DISTANCE EDUCATION AND WOMEN IN EARLY MOTHERHOOD:
AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF CAAP FEMALE STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES

BY

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A Final Project submitted to the
Campus Alberta Applied Psychology: Counselling Initiative
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MASTER OF COUNSELLING

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DEDICATION

To my daughters Amelie and Lauren- for enriching my life and helping me learn the life lessons of motherhood.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Grace, Samantha, and Lynne and their families who gave their voice to this research. I am also indebted to those researchers before me who have given voice to women through their exploration of motherhood. Thank you to my husband Bryan for his support and encouragement as I attempt to juggle my multiple roles and to my parents and parent-in-laws for guiding our paths as parents. I would also like to acknowledge the Athabasca University MCR fund awarded to Dr. Gina Wong-Wylie for women and Distance Education research, which provided financial support for the present study. A final thank-you to my project supervisor, Dr. Gina Wong-Wylie, for her guidance and support over the past year. Portions of this project were presented at the Canadian Association for Distance Education 2005 conference (Wong-Wylie, Orr, Grove, & Swansen, 2005).
The undersigned certifies that she or he has read and recommends to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a final project entitled DISTANCE EDUCATION AND WOMEN IN EARLY MOTHERHOOD: AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF CAAP FEMALE STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES submitted by KARIE ORR in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Counselling.

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Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

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ABSTRACT

This final project explores the experiences, facilitators, and barriers/challenges of women in early motherhood who are concurrently pursuing a graduate degree through Distance Education (DE). Particularly, this qualitative research project explores three unique experiences of women enrolled in the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology: Counselling Initiative (CAAP) program. Since I am also a student in the CAAP program and experiencing early motherhood, I chose an interpretive/constructivist perspective to guide the project while using the voice-centred relational method of data analysis (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). Through this project, a contextual understanding of successes for these students is highlighted. As well, preliminary recommendations for DE programs and for women considering DE while in early motherhood are suggested. Overall, the project contributes to understanding the need for further research in the area.
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PROLOGUE

“And when the stories emerge in their light and their darkness, we will be closer
to honoring the real victories involved in the tough, sweet work of making
ourselves into mothers.” Naomi Wolf (2001, p. 10)

In preparation for my own transition to motherhood three years ago, I read Naomi
Wolf’s (2001) captivating book describing her personal and professional exploration of
motherhood. Wolf described various women’s perspectives, including her own, that
highlighted a variety of socio-cultural issues that face women in the United States. These
issues included inadequate maternity benefits, medical model focus on pregnancy,
birthing and motherhood, and general lack of information to new mothers on the maternal
transition process. Although some of her reflections were not part of the Canadian context
and my experience, her book shed light on what she described as the misconceptions of
motherhood.

In my conversations with other women in early motherhood, I have listened to
many shared concerns about the challenges and misconceptions of entering into
motherhood in the twenty-first century. Besides my personal friendships, I have witnessed
similar themes from female clients within my counselling practice, particularly those
women experiencing depression. These shared themes often relate to unrealistic beliefs
and expectations of perfection, while other emerging themes relate to feelings of loss of
self. It has been through self-reflection on these conversations that led to my interest in
learning more about motherhood, an important yet sometimes overwhelming and
misunderstood period of transition in women’s lives.
In my experience with DE (distance education), I found out that I was pregnant with my first child at the same time I found out I was accepted into graduate school. At that time four years ago, I had fears that I would not be able to manage motherhood, work, and school. I had always wanted to become a mother, but I also wanted to complete a graduate degree. I chose to take on the task of graduate school while transitioning into motherhood. For the most part, I have had a very positive experience. Over these past three years taking on the often competing roles of mother and student, I have found graduate level DE as a flexible alternative to fit my lifestyle and assist to manage my multiple life roles, including part-time employment. In the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology: Counselling Initiative (CAAP) program, I have met several other women who were pregnant or had young children. Many of these women spoke of their diligent work at home during their children’s naptimes or through the night as their family slept.

Since I wanted to complete a final project that had personal meaning to me and I recognized that I was drawn towards feminist qualitative research, I chose to explore this topic area further. What I present next within my final project is a combination of these two areas, which has led me to a deeper and broader understanding of what Wolf (2001) described as the “tough, sweet work of making ourselves into mothers” (p. 10).
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The transition to motherhood has been described as a turning point during which a “person’s life course takes a new direction, requires adaptation or change in life and behaviours” (Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 2000, p. 172). During this time of change, many women face the challenges of multiple role strain associated with managing their roles of being a new mother, partner, employee, student, volunteer, daughter, and more (McBride, 1997). For those women who choose to pursue educational goals during early motherhood, distance education (DE) has been described as a flexible option that fits with the changing demands within their lives (Kramarae, 2001; Mathews, 1999). However, as lifelong learning and knowledge become increasingly important to economic well-being, female learners may face competing demands from work, family, and school (Kramarae, 2001). Adding to these demands within their multiple roles, female graduate students also face socio-cultural pressures related to unrealistic beliefs, standards, and expectations from self and others (McBride, 1997).

The purpose of this final project is to explore the experiences, facilitators, and barriers/challenges for women in early motherhood while pursuing DE. Through this project, three stories of women are presented. These women, like me, chose to embark on DE concurrent to early motherhood. Each woman has a unique story, yet various shared plot lines emerged within their narratives that highlight the challenges that these women have experienced through their own personal and professional journeys.

Current literature on women and DE provides a glimpse of various facilitators and barriers/challenges for women in this context. Mathews (1999) identified that DE mainly
attracts women with children. At Athabasca University (AU), Canada’s Open University, “the proportion of women graduates grew steadily in the past five years from 38 per cent in 1998-99 to 54 per cent in 2002-03” (Athabasca University, 2003). It is also important to note that the majority of distance learners are between the ages of 25 and 34 years (Bontempi, 2004), which are key childbearing years. Additionally, Canadian women are increasingly starting families at age 30 or older (Wu & MacNeill, 2003). For example in 1997, 31% of first time mothers were aged 30 or older, compared to only 7% in 1971. As such, delaying motherhood may be a means for women to navigate the varied roles and aspirations, including furthering their educational and career pursuits. DE is promoted for its flexibility, accessibility, and freedom. These factors attract women who have competing responsibilities associated with their multiple roles (Kramarae, 2001).

Besides these facilitators, Cross (1981) categorized three types of barriers for distance learners: situational, dispositional, and institutional. Although not specific for female distance learners, these barriers are significant for female distance learners even twenty-four years later. Situational barriers for distance learners may include lack of support from the student’s family, employer, or friends. For example, for some students, they may lack support both emotionally and financially to complete their distance learning pursuits. Dispositional barriers may include fear of failure, lack of self-confidence, and anxiety related to technological aspects of DE. For example, distance learners face the challenge of student role adjustment for the online learning environment (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes & Fung, 2004). Within this adjustment process, students are required to learn new protocols and expectations, especially around advances in technology associated with virtual learning. Institutional barriers may include lack of
student support services, technical assistance, and administrative needs. For instance, some students may be faced with access issues for traditional counselling/advising services due to their distance from the main campus.

Besides these barriers identified in the literature that affect both male and female students, the literature identifies additional barriers women face. These include challenges associated with multiple role strain (McBride, 1997), the impact of stress, and the influence of the “superwoman ideal” (Shaevit, 1984). Relational feminist theory underlying much of the research on the transition to motherhood identified several issues contributing to stress for mothers including societal expectations and the internal conflict of being a supermom (O’Reilly & Briscoe, 1993). Undoubtedly, women face a variety of barriers and challenges as they pursue post-secondary education, particularly as distance learners. Using Cross’s (1981) identified barriers for DE learners as a starting point, and the additional challenges that women in DE potentially face, a forth barrier defined as socio-cultural barriers/challenges is explored in this project. For instance, these four barriers/challenges for women in DE guided the semi-structured interviews. These categories will be further investigated as women in early motherhood and DE share their experiences through this preliminary study.

The fact that the majority of DE learners are female and that many are new mothers underlies the importance of learning from the experiences of women. Overall, this final project sheds light on understanding the issues from three woman’s perspectives. From their insights, it is my hope that potential options, support, information, and/or polices are developed or refined though DE programs to facilitate women’s success, thereby decreasing barriers for other women in similar life situations. I
also hope this project begins to help build connections between women within the CAAP program which may lead to a sense of shared understanding of this exciting yet often challenging period of transition in women’s lives.

The final project begins with a review of relevant literature focusing on two areas: 1) Women in DE, and 2) Feminist research within the topic of motherhood. Then, a discussion of the methods and procedures used for the research project is presented. The essence of the project, Individual Voices follows as it introduces Grace, Samantha, and Lynne’s stories. Each story represents a woman in a different transitional stage of early mother while pursuing DE. In the first story presented, Grace, speaks of her experiences taking classes with a newborn baby. The second story describes Samantha’s experience as she manages a toddler and a newborn while beginning her first year of the CAAP program. The third and final story presents Lynne’s perspective of having three preschoolers (ages 5 years, 3 years, and 9 months) while entering her third year of the program. A discussion of the six shared plot lines that emerged within their stories, specific recommendations to graduate DE programs, and guidance to other women considering DE during early motherhood are provided. Finally, the project concludes with identification of strengths/implications and limitations of the project as well as future directions for continued research in this area.
CHAPTER TWO

Theoretical Foundations

Research Strategy

For the purpose of this project, reviews of a variety of subject databases were conducted. Two distinct areas of literature were focused upon: 1) Women and DE, and 2) The transition to motherhood and early motherhood. The primary databases and searches included: Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, PsycINFO, Social Sciences Abstracts (Wilson), Academic Search Premier, ERIC (educational database), university book catalogues, and the CADE (Canadian Association for Distance Education) website. To narrow the search on the topic of motherhood, feminist literature was gathered focusing on historical reviews and pertinent studies that highlighted the topic of motherhood.

Prior to an overview of the literature for this project, an acknowledgement of my philosophical perspective is necessary. First, I recognize my connection with constructivist and emancipatory paradigms as they explore the contextual issues and unique lives of diverse groups, such as women, who have traditionally been marginalized (Mertens, 1998). The basic premise of the constructivist paradigm is that knowledge is socially constructed by people, like myself, active in the research process. The emancipatory paradigm directly addresses the political issues within research by confronting social oppression where it occurs. My choice of using the voice-centred relational method of data analysis (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998) directly addresses these issues. Therefore for the review on motherhood, many of the articles I have chosen explored unique challenges faced by individual women experiencing early motherhood. It
is important to note that my focus on constructivist and emancipatory paradigms influences the development of this project from the data collection process, analysis, presentation of the narratives, to the identification of the storying language or “shared plot lines” that highlight the common themes within each woman’s experience.

Second, I recognize that my personal demographics are reflective of much of the research conducted in both the areas of DE and motherhood. I am a Caucasian, middle class, married woman. As will be highlighted next in the literature review, the main critique of many of the contemporary studies on motherhood is their lack of focus on diverse groups of women (Nelson, 2003).

**Literature Overview**

Women are identified as the primary users of DE (Matthews, 1999). Yet very little is known about their personal experiences, particularly the experiences of women in early motherhood. The first section of this chapter identifies relevant issues for women as they pursue DE. Particularly, facilitators and barriers/challenges for female distance learners are highlighted. The second section of this chapter presents a review of historical and contemporary views on motherhood as they relate to psychological theory. In addition, key issues that inform this study within the topic of motherhood are discussed including a model of maternal transition, research on the concept of a *good mother*, post-natal depression issues, and the *biological clock*.

**Women and Distance Education**

**Facilitators**

It is not surprising that many researchers (e.g., Green Lister, 2003; Kramare, 2001; von Prummer, 2000) describe the flexibility of DE as appealing for female learners. From
a global perspective, DE has become a rapidly growing phenomenon that offers formal learning to women. Many of these women could not otherwise have access to schooling due to various social, demographic, and class issues affecting opportunities for education (Faith, 1988). For female learners in North America, DE is promoted as a flexible alternative to traditional on-campus programs that assists women to navigate through their various life aspirations. Kramarae (2001) identified DE as facilitating women’s educational pursuits by decreasing childcare and commuting costs, decreasing time needed to commute to educational facilities, and increasing accessibility for those who lived in rural or isolated communities. DE can also increase accessibility for those learners with disabilities or others that have been marginalized from traditional programs based on their life or social circumstances.

Within North America, the typical distance learner is described as female, 34 years of age, employed part-time, has previous college credit (Kramarae, 2001) and is married (Thompson, 2004). Bontempi’s (2004) research reflected these findings, identifying average distance learners are female and between the ages of 25 and 34. Not surprising, this age range is critical as it constitutes significant childbearing and childrearing years. Faith (1988) reported that women, who enrol in DE programs including those women who are employed, commonly identified their reason for choosing DE related to their responsibilities as mothers with young children. Additionally in Canada, DE has been reported by female college students as reducing their susceptibility for role strain and overload (Home, 1998).

Another positive outcome for women in DE relates to internal factors such as increased self-esteem. Heenan (2002) interviewed adult women in higher education and
found for those women who reported an enjoyable experience, that their confidence and self-esteem were positively impacted. Distance learning has also been cited to have the potential to provide accessibility to future opportunities for women, alleviating many of the problems associated with traditional university based classroom settings (Furst-Bowe & Ditman, 2001). Overall, research on women distance learners identifies DE as a convenient, accessible, and flexible alternative for women as they manage their multiple life roles while pursuing further professional and career development.

Nevertheless, a variety of barriers and challenges exist that impact student’s success. As previously noted in the introduction to this project, barriers can be categorized as situational, dispositional, institutional, (Cross, 1981) and socio-cultural (Wong-Wylie & Orr, in preparation). Ultimately, the effects of these barriers can result in undue stress and attrition in DE programs (Furst-Bowe & Ditman, 2001). Socio-cultural barriers/challenges, and their impact on women are discussed in the following section.

**Barriers/Challenges**

*Socio-cultural.* Kramarae’s (2001) work within the United States during the 1990’s explored women’s personal experiences of what she termed, *The Third Shift- Women Learning Online.* Kramarae extended sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild’s 1989 metaphor of the second shift being work within the home as well as paid work outside the home. Kramarae used the metaphor of a third shift to refer to women in DE. Within the third shift, various issues arise including the need to balance job, family, community, and academic responsibilities (Furst-Bowe & Dittmann, 2001). For instance, women often juggle primary caregiver responsibilities with school deadlines and other multiple life role demands.
Other issues identified in Kramarae’s (2001) work reflected Cross’ categorizations of barriers for distance learners in general. These included lack of student support and services (institutional) and change of job or residence (situational). Other barriers identified by Kramarae that are specific for female distance learners included difficulties accessing necessary childcare, insufficient time and energy for studies due to employment or family responsibilities, changed family responsibilities, lack of financial support, illness of self or family member, and pregnancy.

Kramarae (2001), in reflecting upon her research with female DE students, wrote, “As one might expect, children, especially young children, are the greatest impediment and heaviest responsibility for female distance learners” (p. 32). Heenan (2002) concurred by noting that since women are the primary caregivers for young children and older people, increased demands are placed upon female learners. Predominantly in the 21st century, women continue to be responsible for the majority of the domestic work (i.e., cooking, cleaning, childcare). Often, if a women returns to school, she must negotiate the competing demands between family responsibility and education. Heenan also identified that financial dependency is a significant barrier for women who attempt to return to study.

Multiple role strain. Besides the various socio-cultural factors identified above, other barriers around societal expectations of female students are described in the literature. For instance, the impact of stress and the influence of the ‘superwoman ideal’ (Shaevit, 1984) can lead to decreased student motivation and inability to cope with heavy course loads. The superwoman syndrome is evidenced by trying to be all things to all people, attempting to do everything well or perfectly, feeling overwhelmed, stressed or
tired, and feeling a lack of control over ones life. McBride (1997) also identified increased workforce participation of women as resulting in a pattern of increased stress due to women’s multiple roles. She acknowledged issues such as gender role constraints, lack of support, and unrealistic expectations that result in the superwoman syndrome (Shaevitz, 1984). McBride concluded that the pressures on adult women to live up to cultural expectations both in and outside of the home produce significant stress associated with multiple role strain.

Feminist relational theorists identify several issues contributing to stress for women with children including societal expectations and the internal conflict of being a supermom (O’Reilly & Briscoe, 1993). Since women still perform the bulk of household tasks (Heenan, 2002), work-personal life balance is a prevalent issue often leading to increased demands and stress on women. The added influence of unrealistic beliefs of women’s role expectations can lead to increased stress for female graduate students (McBride, 1997). These unrealistic beliefs interfere with the ability to cope with the stresses of multiple roles of mother, partner, employee, student, etc. Many internal pressures (e.g., perfectionism) and societal expectations placed on women reinforce the standards and strain women experience.

Studies have also shown the impact of stress associated with these beliefs as heightening the potential for disordered eating and substance abuse (Thorton & Leo, 1992, as cited in McBride, 1997). It is also important to consider the numerous health risks associated with stress related illnesses such as cardiovascular disorders, cancers, and psycho-physiological disorders (Sarafino, 2002). McBride recommends key counselling interventions for women experiencing these multiple role strain issues as: exploring
alternative goals and strategies such as strengthening social support and improving ones personal control, assisting women to regain their voices through assertiveness training, providing education on gender role constraints, using cognitive restructuring techniques to combat perfectionism, and understanding the importance of counsellor role-modeling.

Besides these individual level changes, it is apparent that widespread societal changes are required in order to assist women to manage their multiple life roles. For instance, policy changes within workplaces that support families would be beneficial. Changes may include extended maternity/paternity leave benefits (i.e. wage top up), increased family related and personal leave benefits, and access to quality childcare facilities. Another societal change includes government supported parenting programs to assist families. Parenting programs encouraging egalitarian relationships would be beneficial, beginning to break down some barriers women face that add to their multiple roles (i.e., primarily doing majority of housework). However, at the root of this includes changes in the socialization of children, the future generation, in order to challenge many of the societal expectations and gendered ideologies.

*International issues.* Since DE is a global community, barriers/challenges identified from an international perspective are important to consider in the context of research on women. von Prummer (2000), a German researcher, has explored various international issues in the area of women and DE. In her work, von Prummer identified users of DE as primarily 1) Women of childrearing years; 2) Those individual who are largely excluded from education at all levels on the grounds of class, ethnicity, gender or age; and 3) Individuals who lack mobility due to physical disability or private circumstances. Furthermore, she identified since women are often faced with childcare
and household responsibilities ‘woman’s work is never done’ (von Prummer, 2000, p. 55). Again, from a global perspective, socio-cultural issues are prominent for women in distance education.

Another key international issue facing women is access to literacy education opportunities. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2005) reported that there are an estimated 785 million illiterate adults in the world, about two-thirds of whom are women. Within many developing countries, DE has been used to further women’s access to educational opportunities. However, for women attempting to increase their literacy skills through DE, various barriers have been identified related to opportunity, access, and ability (Wong-Wylie, Orr, Grove, & Swansen, 2005). For instance, home environment, household chores, maternal responsibilities, isolation, and concentration problems all constitute significant socio-cultural barriers for the 84 female DE students surveyed in Nigeria (Effeh, 1991). That is, children disturbing mothers as they studied, noise from neighbours, demands of sick children, fatigue, and inability to concentrate were all typical responses from participants of this study. Similar to Kramarae’s (2001) North American study, women face competing demands on their time. Effeh made several recommendations for the Nigerian educators to assist in student success including communication exchange services and regional support centers for the female students. In addition, to aide in student motivation to complete the work, shorter modules including certificate of merits were recommended.

Besides literacy issues, other socio-cultural issues facing women throughout the world stem from cultural expectations. Mehran (1999) explored lifelong learning opportunities for women in Iran. Although the research is not DE specific, the research
identified the cultural contradictions faced by Muslim women in the post-revolutionary period where the ideal woman is both traditional and modern. In discussing these conflicts, Mehran wrote, “She is expected to be a good wife and devoted mother as well as an active and educated member of the social, political and cultural affairs of her society, all at the same time” (p. 202). Not unlike the North American culture, Muslim women in Iran face multiple life roles and societal expectations previously identified. Although stark cultural and political differences exist, it is interesting to note shared experiences of multiple role strain among women in different countries, some to a much larger degree than others.

These international perspectives provide a snapshot of several of the issues facing women from a global perspective. As highlighted, various socio-cultural issues impact women as they pursue DE. Next, the topic of motherhood is explored in more detail to identify issues facing women in this context.

**Motherhood**

“Women do not have to sacrifice personhood if they are mothers. They do not have to sacrifice motherhood in order to be persons. Liberation was meant to expand women’s opportunities, not to limit them.” (Heffner, 1978, p. 1)

Elaine Heffner (1978), in *Mothering: The emotional experience of motherhood after Freud and feminism*, wrote about some of the broader political and socio-cultural issues facing women as they transition into motherhood. The review on motherhood that follows identifies key issues relevant in studying the topic of motherhood, mainly from a feminist perspective within psychology. Many of the quantitative studies reviewed for this project examined data on specific trends surrounding motherhood such as women’s
re-entry into the labour force following birth of child (O’Reilly & Briscoe, 1993) and prevalence of post-partum depression (Dalton, 2001). In reviewing the literature databases on the topic of motherhood, numerous studies surfaced within the fields of nursing (Tarkka, Paunonen, & Laippala, 2000), psychiatry (Scott & Hill, 2001), sociology (Edwards, 2002), family medicine (Smith & French, 2002), psychology (Thurer, 1994), and economics (Symons & McLeod, 1993). Within each field of research, a variety of philosophical perspectives can be taken. Given the enormity of literature in this topic area, I chose to organize the general themes within the literature with studies that directly connect to this project. That is, qualitative research that focuses on women’s own accounts of their experience of motherhood. However where relevant, quantitative literature has been used to support literature presented. To begin this review and to understand the context of research on motherhood, it is important to first begin with a discussion on the history of psychological theory within the topic area.

**Historical Review**

Motherhood has historically been defined by biology and instincts, but in the 1970’s many feminists began to identify the social construction of motherhood (Withers-Osmond & Thorne, 1993). During this period, feminists such as Nancy Chodorow and Adreinne Rich were key contributors to the consciousness-raising efforts that led researchers to begin to explore the concept of motherhood from women’s own voices (Kaplan, 1992).

In 1978, Chodorow associated gendered divisions of labour, especially the contemporary form of which the mother does most of the parenting and the father is relatively absent from the childcare, to the formation and gendering of personality and
development (Withers-Osmond & Thorne, 1993). She theorized that this gendered division of labour leads to a deep difference between women’s and men’s personalities where the feminine self is connected with others and the masculine self is based on separation. Although there are obvious divisions among scholars about these generalizations about personality development, Chodorow’s work was a turning point in psychology that led researchers to focus on exploring women-centred theories and issues affecting women such as gender roles constraints (Kaplan, 1992).

More recently, researchers such as Withers-Osmond and Thorne (1993) attempted to question gender-based separations. They identified that critics to feminist theories are reluctant to idealize women’s supposed essential nature, rather than grappling with the mix of positive and negative qualities that characterize women’s actual experience. In 1982, Carol Gilligan’s (1994) renowned work entitled, *In a Different Voice*, provided a unique women-centred review of the history of psychological theory and women’s development. Gilligan began her historical review examining the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, whose theory was built upon the psychosocial development of the male child and the Oedipus complex. Freud considered women’s developmental failure as resulting from their experience of relationships and connectedness. During the feminist movement, many theorists challenged these traditional, patriarchal beliefs of personality and women’s development. Not surprisingly within Freud’s work, there was an obvious male bias- not only were the early theorists male- many of the hypothesis’ about personality were based on male patients, not on women’s experiences.
In contrast, Thurer (1994) provided a detailed historical review of the trends around mothering within the westernized twentieth century culture. She took a critical look at the trend in child rearing manuals and how Freud’s theories continued to permeate many of the popular books on child rearing. In discussing the 1946 *Common sense book of baby and child care*, written by renowned paediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock, Thurer (1994) indicated that “Spock’s ideas about infant sexuality, the presence of the unconscious, and Oedipal conflicts, and his equation of motherhood with healthy femininity, are straight from Freud, whose thinking had now penetrated academia and filtered down to the mass mentality” (p. 259). It was shortly after this time when feminist scholars began to express criticisms of Freud’s beliefs and others that motherhood equalled healthy femininity.

In 1976, Jean Baker Miller introduced the idea that in the course of women’s development, as they attempt to make and maintain relationships, women paradoxically keep a large part of themselves out of the relationship (Gilligan, 1994). From this line of thinking, Gilligan suggested a new psychological theory in which women are seen and heard, thereby bringing women’s voices into psychological theory and research. Specifically to the transition to motherhood, Gilligan wrote, “thus women not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care” (p. 17). This is not surprising given societal pressures and expectations women face. Even though Spock’s (1946) work is now outdated, in a review of popular Canadian child-rearing guides, women continue to be the primary parent responsible to learn about how to care for children. For instance, the title says it all in the Canadian parent resource book, *The Mother of all Baby Books* (Douglas, 2001). Within the 614
pages purported as a parents guide, the father’s role is only mentioned on 15 of the pages. The remaining 599 pages are devoted to the mother’s role and responsibilities in relation to infant and childcare.

Besides the numerous efforts of feminists to bring a voice to women’s research, contemporary studies on motherhood typically focus on adjustment to motherhood through the occurrence of postpartum depression, usually from a quantitative research perspective (Brown & Small, 1997). Brown and Small themselves related that within research, women’s own accounts of motherhood are rarely explored and reported. However, within the past two decades, work has begun to surface focusing directly on women’s experiences. A detailed overview of one of these studies is presented next focusing on a model of maternal transition.

A Model of Maternal Transition

Nelson (2003) synthesized the results of nine qualitative studies related to the transition to motherhood and developed a conceptual model (see Figure 1). She noted that researchers have recently applied qualitative methods to the study of maternal transition to reveal core components of the transition process. Within her meta-synthesis, she detailed the metaphors, concepts, themes, and phrases from each study. Nelson concluded that two social processes are inherent to maternal transition: 1) Engagement and 2) Personal growth and transformation. Specifically, active engagement was described as the primary social process leading to personal growth and transformation within motherhood. She noted within these studies, this transformation process involves making a commitment to mothering, experiencing the presence of a child and being actively involved in caring.
Nelson (2003) identified that although there were no doubt many subjective and contextual components influencing maternal transition, the dual process of active engagement and personal growth and transformation were evident within the nine studies synthesized. Within these nine studies, samples ranged from 6 to 55 participants at various stages of maternal transition. As shown in Figure 1, Nelson (2003) identified five thematic categories representing areas of disruption during maternal transition. These categories included changes in the area of commitments, self, daily life, relationships, and work. These themes provided contextual understanding of the maternal transition process. For example, during the process of personal growth and transformation that she described, themes identified included motherhood as a time of re-evaluation, loss, redefining relationships, changes in work/career, redefining professional goals, and alterations of self. These transitional changes are added demands affecting women in early motherhood as they pursue DE.

Nelson (2003) was clear about the limits to her model. In particular, the samples within each study focused on white, married, middle class participants, a common critique within this area of research. From her perspective, she concluded that there was a need to educate expecting women on life transition processes, particularly around motherhood issues. She also cautioned that although there appeared to be a common experience among women that motherhood is not experienced the same by all women. Nelson’s model will be highlighted further in the discussion chapter of this project.

Other Themes within the Literature

Three areas of research on motherhood are of particular importance in the context of this project. These areas include 1) Beliefs of being a good mother, 2) Post-natal
depression, and 3) The biological clock. Brown and Small’s (1997) work on the exploration of beliefs about being a good mother are first illustrated.

_The good mother._ Brown and Small (1997) provided a detailed study of women’s experience within the first two years after motherhood. Within the qualitative aspect of their study, the researchers tape-recorded interviews with 90 women who gave birth in Victoria, Australia in 1989. In addition, they provided follow up with the mothers when their infants were approximately 2 years old. The researchers concluded that the women shared beliefs of perfection that were culturally pervasive and normative in society. For instance, within their survey design, the researchers conducted home interviews following a semi-structured guide. They discussed topics such as participation in housework, child care and parenting, social and emotional support, and time out from mothering. They also explored health issues, the women’s own family and childhood experiences, paid employment, and their expectations and experiences of motherhood. For those women experiencing depression, the researchers focused on the women’s experiences and the factors involved in their recovery.

At the end of the interview, the participants were asked about how they would describe a good mother. The women most frequently mentioned that a good mother was caring and loving, with never ending patience. In addition, a good mother remained calm and relaxed at all times, while spending time with her children to foster their emotional development. The researchers concluded that the _good mother_ ideal was weighing heavy on the women in their study. This conclusion was true for both women who had experienced depression and for those that had not. Overall, Brown and Small (1997) suggested that the current emphasis on better preparing women about motherhood does
not necessarily reduce the likelihood of depression following the transition to motherhood.

Brown and Small’s (1997) conclusions are in contrast with other studies that do suggest a link between post-natal depression and unrealistic beliefs around motherhood (i.e., Mauthner, 2002; O’Reilly & Briscoe, 1993). For instance, O’Reilly and Briscoe examined socio-cultural issues such as societal expectations and the internal conflict of being a supermom. Some of these studies are discussed next.

Post-natal depression. Women perceive the period directly after childbirth to be among the most difficult in the transition to motherhood (Dalton, 2001; Tarkka, Paunonen, & Laippala, 2000). This period of change and adaptation can be overwhelming, especially to the first time mother. Post-natal (post-partum) depression is a controversial issue with most research focusing on biological and hormonal causes (Pitman, 2003) through a quantitative research design. From a relational psychology perspective, Mauthner’s (2002) research into post-natal depression found a common theme emerging from the women interviewed. Many of the women seemed caught between two voices. One voice held on to an idealized image of motherhood while the other voice recognized the reality of being a mother including breastfeeding complications, lack of connection with newborns, anger toward family members, and at times, fantasies of killing or abandoning their children. One of the most intriguing aspects of her study is the fact that all of the women interviewed held idealized cultural constructions of motherhood that contrasted sharply with reality. These conclusions are similar to Brown and Small’s (1997) research. These social pressures are interesting to
note in the context of this present study. Mauthner’s work will be highlighted again during the discussion chapter of this project.

Mauthner’s (2002) study is also similar to Wolf’s (2001) qualitative exploration of women transitioning into motherhood as she explored broader social issues and their impact on women. In Wolf’s reflections on her own transition to motherhood, she wrote about differences between cultures in relation to support for women after childbirth. In westernized cultures, women are often isolated and left to manage on their own during this time of transition. However, many non-westernized cultures nurture post-natal women through connection with other women within their community. For example, Wolf wrote about the process after a women gives birth in Malaysia:

The new mother rests for forty days after childbirth; she is given a ritual bath scented with hot, sweet-smelling leaves and rubbed with ginger, garlic, tamarind, and lime to help her circulation. At the end, a ritual involving untangling slipknots and an incantation ends with a communal meal to celebrate mother and baby and return them safely to the community (Wolf, 2001, p. 219).

It is not surprising that studies have shown women’s support system as having a large impact on the severity of depression following childbirth (Misri, Kostaras, Fox, & Kostaras, 2000). In particular, when women’s partners are supportive, they experience a more rapid recovery from post-natal depression.

Nicolson (2003, 1998) explored women’s depression following childbirth through the theme of loss and change. Within her qualitative exploration of women’s experiences, she found several sub themes including loss of autonomy and time, loss of appearance, loss of femininity/sexuality, and loss of occupational identity. Nicolson (2003), through
her critical examination of the post-natal depression literature, identified the myth of motherhood that views this transition as “natural, desirable and unequivocally fulfilling for all women” (p. 23). She further suggested that when a woman failed to experience a smooth transition, that she is identified as having post-natal depression. There are definite criticisms to Nicolson’s view, particularly from a medical model perspective. However, I believe her writings are a refreshing stance, contrasting the traditional pathologizing of women’s experiences. In particular, although birth is often a period of joy for many women, the transition also represents various losses and changes. The next section turns towards another main theme in the literature that has emerged in the last two decades.

*The biological clock.* Within westernized culture, the term biological clock is a well known phrase used to describe women in their later child-bearing years in western cultures. A recent trend noted in the literature is an overall increased age for first time mothers (Edwards, 2002). As previously noted within Canada, women are increasingly starting families at age 30 or older. In 1997, 31% of first time mothers were aged 30 or older, compared to only 7% in 1971 (Wu & MacNeill, 2003). Several reasons are cited for this trend including increased knowledge of women’s fertility and reproductive technologies, increased level of education, the feminist movement, and changes in career goals.

Edwards (2002), a sociologist, examined the population survey data in the United States between the 1970’s and 1990’s as it related to American mothers. He discussed the trend of how education and occupations have led to the postponement of first births. Edwards reported that being a college educated woman increased the chances of permanent childlessness and achievement in the highest prestige occupations. Although
his results are consistent with similar studies (Wu & MacNeill, 2002), Edwards’ presentation of his data is concerning. In his conclusions about his findings, Edward’s failed to examine the various factors that may play a role in women’s experience and decisions to delay motherhood, or choices to pursue motherhood concurrently with education. For example, Edwards’ failed to address socio-cultural issues such as the inherent power differentials associated with career decisions, nor did he attempt to confirm his hypothesis with women themselves through qualitative methods.

In a recent Canadian sample, Wu and MacNeill (2002) took a different approach to researching the trend of women’s delay of childbirth by using life history data and survival model techniques. Their hypothesis was that women’s reasons for childbearing are influenced by their educational and career goals. Although Wu and MacNeill’s conclusions were quite similar to Edward’s results, there is a vast difference in how researchers analyzed and presented data. Instead of speculating reasons for women’s decisions regarding childbearing, Wu and MacNeill talked directly to women by collecting data through phone surveys. The researchers explored various concepts around autonomy and alternatives for women and analyzed recent statistics through census data. Their dependent variable was motherhood, whereas their explanatory variables were work and education. Wu and MacNeill’s study, unlike Edwards’ (2002) study, identified various cultural variables that were involved such as ethnicity and geographic variables.

Overall, Wu and MacNeill (2002) concluded that delaying motherhood was a reasonable means to negotiate women’s varied roles and aspirations. Furthermore, they provided various reasons that related to delaying motherhood including changes in
medical knowledge and the knowledge that women’s biological clocks are not “ticking as fast as once posited” (Wu & MacNeill, 2002, p. 208).

**Literature Summary and Critique**

Through this literature review two separate issues have been examined: 1) Women and DE, and 2) The transition to motherhood and early motherhood. The first section of this chapter identified relevant issues for women as they pursue DE, focusing on facilitators and barriers/challenges. The second section of this chapter presented a review of historical and contemporary views on motherhood as they relate to psychological theory. Nelson’s (2003) model of maternal transition was outlined as well as Brown and Small’s (1997) research on the concept of a *good mother*. Post-natal depression issues and *the biological clock* emphasized the socio-cultural issues facing women in this context.

Lewin’s (1951) field theory fits nicely with this project, particularly in discussing female students’ motivation with educational pursuits and motherhood. Field theory is based on the assumption that behaviour is a function of the interaction between the person and the environment. Conflict exists in a person’s life space when “forces acting on the person are opposite in direction and about equal in strength” (Lewin, 1951, p. 260). As identified within the literature review, multiple role strain associated with early motherhood and career/educational goals lead to internal conflict for many of these students. As such, as suggested within Lewin’s field theory, the approach/approach conflict, in which a person must decide between two equally yet desirable goals, appears to be significant for women in early motherhood who are concurrently pursing DE.

Although there are few studies combining the topic areas of DE and motherhood, several authors have begun to highlight the experiences of female distance learners who
also are mothers. For instance, Kramarae’s (2001) work identifying the third shift of
women learning online provided an excellent basis for this study. As highlighted
throughout the review, combining motherhood with DE is described as a flexible
alternative for women. For those women transitioning or in early motherhood, DE may
assist them to meet their varied aspirations. However, as identified within the literature, a
variety of barriers have been identified within Cross’ (1981) categorizations of
situational, dispositional and institutional barriers along with the added socio-cultural
barrier presented in this project.

In relation to the topic of motherhood, the area of research is vast. From a
historical perspective, motherhood has traditionally been studied from afar. In recent
years, the expanse of literature that has emerged focusing on women’s own experiences
has provided new understanding on the issues women face during the transition to
motherhood. For instance, Nelson’s (2003) model of maternal transition pointed to some
of the socio-cultural issues relevant for women such as the need to redefine relationships
and alterations of self.

Although there are a variety of studies focusing on motherhood, there is a paucity
of research exploring the unique experiences of Canadian women. In particular, little is
known about the experiences of recent immigrants, our aboriginal population, and other
cultural diversities within our country. Another area dearth of literature within our
national country is our varied geography, especially the unique challenges faced by
women living in rural or northern isolated communities. Besides these unknown areas,
other issues that have begun to appear in the literature include: transition to motherhood
following difficult births, infants with disabilities, unplanned pregnancy, lesbian
motherhood, poverty issues, and single motherhood. For instance, women who are single parents have their own unique challenges associated with the transition to motherhood. Statistics Canada (1996) reported that approximately one in every five Canadian families with children was headed by a lone parent. That equates to more than one million lone-parent families, up 33% from 1986. Although no statistics were available about lone parenting while pursuing education, the additional challenges faced by single mothers are important considerations for DE programs as these women juggle their competing demands.

Many of the studies presented in the literature review focused on feminist perspectives from of a qualitative nature. As a pregnant mother with a three year old, I acknowledge my philosophical perspective influences this research and my choice of literature to present. However, it was important to provide this background to identify the socio-cultural issues facing women. In addition, my connection with the research and the themes that emerged are an obvious reflection of my own cultural values and personal experiences. However, as will be explained in the next chapter, reflexivity is an important part of the qualitative research process underlying this project.
CHAPTER THREE

Methods and Procedures

Over the past two decades women’s own accounts of motherhood have begun to surface in the literature through qualitative methods as researchers listen to women’s individual narratives. As highlighted within the literature review, Kaplan (1994) Mauthner (1998), Wolf (2000), and Nicolson (2003) are among those who have presented their research on motherhood through a qualitative design. Since I was drawn to giving voice to women’s own experiences, I chose a qualitative interview design for my final project. This chapter describes the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology program and identifies the participant recruitment procedures.

Program

Three female participants were recruited from the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology (CAAP): Counselling Initiative Program student population. As highlighted with the program mission statement, the CAAP program is a:

Canadian, collaborative, inter-university, distance education alternative for individuals wishing to prepare for roles as either professional counsellors or counselling psychologists. The Campus Alberta Applied Psychology [CAAP]: Counselling Initiative is a partnership among three universities in Alberta: Athabasca University, the University of Calgary, and the University of Lethbridge. The fundamental principle on which this collaboration is built is a collective desire to enhance the accessibility, flexibility, and responsiveness of graduate counsellor education programming. The various components of the program are offered through both on-site and distance modes of delivery, drawing
on the combined resources and strengths of the participant universities (CAAP, 2005).

The program is committed to providing high quality, accessible, and flexible graduate education to students regardless of their location. In the 2005 school year, approximately 87% of the nearly 600 student population were female (M. Johnson, personal communication, 2004). Not surprisingly, women in early motherhood are drawn to the program due to the multitude of challenges they face around access to on-campus programs. Some of these challenges may include balancing family/work commitments, inability to attend traditional scheduled classes, and distance from educational opportunities due to family/work commitments. The CAAP program has been designed to be completed in 3 years, but there is flexibility for students to take up to 6 years to finish the program. Students are encouraged to devote a minimum of 15 hours per week to each course. Often, students in the 3 year stream take one class at a time year round, except for the summer portion which often requires taking 2 face-to-face classes concurrently. It is no surprise that the flexibility and accessibility of this program fits for the participant sample for this current study.

Participant Selection Process

Purposeful sampling (Mertens, 1998) was used to recruit three women from the CAAP student population for this qualitative study. The study was broken into two steps: 1) Collection of demographic sheets from female students and 2) 3 In-depth interviews. Through a discussion thread posted on the section announcements in November 2004, a call for interest was announced for women who were interested in participating in this study (Appendix E). The call for interest was open for a two-week time period. Through
an e-mail response, five women expressed interest in participating in the project and were each asked via e-mail to complete a demographic sheet (Appendix F).

The demographic sheets identified each woman’s proximal location to the researcher, her age, marital status, child or children ages, and general questions surrounding the birth of her last child (i.e., complications, type of leave from program), and program information. The purpose of the demographic sheet was to determine the number of women who were enrolled in the program that were also in the early stages of motherhood and to determine homogeneity of the sample.

During the call for interest, only five women responded by e-mail to the primary investigator. Several factors may have impacted the low response rate to the call for interest. First, the time of year the call of interest was posted was within two weeks prior to fall classes ending. Typically, this is a busy time of year for students as they finish assignments, thereby possibly decreasing overall response rate. Second, also related to time of year being late November and early December, when many students may have been busy with holiday festivities. Third, I had initially hoped to e-mail female students directly, including those students who already expressed an interest to participate in the project. However, following ethical review, it was deemed inappropriate as students may have felt pressured to participate, especially if they knew me or the project supervisor. Therefore, students themselves were required to check *program announcements* section within the CAAP website to learn about the study. Fourth, another potential drawback from this process was there was no way to contact those students who may have been on a maternity (parental) leave from the program. However, one participant who did take part
in this study was finishing her leave of absence and had continued access to online resources.

As the principal investigator I was the only person that knew the names of the participants in order to avoid conflict of interest since the project supervisor was a faculty member who taught in the program. In consultation with the research supervisor, the final choices of the three participants from the five who responded met the criteria of 1) Recent new mother while taking CAAP program, 2) The proximal location to researcher (for travel purposes), and 3) The homogeneity of the sample. Once each of the three women selected confirmed their participation in the project, a thank-you e-mail was sent to the two women not chosen with a rationale and information that a larger study may follow (Appendix H). As such, criteria for selection of the participants were transparent throughout the process of recruitment and clearly provided to students not asked to participate in the full research project.
CHAPTER FOUR

The design of the research is summarized in this chapter. An overview of the data collection procedures follows with a description of the voice-centred relational method of data analysis (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998).

Design

In the fall of 2004, the project design began with an in-depth literature review on the topics of motherhood and women in distance education. During the ethics’ approval process which occurred simultaneously with the literature review, all of the forms for the study were developed including the consent forms and semi-structured interview (Appendices A-H). As previously described, following ethics approval, the call for interest led to collection of five demographic sheets.

For the second phase of the research process, the three women selected were sent the informed consent letter (Appendix B) and consent form (Appendix C) for formal agreement to participate in the study. Pseudonyms were also chosen by each woman at this time: Grace, Samantha, and Lynne. Once the interview dates were established, the semi-structured interview guide (Appendix D) was sent via e-mail to each woman approximately two weeks prior to the interview. As the interviewer, I relied on the interaction with each woman as she told her story, using the semi-structured interview as a guide. For example, a section of the semi-structured interview focused on a social support map, which each woman was invited to draw. In some cases, this led to a more in-depth discussion of support and resources. Prior to the interview, I advised each woman about the nature of the interview process, by indicating that the guide would be
followed but they were free to discuss the issues that were relevant for them around motherhood and distance education.

At the beginning of the interviews, each woman was made aware of the purpose of the study and we reviewed confidentiality issues, consent for research and audio-taping, and the implications of the research. Between January 15 and February 11, 2005, three separate interviews were conducted in person at the location of their choice: a university interview room, a hotel, and in one woman’s home. Arrangements for childcare were made for one woman and paid for by the Athabasca University Mission Critical Research Fund. The interviews were audio-taped and lasted between 1-3 hours each. Following completion of the interview and transcribing process, each woman was asked to review their transcripts via e-mail or mail to ensure accuracy. When necessary, they were also involved in follow-up email correspondence for confirmation and clarification of the interview transcripts.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative studies is an on-going process with the main analytic process being comparison (Mertens, 1998). For the purpose of data analysis, I chose to use a voice-centred relational method as described and adapted by Mauthner and Doucet (1998). This method was originally developed by Lyn Brown, Carol Gilligan and their colleagues at Harvard University. The relational focus of this method fits nicely with the earlier critique of Cross’ (1981) identification of barriers for distance learners in general, which falls short in examining socio-cultural factors affecting female distance learners.

Another reason I was drawn to this method was the work of Mauthner and Doucet (1998) in feminist research and their recognition of researcher influence on data
outcomes. In discussion of this approach, they indicated that undoubtedly, as researchers, our own personal, political, and theoretical backgrounds influence us. In addition, they acknowledged that all research contains biases and values and it is important to recognize the contextual factors within research. Their data analysis method attempted to identify these inherent biases through self-reflection and transparency within the documentation and reporting of research. For example, during this project throughout the research process I kept a reflective journal and audit trail to assist in my own self-reflection journey.

At the end of February 2005, following the completion of all three interviews, I transcribed each research conversation into text. Once completed, I sent the text to each woman for approval of the final text. In mid-March, I began the data analysis procedures beginning with the first interview, Lynne. In total, I conducted four readings of each research conversation while listening to the audiotapes. The four steps of data analysis include:

1. Reading for the plot and for my responses to the narrative
2. Reading for the voice of “I”
3. Reading for relationships
4. Placing people within cultural contexts and social structures.

Each of these four readings is described in detail next.

Reading One

The first step of the voice-centred relational method involves two elements: 1) reading for the plot and 2) Identifying my reactions to the narrative. First, the text is read for the overall plot and story told by the respondent. Since my sample was only three
respondents, I chose to wait to transcribe the interviews until I was done all three interviews. I then completed all four steps consecutively on each research conversation. While listening to the overall plot as I read the research conversations, the main events, protagonists, and subplots within each narrative were identified. In particular, I listened for reoccurring images, words, metaphors, and contradictions. The shared plot lines that are presented in chapter six emerged from this first reading of the data analysis process. For instance, reading Lynne’s research conversation, she used the metaphor of a fish flopping back and forth when discussing her unresolved career goals. Another example of this element of the first step of data analysis was Grace’s sub-plot that emerged about family of origin issues around her self-concept. As such it was easy to see the connection of another reoccurring image for Grace- that of perseverance. With Samantha, she described a main event in her life that occurred in her family that led her to be overprotective and less secure about the safety of her own baby. Overall, a variety of images emerged from the narratives providing rich and diverse information from each of these women about their experiences while in early motherhood as they pursued DE. To note, from this element of the first reading, six shared plot lines emerged from the women’s narratives that symbolize common threads woven throughout their stories.

The second element of the first reading involved the reader response. As the researcher, this important step involved placing myself into the text. Mauthner and Doucet (1998) indicated this occurs when the researcher places herself in relation to the person interviewed. For example, I attempted to place my own personal history and experiences into the context of each woman’s narrative by identifying how I responded
emotionally and intellectually to the person. This included identifying my feelings, reactions, and biases during the interview and while reading the text.

This step is essential in the voice-centred relational method to ensure reflexivity in the qualitative research process. Mauthner and Doucet (1998) identified reflexivity in their research as being maintained by: 1) Locating oneself socially in relation to the respondent; 2) Attending to ones emotional responses to the person; 3) Examination of our own theoretical interpretations of the respondents’ narrative; and 4) Documenting the responses to ourselves and others. Furthermore, they wrote:

The underlying assumption here is that by trying to name how we are socially, emotionally and intellectually located in relation to our respondents we can retain some grasp over the blurred boundary between their narratives and our interpretation of those narratives. If we fail to name these emotions and responses, they will express themselves in other ways such as our tone of voice or in the way we write about that person. (p. 127-128)

**Reading Two**

The second step, *reading for the voice of “I”*, focused on how each woman experienced, felt, and spoke about herself. This process involved taking a coloured pencil to physically trace and underline certain responses beginning with “I, we, you” when each woman talked about herself. In this reading, I focused my attention on the active “I” which signalled storytelling. For example, I noted times where the woman shifted between “I” and “we”, signalling changes in how the respondent perceived and experienced herself, particularly as they each spoke of their relationship with their partners or family members. Mauthner and Doucet (1998) indicated that spending this
time listening carefully to the respondent assists the researcher to separate how the participant spoke about herself and how the researchers writes for her. This step of the data analysis is a valuable empirical technique that separates the voice-centred relational method from grounded theory. Grounded theory is more focused on action and interaction whereas Mauthner and Doucet view their approach as focused more on the processes of reflection and decision making. Additionally, this step is an attempt to stay as close as possible with the woman’s multilayered voices, views, and perspectives, rather than quickly reflecting their words within our own way of viewing the world. For the presentation of each chapter highlighting Grace, Samantha, and Lynne’s stories, I used this second step to write phenomenologically from their perspective.

Reading Three

The third reading, reading for relationships, involved listening to how the respondents spoke of her interpersonal relationships with partners, relatives, friends, children, and the broader social networks. Again using a pencil of a different colour, this method involved physically underlying where the women spoke of their relationships. Mauthner and Doucet (1998), identified that reading three was “particularly valuable in revealing the theoretical framework which quietly and pervasively underlines the bulk of research that is carried out on gender divisions of household labour, as well as women’s experiences of post-natal depression” (p. 131). Inviting each woman to draw a map of her social supports assisted to identify interpersonal relationships. This piece of the interview was adapted from Mauthner’s (2002) work with women who experienced post-natal depression.
The forth reading places each woman’s experience within broader social, political, and cultural contexts by exploring contextual issues of motherhood. For example, identifying the dominate or normative conceptions of motherhood through the use of moral terms such as “should, ought, right/wrong, good, bad” indicated places in the text where the women were talking about cultural norms and values of society. As will be highlighted in the shared plot lines chapter, each woman described socio-cultural expectations around motherhood and/or their choice to continue their education during this time in their lives.

Within this method of data analysis, I attempted to explore and report my own bias within all parts of the research process. As previously noted, I kept a journal and audit trail throughout the process which helped me reflect on my own influences within the research process. Through this process, I attempted to keep the focus of each reading distinct and reflective of each woman’s voice. Naturally, each reading further informed other readings to a holistic understanding of the women’s shared experiences and thereby deepening my engagement with the research presented. This analysis process also fits well with Cross’ (1981) model of barriers for distance learners along with the addition of socio-cultural barriers/challenges facing female distance learners. As such, the data analysis process has the potential to highlight particular barriers/challenges for the women interviewed in this project. The next chapter of the project presents each narrative, beginning with Grace, including my reflections as highlighted by the data analysis process.
CHAPTER SIX

Individual Voices

Included in the next chapter is each woman’s personal experience while pursuing DE during early motherhood. In describing each perspective, the second reading of the data analysis, the voice of “I” was focused upon. Mauthner and Doucet (1998) described this step of the data analysis process as a valuable technique that attempts to stay close to the participants’ multi-layered voices, views, and perspectives rather than simply reflecting their words into the researchers own way of seeing the world. Pseudonyms were used in all parts of the stories to maintain confidentiality of participants. For each individual voice, my perspective is first presented followed by the woman’s story. I conclude each story with my reflections on the research conversation. Following the presentation of the three individual stories, six shared plot lines are highlighted that emerged from the narratives.

Grace

**Karrie’s Perspective**

She picks her pseudonym as Grace, which fits perfectly with how I experience her. Grace has a quiet, inviting disposition; her smile is warm and welcoming. We met once about two years ago while attending the mandatory summer institute, an on-campus section of our graduate program. At that time, she was a few months pregnant with her son and my daughter was just a year old.

When we met for our research conversation, Grace was visiting the city for her weekend seminar for one of her practicums. I met her at the airport and we drove to her hotel where we began our discussion. I learned a lot from listening to Grace’s story of
living in a northern community, her love of learning, and the joy she expressed being a mother. We laughed about how anxious I was leaving my daughter on her 1st birthday back at the summer institute. We also laughed about many things that we had in common, like our similar age and life stage, our mutual interest in corrections, and our shared challenges with transitioning into motherhood.

**Grace’s Perspective**

My perseverance stems from my family always telling me that I would not make it to university. They thought I would never succeed. That is why I took my early childhood education first- they thought I could probably do that but I would not make it to university. At times I have self-doubt and I still struggle with these messages. But, I am going to do it no matter what. Sometimes, I have to prove to myself that I am smart. I know that I am- I am completing my masters with straight A’s.

My son, John is just over a year old and I am in my final year of the program. When I first looked into the graduate program, I was teaching at the time and I was frustrated with the problems I experienced with students and not having enough time to help within my teacher role. I wanted to be more involved in the counselling aspect. I also wanted to complete the counsellor education where I could work at the same time and continue to live in northern communities. For me, DE was the only option since I was not willing to move. I have my Early Childhood Education and my Bachelors of Education and I have taken some DE classes before. DE has worked for my independent learning style, although at times I do miss the social aspect of on-campus schools. I was initially surprised that I was accepted into this graduate program, but found the opportunity really exciting.
My husband, William and I value simple living. We have lived in a variety of places and enjoy traveling and learning about other cultures. We are both in school right now so that can be a challenge at times as we always have school on our minds and sometimes fight for the computer! Things have changed a lot though since our son John was born. I thought parenthood would be more of an adjustment, but it has felt quite natural. I joke that I should have started earlier so we could have a dozen kids! It has been wonderful, much more rewarding and fulfilling then I ever thought it would be. I love spending time with John. He is a very outgoing little person, which surprised me at first as he is quite different from me. He is a daredevil who will talk to every person he meets!

Although it has been a very rewarding experience, I have experienced some challenges with roles, particularly trying to balance the roles of wife, mother, and student all at the same time. This is hard as I sometimes feel like one role suffers. At times, I am never sure which one to choose.

I have already completed two years of the program and have not taken a break. I chose to continue taking a class when John was first born. He was only two weeks old when my next class began- those first four months were a blur! In hindsight, I would have taken a semester off. I simply did the work to do it, and did not have the time to really learn in the student role. The lack of sleep was my biggest surprise- one day John went 36 hours without closing his eyes! During the first few months, I remember doing my homework between 4 and 6 a.m., since that was the only time he would sleep.

Since then things have been wonderful and I love being at home with him. For the most part, I have no interest in working outside of the home right now. I was initially surprised by this, as I never thought that I would want to stay at home. So it is challenging
finishing school, particularly now with the time commitment with practicums. But I know how school is changing me as a person. Without my education, I would feel like I had to stay at home because I would not have a choice. And now I have a choice.

I am also a more confident person as a result of school. This program has helped me learn how to reflect better on what I am thinking and feeling and if it is negative, to change some of those patterns. I think I am better able to communicate too. Although it can be challenging at times, I know I want to finish my graduate degree. I started it and do not want all the time and energy to be a waste. School has also been important for me in terms of self esteem. I know many women struggle with ‘just being a stay at home mom’. But with my education, I do not feel that way because it is a choice that I really want to make. I guess I have a lot of perseverance and stubbornness- I think that is what keeps me going.

My husband is my main support- he really is the reason I am in school. He encourages me all the way. For example on those days I feel like quitting school, he says “you can do it, don’t give up. You know you are doing well!” He is really instrumental in providing me emotional support to complete school. My other main supports, like my sister, live far away but we keep in regular contact. My father passed away suddenly last year when I was pregnant so that has been difficult time for my family since my mom and family live far away.

My in-laws also live far away. They are wonderful people who inspire us in our own parenting. My own family is quite different, and they do not understanding a lot of our values and decisions. My mother-in-law however, her whole life is geared around
serving and caring for other people. She encouraged her children to be full of life, spirit, and independence—exactly what we want for our family.

We have some supports in the community, a neighbour who is like John’s adoptive grandmother. She takes care of him while I am doing schoolwork. I also have a few acquaintances in the community and there are some community resources available for moms. But, William and I have found it difficult to connect with people in our community as many of them hold a different world view. For example, our church’s philosophy is more reflective of middle class values, which does not reflect our philosophy very much. We believe in reaching out to the community where the people are at. We have always found that we connect more with people in their 50’s, like John’s adoptive grandma.

As for our plans for the future, we hope to have another child soon. And once William finishes his schooling, our plan is to relocate to a fly-in community for a few years. Hopefully if things work out, we will home school our children and see how that goes. The ideal for the future though would be both William and I only working part-time. One of our dreams is to gain more of a world perceptive through travel and volunteering. Our goal is to have enough money that work is not our life because volunteering is just as valuable as getting paid for something. As a volunteer, you have a lot more choice in your job and how you are going to care for people. And with travel, you can learn so much from observing other cultures. We hope our children learn to appreciate this and also to value justice, peace, and compassion. I hope with our guidance they can be independent and think for themselves and not have to feel that they are “put in a box”.

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Karrie’s Reflections

Grace certainly is not someone who would be put into a box. After our interview, I reflected on her strength and determination as she described those self-doubt messages from her family of origin. I also reflected on her resilience of breaking out of that box and how she is living a life based on her own values and beliefs. I was also amazed by her focus on her son and her hopes for him in the future.

Intellectually, I was struck by Grace’s discussion of competing roles between mother, wife, and student and how one role seems to suffer. I often feel caught myself as I juggle family and school/work commitments. I also remembered McBride’s (1997) research that highlighted the challenge of role strain for female graduate students. Although DE has given us some flexibility for family life, role strain still exists when our student life is in the home.

I reacted emotionally towards several issues during the interview. For instance, I struggled with maintaining the unfamiliar researcher role versus my comfort of the counsellor role. When she discussed a death in her family, I could see the grief she continued to feel. My counsellor self wanted to explore this more but within the researcher role I knew she said what she needed to say for the purpose of the study. I also felt the need to talk about my experience after the research conversation concluded so it was not so one-sided in our level of sharing. Like all of the interviews I conducted, I also reflected in my journal on my emotions around the belief of full-time parenting and my surprise that this was an underlying value of all three women. I never really considered being a full-time parent, mainly due to finances and my desire to have a career. For one of my journal entries reflecting on this difference, I wrote:
I have realized that there is a big difference between the participants and myself since I work part-time, while going to school and being a mom. I see my school as a part time job but it’s more flexible. I am surprised that none of the women [in the study] work outside the home- it really has never been an option for me, financially. (Orr, Journal, February 2005)

When I had my daughter, I welcomed the year break, but found at times the maternity leave from paid work to be isolating. During that time I took one DE class and found that to help balance my needs and desires. When I returned to paid work part-time following the maternity leave, I felt more balanced. Overall throughout the research process, I did struggle with these issues and questioned myself as I went through my day to day life, especially when I felt lonely for my daughter during the work day.

In conducting the data analysis with Grace’s research conversation, I learned to challenge my own expectations of people and my expectations of the women I interviewed. Particularly, I challenged my underlying assumption that women in the 21st century need careers in their life at the same time as being in early motherhood. After a half hour of talking about her experience, Grace revealed to me that she had no desire to return to work:

I don’t want to work, in that sense. You probably wonder, then what are you doing going to school? And now that I have him, I don’t want to work. When I finished (maternity leave), I had no interest in working. So it’s quite challenging finishing (school). (L. 220-222)

When Grace said this, I realized that I did question her reasons for continuing, but I recognized from her stories growing up with little encouragement from her family, that
Grace was a determined, motivated woman. I felt a strong sense that she valued choice in her life as an adult which is reflected in her parenting style and lifelong learning not needing to connect with the practicality of job-obtaining.

I also found interesting Grace’s examples of competing expectations and pressures from society. She spoke of the expectations she faced about returning to work:

Oh, even my doctor was getting, almost angry at me, that I was having hesitations about going back to work… like she really let into me… “Your son is going to be fine- like it’s better for him to have some time away from you and be in different environments and learn…” and I was, “Oh!” (laughter). Whereas I really value staying at home. Whereas it’s almost the opposite now. It’s hard to find people that support that. (L. 834-837)

Social pressures expressed by Grace will be further explored when shared plot lines are presented following the presentation of the two remaining narratives. Next, Samantha’s story is presented.

*Samantha*

*Karrie’s Perspective*

As I walked into Samantha’s home on a spring-like winter morning, I felt a welcoming atmosphere. I noticed a laptop computer neatly tucked away on the dining room table, her wedding picture resting comfortably in the living room, and pictures of her kids in the kitchen. On the table, Samantha prepared a layout of brunch items for our morning together along with freshly brewed coffee. I sensed immediately the intimacy of being in someone’s home rather than at a hotel or central interview room.
I was told by Samantha to make myself comfortable as she took her kids to the neighbours for a “play date” so we could begin our research conversation. Once Samantha returned, we chatted for a while getting to know each other before I began the tape. I found Samantha to be a bright, cheerful person who reminded me of a good friend who people love to be around. Her energy was reflected in her passion when she talked about her family and dreams. This interview became the longest of the three, which I related to the intimacy of being in someone’s home.

During the interview, it felt like I witnessed a small glimpse of what Samantha’s days were like. At one point we took a break from the interview for a phone call and near the end of our interview, we took a break so Samantha could lay her son down for his morning nap. After the interview, we also spent time together and went for lunch with her kids. Being with Samantha for the day gave me awareness of her life, where she lived, and her hopes and dreams for the future.

*Samantha’s perspective*

I think school has done a lot for my self-esteem. Getting into a masters program is something to be proud of. Lots of people go to university and lots of people get degrees but it is another step further to obtain a masters degree. There is a lot of work, thought, and effort that goes into school. It has done a lot for my self-esteem as a student and as a parent because I’m doing both of these important things. I am doing well at school and I believe my kids are not being compromised. I remember back to that first year at home before I started the program. It felt like something was missing and I knew that I did not want to go back to work. I did not want to be away from my daughter, but I wanted something else, and now I have it with school.
Transitioning into motherhood for the first time was extremely overwhelming. I had babysat a lot growing up and I am a teacher- I taught preschool and elementary school for years. I thought I was so ready to have a baby! All these visions in my mind and then Danielle was born and at that time of transition, I thought, “This is it, you are an only child”! I had trouble breastfeeding at the start. I remember at one point after my mom and sister were leaving after staying for a week, I looked at Danielle and thought, “I am never going to do anything without you again. Daddy can get up and go to work everyday but now for the rest of my life I have you to get ready, not just myself”. I know part of the difficulty related to a close family member losing her baby during delivery. That really affected me as the whole false sense of security just went out of the window. After that, I became one of those neurotic parents. But when I had my second baby, I found the transition easier. I was waiting for the baby blues but it never came.

When William was first born, Danielle was 19 months old and it seemed like all of my hormones went back into place. I got the attitude that the kids will be okay because if something happened to my husband or I, they would always have each other. Overall, I have had a very positive motherhood experience. William and Danielle have been such easy kids- its ridiculous how they can play with each other! I think there was the initial adjustment with breastfeeding, but from day one, being a mom was great!

My first priority is my family. Kevin and I decided I would stay home when my kids are little. Kevin questioned me going to school at first. But he knew that I wanted to do it and he thinks there is no better time to do it since I am at home. He thinks when I do go back to work it’s kind of like an instant promotion. I consider myself very lucky and fortunate being able to stay home with my kids. I also think it is just as important to be at
home with your kids when they are teenagers as when they are little, so I do not want to return to full time work.

I have never really thought about what my expectations of motherhood were before taking part in this research study. I have always expected it to be a lot of work, to have its benefits, and to have hard days. I do not know if I could have one view on motherhood. You see a lot of differences in parenting styles and beliefs- the extremes. I am somewhere in the middle.

Overall, I believe that as a mom, you need to do whatever your intuition tells you. For example, there are times where I have realized that I have gotten mad at the kids and recognized it was actually me- I was just having a bad day. And sure there are times when you feel guilty but you cannot let it get to you- you are not going to be the perfect parent! You can’t expect to be the perfect parent. You always have your frustrating days, but then I think to myself- just relax and just enjoy it as they are small for such a short period of time.

With combining school and motherhood, I do not feel that I am working since I am raising my children and I am at home with my kids. With school, I have something else to think about other than diapers, meals, and potty training. It is really nice. I also have something else to talk to people about, because at times I feel like all I ever do is talk about my kids.

There are many women in the CAAP program with young kids. I started the program when my daughter, Danielle, was 19 months old and my son, William, was only 6 weeks old. He was actually 2 days old when I was on the computer trying to finish the program orientation! Like I said, my adjustment with my second child was a lot easier. I
found that first semester to be the perfect balance of motherhood and school. It is interesting how school works so well with being at home.

I have found the time and flexibility with DE helpful. I thought I would have a really hard time with DE, not having the social aspect but it has been good. I have not missed face-to-face contact with other students. I find that I contribute a whole lot more through DE. And it is great having professors and students from all over the country to connect with.

The biggest thing that I like with DE is that I do not have to go to the university. So, just being able to walk next door and drop the kids off is great. I can come home and have 2 or 3 full hours of work. I also do not usually do any work on Friday nights and Saturdays, as that is our family time.

I have quite a large team of supports- friends, relatives and other moms from different groups. Some of the people are more supportive than others about my education. My husband Kevin is supportive, but more because he is my husband (and he should be). He will say, “what can I do to help out with the kids?” Whereas some of my friends are more interested in how school is going and what I have done. They think it is great that I am doing it. However, my father-in-law is more interested in what the outcome is going to give me. He is not really interested in the process and what it means to me.

Last fall I was having a really hard term with deadlines for an assignment when I had two sets of visitors over a couple of weeks. My friend that was staying with me said I was living in “chaotic trauma”! Then my sister went home and told my mom that I am “crazy busy”. So my mom talked to me about how my kids are only young once and I better make sure they are my number one priority- which I already know and believe. But
really, I am only crazy busy when these things are due. It really seems to depend on the class though and how many I can take at once. For example, when I took two classes together, that was really hard.

I am trying to give my kids 100% and I am trying to do school. I try to keep them separate and I do not want my husband to think that school is getting in the way. I was always a good student in high school and university- but I am not a perfectionist. I was so happy when our program chair said at summer institute, “sometimes instead of going for the A you have to be happy with the A-, and sometimes if you cannot go for the A-, go for the B+”. He said, “I wouldn’t go much further then that”. I remind myself of that during those chaotic times. I have also always had the attitude that if school starts to get in the way of my kids then I have to take a step back. I have been lucky because I do not think it ever has, minus the few weeks it was really crazy. I believe if you can be doing well in school, but also have a balanced life then that is more important then getting 100% in school.

For the future, I hope my kids are happy, secure, and confident people because of the things that their dad and I have done for them. We hope to have more kids too. I have not quite decided my career plans yet since I am staying home with my kids until they are school age. I am definitely finished with teaching so maybe I will return to the school that I taught at before Danielle was born and become the school counsellor. Or I have some ideas to do private counselling/educational consulting service with a relative of mine. But overall, I believe it is really important to be at home with your kids not just when they are young but when they are teenagers as well. So no matter what, I do not want to work full time. That is my ideal world.
Karrie’s Reflections

The research conversation with Samantha was engaging and we laughed a lot. I felt comfortable being welcomed into her home and found this to deepen my understanding of her experiences. Throughout our interview, I also began to reflect on my current pregnancy. Just prior to our interview, I had found out I was 6 weeks pregnant with my second child. To be honest, I was a bit worried continuing the research, knowing that something could go wrong with the pregnancy as it may have been difficult to immerse myself in this in-depth process of research. But I now see that being pregnant has made me more reflective of my own values as I explored the stories that emerged throughout the whole research process.

At one point after I asked Samantha to draw a social support map, she commented, “This might not help you lots, but it’s helping me” (L. 319-320). I found this comment interesting, as I did not realize that honoring each woman’s experience by listening to their stories could be beneficial in itself, maybe even therapeutic. Throughout this research process, I have reflected emotionally on many areas, particularly multiple roles and my reliance on social supports in my own success. Samantha remarked how she never realized that she had so many supports. In preparation for the interviews, I drew my own social support map and also began to realize how important these support networks are in my success in my life, especially my education.

Another part of the interview that left a lasting impression on me was Samantha’s sharing of a family member’s baby dying during birth. As I was flying home, I realized it happened in the same hospital where I gave birth to my daughter and where I will give birth this fall. This realization put this research project to a deeper level; I began to realize
the very human side of qualitative research and the depth of information shared within this context. I was also reminded of Grace’s family member dying a few weeks before summer institute and began to recognize various family events can affect us within our multiple life roles and impact our ability to balance our responsibilities. As will be discussed further, family related suggestions to DE programs become a central recommendation from the women.

I also found Samantha to be very honest in discussing her beliefs and experiences. For example, she was honest about her values of family and her recognition of socio-cultural contexts of gender roles, particularly changes in division of labour in her household since she became a mother. She spoke of her beliefs:

I’m so fortunate that he [partner] makes a decent living- and he works hard, he works a lot of evenings and weekends, and I am able to stay at home. And let’s face it, he is paying for this program, he is paying for everything- he is supporting us 100%. So for me to have to do all the laundry- big deal right? In the big scheme of things. (L. 817-819)

I also noted that Samantha used the word fortunate three times during the interview, which is similar language used in Lynne’s narrative that is presented next. I was particularly struck by Samantha’s frank discussion about how she attempted to keep her student and parenting roles separate:

It’s like I said, I think I put it more on myself. Because I don’t want him to think that school is coming in the way of the kids, so I really try to make sure that I don’t turn on the computer when they are awake. (L. 824-825)
I initially wondered about the consequences for Samantha if school was coming in the way of the kids. In wondering about this, I also reflected on the rules that each woman seems to have put in place to manage their multiple roles. I think for Samantha, keeping these roles separate helps her manage the strain of being a wife, mother, and student, and not sacrifice her commitment she has made to her children and partner.

I also experienced some feelings of guilt when reflecting on Samantha’s rule of maintaining separate roles. My daughter regularly sees me on the computer. I have always viewed this as role-modeling education, but I also have experienced strain when overlapping roles impact people around me, especially my family. It is through this research that I have reflected on the rules that I have created to manage my multiple roles. The rules that each of us seem to live by, although different, appear to be a shared plot that emerged within each conversation as will be described in chapter six on shared plot lines.

*Lynne*

*Karrie’s Perspective*

Lynne and I met at a local university where a counselling room was booked for our research conversation. I was told by the receptionist that my “client” was here. I found that comment a bit unnerving. I felt more like the client as I began my leap into new territory of researcher, not my usual comfort zone of counsellor. I was nervous at the beginning of the conversation, which I could tell when first reviewing the audiotape during the data analysis process. Yet, early in the research conversation I realized that Lynne and I had a lot in common. Her honesty put me at ease. I was stuck by Lynne’s ability to combine full-time motherhood to three preschool children along with pursuing
her career goal of obtaining a graduate degree. As she described her love of motherhood and her love of learning, she commented that it felt like she was conquering both worlds. It was then that I really felt connected to her narrative and could resonate with some of her struggles.

Lynne indicated before I started the audiotape that she had read the interview guide. As we spoke, I could tell she had put a lot of thought into her answers and upon reflection, this resulted in rich narrative- full of depth about the challenges she has faced, as well as hopes, goals, and dreams for her future. I was also struck by Lynne’s description of her support network. She viewed this network as a main reason for her success.

Lynne’s Perspective

My parents divorced when I was young and I never really had a great relationship with either of them. Since I was young, I remember always wanting to be a mother. I do not know if that is because I wanted to do things right or what, I just remember always wanting to be a mom. Jeff and I were married when I was 21. I was pregnant with my first child when I was 22. The moment I found out I was pregnant, there was meaning in my life-not that it was not complete before. I just had something in my life that was missing before. After we had Jill, I really sat back and reflected on being a mom. It is then that you can look at things from a different perspective. For example, you have insights about your own childhood that maybe you did not have before you have children.

I feel lucky because I am blessed to have my children and I have other things, like school that makes it feel so complete. Jeff and I have three young children- 9 months, 3 years, and 5 years old. Having the children has truly been the most wonderful thing in my
life. Motherhood has been absolutely phenomenal. The actual transitions were not a problem with each birth. My biggest challenge throughout it all was recognizing that my number one priority and love was to be a mom, but that at some point I still would want a career. It was difficult trying to balance those desires. Overall, I feel like I am conquering both worlds!

I just love to learn. I have always loved the idea of getting a master’s degree—really. I do not know if I cared what it was even in! I knew though that I wanted to stay at home and be with my kids. My options were pretty limited with pursuing my education. So this program was a good option to meet my needs as I did not want to go on-campus and find childcare. I needed something that was flexible. DE really fits my style of learning as I am a bit of an introvert. In a regular classroom, I never felt comfortable to be able to say what was on my mind or to be able to challenge anyone. The somewhat anonymous nature of the program allows for me to go on-line and say what I need to say and have that choice. I definitely love being busy. I get bored just being at home with the kids and not having anything else in my life. So school totally satisfies this need in me to have the intellectual side stimulated at the same time. I am also a bit of a perfectionist and I have complete control in this program and I love that.

Although it has worked really well, there have been some challenges with combining DE with motherhood. So far the biggest structural challenge has been the requirement at the Summer Institute for three weeks. It was really hard for me to leave my family. Although it was initially a challenge, once I got there it was okay. We were able to work it out that my family was there for part of the time. I have also found some barriers with the courses as some classes have high course requirements in terms of time
consuming assignments. As a mom, you have all your stresses going on with home life and then you are constantly thinking about school. There have been moments when everything in my life is so busy and I have something big in school due as well. For example, if my kids get sick, then all of a sudden I am faced with having three days to do a week worth of work. So at times that has been a challenge for me.

I remember there was one time in particular that I was a week into a class and I had an extremely busy week at home. I could not get to my material and I was totally stressed about that. It was Sunday by the time I made my posts and the teaching assistant (TA) e-mailed me and said, “you need to get in sooner!” I just lost it at that point. I had a bad week and the TA did not know what my life was like. I said I will post when I am able to! Those situations do not happen often, but there certainly are times when the motherhood part of my life takes priority.

Another challenge is because I am not presently working, there is always the thought that I need to make sure I can get back into the work force. I have to make sure my resume is up to date and I always feel like I need to have hands on experience at the same time, so I make myself available to do volunteer work. I enjoy all the roles, but there are times I will sit there and question whether this is smart and am I still being a good wife and good mother while I am doing all of these things. It is usually when I am feeling overwhelmed when a course starts to get heavy or I am in the middle of a big project. At times, I just feel like school is always moving over me- it penetrates everything I do. If I am sitting on the floor playing with the kids, I seem to always think about school and that is bothersome.
When school starts to pile up or gets busy, then my patience level with my kids is also impacted. I sometimes struggle with guilt when I feel like I am not actually spending much time with the kids—even though that is why I appreciate the program because I feel like I can do both. So I do have those moments of complete self-doubt. But on more of an on-going day to day basis, there is this little piece of guilt that kind of whittles away at me. So it is balancing knowing that my kids are going to be okay if I am not playing with them all day. But, I do not want them to have the message when someone asks them what their childhood was like, to automatically think back to their mom sitting at the computer! At times, things can get overwhelming when school is busy, but typically I really enjoy having the balance of both worlds.

As for my support system, I am sure a lot of women say this but I have the absolutely best husband! Jeff is 100% supportive and he does not pressure me at all. He could care less when he comes home if the house is dirty and the kids still have lunch on their faces. Those things are not an issue for him, as long as we are healthy and happy. He can look beyond to the bigger picture. When I get stressed out, I lean on him a lot. For example, debriefing with him is extremely helpful in getting my priorities set and figuring out what does not need to be a stress. I also know if I am really struggling at the time, I can tell him he needs to take over some of the stuff for me and he will without question. He is just always there to look out and take whatever he can on. And I just think that is a really big help in juggling all of this.

Overall, I tend to use more of my family and friends for support rather than the on-line contacts through school. My supports are all really encouraging. They are always very interested in hearing what is going on and they tell me they are proud of me. Some
people do not really understand school and ask me, “What are you doing again?” While other supports know more about what I am doing and have a different level of understanding. Some people at first were curious about how I was going to do school with kids. And now they look at my life and say, “I do not know how you do it. You are just so busy”. My friends realize that this is the way I am- it is how I operate best. It is no longer, “I cannot believe you are taking this much on”, they just say they would not be able to do it themselves.

In relation to motherhood supports, I am not a part of any formal group, but the kids are in a lot of programs so I meet several moms that way. I also have some really close friends that also have young children. So I have a lot of access to people in the same parenting situation. With my last child, I took a one year leave of absence from the program. Now I am working with a whole new cohort of students so I feel like I need to re-establish connections with other students.

My goals for the future are up in the air. I feel like a really big fish at times because I flop back and forth on what I want. Right now my goals are different from when I started the program. After I finish, I would like to go back and get my after degree in education and ideally I would like to be a teacher/counsellor in an elementary or junior high school setting. During my leave of absence last year, I did a lot of soul-searching and it really hit me. I realized that I have been privileged enough to stay at home with my kids and I value that. So I thought about getting into the school system, as that would be a good fit for my family. I love being around kids and I love the idea of teaching. Working in the school system would let me still be with my kids, which is very important to me.
Overall, DE has allowed me to pursue all of the things that I want to pursue at this time. My main priorities are to be a mom and a wife. I can still do all of that at the same time. I do not feel that I have to put anything on hold because DE is providing me a way to meet my educational and professional needs as well, without taking anything away from my family.

_Karrie’s Reflections_

Lynne struck me as an extremely motivated person particularly when she focused on her love of learning and motherhood. I was also struck by her recognition of her social supports, particularly her partner, as an integral part in her success in school. As Lynne drew her social support map, it was apparent she has a strong team of supporters for her various life roles. Interesting to note was Lynne’s addition following her review of the transcript. She had originally stated that absolutely everyone in her social network supported her going to school. I initially thought that was great, but probably rare. After reviewing the transcripts, Lynne added a comment on the transcript:

This has changed over the past couple months. My in-laws have expressed concern that my life is too stressed and they think this is because I am in school. It was very difficult to hear this, but I reiterated that if I didn’t remain active in working toward my career, that I would have a difficult time once I try to re-enter the workforce. This program allows me to fulfill my commitment to my family as well as my future career. (L. 132-136)

I found her recognition of this pressure from social supports as an interesting shared experience with the other two women interviewed. As described further in the next
chapter on shared plot lines, each woman expressed role pressures associated with her desire and priority of being a full-time mom, while also wanting to pursue her education.

Lynne also provided excellent examples of when she felt pressure from society. Lynne described many metaphors throughout the interview. I particularly liked when she described school overtaking her. She used the words “penetrates” and “moving over me” in describing thinking about school all the time. I really connected with this part of her narrative. At times when coursework is demanding, for me it feels uncontrollable.

Similar to Samantha, Lynne used the word ‘fortunate’ in relation to being able to stay at home with her kids and pursue her educational goals at the same time. Ironically a few decades ago, women may have considered themselves fortunate to be allowed into the workforce when having young children. As previously mentioned, I initially was surprised by this term as I viewed the term fortunate as something we do not have control over. I aligned more with Grace’s narrative which was full of metaphors of personal control and choice. I soon realized though after reflecting on these words throughout the data analysis process, that all three women were talking about the same concept. They all feel personal control over their lives, and maybe that is why Samantha and Lynne felt fortunate.

By the end of the interview with Lynne, I found her enthusiasm for life encouraging. I understood why she was drawn to a career in counselling. Lynne was considerate, passionate, and insightful - qualities I also observed in Samantha and Grace.
CHAPTER SIX

Shared Plot Lines

Through Grace, Samantha, and Lynne’s stories, three unique narratives emerged highlighting the facilitators, challenges, and contextual issues faced by each woman. Since the main objectives of this research project were to explore experiences of women in early motherhood as they pursue DE, I will next highlight six shared plot lines. These plot lines have been integrated from the women’s narratives that symbolize common threads woven throughout their stories. The first reading of the data analysis involved reading the transcripts for the overall plot. In this step, I listened for main events, reoccurring images, metaphors and contradictions. The plot lines, in no particular order, included: (1) Being a Mother is My Number One Priority, (2) I am a More Confident Individual Because of School, (3) Sometimes Each Role Does Not Get What it Should, (4) Staying at Home is a Choice That I Really Want to Make, (5) Expectations, Expectations, Expectations, and (6) My Supports are Integral to My Success in School.

Following discussion of shared plot lines, I present the recommendations offered by the participants for DE programs, as well as specific recommendations to the CAAP program. Finally, I provide some guidance offered to other women in early motherhood who may be considering DE as an option to meet their educational and career goals.

Being a Mother is My Number One Priority

All three women described motherhood as a very positive experience using words like “phenomenal”, “wonderful”, “rewarding”, and “fulfilling”. They each identified that being a mother was their number one priority and expressed their belief of the importance to stay at home with their children while they are young. Although all three women self-
identified their main role as stay-at-home mothers, each clearly had other roles, such as student, that resulted in facing multiple demands within their lives. For example, when asked about the transition to motherhood with each of her three children, Lynne identified the internal conflict she faced: “The transitions were not a problem but I did struggle with the whole... how do I be a mother, because that is my number one priority, and still attend to my desire to be a career person” (L. 396-398).

Another common message was that each woman’s career goals were affected by having children. This was a similar theme within Nelson’s (2003) maternal transitional model identifying personal growth and transformation in the area of work. Grace came to the realization that she wanted to be a full time parent- which was a surprise for her. Grace originally thought she would need to work as a way of having a break from raising kids. Lynne used the metaphor of a fish flopping back and forth and spoke about soul searching during her leave of absence which led to her realizing that being a school counsellor or teaching would be her ideal to fit with her personal needs. Samantha saw different options for her future, but was not making definite plans until her children are in school. Not surprisingly given their commitment to their children, each woman’s career plans were altered once they had children in order to fit their priority of putting their family needs first.

The challenges identified between roles were further highlighted when exploring another common thread among shared narratives. Each woman identified her love and passion for both motherhood and learning. In their unique ways, each commented on how their education has facilitated their success as a parent as discussed next.
I am a More Confident Individual Because of School

Although each woman identified with multiple role strain/conflict to some degree, within each narrative a plot emerged about self-concept. In particular, each woman commented on how pursuing DE has facilitated her parenting. Grace identified:

The schooling has been important for me in terms of self esteem. I know many women struggle with ‘just being a stay at home mom’. With my education, I don’t feel that way because it is a choice that I really want to make. (L. 143-145)

Furthermore, Grace indicated:

Personally, I have experienced many benefits of continuing with my education that have occurred as a direct result of the learning. I am finding that I am a more confident individual, and as a result, I believe I am a better parent. (L. 6-8)

This insight was echoed by Samantha who concluded our research conversation by indicating that DE and motherhood has increased her self-concept:

I think it has done a lot for my self-esteem as a student, and therefore I think it has done a lot for my self-esteem as a parent because I’m doing both of these things and they are both important things… at the same time, my kids are not being compromised. (L. 1174-1177)

Similarly, Lynne commented that DE suits her learning needs by giving her confidence to be more open with her beliefs in an on-line environment. She also commented that DE also helps her conquer both worlds: motherhood and career.

In terms of learning styles, each woman identified or alluded to being introverted. However, they viewed DE as helping them become more open and increase their contributions to discussions in the on-line format adding to their confidence. As
previously identified in the literature review, women participating in higher education who reported enjoyment from their studies developed confidence and self-esteem (Heenan, 2002). This appeared true for all three of these women, including myself.

Grace, Samantha, and Lynne’s narratives represent extremely motivated women who have the ability to juggle multiple demands. However, it was clear that sometimes demands between school and home compete and lead to multiple role strain.

*Sometimes Each Role Does Not Get What It Should*

Pressures on graduate women from multiple-role conflict and strain have been identified in the literature review (e.g., McBride, 1997). Not surprisingly, various roles were identified by the women including: mother, partner/wife, student, sister, daughter, teacher, church member, friend, dog-walker, volunteer worker, bill payer, organizer, cook, cleaner, and maid. As one participant commented, motherhood is a “24-7” job (Samantha, L. 810). Given the multitude of roles and responsibilities and competing priorities, many examples of role conflict emerged from the narratives. Lynne, in reflecting on her internal struggle with roles, revealed:

> I enjoy all of that [multiple roles] but there are times I’ll sit there and go, “Is this smart? Am I still being a good wife and still being a good mother while I’m doing all of these things?” So that [multiple roles] at times has been a challenge. (L. 172-174)

Similarly, Samantha spoke of her partner’s attempts to point out when school was getting in the way of her home responsibilities:

> When I was taking the 2 classes… he said, “this is nuts… you have had babysitters 3 times this week, you are still working on this, you are still working...
on that, there is so much to be done around here, are you sure this isn’t too much?” And of course I’m like, “no it’s all good”. And it wasn’t- it was too much. (L. 140-143)

Grace also shared examples of when the student and the mother roles were in conflict. When Grace and I met for the interview, she was facing a major challenge attending a mandatory seminar for school and leaving her child for the first time at the time of our interview: “I want to keep up breastfeeding. I don’t want to stop because of my program…I hope he will still nurse when I get home”. (Grace, L. 206-210)

Another interesting observation around multiple role strain was noted from the women’s narratives. In order to balance competing roles, particularly between family and school life, these women used strategies to manage or enhance her roles. In discussing role conflict and strategies to manage, Grace indicated:

Usually the wife came last, because I have no choice, I have to take care of him [her son] and school deadlines and those kinds of things. I try to restrict my hours from school and try not to become like obsessive-compulsive with checking the mail and discussion forums. You know setting my times when I am going to post, and not always being on the computer… because I can get carried away. (L. 604-608)

Lynne identified one of her strategies as:

My plan has always kind of been that I’d do the mommy thing during the day or whatever and then in the evenings I’d do my homework. And in my first year that felt…that fit really well. I could get stuff done during nap times during the day but otherwise I got most of my stuff done during the evenings. (L. 419-422)
Since her third child was born and returning to school following her parental leave, Lynne noticed being more tired in the evenings and feeling conflict between her mother and student roles:

She is still quite young… and I am nursing and all that stuff- I have a lot of physical demands on my body as well. So, I was really worried about that coming back into the program, wondering what that would look like… so I am curious what next year will look like with adding a practicum and final project onto that. (L. 423-425)

Lynne recognized that school demands will increase over the next year as time demands change with practicum placements and completion of her final project. Samantha also commented on these increased demands over her final year of the program. At present, Samantha is able to manage her multiple roles by specific self-constructed rules:

I don’t want my husband to think that school is getting in the way. So I am also very organized about things like laundry and stuff like that. I’m more organized when I am in school then when I am out of school because… for instance when my kids have their naps in the afternoon I know that I have 2 hours. So it is always the same kind of thing. Quickly get the kitchen cleaned up from lunch. I put in a load of laundry, I fold the one load, I put it away, I tidy up the toys, I sit down and do a good hour and 10 minutes on the computer or whatever. And when I am not in school, I’m napping with them, (laughter) you know, the kitchen gets cleaned up before supper. (L. 428-434)

It is clear that as women, balancing multiple demands requires specific strategies in order to successfully manage our roles. More of the role enhancement strategies identified by
the three women will be reviewed in the next chapter, which provides guidance for women considering DE during early motherhood.

*Staying at Home is a Choice That I Really Want to Make*

Overall, as seen throughout the narratives, choice is an important aspect for these women. Each woman has had the opportunity to make the choice, with their partner’s emotional and financial support, to stay at home with young children. In turn, pursuing DE during this time in their lives has expanded their options and choices for the future. Making this choice has ultimately assisted them to navigate through their future goals at the same time as ensuring that family takes priority. Overall, when I asked each woman what stood out for them the most, the common response was around having personal choice in balancing their varied life roles and ambitions. Grace’s words illustrate this plot line:

> It [school] is changing me as a person. And I would not be a good stay-at-home mom without my education, because you’d feel like you had to stay at home because you didn’t have a choice. And now I am choosing to stay at home, I could go out and work but it feels like more of a choice. And I am a more confident person as a result and not feel like, oh I can’t do anything I have to stay at home … it is a choice. (L. 522-526)

Similarly, when Samantha spoke of why she liked DE, she spoke of her ability to have control over her work hours:

> Ah, the time, flexibility. I guess of being able to go on and do your posts. If you have to do it at 3 o’clock in the morning, you know? That’s the biggest thing because I don’t have to drive to university, park, walk to class, sit in class, walk
back to the car, and drive home. Like, that alone saves me a good hour, hour and half easily. (L. 58-63)

Lynne concluded our interview by summarizing her main reflection as:

I think for me the biggest thing distance education has allowed me to pursue all of the things that I want to pursue at this time. Just again, that my number one priority is to be a mom. And to be a wife. And I can still do all of that and totally successfully still pursue all of my other stuff without having to… I just can do it all at the same time. I don’t feel that I have to put anything on hold because distance education is providing the way to meet my educational and professional needs as well. And not take anything away from my family. (L. 605-610)

Although each woman expressed feeling personal control and choice over their decisions around motherhood and education, each expressed societal pressures related to motherhood due to these choices.

*Expectations, Expectations, Expectations*

A shared plot line emerged from all three narratives that highlighted social, family, and internal pressures that each woman faced. Grace indicated that at times she found being at home isolating, particularly since society does not value the role of mothers. Grace also spoke about broader social pressures of being a stay at home mom and her associated internalized guilt. The guilt stems from not fitting what she views as the traditional role of mother who is the “homemaker” and does the majority of the labour within the household:

I struggle a bit about the stereotypical role of mother and …housekeeper (laugh).

And yeah, not quite fitting that. And thinking I should be getting the meals ready
and doing the housekeeping, but being a student as well. It’s kind of hard to add that as a full time job and my husband does do a lot of that, and then I feel guilty.

(L. 776-779)

When faced with expectations of fitting into the norm, women have additional stressors placed upon them. Grace also commented that these expectations are contradictory to a generation ago. Grace experienced expectations from others to return to paid work following maternity leave. She noted that this pressure on modern day women appears to particularly weigh heavily on those mothers with higher levels of education such as herself. In Grace’s experience, people assumed she would go back to work. When she chose to stay home, she was questioned why she just wanted to stay at home. As previously noted, an example of this pressure faced by Grace was when her female doctor questioned her hesitation to return to work. This expectation to return to work represents a devaluing of motherhood.

Lynne spoke of other expectations:

I feel like life now is very different then life way years back and parenting now is real different, say when I was a kid. In many ways I think that is a good thing but I also think that has brought a lot of pressure from society. (L. 484-486)

Samantha also identified pressures related to motherhood when she spoke of her dreams for the future:

I hope that I can have both, and I guess that is our generation, we want to be parents and have our careers. So even though my career is on hold, I hope to get that back so when my kids are 30, that I do have both. That I was able to be a successful parent and a successful career woman. It’s still kind of a man’s world,
you know, like he comes home and he’s got supper, and his laundry is done and
his house is fairly…tidy (laughter) I won’t even say clean! I’ll say tidy. You know
and when I work, I know I’ll still have to come home and do more. But I think for
our generation, we have to show our kids, especially our daughters that they can
be and do whatever they want and I think my mother tried to do that but at the
same time she did give up the career side to raise a family. (L. 944-954)

In further discussing gender role expectations, Samantha indicated:

I think it is different to raise a boy then it is to raise a girl. Because you do want to
raise a boy to “be a man”, but you also want him to be a kind, sensitive,
empathetic man. And I think much as my husband does around here to help me
out, he still has a little bit of that, “the man works and the woman stays home”
philosophy. It’s not overt; it’s sort of covert- I guess, it’s just still there”. (L. 959-
963)

Lynne spoke of broader societal expectations she faced:

There are these expectations that you are going to stay at home with the kids and
you are going to play with them every minute that they are awake, and you do
things and make sure that they are fed and make sure they are clean… and all of
these things. (L. 215-218)

Lynne also spoke of expectations she places on herself, as she reflected on a family
member’s parenting influences:

I’ve always kind of felt this challenge, whether I put it on my self or not, to be as
good of a parent as she is. I guess what I’m getting at is she is a really good parent
and am I doing all of these things, what do I do that is different and why, and is
that okay? And so there’s those kind of expectations that I guess I try to live up to.

(L. 475-478)

Another interesting pressure identified by Lynne related to motherhood and women’s image:

I just feel sometimes that you have to be this perfect- you know you never yell at your children…you have to feed them your three meals and two snacks a day, and of course I wouldn’t do anything other than that. And I just felt that everything has to be so perfect and at the same time you have to be fit and healthy and look good. And you know you have to be a wife- and this isn’t coming from my husband but from society. (L.499-504)

It is obvious from the literature and as identified by Grace, Samantha and Lynne, that women continue to face barriers and challenges associated with societal pressures on a variety of levels. For instance, pressures emerge from family of origin, society, internal self-doubt messages, and from social support networks. In summary, these expectations are devaluing the role of ‘mother’, the pressure of perfection, and struggles between redefining “stay-at home” motherhood in the 21st century, and pressures from one’s support system. The next plot line is focused on social support network and how these networks can facilitate success in fulfilling multiple life roles.

*My Supports are Integral to My Success in School*

One of the most apparent shared plot lines among the three women, including myself, is the importance of supports, especially our partners, in relation to our success in school. As each woman drew her social support map, she identified several key supporters, such as her partners, friends, and close relatives that were integral to her
success within DE pursuits. Examples included sharing childcare, friends to debrief with, or leaning on their partners for support emotionally, and for childcare and household responsibilities. In identifying the key to her success, Lynne indicated:

Surround yourself with people that are positive about it and ideally everyone could have the same kind of husband that I have where they can help out as much as possible…There is no doubt in my mind that my support network has- it probably is the reason why I’m not as stressed out as I probably could be. (L. 541-547)

Likewise, both Samantha and Grace identified their partners, among other members in their support network, as directly linked to their success managing DE with young children.

Samantha noted during the research conversation that completing the social support map helped her recognize who are the supporters within her team versus those who do not express real interest. Grace, while drawing her social support map, talked about her partner as being the reason she was in school. Overall, social support emerged as a dominant plot line, which is not surprising since each of these women are enrolled in a graduate program in counselling that promotes social support as key to stress management.

In identifying each of these commonalities within plot lines, it is also important to acknowledge social class and contextual issues underlying this research. To begin with, each woman involved in this study has the financial opportunity to make the decision not to pursue full-time paid work and to be at home with her child and/or children.

Demographical similarities were noted in this study. All were married, middle-class, and
Caucasian females, which is representative of the CAAP student population. Not surprisingly, these participants’ demographics are reflective of the majority of research on motherhood which is clearly a limitation to this research. These contextual issues will be discussed further in the implications section of this project. First, an overview of recommendations is presented.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Recommendations

The next chapter summarizes eight recommendations for DE programs, including some specific recommendations for CAAP program administrator and program developers based on female participant’s shared reflections. It concludes with words of wisdom offered from participants for those students thinking about pursuing DE concurrently to early motherhood.

Recommendations to DE Programs

Overall, the three women described their experiences of DE in the CAAP program as positive. Although issues and challenges are evident with distance learning, particularly having school within the home, the consensus was that DE fit well with motherhood. Specifically, DE was reported as the best option to meet their educational needs at this time. Part of the success shared by the women stemmed from various family-friendly organizational features of the CAAP program. These features are recommended as best-practices for DE programs worldwide. The following eight features have been identified from this research:

1. Family centered leave options (up to 1 year maternity/parental leave).
2. Providing continued access to announcements/e-mail/resources during requested leave of absence.
3. Options for extending length of programming up to 6 years from original 2-3 year plans.
4. For structured, time specific courses, provide options such as one week free from posting, per term, for family related responsibilities.
5. For on-campus sections, access to family student housing.

6. Extensions for assignments available, if needed.

7. Electives that are an interest to parenting roles (i.e. CAAP: Human Development).

8. Academic advisers who understand multiple roles of women.

For the last feature of the CAAP program, Lynne commented:

I just feel that this program is so open to all those different variables in your life, ….because some programs might not be that open to the fact that women have babies while they are taking course … my academic advisor… has been so open throughout this whole program and checking in on me and helping me make decisions about if I should take the entire year off or what would work out best in the end and I think [the advisor] was just a valuable resource throughout all of that. (L. 568-574)

Another interesting example of an organizational feature is the profiles of successful students in the CAAP website which highlights the need for self-motivation and self-responsibility linked to student success that these three women all possess.

Although I view CAAP as a model for international DE programs in terms of supporting new mothers, when asked during the research conversations on recommendations, some specific features were further identified by the women for the CAAP program. These recommendations highlight concerns about family life variables that could add to CAAP’s support of students.

Specific Recommendations for CAAP

For the most part, the women commented that they found the program more structured then initially believed, such as following a weekly format. This structure can
increase stress when family issues need to take priority. Grace, who completed previous DE courses, indicated missing the flexibility of self-paced study. On the other hand, Samantha commented that the structure of weekly lessons helped with motivation in her studies.

For on-campus sections of the program, including summer institute (SI) and weekend seminars, childcare for those traveling from out of town was recommended. Building on this recommendation, based on the number of females in the program, and those in early motherhood, I recommend that breastfeeding friendly areas are provided on campus. Two women did mention that they appreciated the option for family-housing while on campus, especially as they were still nursing at SI. In regards to other mandatory portions of the program, specifically weekend seminars, one woman talked of family issues that may arise, like death or sickness that may impact ones ability to travel. Her suggestion included an alternative weekend seminar for those unable to attend on a specific weekend or options for video teleconferencing to the seminar.

In relation to practicums, one woman identified the difficulty of juggling work and childcare schedules. She also mentioned that the espoused ten hours per week minimum for practicums is very deceptive. She described spending much more than ten hours per week at her practicum site due to interviews, workshops, and other duties that fall outside of the regular practicum schedule. The other two students not in practicums yet, raised similar concerns about how upcoming practicums would impact their ability to commit to their family as well as being successful in their practicums. Overall the recommendation for these issues relates to ensuring students are aware of the time commitments for these sections of the program.
All three women identified taking two classes at a time as a major challenge for their family life. A shared example was the five week on-line portion of summer institute creating challenges due to the increased workload and time commitment needed. This was mainly due to increased readings and posting associated with two classes. However, there are options to decelerate the program and take only one course at a time. They also noted that the workload seemed to depend on the course, as some classes have large assignments with high commitments that ultimately impact their home life.

Another insightful suggestion, given that we are counsellors in training, is access to affordable personal counselling services or referrals especially for those living in rural or isolated areas. Common with many counsellors practicing in rural/isolated communities, access to personal counselling is challenging. One woman, who resided close to the main campus, also recommended on-campus information seminars to assist in helping her with questions and concerns in relation to practicums and the final project. Besides these suggestions specific for the CAAP program, overall the women viewed DE as fitting with their needs and praised the program for its openness to family responsibilities.

Guidance for Other Women

Each woman provided specific recommendations for other female students pursuing or thinking of pursuing DE during early motherhood. These words of wisdom have been categorized as: (1) Self-talk messages, (2) Leave of absence options, and (3) A balancing act: Role enhancement strategies.
**Self-Talk Messages**

To manage their multiple roles, each woman identified a variety of internal self-talk messages they use to manage their busy lives. These messages are echoed in the shared plot lines which have proven beneficial during “overwhelming”, “chaotic”, and “crazy” times. Self-talk statements included:

- Remember that it’s for a limited time. I may be putting in 3 years now but school is a limited duration and in the end it will give me a lot of flexibility and to have choices.

- Learning really changes who I am and that is really valuable. If I’m a better listener as a result, then that in itself is worth it. It’s more about the learning than the degree.

- I can take as long as long as I need, especially when my children are little, there is no rush. If I take an extra year or an extra 3 years, who really cares?

- I’m not going to be the perfect parent- it doesn’t exist.

- Housework is the least of importance!

- If I notice that school gets in the way of my priorities, I’ll take a step back to reflect.

To keep things in perspective, Samantha identified one of her self-talk messages:

There is so much more to life then just school. Because if you can be doing well in school, but also have a balanced life then that is more important the getting 100% in school. (L. 627-630)

Self-talk messages, a common cognitive strategy suggested to clients, proved useful in the women’s self-reflection and self-preservation in managing multiple life demands.
Leave of Absence Options

In relation to beginning or continuing the program following the birth of a newborn, both women that chose to continue school with newborns indicated that they would not recommend this to other women. Grace suggested at least taking the first semester off following the birth of a child mainly due to the changes and difficulty that may arise during the transition. She also commented on her transition as a “blur”, indicating:

I don’t remember because I simply did the work to do the work and not have the time to really learn. To really read all the discussions and get out of it what you could. Because you are doing it to survive basically and you’re doing the minimum, do your posts and not worry too much about it. (L. 125-128)

Similarly, although Samantha found beginning her first class with a newborn and 19-month-old as relatively smooth, she indicated that she would not recommend this to other women with newborns.

Consistent with the advice to take a leave of absence, Lynne, who chose the leave option when she had her third child, found the time away from school to be a nice break and she felt refreshed upon returning to her studies a year later. However, she also experienced some disconnection with other students feeling like she did not belong as most of her original cohort of students had moved to a different stage of the program. With this feeling of disconnection upon her return, Lynne needed to re-establish connections with other students. She also faced the reality that it will be a year later then she originally planned to complete the program.
A Balancing Act: Role Enhancement Strategies

As mentioned in the discussion of shared plot lines, each woman employs strategies to manage or enhance her multiple life roles, particularly in relation to school. These strategies are further highlighted through specific recommendations for other women in DE:

1. Develop an organization/time management system.
2. Schedule specific time for schoolwork. For example, during your child’s/children’s nap times, take them to a friend’s house or childcare, or study while your partner or other family members are at home.
3. Put school in its place.
4. Take it slowly if needed. If you are feeling overwhelmed by the workload, cut back. For example, in discussion forums, do the minimum requirements and be happy with that.
5. Schedule family time; having a routine family time will help you keep balanced.
6. Complete homework in blocks of time, for examples, 2-3 hours as opposed to 20 minute segments throughout the day.
7. Be clear about your priorities.

In relation to priorities, Lynne made an interesting point:

I make the assumption that everyone’s priorities are their kids and maybe it’s not always that way. For me, I know that school is school, and if I don’t …accomplish something, my life is not going to be over. But that the most important thing is that the kids in my life and my husband are taken care of. So I think I’d be clear on my priorities. (L. 531-534)
Similarly, Samantha suggested not working in paid employment while going to school and remembering to put children’s needs first. For instance, she suggested not having the computer on when the children are at home or are awake. Whereas Grace noted, “I think the modeling of behaviours is particularly important and my being in school helps to emphasize the importance of education” (L. 71-73), which echoes my perspective.

In addition to these recommendations, it was also clear from the shared plot lines that having a supportive network of people is a key factor to woman’s success. This may include childcare supports, partners, friends, support groups for moms, on-line support, and other students who are in similar situations. Although not mentioned by the women in this study, an additional recommendation for role enhancement strategies surrounds self-care. This includes ensuring that the woman behind all the roles is taken care of and is a priority. Time for oneself, attending to nutrition, exercise, sleep, stress levels and overall mental health all are considered self-care. The next chapter provides an overall discussion of this research project.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Discussion

A discussion of the results of this study is presented. Facilitators and barriers/challenges for the women in the study are overviewed integrating the plot lines and recommendations from this project.

Facilitators

As discussed by Kramarae (2001) and reflected by the women in this study, DE facilitates access to educational pursuits, particularly for women who choose to stay home with their young children. Access is enhanced due to decreasing childcare and commuting costs, decreasing time needed to commute to educational facilities, and increasing accessibility for those who live in rural or isolated communities. As such, DE assists these women to navigate through their various life priorities and goals, while managing their multiple roles such as mother, wife, and student. As described in the literature review, Lewin’s field theory, particularly the approach/approach conflict, appears to play a role in the experiences of the women involved in this project. However, since all three women identified motherhood as their number one priority, their goals regarding motherhood and education do not appear to be equally desirable goals. Therefore, the motivation towards motherhood as a primary role/goal may factor into these women’s ability to manage the competing responsibilities of early motherhood and DE through the role enhancement strategies outlined.

The role enhancement strategies identified by the women in this study have challenged many of the superwomen ideals that McBride (1997) identified for female graduate students. For instance, the women in this study provided numerous suggestions
to other women pursuing DE concurrent to early motherhood. These recommendations have provided examples of how these women have challenged the notion of perfection within the superwomen ideal as McBride discussed. Their suggestions focusing on time management systems, using social support networks, and knowing their priorities has assisted in challenging these pressures. These results are not surprising given the graduate program in counsellor education focuses on self-reflection, personal growth, and professional development.

Although each of the women were able to identify socio-cultural pressures related to unrealistic beliefs, standards, and expectations from self and others, they managed these pressures through cognitive strategies (I’m not going to be the perfect parent- it does not exist), and by asserting personal control over their life situation and educational choices.

Another facilitator that emerged for these women was reflected in the shared plot line “I am a More Confident Individual Because Of School”. This plot line is reflective of Heenan’s (2002) work that reported women who had a positive educational experience, developed their confidence and self-esteem. Not surprisingly, Grace, Samantha, and Lynne identified how continuing their education enhanced their confidence. The confidence was associated within their roles such as parent, future paid worker, or through enhancing their present relationships. For instance, Samantha identified having school in her life provided an alternative topic for discussion with other adults rather than diapers and toilet training. Overall, it is apparent that female distance learners balance various life roles and responsibilities. DE is viewed as a convenient, accessible, and flexible alternative to manage their multiple life roles while pursuing further professional
and career development. However, the results of this study also support Nelson’s (2003) model of maternal transition in which changes occur in several areas of women’s lives including commitments, self, daily life, relationships, and work.

**Barriers/Challenges**

The semi-structured interview guide used in this project was structured through Cross’ (1981) situational, dispositional, and institutional barriers for distance learners as well as the added socio-cultural barrier specific to female learners (Wong-Wylie & Orr, in preparation). Some situational barriers were identified by the women studied including lack of support from some of their family members. Dispositional barriers identified included lack of self-confidence and at times challenged by school and family demands. Institutional barriers were highlighted such as lack of student support services (e.g., such as access to personal counselling).

As highlighted within the literature, besides these barriers identified, these women identified various examples associated with multiple role strain (McBride, 1997). For the three women in this study, words such as chaotic, crazy, and overwhelming emerged when discussing times they felt multiple role strain. The superwoman syndrome (Shaevit, 1984), does not appear to be a prevalent issue for these three women. Partly, this may be mediated by their choice not to work concurrent to their schooling. For instance, McBride (1997) identified increased workforce participation of women has resulted in a pattern of increased stress on women’s multiple roles. Even though these women were not currently pursuing paid employment outside them home, they faced various demands of a socio-cultural nature. Lynne’s words of feeling like school penetrates and takes over her life are a good example of the demands women in early motherhood face while pursuing DE.
Lynne’s identification of social pressures placed on women to be fit and healthy is echoed in Bailey’s (2001) research on the transition to motherhood. Bailey explored women’s responses to physical changes following the birth of a child and how this has led to further social control. Particularly, she wrote that woman’s bodies contribute to the “dual experience of social identity as both a means of independent expression and a form of social embedding” (p. 128). These added pressures on women to be thin and beautiful during this time period is also important to note from a socio-cultural perspective.

Although there have been positive changes in relation to women’s access to education worldwide, other issues continue to need to be addressed. For instance, although women are the primary consumers of DE, they remain underrepresented in positions providing high end technology solutions, designing delivery systems, software, and online educational packages; and they are chronically underrepresented among faculty and administrators currently shaping distance education (Kramarae, 2001). The final section provides final conclusions about this project along with identifying its limitations.
CHAPTER NINE

Implications and Conclusions

The final section of this project highlights the impact and implications of this research. The limitations of this project are identified. This section concludes with a discussion of future directions for research and final reflections on the project.

*Implications of Women in DE and Early Motherhood*

My primary objective of this project was to explore the experiences, facilitators, and barriers/challenges of three women transitioning to motherhood while pursuing DE. As highlighted within the shared plot lines and recommendation chapters, this objective has been met. A surprise to me during this process was one woman’s comment on how the interview was beneficial for her own self-reflection, particularly when I asked her to draw her social support map. Overall, I believe that conducting this research has given each of these women some time to openly talk about their experiences and to reflect upon how her life has been impacted by motherhood and choosing to continue her educational goals though virtual/distance learning. Through this research I have also been given the opportunity to reflect on my experiences as a distance learner while in early motherhood.

The second objective of the project was to gain personal insight about the experiences of women, like myself, who have chosen to embark on DE while in early motherhood. I initially expected more recommendations/changes for the program. However, the three women generally found the CAAP program facilitative and supportive of their family life. In reflecting on this expectation, I realized the women’s observations are reflective of the level of respect and value that the CAAP program has for multiple life roles of students, particularly associated with family needs and priorities. It is my
hope that the identification of these facilitators of success will decrease and minimize barriers for women in completing their education at a distance by informing other programs of the best practices from CAAP. As a result, further options, support, information, and polices may be developed or refined though DE programs to facilitate women’s access and success in their distance learning.

From a personal perspective, my third objective was to increase my understanding and knowledge of qualitative research design and implementation. Through this project, I have had the opportunity to learn more about research processes through ethics review, grant applications, project preparation, interview methods, and dissemination of research findings. I have also had the opportunity to reflect on my own experience of pursuing DE during early motherhood through journaling, personal reflection, and development of presentation material. In doing so, I have identified limitations that are inherent within this work.

Limitations

When I began the groundwork for this project, I was looking forward to exploring my own biases using the interpretive/constructivist paradigm within a qualitative design. As noted by Mertens (1998), one of the basic tenets of the interpretive/constructivist paradigm is that “reality is socially constructed” (p. 11). An important recognition from this perspective is the influence of researcher values on the process and the importance of understanding the lived experience of the participants themselves. Within this research, I attempted to highlight the main threads woven within each narrative, especially through the use of the voice-centred relational method of data analysis (Mauthner and Doucet,
1998). However, the limitation that obviously exists with this process is clearly highlighted within Mauthner and Doucet’s reflections of their research:

While emphasizing the dynamic and fluid quality of these stories, we believe there is a person within and telling this story, who- in those minutes and hours that we came to speak with them- makes choices about what to emphasize and what to hold back from us. We pay attention to what we think this person is trying to tell us within the context of this relationship, this research setting, and a particular location in the social world, rather than making grand statements who this person or ‘voice’ is”. (p. 136-137)

Given that this was my first exploration into the research world, I found it difficult to write each narrative, not wanting to mistake their meaning or intent during the research conversation. The use of data analysis procedures in qualitative research is a process which is systematic and comprehensive, but not rigid (Mertens, 1998). I have found the voice centred relational method of data analysis to help me understand that these conversations can be viewed as only as one part of each woman’s being. This view was freeing and has allowed me to let go of my hesitations and to become more comfortable while writing each of their individual stories.

Another limitation of this project relates to sampling procedures. The literature identified the major limitation of current research in the area of motherhood as sampling and focusing upon heterosexual, married, middle-class, Caucasian women (Nelson, 2003). Given the demographics of the program, which predominately involves heterosexual, Caucasian women, the sampling within this project was not surprising. However, it is important to note that failure to identify the experiences of under-
represented women is an obvious drawback of the research. Additionally, as with any small sample size, it is apparent that this research was not attempting to generalize results. Therefore, it is best to view this project and recommendations as preliminary findings to inform others of the experiences of these three women. Also, this study provides examples of methods, such as a semi-structured interview guide, and data analysis processes, for this type of research. Qualitative research provides in depth insight into experiences that are not generalizable about lived experiences (Mertens, 1998).

As highlighted in the implications section, there are many areas of strength within the project, especially around giving voice to these three women as they pursue DE during early motherhood. I will next build on these areas by highlighting future directions for research.

Future Directions and Conclusions

An important step from here is to continue this research with other women in CAAP, in other DE programs at Athabasca University, and across Canada and internationally, to compare and contrast experiences. Different methods of research, including quantitative and qualitative methods, including surveys, would be beneficial to understand the experiences of women in early motherhood and DE. In addition, women and DE could be studied from a variety of angles, depending on the student’s contextual issues. Future considerations for research include exploring other transitional times in women’s lives, including midlife transitions. For example, there are many women within the CAAP program and other graduate DE programs that are lifelong learners pursuing their dreams of a graduate degree or change in career. These women, who may have additional roles of grandmothers and/or caretaker of aging parents, face additional
challenges that are important to understand, especially pressures and expectations around their choice to pursue further education during mid-life. Another area for study of women in DE includes single mothers. Without the financial and emotional support offered by shared parenting, many of these women face taking on student loans, several jobs, as well as full-time parenting responsibilities. Other areas for research include under-represented groups within the literature including minorities, lesbian students/mothers, and women with disabilities.

In conclusion, this project has provided contextual understanding of the issues that Grace, Samantha, and Lynne faced while managing their multiple roles around family and school commitments. This project has also heightened my awareness of my own multiple roles and my attempts to manage these roles. Through the qualitative design of the project, the interpretive/constructivist perspective guided the project along with the use of the voice-centred relational method of data analysis (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). The research presented within this project provides contextual understanding of the experiences, facilitators, challenges/barriers for these women including areas of success and areas for improvement from perspectives of these three female distance learners. As identified within this project, six shared plot lines emerged: (1) Being a Mother is My Number One Priority, (2) I am a More Confident Individual Because of School, (3) Sometimes Each Role Does Not Get What it Should, (4) Staying at Home is a Choice That I Really Want to Make, (5) Expectations, Expectations, Expectations, and (6) My Supports are Integral to My Success in School.

In addition, eight features of best practices were highlighted from the CAAP program as well as some specific recommendations to enhance the quality of the program
for students facing multiple life roles, particularly in early motherhood. Overall, this project as a preliminary study, has contributed to understanding the need for further research of women in early motherhood as well as women in DE in general.
EPILOGUE

“And when the stories emerge in their light and their darkness, we will be closer to honoring the real victories involved in the tough, sweet work of making ourselves into mothers.” Naomi Wolf (2001, p. 10)

Upon completion of this project, Wolf’s words have new meaning for me. From a constructivist perspective, I understand with more clarity how we build our own realities. The stories that have been presented in this project, including my own, have many shades of light and darkness, depending on the perspective taken. What I have presented within this project is only a glimpse into these three women’s lives and my own. Honouring these women, as they balance their dreams and passions, has provided me with time to reflect on my own values and beliefs in relation to motherhood and career goals. I have also been given the opportunity to take the time to reflect on the multiple roles in my life and to create more balance through taking into consideration role enhancement strategies.

In the past several months I have often thought of Samantha, Grace, and Lynne’s advice while juggling school, work, and home life.

“Real victories” (Wolf, 2001, p.10) provides me with an image of being in a war or a battle. Ironically, the purpose of this project was to explore barriers/challenges, similar to an image of battle. A metaphor described by Lynne reflects this battle image well. She identified sometimes feeling penetrated by life’s demands when school is overtaking her. For women in early motherhood, whether this penetration is associated with our internal beliefs of perfection or external pressures from society or family, sometimes it feels like a battle. Yet, as we unconsciously lead our lives, there are those little victories that emerge that can be described as both “tough and sweet”.
Motherhood is tough when baby is crying for no reason or will not sleep for 36 straight hours. Motherhood is also tough when our little toddler is sick, we have a paper due the next day that still needs to be proof read, and our in-laws stop by for a visit. Then again, motherhood is sweet when your child smiles, takes those first few steps, rides a bike without your help, or simply calls out “mommy”. These sweet moments are when it is all worth it. It is also worth it when we receive our degrees and see that the years of work as a student have led to accomplishing a dream we have had for years. The phrase “making ourselves into mothers” (Wolf, 2001, p. 10) makes me appreciate that motherhood just does not happen. Becoming a mother is a process of change, transition, and growth, very much like distance education.
REFERENCES


Green Lister, P. (2003). ‘It’s like you can’t be a whole person, a mother who studies’.


APPENDIX A

Pre-Interview Demographic Sheet

Researcher:

Karrie Orr
Graduate Student
Campus Albert Applied Psychology:
Counselling Initiative
2334 William Avenue
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
S7J 1A8
Telephone: (306) 242-1200
E-mail: karrie.bryan@shaw.ca

Supervisor:

Dr. Gina Wong-Wylie
Assistant Professor
Athabasca University
Centre for Graduate Education in
Applied Psychology
7630-118 Street
Edmonton, Alberta T6G 1S9
Telephone: 780-434-5856
E-mail: ginaw@athabascau.ca

1. How old were you on your last birthday?
2. Where do you live (name of closest town/city)?
3. In what year did you begin the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology Program?
4. What is your area of specialty within the program?
5. What date did you first learn of a pregnancy?
6. What was the due date of the baby?
7. Were there any complications with pregnancy?
8. When was the baby born?
9. How many children do you have and what are their ages?
10. What is your current marital status?
11. Have you taken any type of leave from the program (please specify)?
12. When do you plan to graduate from the program?

Note: Completion and return of this Pre-Interview Demographic sheet implies your consent for data collection purposes. Preliminary data is collected to provide the
researcher and her supervisor an understanding of the demographics of the women within
the program who are recent mothers. Only the researcher will have access to your name.
The researcher will put a code number on this sheet prior to sharing with her supervisor to
ensure your anonymity. Your name will not be linked to the information presented within
any research or published data that may flow from this data collection process. Please feel
free to contact myself or my supervisor if you have any questions.

For researcher use only

Code   _______
APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Letter

Campus Alberta Applied Psychology: Counselling Initiative

Research Project Title:

**Distance Education and Women in Early Motherhood:**
*An In-Depth Exploration of CAAP Female Students’ Experiences*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher:</th>
<th>Supervisor:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Karrie Orr</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Alberta Applied Psychology:</td>
<td>Athabasca University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling Initiative</td>
<td>Centre for Graduate Education in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2334 William Avenue</td>
<td>Applied Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saskatoon, Saskatchewan</td>
<td>7630-118 Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S7J 1A8</td>
<td>Edmonton, Alberta T6G 1S9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone: (306) 242-1200</td>
<td>Telephone: 780-434-5856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:karrie.bryan@shaw.ca">karrie.bryan@shaw.ca</a></td>
<td>E-mail: <a href="mailto:ginaw@athabascau.ca">ginaw@athabascau.ca</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Purpose:**

The purpose of research is to explore three women’s experiences of pursuing distance education (DE) through the CAAP program while concurrently experiencing early motherhood to shed light on experiences of women in this context. This research will contribute to understanding the need for further research and provide contextual understanding of success and areas for improvement from perspectives of these female distance learners.

*Your participation in this research is voluntary, therefore:*

- You have the right to refuse participation.
- You may refuse to answer any of the questions, without having to give an explanation.
- You can withdraw at any time during the data collection period, with no advance consequences.

The researcher will interview you at your home or alternative location of your choice for an in-depth, qualitative interview. Childcare costs will be covered if required. The
interview will be tape-recorded. A semi-structured interview will be followed that you will receive two weeks prior to the interview. However, you are free to discuss concerns that are relevant to your own experience of early motherhood while pursuing DE. The interview may last up to three hours in length. If needed following the interview, the researcher may contact you by phone at your convenience for clarification on topics discussed. You will also be provided a copy of the transcribed interview for your final approval to ensure accuracy.

If you are in agreement with the terms outlined within this letter, please only record your name on the consent form. Select a pseudonym for yourself and your child(ren). The pseudonyms will be your identifier throughout the study and within the written material produced from the interview (i.e. final project document, any papers written for publication for journals, presentation at conferences, etc).

**Upon receipt of the consent form, your anonymity and confidentiality will be ensured through the following procedures:**

**Confidentiality:**

Participation in this research will not impact your participation or evaluation within the CAAP program. All information will be held confidential, except when legislation or a professional code of conduct requires that it be reported. No personal identifying information will be given or used in the analyses; confidentiality and anonymity will be ensured at all times.

**Storage and Disposing of Data:**

As part of the data analysis procedures, the interviews will be tape-recorded. Following your interview, the researcher will transcribe the audio-taped interviews on her home computer ensuring the information is password protected. No identifying information will be placed on the computer documents. Only the researcher will have access to your name. You will be provided a copy of the transcribed interview for your review via mail or e-mail (your choice). You may be asked for clarification of the issues discussed within the interview through a follow-up telephone conversation. Both the supervisor, Dr. Gina Wong-Wylie and the researcher will have access to the transcribed interviews.

Your completed consent form, Pre-Interview Demographic sheet, audio-tape(s), and any other identifying data (i.e. e-mails) will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s home until 5 years following completion of the study. This data will be shredded and audio-tapes/hard-drive data containing study information will be cleaned out upon 5 years following completion of the study. The rationale for not destroying the data until 5 years after the study is (a) possible verification/confirmation of qualitative analysis and (b) possible secondary data analysis.
Risks and Benefits:

There is some risk to participate in this research project since I will be asking questions about your personal life, particularly about your experience of motherhood. If you experience distress during or following the interview, I will provide you options for counselling referrals and/or encourage you to consult with your program advisor if issues arise about the program. However, there is no deception in this study. Participants may refuse to answer any questions, or refuse continued participation or complete withdraw from the study during the data collection period without negative consequences. Your participation in this qualitative study is voluntary and no remuneration is provided.

The benefits of this qualitative research project include giving voice to women in early motherhood as they pursue DE and to identify facilitators and challenges associated with this time of transition. As a result, this research may contribute to further research that will lend insight on how to facilitate female student success.

Results:

Results of this project will be documented through the researcher’s final project paper that is shared with the CAAP community for reflective, teaching, and research purposes. You will have access to this final project document through Athabasca University’s Digital Thesis and Project Room. The research may also be presented through publications or conferences.
APPENDIX C

Distance Education and Women in Early Motherhood:
An In-Depth Exploration of CAAP Female Students’ Experiences

Consent Form

I have read and understood the information contained in this letter. I agree to participate in this research project on the understanding that I may refuse to answer certain questions and I may withdraw at anytime during the data collection period simply by informing the researcher or her supervisor at the address or phone numbers provided. I agree to being audio-taped during my interview. I also recognize that there is some personal risk to participate in this research project due to the sensitive nature of the study. I understand that the researcher will provide me with information regarding counselling referrals if I find that I need this support following the interview. I realize the results of this research study: 1) May be used in comparison for future research. 2) May be published or reported to government and educational agencies, scholarly journals/newsletters; and at applicable conferences (i.e. Canadian Association for Distance Education Conference); 3) Will be used in a final project report and within the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology: Counselling Initiative Program for reflective, teaching, and research purposes. I also understand that the rationale for not destroying the data until 5 years after the study is for (a) possible verification/confirmation of qualitative analysis and (b) possible secondary data analysis.

_I understand that my name will NOT be associated in any way with any publications or future studies that may result from this study._

*If you agree to participate in this study, please sign both copies of this form. Please retain one copy of this letter for your records and return one copy to Karrie Orr at the contact addresses below.*

Participant Signature __________________________

Printed Name __________________________

Date __________________________

Pseudonym __________________________

Pseudonym(s) for your child or children __________________________

Researcher Signature __________________________
If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researcher or her supervisor:

**Researcher:**

*Karrie Orr*

Graduate Student  
Campus Alberta Applied Psychology:  
Counselling Initiative  
2334 William Avenue  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; S7J 1A8  
Telephone: (306) 242-1200  
E-mail: karrie.bryan@shaw.ca

**Supervisor:**

*Dr. Gina Wong-Wylie*

Athabasca University  
Centre for Graduate Education in Applied Psychology  
7630-118 Street  
Edmonton, Alberta T6G 1S9  
Telephone: 780-434-5856  
E-mail: ginaw@athabascau.ca

~Thank you for your participation in this important research project.~
APPENDIX D

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

This qualitative research study explores three women’s experiences of pursuing distance education (DE) through the CAAP program while concurrently experiencing early motherhood. The interview guide is semi-structured and theoretically derived from Cross’ (1981) identification of barriers for women in DE. Additionally, following the voice-centred relational approach, questions related to socio-cultural factors in the transition to motherhood have been added. The interview will be approximately 1-3 hours in length.

Note: The phrases in italics are provided for informational purposes only for the reader of this research document and not intended to be part of the interview.

Introduction

A brief description of the format of the interview will first be provided.

• Tell me what it was about this study that interested you in participating

Institutional-Focused Questions:

(Institutional barriers consist of any practices or procedures that exclude or discourage adults from educational activities such as course schedule, enrollment procedures, attendance requirements, etc.)

• What motivated you to take the CAAP program?
• What have you found to be helpful (or facilitative) within the CAAP program?
• What, if any, personal or professional challenges have you faced taking the CAAP program?

Situational-Focused Questions:

(Situational barriers are those arising from one’s situation in life at a given time; for example time, money, competing responsibilities, support network, etc.)

• Mapping of social networks: I would like you to draw a map of the people and social supports that are important to you in your life at the moment. Put yourself
in the middle of the page and then draw the people close or far away from you, depending on how important they are to you. *(In person only if interview is via the phone, a general question about who is in their support network will be asked)*

- Which people in your social network support your DE pursuits?
- How do the people in your support system feel about your studying?
- How do the people in your support network feel generally about mothers working and/or studying while their children are young?
- Describe any challenges you may have faced in relation to balancing your school and personal life.

**Dispositional-Focused Questions:**

*(Dispositional barriers are those obstacles that relate to one's attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner. For example, level of confidence or feeling like one is too old to return to school)*.

- Some people find that their self-perceptions and attitudes are barriers to their DE experience. In your own experience, if you have been faced with any personal messages that are obstacles to your learning, please describe them.
- What are your hopes for the future? What are your professional goals?

**Socio/Cultural-Focused Questions:**

- Besides student and mother what other roles do you have in your life?
- What are the demands you may face between your multiple roles (i.e. home, work, school, etc)?
- Describe your experience of motherhood.
• In relation to your experience of motherhood, please describe some of the challenges you may have faced (or are facing) during this transition.

• What, if any, supports have there been for you through the challenges you just named?

• Briefly describe your expectations of motherhood.

• If you feel that there are societal expectations for you as a mother, can you name them?

• What supports and resources do you have to connect with other mothers?

• What advice would you give to women thinking of pursuing DE at the same time as embarking on motherhood?

• What recommendations would you give to DE programs to help support recent mothers?

**Conclusion:**

• We have spoke about many challenges and successes related to your experience of motherhood and DE, what one factor is the main issue for you?

• Is there anything else that we haven’t spoken about that you would like to mention?

• How did you feel about taking part in the interview?
APPENDIX E

Recruitment Aids

1) Post on Program Announcements and/or E-mail to all CAAP students:

Subject Title: Call for Interest

Date:

From: Gina Wong-Wylie

Distance Education and Women in Early Motherhood: An In-Depth Exploration of CAAP Female Students’ Experiences

Dear Students,

Karrie Orr is conducting a research study for her final project exploring women’s experiences within distance education as they concurrently experience early motherhood. We are looking for three women within the CAAP program who are recent mothers. In order to understand the demographics of students in the program who share this experience, a Pre-Interview Demographic sheet will be provided for those students who express interest prior to final selection of three participants.

Once three participants have been selected, each participant will be interviewed either face-to-face or over the telephone in January 2005. The qualitative study interview will require 1-3 hours of your time. Childcare costs will be covered if required.

Since this is a final project, the results of this qualitative study will be available through Athabasca University’s Digital Thesis and Project Room. However, no identifying information will be reported. If you fit these criteria and are interested, please contact Karrie Orr, CAAP student, prior to (two weeks from e-mail/post).

Thank-you in advance for your interest and support,

Karrie Orr, CAAP Student: karrieo@abcounsellored.net

Gina Wong-Wylie, Supervisor: ginaw@athabascau.ca
2)  E-mail to the female students who express interest

Subject Title: Re: Call for Interest
Date:
From:  Karrie Orr

**Distance Education and Women in Early Motherhood:** An In-Depth Exploration of CAAP Female Students’ Experiences

Dear (student’s name),

Thank-you for your interest in my final project! The first phase of the project requires you to complete the attached Pre-Interview Demographic sheet. The Pre-Interview Demographic sheet can be saved for your records and returned through e-mail to karrieo@abcounsellored.net. Please complete the form within a week’s time. Once I have collected the Pre-Interview Demographic sheets, you will be notified by (two weeks from date of e-mail) of invitation to participate in the second phase of the study. Selection criteria may be based on homogeneity of the samples and proximal location to the researcher and other participants.

I look forward to your response,

Karrie Orr, CAAP Student

Gina Wong-Wylie, Supervisor

**Attachment:** Pre-Interview Demographic Sheet (Appendix A)
APPENDIX G

Recruitment Aids

3) E-mail to the three participants selected

Subject Title: Re: Call for Interest

Dear (student name),

Thank you for your interest in this study. I would like to invite you to participate in the second phase of the research entitled: Distance Education and Women in Early Motherhood study. I have attached the informed consent letter and consent form for your review. I would like to contact you by phone to discuss your availability for participation in the interview and to answer any questions that may arise from the documents provided.

Please provide me with your telephone number and a convenient time to contact you further to discuss your availability. Thank you again for your interest in this final project,

Sincerely,

Karrie Orr, CAAP Student

Gina Wong-Wylie, Supervisor
Recruitment Aids

4) E-mail to those students not selected for interviews

Dear [student name],

Thank you for your interest in this final project and completion of the first phase of the research process. The transition to motherhood has been described as a turning point during which a “person’s life course takes a new direction, requires adaptation or change in life and behaviours” (Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 2000, p. 172). I have chosen three participants based on (rationale given here). Although you have not been chosen to take part in the second phase of the research, there may be upcoming research initiatives around women in distance education that may interest you. Please keep your eye on the CAAP Program Announcements.

You will also have access to the information gleaned from this project through the Athabasca University’s Digital Thesis and Project Room. Thank you again for your interest and participation in the first phase of my project,

Sincerely,

Karrie Orr, CAAP Student

Gina Wong-Wylie, Supervisor

FIGURE 1
Maternal Transition

BASIC SOCIAL PROCESS: ENGAGEMENT

ENABLES

SECONDARY PROCESS: GROWTH & TRANSFORMATION

Thematic Categories Representing Areas of Disruption

**Commitments:**
- Making the decision to mother
- Feeling the maternal/child bond
- Accepting responsibility

**Self:**
- Facing the past
- Facing Oneself
- Coming to feel like a mom

**Daily Life:**
- Learning Mothering
- Using Role Models

**Relationships:**
- Adapting to changed relationship with partner
- Adapting to Changed Relationship with family and friends

**Work:**
- Decision making regarding return to work
- Living with timing of returning to work
- Sealing with conflict/ search for balance

ANTEPARTUM-----------------------------------------------POSTPARTUM

*Figure 1: Engagement is the basic social process in maternal transition, which enables the often simultaneous process of growth and transformation.*