

Use of Possible Selves Theory to Explain Motivation

Cynthia Gibson, Ed.D.

Utah State University
125 West 200 South, Moab, Utah 84532
United States of America

Abstract

This study tested whether possible selves theory could explain when a perceived “possible self” will motivate an individual to persevere toward desired objectives in the face of serious obstacles. The case study method was used to interview single-parent students at two colleges in the United States. The research question was whether a perceived “possible self” (a positive hoped-for self) would dominate over other possible selves to act as the motivator. In support of possible selves theory, results confirmed that the participants did believe that their perceived hoped-for self (the good parent) was the motivator. The unexpected results of the study showed that a contradictory different self was the actual motivator. This conclusion was reached based on outcomes: All participants completed their college degrees, but only one of the six participants retained full custody and care of her children. Results have implications for managers, college administrators and faculty, and researchers.

Key Words: Possible selves theory, motivation, perception, persistence toward goal, nontraditional students, self-awareness, self-assessment

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Purpose of Study

This study focuses on the motivations and behaviors of individuals who require extremely high levels of motivation to pursue positive long-term goals in the face of serious obstacles. Subjects chosen to represent these parameters were a particular subset of nontraditional college students that has been seldom studied—the custodial, single-parent student. The issue is of interest from research, societal, managerial and institutional perspectives. Possible selves theory as demonstrated in this study may be a useful research tool into the area of motivation. Managers of employees with challenging jobs who may not see the results of their efforts for a long period of time may be able to identify, through possible selves theory, a powerful motivation tool. Society may be benefited from an understanding of how to break cycles of multi-generational poverty and crime through higher education. Colleges and universities, both for-profit and not-for-profit may improve recruitment and retention rates of nontraditional students.

As the American population ages, there are fewer potential students of traditional college age (18-22 years old) than there have been in past generations. The United States Census Bureau (2012) shows the most highly-populated age categories to be: 45 to 49 years (21,583,000), 50 to 54 years (22,372,000), and 20 to 24 years (28,878,000). According to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (2013), in a 10-year period from 1995 to 2010 public school closings ranged from a low of 954 in 1995-96 to highs of 2,168 in 2003-04, 2,120 in 2007-08 and 1,929 in 2010-11. Declining population is one of the reasons given for such closures (Engberg, Gill, Zamarro, & Zimmer, 2012; Patton, 2013).

To higher education recruiters these statistics may translate to a shrinking pool of traditional college-bound students - those new freshmen who matriculate directly to college from high school. The costs of operating a college or university continue to rise resulting in increasing tuition to students (Garritty, Fiedler, & Garrison, 2011).

Along with decreasing numbers of traditional students (decreased demand) and increasing operation costs, traditional colleges and universities are competing with an explosion of nontraditional degree programs (increased supply) for potential students (Fethke & Policano, 2013; Garrity, e. al., 2011; Harrison-Walker, 2010; McQuestion & Abelman, 2004). Participants in a survey by the National Association of College and University Business Officers confirmed that declining enrollments were caused by three issues: price sensitivity (by students and their parents), increasing competition, and a smaller pool of traditional students (Carlson, 2014).

All of these factors combine to make the nontraditional college student market more appealing. However, older students who are either returning to college to resume an interrupted degree or are attending college for the first time present different recruiting and retention challenges to higher education administrators. Not only is this category of students older than the traditional matriculating freshman, but nontraditional students may have significant work experiences, part- or full-time jobs while attending college, families to support, and social, church, or community demands on their time. This category of student may require different class schedules (e.g. night classes or online classes) and different types of relationships with faculty, administrators, and other students (Davidson & Wilson, 2014). Although nontraditional students may be very selective and demanding, this demographic could prove very desirable to institutions of higher education for the following reasons:

1. They may replace declining numbers of traditional students;
2. They may be more highly motivated to complete their degree programs than traditional students in order to advance in their careers and improve the lives of their families; and,
3. They may be less dependent upon financial aid because they earn salaries, they have savings, they have assets (e.g. homes they can mortgage), and/or their employers may provide tuition assistance.

Pursuing and retaining nontraditional students requires not only an understanding of the needs of this demographic but may also require different and more expensive marketing (recruiting) strategies, not to mention redesigned and/or new degree programs. To justify these expenses, any organization would find it reassuring if these students would commit all of their education dollars to them from initial enrollment to graduation. Therefore, once nontraditional students have been successfully recruited, the focus should turn to retention. Treating nontraditional students the same as traditional residential students may lead nontraditional students to feel overlooked or underserved if not invisible – without a voice.

The prospective nontraditional student may feel stressed and uncertain about beginning or resuming a college degree especially if the student is the custodial, single parent of minor children. This student must deal with issues related to childcare, health care, schooling, and extracurricular activities. The student may be working fulltime or part-time and experiencing financial stress due to no or inadequate child support payments. The stress attendant upon these issues – children, work, finances – along with other possible demands on the single-parent's time and money may make the decision to return to school very difficult. Once that decision is made, staying in college to the point of completion may continue to be very difficult and requires a high level of intrinsic motivation.

Possible selves theory (PST) may help to explain and even predict why and whether a single-parent student will persist in college. This theory, first presented by Markus and Nurius (1986) identifies a person's perceived "possible self" as supplying a powerful motivator to performance, regardless of whether that perceived "possible self" is one the individual hopes to become or fears becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Ruvalo, 1989). The perceived possible self that one chooses as a motivator to behavior may be a current hoped-for or feared self, i.e., this is who I want to be or fear being right now, or, a future hoped-for or feared self, i.e., this is who I want to become or fear becoming. Further research has confirmed that the visualization of hoped-for possible selves can be a useful coping strategy when an individual experiences difficult obstacles (Barreto & Frazier, 2012).

The nontraditional student who is a single parent may feel that the motivation needed to persist in college in the face of difficulties can come from the belief that a "good parent" is one who made her child's life better in the long run. This represents a perception of a hoped-for future self, as the single-parent student hopes that future evaluations of parenting will adjudge her a "good parent" based on how things turned out for her and her children. Simultaneously, the single-parent student may be just as powerfully motivated by a perception of a feared future self, the "bad parent" who continued to live in poverty and deny her children opportunities that having earned a college degree would have afforded.

Earning a college degree as a performance outcome stems from these perceptions of self as the motivators based on the belief and assumption that the parent who earns a college degree can afford (both meanings of the word) a better life for her children. This belief and assumption will need to be very deep and strong to motivate the student to persist in earning the college degree in the face of obstacles not faced by traditional matriculated students. They are based on the student's perceptions of her future self as a "good parent" who did everything she could have done to improve her children's lives and/or the feared "bad parent" who had not done the same. If this future hoped-for and/or feared parent is indeed the underlying motivator, then the single-parent student will be able to persist through difficulties, clinging to the thought "I'm doing this for my children," no matter the level of stress experienced.

1.2 Objectives of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the intrinsic motivation factors that would compel an individual to pursue and complete a difficult goal when faced with serious obstacles. The subjects chosen to demonstrate this motivation and behavior are single-parent students who were faced with the conflict between putting their children first or persisting in their college studies even when it interfered with their perceptions of themselves as a "hoped-for" good-parent self. There were four specific objectives:

- Objective #1: To fully explore the black box of motivated behavior by giving "voice" to the subjects through an identification of their lives using long interviews to provide the kind of thick description that leads to reader insight and understanding of this type of motivated behavior.

An experiment undertaken by a high school teacher in a socioeconomically depressed neighborhood explained what "giving voice to" people means: "valuing the essence of all humans and recognizing people for the inner core/self rather than the outer shell by which, all too often, society tries to label people" (Holder, 2007, p. 342). While teaching in a public school, Holder recognized that his socioeconomically-deprived students were without voice, a danger that could lead to the state of being without hope. Fearing the outcomes of that pathway, for example addictions and crime, he helped his students engage in a letter-writing project with prison inmates, those who are also often without voice. His point was that being without voice can make a person feel invisible, unwanted, marginalized, and hopeless – possibly leading to unproductive and negative societal behaviors. His book revealed remarkable results that came from giving voice to his students, certain prisoners, and the high school janitor.

Before research and administrative attention began to turn to the nontraditional student, this category of students was without voice. Even once that occurred, the custodial single-parent student was mostly ignored, although the provision of childcare on college campuses was a popular topic for a period during the late 90's and early 2000's. This study is intended, in part, to give voice to this group of nontraditional students to be heard by policymakers, college administrators, college faculty, and counselors and advisors.

- Objective #2: To analyze the multiple perceived possible selves of subjects using the cognitive lens provided by possible selves theory to explain and understand their motivations to complete a difficult task even when it threatened or conflicted with something they valued very highly.

This objective was to determine whether possible selves theory would actually explain or predict single-parent students' motivations, cognitive processes, and behavioral outcomes. It was anticipated that the participants themselves would identify possible selves that they either hoped for or feared and would explain how and why those selves motivated them to either drop out or persist in college despite self-described obstacles to continuance.

- Objective #3: To report what was *not* explained by possible selves theory. It was anticipated that there would arise from the data some description of the elements of the participants' lives or behaviors that would not fit PST.

This objective was created to determine when and where possible selves theory and the assumptions of this study were not useful in explaining or predicting participants' cognitive processes, motivations, or behavioral outcomes.

- Objective #4: To test the usefulness of possible selves theory for subjects and their persistence in a difficult task in order to appropriately motivate them before or during the task and to help them manage their expectations. To that end, this objective is important for both managers of employees who perform difficult jobs as well as for college administrators, recruiters, and faculty dealing with nontraditional students.

This objectives was twofold: to provide a tool to managers and higher education administrators and faculty in their recruiting efforts for challenging jobs or programs, and, to provide continuous motivation to employees or students to support their persistence in the face of challenges.

1.3 Assumptions and Constructs

The subject studied here is the custodial single-parent student. It is assumed that the difficulties of sole custody and responsibility for financial and other decisions for minor children may present barriers to the student's degree completion that would require a very high degree of motivation to overcome. These barriers could include child care arrangements, medical issues and doctor and dental appointments for children, visitation issues with the noncustodial parent, social and recreational activities in which their children may be involved, church activities of the children and family, school activities, financial struggles, and possibly more that would all compete for the participant's time and attention. Once the prospective student has begun or returned to college, the costs in terms money and time demands will be added as stressors to the lives of the custodial, single-parent student and her children.

It is further assumed that there may be an unrecognized conflict within this student between the desire to complete the degree at all costs for the sake of her own self-actualization and the desire to complete the degree for the higher good of her children in hopes of making their lives better. This study explored whether a custodial single-parent student was pursuing a college degree primarily for herself and consequent benefits (to a career, for example) or to help her children in their lives. These differing, perhaps conflicting motivations could lead to different college strategies that could affect retention.

For example, if a student is motivated by her own possible self-actualized future self – her vision of herself as a college degree holder – and finds that there is a conflict between being a good student (attending all classes, studying, completing all assignments) and being a good parent, she may sacrifice a perceived current self of “good parent” for the sake of what she may convince herself will be a future “good parent” self. This may result in spending less time with her children, perhaps even to the point of relinquishing custody of and thus her influence on her children. What the single-parent student may not realize is that she is sacrificing the current perceived “good parent” self by placing college completion above the needs of her children. Her motivation has shifted from what she thinks it is – best possible parent self – to a possible self-actualized future self as a college degree-holder. If she realizes this while or after making sacrifices of time with her children, she may experience serious internal conflict, depression, and low self-esteem. This type of student may be a retention risk.

If a student is motivated (unselfishly) only by her parental self, she may be willing to risk the completion of her degree if she finds that she simply cannot find the necessary time to attend and study for classes because of the demands of her children, thus choosing a current perceived possible self of “good parent” now rather than a future perceived “good parent” who earned a college degree for the sake of her children (if she believes that is the definition of a good parent). This type of prospective student may see it in these terms: current possible self vs. future possible self, intuitively recognizing that choosing a future self-actualized self would conflict with a current “good parent” self. This type of prospective student may believe there is no possible way for her to simultaneously attend college and raise children and is also a retention risk if there are is adequate societal or institutional support.

Early identification and understanding of the actual motivating “possible self” may reduce stress and help this nontraditional student make better decisions about whether to pursue and complete her college degree. The hope is that college recruiters, administrators, advisors, and faculty may gain new insights through possible selves theory that may help them understand these students better in order to counsel them about strategies for beginning and completing their college degrees in a psychologically and emotionally healthy process. The result could be a win-win for students, their families and colleges.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Possible Selves Theory

Markus and Nurius pioneered research on possible selves theory in response to a gap in the psychology research about future-oriented aspects of self-definition (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989). They defined the construct of possible selves as images of what people hope to become, expect to become, or fear becoming in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

The theory explains that, grounded in one's perceptions and images that have been developed through a person's own social context and past and anticipated experiences, behavior will be motivated. One's perception of "possible self" becomes the motivator by providing energy and guidance to pursue hoped-for selves and to avoid feared selves. Research has supported that the visualization of hoped-for possible selves can be a useful coping strategy for life events (Barreto & Frazier, 2012).

"Possible selves" are the cognitive components of hopes, fears, goals, and threats; and "they give the specific self-relevant form [or self] meaning, organization, and direction to these dynamics" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). Possible selves theory (hereinafter referred to as PST) provides a way to examine cognitive factors impacting the academic and personal lives of the nontraditional student population which may motivate them to either persist in college or drop out. It explains how the individual perceives her current self, the self she is afraid of becoming, and the self she would like to become—cognitive factors (Markus & Nurius, 1986). These perceptions, or cognitions, according to PST, may act as motivators for performance in higher education by leading to the adaptation of positive behaviors which may help the nontraditional student to complete a college program (Chalk, 1996; Cini & Fritz, 1996; Davidson & Wilson, 2013; Leondari, Syngollitou, & Kiosseoglou, 1998b; Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2006; Pizzolato, 2006; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013).

Another view of PST is that self-impression or perception can lead a person to actively manage her choices and actions in order to promote desirable selves – the self she would like to become – and inhibit less-desirable selves – the self she might fear becoming (Freer, 2010). If the cognition of either the desired or feared self is strong enough, the perception of such possible self could be a strong enough motivator to lead the person to choose even a difficult goal that requires overcoming significant obstacles (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989; Pervin, 1989).

The literature supports the link between PST and academic performance and persistence at all levels of education from kindergarten through post-secondary and graduate education (Belz, 1993; Blake, 2013; Cadely, Pittman, Kerpelman, & Adler-Baeder, 2011; Chalk, 2005; Hock, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2006; Lemp, 1980; Mitchell & Nebeker, 1973). One study showed strong correlations between feared selves and academic performance, and, hoped-for selves and high levels of educational and occupational attainment (Yowell, 2002).

In this study, it was assumed that the perceived hoped-for self would be "the good parent," and the feared self would be "the bad parent." It was predicted that the combination of the parental hoped-for and feared selves (two sides of the same coin) would prove to be the powerful motivation for completing a college degree. In the early stages of the study it did not appear that a hoped-for future self would turn out to be a self-actualized self because it would imply that the single-parent student would have chosen college over her children, thus conflicting with her perception of her hoped-for future self as "good parent."

The "parent self" could occupy any or all of the three possible selves categories of expected self, hoped-for self, or feared self, depending on how one perceives herself at any given moment in time. For the purposes of this study, "parent self" seemed to fit best into hoped-for self *and* feared self. A hoped-for "good parent" self may be one who believes that her educational choices will affect her children's educational choices (Barajas, 2012; Halfond, Corona, & Moon, 2012). There is evidence that links a parent's aspirations and expectations to their children's possible selves, thus demonstrating that a "good parent" – the hoped-for self – will see value in her college degree for both herself and her children (Zhu, Tse, Cheung, & Oyserman, 2014).

As a student parent looks ahead to the future, she considers not only her own future but that of her children as well. All participants in this study made the comment "I'm doing this [earning a college degree] to give my children a better life." Their hope was that they would be judged a "good parent" by themselves, society, and their children by getting a college degree – by both creating a positive role model and by enhancing the parent's employability which would lead to better opportunities for their children. There is some statistical evidence to support the converse of this belief through studies linking low education levels of parents and juvenile crime (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Landau, 2001; Mack, 1999), for example one study which associated age of child at first adjudication (i.e., court judgments) with mother's education (Mack, 1999). Another study hypothesized that a change (improvement) in the mother's education level during early childrearing years would be associated with lower use of tobacco and alcohol by their offspring than offspring for whom mother's education level did not increase (Singhammer, 2006). The study did confirm this association, but more importantly, as a longitudinal study spanning 28 years, demonstrated that the alcohol and tobacco use persisted into adulthood (Singhammer, 2006).

The implication of this study is that the effect of a mother improving her education is quite powerful on young children and can possibly curtail negative behaviors such as smoking and drinking that can lead to or be involved with delinquent behaviors even as their children grow to adulthood.

A custodial single parent may be unhappy with her current, non-college degree holder “self” and the effect, perhaps in earning power, this has on her family. She may believe she is not being the best parent she could be. She may envision a future more competent, happy self who does make a significant contribution to the quality and opportunities of her children. However, trying to complete a college degree while raising children alone and perhaps further complicated by financial struggles could present significant obstacles to a student parent’s persistence. Her perceptions of her current and future selves must be strong enough motivators to cause her to pursue and persist in earning a college degree while at the same time, maintaining these perceptions (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). She can be aided by supportive advising and counseling while in college. Research supports the necessity of training administrators, faculty, and advisors and counselors in motivation theories in order to recognize and accommodate students who are motivated differently to stay in school (Burt, Young-Jones, Yadon, & Carr, 2013; Kroth, 2007).

2.2 Persistence

The subject of persistence (also termed retention and continuance, and conversely, dropping out, discontinuance, and student departure) in higher education has been a popular topic for study since Vincent Tinto began his 20-plus year study of retention in the 1970’s, attempting to link persistence of college students with the actual learning experience (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). Tinto continued the studies into the 1990’s, expanding his theme of the link between persistence and learning by focusing on the college experience as a community learning, fully participative experience for both students and faculty (Tinto, 1993). A synthesis of Tinto’s work may be summarized as describing an organizational and institutional redesign of the higher education learning experience itself (for example, classes as cohort groups, outside small group work, interdisciplinary studies, thematic courses, and calendar changes) which he feels will cause students to feel more involved in their own education, thus more committed to completing their degrees (see, for example, Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1982; Tinto, 1990; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 1994; Tinto, 1998; Tinto & Cullen, 1973; Tinto & Sherman, 1974). Tinto’s theory of student retention posits that individual and contextual factors affecting students are not as important a contributor to their continuance in school as are organizational and institutional factors (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1982).

Some researchers of student persistence have conducted empirical studies or developed theories which are either different from or contradict Tinto’s findings. Alexander Astin’s theory of student retention is based on student involvement from an individual, rather than an organizational perspective, referring to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy students invest in their college experiences (1984). Astin has exhaustively studied the American college student and the issue of persistence, tying individual and institutional factors of persistence together with statistical findings, resulting in Astin’s theory of student retention and producing formulas for estimating any institution’s expected retention rate (Astin, 1972; Astin, 1984; Astin, 1996; Astin, 1997; Astin, 1998; Astin, 2006; Astin, 2013; Astin, Korn, & Green, 1987).

Researchers have applied both Astin’s and Tinto’s theories of student retention with mixed results. One study supported Astin’s proposals that working off-campus less than two hours a week and receiving financial aid (individual factors) were major components of student persistence, but contradicted Tinto’s assertion that finances are not a major factor in degree completion (Janes, 1997). Other than the assumptions regarding financial aid, however, the findings of the study corroborated Tinto’s theory. A dissertation study failed to completely support Tinto’s theory, finding that retention is clearly related to a multitude of individual factors such as socioeconomic status, family background, and race as well as institutional factors such as counseling, advising, and mentoring programs (Fries-Britt, 1994). Using Chicanos as subjects, another study challenged Tinto’s theory, finding that the normative implications of institutional factors were no more important than Chicano student characteristics in their persistence in higher education (Velasquez, 1998). Multiple other studies have extended or reformulated Tinto’s theories of retention showing that many other factors have a motivational effect on persistence in college such as: value of the degree (Stuart, Rios-Aguilar, & Deil-Amen, 2014); student’s sense of self-efficacy (Weng, Cheong, & Cheong, 2010); student expectations and experiences (Pleitz, MacDougall, Terry, Buckley, & Campbell, 2015); and nontraditional student characteristics (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2011; Palmer, Davis & Maramba, 2011).

The difference between the explosive increases in total student enrollment in higher education from 1960 to 1970 (221%) and from 1970 to 1980 (70%) as contrasted with only 13% increase in the entire decade between 1980 and 1990 signaled a need for attention to recruitment and retention efforts (Kerr, 1995, p. 143) with a growing awareness of degree completion among nontraditional students (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Both early and later studies have approached the issue of persistence with a goal of identifying factors which contribute to either retention or dropping out of college, such as financial status, family support, child care, race, gender, age, and institutional type (Astin, 1996; Borden, Burton, Evenbeck, & Williams, 1997; Demeules & Hamer, 2013; Ford, 1996; Johnson, 1996; Sadler, Cohen, & Kockesen, 1997; Wallace & Abel, 1997; Wilson, Mason, & Ewing, 1997). There did not seem to be a specific focus on single-parent or parent-students until the 2000s (Demeules & Hamer, 2013; Lovelle, 2014).

The decades between 1990 and 2020 show even more difficulties for college recruitment and retention coming from tuition increases (Carlson, 2014; Troop, 2014), appropriate targeting of students (Fant, 2003), disparity between recruitment and retention expenses and revenues (Garritty, Fiedler, & Garrison, 2011), inadequate advising (McQuestion & Abelman, 2004), and the needs of nontraditional students (Gonchar, 1995; Meyers, Berling, & Corcoran, 2012; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

Many studies aim to develop strategies designed to keep students in school such as financial support, counseling, and mentoring programs (Burt, Yadon & Carr, 2013; Martinez, 1996; Meyers, Berling & Corcoran, 2012; Nerad & Miller, 1996). Some studies, especially those commissioned by states' boards of higher education, seem to be designed solely for statistical purposes—to identify and count those students who continue to degree completion and those who do not (*AASCU/Sallie Mae National Retention Project: 1993 Survey Results*, 1994; *ACT 2014 Retention/Completion Tables*, 2014; *Retention and Graduation Rates at Maryland Four-Year Public Institutions*, 2014; *Community College Survey of Student Engagement 2014*, 2014). Further attesting to the importance of persistence as a critical issue in higher education is the devotion of a serial journal to the subject—*Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, published four times a year in Amityville, New York by Baywood Publishing Company, Inc. (2014).

2.3 Nontraditional College Students

Early persistence studies of students other than the traditional 18-to-23 year old, straight-from-high school, unmarried, predominately male and predominately white student usually defined nontraditional students as those holding “minority” classification leading to the focus of many early persistence studies on minority students, primarily African-American, Hispanic, and Asian students—a focus which continued into the 1990's (Altbach, 1990; Astin, 1998; Carter & Wilson, 1995; Janes, 1997; Kerr, 1995; Nora, Kraemer, & Itzen, 1997).

Basing his findings on 1995 National Center for Education Statistics, Van Dusen (1997) was a pioneer researcher into nontraditional students other than racial minorities. He found that campus demographic patterns were changing to reflect a range of student characteristics other than minority status either not represented, or represented in different proportions in previous decades. These characteristics included gender, with women in higher education increasing from slightly under 50% in 1978 to over 55% by the mid-1990's, and the number of students over the age of 25 steadily rising to a peak of 44% of total enrollments in 1991 (1997, p. 6).

Compared with retention studies of minorities and women, older and returning students initially received little attention in persistence studies of nontraditional students. This lack of attention is puzzling in view of the fact that student demographics are changing toward an increase in older students and those returning to school after an interruption for either child raising or working (Altbach, 1998; Astin, 1998; Beachler, 1997; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2012). Studies of parent students have been particularly lacking, however the statistics show this to be a growing group: from 1995 to 2011 the number of parent students increased by more than 1.6 million (50%), with 2011 statistics showing that 4.8 million college students are raising dependent children (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014).

Retention studies began to examine those who have not typically been the focus of either traditional-student or nontraditional-student (such as minorities) retention studies. Some are focusing on women returning to school after interrupting college to raise families (Lamb, 1998); other factors such as student's parental status (Crum, 1994; Lashley & Ollivierre, 2014); and age (Colletta-Fasullo, 1998; Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1994; Martinez, 1996); and others a multitude of demographic and economic variables (Horn & Neville, 2006).

One study, commissioned by the American Association of University Women Educational foundation, found that a large number of women enter and leave school in a noncontinuous time frame because of factors such as parental responsibilities, academic anxieties, burdensome credit-card debt, and insufficient knowledge about available financial aid (Haag, 1999). The same study found that although adult students comprise nearly half of all college enrollments, significantly more women (18%) than men (3%) felt that their age posed a barrier to college. A study on role conflict, overload and contagion in adult women university students with families and jobs (a combination of nontraditional characteristics) showed that lower income increased their vulnerability to role conflict because of the perceived intensity of student demands (Home, 1998). The Home study concluded that conflict and overload could be eased by distance education. One study demonstrated that an institutional response to some of these issues should come from nontraditional student-friendly policies and practices such as convenient and long-term scheduling, career-oriented counseling, transfer-friendly procedures, eliminating systematic obstacles to degrees, and giving personal attention (McQuestion & Abelman, 2004).

Large urban areas which are attempting to reduce welfare rolls by government sponsorship of higher education have stimulated studies of the dual-parent and single-parent nontraditional students. These studies have found the availability of child care to be a major factor in the retention of these nontraditional students (Beachler, 1997; Gonchar, 1995; Keyes, 1995; Ritze, 1996) with one study finding that the provision of child care by colleges has actually decreased since 2004 (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014). The University of Texas collects annual national data on community college student characteristics and found that 30% of female community college students listed “caring for dependents” as likely or very likely to cause them to withdraw from class or from college altogether (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2014).

A review of the research since 2000 reveals just a few persistence studies that have focused on parental status as a factor in student retention (Gault, et al., 2014; Meyers, Berling, & Corcoran, 2012; Miller & Dilworth-Bart, 2014; Ross-Gordon, 2011). There are almost no theory-driven, empirical studies of cognitive factors that influence the single-parent student’s motivation to stay in school and obtain a college degree. Studies of cognitive factors contributing to the persistence of nontraditional students in higher education usually choose the generic “adult students” as their “nontraditional” subjects. One such study concluded that adult students enrolled in a Saturday College Program designed for older adults wishing to complete their baccalaureate degrees by attending classes at a midsize private university in the Northeast did engage in cognitive evaluations (of rewards, investments of time and money, investments represented by potential losses upon leaving, and few perceived acceptable alternatives) (Cini & Fritz, 1996). The study determined that such cognitive evaluation was a significant predictor of commitment for adult students. Another study did consider the stressors faced by adult women university students who had families and jobs (Home, 1998).

2.4 Motivation

It is reasonable to assume that the common denominator of all college retention issues is motivation (Burt, Young-Jones, Yadon, & Carr, 2013). This assumption is supported by the motivation theory known as expectancy theory (EC). Expectancy theory posits that something will be a motivator if one has a reasonable expectation that certain behaviors will lead to certain outcomes, and, that those outcomes are desirable (Vroom, 1964). Discovering a student’s motivation to persist in her degree program (expectation of earning a college degree through a certain amount of effort) and providing such motivation (the value of the college degree along with institutional support in the form of financial aid, advisors, scheduling options, etc.) as to move the student toward positive student behaviors (persistence) will result in completion of the degree. The foundational underpinning of EC is the cognitive process of how an individual considers and weighs the elements of motivation. Expectancy theory assumes two things: that this consideration takes place before making the ultimate choice, and, that the outcome is not the sole determining factor in making the decision of how to behave (Oliver, 1974). Therefore, expectancy theory could predict the behavior (persistence) of many traditional students, but not necessarily nontraditional students, because for the custodial single-parent student the outcome (possible self: good parent vs. bad parent) is the determining factor between persistence and dropping out of (or not beginning) college. A traditional student may be motivated to work hard if she thinks her effort will lead to good performance and that good performance will lead to valued outcomes. This assumption was supported in a test of expectancy theory as a predictor of academic effort and performance in a 1973 study (Mitchell and Nebeker, 1973). However, traditional students were the typical student at the time of the Mitchell and Nebeker study, with little to no understanding of the needs and challenges of the then-rare nontraditional students.

Possible selves theory offers a missing piece of the cognition-motivation-outcome puzzle in the case of nontraditional, especially parent students. Possible selves are representative of an individual's ideas of what she might become, what she would like to become, and what she is afraid of becoming – definitely outcomes that could motivate persistence behavior. Further support for the possible selves theory complementary linkage with expectancy theory (because it is only through the pursuit of a hoped-for possible self – “good parent” – that the valued outcome can take place - a college degree *and* a better life for the dependent children) comes from a study that found support for expectancy-value variables predicting achievement-related outcomes both directly and indirectly through achievement goals (Plante, O’Keefe & Theoret, 2013).

The utility of possible selves theory beyond expectancy theory, then, lies in the provision of a conceptual link between cognition and motivation, that is, providing an explanation for the ways in which an individual perceives herself (cognition) and how those perceptions affect her behavior (motivation) – in this study, persisting to degree completion. The assumption that a hoped-for “good parent” self is a motivation to persist in college for the sake of her children is supported by a longitudinal study spanning 40 years that tied parents’ educational levels to subsequent behaviors of their children including their own children’s’ educational attainments. A very powerful finding of that study was that parents’ educational levels when their child was just eight years old significantly predicted the child’s educational and occupational success forty years later (Dubow, Boxer, & Huesmann, 2009).

Because motivation is a complex construct dependent upon one’s perception of one’s own motivating factors, it seems possible that the nontraditional student may not understand or may even deny her true motivation to persist in earning a college degree, misinterpreting her motivation to be the hoped-for “good parent” self and denying her own need for self-actualization and career advancement (Doucet, 2012). Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory, specifically self-actualization as a motivator, combines with possible selves theory to offer the “self-actualized self” as one of the student’s future possible hoped-for selves (Maslow, 1954). The single-parent student may not see this as one of her possible selves because it may appear a selfish choice: college degree and my career vs. children. She may not realize that a hoped-for “self-actualized” self may actually be the stronger motivator, clinging to the belief that she and her family are going through the stress of her college studies because she is becoming a better provider for them. The strength that women’s perception of their possible selves has on their motivation is supported in a study of college women and their fears and aspirations (Chalk, Meara, Day, & Davis, 2005).

3.0 Method and Materials

3.1 Sample and Participant Selection

Using a convenience sample, six female students pursuing a university degree were solicited at two different colleges at which the primary investigator was employed. The table below presents the participants’ profiles.

Table 1. Subject Characteristics

Name ¹	Alex	Karen	Bekka	Felicity	Annie	Susan
Degree sought	B.A. Business Admin.	B.A. Business Admin.	B.A. Business Admin.	Ph.D. Economics	B.A. Education	B.S. Business Admin.
Age ²	28	40	29	40	28	27
Ages of Children ³	4	8, 10, 12, & 15	3	9 & 12	2 & 3	4
Socioeconomic Status ⁴	Poverty	Poverty	Poverty	Above	Poverty	Below
Received financial aid	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Employed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Hours worked/week	35	30-35	12	20	-	-
Average credit hours taken/semester	15	15	18	12	9	21
Lived with ⁵ parents	At times	No	At times	No	Yes	At times

Notes:

1. Name is the pseudonym of the participant.
2. Age refers to the respondent's age at time of data collection.
3. Ages of children refer to the number of children the respondent initially had living with her while attending college and the ages of the children at the time of data collection.
4. Socioeconomic status counts income earned by the respondent herself and does not include financial aid. "Poverty" indicates that, based on the respondent's own earned income, her family lived below the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Resources poverty level. "Above" indicates that the respondent had sufficient income to be ranked above the poverty level. Although Felicity's own income derived from her teaching assistantship would have classified her as below the poverty level, she received substantial ex-spouse alimony and child support that were deemed exceptions to this classification. By self-report, she experienced no financial stress.
5. Lived with parent means the participant and her children lived full-time with a parent or parents while attending college some or all of the time.

The sample size was determined by convenience and methodology. Collecting data by meeting with participants for face-to-face interviews sometimes lasting for hours necessitated a smaller sample size. The need to collect data through face-to-face interviews meant that the investigator had to be able to conveniently find and meet with participants at geographical locations accessible to both parties.

The methodology chosen for the study was a qualitative method using case studies with elements of ethnography (identification with the participants' lives) partially influencing the process. Data collection was through long interviews lasting up to three hours at a time. As a case study with the trust and empathic elements of ethnography embedded, the investigator needed the participants to be able to relate to her in order to reveal personal and sometimes painful information. It was important that participants either already knew the investigator or could easily verify the authenticity of the interviewer. This necessitated a careful selection process of identifying participants either already known to the investigator as students in her classes or those recommended to her by colleagues. All participants were fully informed of the purpose of this study and signed releases. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the investigator's home university at which she was employed and completing doctoral studies.

Average age of the participants was 32, ranging from 27 to 40 years old. All participants were female simply because there were more female custodial single-parent students to be found.

Number of children per respondent ranged from one to four; three participants had one child, two participants had two children, and one respondent had four children. Ages of the children ranged from two to fifteen, with the average child's age being seven years old. Four of the participants lived on their own with their children most of their time in college, although two had moved in and out with their parents at least twice during college. One respondent and her children lived with her parents fulltime, and one respondent's child lived with her parents when she was deployed in the military during her last semester of college. Five of the participants relied heavily on ex-spouses or parents for child care while attending college.

Four of the participants held at least part-time jobs while they attended school, one respondent (living with her parents) did not work at all, and one respondent (living on her own but at times homeless) subsisted on her child's social security, food stamps, and other social benefits. Five of the participants were divorced, and one had never been married.

At the time of data collection, one respondent had graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration five months prior to the interview, three of the participants were in their last semester of their Bachelor's programs in Business Administration, one student was in her third (junior) year of college (Education), and one student was in her second year of a doctoral program in Economics. Five of the participants attended a large southwest state university, and one student attended a small, private four-year liberal arts college in the Northeastern United States. Follow-up interviews prior to the final manuscript draft determined that all participants did complete their college degrees.

Although all participants maintained at least partial custody of their children during their college attendance, at some point during their college career custody or primary care of their children had changed. Two of the participants gave full custody to their ex-spouses so they could continue college. Three of the students relied on their parents for primary care of their children, with two participants' children living full-time with their grandparents. Only one respondent, the one with a disabled child who lived on governmental benefits, lived continuously alone with her child throughout her college career.

3.2 Assessments and Measures

3.21 Study Design and Data Collection

In conformance with the axioms of the naturalistic, or postpositivist, paradigm and its related characteristics as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985, pp. 36-43), this study followed an explanatory, qualitative design utilizing the long interview to explore the multiple, constructed realities of single-parent students who were pursuing higher education degrees. To fully explore the dimensions of motivation and behavioral outcomes through the lens of possible selves theory, it was important to use a qualitative methodology because the theory rests so completely on perceptions of self that could only be explained by the experiencer (participant). It was important to use a qualitative methodology to adequately probe the perceptions this group of students held about themselves, their educational processes, and their (and their children's') futures. This method allowed participants to express themselves in their own words, revealing their internal processes in a way that a quantitative survey would not. This was in conformance with Objective #1 to obtain a thick, in-depth description of participants' circumstances. The method also allowed the investigator to delve deeper into selected participants, explore new areas when presented, and elicit a richness and depth of data not possible through surveys. Yin and Gwaltney (1982) concluded that this method is advantageous in dealing with the entire knowledge utilization process in an explanatory manner.

A qualitative methodology is appropriate when it matches the purpose of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). One purpose of this study was to give "voice" to the nontraditional student. To generate meaning, this voice must come from the words, expressions, and experiences of the participants themselves which establish meaning inferentially (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using a qualitative methodology to guide data collection through long interviews allowed the participants to tell their stories in their own voices. The postpositivist approach to interviewing employed by this study was the method most suited to bringing out this voice from the participants, satisfying Objective #1. Features of the postpositivist interview that make it conducive to developing the voice of the respondent are:

- Respondent-oriented direction, not researcher oriented or questionnaire oriented;
- Encouragement of respondent to express themselves in ways they are most comfortable – for example, by telling stories or following digressions;

- Careful listening; interviewers become emotionally engaged with participants;
- A preference for an unstructured and open-ended format (Neuman, 2000, p. 282).

This process and methodology merges data collection and data analysis, as patterns and themes naturally emerge when interviews are listened to and later transcribed (Yin, 1994). From this collection and analysis arose the “voice” of the single-parent students, embedded in the thick description of their lives.

3.22 Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by *a priori* assumptions to determine in what ways the stories of the participants could be explained by PST. Because a naturalistic inquiry allows the data itself to tell a story, the steps for data analysis are less structured and more open to alternative procedures than are other methodologies (Creswell, 2003). However, some structure must be in evidence in order to guide the interviews with some consistency that would give validity to the study. The structured part of the interview employed three questions:

1. What is your life as a single-parent student like?
2. How would you describe your future life and that of your family?
3. If you could design all aspects of your life to fit your needs as a single-parent student, how would you design them?

Interviews were transcribed as soon as possible after administration from both the recordings and notes, taking an average eight hours per interview. The transcript was then returned to the respondent for a member check. A member check is important to establish the credibility of the study and to offer all participants the opportunity to challenge interpretations or modify factual mistakes (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). None of the participants returned the transcripts with corrections. Following the sixth interview of the study, it was determined that no new categories were emerging and that a saturation of data had been achieved.

The data was analyzed through pattern recognition based on repeated words, phrases, or descriptions by two or more of the participants. The repetition of such words, phrases, or descriptions created a construct that met or did not support one of the four objectives. For example, “parent self” became a construct when all participants identified themselves as “mother” by repeatedly describing how they felt about the effects of their decisions on their children, thus creating a pattern. “Lack of voice” was identified as a construct through repeated descriptions of how the participants believed they were perceived by others as parent students.

Even before transcription took place analysis was taking place *as* data was collected because One does not know . . . what to ask, or where to look next without analyzing data as they are collected. Hunches, working hypotheses, and educated guesses direct the investigator’s attention to certain data and then to refining and/or verifying one’s hunches. (Merriam, 1988, p. 123)

Data was analyzed concurrently with data collection, data interpretation, and narrative reporting in order to begin early recognition of emergent patterns. This simultaneous data collection, transcription, and analysis required the investigator to record observations directly on the transcripts as typed. For example, if a respondent had made a statement with a great deal of vehemence, the principal investigator recorded “she spoke loudly, and tears came to her eyes.”

Collecting the data through interviews, responding to participants’ responses, and engaging in verbatim transcription allowed an identification of emerging patterns. This pattern identification enabled a revelation of structural invariants of particular types of experiences (for example, sleeping habits) that gave meaning to the study. The identified patterns were examined to determine in what ways PST explained the stories of the participants. Once identified, these patterns were submitted to different researcher colleagues at two different institutions for confirmation in order to bring validity to the study (Dukes, 1984).

In accordance with one objective of the study, the data were also analyzed with a view toward uncovering the elements of single-parent students’ lives that did not fit PST. This is a necessary step in a qualitative study when using an *a priori* theory because data gathered subsequent to erection of the theoretical framework might not fit the frame. An explanation of the failure of data to fit the frame is necessary in order to evaluate the usefulness of the theory and to seek other explanations. If a significant portion of the data does not fit the *a priori* theoretical framework, it may be necessary to conclude that the theory is not supported by the data, or, that the data is not explained by the theory.

Throughout the data analysis process the literature was reviewed to compare it with the data being collected. The lens that was being used to view the data, PST, was well supported in the literature and raised more questions that guided further investigation. Each subsequent interview that was analyzed fed into this recursive loop of comparison and development of more questions as findings from the investigations were compared to the original categories. Analytical categories began to emerge through the constant comparison of data from each interview. Any data that challenged established or original conceptualizations was more closely examined (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013). Recurring regularities—repetitions in key words or phrases—served as the basis for defining categories. The categories reflected both the major elements of PST, that is, recognition of different states of “selves” and the usefulness of the theory in giving “voice” to the single-parent students.

Primary data categories that emerged through recurring patterns of phrases used by the participants were:

1. Primary self as “good parent”, with the identification essence of “Mother”: data which provided the thick description of the single-parent students’ lives who strongly and almost solely identified both their current and future desired selves as “good parent,” specifically “Mother”; with the hoped-for self being the parent of the future who had earned a college degree, and the feared self being the mother now and in the future who did not earn a college degree (Objectives 1, 2, and 4; Interview Questions 1, 2, and 3);
2. Primary self as “self-actualized”: data that provided the thick description of the participants who identified their current and future selves primarily as striving toward their own self-actualization rather than mother as the hoped-for future self (Objectives 1, 2, and 4; Interview Questions 1 and 2); and,
3. Differences: Data that was different from what the majority of the participants seemed to be saying or wanted to be perceived as saying - discordances (Objective 3; all interview questions).

This study took advantage of purposive sampling, which permits the researcher to select the sample to fit the purpose of the study. The investigator chose individuals based on their abilities to provide insights and understanding of the phenomenon under study as well as to provide typical and divergent data (Erlandson et al., 1993). The only criteria the participants needed to fulfill were their status as a single-parent while they were enrolled in a degree program. They could have been of gender, any race or socioeconomic background, and at any level in college at any college. Both the specificity and broadness of the criteria contributed to the transferability of the study.

The advantage of qualitative research is that “the naturalistic researcher does not attempt to ensure that observations are free from contamination by the researcher but rather to trust in the ‘confirmability’ of the data themselves” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 34). As with dependability, confirmability is relayed through the audit trail. The investigator developed an audit trail of interview audiotapes, interview transcripts, notes, journal material and spreadsheets. This audit trail enables the auditor to ascertain that the conclusions, interpretations, and recommendations can be traced to their sources and that they are supported by the inquiry. (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Peer debriefing and member checks were used to establish credibility. Peer debriefing allowed outside professionals (faculty and doctoral students) to analyze the study and provide feedback about the findings and conclusions in order to challenge, refine and redirect the process of the study as necessary. Doctoral students in the disciplines of Accounting, Economics, and Marketing as well as faculty members at two colleges were invited to read and critique the study. Member checks were carried out by the participants themselves through the reading and correcting of the typed transcripts of their interviews. This allowed them to test categories, interpretations, and conclusions of the inquiry throughout and upon completion of the study (Erlandson et al., 1993).

4.0 Results

- Objective #1: To fully explore the black box of motivated behavior by giving “voice” to the subjects through an identification of their lives using long interviews to provide the kind of thick description that leads to reader insight and understanding of this type of motivated behavior.

The participants in this study unanimously expressed their feelings of being without voice and expressed surprise that a research study was focusing on them. When encouraged by the investigator to speak in their own words about their experiences, the interviews went on much longer than the investigator would have initially requested or expected. All participants behaved as though they wanted to tell their stories in order to convince others to believe them.

Engaging in the process of the interview itself, objective #1 allowed the participants to have a voice. However, they generally expressed the belief that they did not possess a voice in any structural or administrative matters of their college careers, worrying that they would be seen either as “just a mom” who should be at home taking care of her kids, or, a college student who was using her kids as an excuse to miss class or turn in assignments late. This feeling of lack of voice was summed up by participants’ remarks:

I want to be accepted as my own person, and that is what identity is all about. I don’t think I should be forgotten. I love being a mom, but that’s not all I am. (Felicity)

POP, the poverty person, the welfare person, the single parent . . . I mean a lot of people have ideologies about . . . and when you put all of those words together you don’t picture a pretty woman, a very intelligent woman . . . I’m well kept. People are very surprised to find out that my son and I are very . . . poverty. (Susan)

It’s kind of like the old racist concept—the business world, everybody’s white males. And that’s just how they [college administrators and faculty] view everybody: everybody is 18 to 20 and living off their parents, and that’s how they [faculty] walk in and teach their classes.” (Alex)

In this college I see too much of the good old boy thing—the College of Business. There are just too many men in charge here that still see women as not being in charge of anything. Even though we have female faculty that are tenured professors, they still don’t seem to get the respect that men get. So I think if they don’t respect their own, I don’t see them looking upon the female nontraditional student any differently. (Karen)

I don’t necessarily want or expect special treatment or consideration or to call attention to my situation because I don’t want to be labeled a whiner, but I am going through something different from traditional students. I’d like some understanding that I am an adult with problems different from their traditional students. (Alex)

There was consensus among all participants that they didn’t want a strident voice as a single-parent student, just understanding of what they were going through. Several participants indicated that they would welcome a student classification system as a proxy which would identify them as a single parent so that instructors and administrators would be aware of their status and how that might affect their performance. They did not want to individually inform their instructors of their status for fear they would be perceived as trying to use it as an excuse for missed classes, assignments and late work. In summary, all participants expressed a high level of frustration over their lack of voice as single-parent students and did not believe that this study would be effective in delivering that voice for them even though they were willing to participate just to have their voices heard. Unless the original dissertation or subsequent published papers based on it reach wide circulation, the logical conclusion is that the participants are correct, therefore objective #1 would be rated as achieved only if “giving voice” is narrowly defined as: voice given through the act of the interview itself and to anyone who reads the published study.

- Objective #2: To analyze the multiple perceived possible selves of subjects using the cognitive lens provided by possible selves theory to explain and understand their motivations to complete a difficult task even when it threatened or conflicted with something they valued very highly.

This objective was achieved, as all participants described both their hoped-for and feared possible selves through structured interview questions 1 and 2: “What is your life as a single-parent student like” (current self) and “How would you describe your future life and that of your family” (future self). They all described undesirable states (feared future selves) and desired states (hoped-for future self) in contrasting their current lives without a college degree with their future lives as a college degree-holder.

When data were reviewed, they appeared to cluster into two categories of primary possible selves: a “mother self” and “self-actualized”. The “mother self” was a manifestation of “good parent” self but seemed to be imbued with more meaning. Participants describing their ideal of a good parent would emphasize the word mother as though it spoke for itself: “I mean, I’m a *mother*” was a typical response given to explain their motivations to earn a college degree if they said they were doing this “for my children.”

Those participants with a strongly-identified “mother self” perceived their identities to be defined by their responsibilities toward their children for all possible selves states: current (single-parent student self), hoped-for future (college degree holder, empowered, financially stable self), and feared future (degree-less, poverty-stricken self). When participants spoke of persistence difficulties, the majority of these difficulties were presented through the lens of “mother self” in the child-parent-school-work frameworks.

Primary Possible Self as Mother: Feared or Hoped-For Current and Future Possible Selves

Four of the participants strongly identified their current and future selves as “parent self” without talking about any identity or role separate from parent, leading the investigator to label said strong identifications as “primary self – mother” or, “mother self.” Despite such strong primary identifications, most of them acknowledged that their current “parent self” was not a very good parent due to their high levels of stress and lack of quality time spent with their children due to school conflicts. Interestingly, even though some participants admitted that they were not always a good parent, none of them ever said they were not a good mother.

In response to structured interview question #1 the predominant view of single-parent student life was negative in tone and description, portraying this lifestyle as a means to end, the end being greater career opportunities. The four primary “mother self” participants justified the current self of “not-so-good parent” with the hoped-for future self of “good parent” who had earned a college degree and made her family’s lives better. This confirmed that possible selves theory, particularly a hoped-for future self, is not only a significant motivator even in the face of obstacles, but that it is a powerful enough motivator to allow the student to be able to accept a current undesirable self while pursuing their college degrees. They seemed to believe that the hoped-for future self would justify the undesirable current self because the hoped-for future self would more than make up for hardships experienced during college for herself as well as her children.

Five of the six participants made clear distinctions between temporal states of self: the self they perceived themselves to be while a single-parent student (the current self), the self they were afraid they might become if they did not persist in pursuing their college degrees (the feared future self), and the self they hoped to become once they had attained their college degrees (the hoped-for future self) (Alex, Annie, Karen, Rebecca, and Susan). They clearly identified the hoped-for future possible self as “mother who earned a college degree” as their strong motivator in persisting in their studies.

Strong evidence of the “mother” primary identification of the current self was given by several participants (Alex, Annie, Karen, and Rebecca). Alex and Annie were the most forthright in identifying themselves as mothers:

I’d rather have a big old stamp on the front of my [college] file that says ‘MOTHER—Three-Year-Old Child’. When I walk in there, he [instructor] knows it. He doesn’t have to hear it from me, he just has to understand. You’ve heard it before—they think I don’t have a life, all I have to do is come to this class and do this work—they don’t see all of it. Maybe you don’t see exceptions because you’re a mother, because other kids are working, and it all balances out. But it doesn’t, because when you’re a mother, it never shuts off. (Alex)

A lot of people think that I like school and I find it interesting; and I’m happy that I do well, but I’m doing this all more because I have to. Not so much because I want to, because ideally I would be. . .I mean if it would. . .I almost said this about the fantasy [Structured interview question #3], but. . .it didn’t include being in school because a fantasy to me would be having a husband that wanted to work. . .I mean my ex-husband didn’t want to work. He was in and out of jobs. I want a husband that wanted to work, and I could stay home with my kids when they’re little. People used to tease me and say, you just want the white picket fence, and I was like, yeah, I do. I don’t think that’s bad. I really think that a lot of women probably do want that, maybe just can’t admit it. . .I think maybe it’s what we’re called to do. I think that would be a wonderful situation. I’m happy with what I’m doing, I mean I’m not unhappy. I just. . .when I was 15 and 16, and I looked at what my life would be it wasn’t that I would be working a full time job and stuff like that, it was that I would stay home with my kids. (Annie)

Rebecca answered many questions in the context of her “mother” self, using her son’s name with frequency. One example was in response to the question “What kept you going through college?” She unhesitatingly gave a one-word reply “Michael” (6-4-99). Even when describing her role as a student, she superimposed her obligations as a mother:

. . .so I'd even have to do homework in that hour that we spent together, and I didn't like doing that because I'd prefer to do homework when he was in bed asleep. . .One thing that would have been kind of neat if he had gone there [campus daycare center] would have been to pick him up between classes and then take him back, just to be able to spend more time with him. . .it was difficult, especially when the classes were required, and especially when they were at night, because it wasn't always easy to get someone to take care of Michael, and sometimes you feel like you should take him with you. . .Sometimes I would have them [group members from classes] come over to my house just to make it easier to take care of Michael. Sometimes I would take Michael to the computer lab at night, so it was helpful that they had late hours. I wonder how hard it has been on Michael, I'll try to explain to him what I did, and did for him.

Four of the six participants talked about "time with" their children in identifying themselves as a parent, usually in the words, "I never got enough time with [my child]" (Alex, Annie, Karen, and Rebecca). These comments always occurred in the context of discussions of their roles as mothers. "Every minute I'm away from her costs me something" was one typical comment (Alex, 5-4-99). Another comment was "I probably did not get enough time with Jeremy. . .there's a lot of guilt about that" (Karen, 5-19-99).

In describing a hoped-for future self (Structured Interview Questions 2 and 3), the participants with primary (Alex, Annie, Karen, Rebecca) and strong (Susan) identifications as "mother self" were unanimous in their descriptions of a future based on having earned a college degree. Alex' hoped-for future self was based on both reality and wishful thinking. She had been offered a full time job by a major oil company before she graduated, and she already knew some details of her life after graduation.

And then I'm going to a finance program at Conoco, and they're going to house me and tell me where I need to be for nine weeks. And I am ready for someone to do that for me because I'm tired of having to make all the decisions and to sit and pull everything together all the time, and this is going to be it. Somebody is finally going to take it away, and that's going to give me nine weeks to regroup and get everything back together" (5-4-99)

In speaking of her hoped-for future in terms of money and respect, Alex also mentioned the difference in jobs at Conoco between those who have college degrees and those who don't:

I started to go on full time at Conoco, what they call a nonexempt employee, what that means is basically no college education. The beginning salary for that is \$1400 a month. When you start as an exempt, the minimum is \$2700, so that's a \$1300 swing. Also, when you work for the company [while you are getting] a college degree, they pretty much don't care. You already have a stigma attached to you. You may have gone back and gotten it, but it's not like you came into the company with a degree. If I had gone in as a nonexempt, it would have taken six years to get to the salary point of an exempt and maybe never to the respect point without the degree (5-4-99)

Annie's hoped-for future as a kindergarten teacher required a specific college degree. Of all the participants, Annie most strongly identified her career hoped-for future self as college degree holder with her good parent hoped-for future self.

I want to teach kindergarten, because it's such a good job. I remember my kindergarten teacher. But teaching, because I want to be able to be on their—my kid's—schedule, and I think it's ideal for that, because it all goes back to me not wanting to stick them in daycare and let other people take care of them (6-21-99)

The other participants spoke more in terms of money they would be able to earn and benefits they would receive in their hoped-for futures rather than any specific professions (Alex, Karen, Rebecca, and Susan). "More than minimum wage" (Karen, 5-19-99, 5), "more than \$6 an hour" (Rebecca, 6-4-99, 3), "more than \$7 an hour" (Susan, 9-14-99, 5) were comments describing their hopes for future earnings with a college degree. Health and medical benefits, dental benefits, retirement plans, and job security were other descriptors of the hoped-for futures when the college degree had been earned. As Karen described it: "So I thought, okay, I'll go to school, get a real job that has benefits and retirement and something to look forward to" (5-19-99).

Another aspect of the hoped-for future self in which the respondent had persisted to attainment of the college degree was the assumed positive impact on the participants' children's lives.

I want things set up where she will always be taken care of. And I don't want her to go through the struggles and hardships that I've gone through. . . I'll have merit raises, and I'll take different jobs, and she's going to get exposed to different things because we'll start out in Houston, but I want to move around the country. I want her to have a bigger base growing up than I did growing up. (Alex)

This strong identification of the single-parent student self as mother colored five of the six participants' remarks about what they thought might happen if they did not persist in earning the college degree – a feared future self (Alex, Annie, Karen, Rebecca, and Susan). Felicity was the only respondent who did not describe a feared future self.

After answering question number 1 in the structured interview “What is your life like as a single-parent student?” participants were asked what motivated them to stay in the mostly-negative situations they had described. Five of the six participants also answered in terms of feared future selves - theirs and their children's. The description that emerged was that of a feared future self in a career consisting of minimum-wage jobs with no medical benefits, no retirement plan, no job security, long hours, and a less-than desirable life for the respondent and her children. Alex typified this response by her remarks: “I don't have any health insurance, I don't have any medical insurance, I don't have any retirement, and I can't do this forever, and my daughter has to have some kind of security” (5-4-99, 4). Karen had worked as a convenience store clerk before returning to school and projected that experience into her feared-future self, even once her children had left home:

I wasn't qualified for anything, and I was almost forty years old. So I could do this for twenty years, and then what—have no retirement? I'd have nothing, and only have progressed as far as assistant manager, maybe manager, with still no money but working over forty hours a week, spending no quality time with my family. And I needed to be able to help even the children who were not living with me. I kept thinking, now there are things I'm going to want to be able to do for them, to help them if something comes up for them, money or health. I couldn't do that because I lived from paycheck to paycheck. (5-19-99)

While Karen described her feared future self, one without a college degree, as working at a convenience store, Annie described hers as a clerical worker “sitting behind a desk, typing, while somebody else is taking care of my children. . . every penny would have to go to daycare, and it just would have been this, you know, you don't get out from underneath forever” (6-21-99). Alex saw her future self without a college degree as continuing to waitress three nights a week and work part-time at a major oil company in a nearby city two days a week (5-4-99). Without a college degree, Rebecca saw herself working at a \$6 per hour job, “barely paying my bills, living with my grandmother, basically mooching off my grandmother. . . my bills killing me. . . plugging away” (6-4-99). Susan's picture of her future self without a college degree was described in negative terms: “I'm not going to be able to really survive and provide for my son, for myself, working for \$7 an hour to pay rent, to do all of that” (9-14-99). So was Karen's: “Without the degree, you're not going anywhere, you're standing there doing the same thing for twenty years” (5-19-99). Susan drew the starkest picture of her son's future in her description of her feared future self without the college degree: “Jail or college: that's two extremes, but no kidding” (9-14-99). She noted that his chances for going to college would be improved if she completed college because

he can see that it's been done, most likely. He might see that my friends are poor, from a poor area, but as you make more money your friends change, and people become your companions, also. So he will probably have friends in both worlds, and he will be able to see where we're at, and, 'this is where my mom and I used to be at,' so I think most definitely he'll want to go to school. (9-14-99)

Most, if not all of the difficulties the subjects described in persisting towards completion of their degrees stemmed from some facet of their identification of the mother self. The predominant view of life of a single-parent student was portrayed as stressful by most of the participants, leading three of the six participants to their college counselors at some point in their college careers for depression (Karen, 5-19-99; Rebecca, 5-19-99; and Susan, 9-14-99). One respondent said she used food as a stress reliever (Karen, 5-19-99), two participants took antidepressants (Karen, 5-19-99; Rebecca, 6-4-99), and one respondent said she used smoking as a stress reliever:

Well, everybody gets on to me because I smoke, but my stress level is so high, I'm thinking that this is by no way something that makes it worse. If anything, it makes it better, it's a crutch, yeah, a stress-reliever.” (Alex)

Negative phrases and terms used to describe the life of a single-parent student were: busy, frustrating at times, depressing (Rebecca, 6-4-99); not really easy, overwhelming, depressing, guilt-provoking, sacrificing (Karen, 5-19-99); awful, totally out of control, exhausting, the toughest time of my life, willing to accept a “D” (Alex, 5-4-99); worse than many, depressed, stressed, poverty stricken, grim, very hard, behind in studying, a struggle (Susan, 9-14-99); difficult year, never enough hours in the day, exhausted, burned out, (Annie, 6-21-99); and, kind of difficult, a period battle, being between a rock and a hard place (Felicity, 6-7-99). “It’s crazy, just crazy, to sum it all up” responded Annie (6-21-99). “Everything I do, if I had to go another month, I would probably not finish. . . I know it cannot be any worse. This is probably going to be the toughest time in my life” (Alex, 5-4-99). “I think the best way to describe it is that there’s never enough hours in the day to do everything” (Annie, 6-21-99).

External difficulties, that is, difficulties outside of the single-parent student’s family unit, that also contributed to difficulty in persisting in college as a parent student were: scheduling of courses (all six participants mentioned this difficulty), and attitudes of faculty and administrators (Alex, 5-4-99; Annie, 6-21-99; Felicity, 6-7-99; Karen, 5-19-99). Participants expressed desires for more evening and early morning courses, as well as more course offerings in the summer, although one respondent expressed the desire that all courses be scheduled to parallel the public school schedule—from eight a.m. to three p.m. daily—so she could have the same schedule as her son (Karen, 5-19-99).

All four participants who had identified “mother self” as primary mentioned the desire at times to *not* persist in their pursuit of a college degree (Alex; Annie; Karen; and Rebecca). Annie called it being “burned out” (6-21-99); Alex said “if I had to go another month, I would probably not finish” (5-4-99); Karen said that at one point “what I was fixing to give up was going to be school” (5-19-99); and Rebecca said “At times I felt like just giving up—frustration, bad grades, not wanting to study, not wanting to clean my apartment, not having any support” (6-4-99). Karen was one of the participants who gave full custody of her children to her ex-spouse before completing her studies. Alex, Rebecca and Annie either lived with or their children lived with parents or grandparents some of all of the time while attending college.

Primary Possible Self as Self-Actualized: Feared or Hoped-For Current and Future Possible Selves

Only Felicity did not distinguish between separate and identifiable selves and did not describe her current and future situations entirely within the context of her life with her children. Felicity used the words and repeatedly described herself as “self-actualized.” Due to Felicity’s high degree of confidence, lack of financial hardships, and previous attainment of two college degrees (bachelor’s and master’s) she was judged to have the strongest identification of primary self (both current and future) as the most self-actualized of the participants. Although Susan also described at least one self (hoped-for future self) as “self-actualized,” she clearly also identified another one of her selves (hoped-for future self) as “good parent” who had attained her goal of college degree.

A determination of primary self as “self-actualized” emerged from descriptions of participants’ expressed strong needs to see themselves as separate from their children, their families, and anyone else. Examples came from Felicity and Susan: “. . . my own person and that is what identity is all about. I don’t think I should be forgotten. I love being a mom, but that’s not all I am” (Felicity, 6-7-99); and, “. . . self happiness. . . always trying to reach self-actualization. I can’t be the 100% perfect person to be here with my son all the time anymore” (Susan, 9-14-99).

Susan was one of the two participants (Felicity and Susan) who indicated the actual dominance of a self-actualized possible self over a parent self. Even though having a child who required much more attention and special care than the other participants, Susan indicated the greatest interest in grades and achievement of all the participants. She described her background and her philosophy of learning to explain the development of her self-identity and separation between her self-identity and parent-identity:

I’m a very intelligent person. I was always smart as a child. I used to prefer to read the dictionary. I’d tell my mom, pick a word, any word, and I’ll tell you the definition and how to spell it. So, it was just a realization that this is the time. I can’t be the 100% perfect person to be here with my son all the time anymore. . . Physical therapy, you know, all day with my son. . . you know, it’s just. . . I lost who I was through all of that. I was no longer—I didn’t know who I was. I was referred to as my son’s mom. (9-14-99)

And,

Now if I don't want to be that quality of parent, and I don't want to be that "A" student which I am—I've made the dean's list every semester, took honor courses at MCC [community college]—if I wanted to sacrifice that, I could probably swing a part time job, a few hours here and there. Then, I'm not going to be that "A" student, and I'm not going to comprehend it as much, and therefore I'm not going to be as effective in the field when I get done with my degree. And I don't want to go out there being a mediocre person doing a job and only remembering half of it, like, I've got my degree, but I just skimmed by. I don't want to be that kind of employee. (9-14-99)

Felicity also made a clear distinction between her self-actualized self and her mother self:

School has always been important to me in my life, ever since grade school. I think the thing is that I never saw my identity in somebody else—regardless of my kids, or my husband, or my nothing. My identity is my own. I want to be my own person, and that is what identity is all about. I will do everything I can for my kids' success or my husband's if I am married, but I don't think I should be forgotten. And I don't expect anything from anybody else, but I want to be allowed to do anything I want to do, and I always have been. . . I don't think I could have lived without something that was really mine. (6-7-99)

The only positive portrayals of the single-parent student life of all six participants came from Felicity and Susan even though these two participants were different from each other in every way counted in this study. Felicity was the oldest respondent at 40; Susan was the youngest respondent at 27. Felicity had older children—ages nine and 12; Susan's child was four years old. Felicity was a naturalized American citizen originally from a Middle East country. Susan came from generations of poor, rural dwellers in a northeastern state. Felicity was between the second and third years of her doctoral program in Economics; Susan was soon to graduate with a Bachelor of Science degree in Marketing. Felicity attended a large, southwestern state university; Susan attended a small, private college in a northeast state. Felicity had been married ten years, Susan had never been married. Felicity did not have pressing financial difficulties because of generous child support and alimony; Susan lived below the poverty level. Felicity worked while going to school, Susan did not. What Felicity and Susan had in common was their description of college as a positive experience in that it provided self-identity and self-actualization apart from their parent identities.

Apart from multiple differences, they were the only ones that described the experience, at least some of the time, as enjoyable. "For me, I guess it's just something that I do enjoy—school, marketing, business, I love to learn about it. I always have, and . . . always trying to reach self-actualization" (Susan, 9-14-99). Felicity was married and had a one-year-old and three-year-old child when she began her Master's degree, so the continuation in higher education with children was not a new experience for her, other than her now-single status. "I don't think you should sacrifice your family for your education, but I think you can have a very nice balance without having to sacrifice. I chose the way I chose to go to school" (Felicity, 6-7-99). Felicity was one of the participants who gave fulltime custody of her children to her ex-spouse while she completed her studies. Susan was the only participant who retained full custody and care of her child from the start of her college studies to completion.

There was only one description of a future self without having finished the current degree that was not a feared self, however that future was also not the desired, hoped-for future self (Felicity, 6-7-99). Even Felicity's hoped-for future self was based on finishing her current degree plan:

I know I could have a job that I could make much more money than a college professor—before I even started my Ph.D. I had a bachelor's in accounting—but I decided what I want, and I have no desire for things like that, and this is the way to get it. (6-7-99)

Where Felicity did describe a future hoped-for "good parent" self, she pointed out not only tangible benefits to her children's futures through attainment of her current degree, but also a philosophy a life that would be different:

Everybody else is going to benefit from it, the kids by having a mother who can have a broader understanding of life in general, because I don't think school just makes you, you know, smart in that way, it just gives you a broader understanding of what life is all about. They understand that education is really important because it is, to me it is extremely important, and they can be proud of their mother. I'll also be in a better position to help them in different areas, not, I don't mean money, but it feels good when my older son who is in seventh grade comes to me with his algebra questions and he actually knows that his mother. . . he respects me. . . the other day somebody was telling him how smart he is, and he said 'well sure, what do you expect, I have the two smartest parents. Well, yeah, my mother is getting a doctorate.' He was so proud. I never knew that he was so proud of it. That really made me feel good.

Absolutely, there is a better chance of them going on to college because I've gotten these degrees. I also see them looking at women a certain way. And that is really important, especially having two boys. It is extremely important for them to respect women for what they are, not for, say doing the laundry and doing all of that. (6-7-99)

- Objective #3: To report what was *not* explained by possible selves theory. It was anticipated that there would arise from the data some description of the elements of the participants' lives or behaviors that would not fit PST.

At first analysis, two major categories of differences seemed to emerge from the data. The first major difference was that five of the participants generally described their lives as single-parent students as extremely difficult and stressful, even painful and depressing (Alex, Annie, Karen, Rebecca, and Susan). The assumption of the study was that it could only be the perception (either feared or hoped-for) of future "parent self" that could possibly motivate the single-parent student to complete a college degree in the face of extreme difficulties. Susan and Felicity presented different motivations. Susan and Felicity both described very strong self-identities and the ways in which these self-perceptions motivated them to pursue college degrees.

Felicity described life as a single-parent student as even easier than when she was married:

It's working really well. I returned, my kids are very happy with me. I wouldn't change anything. Being a single parent and going to school, it is difficult, it is not as difficult as everyone portrays. I have absolutely no complaints. I love it. (6-7-99)

As far as I understand, I want to be my own person, and that is what identity is all about. And I think by people having their own identity you would actually be a better mother and a better person, to have your own identity. I never thought I'd be a. . . I love being a mom, but that's not all I am. I've never been. I don't think you should sacrifice your family for your education, but I think you can have a very nice balance without having to sacrifice. . . If you have the motivation, this is where it comes in—that won't stop you. In other words, if you don't have the motivation, don't use the kids and being a single parent as an excuse. (Felicity, 6-7-99)

Susan experienced problems of a different nature due to her child's disability:

Physical therapy, you know, all day with my son, speech therapists. . . you know, it's just. . . I lost who I was through all of that. I was no longer. . . I didn't know who I was. I was referred to as my son's mom. A lot of people gave me a hard time about coming back to school, you know: 'how could you leave him, he needs you so much right now?' But if I don't get a break right now I'm not going to be able to be the parent that everybody expects me to live up to. So that's what brought me back to school. . . happiness, self-happiness. For me, I guess it's just something that I do enjoy—school, marketing, business, I love to learn about it. I always have, and other than. . . always trying to reach self-actualization. Also, I think it's within people, you always try to further yourself, you always try to do better, try to learn more, and that is what I'm trying to do. I've had some obstacles, and some of the obstacles have helped to bring me here—my son's surgery. . . for everything to be happy, to be closer to that self-actualization, that is my long term goal, and what comes along with it is for himself, and he is a part of my goal. (9-14-99)

After reviewing the fundamentals of possible selves theory, expectancy theory, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory (the self-actualized category) and their linkages between motivation and outcomes, however, it became clear that possible selves theory as applied in this study *did* explain Felicity and Susan's primary possible self (current and future) identifications as self-actualized serving as powerful motivators to persist in their college studies.

What was in error was the original study assumption that only the choice of “parent self” (both current and future feared and hoped-for possible selves) would serve as the powerful motivator needed to persist in the face of obstacles. Objective #3 therefore was not met in that PST *did* explain all possible self-identifications as motivators for all participants.

Another difference where PST did not seem to explain the data and the data did not seem to fit PST was not apparent until after all interviews were transcribed and data analysis (the process of pattern recognition) was begun. The data showed that all participants described lives of stress and family-college conflict, indicating that their lives were worse for all of them (except Felicity) while they were pursuing their college degrees. Even Felicity, despite her words above, ended up giving custody of her children to her ex-spouse while she completed her doctoral studies. To say that you are motivated to do something for the good of your children as your perception of being a good parent would indicate, yet doing something that makes your family’s life worse while you are doing, or even results in giving the care of your children to someone else seems contradictory. The motivation does not seem to fit the performance.

At first this seemed a difference, thus fulfilling the expectation of objective #3. On closer analysis, however, it was seen that the seemingly contradictory behavior was explained by possible selves theory. It was not the self-proclaimed “possible self” that participants identified that was motivating them after all—it was the stronger “self-actualized” self that motivated them to persist in their college studies despite all obstacles. Giving the care of their children to someone else was a way the “self-actualized” self predominated. This is explained by PST. The dominant perceived self motivates behavioral outcomes. Participants did not acknowledge or perhaps realize on a conscious level which self was really motivating them. The fact that at least two of them were seeking counseling and two were taking antidepressants does indicate that there was a subconscious realization of the conflict between their hoped-for “good parent” self and their “self-actualized” self. PST explains the resolution of that conflict (choice of “self-actualized” self, whether known and acknowledged or not) because the desired outcome and the future, hoped-for possible selves held such high valence for them, more so than even a current, feared self of “bad parent.”

- Objective #4: To test the usefulness of possible selves theory for subjects and their persistence in a difficult task in order to appropriately motivate them before or during the task and to help them manage their expectations. To that end, this objective is important for both managers of employees who perform difficult jobs as well as for college administrators, recruiters, and faculty dealing with nontraditional students.

All participants conformed to the predictions and explanations of PST through describing their college journeys as single-parent students through their most strongly identified selves: either mother as primary self, or, as self-actualized self as primary self. They described both feared and hoped-for current and future selves using those same identifications. They all described those selves as the most powerful motivators to continue in college even when their lives were very difficult because of their parental responsibilities. This partially fulfills objective #4.

Although subjects of this study reached their desired outcome (college degree) it was at the sacrifice of their children (five of the six subjects). If students had realized ahead of time that they would be choosing to persist in their college studies (self-actualization) rather than continue fulltime care of their children (hoped-for good parent self), they may have been able to reduce stress and plan better prepare for their course of action. The subjects’ misidentification of the self that was actually providing their motivation (not the parent self as most expressed, but rather the self-actualized self) was strongly supportive of this objective in showing that when an incorrect possible self is chosen as the primary motivator to persist in a difficult course it can create stress, role conflict and lead to an undesired outcome.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Summary

For future researchers, this study has provided empirical support for theoretical and conceptual links between persistence, nontraditional students, and possible selves theory as the motivator. The study has demonstrated the predictive usefulness and explanatory power of PST. This usefulness applies at the policy level institutionally: if we accept that PST drives motivation, we must accept that people have different views of their multiple realities, but that their concerns for their multiple realities can be problematic individually and institutionally.

For the individual single-parent student, failure to recognize the true motivating possible self can lead to internal conflict, extreme stress, depression and even relinquishment of dependent children. For the institution, failure to recognize and accommodate this very different category of student could lead to recruitment and retention problems at a time when traditional student populations are declining. The institution should take the responsibility of helping the individual to identify a focused self—one which leads to organized, productive activity that will help the student to persist to degree completion in a manner that does not have a high cost for the student and her family. This benefits the institution through increased retention, and it benefits the individual and her family in obtaining a college degree in as stress-free a manner as is possible. It also benefits society when the single-parent student can transcend poverty, increase socioeconomic status, and raise children who will become productive members of society.

5.2 Interpretation

The power of possible selves theory to motivate behavior was strongly supported by this study. It was the participants' perceptions of a hoped-for future self that most strongly motivated them to persist in their college studies whether the primary identified self was "good mother" or "self-actualized." The evidence that a perceived possible self can act as a powerful motivator even in the face of extreme difficulties comes from the participants' own words in describing the difficulty of pursuing a college degree while raising children. Examples of their words and descriptions were: frustrating at times, depressing, not really easy, overwhelming, guilt-provoking, sacrificing, awful, totally out of control, exhausting, the toughest time of my life, willing to accept a "D," worse than many, stressed, poverty stricken, grim, very hard, behind in studying, a struggle, difficult year, never enough hours in the day, burned out, kind of difficult, a period battle, being between a rock and a hard place, and crazy. All of those descriptions applied to the period while the participants were going to college. Yet all of them chose "good parent" self, to identify their motivation to persist, with four of the six choosing "good parent" self, specifically "mother," as their primary self. They strongly believed that the best thing they could do for their children was to get a college degree themselves.

One of the most startling interpretations of this study is the realization that although all participants said they were either in part or totally motivated by their "good parent" self, current and future, the words and phrases in the preceding paragraph contradict that belief. Their lifestyles and that of their children were actually made worse by adding the burden of college while trying to raise their children, to the point where some of them gave partial or full care of their children to someone else so they could complete college. The proven stress and difficulties that pursuing a college degree add to a family would rationally lead to the conclusion that giving your children to someone else person makes you *not* a "good parent" at all—not now and possibly not in the future. The study evidence flies in the face of the participants' beliefs that they were doing this for the sake of their children when it was in actuality making life harder for their children. By the end of their college degrees (based on follow-up interviews with participants) only one of the six participants retained full custody and care for her child all the way to graduation. Before they finished their college degrees two of the participants gave custody of their children to their ex-spouses; two of the participants gave virtually 100% of the care to their parents; and one of the participants gave a majority of the care of her child to her mother.

This proves possible selves theory to be reliably robust and useful in explaining and predicting behavior. It is the *perception* and *choice* and even visualization of possible self that serve as the powerful motivator to persist despite difficulties, not the actual self-role. Further, this study showed that it is the future possible self that is the more powerful motivator regardless of whether it is a feared possible future self (no college degree) or a hoped-for future possible self (degree holder). If a person can see herself as she would like to be, she can deny who she currently is so that she can pursue her desired outcome. A few of the participants hinted at being a less-than-ideal parent while going to college, but they all clung to the perception that they were currently a good parent because they were doing this for their children. Ironically, they believed that they were a good current parent, despite the evidence, because they wanted to be a good *future* parent (someone who had earned a college degree). They valued the future outcome more highly than the current outcome apparently and were thus more strongly motivated by the future hoped-for possible self, fulfilling the predictions of both possible selves theory and expectancy theory.

The need to continually deny bad parenting while pursuing a college degree can create even more stress and conflict within the parent student. Four of the participants admitted to struggling with depression and were either seeking counseling or taking antidepressants.

None dropped out of college. Some did end up sacrificing their children even though their primary self-identification was “mother.” Possible selves theory explains both the motivation and the outcome, and in this study it did prove to be the perception of a certain future self that predicted behavioral outcomes. The study not only supports the predictability and explanatory usefulness of PST, it demonstrates the tremendous level of power that a perceived possible self can have.

5.3 Implications of the results

This study holds significance for several segments of the population, from managers to college administrators and faculty to social policy. The significance to the participants themselves is that they are allowed to tell their stories to an unbiased observer from outside their circle of family and friends, thus giving them “voice”. This opportunity affirmed to them that their situations have been noticed and are worthy of study. A hoped-for outcome of this study is that the voice of these students will be heard, noted, and responded to by those in positions of decision-making authority. At the very least, these students may be motivated to continue, knowing that their struggles have been recognized.

For managers, this study may expand the traditional motivational tools of checklist intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. The existence of multiple, possibly conflicting possible selves is an important managerial concept that may be used to identify the “best” motivating possible self.

Another implication of the study is that role conflict must be managed to avoid damage, even when a person believes she is motivated to achieve a very desirable outcome. Most of the participants described lives of stress, exhaustion, and constant time conflicts while attending college. A majority of them sought aid through counseling or medication, and all but one ended up requiring significant help with their children. It would be misleading to take from this study only the validity of a powerful motivational tool—PST—especially the power of the visualization of a future possible self. It is such a tool, but at what cost to the participants and their children is something that must also be considered. There could be residual guilt lasting many years over the choices the participants made while they were going to college. The family may be forever damaged especially if the single-parent student never gets her children back. Colleges and universities have a moral obligation to identify and support this class of student.

The obvious benefit to society of finding ways to improve college retention of the single-parent student is in keeping their families above the poverty level and off welfare rolls. This is a generational benefit, as parents who have attended college themselves are commonly recognized as more likely to raise children who also attend college. As the most likely candidate in our society for welfare is the single mother, it would seem that public policy would concern itself with access and retention issues in higher education for single-parent students. These responsibilities should not be limited to simply giving access to single-parent students but also supporting them while they are attending college.

5.4 Applications

Managers may find possible selves theory useful in motivating employees in specialized, nontraditional, unstructured or otherwise challenging types of jobs that may require a long investment of time by employees before positive results may occur (e.g. research scientist). If they are able to use possible selves theory to accurately identify the best fit between the most motivational “possible self” and the challenges of the job, they may be able to retain and motivate continued high levels of performance in their employees.

College and university administrators at all levels of higher education may benefit from the results of this study. It is common knowledge that administrators are concerned with the issue of retention. This study brings recognition and gives voice to a previously underrepresented group of college students, albeit a group of highly motivated, yet challenged students. If administrators learn what factors help single-parent students stay in school and earn their degrees, they may be able to better assist this group and improve retention. They may also be able to transfer these results to other groups, thus enhancing retention of all groups of students.

Institutional changes in both recruitment and retention are required. Recruiters should consider the parent student as a separate category of admission and tailor their admissions offer accordingly. Recruiters, admissions counselors, advisors and others with similar responsibilities should help parent students identify a single possible self that can help positively motivate them and avoid role conflict.

Conversely, counselors and advisors knowledgeable of PST should help custodial single-parent students identify and deal with their true motivations (selves) in pursuing their college degrees in order to help them explore strategies (such as temporarily shifting of custody as a planned strategy) that can prepare and support these students and their families for the difficulties they may encounter. College student services that help support the parent self as primary (such as targeted counseling and advising) should be provided to alleviate the guilt over conflicting selves which can lead to depression and thoughts of dropping out of school. Colleges and universities should reconsider student service offerings such as child care, weighing the cost of such care against retention costs.

As institutions adopt PST in counseling, follow-up studies of single-parent students who have succeeded and are one to two years beyond their degrees could be valuable in providing retrospective evidence of the cognitive-motivation process that led to successful completion of college. Further, it would be interesting to see if participants had adopted new possible selves to motivate them in their professional lives. Once institutions recognize the power that PST holds in improving retention of nontraditional students, there is no reason why this theory could not be used with traditional students as well. This study has provided evidence that PST is robust and useful in explaining and predicting motivation through identification of hoped-for or feared possible selves.

5.5 Future Research

The single-parent nontraditional student segment of higher education populations has been under-researched in relation to the issue of retention of college students. Because census data points to the increase in college populations coming from nontraditional students who are parents, it would seem that studying the cognition and motivation of this segment of college students would be a positive direction to take for research in higher education. Additionally, whatever emerges from this study may be transferable to other segments of the college population and thus become a useful tool for future research.

The theory of possible selves as an explanation for the motivation and persistence of nontraditional, single-parent students will enhance its theoretical contribution to motivation theories as a bridge between cognition and performance. Further support for PST may broaden its application to other disciplines as well as enhance its usefulness in education and industry.

Limitations

There were two major and one minor limitations of this study. One is that only single-parent students who persisted in obtaining their college degrees were studied. It would have been interesting and useful to compare possible selves of these students with non-persisters to see if PST could still explain the cognitive-motivation link to performance. It would also have been useful to have males and different races represented in the study to determine if there were gender or cultural differences affecting possible selves and motivation.

Another major limitation of the study is that because it was a qualitative study using the long interview method, sample size was necessarily small. What this study does not answer is how representative this sample may be of the general population. This study does not allow us to draw a conclusion that a majority of single-parent students will arrive at the same possible self-perceptions or be motivated in the same manner. Since a major objective of this study was simply to give voice to a particular group of students, this limitation was not a critical one. Concluding that PST was useful in explaining motivation of these students however would have been strengthened by a larger sample size.

A minor limitation of the study was that it was temporally constrained and based on participants' perceptions at one point in time. It would have been useful to obtain permissions and contact information to continue the study longitudinally, perhaps even to the point of their own children's matriculations. Perceptions may also have changed after graduation once the participants had time and distance to reflect on the single-parent student phase of their lives.

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