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Personal Vulnerability in University Student Mothers: An Examination of Cultural Expectations and Coping Mechanisms

Joanna Daines
Utah State University

PERSONAL VULNERABILITY IN UNIVERSITY STUDENT MOTHERS: AN EXAMINATION OF CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS AND COPING MECHANISMS

by

Joanna Daines

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Approved:

Thesis/Project Advisor
Dr. Lisa Boyce

Departmental Honors Advisor
Dr. Scott Bates

Director of Honors Program
Dr. Kristine Miller

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
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ABSTRACT

Personal Vulnerability in University Student Mothers: An Examination of Cultural Expectations and Coping Mechanisms

by

Joanna Daines, BS Psychology

Utah State University, 2015

Past research has emphasized the inter-role conflict and resulting stress and depression working mothers' experience. Similar conflicting responsibilities are faced by student mothers, or mothers attending post-secondary institutes of higher education. These women may be subject to feelings of personal vulnerability, depression, feelings of incompetence as parents, and dysfunctional interaction with their children. However, it is unclear how these factors are related among the student-mother population. Additionally, stress resulting from conflicting roles may be exacerbated by the cultural expectations placed on these women especially in the context of Utah culture. This study sought to understand how personal vulnerability is related to depression, perceived lack of parental competence, and parent-to-child dysfunctional interaction among student mothers. This study also explored the cultural expectations these women reported and the mechanisms they employed to cope with all the stressors they face.

Survey data were collected from forty student mothers to understand personal vulnerability correlates and follow-up interviews were conducted with a subsample of ten of these mothers to study their reported Utah culture expectations and mechanisms used to cope with their stressors. Personal vulnerability was shown to be highly correlated with depression, perceived lack of parental competence, and parent-to-child dysfunctional interaction. Many student-mothers identified similar cultural expectations including being stay-at-home moms, being perfect, and subsequently not measuring up. Most of these women reported exercise, time alone, and relying on the support of others as effective coping mechanisms in responding to stress.

(42 pages)

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Joanna Daines

Personal Vulnerability in University Student Mothers: An Examination of Cultural Expectations and Coping Mechanisms

There is ample research to show that mothers experience stress and depression while striving to balance work and home responsibilities (Kelly et al., 2014, Mitchell, Eby, & Lorys, 2015, Warr, 2011). As mothers decide how to allocate their time and attention, they are not influenced by these demands alone. Research suggests that personal and cultural expectations also bear on these choices (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Hill & Sprague, 1999; Johnson & Swanson, 2006).

University students may be more susceptible to stress than the general population (Krieg, 2013), owing in part to increased academic workloads and new responsibilities (Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999). Research has also shown that increases in inter-role demands are related to increased personal vulnerability (Innstrand, Langballe, Epnes, Aasland & Falkum, 2010) which has been shown to be related to negative interpersonal contexts (Alloy, 2001). As of yet, this author is not aware of any studies that have been conducted that consider whether the combination of motherhood and college attendance exacerbate stress, depression, and personal vulnerability. Furthermore, research has not examined the personal and cultural expectations of student-mothers (mothers attending post-secondary institutions of higher education). Utah culture may place additional psychological burdens on mothers contemplating the trade-off between child-rearing and work outside the home (Lameraux, 2012) because Utah's predominant religion emphasizes the traditional maternal role of primary caregiver. Thus, the purpose of the current study is to explore the presence of stress and depression in student-mothers as well as influences of family, friends, and religious expectations on parenting and perceptions of personal vulnerability specifically in the context of Utah culture.

Research examining the consequences of maternal mental health has found that maternal stress and depression detract from healthy mother/child relationships (Coyl, Roggman, & Newland, 2002) and negatively influence child behavior (Webster-Stratton, 1990). We can expect that as mothers experience greater stress and depression, negative effects on mother-child relationships and child behavior will be more widespread and pronounced. A better understanding of the special mental health challenges faced by student-mothers and the coping mechanisms they employ could lead to identification and promotion of policies to reduce or address stressors and depression.

Career Expectations

The United States Department of Labor (2014) reported that 69.9% of all mothers with children under the age of 18 were working or looking for work in 2013. Thus, work-related demands are important to consider in exploring cultural expectations mothers experience. Maternal research places great emphasis on work and family conflict (Hoobler, Wayne & Lemmon, 2009). Studies regarding general workforce trends suggest that positive career expectations are related to greater employee commitment (Chang, Chin, & Ye, 2014). Employers have also been found to be requiring more from their employees (Bolino & Turnley, 2005; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). Yet, if employees feel highly committed to their employers, this leads to greater conflict and stress levels (Chang et al., 2014). On top of these findings, research suggest that working mothers already face high inter-role conflict as it relates to domestic and career trade-offs (Kelly et al., 2014, Mäkelä, Bergbom, Saarenpää, & Suutari, 2015, Rashid, Omar, & Shah, 2015). Thus the occupational demands working mothers face lead to greater vulnerability for stress and depression (Bolino & Turnley, 2005; Chang et al., 2014; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Personal Expectations

Though work-related demands may lead to maternal conflict, personal expectations (the expectations that mothers place on themselves) are also related to stress and depression (Johnson & Swanson, 2006). When asked to define a good mother, women's answers correlated with the amount of time they worked outside the home (Johnston & Swanson, 2006): stay at-home mothers considered a good mother to be one who is constantly available for her children; mothers working part time tended to define a good mother as one who has periodic quality interactions with her children; and mothers working full-time described good mothers as those who are psychologically and emotionally accessible to her children. These findings raise the question: Do mothers base their lifestyle and parenting choices off of their mothering ideology, or do their lifestyle choices shape their ideology and thus the expectations they have for themselves?

Parental expectations have been shown to influence child outcomes (Alexander, Entwisle, & Bedinger, 1994; Davis-Kean, 2005; Durgel et al., 2013; Woodcock & Johnson, 1989). For example, Woodcock and Johnson (1989) suggest that parental expectations are directly influenced by both education and income and that these expectations then impact parental behaviors which leads to child achievement. But other than the Johnson and Swanson (2006) study on idealization and lifestyle summarized above, current literature is devoid of research seeking to understand maternal expectations as they relate to lifestyle choices. The proposed study will extend this research by examining the cultural expectations Utah student-mothers report experiencing.

Societal Expectations

Societal expectations (prevailing public opinion) could be considered an underlying base from which cultural expectations stem. Societal views of motherhood are often reflected in media portrayals (Goc, 2007; Tyler & Cook, 1984). Examining how motherhood is viewed through the medial lens is important because public opinion is informed by media coverage (Goc, 2007) and a majority of mothers are exposed to the media on a daily basis (McDaniel, Coyne, & Holmes, 2012). This may lead to adverse outcomes if mothers feel unable to live up to the image of motherhood represented by the media.

Goc (2007) found that the media depicted mothers as one of two extremes: idealized or atrocious. On the ideal end of the spectrum, the media represented mothers as women with perfect, athletic bodies (Goc, 2007). Additionally, Johnson and Swanson (2003) found that motherhood ideals as portrayed in magazines favor traditional views with only 12% of magazines representing employed mothers, despite the increasing prevalence of working mothers (United States Department of Labor, 2014). These results show that the media depicts the good mother as a flawless stay at-home mom, despite the reality of a working mother society (Jeremiah, 2006; O'Reilly, 2010). Further, the Goc (2007) and Johnson and Swanson (2003) studies did not include any discussion of student-mothers which suggests that the media does not even consider this population. This lack of representation of working mothers or student mothers in media may contribute to mothers' feelings of being alone in their venture or maybe even vulnerable.

Academic Expectations

Though student-mothers are often overlooked by society as reflected by the lack of media coverage, they should be given more attention especially with regards to reducing stress and depression levels. Studies have shown a positive correlation between maternal health and child

outcomes (Coyl et al., 2002). Yet Krieg (2013) has seen that university students are highly susceptible to stress. Academic workloads and new responsibilities are among the stressors that are significant influences on college students (Ross et al., 1999). Although student-mothers can have a variety of positive motives for pursuing higher education including increasing future earning potential, living up to personal expectations, or setting an example for their children (Bradley & Corwyn 2002; Ricco, Sabet, & Clough, 2009), college involves increased stress which may lead to negative mother-child interactions. The effects of academic expectations on student-mothers is of particular importance in the context of society's recent emphasis on advancement and achievement, especially among women which has led to a larger number of women seeking and pursuing higher education (Keller, 2001).

Just as stress is associated with the conflict between mothers' work and domestic roles, even so the tension between mothers' academic and domestic roles can be a major source of stress and depression. While there is abundant literature on the stresses caused by work versus domestic expectations (Kelly et al., 2014, Mitchell, Eby, & Lorys, 2015, Warr, 2011), there is minimal if any research surveying the conflict arising from academic versus domestic expectations among student-mothers.

Personal Vulnerability

Calvo and Decron (2005) define personal vulnerability as the individual capacity to become hurt or wounded. Studies have found personal vulnerability is related to work-to-home conflict (Innstrand et al., 2010), chronic stress (Bartolomucci et al., 2005) and social factors (Turner & Noh, 1983). However, the precise relationships between personal vulnerability, social class, stress level, and psychological distress are highly complex (Lin, Dean, & Ensel, 2013; Ross & Mirowsky, 2013; Turner & Noh, 1983). A greater understanding how personal

vulnerability is related to depression, perceived lack of parental competence, and parent/child dysfunctional interaction could provide support to promote academic policies to make changes to help reduce the risk of vulnerability among this population of students.

Utah Culture

The inter-role conflict experienced by student-mothers is bound to be more pronounced in Utah than elsewhere. This is so because Utah culture places great emphasis on traditional maternal roles. Hertzler (1939) defines culture regions by the ways cultural differences are manifested and the self-awareness of the region's residents. With those criteria in mind, Toney (2003) identified Utah as the Mormon culture region with 71% of Utah's population identifying as Mormon. Other features seen with the Utah population are high rates of depression (SAMSA, 2014) and suicide (Utah Department of Health, 2015). Although many have related the Mormon faith with depression (Lindbloom, 2011), research has yet to document a direct link between the two (Walch, 2006).

Unique stressors associated with Mormon culture could explain the correlation between Mormonism and depression. Freeman, Palmer, and Baker (2006) assert that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints ("LDS Church," members of which are commonly referred to as "Mormons") promotes more conservative behaviors in comparison with other Christian religions and the rest of the world. Specifically, the LDS faith places strong emphasis on marriage, motherhood, and the role women have as primary caregiver of their children (Mihelich & Storrs, 2003). Lameraux (2012) also points out that the practice of Mormonism extends into lifestyle choices such as family planning and career and life goals to conform to the counsel of religious leaders. The LDS Church identifies itself as a family-centered faith (CJCLDS, 1995). Though some have found it to be demanding (Lindbloom, 2011), others have suggested the LDS

Church's goals and expectations drive Mormons' success and educational pursuits (Andrew, 2009).

Where the expectations society in general places on motherhood favor a traditional role, Utah culture further emphasizes the traditional role, making it so that a Utah working mother or student-mother may feel she is betraying her faith or subjecting herself to the religious judgement of her peers by "abandoning" her family. Pedersen (2008) asserts that the LDS Church puts emphasis on traditional gender roles. Namely, mothers are only encouraged to work outside the home under extreme circumstances and should make raising and nurturing their children the number one priority (CJCLDS, 1994; Hinkley, 1996). Lameraux (2012) postulates that married Mormon women who work are subject to cognitive dissonance, which can be compounded if absence from the home results in the use of daycare. This may account for the pronounced gap between female and male college graduates in Utah (Department of Workforce Services, 2014; Keller, 2001; McBaine, 2014).

Although researchers have studied Mormon culture (Toney, 2003) and how it influences Mormon women (Lameraux, 2012; Pedersen 2008), studies have yet to focus on the integration of religious expectations of the LDS faith in Utah culture and mothers who are pursuing higher education, whether these mothers identify as Mormon or not. Specifically, I am interested in the student mothers' perceptions of Utah cultural expectations, their reports of any symptoms of stress and depression related to their status of being students and mothers, and what strategies and resources they use to cope with their stress and depression if present.

Current Study

A review of the literature suggests that mothers faced with inter-role conflict experience greater stress (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) which can be influenced by personal vulnerability

(Bartolomucci et al., 2005) and cultural expectations (Johnson & Swanson, 2006). Student-mothers are even more susceptible to these expectations (Ross et al., 1999). Additionally, Utah culture may exacerbate the stress student-mothers feel due to the emphasis of traditional gender roles (Lameraux, 2012).

In order to examine correlates of personal vulnerability, survey data was collected from forty mothers on indicators of personal vulnerability, perceived lack of parental competence, and parent/child dysfunctional interaction. To understand how student-mothers view their cultural expectations and cope with any resulting stressors, unstructured interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of ten Utah student-mothers. In these interviews, participants were asked what expectations they perceive from their culture in addition to the expectations they hold for themselves and what coping mechanisms they deem to be effective in the face of stressors. Because of the exploratory nature of the study, we did not put specific hypotheses forward.

Research Questions

1. Are student mothers' feelings of personal vulnerability related to their feelings of depression, lack of parental competence, and parent/child dysfunctional interaction?
2. What cultural expectations (including expectations from friends, family, religion and self-expectations) do student mothers' report as salient in their lives?
3. How do these women cope with these expectations and other stressors they face as student-mothers?

Method

Participants

A sample of mothers (N=40) agreed to participate in the quantitative portion of the study. In order for the women to be eligible for the study, they needed to have been involved in the

Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program, a program where parents involved in higher education are given grants to help fund childcare. Additionally, only mothers who completed the online survey as a part of the research portion of the CCAMPIS program were selected. Average maternal age was 29 years. Twenty-nine mothers reported being married, 11 did not list a spouse. Their mean education level was a Junior (60-89 credits).

All CCAMPIS participants were invited to participate in the research portion of the program. Those who agreed, and returned a signed informed consent form, were sent an e-mail with a link to the survey. Both mothers and fathers were invited to take the survey, however, only data from mothers' responses were analyzed for the current study. The survey consisted of four different measures, three of which were analyzed for the present study. Parents took about an hour on average to complete the full survey.

Measures

Each participant was asked to complete three surveys. The first measure was the Parenting Stress Index (PSI-IV). This survey was designed to measure how competent the participant feels as a parent, parent-child dysfunctional interaction, and the participants' overall stress (Abidin, 1990). This measure has 101, 5-point Likert-scale items ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." Scores were summed to calculate a respondent's Total Stress. The The two subscales of perceived parental competence and parent-child dysfunctional interaction were included in the present study. Participants who score high on perceived lack of parental competence are those who report possessing a limited range of child management skills and feel overwhelmed by the responsibilities placed on them as parents. Participants who score high on parent-child dysfunctional interaction indicate that the parent-child bond is either threatened or has never been adequately established.

The Center for Epidemiological Studies—Depression Scale (CES-D) was used to measure depressive symptoms. The CES-D is a self-report measure. The shortened version containing 10 items describing symptoms of depression was used for this study. Higher scores indicate higher levels of depression; a score of 10 has been used as a cut-off indicating which participants should be referred for further evaluation for clinical levels of depression. The Chronbach's alpha for this scale was reported as .85 in the general population (Radloff, 1977).

The last survey used was the Stress Overload Scale (A Measure of Day-to-Day Feelings; Amirkhan, 2012) which was used as another measure of overall stress. The S.O.S asks the respondent to identify how often they have felt a particular way (i.e. carefree; like there was no escape; confident) during the past week. The entire measure is 30 questions and scored on a Likert-scale from "Not At All," scored as a one, to "A Lot," scored as a 5. One item was reverse coded. Scores were calculated by first ignoring 6 filler items, and then summing the total of remaining odd-numbered items and even-numbered items separately. This produces a personal vulnerability scale, and event load scale, respectively. Scores may also be summed, or they may categorize from high to low risk by plotting the scale scores.

A subsample of ten mothers were interviewed for more qualitative information regarding the expectations they experienced from their culture and coping mechanisms they used to handle their stress. Pseudonyms were used in place of their names to ensure confidentiality. The inclusion criteria for these mothers was narrowed to mothers who were or had been in school themselves. In addition, we first invited mothers with mismatched scores, meaning they were high in depression and low in stress or vice versa. We invited all of these mothers to participate and twelve agreed to be interviewed. We interviewed the first ten mothers that agreed and the interviews were conducted over a period of approximately three weeks during the spring

semester of school. Interviews took approximately half an hour to complete and participants were compensated $20 for their time.

The format for these interviews was unstructured with the foundation questions being: What are some of the stressors that you face as a student and a parent? What are coping strategies and resources you use to help you with these stressors? How do expectations from your friends, family, religion, and culture influence your parenting and academic experiences? Follow up questions were asked as needed to clarify the answers that were given.

The interviews were transcribed and the data were analyzed using the categorizing strategy of coding. This process includes labeling and grouping data segments by category to compare data within and between categories (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). One coder read over the transcriptions and pulled relevant quotes from each interview to fit into one of three general themes: expectations, stressors, and coping mechanisms. These codes were then reviewed by a second coder who confirmed the proper categorization of the quotes as a reliability check. This coder then separated the expectations into four subgroups: friends, family, religion, and self-expectations. Because categorizing approaches to qualitative data analysis often result in decontextualization (Maxwell & Miller, 2008), a narrative providing appropriate context is included in the presentation of the qualitative results.

Results

Descriptive statistics for personal vulnerability, depression, perceived lack of parental competence, and dysfunctional parent/child interaction variables are shown in Table 1. From our sample of mothers, 44% met the cut-off suggesting depression and 33% met the screening criteria for personal vulnerability.

Table 1.

Measure Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges for the Current Sample

Variable	n	Mean	SD	Range
Personal Vulnerability	36	26.33	10.23	44.00
Depression	39	9.26	5.26	22.00
Competence Score	38	51.26	7.60	31.00
Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction	36	37.75	7.71	34.00

Personal Vulnerability

The correlations shown in Table 2 show that personal vulnerability is significantly related to maternal depression, lack of parental competence and parent-child dysfunctional interaction. Those who scored high on personal vulnerability also reported feeling less competent as parents and reported more dysfunctional parent-child interaction than those who scored low on personal vulnerability. Additionally, those who reported more depressive symptoms also reported feeling less competent as parents and reported more dysfunctional interaction with their children than those reporting fewer depressive symptoms. Finally, mothers who scored low on parental competence also scored low on dysfunctional parent-child interaction. In answer to the first research question, our data suggest that mothers' who reported feelings of personal vulnerability also reported feelings of depression, lack competence as a parent, and high levels of parenting stress as indicated by their ratings of parent/child dysfunctional interaction.

Table 2.

Correlations Among Maternal Mental Health Variables

Variables	1	2	3
1) Personal Vulnerability	–		
2) Depression	.74**	–	
3) Perceived Lack of Parental Competence	.49**	.49**	–
4) Parent/Child Dysfunctional Interaction	.49**	.52**	.64**

** = $p < .01$

Qualitative Analyses

A qualitative approach was used to answer the research questions regarding the cultural expectations experienced by Utah student-mothers and the coping mechanisms they employ in response to their stressors. After reviewing the interview transcripts, cultural expectations were further categorized as religious expectations, expectations from friends, expectations from family, and self-expectations. Additionally, the coping mechanisms presented naturally fell under one of two classes: resources and strategies. Quotes from the participants are used to illustrate and summarize the findings.

Cultural expectations.

Student-mothers were asked about the expectations they held for themselves as well as the expectations they experienced from friends, family, and their religion. Although each student-mother expressed different points of view on the expectations they experienced, there were common themes these women reported. Some of these common cultural expectations relating to religion include being stay-at-home moms, being perfect, and not measuring up. Most mothers reported that their friends provided unconditional support rather than imposing expectations. While these student-mothers reported highly varying family expectations, it was commonly seen that family members offered support while encouraging them to live up to the

varying expectations they had for them. While many of the expectations these mothers had for themselves matched those they perceived coming from those around them, they also expected themselves to find a balance and earn money for their family.

Religious expectations.

Being stay-at-home moms. Many of the participants in this study mentioned the expectation that mothers should be at home with their kids. Leslie made a blanket statement when she said, "Well with culture, you know living in Utah, you're expected to be a stay at home mom and enjoy every single second of it." Barbara shared an experience that illustrates how this expectation affected her life. She shared:

> I know, like, some of my church leaders weren't always very nice about me being in school. They even said things to the effects that it was going to be bad for my family…When I stopped school this year I was told that my family seemed a lot happier, which was silly because they only ever see me at church, so I don't know what in the world they were basing that on because I don't really think it's true. So yeah, there's definitely, you know, people in the culture here in Utah are definitely kind of down on moms having ambitions. But I don't know. I just feel like, you know, I've waited. I've waited until my kids were older so it's not like I just jumped right into it and ignored the fact I had kids but that's how you get treated sometimes.

Alexa shared a similar experience. When asked what expectations she felt from religion, she answered:

> Living in Utah makes that a little weird. We had a really weird experience just last year 'cause I love working and so I work, and Matt is going to school so he hasn't had to work. And our next door neighbor for some reason, I mean this is the only reason I can think,

> she just did not like us and I think mainly it was because I wasn't home and she was always home with her kid and she was super protective and I was like go for it, you know? Like, exploring the world, and she always would go inside and take her kids [inside]. It was just the weirdest experience, I think, and that whole ward [congregation] was kind of, 'cause we're LDS and they were kind of like, 'Moms need to stay home and take care of the kids and the dads need to work.'

Being perfect. While many women focused on different aspects of perfection, the idea that the religious culture expected perfection was reported often. Leslie generalized this feeling when she expressed:

> [It goes] back to that whole Utah thing. You've got to be a stay at home mom, you've got to be always happy, super crafty, making home-cooked meals from scratch every single night, your house has to be spotless, always ready in case somebody pops over. Yeah, that's not my house.

Emma acknowledged that these expectations of others were unrealistic. She further elaborated:

> …where the mother has to be super skinny and a super model and have dinner on the table every single night and have a spotless clean house. You know, this is just generalizing society's expectations of what women should do. That's not me and that's never going to happen.

Kelly shared a more specific experience of how a co-worker placed these type of expectations on her. She reflected:

> I had joined Mary Kay for a while and I'm still a Mary Kay consultant so I still sell it just kind of as a hobby to friends and family to supply them and myself, but I don't sell it

> hardcore anymore because it ended up being a lot more work than I thought it would be and the sales directors there, they expected you to be putting everything into it. And what really turned me away from it was one of the sales directors told me that she was able to go to school full time and be a mother full time and do the Mary Kay full time and so she is like, so it's totally possible…She was after me about it because I was only going to school part time and had my son and then didn't really wants to spend that much time in it.

Not measuring up. Following from the same logic as expecting perfection, these mothers reported the expectation that they aren't measuring up. Evelyn explained, "I have like this failure complex I think that I've developed where everyone thinks I'm one [a failure] when I think I'm doing well given my circumstances." Similarly, Jessica said, "Your family, your church, other resources can say, 'Oh, well, you're not doing this right. You need to do it this way.'" However, Jessica resolved this expectation explaining, "It's really up to you, you know. You need to teach your child what they need to learn so they can grow and be successful."

Kelly tied the high expectations of religion in with the feeling of failing when she observed:

> With my religion I feel like the education is definitely stressed but then also being home with your children in caring for them is a very high expectation of them and so it was sometimes I felt like, well, if I give up on school that I'm failing. If I, you know, I'm not home with my kids I'm failing. And so either way I'm not doing it right.

Evelyn added her insight by comparing what she experienced in Utah culture to the Texas culture in which she grew up:

> I've asked people wondering myself, like how do you feel… Is it a village versus a person raising a family? And it's like over and over again it was the parent's responsibility to do it. I come from a different kind of culture where there's more of a village perspective I guess where it's like if you see a child who is running around shirtless with a diaper on you don't assume CPS. You assume, let's pick the child up, take her to her mom and be like hey so-and-so got out of the house. Do you need anything? Is there anything wrong? Can I help you? It's a completely different attitude than here it's like, oh, they're not doing it right. Somebody needs to call on them. So here everybody is 5 in kindergarten and can't wait to tell their teacher. That's my perspective. So I think that mostly people who don't have the same situation make a lot of judgments and pass them on you and whether they're correct judgments or not they impact my life.

Expectations from friends.

Unlike religious expectations, these student mothers didn't report any concrete expectations from friends. Instead, these women reported that their friends supported them unconditionally. Leslie mentioned, "All of my friends are really proud of the fact that I am in school… I've got lots of friends that are really supportive of the fact that I'm in school." Lauren added, "Oh, my friends all know I'm in school and I have wonderful, I really have a good support group. A support system."

Barbara added some ways that her friends have shown their support when she shared, "I have had a lot of support from friends. A lot of my friends have watched my kids and have been, you know, supportive when things were frustrating and so yeah that part of it's been good."

While these reports of unconditional support from friends is encouraging, Emma pointed out:

> I'm only friends with the [mothers] that are okay with my parenting style. The other ones, I'm cordial to, but you know if you clash on how you raise your children and how you live your life, you're not going to be friends. And even though I'm not going to shove your opinion down my throat, we just won't talk so I feel like it's fine.

Expectations from family.

The expectations these women reported from their families varied widely. While most mothers reported that their families were supportive of them, it appeared common that these families also tried to influence them to do the things these families thought best for them. Kelly expressed this feeling when she shared:

> [My family] always encouraged me and told me that I was doing great and that they liked what I was doing. And then other times I kind of feel like maybe it wasn't enough that I wasn't doing good enough, and that I could have been doing more and stuff and like sometimes they would tell me how to parent my son or what I need to do different or better or whatever.

Leslie shared a particular experience of how her family is supportive of her, yet pushes her towards their specific expectations. She stated:

> In my family it's also, you're an engineer. I've got you know nine siblings and seven of them are engineers. Yeah, three of us are rebels. But yeah, seven of them are engineers so every time I talk to my dad--, 'Have you switched to engineering yet?' 'No, dad, I'm not switching to engineering'… But you know my family is very supportive with me going to school as a parent.

Jessica talked often of how supportive her family was of her, yet even she recounted, "My family's always telling me, you need to do this and you need to do that. And I'm just like, I know my son and I know what discipline he needs."

Alexa shared how her family expectations affected her by explaining, "My mom has always been a stay at home mom but personally I've always been kind of independent like I want to have my own job." When asked how her mom reacted to her independence, Alexa responded:

> I think it's been positive actually because she didn't originally want me to be an English major. My goal in life when I was 10 was to be an OB doctor, and so when I changed my mind in high school my parents were kind of awed. Like they just were so shocked and so they were always pressuring me to go back into becoming an OB and I was like I'm not doing this so just get that out of your mind. And then I decided to go into nursing and when I told them that they were like yay. They were always kind of supportive of me doing that.

Self-expectations.

Finding a balance. Many of these student-mothers reported holding the same expectations for themselves as were held by others. Finding a balance in all the roles they were juggling was solely reported as an expectation they held for themselves. Julie explained, "Trying to find a balance [is] constant. Like, sometimes you feel like you find a balance and then other times you're like, you're completely thrown off by just life so it's a constant balancing act." Jessica stated, "I know what works best for [my child] and so I think, I think it's all in just finding a median." Leslie added, "It's finding the happy medium that's more important than trying to be perfect."

Julie shared her insight on the enormity of this expectation and how difficult finding a balance can be. She observed:

> [I have] to keep reminding myself why I'm doing school…especially like when [the kids] are sick and so like when they are sick or when I have my breakdowns it's those moments when I'm like not living up to…the expectations I place on myself because I can't…I haven't found that, like, balance of my expectations between what my expectations are and what reality is, you know, and how much time I really can put into school…I feel like I can't be…a straight A student or have, I mean, I still have a good GPA, but not as high as what I would like it to be or like a great mom because I'm not with them all the time. There's give and take on both sides and so I haven't found that, like, balance between my expectations. So when I'm not being a great mom and then I'm doing bad at school the same time because of situations, that's when my breakdowns happen is when I'm not meeting either expectation. I'm not being a good mom because I have to do school or I'm not doing very good in school because I'm trying to be a mom. That's why my emotional breakdowns happen is 'cause I haven't found that balance in my own expectations for myself and what reality is.

Although Julie expressed that she felt she had "too high of expectations for myself" when it came to finding a balance, she added that "that's what pushes me at the same time is to try to live up to those expectations even though sometimes I fall short."

Make money for the family. Another expectation these women had for themselves was to make money for the family. Alexa expressed, "We have to make money and take care of the kids… I work really hard to do that." This particular expectation was emphasized more with single mothers. Lauren was recently divorced and raising three young children. This

expectation felt more urgent for her. She stated, "I have to be in school, I have to graduate, and I have to do well so that I can support my family."

Evelyn was also recently divorced, raising four children, working, and finishing her degree. Before going back to school, she described her situation.

> Honestly if you want to know how I feel, stressed out of my f'in' mind all the time. I couldn't support my kids. I worked four jobs. After I left their dad, I worked, I ran my own catering on the side of catering weddings and working for a restaurant and working for a place that I put up, like, things at Sam's club or things like that like just, I was a vendor.

Evelyn went on to explain that she had to go to school so that, "eventually I can go to work somewhere that's decent" and she could provide for her children.

Coping resources and strategies.

While each woman described a variety of cultural expectations, they also offered coping resources and strategies they used to deal with their stress. External resources included family, friends, husbands, and child care. Common coping strategies included exercise, time alone, just pushing through, and putting the expectations into perspective.

Resources.

Family. Many student-mothers relied heavily on family to cope with stress. When asked what resource she used to cope with stress, Kelly responded, "My family. Even if we don't talk about what's bothering me it really just helps relax me and help me feel better just being around them." Jessica added, "I think it's easier for me now…It's nice having my family around whereas before I didn't."

Lauren in particular relied on the support of her family. After her divorce, she recalled, "My parents said that I could live with them and they would help support me if I was in school full time and they paid for my room and board." Lauren also relied on her family for emotional support. She added, "I live with my mom. She's a huge [help]. I call her if I need to calm down and if I need a break she's always here."

Leslie found that her children and immediate family helped her. She stated:

> I'll just usually grab one of my kids [and] we all go for a walk, we go outside, we play, [and] watch a movie that they've been dying to watch with me 'cause I'll start it and then I go study and they don't get to watch it with me. Just spending time with my family.

Friends. Having mentioned the unconditional support from friends as far as expectations go, it is understandable that these women use their friends as resources to help them cope as well. When thinking about the trials she's been through as a mom, Jessica admitted:

> I honestly couldn't do it without all the people that cared about me and cared about [my child] so much that…it makes you thankful for life and it makes you think about the positive because, you know, things could be so much worse and they had been for us."

Evelyn recalled, "In the last couple weeks, I started letting my best friend come up…and help me with the kids and I think that's probably been the best."

Lauren added:

> My friends are wonderful…We all get together once a month and go to dinner and so I mean it's fun and it's something we do, but they know other than that I'm not available like I used to be, you know. And it's no big deal. It's never been an issue at all. And their families are growing and changing and so they, you know, it's not like we're stay-at-home moms of little tiny kids anymore, so it's been--. It's fine.

Kelly referred primarily to friends or others to lean on when thinking of advice to give future student-mothers. She expounded:

> It's so helpful and great to actually lean on people. Like I said I wanted to be superwoman and be able to do it all myself, but then when I stopped worrying about looking at how perfect I thought everything needed to be or how perfect I thought everybody else was…Then I realized that they didn't expect me to be perfect and I shouldn't expected it either. And so really just, you know, it's great to reach out and lean on people and not have the perfect expectation I guess. If I was ever to give advice to future parents…Don't be worrying about being perfect and then also seek and accept the help. There are so many things out there that will help you through it. It's super stressful, but once you seek out the help it does eliminate a little bit of the stress or at least alleviate it and it will end someday even though it doesn't feel like it so you can just work through it. It'll be okay.

Husband. Married student-mothers found their husbands to be nearly essential resources when coping with stress. When asked what helps her the most to cope with stress, Megan responded, "My husband's really great." Julie stated, "My family has been huge resource, especially my husband. He was going to school, he graduated in May, but right now he's not going to school so [I] have his help."

Evelyn even admitted that before her divorce, her husband helped her, when she recalled:

> He ignored me most the time and I could at least get my homework done when the kids went to bed…He would have watched them if they were sick you know at least for me to go to class.

Alexa found assurance from her husband. She said, "[My husband's] way calm and collected about everything and I'm just always worried, so I think he just kind of is like, 'Alexa, calm down. It's going to be fine.'" When Julie talked about how she handled stress, she stated, "My husband is good to help me put it into perspective."

Leslie explained:

> I rely on my husband. I can just say, you know, I need to go to the library on campus. You need to drop me off and either I'll catch the bus or I'll call you to come and get me when I'm done. I don't know when I will be home. I may fall asleep there. And he's like, 'Okay just let me know what I need to do to help you.' With three kids and school then multiple other things we're doing, it's hectic and I could not do it if he wasn't there backing me up.

Quality child care. Being involved in the CCAMPIS program, each of these mothers had a grant to cover a portion of child care costs. As would be expected, quality child care was often mentioned as a helpful resource. Emma remembered, "We got into an amazing day care and we felt good about it. When my kids were excited to go to day care, it made being away from them so much easier."

Jessica stated:

> I'm really thankful for the program…here…It has really helped us out a lot. Especially the daycare part. That really helps me out a lot and especially being able to pick where [my child] goes because, you know, I live on campus and so it's easier if he's close. Yeah, so I'm really thankful for the program and the people.

Kelly reiterated:

> I found myself less stressed...about school knowing that [my child] was in daycare with people that were actually taking care of him and doing things with him...[At] day care, they did actual activities and it also was comforting to me that he was with someone who had certification to take care of him...They were CPR certified and...it was a relief because I wasn't worried about him being gone and it was hard being away from him because I'm very clingy, but it made it so much less stressful and I was able to focus more on my school.

Megan affirmed:

> It's been really nice to just have like one steady place to be able to take my kids and leave them and not have to jumble them around all over 'cause it's a little bit crazy...That's been a huge help, to have a place to take them that they love.

Strategies.

Exercise. One of the most common coping strategies mentioned by these student-mothers was exercise. Alexa commented, "I exercise at night usually on Monday Wednesday Friday and that helps give me some time to relax."

When asked what strategies she used to cope with stress, Emma answered:

> Breathing techniques... I was surprised at how much that helped like deep breaths and controlled breathing and then muscle relaxations. So those are some things I still try to put into my life and stretching and stuff. Once your body feels a little better, then you can calm down and do stuff. So that's kind of when I'm feeling super stressed I do take some time and you know, try to stretch or get up and walk and kind of take breaks so that's kind of what I'm doing right now for coping.

Leslie added:

> The biggest [strategy] is the gym just because it gets me out of the house, it gets me away from classes, away from school, away from all my homework so I don't have to worry about that. You know, it just lets me work out some of my frustration and get healthy all at the same time.

Julie reiterated:

> As a coping strategy, I've started to like exercise a lot more and there's, like, two main reasons for doing that. One is that I wanted it to be something where my family was outdoors, so I take them with me and we walk a mile every day together. And so just to exercise is one of my initial, like, coping strategies. So I just feel like it helps clear my mind as well as get my family out exercising and doing something.

Time alone. Many of these women also found that taking time for themselves was an effective coping strategy. Leslie said, "Just taking a break from anything and all school for a couple hours usually helps me refocus and calm down and go, 'Okay, you can do this. You can do this.'"

Julie related:

> I call it healing time [where] I just will take like a warm bath or something just so I feel like I have some sort of healing -- my kind of moment -- and so just exercise and warm baths mostly is just how I cope with stuff. Like I need to remove myself from it for a little bit and then allow myself time to think clearly about what's going on.

Emma described why spending time alone was effective for her. She explained:

> The biggest coping strategy was I needed to make time for myself. I needed to have a down time where I didn't think about school, I didn't think about work, and I didn't think about my family. Where I could just lay down in bed or drive somewhere and just sit

outside and read like just being by myself helped me not feel so pulled and stretched in so many different ways where I could just relax, take some time, and then return as a better person.

Just pushing through it. With the variety of stressors these student-mothers face, many of them explained that they just pushed through their circumstances. Lauren stated, "I'm not a stressed out person. I don't get stressed and I don't get frazzled easy. Does that make sense? And so I just take things as they come."

Megan related:

After my husband got home from his deployment and I went to the grocery store for the first time I was like, holy cow. This is so easy. I didn't realize like what I'd been dealing with for a year…I just deal with it until afterwards.

Jessica's perspective added the dimension of her feeling that there was no other choice when she explained:

To be honest sometimes I just lay down and I'm like, I don't know what to do. And so I just, you know, I work it out and I just kinda work my way through [the stress]… because I know just sitting there or not doing anything's not going to accomplish much. So I just deal with [the stress] and do the best that I can do.

To the above statement, Jessica added:

Yeah, usually my coping strategy is I just keep trying and I just keep going because that's all I know to do. I've been through way too much in my life to give up now. So why roll over and die? Just get it done.

Evelyn described a similar viewpoint. She did not list many coping resources or other strategies when she explained:

> I just shut off emotionally and deal with it and then usually to be honest I crash once it's all taken care of…I just shut off and just work like a robot. Yeah I don't know that that's healthy but that's all I have.

Putting expectations into perspective. Expectations these women perceive from their culture were reportedly high. As a coping strategy, these student mothers looked at these expectations from a different perspective. Some mothers ignored the expectations entirely. For example, Emma explained, "Living up to others' expectations is ridiculous cause I'm never going to meet them and so if my family has peanut butter and jelly and cereal every night, gosh dang it, they have food." Similarly, Megan explained, "I don't really have time to keep up with what others care about. I'm trying to survive right now…I can see how there could be [expectations] but not like currently 'cause I just don't have the time to care." Julie also stated, "I just try to ignore what other people think because I know what's best for my family."

Kelly was most influenced by the expectations she placed on herself, but she seemed to resolve those expectations:

> I just felt so overwhelmed and started feeling like kind of…trapped, like I needed to be superwoman but I couldn't be…Why can't I be? … [But] I can't expect myself to be superwoman because there's no such thing as superwoman.

Jessica explained how she put her own expectations and the expectations of others into perspective when she described:

> Sometimes I feel like I'm doing it all wrong and then somebody will tell you you're doing it all right and so I think they influence a lot. I think you need that influence sometimes to know that you're doing it right and you're a good person and you're a good parent. But if in your heart you know that what you're saying doesn't fit right, then I think you just take

it with a grain of salt. I'll evaluate [the criticism] and be like, okay, well, they're right. Let's try this.

Barbara concluded:

[It] was really valuable for me to realize that I was capable of a lot more than I thought I was. 'Cause I had written myself off a long time ago as being a hopeless cause in certain subjects. But...I just realize that it really doesn't work like that. It just, you know, you have to work harder and try and sometimes really screw up and that, really, that's not the end of the world.

Summary of the Findings

As a review, these student-mothers experience many different cultural expectations. Religious expectations often include being stay-at-home moms, being perfect, and not measuring up. Friends were most likely to provide unconditional support rather than imposing expectations while families, in comparison, were reported to offer hesitant support. Familial support was reportedly accompanied by specific expectations such as studying engineering, altering parenting techniques, or becoming a doctor. These women commonly reported expecting themselves to find a balance between home and school and to earn money for the family.

In response to cultural expectations and stressors in these student-mothers' lives, each woman reported coping mechanisms they developed. Resources often used to cope were comprised of family, friends, husbands, and quality child care. The coping strategies these student-mothers shared included exercise, time alone, just pushing through, and putting the expectations into perspective.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOANNA DAINES is a student of psychology with educational focuses on family consumer and human development, business, and statistics. During her undergraduate years, she worked as an assistant in behavioral and cognition labs, served as an industrial organizational psychology club president, worked in the mathematics and statistics department working as a statistics recitation instructor, and worked on various extracurricular research projects. She received a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Utah State University, Logan, Utah, graduating Cum Laude with departmental honors.