling, but I did this and so can you.”

In closing, I will sum up this section on reflection and personal growth with a sentiment I heard from a few women. Josephine said pursuing this terminal degree has “really broken open the gates for me. I no longer just think I’m an intelligent being. I know I am. I no longer just think I might have something of importance to contribute to the conversation. I know I do.” Here a number of the women are talking about their doctoral experiences as part of a more extensive discussion about how women mother. Specifically, they note that mothers in doctoral programs are motivated by a desire to be a role model to their children, so that their children too, pursue academic and professional goals.

Conclusion

While prior research has examined women doctoral students and first-generation doctoral students, my study uses feminist standpoint theory to contribute to the literature by centering women's voices to explore the unique and diverse experiences of first-generation doctoral mothers. Bringing the three themes together, my main takeaway is that even the thirteen irrefutably successful women in this study experienced frequent systemic obstacles in their doctoral training. They discussed barriers to access and barriers to their continued success in their doctoral programs—these barriers related to their identities, such as being a mother and their first-generation status. Across themes, the women spoke about their experiences regarding the phases of their doctoral training. During coursework, they expressed higher self-confidence and a lower sense of belonging. While at the dissertation phase, they expressed a lower confidence level in their ability to graduate and a higher sense of belonging. My findings provide new insights into how the women in this study exercised agency to navigate existing systems

within their programs. At times, participants shared that they felt the systems of higher education were oppressive or exclusionary, emphasizing the self-discipline necessary to navigate the structural inequities that exist in higher education. All thirteen women in this study were optimistic about their future professions; they were individually motivated and highly driven to pursue their goals regardless of personal or academic challenges. These findings provide insight into some challenges by exploring how first-generation doctoral mothers interact with various social and institutional systems and sharing how they use their social capital and agency to ensure academic success. In Chapter Five, I discuss the implications of this study and recommendations for practice and future research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter includes a thorough discussion and interpretation of the findings focusing on how the literature in Chapter Two and the findings in Chapter Four converge. I begin by providing (1) a summary of the purpose of the study, (2) the theoretical implications, (3) the findings in relation to the literature reviewed, (4) the implications of these findings for practice and future research, and (5) a conclusion.

Summary of the Study Purpose

In this hermeneutic phenomenological study, I aimed to explore and understand the lived experiences of the women I interviewed, who were all doctoral students, first-generation college students, and mothers. In doing so, I sought to highlight the challenges these women face on the path to their doctoral degrees and how those challenges inform their ability to persist, focusing on the following question: what are the lived experiences of first-generation women doctoral students [who are mothers] persisting in their doctoral program? To address this question, I recruited thirteen women who shared their experiences with me during two semi-structured interviews per person, with all twenty-six interviews lasting approximately sixty minutes and, at most, ninety minutes. Each woman was actively enrolled in a doctoral program at the time of the interviews. The women in this study were conscious of their identity as doctoral mothers, though this identity varied for each woman. Some of them were moms for decades before they began their doctoral journey, and others became moms for the first time as doctoral students. Guided by a feminist standpoint, which identifies the importance of developing knowledge that is socially situated through the researcher's and participants' standpoints, I sought to recruit women from diverse ethnic backgrounds to be inclusive of multiple voices. Ultimately, I learned how

complicated it is, even for these accomplished women, to persist through their doctoral programs.

Illuminating Doctoral Mothers' Standpoint

A university administrator takes advantage of the tuition benefit for employees to study leadership in an Ed.D. program. An Indigenous Latina who is a first-generation American, excels as an undergraduate honor student and is immediately accepted into a Ph.D. program where she realizes her professional autonomy as a researcher. A woman raises her children and owns a private practice, then pursues a Psy.D. to hone her expertise as a client-centered therapist. These three examples speak to women pursuing higher education. However, these brief statements lack the nuance of actual experiences. Stories like these broad overviews lack depth, gloss over challenges, and exclude details in data-driven research, resulting in the existing andocentric knowledge in higher education (LeSavoy & Bergeroni, 2011). Since we know that the perspective of men guides discourse in the social sciences and minimizes the voices of women (Gurung, 2020), I leaned on the work of Harding (2004) and Freeman (2019) to use feminist standpoint theory as a framework to initiate my research with the voices of women. I sought insight, nuance, and depth into women's lived experiences using standpoint theory. I rejected the marginalization of women by situating their experiences at the center of the study. The women brought their authentic selves to our conversations and their doctoral programs, even when the doctoral program was not necessarily encouraging authenticity from these women. Significantly, this experience shaped how they persist in their doctoral program by prompting them to value empathy, compassion, and a human-first worldview.

The stories women shared in this study have implications beyond each individual transformation. As I discuss in this chapter, my conversations with the women in this study led

me to new visions and understandings. These understandings have the following three purposes. First, I used a feminist standpoint to understand women's experiences in doctoral programs. Secondly, women beyond myself can use this study to understand the phenomenon. And even further, beyond understanding, these findings can be used to improve the conditions for women in higher education.

Discussion

As I shared in Chapter Four, I identified three themes in the data that answer the question about how first-generation doctoral mothers experience their doctoral programs: they experienced (a) unattainable work-life balance for doctoral students, (b) (problematizing) stories of grit and resilience, and (c) the women use agency to create community. The first theme addresses how women navigate the complexities of having multiple roles, the second speaks to the way women in this study experience their confidence in terms of their perceived ability to persist, and the third addresses how they articulated feeling a sense of belonging to their program (or lack thereof).

The women in this study are diverse in their schools, research interests, and careers, but they are all awe-inspiring individuals. In addition to being moms, they are leaders in their workplace, they are volunteers contributing to their community, and they have chosen to pursue the ambitious goal of pursuing a doctorate. At the time of the interviews, I did not doubt that these thirteen women would complete their degrees because of how they spoke about their discipline, research interests, and personal drive in this process. They are highly motivated, inspiring women who brought professional experience and zeal to this study. The women described their doctoral experience by describing how they persisted through an unknown process, reconciled the incompatibilities of having multiple roles, viewed the importance of

social capital, and developed a sense of belonging. Most notably, the women in this study discussed the profound change they experienced in themselves by furthering their education.

Persisting in an Unknown Process

Across women in this study, there was a simultaneous experience of being a driven, motivated professional and feeling that this experience was an unknown process. Camille shared that the challenge for her stemmed from "the difference between being a professional in a career [where she] is confident and competent in what [she's] doing, and the ways doctoral students are continually positioned as not knowing in this learning space." She continued to share "for doctoral students it's like, 'oh, you're gonna get there, but you're not there yet,' and having that invalidation of experience and expertise has been really difficult." This is just one example of how the women in this study lean on their professional competence to help get them through times when they experience invalidation or self-doubt as doctoral students.

In this sense, I am using the word belief to share findings about how women perceived competence in their ability to complete doctoral-level work (Sverdlik & Hall, 2020). There are various examples of this complexity that women experienced. Maya shared that "my entire first year was super uncomfortable for me… I went from the expert in this [equity in higher education] to I don't know anything about anything. Part of that is being a first-generation doctoral student and being a little bit out of your wheelhouse." In general, the women believed in their ability as students, professionals, and future academics, which often led them to pursue a doctoral degree; however, through the doctoral degree, they often questioned this belief in themselves as doctoral students and their belief to complete the program.

Across participants and even within individual experiences, I found that there were times when women experienced greater and lesser belief in themselves. Many women shared high

levels of self-belief as applicants and early in doctoral coursework, while women described self-doubt as they advanced toward comprehensive exams and the dissertation. The women approaching graduation reported belief that they would complete the degree. Sverdlik and Hall (2020) similarly found that doctoral students tend to report the highest levels of internal motivation and emotional well-being when they are in coursework and the lowest levels of internal motivation and emotional well-being during the comprehensive exam phase. Perhaps this results from doctoral work being increasingly independent as student progress, or maybe it is the unstructured nature of the later doctoral training (e.g., comprehensive exams and dissertations). This acclimatization process is worth sharing with doctoral students, so they understand that the phases in doctoral training will likely result in shifts in their motivation and well-being and that each shift is malleable and short-term. This observation is worthy of continued research to determine if trends in individual self-belief at various stages of the doctoral degree program exist among other student populations.

They spoke of the assets that served them well through their program. When I asked each woman about their ability to progress and the belief that they would graduate, Maya said her "own motivation" is her most significant asset. Luisa discussed her organization as a strength "I have a very set schedule," and Ruthie said, "discipline is the word I would use." However, upon probing about this self-belief, there was an overwhelming shift in the phrases they used. Damia said, "one of the things that I have brought into this is the level of grit I have," Maya said, "I feel like I'm pretty resilient." As I discussed in Chapter Four, these phrases are problematic because they imply that individuals are at fault for larger structural inequities and systems of power.

Both phrases—grit and resilience—are individualized when we know that persistence in higher education is not just an individualized process but structurally it is inequitable (Slater,

2022). Focusing on the achievement of an individual, as these phrases imply, minimizes the collective struggle and the need to explore further collective challenges that could lead to transformative change in higher education as an institution. Increasingly, scholars have expressed concern that much of the higher education literature has utilized deficit frameworks to blame minoritized individuals for the results of structural inequities (e.g., Holley & Gardner, 2012; House et al., 2020; Phu, 2020; Sánchez-Connally, 2018; Schelbe et al., 2019; Vega, 2016). As educational researchers, we must continue to pursue more equitable education. To do this, we must not focus on such affirmative individual language but critically analyze the larger system. One of the collective struggles I found among the women in this study was how becoming a doctoral student was challenging to balance with their other roles.

The Incompatibility of Multiple Roles

Every woman in this study had multiple anecdotes about their daily challenges. When I asked them to discuss their experience balancing multiple roles, some chuckled, and others gave an exhausted sigh, indicating that they saw balance as an unattainable goal. This aligns with role conflict theory which assumes there are socially constructed gender-based stereotypes around women's roles professionally and at home. This theory suggests that individuals have limited time and energy, so multiple roles can lead to excessive role expectations that may be incompatible (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). While the women in this study referenced a couple of ways being a doctoral student has benefited their other roles (e.g., Estrella and Ruthie feeling that it has helped their mothering, and Damia feeling that it helped her teaching) they focused on the incompatibility of their multiple roles as I will discuss further in this section.

These findings relate to the concept of complex personhood (Gordon, 2008), as the women in my study brought myriad identities to their graduate programs, and their views and

opinions shifted with every new experience. When considering complex personhood, I think about the various invisible identities that women mentioned throughout our interviews, which included chronic health issues, mental health diagnoses, sexual orientation, gender identity, and neurodivergence. Gordon's description of complex personhood captures the numerous intricacies that every person carries with them. At times, the women discussed sacrificing sleep *and* prioritizing their wellbeing, they felt both guilt and immense pride in their accomplishments, they tried to be present parents and were also distracted. These contradictions are examples of the depth of human experience. The women I interviewed were complex, and they brought themselves to the interviews in a way that spanned beyond the over simplified eligibility criteria of this study. These findings confirm and expand upon Gordon's complex personhood, as all thirteen women in my study described intersecting identities that do not necessarily fit into definable boxes, and that is where we find depth and nuance in their experiences.

As I shared in Chapter Four, the women in this study spoke about guilt as students, mothers, partners, and daughters. In line with the existing research by Sallee (2011) and Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2004), the women in this study shared that guilt is the emotion that most resonate with their experience regarding their ability to balance their academics and their home responsibilities. Camille shared, "I still feel a lot of guilt because I'm basically taking the time from them [her children]…. I'm balancing it, but this extra piece of guilt goes along with it that I can't get rid of. It's just kind of there all the time." Regardless of their field of study, or family dynamics, the combination of mothering and being a student led to guilt among women when they faced situations and prioritized their children over their work or vice versa (Sallee et al., 2016; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). This guilt was at the front of their minds, often making them feel inadequate in their mothering and student roles.

Nine of the thirteen women had partners, and they all expressed gratitude for the support from their partners. Being a doctoral student shifted their finances and ability to contribute time to household responsibilities. While many of the women I interviewed shared the sentiment, two articulated they feel indebted to their partner for their support and the increased responsibilities their partner is taking on due to this program. This finding that partner support is a helpful characteristic of doctoral students is discussed in the literature by Holley and Gardner (2012) and González (2006). Camille mentioned that she is grateful for her partner, and she said, "I really feel empathy for them [single moms]" because she sees how much more challenging it would be as a doctoral mother without a partner. Some women I met shared that they relied on their partners for financial support, while others most valued their partner's emotional support. In listening to the women share how they relied on their partners for support, I am left wondering if having a supportive partner is specific to my sample, or if could be part of a broader conversation about necessary support due to the limited time and energy the women in this study discussed as a result of being a doctoral student. The women in this study who had partners were each in relationships prior to beginning their doctoral programs. They discussed conversations with their partners before they applied to programs, as they considered relocating their families, and as they accepted admissions. In the case of the eleven partnered women in my sample, each discussed the encouragement they received from their partners to pursue this degree. More research is needed to explore how women doctoral students navigate their relationships, especially for those who may not receive consistent support from their partners.

In addition to having a partner, the women discussed the importance of family stability. Phu (2020) described the isolation and lack of sleep she experienced as a mothering doctoral student in her auto-ethnography and she mentioned the importance of family stability. When each

woman in my study discussed potential barriers to their degree completion, the responses often surrounded the current stability of their family. They saw shifting the stability of their family (if a family member were to pass away or if their spouse was to lose their job) as something that would complicate their roles even further and may prohibit them from completing their degree. This supportive partner and family stability were critical.

This stability was essential for Luisa and Kirby, the two women in this study, who gave birth to their first child during their doctoral programs. They each took a leave of absence immediately after childbirth and returned to their studies shortly after. They both shared that their advisors were accommodating and understanding about the leave of absence. Luisa mentioned that even though she was on leave, she was in touch with her colleague overseeing her projects. Phu (2020) and Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2004) found an unspoken pressure for doctoral students to demonstrate their commitment to their program by returning to the program as quickly as possible after childbirth. This was not the experience of Kirby and Luisa; however, I wonder if they will reflect on the experience differently a few more years removed from the situation.

Research by Phu (2020) and Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2004) discussed the invisibility of parenting. Coupled with professional or academic responsibilities, the invisibility can result in isolation and loneliness for those parents. However, the women in this study proactively ensured that their mothering identity was not invisible. Josephine said, “our cohort was eighteen. My core posse is five other students. Three of us are older moms with kids.” Kirby said that her daughter sits on her lap during meetings with her advisor. They shared that their role as a mom was a way they related to their peers, and it was a way that they formed connections with other parents in

their program. They found connections with other doctoral mothers to be a vital shared experience that translated to meaningful support.

The Expense of Personal Well-Being

Based on the conversation about doctoral student well-being in the literature by Jackman et al. (2021) and Janta et al. (2012), as I began interviews, I assumed that well-being would be at the forefront of the experience for these women. I was curious about emotional well-being in terms of the stress of the coursework, paired with their additional responsibilities. When I asked Brianna how she takes care of her well-being as a student with so many responsibilities, I asked if she has prioritized her well-being in any way. “I don’t know that I have. I think I’m still learning. I think I’m trying to figure out how to do that.” This statement speaks to the literature that women could risk their health and happiness by pursuing academia that has even higher and often unmeasurable performance standards (Acker & Armenti, 2004). These performance standards seem impossible and lead to feelings of inadequacy. When I explicitly asked about their well-being since beginning the doctoral program, the overarching sense was that they were getting by day-to-day. Janta et al. (2012) shared that doctoral student well-being often reflects the culture of that individual doctoral program, and the women in this study spoke highly of the collaborative and inclusive aspects of their programs. While it is encouraging that the women in this study felt supported by their peers and advisors, women in doctoral programs with a more competitive culture may likely have a different experience. A couple of women answered the question about their well-being with major medical procedures, but those were health conditions that existed before they were doctoral students. Any stress they were experiencing was not a direct result of their role as doctoral students as much as it was a result of demands on their time and their lack of sleep. This shared experience from the women in this study aligns with Acker

and Armenti (2004) and Phu (2020), who similarly discuss the lack of sleep and the resulting increased stress of doctoral students. Their roles as moms and their desire to find balance in all their roles far surpassed the women's sense of well-being.

The complex environment of higher education challenges both work-life balance and emotional well-being. The women in this study shared experiences that are consistent with the research by Evans et al. (2018) that most graduate students do not have a sustainable work-life balance. Because of academic stressors, women experience uncertainty, anxiety, and loneliness (Janta et al., 2012; Posselt, 2018). At the same time, Schmidt and Hansson (2018) found that a person's emotional state and ability to manage stressors can impact their doctoral work and degree progress. These stressors looked different for each woman: Maya said, "it caused quite a bit of emotional stress at the beginning of the move," Kirby said inadequate funding causes "so much stress for a lot of students," Damia shared that her daughter's brain surgery came at "really really horrible timing for us." These stressors directly impacted their courses. In Damia's situation, she "ended up having to take an incomplete in one course that semester and finish it the following semester." As much as the students tried to keep external stressors from affecting their schoolwork, they inevitably impacted their academics. The women in this study experienced ever-changing demands on their time and energy as they attempted to find balance. This challenge strengthens the following discussion on why social capital and a sense of belonging are crucial to their success.

Social Capital & Belonging

In higher education contexts, there is an interconnectedness between social capital and belonging. Social capital includes the "three main components—trust, social network, and participation" (Ahn & Davis, 2020, p. 628). The definition is broad, so it stretches interpretations

(Baron et al., 2000). However, it also means that it can be ambiguous and difficult to measure (Patulny & Lind Haase Svendsen, 2007). Belonging is "a feeling of ease, safety, being connected and respected" (Ahn & Davis, 2020, p. 628) and is sometimes used as a measurable facet of social capital. In higher education, social capital and belonging are less ambiguous than in other fields because they fit within the boundary of the student's institution.

As we know from the literature by Gardner and Holley (2011) and Gardner (2013), belonging is essential to first-generation doctoral success. At the same time, most departments did not formally foster belonging among first-generation doctoral students. Students shared that they have various levels of social capital, and everyone had an ideal vision of what it would feel like to belong in their program. In every instance, the women in this study discussed how their various forms of social capital and their feelings of belonging aided their success.

The Importance of Social Capital

The women described their awareness of being first-generation college students in ways they may or may not have disclosed to their fellow doctoral students. However, they were acutely aware of this identity in class discussions, in interactions with their advisors, and in how they saw themselves as outsiders of the doctoral experience. The women in this study had varied levels of social capital. Maya was attending a new university where she knew no one, and Lucy was attending her undergraduate institution where she knew staff across campus. Ruthie understood that her perspective differed from most first-generation students, "it's a little bit different for me because I work within the university. I have a ton of social capital." Ruthie said that she was able to help her peers connect to resources on campus and "find my own chair because I have social capital." Ruthie's experience is unique, but it highlights just how much information is lost when a student does not have that social capital.

There is a significant overlap between Calarco's (2020) research on the hidden curriculum in doctoral programs and the need for social capital among the women in this study. Patricia and Damia referenced feeling like outsiders, one being a Latina student at a predominantly white university, and the other being neurodivergent. Camille shared that it took time for her to realize that the hidden curriculum was "not some sort of deficiency on my end. It is an actual gap that exists between my experience and the expectations from the program that I would have this insider knowledge." Over time, Camille recognized these moments as part of the hidden curriculum in doctoral training. She used this realization to replace her previous response of feeling "not as smart as someone." Across the study, the women longed for access to information. Some wanted onboarding information as new students, but there was a shared experience that even as a current doctoral student successfully meeting program milestones, there was still a need for access to information. This finding echoes the literature that the hidden curriculum continues throughout doctoral training because comprehensive exams and independent research are often more complex and less explicitly explained than earlier coursework (Jackman et al., 2021; Sverdlik & Hall, 2020). Almost all the women noted peers in their program who had a distinctly different experience from them because of their access to family members who have pursued graduate degrees, while the women in this study did not come from communities where doctoral holders were prevalent (González, 2006; Holley & Gardner, 2012; Sánchez-Connally, 2018). The conversation about the lack of access to information amplified the immense value of advisors and peers.

Scholars who study first-generation students and women continuously reference the importance of supportive faculty and college peers (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Kim et al., 2021). Their research shows that relationships within a social network motivate women to

persist. In addition to informal support systems, several studies found that having a mentor was a key to the student's success (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Green, 2015; Kim et al., 2021). This one individual, their advisor, contributed to the women's trust, social network, and continued participation, which is why the advisor relationship is crucial to doctoral students' social capital, especially for first-generation college students. Research also affirms the importance of collegial interactions between faculty and students, creating a supportive doctoral program climate that promotes furthering scholarship (Weidman & Stein, 2003). Women noted that the support from their advisors was multifaceted; they appreciate having an academic example, continuous encouragement, and emotional support, and this relationship validates their effort and progress.

The Importance of Belonging

Camille did not feel she belonged in her program, which she attributed to her being a mom and a first-generation college student. She had not yet experienced feeling ease or connectedness as a doctoral student with both identities. When I asked her what belonging would ideally feel like, she shared, "I wouldn't be the only one, and I would be able to find other people who kind of have similar roles, and maybe get together with them… we would be able to talk and connect… we wouldn't have to pull these things [various aspects of her identity] apart." I posed the same question to Luisa. She said that belonging is "being embraced and honored to come as you are." For Maya belonging means that she "feels comfortable as a researcher." Women in this study varied in terms of experiencing belonging. Most of the women in the proposal and dissertation phases felt that they belonged; however, the women still working on coursework reported a weaker sense of belonging which resonates with literature on first-generation doctoral students (Gardner, 2013; Gardner & Holley, 2011). A standard narrative among the women in this study was that a program faculty or other doctoral student encouraged

the student to apply to the program initially. The reassurance translated to a first step in belonging, and they saw this encouragement was an invitation and validation that they would fit well in the program. This finding reflects the literature where first-generation students credited a connection on campus for their interest and comfort in pursuing a graduate degree (Gardner & Holley, 2011). It also meant that the student began the program with someone who already knew them, which added to their feelings of connection.

Because of this theme, I returned to the literature and found that the women I interviewed were seeking out communities of practice. Communities of practice are "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, 2011, p. 1). Women in this study found this community of practice in their lab, with their advisor, with their peers, and in online forums for doctoral mothers. Students begin to develop feelings of belonging through participating in social interactions within these communities of practice (Park & Schallert, 2020). Conference presentations or connections with experts in their field aided in belongingness. Women in this study gauged their experiences (e.g., with advisors, on comprehensive exams, and publishing) by comparing and normalizing their experiences in terms of their peers. This social comparison helps students make meaning of their experiences during their doctoral training (Wofford & Blaney, 2021). This community provided validation, support, and a sense of belonging to the women. Relating to people in their fields in terms of both social capital and a sense of belonging allowed women to build meaningful reciprocal relationships, which aided in the women growing as researchers and academics.

"Profoundly Changed"

Without question, the women in this study justified the time and effort they committed to their doctoral degrees with the benefits of being doctoral students. They enjoyed learning and

developing as researchers. In addition to the immediate benefits of being a student, they discussed future benefits regarding positions they will be qualified for upon completing their degrees: content area experts, tenure track faculty, and university administrators. These positions provide optimism for the future. More than that, they allow women to continue doing work they are passionate about as practitioners and researchers. There was a shared experience of participants experiencing a shift in their worldview. Patricia said, "My worldview has narrowed in a positive way… I feel more focused." Lucy said, "I have changed tremendously," and Josephine shared, "this [doctoral program] has profoundly changed me." These moments of growth may be subtle or profound, but either way, they inspired continued learning.

The women in this study mentioned that they see themselves as examples for their children and find furthering their education fulfilling. Patricia shared, "the biggest value is that my kids are seeing what it means to be in school… that's not something I saw, and so I didn't know how to study…. They're seeing that it's natural in our home." The narratives the women in this study shared resonated with those of the expansionist theory, a more contemporary take on the role-conflict theory. The expansionist theory argues that multiple roles for individuals benefit the individual (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). While this theory looks at work and home responsibilities, it applies to women's experiences in this study. Through their experiences as doctoral students, the women in this study had an expanded frame of reference, increased their self-complexity, increased their opportunities for success, and built additional social support systems (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). Through this increased self-complexity, increased opportunities for success, and additional support, women made meaning of their multiple roles. This finding is worthy for future research to determine if doctoral training, professional responsibilities, and mothering fit within the frame of increased benefits due to multiple roles that fit within the

expansionist theory or if these women are at risk of the overload and distress of taking on too many roles (Barnett & Hyde, 2001).

The women in this study were encouraged to center their unique perspectives and the value they bring to their field in their doctoral programs. Josephine shared, “my program is more about being very much your own authentic self.” Luisa embraces authenticity and encourages the same from the first-generation students she mentors “I always say, please show up authentically.” It was incredibly inspiring to hear women talk about blending roles, embracing their strengths, and showing up authentically as academics and professionals. Gardner (2013) says this is a way first-generation doctoral students develop their academic identity by “integrating all of these selves” (p. 106). However, the women spoke of this more broadly than just in an academic sense. They shared that they are encouraged to speak and write in their voice, pursue practical research, and avoid using academic jargon with their research participants. Personally, professionally, and academically they are pursuing an authentic identity where they are most truly themselves as humans first.

After conversing with the women in this study, I have new insights about this specific student population. Seeing themselves and others around them as humans first leads to speaking with compassion and understanding and pursuing research that speaks to them as individuals. They combine this authenticity and discipline-specific expertise, which results in the women experiencing fulfillment through the doctoral journey. From these insights, I will share my recommendations for both doctoral program leadership and women pursuing these degrees. I will also set up questions for future work to continue actively improving higher education for women.

Recommendations

I intended this study to contribute to the growing body of literature describing doctoral training by including the lived experiences of first-generation doctoral mothers. Extant research does not fully explore belonging, self-belief, and managing multiple roles of doctoral mothers. It should be of great interest to institutional leaders that women, a highly motivated and irrefutably successful group of women, find their doctoral training to have numerous barriers that continuously challenge their ability to persist. While I understand the complexity of doctoral training being embedded in the academic system, it is important to continue evaluating the existing processes to dismantle the unbalanced legacy within institutions. Given the findings of this study, I will share practical applications.

Doctoral Programs Have a Responsibility to Improve Student Support and Pay

There is a need for doctoral programs to evaluate and update the ways they disseminate information, provide student support, and disburse funding for students with assistantships. The women in this study had various social capital, yet they all shared a need for clear communication regarding program policies. Students would benefit from a continuously updated doctoral program handbook, a new student orientation, and access to department faculty research interests. Across women in this study, there was a need for information. This practice would help ensure that students across the program have access to the same information.

The women in this study pointed out that one of the reasons they experienced varied information within their program was a result of students working with various faculty advisors. Some advisors shared more information than others. Some advisors provided more support than others. It was up to the students to reconcile these differences. Every woman in this study appreciated their advisor, but they also referenced how these relationships varied across their

program. While the support may never be the same across advisors, doctoral programs could easily make the following minor adjustments to support all students better.

One of the findings in this study was the importance of advisors, which has important implications for advising practices. Doctoral programs provide advising in various ways, but this advisor relationship varies greatly from the undergraduate experience. As an undergraduate, the advisor is there to measure degree progress and to help with course selection. This is a very small portion of the support students needed at a doctoral level. The women I interviewed were often looking for someone to help them choose a research topic and chair their dissertation committee. One possible way to address the labor implications for faculty who are advisors is by more clearly defining and differentiating the role of advisor versus mentor. The advisor's role around research support is most critical, but often that advisor is also providing mentoring support in a variety of ways. All faculty in a doctoral program could share the role of mentoring students by providing personal support, professional guidance, and networking opportunities. Perhaps this distinction would help support the faculty advisor, because their role would be more clearly defined. It may be ideal for the advisor could focus on research support, while all program faculty could help mentor students more broadly.

Given that community was an important finding in this study, doctoral programs should support students by initiating peer mentoring programs and creating an environment where faculty are comfortable disclosing their own marginalized backgrounds and/or invisible identities. Structured peer mentoring programs could be as simple as research groups or pairing incoming doctoral students with someone further along in the program. Faculty from historically marginalized backgrounds (or doctoral mothers) could self-disclose their own experiences with students to help students make meaning of their experiences and develop authentic connections

to their advisors (Holley & Gardner, 2012). Adding these initiatives would help eliminate the sense of some students having access to more information than others. First-generation support initiatives are successful at the undergraduate level, and it is time to extend similarly relevant support at the graduate level.

Another central finding in this study is how the women were juggling their professional and parenting roles on top of being doctoral students. Doctoral programs must acknowledge their students' (quite varied and sometimes conflicting) realities. The women with assistantships could not live off their wages as doctoral students, making them financially reliant on their partners. It is time for institutions to ensure that they pay graduate students a living wage. In addition to a living wage, doctoral mothers also need free or affordable childcare. Having free or affordable childcare would allow doctoral mothers a realistic option that does not currently exist. This accommodation would give doctoral mothers more time to focus on their doctoral work. Beyond ideas for doctoral programs, here are recommendations for women in this student population.

First-Generation Doctoral Mothers Must Ask for Help, Initiate Community, and Establish Healthy Boundaries

The findings of this study are rich with recommendations for women considering pursuing a doctoral degree or currently enrolled in a program. Once again, I will center the voices of the women. Doctoral mothers suggested the following recommendations. The most salient need for the women in this study is to normalize and understand the process; this normalization and understanding is only possible by conversing with others who have shared the experience. The women I interviewed wondered about norms. They had questions about the normal amount of work, stress, and support. These questions highlight the needs of first-generation doctoral mothers. They need to be able to ask for help, and they need to have people

whom they can ask. The women in this study discussed the shared challenge of asking for help. This challenge may result from how our society socializes girls to be helpers, or perhaps it is that all of the women I interviewed are very high achieving. Regardless, the women in this study discussed how hard it was to ask for help but how critical it was to their success. Conversations with their peers and advisors helped the women understand their experience, which was the first step to creating a community.

Another key finding in this study was the importance of peers who understand what it means to be a doctoral mother. Whether this community is within a doctoral cohort of peers, a graduate student organization, or an online forum, having people who understand the shared experience is critical. The women in this study discussed their reliance on this community to ask questions, clarify class assignments, share successes, and hold each other accountable. The level of embedded community varies greatly across doctoral programs. Even within a doctoral cohort, it is up to the women as individuals to initiate these connections and relationships. It is up to each woman to show up authentically as a first-generation doctoral mother to form connections with peers who share these (often invisible) identities.

While balancing tasks was an ongoing struggle for the women in this study, the challenge was lessened when the women established healthy boundaries. For some women, these boundaries were around their weekly schedule, the volume of coursework they completed each semester, or minimizing extraneous outside responsibilities. It is essential to be realistic about the logistic workload, anticipate conflict between responsibilities, and enforce boundaries to protect their well-being. Women must establish healthy boundaries around their physical health, such as sleep, exercise, and nourishing meals, and it is just as imperative that they use these boundaries to protect their emotional health by prioritizing downtime, breaks, and therapy. When

the women created boundaries that worked for them and their families, they could reduce their daily stress.

Directions for Future Research

As ascribed by phenomenological research, I aim to understand the meaning women make of their lived experiences. The experiences, insights, and understandings I shared in the findings have value for future research about first-generation students in graduate programs and women persisting in doctoral programs. As I analyzed and wrote Chapters 4 and 5, I compiled a list of potential focus areas for future research. One recommendation is to complement this study with a quantitative study to triangulate the findings with data. A quantitative study would allow us to measure how women experience relevant facets of this study (belonging, social capital, well-being) and analyze these students' success predictors.

I am curious about similar but distinctly different student populations (i.e., continuing-generation doctoral mothers, women who are not mothers, or first-generation students who do not identify as women). I am also curious about first-generation doctoral mothers in broader fields. Exploring these other populations would provide insight into similarities and differences across students. Two more focuses are beyond the scope of this study but are also worthy of future consideration. First, how do these findings look different for women not partnered with men? I am curious about the women not making it to graduate school because they do not have financial access, thus, eliminating the opportunity for them to produce knowledge. Second, what would faculty advisors say about how they experience their role in doctoral training?

Given that their advisor support was crucial to the women in this study and the broader literature, it is time to bring faculty advisors into this conversation. This inclusion would stretch the conversation beyond how an individual persists to include how programs provide support.

Reproducing this study with a different student population or researching the final two questions would lead to a more comprehensive understanding of doctoral training and ways to support doctoral students better.

Concluding Thoughts

The most important sources of information for this study were the thirteen remarkable women who I met through this study. They provided candor, depth, humor, and insight into their experiences in their various doctoral programs. Every woman in this study was ambitious, energetic, high-achieving, and they were each deeply committed to their individual responsibilities. Even this incredible group of women experienced a variety of factors that jeopardized their well-being as doctoral students. Understanding how they make meaning of their experience is the first step to situating this knowledge in the broader literature about doctoral training. From there I hope this will lead to improvements in doctoral policies and practices to support both first-generation students and women better. The women I met described how every single day they are committing to every role and are trying their best to meet every deadline while being a present parent. They are constantly adjusting and trying to better understand the expectations of them as doctoral students. With adjustments (i.e., peer mentoring, fair pay, childcare, consistent and comprehensive dissemination of information), the doctoral programs could greatly reduce stressors that these women are experiencing. A reduction of stress in this way would allow women, just like the women in this study, to complete their terminal degree in a way that is healthier than the current experience.

There is a need for continued research that includes women's voices, particularly those from underrepresented populations such as first-generation college students. With the knowledge gained from this study it is imperative that we make changes to the way marginalized students

access doctoral programs and are then supported as doctoral students. Only with this change will we see more equitable doctoral training, that in turn serves students and supports the creation and contribution of their knowledge to various fields. In research and practice we must model and encourage authenticity by seeing doctoral students as individual human beings with their own complex multifaceted identities and life experiences. The individualized approach will allow us to see the differences in each journey and better support them in completing a terminal degree. By centering women's voices and with continued research, we must reimagine doctoral training to promote the scholarly creation of knowledge in a way that is accessible, equitable, healthy, and sustainable.

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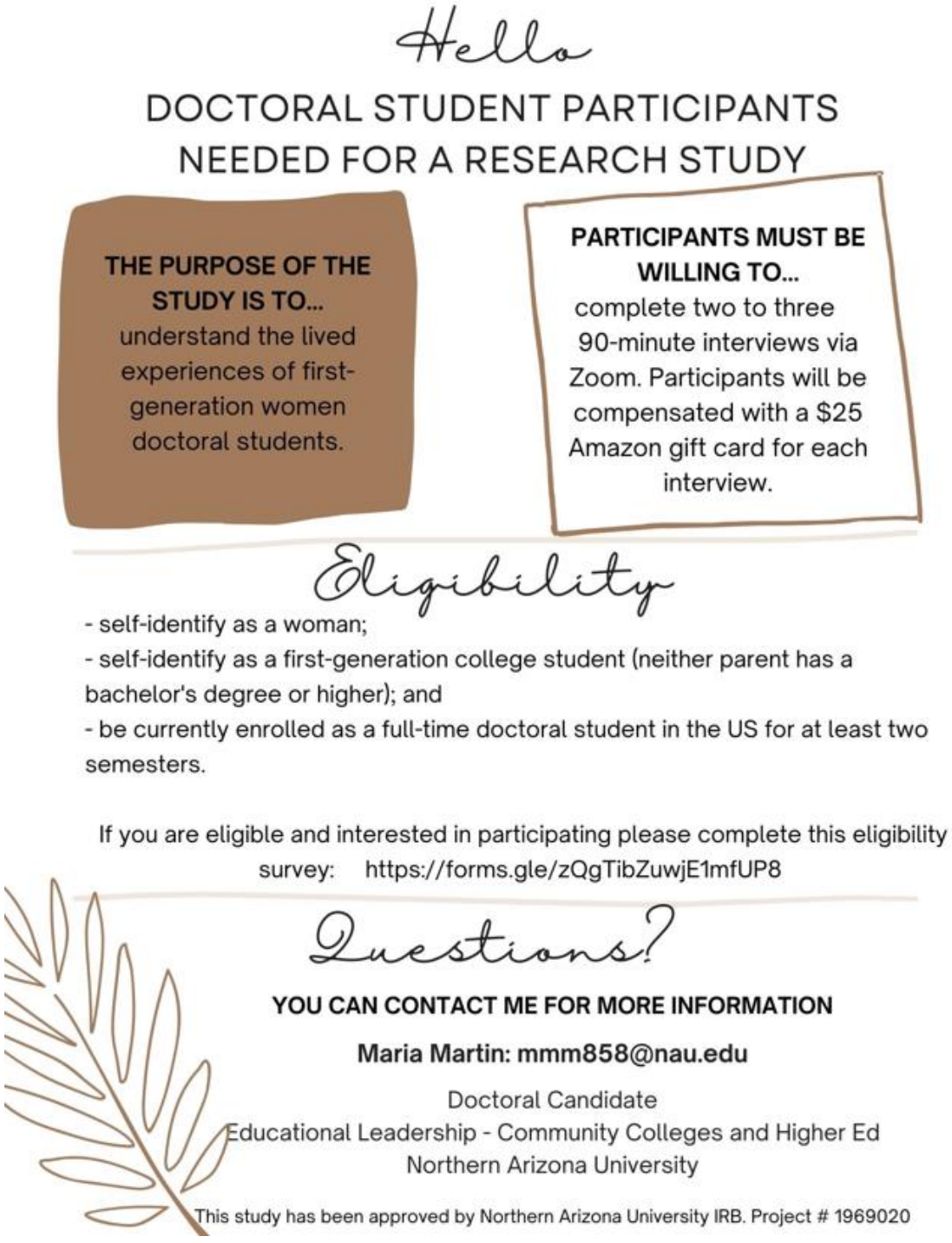
Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer



Appendix B: Screening Criteria

Participants Must:
1. Be 18 years of age or older; 2. Self-identify as a woman; 3. Self-identify as a first-generation college student (neither parent has a four-year degree or higher; 4. Meet the criteria of being currently enrolled in a doctoral program in the US; and 5. Comfortable participating in an interview in English.
The criteria for qualifying as currently enrolled in a doctoral program are:
1. Has completed at least two semesters of coursework; 2. Is currently enrolled in a doctoral program; and 3. Full-time enrollment as determined by their program.

Appendix C: Eligibility Survey

Demographics (free responses textbox)

First Name
University email
Phone Number
Ethnicity
University where you are currently enrolled
College/Department of your doctoral program
Doctoral Program Name

Eligibility (Yes/No responses)

Are you at least 18 years old?
Do you self-identify as a woman?
Do you self-identify as a first-generation college student (neither parent has a four-year degree or higher)?
Do you identify as Black, Indigenous, or as a person of color?
Are you currently enrolled in a doctoral program?
Are you enrolled full-time or part-time (as defined by your program)?
Have you completed at least two semesters of coursework?
Have you met your comprehensive exam milestone (if it is part of your program)?
Have you proposed your dissertation research and moved on to candidacy?
Are you comfortable completing interviews in English?
Do you currently work?
Are you a mother?
Are you available within the next two months to schedule two 90-minute interviews at a mutually agreed upon time?

Appendix D: Research Information Sheet

Project Number: 1969020-2
Approval Date: November 9, 2022
This stamp must be on all consenting documents

NAU NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY
Office of Research Compliance

Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: A Phenomenological Study of First-Generation, Women, Doctoral Students
Principal Investigator: Maria Martin

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you do not have to participate. This document contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate.

PURPOSE: You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to investigate the lived experience of first-generation college graduates, who self-identify as women, and are currently enrolled in a doctoral program.

RISKS/BENEFITS: The benefits include that participants will have an opportunity to share their story, they will be asked to recall specific/meaningful experiences from their doctoral experience. The risks may include emotional discomfort created from discussing your experience. Risks involved are no greater than those encountered in everyday life. This study is not affiliated with any group, and no one will know you are participating other than the researcher.

TIME COMMITMENT: Participants will be interviewed twice, each interview is expected to take 60-90 minutes.

COMPENSATION: Participants will be compensated with a $25 gift card for each interview. Participants who chose to withdraw after one interview or choose not to complete the first interview will still be compensated with the $25 gift card.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All research materials (written and taped) will be stored on a locked laptop in the researcher's home. The videotaped discussion parts will be transcribed, and I will remove all identifying material about you and any others that you talk about. Final data that is reported will be drawn from the transcripts without identifiers. Video recordings will be destroyed immediately at the conclusion of the study. The information in this research study will be held confidential by the researcher.

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This stamp must be on all consenting documents

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW: You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw at any time.

Your name will not be used in any report. Identifiable research data will be encrypted and password protected.

Your responses will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in an encrypted and password protected file. Only the research team will have access to the file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the list will be destroyed.

With your permission, I would like to videorecord this interview so that I can make an accurate transcript. Once I have made the transcript, I will erase the recordings. Your name will not be in the transcript or my notes.

The information that you give in the study will be anonymous. Your name will not be linked to your answers.

Information collected about you will not be used or shared for future research studies.

The information that you provide in the study will be handled confidentially. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released or shared as required by law. Northern Arizona University Institutional Review Board may review the research records for monitoring purposes.

I understand that should I have any further questions about my participation in this study, I may contact Maria Martin at 231-434-8320 or at mmm858@nau.edu, or I may contact her dissertation committee chairs Dr. Jennifer Blaney at jennifer.blaney@nau.edu or Dr. Frances Riemer at frances.riemer@nau.edu.

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact the Human Research Protection Program at 928-523-9551 or online at http://nau.edu/Research/Compliance/Human-Research/Welcome/.

Project Number: 1969020-2
Approval Date: November 9, 2022
This stamp must be on all consenting documents

VERBAL AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form, and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I affirm that I am at least 18 years of age, meet the eligibility for this study, and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I understand that before the first interview I will be asked to verbally confirm my participation in this study.

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Interview #1

1. **The decision to enroll in a doctoral program**
    1. How did you decide on your field of study and university?
    2. Can you reconstruct your journey of becoming a doctoral student?
        1. What were you experiencing in the moment you decided to apply? In the moment you were accepted? What did that look like?
    3. How did your family respond when you decided to pursue a doctorate?
2. **Significant moments in the program**
    1. As a first-generation college student what significant moments of your program stand out for you? (program orientation, meeting classmates, selecting a chair, independent research). Can you tell me more about this?
    2. Do you feel your program was supportive of first-gen students? What could your program have done to be more inviting or supportive of first-gen students?
    3. Can you describe your relationship with your peers and your professors?
    4. When you think about your doctoral experience – what crystalized moments stand out to you.
3. **Challenging moments**
    1. Was there a moment when the doctoral level work was especially challenging? Can you describe it?
    2. Can you discuss what it was like to balance being both a mother and a student?
    3. Do you foresee any potential barriers to completing your degree?
4. **Leave of Absences**
    1. Have you taken a leave of absence since beginning your program? Or have you considered taking a leave of absence?
        1. If you took a leave of absence (or considered one) can you share more about your experience?
        2. What were the motivating factors for you to continue in the program?
5. **Belongingness –** this is a term that refers to a person's perception of the amount of social support and acceptance they receive. A high sense of belongingness is correlated with a sense of wellbeing. This can be perceived quality of relationships and whether a person believes others care about their wellbeing and happiness. In contrast it can look like a lack of social support or loneliness.
    1. Have you experienced belonging (or lack thereof)?
    2. What is this like for first-generation women in doctoral programs?
    3. How do you describe and felt sense of belonging?
6. **Sketch**
    1. Can you draw yourself as a doctoral student mother with your various roles. Can you describe the picture?
7. **Moments of growth**
    1. Did you bring any strengths have helped you during your doctoral experience? What were those strengths? What have you learned about yourself?
    2. Can you share any moments of success you have experienced in your program?

Interview #2

1. **Start with member checking – discuss emergent themes in analysis so far**
2. **Advising**
    1. Can you talk more about your dynamic with your advisor?
    2. Do you have any other mentors within your program or outside of your program that have been significant?
    3. What is the emotion you feel when you are about to meet with your advisor?
3. **Covid**
    1. Depending on the timing of beginning a program, some women are discussing the effects of COVID on their experience. How has COVID effected your doctoral journey?
4. **Identity**
    1. Arguably, one of the most significant factors in lived experience is age- are you comfortable sharing how old you are?
        1. How has your age effected your experience?
    2. Can you tell me about any experiences you have had that may have felt gendered?
    3. How do you describe your lived experience regarding race?
    4. First-gen/ low income – have there been any class implications you have experienced as you continue your education? How has this affected relationships with your family?
    5. Has your worldview or sense of self expanded during your doctoral journey?
5. **Voice**
    1. Can you talk about the journey of developing an academic voice? language/ confidence. Probe: Validated or discredited?
6. **Strategies**
    1. What strategies have you used in your coursework or writing? Tutoring/writing center/editor
    2. Where do you pull motivation from?
7. **Well-being**
    1. Is there a moment you recall when you had to prioritize your own wellbeing? What was the situation and how did you respond?
    2. Physical health/ mental health how would you compare how you are doing now compared to before beginning the doctoral program?
    3. How do you take care of yourself? Self-care
8. **Balancing Roles –**
    1. Tell me about the way you balance your various roles (work, school, personal life…)
    2. In what ways have your various roles caused conflict for you?
    3. In what ways have your various roles added value for you?
9. **Moments of Growth**
    1. If I could wave a magic wand to give you support – What support would be most helpful to you?
    2. What value has being a doctoral student added to your life?
    3. What advice would you give to a first-gen student/mom starting a doc program?