

Equity for Student Parents:
Toward Academic Culture and Policy Change

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Dedication

For all the students juggling academia and caregiving.

Abstract

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This thesis discusses the experiences of undergraduate student parents with university policies and expectations; the factors that affect their experiences; and recommendations to make universities more accessible and inclusive. Data was collected from the websites of seven Nova Scotia universities and through an online asynchronous text-based focus group. The methodological and theoretical framework is based on Intersectionality-based Policy Analysis, Institutional Ethnography, and Ethic of Care. I argue that the effects of systems of oppression are a large factor in student parent experiences and that attempting to address the hardships that many student parents share without attention to structural forces and differential impacts limits the effectiveness of solutions. Recommendations include policy changes to acknowledge the diversity of students and their circumstances, more accessible social activities and events, and an expansion of childcare supports, as well as cultural changes to begin addressing unwritten rules and assumptions.

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Acronyms

BIPOC – Black, Indigenous, or Person of Color

CBU – Cape Breton University

EOC – Ethic of Care

IBPA – Intersectionality-based Policy Analysis

IE – Institutional Ethnography

MSVU – Mount Saint Vincent University

NSCAD – Nova Scotia College of Art and Design

NS – Nova Scotia

StFX – Saint Francis Xavier University

SMU – Saint Mary’s University

UK – United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland)

UREB - University Research Ethics Board

2SLGBTQIAP+ - Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer / Questioning, Intersex,

Asexual/Aromantic/Agender, Pan, Plus (for identities not otherwise listed)

Chapter 1: Introduction

When you think about universities and their students, is there a particular image that pops into your head? A set of characteristics that immediately comes to mind? Are parents included? Not the parents shuttling their grown children off to a new chapter of life, cars full of dorm room essentials – or in the case of these pandemic-influenced times, shopping carts full of tech for social-distanced and online classes. Parents, as in: students who have children; people who are simultaneously working towards a degree and caring for children or teens or who are still closely involved with the lives of their grown offspring; adults from various circumstances, with a variety of identities, who are juggling academia and parenting. If those possibilities were not included in your understanding, then that is a part of the reason this project was necessary, and why more projects like it are still needed.

It is not just the stereotypes that leave student parents out; there is, in general, difficulty combining academia and parenting at any level, although the literature suggests, unsurprisingly, that men tend to avoid many of the downfalls of this combination (Mason and Goulden 2002). While women now typically outnumber men on university campuses, the tables quickly turn the further up the “pipeline” (Wolfinger, Mason, & Goulden 2008) of academia you go. If they do make it through and secure faculty spots, mothers in particular face extra challenges that their male co-workers do not (Armenti, 2004; Mason and Goulden 2002). Trans and nonbinary parents – faculty or students – navigating academia are not even acknowledged in the literature. Likewise,

there is little acknowledgement of the differences in academic parenting experiences that results from racialization, indigeneity, citizenship, sexuality, disability, etc.

This thesis draws data from various documents on university websites as well as from a focus group of 8 student parents; which were collected and analysed within a framework of institutional ethnography and intersectional theory (the details of which will be discussed later). While I originally aimed to bring attention to these gaps by focusing on the experiences of marginalized students who are combining academia and parenting, various factors complicated participant recruitment and the resulting focus group was a relatively¹ privileged group. This is somewhat unsurprising; given that the same factors compounding the challenges and barriers marginalized student parents face likely also make it difficult to be a participant in research. Regardless, those who were able to participate, and the experiences and suggestions they shared, are important. Below I have attempted to bring balance where I could by emphasizing which perspectives and considerations are left out, in the spirit of the intersectional theory and analysis that this project is built on. Some of these are based in identities I share (e.g. neurodivergence and gender non-conformity) and some are not (e.g. I am white and a Canadian citizen). We need more intersectional research, more information about the experiences of those that are excluded or misrepresented in the literature, and more action taken to eliminate the challenges and barriers facing marginalized and non-traditional students (parents among them) across all levels of academia.

¹ I would like to emphasize the word relatively here. There are only 8 participants accounted for in the focus group which is a small group, within which there are some marginalized identities represented. However, people can hold a mix of both marginalized and privileged identities at once, and overall, in this group, there are more privileged identities represented, at least of the categories my demographics survey

Project Overview

This project started as a way to bring attention to those structures and operation gaps that I had, in many ways, experienced myself. This project also approaches the issue with a feminist and intersectional lens, partly because it was making the acquaintance of those theories, at the end of my undergraduate degree, which helped me to begin making sense of my rather isolating experiences as a student parent. They also helped me to recognize that there is a diverse spectrum of experiences typically left out of the mainstream, and they led me to the Women and Gender Studies Masters program in which I have had the opportunity to learn more about these lenses and to do this research.

It would be irresponsible to move forward with these motivations and not be open about them. Reflexivity is an important tenet to feminist research for several reasons including transparency; “the identification of power relations in the research process” (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002: 118); the acknowledgment that what we see, understand, and interpret are extremely dependent on who we are and where we are standing; and accountability for those interpretations (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). It encourages the researcher to critically consider their own position and biases throughout the process. Reflexivity in this particular project means that I was upfront about my motivations from the beginning, that I made it clear to participants that I was also a student parent and had been during my undergraduate program as well (see: appendix G for recruitment materials), that despite this shared experience I acknowledge that I may not understand every aspect of their experiences and must remain vigilant in not misinterpreting their contributions. I also chose not to share my own experiences

during the focus group, so as to avoid over-directing the discussion because of power dynamics (due to my being the researcher as well as having already successfully made it through undergrad as a student parent). Reflexivity also means being up front with you, the reader, about my positionality in relation to this research.

I do not exactly fit the stereotyped image of a university student. I am white and a Canadian citizen, and thus do not face barriers from those identities. I am also neurodivergent, disabled/chronically ill, nonbinary, queer, low income (before, during, and still), the first in my family to attend university, and was older than the average student when I started, which have all come with varying additional challenges to navigating typical academic norms and expectations, though my whiteness has certainly cushioned those challenges. It is also relevant that I was pregnant twice during my undergraduate degree, that I went from being a married student without children to a single parent of two before completing said degree, and that while my age set me apart from the other mostly younger students it was also an unremarkable age to have children².

This project is inextricably linked to and built atop my experiences navigating academia as a ‘non-traditional’ student and clearly was always a deeply personal endeavour. It was also clearly necessary for beginning to address substantial gaps in the literature regarding the experiences of parents, like me and unlike me, studying at the undergraduate level and for identifying changes to policies that could help make universities more accessible, equitable, and inclusive for everyone. I am hopeful that this is possible as long as we are careful in building new policies and changing existing

² By this I mean that I did not face stigma about being too young to have children, which I imagine adds a unique cast to the experiences of younger student parents.

academic cultural norms and expectations in ways that take into account the experiences of the many diverse people within this demographic, and not just those student parents with the most societal privilege (and perhaps the most time to participate in studies). While I have not included as many diverse participants and their possibly different student parent experiences as I would have liked in this project, I can still point out some of those gaps so as to help direct future research.

Many universities have created some resources for faculty with children, which I will discuss more in the next section. These resources for faculty parents have not flowed back down to offer much in the way of help to undergraduate student parents. Universities widening their approach to these resources and supports and refocusing so as to actually take parents at the entry levels of academia (i.e. students) into account as well as those parents nearer the top offers more promise. In other words, working towards more equitable access at the undergraduate level could be enough reason on its own to pursue research into the link between student parent experiences and the institutional policies that they must contend with. There are other reasons too. Working to fix the “care-less” (Lynch 2010: 57) academic atmosphere at the undergraduate level could feasibly send positive reverberations up the “pipeline” (Wolfinger, Mason, & Goulden 2008) as well, perhaps patching up some of the “leaks” (Wolfinger, Mason, & Goulden 2008) along the way. Careless here refers to the historical and ongoing “individualized capitalist” culture within academia “marked by increasing egocentrism, [...] and a declining sense of responsibility for others, particularly for students” (Lynch 2010: 57), which Lynch argues is “care-less” (2010) because it is set up to prioritize the advancement of those without caring responsibilities and those with the resources to pass

their responsibilities onto someone else (such as a wife). The word does double duty by also referring subtly to the way institutions more generally do not care about the ways our individual situations do not fit their structures and expect us to cope with those difficulties individually and privately, but we will discuss that more later. Regardless, if we approach changes with an acknowledgment of nuance and an intersectional lens and framework, it could be good for all parents, not just those from one demographic or one level of education. Indeed it could and should help students from a variety of circumstances, not just parents. Additionally, need it be said that undergraduate student parents simply deserve to have their experiences heard and validated?

Project Context and Background

Before I lay out the details for this project, I want to briefly situate it within the larger context of who has faced and still faces exclusions, barriers, and challenges to working or studying in academia. For this I will start by discussing faculty demographics for Canadian universities and what has been attempted thus far to address those gaps. This will bring us more specifically to what resources have been added thus far for faculty who are parents and how this has somewhat also helped graduate student parents, but largely overlooked undergraduate student parents. A literature review focused on student parents will follow in chapter 2, after which there will be more specifics about this project in particular.

While describing “[s]trategies for survival” for othered³ faculty members in academia, Monture asserts that “[t]he ‘old (white) boys club’ [academic structures] have not been dismantled despite women challenging their existence” (2010: 31). She, alongside other othered academics such as Malinda S. Smith (2010), have argued convincingly that increased numbers of women in universities, and increased attention to gendered disparities and mistreatments are not enough to address the real breadth of exclusion within the academy. Census and survey data compiled by Universities Canada (n.d.a & n.d.b) comparing the difference between 2006 and 2016 concurs with Wolfinger, Mason, and Goulden’s (2008) description of the gendered “leaky pipeline” – which describes the way the percentage of women faculty declines, or leaks, the further up you go in the academic position hierarchy – and shows similar trends for racialized and Indigenous academics. The disparities in representation for racialized, Indigenous, and disabled⁴ individuals are just as distressing, although more often overlooked. Looking solely at full time faculty in 2016, women made up 39.6% (up 6% from 2006) as opposed to the stated 51%⁵ of the Canadian population (Universities Canada n.d.b). Disabled faculty were at 22% in 2017 (with no comparative data from 2006), which is

³ Othered in this sense refers to demographics that fall outside of the one used as the normative base for assumptions and expectations within policies and institutional culture: that is to say that white men are typically the majority in academia and anyone who is not a white man is often made to feel “other”. If one is “other” they are more likely to be affected by practices that remind them of the ways their reality is mismatched to or not represented within the institutional context, which can result in additional stress, among other challenges. Monture writes of this in regards to racialized and Indigenous faculty, for example (2010).

⁴ This document uses identity first language, as it is the language preferred by the majority of disabled people (see: Liebowitz 2015). Person first language is more commonly used outside of the disability community because “[t]he idea is to *See the person first* or *See the person – not the disability!*” ([sic] Liebowitz 2015). However, disabled advocates argue that person first phrasing “is based on the idea that disability is something negative, something that you shouldn’t want to see” (Liebowitz 2015), that it paints disabilities as accessories rather than the “integrated” (Liebowitz 2015) reality, and that it reinforces the medical model of disability over the social model (i.e. that the flaws lie within the individual and their disability, rather than the way society is set up to exclude.)

⁵ A nonbinary option on the census is new in 2021, thus this older 51% stat does not take nonbinary people into account.

representative of the Canadian population; however, there is an obvious disjuncture with the numbers of disabled faculty and the numbers of disabled graduate students⁶, which are only at 5% (Universities Canada n.d.b). The much higher numbers of disabled faculty over disabled graduate students suggests that we should also be asking specifically how many faculty are hired with a disability, as a portion of the 22% have likely acquired their disability (e.g. from aging, illness, accidents, etc.) after establishing themselves, which makes a difference when trying to determine the extent of systemic discrimination in hiring. Racialized individuals accounted for 21.1% (up between⁷ 4% and 6.5% from 2006) of academic full time faculty, as opposed to 22% of the Canadian population (Universities Canada n.d.a & n.d.b). This is artificially comforting, as Malinda Smith (2019) points out, because the data lumps many different racialized groups together and camouflages the continued insidiousness of racism and its sibling colourism. According to Brathwaite, “[c]olourism is discrimination against dark-skinned people” which “is an issue across many races” (2021). The lack of detailed data regarding race, then, hides which communities and skin tones are still being excluded disproportionately. Similar consideration for details about disability inclusion rates and experiences would also be beneficial. Lastly, Indigenous peoples accounted for just 1.4% (up half a percentage point from 2006) of full time faculty, as opposed to 5% of the Canadian population (Universities Canada n.d.b). In a 2019 presentation, Malinda Smith pointed out that while these numbers do show improvement, it is a very small amount, that has taken a long time to grow, and is most concentrated on improving the representation of white women

⁶ Lack of or limited accessibility programs are likely part of the reason for such low numbers of disabled graduate students.

⁷ When Universities Canada updated their statistics, there was a big change in the 2006 percentage of racialized faculty. The older statistics page listed 2006 racialized faculty at 17% (Universities Canada n.d.a) while the newer page listed the same category and year as 14.5% (Universities Canada n.d.b).

through the focus on gender equity that has overshadowed the need for a more intersectional commitment to equity policies. Smith (2019) also pointed out that the issue of slow change cannot be blamed on a lack of qualified individuals as the statistics clearly show that – excepting disabled people⁸ and indigenous people⁹ – there are much larger enrolment percentages of women and “visible minorities / racialized groups” represented in the student populations at both undergraduate and graduate levels (Universities Canada n.d.a & n.d.b).

Many universities have or are attempting to address inequities in their faculty representation, for instance by designating spots for racialized and Indigenous faculty hires (Henry et al. 2017; Smith 2010; Zoledziowski 2019). Other policies present at Canadian universities that are meant to address related issues include having mechanisms for reporting discrimination and harassment, providing advice on what to do when trouble arises, and facilitating workshops to spread “increased understanding and acceptance of those who are ‘different’” (Dua and Bhanji 2017: 182). The types of initiatives and the extent to which they are utilized are “unevenly developed in [Canadian] higher education” (Dua and Bhanji, 2017), as well as underfunded and understaffed. Their results are also progressing with incredible lethargy, as shown by the Universities Canada (n.d.a & n.d.b) stats explicated above. They have also been criticized for being too superficial – in that simply the presence of the aforementioned mechanisms

⁸ Statistics for disabled students show a representative number enroll in undergraduate programs (22%) however the number drops very low for graduate student enrolment (6%), and the information is not available for “doctorate holders” (Universities Canada, n.d.b). A caveat feels necessary here as a reminder that this is likely due more to limited accessibility of student programs for disabled people, and is not evidence that the disabled population is not capable of flourishing in academia with the right supports in place and the barriers discarded.

⁹ Indigenous undergraduate enrollment is 3%, graduate enrollment 4%, and “doctorate holders” only 1% versus 5% of the general population (Universities Canada, n.d.b) and again points to the need for the right supports to increase that enrollment number.

for addressing racialized issues is too-often used as an excuse for not doing more – among other problems (Henry et al. 2017; Smith 2010; Zoledziowski 2019). Dua and Bhanji (2017) also note that most of the policies and the offices charged with looking after discrimination issues are focused on faculty, often leaving students with no central place to go to for help in this regard.

Much like the above described discrimination policies, those directed at parents within academia also often leave student considerations out while focusing on faculty, are often underfunded and underemployed (such as in the case for limited childcare spaces), and have been critiqued as superficial. Universities have attempted to address the gendered inequities of parenthood with some specific policies including more flexible tenure-track regulations, parental leave policies, and sometimes on-campus childcare centres, even though they often fall short of addressing the full scope of needs (Armenti 2004; Wolfinger et al. 2008; Kuperberg 2008; Sallee 2013).

The attempts at equalizing the academic work environment for faculty who are parents have somewhat trickled down to graduate students. Undergraduate student parents, however, have seen the least support (Draper 2015; Kuperberg 2008). Universities often present the typical (or traditional) undergraduate student as young, childless, white, middle/upper class, and non-disabled. This creates difficulties for students whose identities do not fit that mould (Draper 2015; Moreau 2016; Van Rhijn, Lero, and Burke 2016). It seems to me that simply labeling certain groups as ‘non-traditional’ may contribute to the impression that our numbers are too small to warrant changes to make the academic system more inclusive, though given the variety of demographics and situations that may fall into this category it is unlikely our numbers are

actually so insignificant. From my perspective, even if changes would only address harms done to relatively small groups of people, it would still be important. Regardless, there are growing numbers of non-traditional students, student parents included, who show admirable resilience in reckoning with a system not designed with their needs in mind (Draper 2015; Moreau 2016); they should not have to be so resilient.

As for the actual numbers and demographics, in Canada alone enrolment by undergraduate student parents saw a 55% increase from 1976 to 2005 (Van Rhijn, Quosai, and Lero 2011). There is some data on the age, income, marital status, and binary gender “Profile of Undergraduate Student Parents in Canada” (see: Van Rhijn, Quosai, and Lero 2011). There is a lot of data in Van Rhijn, Quosai, and Lero (2011), which compares percentages of student parents from 1976 to 2005, but I will relay some key points in relation to age, income, marital status, and binary gender here. Van Rhijn, Quosai, and Lero note that “90% of all non-parent students were in the 15-to-29-year-old age category” as opposed to the “30 to 44 years old” category “accounting for approximately 65% of all student parents” (2011: 67). They note that comparing non-parents to parents for income levels presented some problems, but overall student parents actually had higher average family and individual income levels (Van Rhijn, Quosai, and Lero 2011). Unsurprisingly, student parents (both men and women) were more likely to be partnered than to be single; “married female student parents” accounted for the largest proportion of student parents, with “single male student parents” accounting for the smallest (Van Rhijn, Quosai, and Lero 2011: 69-70). Van Rhijn, Quosai, and Lero also note that “[f]emale student parents represented between 62% and 71% of all student parents from the mid-1980s up until 2005” (2011: 68).

While more recent data on student parents is needed, there is a larger dearth of information in regards to how race, disability, neurodiversity, sexuality, gender outside of men and women, and citizenship are represented within the student parent population – a worthy topic for another research project. There is also an absence of statistics on the percentage of racialized university students as a whole (McDonald and Ward 2017). Ironically, a report by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada that gives an overview of the demographic trends in student enrolment includes many pictures of racialized students, but completely lacks any written or statistical references to this demographic – a rather superficial homage to diversity. This gap in statistical identity data has generally been held in place by the argument that its collection (along with that of other protected identity variables such as sexual orientation) is a discriminatory act in itself under human rights laws and that apparently the benefit of having the data would not outweigh the “effort involved in getting new data” (Usher 2017). However, information has and continues to be gathered in regards to other protected identities, and racialized students, faculty, and human rights advocates, and even the 2017 “chief commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission” (McDonald and Ward) have been vocal in support of the necessity of the data for “help[ing] universities address racial discrimination” (McDonald and Ward 2017).

Yet, despite the challenges and barriers for all non-traditional students, including student parents, there have been notable increases in the latter’s enrolment, as noted above (Van Rhijn, Quosai, and Lero 2011). Clear information about how many student parents hold various and intersecting marginalized identities is still lacking and much needed. I will make the argument that it is past time for universities to acknowledge and

fix many gaps in their structure, operations, and policies, including the unwritten assumptions and expectations underlying it all.

This chapter introduced you to the subject and inspiration, as well as the context and background for this project. The following chapter will discuss the existing literature about student parents. Chapter 3 lays out the research questions, methods, methodology, and theory that were used to build the project. Chapter 4 covers the results of data gathering, including a summary of university texts,¹⁰ participant demographics for this project, the main themes of the focus group discussions, and a short reflexive account of my experiences as a student parent. The discussion of these results and how they fit within existing literature and theory are in chapter 5. Finally, chapter 6 offers a brief summary of this project and its findings, along with its contributions, limitations, and recommendations for further research.

¹⁰ “Texts” refers to the documents that were available on the universities public websites, which mentioned student parents. This included some policy documents, as well as press releases, blogs, event listing, support listings, etc.

Chapter 2: Literature review

The research on student parents within academia is sparse, particularly when it comes to those enrolled at the undergraduate level, although it has been growing over the last few years¹¹. Canadian specific research on that topic is particularly lacking, mainly produced by one author, but international research is only slightly more substantial. Research on faculty who are parents has been accumulating a bit longer, and thus has more insight to offer, although it too falls victim to a lack of intersectional attention. This narrow representation of demographics and circumstances in the literature pairs with an individualized focus on the types of problems and solutions considered for student parents, although there are some researchers who have taken a more structural approach.

A Lack of Intersectional Analysis

For faculty, parenting responsibilities have been shown to more negatively affect women than men (Mason and Goulden 2002). Perhaps partly because of that, more male faculty have children than do female faculty; indeed, in 2002, male faculty with children were the demographic most likely to get tenure (Sallee 2013; Mason & Goulden 2002). The mothers among faculty were, however, the least likely to obtain tenure, particularly those who had children early in their post-doctorate careers (Mason and Goulden 2002). Mason and Goulden (2002) found that having babies later into careers can help more women reach tenure, and they suggest several ways that universities can implement policies to even out the playing field a little more.

¹¹ The amount of articles that I could find and access on (or including) undergraduate student parents has increased from 10 to 15 articles in the years since I started this thesis. Most of these ‘new’ articles have included more acknowledgment of structural factors.

Unfortunately, this research does not consider the experiences of students with children in their research, and thus misses the possibility that having babies earlier could also help faculty mothers avoid the pitfalls of early career babies. In fact, in a follow up study, Wolfinger, Mason, and Goulden analyzed faculty demographic data and found that while babies did have negative effects on their mother's academic careers in terms of "getting a tenure-track job" (2008: 394), children older than 6 had "no negative effect" (2008: 395).¹² Although it seems likely that this would be related to the enrollment of children older than 6 in school, which would alleviate some need for childcare during work hours, the possibility is not mentioned or discussed by Wolfinger, Mason, and Goulden (2008). They hypothesized that the different effects correlated with children's ages could be because those particular women were "predisposed to reconcile work and family" since they were able to successfully combine postgraduate work and having children (Wolfinger, Mason, and Goulden 2008: 400). Although Wolfinger, Mason, and Goulden (2008) acknowledge, in their introduction, the structural forces that shape the ability of women to combine academia and parenting, their focus after that holds to the individual effects and consequences of having children.

Under an intersectional lens, Wolfinger, Mason, and Goulden's (2008) suggestion that some women were "predisposed" to combining academia and parenting successfully begs the question of what other differences characterized the women in their study. Were they "predisposed" to make it work because they had more privileges, i.e. access to

¹² This differed for achievement of tenure, for which women with older children had "16% greater odds of getting tenure in comparison to their counterparts without children" (Wolfinger, Mason, and Goulden 2008: 396); no effect was found from younger children at the point of achieving tenure. They state that although women were achieving tenure less than men, it seemed to be "for reasons unrelated to family formation" (Wolfinger, Mason, and Goulden 2008: 396), which suggests sexism at play beyond the gendered expectations of women taking on more of the work of parenting.

resources and supports? With that in mind, we also need to talk about how little attention the current literature pays to the identity variables of student parents beyond gender, which is even then represented in rather narrow terms, focusing mainly on those identified as women and mothers. There is little research into the student experience for fathers, and a complete absence of trans and nonbinary parents from the literature. Inclusion and consideration of other variables such as race, income level, neurodiversity, disability/chronic illness, sexual orientation, relationship/marital status, age, citizenship, or mental health conditions are also low, though some of these are gaining more attention (e.g. Hispanic undergraduate student parents in Cho, Roy, and Dayne 2021 or international student parents in graduate programs in Brooks 2015). All of these identity variables can make individuals more vulnerable to the effects of systems of oppression that can limit access to resources and supports, especially when one holds multiple marginalized identities. Although their work was with faculty caregivers¹³, Moreau and Robertson also pointed out the diversity gap when they found a “need for greater visibility and recognition of caring responsibilities in academia, *especially in terms of their diverse identities*” (2019: 1, emphasis added).

Given that most student parents tend to be mothers, “it is not surprising” (Cho, Roy, and Dayne 2021) that mothers have been centered in research. Though considering this focus on mothers extends to literature about faculty and parenting, there seems to be other factors at play as well, since more faculty are fathers (Sallee 2013; Mason & Goulden 2002). The lower number of faculty who are mothers suggests that systemic sexism in academia as well as in the division of childcare and raising responsibilities in

¹³ They included “academics with a diverse range of caring responsibilities” (Moreau and Robertson 2019:164), not just parents.

cisheteronormative¹⁴ relationships is another reason for the focus on mothers (Sallee 2013; Wolfinger, Mason, and Goulden's 2008). Regardless – and because we cannot build a full picture without all the pieces – I think it still pertinent to note that research including fathers is particularly hard to find at the student level and that when student fathers were included in the studies on undergraduate student parents, it was often in much lower numbers than student mothers, making quantitative comparisons troublesome and limited (Brooks 2012 & 2014; Estes 2011; Van Rhijn 2011). Trans and nonbinary student parents were not represented or even referred to in the literature – perhaps also because there are less of us, and likely also because of systemic transphobia, i.e. an unacknowledged assumption of binary and essentialist understandings of gender as the norm. A similar absence is true for any non-cisheteronormative family formations. For example, while Brooks (2012) often opts for the more gender-neutral term “partner” throughout her article, there is no demographic data presented on how many of the participants were heterosexual couples or otherwise. No mentions of queer relationships or 2SLGBTQIAP+¹⁵ identities were present at all, and overall cisheteronormativity seemed to be presumed.

A study by Scharp et al. (2021) was an exception to fathers as a minority within undergraduate student parent research, as their study included a majority of male participants (25 out of 40). They looked at the ways that student and parent roles intersected in relation to the ways that uncertainty was experienced and managed

¹⁴ Cisheteronormative rather than heterosexual because the key point is not the parent's sexuality but the expectations attached to that particular family formulation (i.e. gender roles and the sexist division of labour that puts more responsibilities on mothers).

¹⁵ 2SLGBTQIAP+ stands for Two Spirit, lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual/aromantic/agender, pan, plus any non-heteronormative sexual, romantic, and/or gender identities not otherwise specified in the acronym.

individually (Scharp et al. 2021). Although using a thread of intersectional theory, they acknowledged that their “interests diverge from identifying the institutionalized power structures that oppress certain populations to a more interpretive acknowledgment that it is not sufficient to see the concerns of [undergraduate student parents] as additive” (Scharp et al. 2021: 1062). Scharp et al. discuss the “anticipated uncertainties” (2021: 1068) inherent in transitioning to new roles such as being a student, those that are “exacerbated uncertainties” (2021: 1068) wherein parenting compounded the “student related uncertainties” (2021: 1068), and “intersectional uncertainties ... that only emerged because [undergraduate student parents] were both student and parents” (2021: 1069). While overall they had an individualized focus on coping strategies, they also identified seeking “tangible support” (Scharp et al. 2021: 1070) as the strategy their participants discussed the most, including such factors as “government assistance, getting help with childcare, or financial support” (Scharp et al. 2021: 1071). Scharp et al. also suggest that “[i]n the future, researchers should interrogate the relationship between privilege and uncertainty” (2021: 1079) to account for the differential effects of access to resources. Although they did not specifically discuss the gendered differences between the parents in their study, they do argue that their “sample does give fathers a voice” (Scharp et al. 2021: 1079) in the literature, which is interesting because theirs seems to echo much of the struggles and themes in the rest of the, generally mother-focused, student parent literature.

An Individual Focus

In addition to the minimal research into student parenting experiences and the minimal intersectional attention, the literature available about undergraduate student parents largely focuses on individual feelings and solutions, while simultaneously minimizing the necessity of policy change and institutional supports in equalizing access and breaking down barriers. The article by Scharp et al. (2021) discussed above is one example of this, though they do acknowledge some structural factors.

Canadian research on the undergraduate student parent demographic seems to originate from a single author (with various co-authors): Van Rhijn. Like Van Rhijn's dissertation (2012) and articles (2014 and 2016) delving into the topics of motivation and self-efficacy, much of the literature originating from the United Kingdom (see Brooks 2012 & 2014; Moreau 2016; Moreau and Kerner 2015), the United States (see Estes 2011; Scharp and Hall 2019; and Scharp et al. 2021), Australia, and Iran (see: Moghandam et al. 2017) are similarly focused on the individual level of cause and consequence in their exploration of student parents' experiences. While many of the studies allude to and occasionally specify the need to address systemic and structural issues that, regardless of individual navigation skills and coping practices, continue to 'other' student parents – particularly those who also hold marginalized identities – they rarely offer specific suggestions for institutional scale change (Moreau 2016).

One exception to this is a recent study by Cho, Roy, and Dayne who – while still focusing on feelings per se in terms of stress, anxiety, and depression and the role these play in “student retention and degree completion” (2021: n.p. para 21) – point out and discuss how some demographic/identity factors and structural supports related in their

results. Their study surveyed student parents at a 4 year “large, Hispanic-serving higher education institution” (Cho, Roy, and Dayne 2021: n.p. para 1) in the United States. They compared Hispanic respondents to non-Hispanic and while their analysis did not show a relationship between “anxiety and depression levels” (Cho, Roy, and Dayne 2021: n.p. para 1) and ethnicity, they did find that Hispanic student parents had overall higher rates of “perceived challenges” [e.g. “time to study..., cost..., [and] isolation” (Cho, Roy, and Dayne 2021: n.p. para 28)] than non-Hispanic ones (Cho, Roy, and Dayne 2021). They suggest more research is needed, particularly that can separate the effects of race versus ethnicity (Cho, Roy, and Dayne 2021). Cho, Roy, and Dayne found a lot of overlap between factors and their effects on mental health, and have thus suggested that “it is likely that the responsibility of caring for a dependent child while engaging in studies can pose shared challenges and that it would create a universal experience for student–parents” (2021: n.p. para 35). With the suggestion of a “universal experience” they seem to be highlighting the needs shared by the majority of the student parents in their study as a way to support their call for more structural supports. For example, they have recommended universities invest in more supports such as “making campuses more family friendly ... to alleviate the social isolation”, “access to resources, such as counseling services and parenting groups”, and more financial supports (Cho, Roy, and Dayne 2021: n.p. para 36 – 39). However, they have also suggested that there are “unique needs of Hispanic student–parents” (Cho, Roy, and Dayne 2021: n.p. para 39) which should also be addressed.

The structural quality of Cho, Roy, and Dayne’s recommendations is more close to those suggested in the faculty literature, which is more likely to suggest policy changes

to combat the gendered differences in combining academia and parenting, rather than thrusting the responsibility for adjustment back toward the individual, as is the case with much student parent research. Sallee (2013), whose study also looked at faculty and did not include students, took a policy centred approach to mitigating the effects of children on faculty careers. Sallee (2013) contends that since fathers actually make up more of the numbers of parenting academics, that focusing on making policies to ensure that the universities are actively “father-friendly” – rather than that the fathers are ‘university-friendly’ by offloading their share of care responsibilities to their partners – could help establish a more foundational cultural shift to a more even split in gendered parenting responsibilities. Sallee explains that this may include tenure clock extensions that are open to any gender and policies that take many different situations into account (such as adoption), but must be paired with active support from administration to encourage a cultural shift, such as having “a staff member who is solely dedicated to promoting work/life issues” (2013: 386). This represents an institutional solution rather than an individual one on which student studies are overwhelmingly focused.

Generally, however, the studies that branched out slightly from the more common focus on mothers, and included fathers, maintained the trend of focusing on the individual effects and coping strategies. Differences noted between fathers and mothers¹⁶ included the latter dealing with much more guilt about parent as well as student obligations, while the former rarely professed guilt (Brooks 2014). This was, as one would expect, shown to have some relationship with the social expectations of mothers, which Brooks (2014) shows also differs between countries. Brooks (2014) found that mothers in the United Kingdom (UK) felt guilt at being in school as they would have

¹⁶ Study included undergraduate and post graduates, with only half as much of the former.

likely otherwise been at home with their children full time. On the other hand, mothers in Denmark felt less guilt from being in school, as they would have likely otherwise been working rather than home with their children full time (Brooks 2014). This suggests that, (a) mothers are still expected to bear more of the childrearing responsibilities in the UK, where stay at home mothers are the ideal, and (b) that nation-wide affordable childcare and more equal expectations of the gendered division of labor, such as in Denmark, can create real positive implications (Brooks 2014). The article's focus was on the individualized guilt (or lack thereof) that student parents felt, and while the data that Brooks (2014) lays out suggests structural reasons for these experiences, this connection is not deeply explored in the article.

In another of Brook's articles, she looks at how participants balanced student versus parent identities, elaborating on the different strategies that mothers versus fathers used to find time to study in both the UK and Denmark. While fathers in the UK preferred to keep separate from their family at the university until all work was complete, the mothers more often multi-tasked, fitting work in around childcare and household chores (Brooks 2012). This meant that, in the UK at least, while mothers often adjusted their commitments and workload around a spouse/student father, the opposite was not true for the male partners of student mothers (Brooks 2012). However, that polarizing difference was much less a problem in Denmark, where the division of caring responsibilities is expected to be more equal (Brooks 2012). Brooks work suggests that there is a structural element to the issues although it is not the focus of the article. She only briefly links the "considerable national variation" and "institutional variation"¹⁷ (2012: 456-457) to structural forces such as gender role expectations and income levels,

¹⁷ between older (more established) and newer universities in each country.

focusing instead on the individual ramifications for how “time and space for study is negotiated within familial relationships” (2012:457). Additionally, while Brooks lists 8 single parents out of 68 total in the respondent “characteristics” (2012: 446) table, there is no mention of how they compared to the paired student parents, and in general the article assumes a two parent, cis-heteronormative family formation.

Estes (2011) found that all the parents she interviewed, mothers and fathers alike, expressed similar expectations for how much they felt they should be involved with their children, despite being students as well. She alludes to the fact that some of this may be discourse used to frame their identities as good parents and good students (and thus potentially not reflecting actual behavior) which developed through their interviews (Estes 2011). She elaborates on how students felt the need to redefine themselves against greater forces painting them as both bad students and bad parents for attempting to combine the two roles (Estes 2011). However, Estes’ (2011) focus remains on the individual ways of coping (building a new identity as good at both, through the way they talked about childcare for instance), and less so on why these assumptions persist, even with universities attempting to seem more inclusive from the outside.

Scharp and Hall carried similar themes, in that their study regarding “the relationship between undergraduate student parent social support-seeking factors, stress, and somatic symptoms” (2019: 54) focused on the individual ramifications of their findings, ignoring the structural factors that are also suggested. They found that student parent’s physical symptoms such as headaches were related to the stress of being student parents and that it was also stressful to seek supports for managing their conflicting roles of student and parent (Scharp and Hall 2019). Among the reasons listed for experiencing

stress while seeking support they have listed: stigma and “fear [of] negative evaluation”, “disclosure indiscretions”, and “perceived support availability” (Scharp and Hall 2019: 56-57). These could be interpreted with both individual and structural implications. However, their recommendations are limited to individual rather than structural suggestions such as that student parents’ social networks should offer more support proactively and that universities should offer programs for student parents to practice stress relief strategies such as yoga (Scharp and Hall 2019). They have, however, also suggested that “normalizing the challenges of being a [undergraduate student parent] might help students understand that the stressors and obstacles they are facing are expected, and seeking help is necessary, thereby reducing the costs they perceive in asking for help” (Scharp and Hall 2019: 61). This is perhaps somewhat of a structural approach, however it begs the questions: is this struggle not already normalized; and if not, how much should we be normalizing the difficulty versus finding tangible ways to mitigate and eliminate the struggles, normalizing instead the inclusion of various life circumstances?

Toward a Structural Focus

While most studies have taken an individualizing stance on student parents’ experiences and needs, more are including some analysis and recommendations that are more structural in nature. A study about the experiences of Iranian student mothers, including both undergraduate and graduate students, alludes to structural forces more than much of the above discussed literature. They even state that “[m]yths, expectations, and ideals available in the campus culture can influence” (Moghandam et al. 2017: 1) the

role strain that student mothers experience and that “[t]he management of maternal and family affairs by female students *in universities where motherhood is not supported is a challenge*” (emphasis added, Moghandam et al. 2017: 1). While they do not make specific or direct suggestions for change to the universities and the culture of academia, they opt instead for broader suggestions such as that “policy makers” should tackle the assumption “that motherhood and educational responsibilities” (Moghandam et al. 2017: 1) are incompatible, and that “the structure of universities should be family friendly” (Moghandam et al. 2017: 9). While the article includes many references to experiences that could be understood as related to social forces of sexism and binary gender roles, the idea of breaking down these particular barriers is not broached directly. Rather, they split from the structural suggestions otherwise made, and instead individualize the responsibility for challenging sexism by suggesting that mothers could be taught more “skills to play [and manage the combination of] these roles” (Moghandam et al. 2017: 9).

Another study diverging from the individual focus is that from Moreau (2016), which focuses on the structural limitations, barriers, and challenges that the university imposes on student parents. Moreau laments that “extant research concentrates mostly on the experiential level – often alluding to policies, yet rarely focusing on their role in compounding or easing the issues experienced by this group” (2016: abstract). Moreau (2016) discusses the ways that policies can ‘other’ student parents, for example by sometimes specifically banning children from key campus areas, sneakily enforcing the idea that the parents themselves do not belong. For the most part, though, Moreau (2016) does not get specific about which rules, expectations, and policies are in need of changes; instead broadly categorizing the types of policy strategies that the universities had for

dealing with student parents. Moreau labels these categories as (1) “‘universal’ or ‘careblind’”, (2) “‘targeted’”, and (3) “‘mainstreaming’” (2016: n.p.), the first two of which are critiqued heavily. Moreau describes the first category, “‘universal’ or ‘careblind’”, as “typified by a minimal policy intervention”, “a prevailing discourse of invisibility”, a lack of “policy ... in the form of a specific provision or of the mainstreaming of care in generic policies”, and only “rare” specific references of student parents, such as in an exception for “extenuating circumstances” (2016: n.p.). The second category, “‘targeted’” is described as having “some specific provision[s]” and specific references to and for the demographic, some on campus childcare, “a means-tested grant to support students with childcare, a school holiday play scheme, and a toy loan service” (Moreau 2016: n.p.). The third category, mainstreaming, Moreau identifies as having the most potential to help, noting that “the mainstreaming of care [...] approach [...] tackles the cultures and structures of institutions” (2016: 918). These universities had much more supports relative to the other two categories, including more childcare options, “spaces ... dedicated to student parents”, “an equality adviser” who could advocate for policy inclusion and “also provided one-to-one support”, as well as “two comprehensive sets of guidelines for students with dependants and for staff dealing with this group” (Moreau 2016: n.p.) which covered an array of relevant topics such as accessing supports and adjustments. Moreau’s third category, “‘mainstreaming’” (2016: n.p.), is reminiscent of Sallee’s (2013) suggestion of academic cultural change towards father-friendly universities, although broader. Moreau’s article uses data gathered from the experiences of undergraduate and graduate student parents at “ten English universities, in various regions and with diverse statuses” (2016: n.p.), along with information about the policies

listed on the university websites. It does not note how many of the participants were undergraduates, or if their experience differed from that of the postgraduates. Moreau (2016) attempts to draw attention to intersectional concerns in regards to the data and the repercussions of the policies for racialized and otherwise othered student parents, however does admit that there was trouble recruiting enough diverse participants (i.e. not white women) to make comparisons possible. Moreau does not get specific about the ways that the experiences of student parents with otherwise marginalized identities might differ.

While Moreau focused on the categorization of university policies, Lindsay and Gillum (2019) focused on how their participants experienced their time as student mothers. They discuss many structural factors throughout the article, including noting that “student parents believed that campus policies were created with the traditional student in mind” (Lindsay and Gillum 2019: n.p.). It is an interesting twist that while they have maintained much more of a focus towards structural factors and suggestions for improvement for student mothers than some of the previously discussed literature, they have also defined this as student mother’s wanting “the University to consider them as individuals” (Lindsay and Gillum 2019: n.p.), by which they seem to mean that they wish for the university to acknowledge their difference from typical students. This is very different from the individualization of responsibilities that many other studies support through their overwhelming focus on individual level feelings and coping mechanisms.

Most of the articles discussed or alluded to, in various ways, the effects of both agency (the individual feelings and responses) and structure (the universities’ influence and presence or lack of supports) in navigating the often-conflicting roles and demands of

student parents. Despite this, none have utilized a framework that explicitly ties the student parent standpoint to the institutional context so as to locate the gaps and divergences between them.¹⁸ This is a space that I have tried to begin filling, along with drawing attention to intersectional concerns. I elaborate more on this project and what one can expect from the rest of this paper next.

¹⁸ Moreau's (2016) comes close, and the methodology and framework resembles IE in several ways, but it is never mentioned specifically. Lindsay and Gillum (2019) come close in terms of the topics discussed, however they utilized interviews only and did not examine the policies/texts of the universities their participants were attending.

Chapter 3: Methodology, Theory, and Methods

For this research I focused on gathering data about the connections between institutional policies and the experiences of what I had hoped could be a diverse group of student parents¹⁹, in order to identify necessary changes within academia. This was done through a methodological and theoretical framework combining aspects of institutional ethnography (IE)²⁰, feminist and intersectional theory, and intersectionality-based policy analysis (IBPA) using an online focus group as well as document/policy analysis for data gathering. Data was coded and sorted by hand and analyzed thematically, with attention to the research questions and intersectional concerns, for commonalities and differences and evidence of systems of oppression among participants' experiences and the policies and expectations broadcast through each universities' website. Suggestions for change come directly from participants' contributions, though I have also built on them with my experience and with that provided by the existing literature and the above-mentioned theoretical frameworks. Ethic of care (EOC) theory is suggested as a direction for necessary change to the currently "care-less" (Lynch 2010: 57) academic culture. The research questions that guided this project were as follows: (1) what can an intersectional lens reveal about the differences in experiences of, challenges of/to, and barriers to combining academia and parenting? (2) What do participants identify as the institutional factors (university and government policies, non-university structures and supports) most

¹⁹ I had hoped to include more diversity in participants than other projects have; however, this proved difficult and ultimately resulted in a group very like those in the existing literature. This will be discussed in more depth in the methods, results, and discussion chapters.

²⁰ I am not the only one with personal ties to this research. Sociologist Dorothy Smith, who developed Institutional Ethnography (IE) beginning in the 1980s, gathered the ideas that would become IE after personally experiencing the disjuncture of combining academia and parenting (Devault, 2006; Smith 1987). It seems only too fitting that while its framework matches this project, so does its origins.

salient to their experience combining academia and parenting? And (3) what can be done to address policy gaps so as to improve student parent experiences?

The answers that I have come to, and will explicate in the rest of this thesis, can be summed up as follows:

(1) Intersectionality

An intersectional feminist lens highlights connections among and between the literature, the university websites, and the experiences of focus group participants that fit patterns of oppression (such as from white supremacy, sexism, cisheteronormativity, ableism, and ageism) from wider Canadian society, which may contribute to and exacerbate the effects of untended differences, challenges, and barriers within academia. This is visible in the literature regarding the experiences of those combining academia and parenting (from students to faculty), the policies and expectations communicated through Nova Scotia university websites, and through the experiences of the Nova Scotia undergraduate student parents who participated in this research. More specifically, there are expectations and assumptions normalized by sexism, cisheteronormativity, ableism, white supremacy, etc.; a reluctance to discuss difference; a pattern of universalizing privileged perspectives that leaves many people out; and a focus on individual responsibility for coping that also works to shift attention away from the need for structural and systemic change.

(2) Sameness and Difference

Participants identified several factors salient to their experiences combining academia and parenting, including childcare, finances, family support, and various policies (or the lack of them). There are many similarities across circumstances as well as important

differences in the everyday effects of combining student and caregiver roles. Because of systems of oppression, many of these similarities and differences echo those in the existing student parent literature, and concerns of parents outside academia as well as non-parent students within academia.

(3) Policy and Culture

Participants identified eight areas where gaps in policies should be addressed to improve their experiences as student parents, including:

- expanding childcare offerings,
- making extracurricular activities more accessible,
- providing more financial supports.

While these are valid steps, I am suggesting that the larger picture also supports and necessitates a move towards more thorough cultural change within Academia²¹ so as to mitigate unforeseen and unwanted consequences of policy changes directed at specific groups²² (such as student parents), leave room for the unique experiences of those student parents from marginalized groups who have thus far been excluded from research nominally “for” them, and to instead spread any positive changes to all students, faculty, and university employees alike. For this I suggest we shift towards an intersectional ethic of care approach within academic culture.

Below, I elaborate on the methodology, theory, and methods used in this project, and while they all technically overlap, I have separated the more practical aspects from

²¹ ...and outside it too, but that is outside of the purview of this thesis.

²² Isgroa and Castañeda (2015: n.p.) quote another article, which argues that “[w]hen organizational policies are framed as ‘family-friendly’ and when care work allowances are called ‘parental’ or ‘maternity leave,’ this fuels resentment among non-parents and glosses over the fact that care is important for everyone” (Tracy 2008: 171). Sallee (2013: 371) also briefly mentions the potential consequence of policies that may make space for parent to have more flexibility by shifting work to other employees.

the framework behind this project for ease of writing and comprehension. The first subsection will discuss the methodology and theory that laid the framework for this project and guided decisions about how to collect data and how to interpret it, briefly explaining IBPA and then IE, and their importance to this project. The second subsection will discuss practical methods decisions such as why I chose to do a focus group, how it was set up, and ethics approval. The chapter following that will discuss the data resulting from those methods.

Methodology and Theory

Even though I do not much mention feminism specifically in this thesis, feminism is regardless the overarching context in which this study was conducted. Feminism is a broad movement and ideology that has grown to include a lot of different perspectives and theories; intersectional theory (that IBPA builds from) and IE, which I am about to discuss in more detail below, are included under that umbrella. Hesse-Biber wrote “[t]o engage in feminist theory and praxis means to challenge knowledge that excludes, while seeming to include” (2012: 3); this project engages in feminist theory with that same purpose in mind. While some may still view feminism as being concerned primarily with the equality of women to men, it has in many spaces – the best ones – grown to encompass so much more than that. Likewise for the academic programs encompassing women and gender studies. Yes, this project is relevant to women and mothers and challenging the sexism they continue to face in academia. If I had framed this project in a way that centers women and mothers – like much of the existing literature on parenting and academia – it would perhaps be a more overtly feminist project than it may appear to some people now. However, I chose to frame this thesis within a broader notion of

parenting, because it is also about the parents who are not mothers – be they fathers or non-binary parents like myself – as well as the mothers from marginalized communities who have too often been excluded, while perhaps seemingly included, from that narrow focus and whose experiences are distinct²³ but certainly linked. It is my hope that engaging intersectional and IE lens’ will help strengthen those links and give us more leverage with which to pull those persistent gaps closed.

It is perhaps most appropriate, then, that the methodology and theory underlying this project are not easily separable from each other. They are very much linked. The main frameworks used – IE and IBPA – have elements of both methodology and theory. In fact, the creator of IE insists that it is methodology and not theory, which I will address more below. I have divided this subsection further, separating IBPA and IE for clarity. A third theory, Ethic of Care (EOC), is also relevant to this thesis, particularly in the recommendations section, and will be introduced after IBPA and IE. Each part will briefly explain the history, how it works, and how it has been used in the framework and analysis of this thesis.

Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis

IBPA is a key element to this thesis, not just to the analysis, which works because IBPA is not simply a tool for how to analyze. As its name suggests, IBPA is thoroughly entwined with the theory that it is based on. As such, intersectionality has been important to all parts of this thesis; including the decision near the beginning to focus beyond just the gendered differences in student parent experiences; attempting to build inclusive

²³ Distinct by virtue of being from different standpoints, although the specific ways in which these experience vary in the day-to-day are, as noted elsewhere in this thesis, underresearched and not well understood or represented in the literature on parenting and academia.

focus group methods; the recommendations for change I will discuss later on; as well as the more analysis specific guidance relevant to the literature review, the analysis of university texts, and the focus group discussion.

The guiding principles of IBPA – “[i]ntersecting [c]ategories ... [m]ulti-level [a]nalysis... [p]ower... [r]eflexivity... [t]ime and [s]pace... [d]iverse [k]nowledges ... [s]ocial [j]ustice.. [and] [e]quity” (Hankivsky et al. 2012b: 35-38) – encompass many important points of the intersectional theory it is built from.

The creators of IBPA describe intersectionality as being “[r]ooted in a long and deep history of Black feminist writing, indigenous feminism, third world feminism, and queer and postcolonial theory” (Hankivsky et al. 2012: 17). Denis also describes a few of the different people and groups who have built towards this “more complex” (2008: 679) type of theory and analysis, in large parts as a reaction to the kind of feminism that centered white, “able-bodied, usually heterosexual women from the economic North, who were often middle class” (2008: 679), which left many experiences out. The specific term intersectionality was “coined in 1989 by professor Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics ‘intersect’ with one another and overlap” (Coaston 2019: n.p.). The theory has since grown in popularity both within academia and outside it, and has thus been expanded upon and interpreted in various ways (Coaston 2019; Hankivsky et al. 2012).

For Crenshaw “the point of intersectionality is to make room ‘for more advocacy and remedial practices’ to create a more egalitarian system” (Coaston 2019: n.p.) by addressing the interplay between identity, power, and “the structures that undergird our politics, law, and culture in order to level the playing field” (Coaston 2019: n.p.). Ijeoma

Oluo, author of *So You Want To Talk About Race* simultaneously expands and simplifies this by explaining that “[i]ntersectionality helps ensure that fewer people are left behind and that our efforts to do better for some do not make things far worse for others” (2018: 77-78). This reasoning is precisely why it is necessary to address the gaps in university policies that affect student parents with attention to factors beyond binary gender roles, which I will discuss more later.

We need to back up for a moment, though, because those “structures that undergird” (Coaston 2019: n.p.) are an important part, and a main part of the analysis that will follow in the discussion chapter. Hankivsky et al. also mention how intersectional analyses of multiple and complex “social locations and identities” allows an “examination of the simultaneous impact of and resistance to systems and structures of oppression and domination, such as racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and heterosexism” (2012: 18). Those systems are an important piece of the puzzle, because focusing only on the identities can seem to locate the problem in the identity and by extension the person and/or people who hold that identity, when they are not the problem and may have little power to fix it. This echoes Devault’s description of how Dorothy Smith’s IE showed that “seeking an explanation in the behavior... [is] an analytical project that assumes defectiveness” (2006: 295) in the person or particular group, rather than looking at the “conceptual practices” (2006: 295) and structures that they move within. The problem is the systems of oppression woven throughout our institutions that allow for the inequities to reproduce unchecked, not the people who struggle to find space within them. Which is why we need to acknowledge both in analyses.

In that vein, IBPA was developed to address the gaps in popular health policy analysis techniques, particularly gender based analysis (GBA) and health and health equity impact assessments (HIAs/HEIAs) (Hankivsky et al. 2012). Hankivsky et al. critique both for their more narrow focuses, and in the case of the latter (which takes a wider focus than the former) its lack of: reflexivity, acknowledgement of interaction between categories and scales (individual, intermediate, and national levels for instance), accounting for “resistance and resilience” (2012: 16), and the participation of those who “may be intentionally or inadvertently affected by [the] policy process” (2012: 17). Bringing intersectionality into the policy analysis process is meant to address those gaps, via the above-mentioned guiding principles (Hankivsky et al. 2012b).

As an analysis technique, IBPA entails paying close attention to not only the similarities across participants’ experiences, but also the differences, as they relate to participants’ identity variables as well as the structural elements, and the way these all connect and interact. Hankivsky et al. also list a set of “12 overarching questions to help guide/frame/shape the analysis” (2012b: 33); they clarify that it is reasonable – depending on project size and scope – to focus on a single of those questions, or as many as are relevant. The questions can relate to various parts of the research process, and are not limited to only the data that is newly collected. This project focused on four of the question categories, to varying extents, and for different parts of this thesis.

Question 5, which asks: “what are the current policy responses to the problem?” (Hankivsky et al. 2012b: 40), is answered in part via the literature review and the analysis of documents representing university expectations, rules, regulations, and policies. Question number 6, which asks “what inequities actually exist,” “how are groups

differently affected,” and “what are the knowledge/evidence gaps about the problem” (Hankivsky et al. 2012b: 40) played a smaller part than I had hoped due to little diversity in participant demographics, but is nevertheless addressed as much as possible throughout this thesis. Questions 8 and 9 were the most relevant to the analysis of focus group contributions; respectively they focused on the “feasible short, medium, and long-term solutions” and how suggestions will help “reduce inequities” (Hankivsky et al. 2012b: 41).

Of course, the lines about what questions relate to what data are not actually so clearly delineated. They overlap, as they do in the reality of the everyday. As stated earlier, IBPA is not solely a method of data analysis; its guiding principles are also relevant to how projects are built, and thus have been taken into consideration as method, methodology, and theory in this project. This means that the analysis was guided by IBPA’s questions created by Hankivsky et al. (2012b) to draw attention to intersectional ramifications within the data, to link the differences and similarities in participants’ experiences combining academia and parenting, and to link those differences and similarities to structural forces within the academy. The main concerns of intersectionality have also been worked into the research design (e.g. the accessibility of the focus group design) of this project, alongside the concepts put forth by IE, which we turn to now.

Institutional Ethnography

Institutional Ethnography shares intersectionality’s ability to act as both theory and methodology, although it is most commonly thought of as a methodology. It offers a

set of guidelines for how to proceed in connecting the everyday reality of the individual scale to the generalized expectations of the institutional scale, so that the relationships between personal experience and institutional policies and discourses can be investigated for the gaps, misunderstandings, disconnections, and oversights that create problems and exclude populations. In IE, the “entry point” (Walby 2013: 142) is typically to choose a perspective, group, and/or “standpoint”²⁴ (Smith 1987) – such as that of student parent – and interview those who hold it so as to gain understanding from their lived expertise (Devault 2006). During interviews, “texts” would be identified, and then more interviews (or other qualitative data gathering methods) performed with the other groups of people that are responsible for delivering, enforcing, and/or creating those texts (Walby 2013). The texts themselves would also be analyzed for data. This makes IE quite an involved and lengthy process, however it allows for the detailed differences between the expectations and assumptions that are woven into the texts – often quite invisibly – and the ways that the texts are actually taken up in peoples everyday lives to come to light (Smith 1987; Devault 2006).

But what are texts? In IE, the name typically refers to any and all documents or media that institutions use in their operational processes (Walby 2013; Devault 2006). In this project specifically, the concept of texts are represented and referred to as the policies, rules, regulations, and expectations that student parents encounter and must find a way to work with or work around in their time within the institution of academia. These include rules listed on placards around campus, policies on relevant websites, regulations

²⁴ In regards to standpoint, Smith writes that it “preserves the presence of subjects as knowers and as actors. It does not transform subjects into the objects of study or make use of conceptual devices for eliminating the active presence of subjects.” (1987: n.p.)

found in the universities' student calendars, class-based expectations described through syllabi and expressed orally by individual professors, etc.

While my project borrows heavily from the methodological framework of IE, some elements have been altered to fit the time constraints of a master's level research project, and to add in the important concerns of intersectionality. My project has focused its attention both on the relevant texts – the policies, rules, regulations, and expectations communicated by the Nova Scotia universities' websites – as well as the experiences of those individuals who interact with the texts from the standpoint of an undergraduate student parent. While it would certainly be interesting and enlightening²⁵ to include interviews with people responsible for the creation and enforcement of those texts, it was simply not possible to fit it into the necessary timeline here, but would be a fruitful area of future research.

Intersectional concerns, especially those based on the intersection of racialization, are not specifically attended to in the formation of IE – for which Smith expresses regret in *The Everyday World as Problematic* (1987). However, there is certainly room in the framework for its consideration to be integrated. This adds a bit more complexity, however I believe it to be more important than spending that time collecting accounts from more privileged standpoints because, as stated earlier, the current literature on student parents takes so little notice of intersectional concerns. Such gaps are a problem given the logic that policies influence and invisibilize different people in different ways depending on how and where people diverge from the normative assumptions that went into creating the texts that influence their experience of academia. Additionally, I believe

²⁵ This is particularly so as it could help more thoroughly establish what the normative assumptions and the 'typical student' are in the institutional understanding.

the texts on their own communicated enough of an idea of the normative assumptions to compare with participants experiences and make effective policy change suggestions for this project.

While IE does not have intersectional theory worked into its framework, its methodology is still very influenced by feminist theory and thus brings those logics with it – regardless of Smith’s expressed distrust of theory and preference to see IE as methodology (Smith 2006). IE’s origins and its legacy are steeped in the uncovering of the invisibilized assumptions that govern institutions and the understanding that these assumptions are all too often built on the needs of a privileged few and are thus inhospitable to those whose needs and circumstances vary from “the coordination logics of ... institutions” (Devault 2006: 295; Smith 1987). Its purpose – connecting individual standpoints and experiences to institutional ones, so as to find the assumptions and gaps that create disjuncture – fits with IBPA’s goals of including multi-level analysis, paying attention to the individuals’ particular demographics and experiences, and using those perspectives to identify and analyze structures and systems of oppression that create inequities in policies. A 2014 study regarding “student-equity policy in Australia” by Peacock, Seller, and Lingar also frames IE as both methodology and theory.

To sum it up: utilizing an IE framework for this research enables us to see where specifically the everyday realities and support needs are discounted, unaccounted for and/or invisibilized within institutional (be that university or government) policies, rules, requirements, and expectations. Pinpointing those policy gaps will allow for specific and ideally more efficient and effective suggestions for change to allow more equitable access to, and attainment of, higher education. However, there is a risk in advocating for

changes to exclusionary policies and practices when the standpoint used to trouble them is itself still too narrow for the benefits to be a substantial help. Changing (or adding, in the case of childcare centres) a few policies to better support mothers in faculty positions trickles down poorly to struggling undergraduate student parents. In the same way, those changes may miss – or even further burden – faculty members and others within the many levels of and associations with academia who have non-parenting care work to attend to, health issues to juggle, or other forms of discrimination to face-down on the daily. Thus, pairing IE with intersectional theory (IBPA specifically in this case) helps us evade the pitfalls of advocating for change from too narrow a standpoint, which could otherwise make the problem of invisibilized and untended differences in the relevant institutional policies worse.

Ethic of Care

Ethic of care (EOC) is a theoretical framework that dates back to 1982 and was originally connected with stereotyped understandings of gender; Hankivsky categorizes these origins as the “first-generation [of] care theorists” (2004: 11 and 2014: 253). The “second generation care theorists” (Hankivsky 2014: 253 and 2004: 27) tackled some of the limitations in the theory from the first generation theorists, including divesting it of the narrow understanding of gender relevance and instead “establish[ing] the centrality of care to all human life and activities” (Hankivsky 2004: 27).

This thesis draws from those second generation care theorists, and in particular from Hankivsky’s conception of EOC, which is built on the belief “that across our lifespan – at all stages and in many situations – we need care to ‘sustain the best possible

lives” (Hankivsky 2004: 1). Care, in the social policy context from which Hankivsky is writing, is the act of acknowledging and making space for differences to help alleviate “disadvantage and discrimination” because “people have different capacities and abilities to attend to their needs” (Hankivsky 2004: 6). This belief is paired with the observation and critique that care is too often excluded from the public sphere (like universities) and isolated to the private sphere (Hankivsky 2004). This exclusion of care from the public sphere parallels the individualization of the responsibility for fitting into the institutional culture of academia and the way that students, parent or otherwise, are often expected to deal with the structural and systemic barriers they face through individual coping mechanisms on their own time.

EOC opposes the “liberal perspective ... that human needs are essentially universal” (Hankivsky 2004: 6), because this perspective results in the creation of policies that are generalized enough to seem as though they apply fairly to everyone, but which are in reality built off the assumptions and expectations of majority groups – thus leaving marginalized groups to struggle to assimilate. This is a problem with certain conceptions of universal and, to a lesser extent, targeted policy approaches currently favored by universities and the student parent literature. In line with the arguments laid out later in this thesis, EOC asks that policies make room for the differences among people and that their circumstances be respected, acknowledged, and cared for to facilitate participation and success, particularly for those who are struggling (Hankivsky 2004).

This converges nicely with intersectional theory, though Hankivsky admits that “care ethics [are] not an inherently intersectional perspective” (2014: 252) and there are some adjustments needed to attend more fully to the concerns of intersectionality.

Hankivsky notes that without the lens of intersectionality, interpretations of care can happen that further colonialist, racist, paternalist, and other oppressive ideals, such as when “care ethics ... construct disabled persons as those who are perpetually and passively ‘dependent’” or when “care discourses play a role ‘in justifying relationships of power and domination between *groups of people*, such as the colonizer and the colonized” (2014: 254, emphasis in original). One way to counter these faults is not to prioritize any one identity or system of oppression over others (Hankivsky 2014).

Hankivsky notes that “[s]ome care theorists ... claim that if the world was more caring, and if the work of care was distributed more equally, then less power would be used in the world, or used more justly and more equitably, and political and structural violence would decline” (2014: 259). While the extent²⁶ of this claim is debatable, Hankivsky also notes that in order to do this EOC – and us, I would add, as wielders of EOC – “must recognize the ubiquity of unequal power relations” (2014: 259) in the world. There have also been previous studies suggesting that EOC could be the key to effecting more positive influence on university students (Thompson 2018) as well as creating a more positive environment for more students to flourish rather than struggle (Dalton & Crosby 2013).

While Hankivsky primarily advances EOC as a tool to be used with policy development, its concepts and values can be used “‘face-to-face’” as well as between “‘strangers in the public world of social policy’” (2004: 19). It has three main components: contextual sensitivity, responsiveness, and consequences of choice. “Contextual sensitivity” (Hankivsky 2004: 32) is meant to counter the “universal point of

²⁶ In the sense that we cannot know how much of an effect this would have, and how much that would/will be dependent on conceptualizations of what care entails and whether it is paired with understandings of intersectional theory.

view” (32) and acknowledges the ways that “people are shaped by their contexts” (33), which aligns with the need for acknowledgment of difference that intersectionality also supports. “Responsiveness” (Hankivsky 2004: 35) is perhaps currently the piece that could best counter the influence of an individual’s biases within interactions, as it gives space for people to voice their needs themselves. According to Hankivsky it “goes beyond being sympathetic... or even taking into account their needs, as we perceive them” and “beyond determining what others need by generalizing from [ourselves]” (2004: 35). Instead, it “requires that we consider the other’s position as [they] [express] it” (Hankivsky 2004: 70). “Consequences of choice” (Hankivsky 2004: 38) entails that we “consider the effects of our judgements or actions” because there should be a “focus on preventing harm and suffering” (2004:38). Hankivsky argues the “positive implications” could mean that “[t]hose who require ... support and assistance would not automatically be stigmatized; instead their needs would be understood as a normal development or occurrence in the course of human living” (2004: 39).

Hankivsky argues that these strategies can “prioritize policy decisions that attend to the complexities of citizens who differ on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and class but who are united in their need for care” (2004: 40). I argue the same considerations can be extended to person-to-person interactions outside of policy contexts as well, and that this shift could prove beneficial to students, faculty, and university employees alike because it leaves room for our various circumstances and needs within academia in ways which are further explained in the discussion chapter.

Methods

Before I lay out any other practical method choices, I want to clarify that this project was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, in terms of data collection as well as data content. The first lockdowns happened while the proposal of this project was in the ethics review process, and thus required some changes to the methods to ensure accessibility of the focus group, the safety of participants, and compliance with pandemic rules. These changes are mentioned briefly below as relevant, such as switching from in person focus groups to an online forum. The pandemic also meant changes for student parents to their routines and how they combine academia and parenting, which was reflected in the topics that they discussed and will be further addressed in the results and discussion chapters of this thesis. With that in mind, the rest of this subsection will cover the practicalities behind this project, as well as the reason behind those choices.

The first time I read a paper about the experiences of student parents, during my last year of my undergraduate degree – with a year and a half of student parenting under my belt, a toddler asleep on the couch and a baby asleep on my shoulder – I felt incredibly seen and validated. It was even better when I finally met other student parents. That relief and validation from simply reading stories that represented major pieces of my own rather isolating university experience is the main reason why I chose to have a focus group for this project. Focus groups matched the type of data I was looking for, but perhaps equally as important, they provided a way to bring student parents together and remind them that they are not alone in their experiences. The literature backs this up: Lavie-Ajayi argued that “working with groups in research can have ... advantages of mutual support” (2014: 179) and Moloney showed that group discussions can offer “a

spiritually rewarding encounter” (2011: 59) for participants and researchers alike. Lavie-Ajayi (2014) and Moloney (2011) were referring to traditional in-person focus groups. It seems likely that, while this effect was at least partially maintained with the online focus group that this research required due to pandemic limitations on in person gathering, it was also likely lessened.

This reasoning also aligned with the frequent goal of feminist research to gather “experiences of groups who have been marginalized or silenced” (Leavy 2007: 173), wherein the comfort and validation of entering a space containing others dealing with similar situations can help involve “people who may feel ... weary of participation in a research study” (Leavy 2007: 173) by helping put them more at ease than they may be in a one-on-one interview. This was important especially as the goal was to include student parents with marginalized identities – whose experiences are particularly absent from the literature. Leavy (2007) also argues that focus groups can help facilitate more open and honest discussions, as well as elicit details that might have gone otherwise unremembered if not triggered by others sharing, resulting in richer data for researchers and perhaps a more thorough understanding of their own situations for participants.

I also chose this method in an attempt to help shift the focus away from the individual level feelings and consequences, towards the institutional barriers that are in need of change. As shown in the previous chapter, in much of the literature focusing on undergraduate student parents the focus is on the individual, and matching that, more intimate and personalized one-on-one interviews were the preferred data collection method. LaCie-Ajayi has proposed that focus groups are helpful for “challenging the overindividualistic approach of most psychological studies” (2014: 175), and the

reasoning works here too. The focus group was thus an attempt to remind participants that their experiences are part of a group of parents' experiences and are all connected to the policies, rules, requirements, and expectations of academia that exclude or at least fail to take their perspectives and needs into account.

This mirrors IE's goal of connecting individual standpoint to institutional understandings. An IE framework is essentially guidelines for how to trace the relationship and interactions between people and policies of the individual and institutional scale, so as to illuminate the disjuncture between their realities and expectations which can create problems and exclude populations. Research using this framework can be done with various methods (Smith 2006). This can be one on one interviews as well as focus groups, as long as it involves some way of interacting with and talking to people about their experience with institutional expectations, rules, regulations, and policies (Smith 2006). This project opted for focus groups rather than the previously ubiquitously used one on one interviews for gathering student parent perspectives.

Using focus groups meant that my project required human participants and was thus subject to the Mount Saint Vincent University Research Ethics Board (UREB) review process, which is meant to ensure that participation will not harm those involved. More specifically, the UREB reviewed my plans for data collection and analysis, particularly details about interaction with participants and their personal information, "to ensure a balance between the protection of participants and the value of human dignity and the legitimate requirements of research" (UREB MSVU 2017: 1). This research required passing ethics reviews at Acadia University and Cape Breton University as well,

because recruitment required asking faculty at other universities to share the information for this project. I opted not to obtain UREB approval from Saint Mary's University and Nova Scotia College of Art and Design because of time constraints, and thus no participants were recruited from those two universities. The remaining Nova Scotia universities did not require full ethics reviews in order to forward the information onto potential participants. Details about what I did to ensure compliance with UREB requirements are in the following paragraphs, in addition to more practical elements of how participants were recruited, focus groups held, and the ensuing data analyzed.

Eight focus group participants were recruited via social media and email. Emails were sent to various faculty members, student interest groups, and student help centers at each of the participating Nova Scotia universities, who were asked to forward the study information to anyone who might be interested. It was left up to them to decide if they would forward the study information to their whole email list or membership (such as for student interest groups and help centers) or just to those students they knew or suspected had children. Upon reflection, this may be partially responsible for the low number of participants, and especially of participants with marginalized identities, who may have more incentive to keep their parenting separate from university spaces and personnel to avoid additional stigma and/or microaggressions.²⁷ From my searches, there does not appear to be an unofficial network of Nova Scotia undergraduate student parents where the information could have been more efficiently passed along. Additional methods of recruitment (such as posters and flyers) were unavailable for several reasons including:

²⁷ Moghandam et al. mention that some "student mothers avoid bringing their child with them or hide their parenting roles" (2017: 1) due to stigma and unfairly biased assumptions about their ability and commitment to their education. They do not link this to and discuss how this might be impacted or increased by other forces of oppressions (sexism, racism, etc.).

accessibility (of the researcher to the campuses across NS), cost, and Covid-19 pandemic precautions (including lockdowns).

Participants were limited to those who were 18 years of age or older, are a parent and/or primary caregiver to one or more children under the age of 18²⁸, and who were enrolled at the time in an undergraduate degree program at a Nova Scotia university. Efforts were made to include a diverse group of participants: including parents and/or primary caregivers who were non-binary, transgender, cisgender, 2SLGBTQIAP+, single, with partner/s, married, Indigenous, racialized, non-racialized, with Canadian citizenship or not, neurodivergent²⁹ or neurotypical³⁰, disabled and/or chronically ill, from various socio-economic statuses, and of any age above 18 themselves. This was approached by making it clear they were welcome in the recruitment material, and by specifically contacting groups most likely to include diverse student parents (such as international student centers, Indigenous student centers, Black student supports, campus 2SLGBTQIAP+ groups, accessibility services, etc.). It was stated in the recruitment material that priority would be given to participants with marginalized identities in the event of an over abundance of participants. Unfortunately, this strategy did not have the desired effect, and the resulting participant group was not very diverse. I will explore this more in the results chapter. Additionally, I focused on undergraduate university students, and thus excluded student parents within college programs in the province; this was

²⁸ It was also open to those whose children were over 18, and who maintained a close relationship with them (i.e. they were not estranged). This was made clear in the recruitment material. However, as it turned out, all participants had at least one child under the age of 18.

²⁹ Neurodivergent is a term used to refer to people whose mental processes differ from those that are normalized and considered typical. This usually includes those of us who are autistic, as well as those who are ADHD, dyslexic, etc., and often includes those with long-term mental health issues as well.

³⁰ Neurotypical is the opposite of neurodivergent; it refers to someone whose mental processes aligns with normative expectations and is generally considered typical (i.e. someone who is not autistic, does not have an anxiety disorder, etc.).

primarily due to the major differences in structures, policies, expectations, and populations between university and college programs.

Originally focus groups were going to be held in person, but because this research took place during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, changes had to be made to the methods in order to ensure participant safety. The essence of focus group mechanics were maintained, but moved online. The Microsoft Outlook group site function (available through the MSVU email site, and with ethics compliant Canadian based servers) was used to facilitate the focus group through discussion board posts. Unlike other possible Internet based methods, this option allowed the participants to interact as their schedules allowed. This was especially important since participants were parents who, with childcare centres and schools shut and/or dramatically reduced during the pandemic, were likely busy parenting. The aim was to hold 2 focus groups with between 5 and 10 participants each, however in the end only one focus group of 8 participants was conducted because there were not enough participants for a second. The number of participants in each focus group was originally based on the maximum of eight (in addition to me) and a minimum of three suggested by Barbour (2007: 60), however these limits were increased to better reflect the online environment, where it is easier to keep track of participant contributions.

It is unclear what factors might have helped attract more participants, however it seems likely that conditions surrounding the pandemic were salient to the low turnout of participants, both in terms of changes that needed to be made on my end (to make time to care for my own children during lockdowns and to apply for additional ethics clearances

for recruitment³¹), and more demand on the time of those in the potential participant pool. It also seems likely that my recruitment methods were not fully effective (as mentioned above), and for similar future projects I would recommend more diverse ways of reaching out to the potential participants.

The focus group took place over the course of two weeks, with 1 or 2 questions posted a day (a posting schedule and questions can be found in Appendix D at the end of this document). An e-mail reminder was sent each day to inform participants that a question was posted, and participants attended to the questions on their own schedules. Participants were encouraged to respond to each other's answers or refer to them if relevant to their own thoughts. I responded occasionally with clarification questions or requests for further elaboration. The questions that were originally intended for in-person focus groups were not changed for the online discussion format, however in retrospect, I have wondered if more specific and narrow questions would have been beneficial to the online format where small indications (such as body language or non-word vocalizations) that would otherwise encourage elaboration among participants are lacking. The questions instead were very broad and open-ended (again, available in Appendix D).

Before the focus group discussions took place, interested participants were sent a link via email to a Limesurvey questionnaire regarding their demographic information, such as university program, number of children, and income. This questionnaire is available to view in Appendix C. Participants were also sent an instruction sheet for how to use the group site (available in Appendix E) and were asked to reply, if they had read and agreed, to the consent form (available in Appendix B) post on the focus group forum

³¹ I am referring to the clearances I had to obtain from Cape Breton University and Acadia (discussed on page 56), which I was unaware I would need until the timeline for the focus group was already locked in. Making changes to recruitment at that point would have delayed everything again.

before beginning to answer any questions. Other resources that were emailed to participants as well as posted on the discussion group page were an information document (Appendix A) with an overview of the study, the group site instructions (Appendix E), and a list of support contacts in case of emotional distress over the discussion topics (Appendix F).

Litosseliti cautions that one of the limitations of focus groups is the “[d]ifficulty in distinguishing between an individual view and a group view. ...because individuals who disagree may not say so” (2003: 21). This was somewhat mitigated with the online discussion board format, because everyone could post separate replies without having to interact specifically with the others. I additionally made the offer that if anyone felt uncomfortable replying to a question on the boards, they could send their reply privately to me, to be added into the transcripts at a later time so that the other participants would not be privy. No one made use of that offer, however.

After the focus group questions had all been posted, participants were given an additional week to finish answering questions, edit, and/or delete their contributions, as they felt necessary. Afterwards, the group site was closed so that participants could no longer access it. I took screenshots of all the posts and answers for secure storage as outlined in my ethics application. I also copied and pasted all the text into a full transcript word document for easier analysis. Participants’ names and email addresses were swapped out for a numerical identifier (e.g. P1 through P8). Any information within the transcript that could have been used to identify participants was changed for more general language (e.g. school names, job titles, and others’ titles). Aside from those necessary changes, transcription remained as the participants wrote it, because as Walby (2013:

147) writes, “[t]ranscription is an important ethical moment where the talk of the participant is vulnerable to misrepresentation,” thus minimal changes hopefully helped to minimize misinterpretation.

In the same way that anonymity cannot be promised in traditional in-person focus groups, it was not promised for this one, as participants’ names and email addresses were visible to other participants on the group site. The site was, however, blocked from the general public. Regardless, all reasonable measures were taken to ensure confidentiality. Consent forms included this reasoning, as well as reminders for participants to maintain other participants’ confidentiality by not discussing others’ contributions to the discussions outside of the focus group. All names and information that could identify the program participants are enrolled in were removed from transcripts and subsequently from any quotations used in this document, as stated above. References by participants to their own identity variables such as race, gender, marital status, etc. were not removed because of the importance to the methodological and theoretical underpinnings of intersectionality to this project. However, all effort was made to ensure no direct quotations could be used to identify specific participants. All collected data (consent forms, questionnaire results, comments, and discussions) were copied to a password-protected computer for storage, to which only I have access. All data will be deleted five years after the completion of this project, in 2026.

The focus group data was coded and sorted by hand (without the use of data analysis software, simply as a personal choice), which I did by reading through the transcript many times so as to build familiarity, noting main points that the participants brought up. I then physically cut up a copy of the transcript and sorted the contributions,

with attention to the research questions and intersectional concerns, to find commonalities, differences, and evidence of systems of oppression. Focus group data analysis was based around answering the research questions and took into account questions 8 and 9 from IBPA, which respectively asked about “feasible short, medium, and long-term solutions” and how suggestions will help “reduce inequities” (Hankivsky et al. 2012b: 41). The demographic questionnaire from the focus group was not analyzed, but rather simply compiled to show the basic make-up of the focus group.

I also compiled and analyzed what types of references to and resources for student parents were present on the public websites of Nova Scotia universities. Originally this was to be an analysis of the policies, regulations, rules, and expectations specifically posted on the universities websites’ that related to parenting students, however this approach was limited by the lack of content. Thus, this portion of the research and analysis became mostly about if there were any relevant mentions of student parents posted on university websites and, if so, what did they imply and who did they include. This was based loosely on IBPA question number 5, which asks about “the current policy responses to the problem” (Hankivsky et al. 2012b: 40), while keeping in mind the theory behind IBPA more generally. Participants in the focus group also pointed out the lack of relevant student parent policies, or at least their lack of awareness of such policies. This will be discussed more in the results chapter.

This adjustment in approach meant that, instead of analyzing what was mentioned in the main policy documents (i.e. the university calendars), I searched the publicly available side of the university websites with relevant key words³² and noted how many

³² There were 19 key word searches: student parent, student dad, student mom, mother, father, parenting, parent, childcare, daycare, breastfeeding, pumping, baby-friendly, baby friendly, pregnant, pregnancy,

results were relevant to student parents. I included student parent relevant resources I was otherwise aware of even if they did not turn up in the keyword search, as I did not want to misrepresent what universities had on offer. However, I have noted in the results section when mentions and/or resources did not turn up in the keyword search, as the difficulty in locating them on the website is also relevant. For all the mentions and resources I considered what the content was based on (i.e. simple what, why, where, and who questions). As with the rest of the thesis, I kept an intersectional lens in mind particularly in noting who was included in these mentions, and in what way, i.e. what assumptions are presented about student parents' identities? Of course, participants' contributions during the focus group were also kept in mind.

This chapter explained the main methodological and theoretical frameworks used to build this project, and all the more practical decisions that went into the process of collecting data on Nova Scotia university policies and the input of Nova Scotia student parents. The following chapter will discuss the information thus gathered, including what relevant student parent mentions, policies, and resources I was able to find on each university website; the demographics of the focus group; and what participants' contributed.

dependents, family housing, caregiving, and Covid plan. For the words it applied to, I also searched for the plural versions though it made no difference in terms of results.

Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter I will outline the results of a search through Nova Scotia university websites for mentions of and resources for student parents, the demographics of the focus group participants, and the contributions of the focus group discussions. The university results are discussed separately, in alphabetical order by university name, with a summary of main points at the end. The contributions from the focus group are separated into three themes: similarities, differences, and systems of oppression. An analysis and discussion of what these results and contributions mean in the context of the research questions follows in chapter 5.

University Websites

Originally, I meant to search and analyze only university policy documents (such as student calendars). However, upon reading the policy documents it quickly became clear that student parents were not mentioned, nor were issues directly relevant to our particular situations. It also became clear that many policies are not outlined in any one accessible place, but instead scattered around departments and documents wherever the need arises. Additionally, I was interested in more than just the official policies: I also asked participants in the focus group to consider unwritten rules and expectations, as well as individual professors' rules in their answers. Unwritten expectations are by nature less obvious, but are here interpreted via such things as who is represented and referred to on university websites, and how certain identities and situations are presented, if they are at all. So in lieu of reviewing what few official policy documents I could find, I instead searched each Nova Scotia university's website for a variety of terms related to student

parents (for example: parent, student parent, breastfeeding, pregnancy, childcare, family housing, etc.) in order to see if and how we are included, and what expectations these representations might imply. This does mean that some resources available on campus and some official policies and practices that are not kept updated or accessible via the websites may be missing from these results. I did also include policies and resources that I was otherwise already aware of, even if they did not appear in the keyword searches (I have noted if this was the case), because I do not wish to knowingly misrepresent what is actually offered by the universities.

These results have been analyzed similar to the focus group (which will be discussed further down) in terms of similarities and differences among the universities offerings, and evidence of systems of oppression in the texts. In the discussion chapter these university results are also integrated with the analyses from the focus group contributions and the student parent literature. There is a summary of the key points of analysis (from across all included universities) and a table presenting a quick overview of the results for each university at the end of this subsection.

Acadia University

Acadia had quite a few more results than most of the other schools, excepting MSVU. The “Student Health Centre” page lists pregnancy tests as available under “women’s health, reproductive health” (Acadia University N.d.a). They have separately listed men’s health and “transgender and gender non-conforming health” (Acadia University N.d.a) as issues that the centre also deals with. This suggests they recognize the existence of trans and gender non-conforming students, and also that pregnancy tests

are a potential necessity. However the awkward division of types of care by gender also incorrectly suggests that only women require pregnancy tests and reproductive healthcare.

The Acadia library has a whole page regarding “children in the library” (Acadia University 2021) which can be found under the library specific policies page. The page starts out by stating that “[c]hildren are welcome to be at the library with their parents/guardians. The library cares about children’s well-being and safety, and therefore has developed this policy with these concerns in mind” (Acadia University 2021). The page lays out ten points, helpfully specifying how librarians will handle unattended children, reminders for parents about the computers “unfiltered internet access” (Acadia University 2021), and what is expected of parents and their children (for example regarding noise level and supervision).

Acadia is one of only two Nova Scotia Universities that has no onsite childcare, which is interesting considering they are also one of the universities with the most mentions of student parents on their website (second to MSVU). They do have a document listing the childcare centers available in the whole Annapolis Valley area, which is the first result when searching “childcare” on their website. The document (see: Acadia University, N.d.b) lists program names, contact info, locations, and a brief description of the offerings (days/times, ages, etc.).

Searches on the website also bring up a couple of references to student mothers who attended the school. One is a brief article about a student mother receiving a bursary and the local business that funded the bursary specifically for student parents (Acadia University 2018b). The mother appears to be white in the accompanying photo, although

this is not discussed or mentioned in the article; profiles of BIPOC student parents clearly specify the individuals race, however, which suggests that it is not discussed in regards to the students who appear white because white is the presumed default in Canadian society.

The other profile is a longer profile of a successful Indigenous mother who returned to school as a mature student (with three children) for a change in career from communications towards a medical degree. In the article she shares: “‘I found it very challenging,’ [...] ‘I don’t think I ever worked as hard as I did during my undergrad. In my first year especially I was working until 2 a.m. and pulling all-nighters for my exams. But everybody was so supportive’” (Sgambati 2012). She also says that “she rolled the dice as a mature student, ... the first member of her family and also the first Mi’kmaq woman from Eskasoni First Nation to earn a medical degree” but that “[t]here’s a great sense of fulfillment to know that [she] was able to do it” (Sgambati 2012).

Another result of searching the Acadia website was a short document from the School of Education outlining the procedure and expectation for students in that particular program who may need to bring their child/ren to class, such as making sure the child is not sick and bringing a quiet activity to occupy them during the class. It includes a note that “all students in the class will help provide a welcoming and respectful environment for the child/children” (Acadia University N.d.c).

Another policy document that acknowledges parents is the Acadia University Food Services Plan from December 2018 (see: Acadia University, 2018). Under its “Campus food services plan” (Acadia University 2018: 17), in the section for accessibility and inclusion the plan specifies “establish breastfeeding friendly initiative”

(Acadia University 2018: 23) for one of its goals, although its not clear in the document what actions are to be taken for the initiative.

While website searches brought up some older documents and webpages noting that dependents could be added to the student health plan, this option is unfortunately not specifically mentioned on the main “Health/Medical & Dental” (Acadia Student’s Union 2021) page.

Lastly, Acadia’s “CRC Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Action Plan (EDIAP) 2019-2022” (Acadia University 2019: 1) also showed up in several search results, and includes several mentions of student parents and plans to help better support them. The report makes helpful suggestions (among many other points) such as to “[p]rovide opportunity for students to self-identify as parents on admission forms” (Acadia University 2019: 33), as well as to “[h]ire a student-parent advisor/navigator to assist with practical and academic supports, liaison with campus and community resources, and provide peer support” (Acadia University 2019: 33). It also suggests “[i]ntegration of policies to accommodate and provide greater flexibility to students with children. Policies could address class attendance, deadlines, test/exam taking and any number of known barriers to student parent engagement in their courses/programs (Acadia University 2019: 33) and mentions several “[c]hildcare and student parent related recommendations” (Acadia University 2019: 35) including for “on-campus childcare,” “child-friendly spaces”, and “change tables and breast-feeding friendly policies and spaces” (Acadia University 2019: 35). The report uses inclusive non-gendered language in regards to parent friendly policies, and also includes acknowledgment of and policies for many other situations and identities as well.

I included a search for/of the Covid-19 plans in my keyword search of all universities because the updates regarding and the changes made for the pandemic were so salient to the participants in the focus group. For their Covid-19 plan, Acadia did not specifically acknowledge student parents. However, they did have a labeling system for courses with which to communicate which would be delivered in person, via a hybrid of in person and online, and fully online. In addition, the system labeled which of these course would require “specific ‘live’ class times” and which would “be unscheduled allowing students to participate primarily on their own schedule” (Keefe 2020).

Cape Breton University (CBU)

Searches on CBU’s website show that their page about counseling services lists “parenting” (Cape Breton University 2021d) under the issues they can offer support for. Another search result shows that free pregnancy tests are available at their “Pride and Ally Centre” (Cape Breton University 2021c), though there is no mention of pregnancy tests under the student health pages. The listing of pregnancy tests in only one of those locations is a bit odd, but it is regardless helpful that their availability is clearly signaled on the website.

Childcare is listed under CBU’s student services menu; it is a couple of menus removed from the main page, and could certainly be more easily accessible. The Childcare page offers only brief necessary information and contact information (a phone number and email address). It does not have its own website, though a website would be helpful for those in need of more information who do not wish to or cannot call. At the time of writing, their page advises that it is closed due to Covid-19, and while it says

more information can be found at the link for their covid-19 plan, there is no mention of the childcare center in the plan that I could find. CBU's childcare in non-Covid times lists its services as weekdays, with part and full time care spots for children two to five years old, costs are congruent with the rest of the province, and accepting provincial subsidy. They also operate with a waitlist that "can range from 1-2 years, depending on the age of the child" (Cape Breton University 2021a).

The last reference to student parents on CBU's website is a single profile of a successfully graduating Indigenous student who "became a father" (Cape Breton University 2021b) during the second year of his undergraduate studies. Regarding parenting as a student the article relates that:

Levi says becoming a father during his education encouraged him to work even harder. He was not only learning how to parent a newborn, but also dedicating extra time to his studies in order to excel. 'I knew I had to perform well in school so I could graduate and provide for my family,' Levi explains. 'They're very happy and proud that I'm graduating with a university degree.' (Cape Breton University 2021b).

In the next paragraph, the article also says that "[w]hen he wasn't busy with class work, Levi enjoyed hanging out in The Pit with his friends" which is "a great spot for students to have lunch and play pool or ping pong" (Cape Breton University 2021b). This is an interesting contrast to the profiles of student mothers on other universities' website, which emphasize the challenges of student parenting rather than enjoying time with friends.

Searching for “breastfeeding” on Dalhousie’s website brings a couple of relevant resources: one is official “Breastfeeding Guidelines” for the campus, and another is an article from 2018 that discusses the new-at-the-time guidelines. The article argues that

[t]he guidelines are not a new policy in and of themselves — they’re built on pre-established policies like the Student Accommodation Policy and the Accommodation Policy for Employees. But they ensure clear understanding of the university committee’s commitment to supporting the rights of breastfeeding individuals, and that the university will take reasonable measures to support any student or employee who chooses to breastfeed or express breastmilk on campus (McNutt 2018).

The article and guidelines use a mix of gender neutral and gendered language (referring to ‘mothers’ specifically in some places, for example) to refer to the students and employees who will benefit from the guidelines. The article includes a photograph of a nursing student and her baby, along with some thoughts from the mother on breastfeeding while at the university; she notes that it adds extra time pressure and can add extra stress, while also relating that her favourite spot for breastfeeding is the “Nursing lounge” (McNutt 2018) – though its not clear if that is a lounge for students in the nursing program or breastfeeding students from any program. The article also briefly discusses the positive effect that breastfeeding supports can have for both parents and children, though they do specify mothers.

The guidelines lay out both the university's responsibilities and what is expected of the breastfeeding students and/or employees, such as the need for them to specifically request accommodation. It also includes points about making sure all students know about the rules; expectations over time and scheduling; who the guidelines apply to; and what activities the policy covers, i.e. including the act of expressing breast milk as well as breastfeeding directly (Dalhousie University n.d.a). The guidelines acknowledge that needs will vary depending on the person and so should supports (Dalhousie University n.d.a). The right for "access to a private ..., clean, comfortable and safe space" (Dalhousie University n.d.a) and what that includes is also noted. It is specified that "the act of breastfeeding alone cannot be deemed disruptive" (Dalhousie University n.d.a) but that breastfeeding is nonetheless not permitted during "formal evaluation (such as tests or exams) or where doing so poses a health and safety risk to the child" (Dalhousie University n.d.a). However, accommodations for testing times can be made if necessary. The guidelines are clear and helpful, though they could be improved with inclusivity of trans and non-binary parents.

There are many articles and old pages referencing a now-closed campus childcare centre. Searching the website did not bring up a result about a current childcare centre on the campus, however I am otherwise aware that they actually have two locations associated with the university, and thus I specifically looked for them via a Google search for more specific information about the centres. One is for younger children (the typical childcare demographic) and the other location has part time spaces for older toddlers as well as for older children during lunch, afterschool, and planned public school closure days. The website of both childcare center locations notes an "extensive" waitlist on the

website (University Children's Centre N.d.). There are no updates regarding Covid-19 on the childcare website.

Another search result brings up an August 2020 profile of a PhD student mother for receiving a "Kappa Kappa Gamma scholarship for women" (Rolle 2020). Like the first profile from Acadia University, the mother in this profile piece appears to be white in the accompanying photo, although her race is not discussed or mentioned in the article. However, profiles of BIPOC student parents clearly specify the individuals race, which suggests that it is not discussed in regards to the students who appear white because white is the presumed default in Canadian society. The article briefly notes the challenge of being parent, "health professional," and "scholar" (Rolle 2020), her work with mothers with cancer, and the additional challenges Covid-19 has brought. Here is an excerpt from the article:

'All students with dependents must balance their academic demands with caring for their loved ones. Covid-19 has interrupted for many of us, the systems that we had in place to do so. At the same time, my daughter is seeing daily how women can pursue doctoral degrees and work in science. She is my teammate and inspiration. She reminds me of the importance of play and adventure. As a mother I have to maintain balance in my life,' she says. Many women in academia face similar challenges and acknowledge that institutions and health research bodies still have work to do, in order to dismantle the misogyny and racism that exists in higher education (Rolle 2020).

Other results that came up upon searching Dalhousie's website for references to student parents were lots of old calendar entries about past zoom meetings for parents (though with no additional information to glean the context and actual audience, so it is unclear whether the old zoom meetings were for student parents, parents of students, or another group of parents entirely). There were also reminders within several bursary applications to include childcare costs in calculations.

Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU)

MSVU had the most varied references to student parents, with Acadia a close second (this is clear in the table at the end of the section). Searching "pregnancy" on the MSVU website brings up a link to the sexual assault information and resource page. It also brings up a link to the student health page with information about how to book an appointment, which does not specifically mention pregnancy. Pregnancy tests are not specifically mentioned (as they are at other universities), however "birth control education" (MSVU 2021f) is listed on the Health Offices page. There are no results of pages or resources that show student parenting as a possibility accompanying the resources for sexual assault and birth control.

MSVU does have a childcare centre on campus, which is listed under campus services, via the "campus life" tab of the home page. The childcare center – called the Child Study Centre – main page shows up in the second page of results for the term "childcare." A link to their "health and safety" (MSVU 2021e) page does come up at the bottom of the first page of results. There are no Covid-19 related updates on the childcare centre page, nor are there updates about the childcare centre in the MSVU Covid-19 plan.

There is also no posted information on the ages of children accepted, costs, types of spots available, how to apply, etc, which would be helpful for any parents (student or otherwise) searching the website to know. There is, however, a lot of information about the program, how they approach the day with the children, the values and goals of the centre, and contact information. There is also a “frequently asked questions” page³³ for the Child Study Centre that briefly addresses who is prioritized for spaces – “students, staff and faculty from the Mount community” with leftover spaces “open to the public” (MSVU, n.d.) – before laying out a page worth of information on how the waitlist works. The page does not note how long the waitlist is typically, but does say “[t]he demand for a space ... far outweighs our capacity” (MSVU, n.d.).

A couple of profiles of successful student parents also came up in search results. One of these was of a student who “came to the Mount in 2011 as a sponsored refugee student” (MSVU 2017) originally from Somali and by way of a refugee camp in Kenya. The article talks a bit about her life, her family, her background, as well as how having a child in year three of her degree affected her, as a single mother with no family nearby for support. It also discusses the great lengths she went through to manage combining academia and parenting, the support she felt she received from the university, and her success after completing her degree. Here is an excerpt:

As a single mother with no family around to help, she decided to leave school to focus on bonding with her daughter. A year later, after much personal reflection and encouragement from staff at the Mount, she made the decision to go back to school to finish her degree.

³³ I did not come across this while I was doing the keyword search, but later while I was editing and double-checking information.

‘Education was the reason I came to Canada and I thought about what the future would be if I stayed home. I knew I needed to make a better future for me and my daughter,’ Abshiro explained. At this point, there was no prospect of her family joining her in Halifax. This meant she would need to find a job and rely on daycare so she could attend classes. For three months, Abshiro’s life revolved around school, work and caring for her daughter. She would wake up at 3 a.m. and study until her daughter awoke at 8 a.m. She would then go to school to attend classes, put in some hours at her job as an organizer of the Alexa McDonough Institute Girls Conference on campus, then head home to spend time with her baby before going to bed, and then start all over again the next day. This hectic schedule didn’t negatively impact her education, though. ‘My grades actually went up after I had Amal,’ said Abshiro. ‘I was more focused and better able to prioritize my school work. I owe my success to her.’ Abshiro also credits the individualized attention she received from her professors. Throughout her time at the Mount, she felt that they truly cared about her and her future. They were accommodating, with one professor allowing her to bring her baby to class when she had childcare issues. Fittingly, it was a class on the parent-child relationship. ‘Professors really try to understand your situation and accommodate you,’ said Abshiro. ‘It’s more of a family here, everyone wants the best for everyone.’ (MSVU 2017)

Another Student parent profile covers the successful experiences of a couple “in their late 30s” (MSVU 2018) with a young child, who returned to university at the same time after health issues made their original careers unsustainable. The couple appears to be white in the accompanying photo, although their race is not discussed or mentioned in the article. However, profiles of BIPOC student parents clearly specify the individuals race, which suggests that it is not discussed in regards to the students who appear white because white is the presumed default in Canadian society. The struggle of combining academia and parenting is only mentioned in regards to the mother in the article: “Roberta admits that balancing family and academics – juggling schedules and parenting – has been her greatest struggle” (MSVU 2018).

The page listing scholarships includes one that is specifically for parents, the Lawrence Hayes Endowed Scholarship (MSVU 2021c). Searching the website for “parent” brings up a link (3rd from the top) to information about the “Lone Parent Subsidy” which is actually “subsidized rental units for low income single parents who are attending university” (MSVU 2021b). The page lists a few qualifications (including that it be your first undergraduate program), and then provides a link to Housing Nova Scotia, who run the program. Neither page mentions if there is a waitlist – or how long it might be – for the program as there is for the general public housing programs (Rankin 2020).

There is a brief acknowledgment that “MSVU is home to many mature students and single parents who are also supporting families while pursuing their educational dreams” (MSVU 2020a) in an article about the creation of the “President’s Student Relief Fund” in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, meant to help fill in some gaps where federal relief funds are missing due to eligibility criteria.

Another brief acknowledgment comes in the Context portion of the MSVU Strategic Plan, wherein it states, presumably comparing itself to other universities, that “history demonstrates that we are best positioned to respond to students requiring flexibility/accommodation in the delivery of education as they balance family, singleparenthood [sic], careers and socio-economic impacts that are the reality in the lives of many of our students” (MSVU 2021a). The rest of the Strategic plan includes many points about assessing and improving access and removing barriers for “all faculty, staff and students, especially for those from underrepresented groups” (MSVU 2020b: 15) among other things, but does not mention parents specifically, though it does briefly mention building “a new child study centre and other services that would enhance health and well-being for our community” (MSVU 2020b: 22). The mention of a new child study centre did not come up in the keyword search, likely because neither the word “childcare” nor “daycare” are used to reference it and neither are student parents specifically mentioned in relation to the centre but rather a vague nod to “our community” (MSVU 2020b: 22).

The “Biology Department EDI [equity, diversity, and inclusion] Statement” (MSVU 2021d) also acknowledges student parents, though specifying graduate students in the third point. It states:

We recognize parental responsibilities that students and faculty may have. The Department will promote:

- Awareness that unexpected family emergencies do occasionally arise;
- Scheduling of Departmental social activities during regular business/school hours in a manner that strives to be inclusive;

- Directing graduate students and post-docs to the MSVU Research Office webpage that lists parental leave options for graduate students and post-docs supported by Tri-council fund. (MSVU 2021d)

Another search result is a short article from 2019 about a program designed in partnership between MSVU and the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre, “designed to support Aboriginal students in achieving their education and career goals” (MSVU 2019). The article briefly mentions the importance of supports such as childcare at the Friendship Centre, implying some of the would-be students will be parents.

Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD)

There were no results regarding student parents present on the NSCAD website at all. There was one reference to offsite childcare in the area regarding employee recruitment.

Saint Mary's University (SMU)

Seemingly inaccessible from the main drop down menus, there is a page titled “Sexuality” that discusses ways to decide if you are prepared for sex, birth control, and questions to consider in the event of “unplanned pregnancy” (Saint Mary's University N.d.d). There is contact information for university counseling services on the same page, to help talk those issues out. There is no mention of whether pregnancy tests or birth control are available through the health clinic. What information is presented is not gendered.

SMU has a page with information about and a link to the website for their onsite childcare, which is “open to all students, staff, and faculty, with priority given to those needing full-time care” (Saint Mary’s University N.d.c). The childcare centre is open typical hours, Monday through Friday 8:00am until 5:30pm, and accepts children ages three months to five years. Their fees are comparable to most in Halifax, and they accept the provincial childcare subsidy. Also like many childcare centres in the area, they operate with a waitlist. The centre’s website states that “[t]he requests for spaces in our program far outweigh our capacity” (Point Pleasant Child Care Centre 2021) and encourages applicants to make backup plans.

Under the same resource page listing and linking to the childcare centre, SMU has also listed contact information and locations for the closest public schools for all grade levels. There are also links to the city’s school board website, and a broken link to what it seems was once a list of private schools. The page with childcare and public school information does not appear to be accessible directly from the website’s main menu. There were also a couple links to provincial government run “caregiver” and “lone parent” websites under a resources page (Saint Mary’s University N.d.e).

SMU is the only university that brought up results about on campus housing that includes options for student parents. The link to “Family [and] Graduate Housing” is located near the bottom of the “Housing Options” page (Saint Mary’s University N.d.a). It includes one and two bedroom options “for student families, graduate students, and other eligible individuals associated with the University” including “married and common law couples, with or without children” (Saint Mary’s University N.d.b), disabled students for whom other residences are not accessible, and single parents. It

indicates priority goes to full-time students, though part-timers may be “considered” (Saint Mary’s University N.d.b). At the time of writing, it is also “running a lengthy waitlist” (Saint Mary’s University N.d.b), indicating the need for more spaces.

St. Francis Xavier University (StFX)

While searching “breastfeeding” on the website does not bring up any information on the university’s policies in that regard, it does bring up an article from 2014 that discusses how students still find it uncomfortable to see others breastfeeding, even when they are “knowledgeable about the health benefits of breastfeeding, hold positive attitudes towards breastfeeding and intend to breastfeed their own [hypothetical future] children” (St. Francis Xavier University 2014). The article’s language assumes anyone breastfeeding will be a mother. This may be a discouraging article for a student parent to see while searching for policies and resources to support them, especially since no policies or resources appear alongside the article in the search results.

Searching the StFX university website for childcare brings up a listing for “Campus Amenities & Services” under which “a licensed child-care facility” (St. Francis Xavier University 2021a) is included. The search does not bring up the page for the childcare center, however there is a link to it tucked down at the very bottom of the Amenities page. The linked page gives the basic necessary information: location (on campus), hours (weekdays 7:30am – 5:30pm), cost, a link to the provincial subsidy application, age range accepted (3 months – 12 years), contact number and email. The childcare page also indicates it operates with a waitlist, though there is no indication how long it is. Unlike other university childcare pages, this one also “encourage[s] [StFX

students] to contact Financial Aid to apply annually for the daycare bursary during the month of September” (St. Francis Xavier University N.d.a).

StFX also lists a “Student Parent Holiday Fund” on their “financial aid: at a glance” page (St. Francis Xavier University 2021b). The fund “gives gift cards that allow **student parents to provide for their families over the holiday season**” (emphasis from source, St. Francis Xavier University 2021b). They indicate that they helped “over 20 student parents ... many of them single mothers and fathers” (St. Francis Xavier University 2021b) the year previous, and that the number of students accessing the fund keeps growing. While small initiatives like this are helpful on a very small scale, they also point to the need for broader solutions to funding issues that, if addressed properly, would make the need for such a program unnecessary.

Another result of searches on the StFX website brings up an article about a “Fredericton, [New Brunswick] couple, both StFX alumni, [who] have donated \$210,000 to establish the Hatchette Nicholas Bursary Endowment at StFX to provide emergency funding for Indigenous Canadian students in need of immediate financial assistance” (St. Francis Xavier University 2020a). The article briefly mentions Indigenous single mothers as possible recipients, in the following excerpt:

Mr. Nicholas, former Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick, retired lawyer and judge, who currently holds the Endowed Chair in Native Studies at St. Thomas University, says they wanted to help Indigenous students in their moment of need. He says being Indigenous himself, he knows what it’s like to go to university as an Indigenous student. Finances may be limited, and the students may be the first in their

family to attend university. Students may find themselves in need of resources throughout the year to continue their academic journey.

Additionally, some students are single mothers who have extra costs associated with childcare and travel. “This bursary will help them,” he says. “We’re hoping it will make university life a little easier for them.” (St. Francis Xavier University 2020a)

There is no link to the bursary application form, it did not otherwise show up in my search, and I could not locate any additional information about it.

There is another article from February 2020, discussing how the university’s “Frank McKenna Centre for Leadership [will] sponsor 10 First Nations women to attend leadership conference” (St. Francis Xavier University 2020b). The article indicates that the conference was looking for help funding “child care and travel costs to help remove barriers to participate” (St. Francis Xavier University 2020b).

Commonalities

There are some similarities in mentions and resources among the universities, as well as commonalities with resources outside of academia. Most of the universities have an associated childcare centre, which is an important resource for student parents.

However, all the centres indicate having waitlists – with CBU noting the most specific waitlist timeline of “1-2 years” (Cape Breton University 2021a) – indicating that the resource is inadequately mismatched to needs. This can be an issue especially when drawn out waits could mean the resource will no longer be required once space does become available for the person waiting, either because they have finished their program

or their child has aged out of that resource need. The centres, though associated with the universities, also echo the operational times and policies and waitlists of most childcares across the province. This is problematic in that the centres do not reflect the operational schedules of the universities in which they are located, which offer and can even require evening courses for some programs. Student parents attending these courses and the professors teaching them do not have access to the universities' childcare resource during those courses, for instance. Having centres favor set-hour full-time childcare spaces is also incongruent with student parent needs, what with students' schedules which change each semester. None of the universities have altered their associated centers to better match the realities of students, which suggests that other factors were prioritized over student parents' needs when the centres were set up.

Another commonality among the universities was the lack of reference to student parents in their Covid-19 plans, including an absence of updates for on campus childcare centres. This was a worrying absence of acknowledgement and consideration for a demographic that faced particular challenges with the large-scale closing of important support resources both within and outside of their university.

A third commonality among these universities was the difficulty navigating websites and finding information relevant to student parents. Few mentions and resources showed up near the tops of the search results, and often there were results that indicated a resource but once on the linked page I would need to hunt around to actually find the small mention or another link (such as the link to St.FX's childcare centre that was at the bottom of another page or the link to family housing on SMU's website). All the universities would benefit from improving their search features and adding resources for

student demographic groups like student parents clearly to their homepage tabs to improve visibility and accessibility. There were some smaller commonalities that fit within themes of systems of oppression, which will be discussed below.

Differences

One main difference among the universities was the number and types of student parent mentions, documents, policies, and resources each had. For example, NSCAD had nothing but MSVU had 10 different texts (documents, policies, articles, resources etc.) that mentioned, were for, or were about, student parents. A visual overview of these are available in the table at the end of the university results section, below.

There were several resources and/or policies that only existed in some form at one or two universities. For instance, only SMU had information about on-campus family housing, though MSVU had a link to a provincial subsidized housing program for single parent students. Only Acadia had a specific policy and page regarding bringing children to the campus library. Only Dalhousie had a policy regarding breastfeeding on campus. Some individual departments had policies that mentioned student parents; a couple of universities had some additional funding specific to student parents (e.g. a scholarship at MSVU, the holiday fund at St.FX); and 4 out of 7 universities had a profile or two about successful student parents (the demographics of these parents varied). More examples can be found in the overview table below or above in the descriptions of each university's results. The flip side of these many different documents, policies, resources, etc. is that there is also a general lack of them. Regardless of which way one looks at it, the differences in offerings or the general lack of offerings, it makes it hard for student

parents to know what they can expect and/or ask for in terms of accommodations and supports.

Systems of Oppression

There are a few areas where the influence of systems of oppression can be seen on the content of the universities' student parent related materials on their websites. One example of this is the influence of sexism in the way that the difficulty of juggling student and parent roles are only mentioned in relation to the mothers and not the fathers. While many of the references to student parents were without assumptions of gender, resources about breastfeeding and reproductive healthcare often specifically referenced mothers and seemed to forget about non-binary and trans student parents to whom these resources could also apply, reinforcing cisheteronormativity. Praise of overwork in some of the student parent profiles aligned with ableist notions around what marginalized students are expected to do in order to be successful. More details are provided in the discussion section about these instances and the issues around them.

There were several references to Indigenous student parents among the universities, half of the profiles were BIPOC student parents (one among them a refugee), and there were multiple references to single parent students. This was interestingly diverse in comparison to the literature about student parents, which highlights the absence of diverse student parents' perspective in said literature even more.

An Overview of the University Website Results

A table that provides a simplified overview of how many mentions of student parents and/or their needs I found on each university's website is on the next page. The results from the websites will be discussed alongside those of the focus group in chapter 5. The summary of the focus group demographics, and then the results of the focus group discussion are presented in the following two sections respectively, after the overview table.

Table 1: The student parent mentions (on a webpage, resource, policy document, etc.) for each Nova Scotia university website presented by theme of result.

Theme of Result	Acadia	CBU	Dalhousie	MSVU	NSCAD	SMU	StFX
Breastfeeding Policy	-	-	Y	-	-	-	-
Childcare (onsite)	-	Y	Y	Y	-	Y	Y
Covid-19 plan	Z	-	-	-	-	-	-
Dependents on Health Coverage	Y	-	-	-	-	-	-
Financial Supports	-	-	-	Y(2)	-	-	Y
Childcare Cost Reminders on Bursary Applications	-	-	Y	-	-	-	-
Healthcare Services	Y	Y	-	Y	-	Y	-
Articles about Programs or Resources	-	-	-	Y	-	-	Y(2)
Links to Government Resources	-	-	-	Y	-	Y	-
University-wide Policy Planning	Y(2)	-		Y	-	-	-
Departmental Policy Documents	Y(2)	-	-	Y	-	-	-
Profiles	Y(2)	Y	Y	Y(2)	-	-	-
Family Housing	-	-	-	-	-	Y	-

Dashes (-) indicate no results upon website search, while Y indicates a result referencing student parents or caregivers. The number in parentheses (#) next to the Y indicates the number of different results (webpages, resources, policy documents, etc.) referencing student parents for that theme. Z indicates the presence of a potentially useful feature for student parents, but no specific mention of the demographic. For more specific information about any of these results, please read the more detailed section above.

Focus Group Demographics

The demographics questionnaire was separate from the focus group discussions, which was done to ensure participants anonymity with this bit of information. This also means that I cannot remove the two extra submissions from people who did not follow through with the focus group, because I do not know which they are. Therefore, although I am going to talk about the results of the demographics survey here, for which there are 10 responses, there are only 8 who continued on and participated in the focus group portion of the research.

All participants identified themselves as currently enrolled students in Nova Scotia universities; 7 participants were full-time, and 3 said they were part-time students. Five of the participants were in Bachelor of Arts programs, 4 were in Bachelor of Science programs, and 1 in Education. Participants' ages ranged between 28 and 46, with most being in their thirties. Five had two children, 3 had a single child, and 2 had 3 children. The children's age range was wide: from expected soon to 21³⁴. Of the children, 1/4 were over 10, and 3/4 were under 10; just under half of the kids were not yet school age.

Despite intentions and efforts to include participants with diverse identities, participants were rather homogenous (see the methods chapter for discussion on steps taken towards inclusion and suggestions for what could be improved in future projects of this nature). All participants identified themselves as woman or female³⁵ and all were Canadian citizens. Two Participants identified themselves as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous,

³⁴ As noted earlier in the methods section all participants had at least one child under the age of 18. However, having only older children was not an exclusionary criteria for participation, there simply were no participants in that situation.

³⁵ I overlooked asking for pronouns, and although anyone can use any pronouns and we should not assume pronouns based on gender identification, I have used she/her pronouns when referring to specific singular participants during this paper. However, for instances when I refer to a nonspecific or hypothetical singular person I have used a singular they pronoun.

or Person of Color) and the rest as white, though no participants in the focus group discussion mentioned race in their answers at all. Six participants were married or partnered, 4 were single parents (2 of which indicated there was some sort of arrangement with a co-parent). Three respondents indicated that they were 2SLGBTQIAP+, and all three of them were part of the 4 single and/or separated parents. Only one participant indicated they were disabled and, separately, 2 indicated chronic illness³⁶.

When I asked about yearly family income, I gave participants 5 ranges to choose from, which I based on the Nova Scotia tax brackets for 2018 (Government of Canada 2019). These ranges were as follows:

\$29,590 or less;

\$29,591 to \$59,180;

\$59,181 to \$93,000;

\$93,001 to \$150,000;

\$150,001 or more.

Out of those categories, the lowest was the most populated, with 4 participants (all of the single parents). The rest of the participants were spread over the remaining categories. One participant abstained from answering this question. In terms of funding their education, 4 participants indicated they had part-time employment, 8 indicated the use of student loans, 3 had scholarships, 3 had grants, 3 received child support, 6 had partners with full-time employment, one was using their own savings, one had financial assistance

³⁶ Many consider chronic illness a disability, though I had it in a separate category on the demographics form so have noted it separately.

from their parents, and one had funding from their non-academic career. Many of these overlapped: 9 out of 10 respondents indicated more than 1 source of funding.

I did not do any additional analysis on the demographic categories, since this was not the point of this research and would be rather limited given the small sample. Rather this section is more important as an indication of who was involved in the focus group discussions and who has been left out. Although there is still a lot of people (whose opinions and experiences are valid and valuable to this topic) who are missing from this project and the focus group discussion that I will outline below, I hope that this information could be used to bring more attention to – and perhaps eventually fill – the gaps that persist in the literature around the subject of student parents.

Focus Group Discussions

The results of the focus group discussions are presented here organized by the basic overarching themes of commonalities, differences, and systems of oppression. There are not hard distinctions between these themes; there are many portions that overlap. Many of the commonalities have variations underneath what ties them together, and there are commonalities within smaller groups underneath differences. There is evidence of systems of oppression (sexism, ableism, classism, etc.) woven throughout those similarities and differences, and of course this is all heavily influenced by the demographic make-up of the participants. I have separated commonalities and differences based whether there were there more commonalities or more differences within the group for each topic of discussion (e.g. childcare or employment). Evidence of the influence of systems of oppression have more variation among participants as these do tend to show

up more obviously for those with more marginalized identities. Participants did not tend to name these categories of oppression outright, for instance those who described their (individual scale) issues with chronic illness did not connect this directly to ableism (social scale), however it is conceptually connected. These overarching themes will be discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter.

Commonalities

There were quite a lot of overarching commonalities between participants' experiences in the focus group discussion. Those commonalities were: difficulty managing the conflicting roles of student and parent, financial strain, inadequate childcare, reliance on family support, the absence of friends from their narratives, nonparticipation in social extracurricular campus activities (clubs, groups, events), themes of their experiences of and suggestions for policies, and discomfort asking for and receiving support. There is, of course, some variation in the details underneath these categories, which I will also point out and for some categories discuss more in the section titled "Differences" below.

All of the participants talked about the difficulty of managing the conflicting demands of academia and parenting. Comments included that it was "challenging to balance" (P4), that parenting "takes up a lot of headspace" (P1), that "study time and class time are impacted by [the] children and vice versa" (P5), and that it is "understand[able] why many people choose not to pursue further education after having a child" (P8).

The challenge of balancing both was true for the single parents as well as the partnered ones. Most mentioned the importance of schedules, being organized, and trying to plan for the unexpected – or at least “hope the unexpected doesn’t come up like the kids getting sick or trouble at daycare causing you to miss classes and lose time set aside for projects or studying” (P1). Another participant noted that she felt “like I have to account for every minute of my time” and that she did not “get time to do things for [her]self” (P5). Similarly, another wrote how she had “forgot[ten] how much easier it is when you’ve had a break to be motivated and accomplish everything” (P4), after her child had been to their father’s for the weekend.

Another participant shared that she felt the need to “lower [her] expectations” (P8) for what she could handle, and had to outsource tasks (e.g. by paying for a cleaner) or settle for meals she deemed less than ideal nutritionally, that she would not have in the past. She also wrote: “I don’t think most of my classmates have to put near as much mental and emotional energy into making their education happen. I’m not saying they have it easy, but there is a whole other dimension of emotional labour that comes with having a family” (P8).

Other tactics participants mentioned for trying to balance their roles included asking for extensions, choosing online and recorded classes for flexibility, using additional childcare (outside of children’s school and/or regulated childcare hours), seeking support from university counseling services, and working after their children’s bedtimes.

Most participants also mentioned finances being strained in some way, whether that be from the high costs of childcare, being unable to find work (at all or the amount

necessary) due to childcare costs and time, losing jobs unexpectedly, not qualifying for Employment Insurance, the insufficient amounts allotted by student loans, and/or relying on the food bank.

The participants that mentioned student loans found it, and the qualifying rules, insufficient. One said that she “felt like [they] carefully budgeted [the] student loan to last throughout the year but unexpected things [still] kept coming up” and so “things were very tight money-wise” (P5), however the bump in payments because of Covid-19 had been beneficial. Another expressed frustration that the needs assessment for student loans is based on the previous year’s tax assessment, and how this was complicated because her “financial situation ha[d] drastically changed” (P7). She had to resort to a student line of credit through her bank, which she said was incredibly hard logistically to set up during Covid-19 and caring for children she could not bring to the bank. Even after getting it approved, she continued to have trouble accessing it. She said: “university is so expensive, nobody has the money saved for it! Especially someone with a family” (P7).

All of the participants mentioned childcare in some way, and overall, the message seemed to be that, no matter the types they used, the childcare available was inadequate to meet needs. Though there was variation in how participants framed the childcare they could access (whether they liked it or not, for example), most participants were pulling together childcare from several sources and still having difficulty juggling everything. A couple of participants had school aged children, and one mentioned depending on the afterschool program as part of a complicated schedule of childcare meant to keep costs lower and still leave enough time for study.

Some participants were grateful for on campus childcare centres, which offered convenience and allowed them to be close to their child/ren, others for the support their childcare centre offered with other parenting issues, such as transitioning children to two homes upon a relationship split. Others were more critical, citing issues such as no or few “infant spaces ... in the local area” (P8), lengthy waiting lists, the costs, and the unavailability of part-time spaces. One participant mentioned having to change providers often, which created additional problems.

Extended family was a major support for all but one participant, mostly for additional childcare during evenings and weekends. Participants mainly mentioned theirs and their partner’s parents as the ones most likely to offer this support. For some this created issues with additional travel time requirements, and for one a baby that would not take bottles when away from home.

Although the question that asked about non-university supports mentioned family and friends as one possible avenue of discussion, nobody mentioned friends in regards to that question or elsewhere during the focus group. Perhaps it is unsurprising then that participants overall had not participated in extracurricular events on campus, save for a single exception of a family friendly tree-lighting event during the holidays that one participant mentioned enjoying with her kids. Participants cited a few different reasons for this. One participant did not attend any specifically because they were a distance student and events were only in person. Others mentioned the inaccessibility of events, particularly the lack of childcare and time, scheduling conflicts, and feeling that events and groups were geared towards younger students. Regarding childcare, one participant said: “I think I would be more inclined to attend events if they offered childcare, or held

child-friendly events that we could do together. [...] I would be interested in meeting other student parents and perhaps the universities could facilitate this. Community is really important...” (P4).

Relatedly, one participant noted that “[a]s a lone parent, it is difficult to navigate certain events on campus as they are held in the evenings. There were a few events that I was interested in but could not attend due to timing” (P3). Another said: “[m]y biggest limitation is time. There are never enough hours in the day. For every task I choose to complete, I must ignore 4 other things. It doesn't mean those tasks aren't valuable, or necessary, or enjoyable. Sometimes they just have to wait, or not happen at all” (P8). A couple of other participants mentioned that they were “not there for the extras”, “attend class as though it is [their] job” (P7), and “would never feel very compelled to stay on campus longer than necessary for extra-curricular groups or events” (P1). Half the participants also talked about not seeing themselves “reflected in the groups/clubs at the school as a mom” (P4) due to age differences. Conversely, one of the participants “would LOVE to” access groups and clubs, “however all of these activities take place during mostly evening times when I’m making supper for myself and kiddos and can't usually find childcare for this type of activity that is just for me. I reserve my childcare requests for emergencies only so that I have a better chance of getting a yes response,” (P6), the latter part which echoes another participant’s point about having to choose which tasks to ignore.

One parent mentioned that while she does not participate in extra-curricular events, she does “make a point to connect with other mature students and student parents when [she] meet[s] them” because “[i]t always helps knowing you are not alone” (P8).

Several participants indicated they had “inquired as to a parent/student society,” however were “disappoint[ed]” to find “it didn’t exist” (P2). One participant had this to say: “I like the idea of having a parent student group, but its [sic] clear from reading these discussions that a lot of [student parents] have a heavy workload already, it might be hard for us to take the initiative to start this kind of group” (P4).

In terms of policies, there was generally a lot of variation on what participants focused on specifically, however overall, the criticisms of policies and/or rules, or the lack of them, tended to be because they required more work from the student parent and/or treated them as if they could not make their own decisions. One broad example of this that participants indicated is simply a lack of policies acknowledging student parents. This absence makes more work for the student parent because they take on all the responsibility to set up their own accommodations outside of the university, which may work if they personally have the resources for this. On the other hand, the student must do the extra work of seeking out accommodation, make their case for why they deserve it, and hope that the person on the other side is receptive. Participants did note that their professors were often understanding, though this was not always the case, and regardless that it was tiring and time consuming to seek these individual accommodations each time they had a different teacher. If there is no policy on bringing children to class, for instance, but their childcare unexpectedly falls through, the student parent may have multiple backup options they can call in to watch their child, as one participant indicated she had to set up. Maybe they have no backup, so they decide to skip the class and then possibly take steps to try to catch up on the materials and discussions they have missed. Or maybe they decide they cannot miss the class but also do not have back up childcare,

so must reach out to their professor to ask for permission to bring their child to class with them; how well that goes depends a lot of the professor. One participant was frustrated at being in that situation and having the professor remind her to keep the baby “quiet,” which she found “a bit insulting” because “[w]ho wants to bring a screaming child to a lecture hall?” (P2).³⁷

With the problematic³⁸ policies and/or rules that do exist – in syllabi by individual professors or by the university at large – the consequences and options are similar to policies that do not exist. For example if professors have ‘no-cellphone’ policies in their classes, the student may have someone else be emergency contact for their child’s daycare while they are in those classes; this only works if they have someone who can tag in. On the other hand, they could negotiate and self advocate, asking for permission to have their phone on and/or check their phone occasionally without penalty (e.g. without having it interpreted as a signal that they are being deliberately rude or purposefully not paying attention); how this goes will depend largely on the professors reaction and whether they deem the student’s reasoning valid. Another specific example participants mentioned is strict deadlines. One participant shared her frustration with “strict deadlines to assignments” (P2) by saying:

I realize that [strict deadlines] are there for a reason, because some students need [...] deadlines so they are not overwhelmed with work at the end of the semester but I've come across some profs that I've had to beg to move a deadline. Parents just don't have the same access to free

³⁷ I suspect that such a reminder would not have been so “insulting” if it was part of a document outlining the expectations for everyone involved and not a one to one interaction with an imbalance of power that turns the comment into a patronizing reminder of being a burden.

³⁸ Problematic in that various circumstances are not taken into account in the development of the rule.

time as other students do. My evenings are not open to being able to study. I need flexibility in deadlines to accommodate the wellbeing of my children and when they need their Mom, I need to be able to tend to them and not worry about an encroaching paper due date. (P2)

The policies that participants liked, or that they wanted more of, could be categorized into cohesive themes such as having more control, flexibility, access, acknowledgment, and support (especially in regards to childcare and money). These included subsidies for childcare and housing, flexible deadlines (to submit later if things come up or potentially ahead of time – as one participant noted) and schedules, permanent breastfeeding supports and spaces, changing tables in campus bathrooms, more childcare options (including evening options), reduced or no-cost childcare, being able to turn off the camera during online classes for breastfeeding privacy, being able to have their cell phone on for emergencies during class, more financial support in general, and policy that specifically acknowledges student parents. When one participant mentioned that she wished the price for childcare was covered, she also said that this felt like a “dream” (P7). Evening childcare was mentioned in relation to events, but also to mandatory classes that are sometimes scheduled during that time.

As for more “financial support,” one participant wrote: “I don’t know where they³⁹ come up with equations, but sweet lord, look at what we actually pay. We live a modest life and school is expensive, let alone not being able to work as well” (P7).

Another mentioned the “lack of insight the university and the staff have about how hard [the pandemic] has been [for student parents]” (P2). Two participants agreed that they

³⁹ The participant is referring to people in charge of “financial support” (p7), though it is unclear what types of financial support programs (or the lack of them) she was thinking of specifically.

“would really appreciate it if the school had one standard policy for student caregivers” (P8), elaborating that:

There is a policy in place at every university regarding student athletes, which recognizes the unique role they fill in the university landscape. Perhaps this would be a good starting place for building a new policy for student caregivers. Right now, it feels like these situations are handled based on courtesy. This is all well and good, until someone decides not to play ball. (P8)

The other added that “[o]n an individual level, most professors are willing to give extensions or make accommodations, but it also takes time for us to self-advocate and communicate with our professors” (P4).

One final commonality across focus group participants was that they all seemed hesitant to ask for and/or use supports that were available, more so the supports or accommodations that had to be sought out and requested on an individual basis. Participants expressed hesitance to use or request extensions, to rely on family members for additional childcare, and/or to inconvenience their partner’s schedules (for those who had partners). One participant said that she tries her “best not to expect anything like special treatment for having a sick child” (P1). There is perhaps common ground between this reluctance and the way they mostly noted small and practical changes they wished to see in university policy. Putting forward ideas for large scale changes when you are used to making your requests as small and non-intrusive as possible is not an easy thing; indeed one participant did broach the topic of free childcare, but brushed it off quickly like it was a joke – “hahaha, I can dream” (P7) – rather than a valid suggestion.

Differences

Despite a lot of overarching commonalities among the experiences of participants, there were a few categories within which the variations were more evident than similarities, including: parenting responsibilities, paid work, reactions to changes from Covid-19, experiences with non-social university supports, and knowledge of university policies. There were also a few categories that, despite the overarching similarities that brought them together, also had a lot of variation underneath that I want to reiterate here, such as amount of family support and the effects of financial strain.

There was variation in what I will call parenting responsibilities, meaning that some participants had partners who shared the work of parenting, others had to navigate the particular blends of logistics, communications, and boundaries that can come with being a step- or co-parent, and some were single parents with varying amounts of involvement from a second parent. Those who mentioned being a step- and/or co-parent talked about the extra work it can require, the “ups and downs [trying] to navigate” (P1) the different relationships brought. Single-parent participants wrote about the financial and time strains that come with their “full responsibility” (P3), and how they “don’t often have relief from [said] responsibilities” (P6). The father of one participant’s children lived “in another province” and she noted that because of that “even if there is an emergency, it is all on me to make arrangements. Our family is in a constant state of fragility and vulnerability” (P6).

The participants who mentioned their roles as wives wrote about the support that their husbands and extended family gave, particularly when it comes to childcare and finances. One noted that she “wouldn’t have gone back to school” without the support of

her husband, “parents and ... in-laws” (P7). Others did not have extended family nearby for support in addition to their husbands. A couple of the participants also shared that the demands of combining academia and parenting put extra stress on their husbands and their relationships with their husbands. One noted, “it hasn’t always felt like we were on the same team” and that “there were definitely times when my education pushed his needs to the back burner” (P8). The same participant noted that her husband has “always been supportive, ... because he can see the long term benefits” (P8). Another said that her “role as a mom/daughter/wife took a backseat since [she] was just not physically available” (P2) due to long hours.

There was also a lot of variation in the paid work participants did or did not engage in. Some had part time jobs, some could not work for various reasons (mostly due to lack of time and high childcare costs), and one had a very supportive (part time) career in addition to her studies. One participant pointed out “there seems to be an expectation that all students will work summer jobs and funding is based on that, but it can be a lot more tricky for students who are parents” (P5). For her this was impossible for several years because of injury as well as the difficulty in securing “work and childcare during Covid” (P5). Another participant pointed out that, “no one is hiring a single mother who goes to university full time for a summer job. And even if they did, the summer job doesn’t pay enough for childcare” (P6). Another mentioned having to work two jobs in addition to going to school, to “pay [her] bills and childcare” and that she was thankful her “workplaces are flexible,” allowing her “to do some studying when time permits” (P3). Another talked about being in the same career as her husband, though a part-time version in comparison to his full-time, and the supportive and flexible culture of their

employer, which she noted had “a lot more” (P8) resources and supports for families than did her university, related perhaps to the different expectation her employer had for its employees as compared to those that universities had for their students. She noted that these resources “helped ... enormously” (P8).

Changes within and outside of universities during the Covid-19 pandemic also had varied effects on participants. Some emphasized benefits from the flexibility in changing to online learning, others felt their flexibility of time had reduced due to combining all their responsibilities under one roof. One participant mentioned that having her children home due to Covid-19, with supports such as schools and childcare centres closed and a husband still working “a full time job” (P2), had drastically decreased how “productive” (P2) she had been with those supports in place. Indeed, several participants mentioned that Covid-19 had made trying to find childcare harder. One participant said she was “juggling academia at home ... during naps and when the kids are in bed” (P1). On the other hand, one participant mentioned that changes to classes due to the Covid-19 pandemic had been helpful. She said the asynchronous delivery had been helpful “since [she] can work ahead when [she is] less busy. This helps at times, like mid-term or end of November, when the work piles up” (P4).

Although none of the participants participated in social clubs, groups, or extracurricular social events, as discussed in the previous section, there was one big difference between participants in this regard: while some participants indicated that they would love to join in given the right supports, others did not indicate any interest, although it is unclear if that would change under different circumstances.

As for supports and resources that were more practical rather than social, participants had a variety of experiences with them. Some of the participants indicated they had their own family doctors and/or access to resources via their partners and/or workplaces and thus had not made use of campus resources. One participant pointed out that most of the universities' supports and resources were inaccessible for distance students, who could not go to campus. Others indicated they had good, timely experiences with accessibility services, campus physicians and mental health services, access to bursaries, and holiday specific funding initiatives through their universities. Flexibility and ability to book appointments online were mentioned as positives. One person shared that "it took a bit of following up" (P8) with her professor to get accessibility support changes to her exam time because it conflicted with her baby's feeding time in the evening, but overall, it was a positive experience.

While the policies that participants liked and disliked had common themes, there was variation in how participants talked about those policies. There was perhaps some confusion over what counted as a policy. For instance, four participants said they were not aware of any university policies, rules, or regulations that made their time harder, when asked specifically. However, they had elaborated elsewhere in the focus group about struggling with the combination of parenting and academia, citing things like childcare accessibility and the timing of mandatory classes that would certainly qualify. One elaborated that she felt her own "self-inflicted" (P7) high expectations, her "need to do well" and "do it right" (P7), were more relevant.

Similarly, in answer to another question, five of the participants felt they had not come into conflict with any policies, rules, regulations, and expectations of their

professors or universities, and had found professors “very understanding” (P8 & P5) and generally supportive. However, three of them then went on, under the same question, to discuss instances where there had been conflict with the university’s expectations. One mentioned having a request turned down to use a proctor for a couple of exams. Another mentioned having to “make some extra effort to schedule back up daycare during exams or important dates” (P1). The third mentioned how the changes made for Covid-19 precautions had a “positive” (P3) effect because of mandatory evening classes that would have presented a major childcare challenge before the switch to online.

The other two who said they had not come into conflict with policies attributed this, respectively, to being new to the program and to being in a program with lots of other caregivers who understood the demands. However, one had been given advice about “which professors to take courses from, as they would be very accommodating” (P7), insinuating there were certainly professors who would not be accommodating. She also noted that although she had been told to request extensions, when necessary, that “[t]he reality is, I cannot take as much time [as needed], or I would be so far behind” (P7). The other mentioned that she does not “like to have to ask for extensions,” but the times she had, it “was no big deal” (P5).

One participant noted conflicts but said that she could not “think of a direct policy or rule that would have caused [the] conflict... but [she] certainly [has] a lot of conflict with [her professors]” (P2). She mentions having to bring her child to school several times and being reminded to keep the child “quiet” (P2). She “found that to be insulting” as “[w]ho wants to bring a screaming child to a lecture hall” (P2).

Lastly, one other participant indicated that she struggled a lot with the changes in expectations and rules that came with Covid-19 and that reaching out to professors had mixed effects, creating conflicts. One professor, who was himself a parent, was unwilling to be flexible, and indicated she should “try harder” (P4). The participant eventually reached out to university officials above the professor, and believed the university ended up putting pressure on all professors to extend deadlines because of the number of students struggling. Although she eventually got the much-needed extension, along with the rest of her class, she “felt really alone at this time” (P4). She also notes that during the whole process no one referred to any specific policies or rules.

In addition to the above comments, several of the participants mentioned connecting with professors about expectations ahead of time or at the beginning of courses so as to lay a base for how to approach conflicts in deadlines and the like during the course and build rapport.

Another area that showed a lot of differences was in the amount of family support participants had. There was of course variation in number of parents within the family unit, as well as participants having various amounts of extended family available to offer additional childcare and other supports. One participant had no extended family to rely on, whereas others had multiple sets of grandparents and their own siblings that helped out. These make a big difference in what one can juggle.

One final difference to note is that although all participants discussed money and the strain that university had put on their budgets, the impact of that strain varied significantly. Some dealt with valid discomfort over temporary budget reductions, but felt it was worth it for the better job later. One was frustrated that the savings she had put

away for her retirement disqualified her for childcare subsidy. Others were regularly running out of money and relying on the food bank. These are all very different experiences in terms of everyday effects.

Identities and Systems of Oppression

A third theme throughout the focus group discussions was the identities that participants held, how they did and/or did not talk about them, and the systems of oppression that were hinted at. In other words, in the ways that participants talked about their identities and the effects of those on their experience, there was evidence of the influence of such systems as racism, sexism, heteronormativity, classism, ageism and ableism even though participants did not characterize their experiences in that systemic way. In each question, participants were encouraged to think about the additional layers to their experiences, outside of their identities of parent and student (i.e. race/ethnicity, citizenship, income level, marital or relationship status, gender, sexuality, age, disabilities and/or conditions, neurotype, health, etc.), and they did write about some of those. There were also some blatant silences, which are telling in their own, albeit limited, way.

For starters, no one mentioned their race/ethnicity, citizenship, or neurotype during the focus group. The demographic data suggests there were possibly⁴⁰ two BIPOC participants, no international or immigrant student, and possibly one participant was disabled with a cognitive condition (which could include neurodivergence such as ADHD, autism, generalized anxiety disorder, etc.). There were however plenty of

⁴⁰ Possibly because two participants who filled out the demographics survey did not continue to the focus group discussions (by their own choice), and I do not know which two. Since no one spoke of their race or ethnicity in the discussion, I also have no way to know if the BIPOC individuals participated or not. The same goes for the possibility that a participant was disabled.

Canadian citizens, white, and neurotypical participants. No one, however, mentioned these aspects of their identities' during discussions, though the questions did reference them. The absence of these acknowledgments is itself a demonstration of the influence of systems of oppressions on the way we talk about these factors, particularly in relation to those who are privileged.

When participants were specifically asked to consider how other parts of their identities interacted with their student parent experience, they spoke variously of being step and/or co-parents, single/lone parents, wives, daughters, low income / “financially unstable” (P6), pregnant, physically disabled, chronically ill, employed, 2SLGBTQIAP+, and being an older/mature student. They characterized some of these as positives that provided support, others represented additional stresses, and some were seemingly neutral (such as being queer).

The 2SLGBTQIAP+ participants, for instance, shared that they felt welcome in queer campus spaces, and that they would like to date, but did not have enough time due to parenting and school. This seems fairly neutral until connected with the demographic data that shows that the 2SLGBTQIAP+ participants were also all single parents and in the lowest income bracket. Additionally, one pointed out that “[p]eople tend to assume that if you are a parent, you are heterosexual” (P4). This is heteronormativity. The way that none of the participants spoke of friends – even though I included “friends” as one of several examples in a question about supports – and spoke only of their close family members (their children’s fathers and grandparents for example) could be related to the

influence of amatonormativity⁴¹ in our society. The way we – as in Canadian society, broadly speaking – tend to categorize parenting supports as something that we should only lean on close family (or paid strangers) for, is interestingly limited.

Relatedly, there were a lot of heteronormative and sexist gender roles alluded to in the focus group discussion by those participants who were partnered and/or married (who were all heterosexual). These were mostly discussed obliquely, for instance by expressing regrets about having to ask their husbands to take on more household and childcare tasks. One participant was more direct in saying specifically that “there [are] a lot of gender expectations of who does what work” (P5). She felt that even though her husband was participating and taking on more responsibilities, the gaps created stress due to the expectation that “others will judge [her] because [she is] the woman in [the] relationship” (P5).

While many of the partnered participants also mentioned relying on their partner and/or their co-parent for some childcare, emotional support, and financial support, they also expressed some difficulties. One participant mentioned that her husband had originally agreed that she could do courses evenings and weekends, but was having a hard time readjusting his schedule to actually accommodate her absence during those times. Another mentioned trying “to accommodate activities that [her husband] wants to do” because of his “sacrifices” to “allow [her] study time” (P2). The single-mothers were not free from these sexist and heteronormative expectations either. One participant described the extra labour involved in taking her child to and from his father’s home so

⁴¹ Amatonormativity, a term coined by Professor Elizabeth Brake (n.d.), is when there is a relationship hierarchy based on the assumption that sexual and/or romantic partnerships and marriages – such as those normalized in the ideal of the nuclear family – are best, most important, and a goal everyone is or should be working towards. It is also related to the way we view and categorize types of relationships as looking certain ways.

that she could attend an evening class. She mentions that she is “working so hard on having good co-parent relations, but it is hard” (P4) and that she feels that there is an additional pressure for her to teach her co-parent “to be a better parent” (P4).

Finances are related to this in a way, as all the partnered or married participants had another adult in the household working fulltime and bringing in money, whereas the single parents did not. Regardless, most of the participants discussed the high costs of university, most were using student loans, and most also found those student loans inadequate. The effects of this varied greatly between situations and made it especially hard for those in the lower income brackets.

Alongside the classism of high costs and limited financial assistance, there was a lot of ableism – expectations that clashed with the reality that physical and cognitive ability varies and that disability exists, and the fact that space for this variance is often not present. For instance, three participants noted that their various health conditions (pregnancy, a chronic condition that flares with stress, and long term but temporary disability during accident recovery) placed additional demands and limits on their time and ability to juggle parenting and university because of fatigue and the need for additional but basic self-care (i.e. taking the time and effort to eat nutritionally).

Another example of ableism was accessibility issues with events, resources and supports, and even mandatory classes. For instance, a couple of participants mentioned how, as distance students, they found university resources hard to access, or “near impossible” (P7). One shared that, “[e]ven with things moving online due to [C]ovid, I don't often find time to engage with the university community in any way outside of classes” (P5), echoing the time constraints many other participants expressed. Another

participant who was not a distance student, but lived far from the campus, also noted travel time and scheduling “on evenings or weekends” as reasons for not participating “in most campus activities” (P8). Lack of childcare during events and night classes was also an issue. Relatedly, some participants mentioned feeling like events and groups were geared at younger students, which could be connected to ageism in university assumptions about student ages and in participants’ own assumptions about appropriate activities for various age ranges.

There was still more ableism in the lack of accessible information about policies and supports. Several times during the focus group one person would mention a support or program, and another would then express interest in knowing more about it, or relief that such a resource existed. After learning of some breastfeeding policies and supports that she would need, one participant said that it was “something you wouldn't know about unless you went looking for that information” (P1).

Lastly, one participant, when talking about the support she had received, said: “I don't think it is fair to expect a need to be met that hasn't been voiced. ... I think that if a policy is in place, the need has been voiced” (P8). Although it was not discussed further in the focus group, under an intersectional lens this brings up some interesting questions about which, whose, and how many voices and requests are necessary for needs to be acknowledged and valued enough that policies and supports are put into place. I will elaborate on in the discussion chapter.

My Experience As A Student Parent

During my time in undergrad and in my masters, I have only rarely come into contact with individual people within academia who were rude, dismissive, or hostile about my being a student parent. There were of course a few, but not many. Most people were gracious and understanding and tried to help in the limited ways that they could, with encouragement, extensions, being patient and friendly when I brought my baby to class, etc. For me, the big stresses of being a student and a parent at the same time did not come from those interactions, instead, they came from the policies and expectations that made navigating beyond the pleasantries exhausting and confusing (on top of the exhaustion and confusion that being a student or being a parent typically bring on their own, that is). I have no doubt that these experiences were influenced by parts of my identity, beyond being a parent, and the ways others reacted to that, whether positive, negative, neutral or somewhere in between – if I were not white, was an international student, or had struggled with my grades, my experience would have no doubt been different, perhaps less cordial, though I cannot say precisely.

During my first pregnancy, one of the first sets of policies I stumbled over was for student loans. I had the incredibly good fortune for my child to be due at the end of a semester, though right in the middle of the year. I worried what would happen if I went into labour early and missed any final papers and exams. I knew vaguely that one unfinished course could cause problems with my loans for the following semester/s, and there was no information about the situation online at the time. This was nearly 9 years ago now, and Nova Scotia Student Assistance has since updated their website to include

clearer expectations on what happens with failed or incomplete courses.⁴² At the time, I tried calling the student loan information line, but talking to someone who worked there yielded little information and only superficial reassurances about how they may or may not consider it grounds to suspend my loans, but could not say for certain ahead of time. This was stressful because without loans I would have had to drop out, so I did what I could to prepare and finish things ahead of time. Final papers were easier to sort out, as they could be turned in ahead of time, as long as I found time to finish them. Exams were scheduled and thus harder, and as it turned out, I did need to reschedule several of them. I was lucky once more with an uncomplicated delivery that had me able to write those missed exams only a couple of weeks later, before it would have been a problem for the loans; and before I forgot the finer points of those courses. Not everyone is that lucky though, and that certainly was not the only time student loans policies, or the lack of clarity in them, added a lot of stress and uncertainty.

Another way that student loan policies required additional work as a student parent was that in order to take a lighter course load the semester following the birth of my first child, without messing up my student loans, I had to get it approved by the Dean. It was up to the Dean to deem whether my reasons were good enough to support the decision. This ended well for me, but I did hear awful stories around that time from other parents who were turned down or whose advisors were unfamiliar with the policies, resulting in trouble for the student parent.

⁴² Under a page titled “Your obligations as a Student Assistance borrower” they now note: “[y]ou must successfully complete 60% of a full course load each year (40% for students with permanent disabilities). If you fail to meet this criteria, you will be placed on probation (warning) for the purposes of borrowing any more money. The second time this happens, you will be suspended from receiving student loans or grants for 12 consecutive months. A third time and you will be suspended from our programs for 36 months” (Nova Scotia Canada, n.d.).

As a student parent, I could not take maternity leave after my baby arrived, at least, not if I wanted to have money to pay my bills. I could not manage a job on top of university and being pregnant, so I did not have access to government employment insurance programs for parents. Even if I had been able to work part time, I may not have accumulated the required minimum hours to unlock access. My partner at the time did not make enough money to support us. Although I wanted to return to classes, I also needed the temporary⁴³ income relief of student loans. The baby would have to go to childcare, of course.

However, childcare, like most things necessary for and about parenting, was not quite as straightforward as it seemed. There were very few options in the town where I attended university. There were no on-campus options, and the closest one did not take children until they were at least 18 months old. There were a few places further out, but neither my partner nor myself could drive, and public transport was limited. Neither of us had family or friends nearby, either. These factors were still true when I had my second child.

It was a professor who suggested to me that I could bring my baby to class with me. It was a possibility I had considered briefly and discarded quickly as I did not think it would be allowed – not in the sense that there were official rules against it, but in the sense that there was (and still are) unwritten social expectations that parenting be done in private or in the least conspicuous ways possible in public, and I was very aware of this. This felt especially palpable on a campus where the space was specifically designed with a particular type of unattached clientele in mind (for instance, that the only washroom with a change table was nearest the entrance most visitors to the university used was not

⁴³ Temporary because it is a debt that eventually will need to be paid off.

lost on me). In that context, it makes sense that I was worried about imposing and being a distraction to other students, and to myself. The professor kindly pointed out that regardless of those expectations, I was welcome to try it in her class. As it turned out, my first child was not at all amenable to this option – she was a baby who needed to perpetually be on the go even at a month old and could not bear to have me sit in one spot in a class for even half an hour. This did suit my second child though, who eventually spent a chunk of his babyhood soaking up university vocabulary while napping in my arms, a distraction to no one. As for the first, our only option was to juggle our schedules carefully and try to make it work. While I managed to dodge the negative effects of the stress rolling onto my schoolwork or my child/ren, there were personal and interpersonal consequences.

There were other policies too, or rather the absence of them, which created problems of varying frustrations, beyond those of money and childcare. There was nowhere to pump or breastfeed privately and hygienically (i.e. not in the bathroom), and inquiries yielded no useful supports. I did not have the energy at the time to keep pushing for it and simply let it go. There were a couple washrooms on campus with change tables, which was a new feature at the time. While this was a small win, it was limited to the areas of the university most likely to see non-university community traffic, subtly reinforcing the expectations and assumptions that students were not the ones who needed them. Little details in many syllabi reproduced this too. One example was rules against checking cellphones and keeping them off, which is something that anyone – parent or otherwise – might have reason to do for various valid reasons, although the assumption seems to be that using ones cellphone is a show of deliberate disrespect to the class and

the professor. Inclement weather policies were another source of frustration, as they usually defaulted to the university's decision to close or not, which did not always line up with public school and daycare closures or longer distance road conditions, potentially creating uncertainty and conflict in particular for due dates and tests. Extension requests requiring a certain amount of pre-planned advanced notice were also a common syllabus element that presented issues. There was also the extra time and energy it took to look up rules and policies and keep track of where they interacted. The policies were not always relevant to my particular situation, but I always noticed the ones that could be problems for any parent or the few that took us into consideration.

As I am not usually very interested in social events or extracurriculars, I personally appreciated the excuse that being busy with parenting responsibilities provided me to decline those types of events with less scrutiny and disapproval. It is ridiculous that I felt in need of a seemingly more valid excuse beyond that I just did not want to, but regardless that did not stop me from simultaneously wishing events were more accessible. Being a parent on campus, and older than many of the other students, also simply contributed to feeling out of place, which was also influenced by being neurodivergent. Feeling out of place likely also contributed to my not wanting to participate in those events and extracurriculars. I did look for and regret the absence of a group for student parents specifically, even online, even unattached to a particular university.

The experience of being a student parent cannot really be distilled down into which policies tripped me up⁴⁴. The day-to-day reality is more complex than that, with positives, negatives, and seemingly neutral elements. The details are going to be different

⁴⁴ Nor could I remember and list all the instances here.

for everyone, even though there are likely to be similarities, as there are between my experience and the focus group participants'. We share in common issues with childcare, finances, and nonparticipation in extracurricular events and groups, among other elements.

Many of these elements have followed me into my master's program experience. Now my children are a bit older and we have the new and different experiences of navigating childcare centers and public schools that are (also) ill equipped for dealing with atypical circumstances and people. Working on this project while struggling to single parent during a pandemic is an irony that is not lost on me, either: it has been a struggle to say the least. Hopefully the years will have been worth it.

This chapter covered the results of website searches on Nova Scotia universities for student parent relevant texts; the demographic data of the focus group participants; the themes of similarities, differences, and identity and systems of oppression within the focus group contributions; and a brief look at my experience with university policies as a student parent. I have mostly limited these summaries to relaying of facts. The next chapter will expand on these results and mark their connections to the relevant literature and theory.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter I will discuss how the results from the focus group and university websites, the pre-existing literature, and the relevant theories relate to answer the research questions that I started with at the beginning of this project. I have divided the discussion into three sections, to match those research questions. As a reminder, the research questions were (1) what can an intersectional lens reveal about the differences in experiences of, challenges of/to, and barriers to combining academia and parenting? (2) What do participants identify as the institutional factors (university and government policies, non-university structures and supports) most salient to their experience combining academia and parenting? And (3), what can be done to address policy gaps so as to improve student parent experiences?

The first section discusses structural inequity within academia, with the intersectional lens highlighting the influence of systems of oppression (white supremacy, sexism, cisheteronormativity, ableism, ageism, etc.) on the differences, challenges, and barriers within academia, and in particular – for the context of this project – within student parent experiences.

The second section identifies the factors participants identified as affecting their experience, and the differences and similarities between them.

The third section contains suggestions for policy and cultural change within academia that come from a combination of participant suggestions, my experience, the analysis of existing policies and supports on the university websites, and the relevant literature and theory discussed earlier in this thesis.

An Intersectional Lens

An intersectional feminist lens highlights connections among and between the literature, the university websites, and the experiences of focus group participants that fit patterns of oppression (such as from white supremacy, sexism, cisheteronormativity, ableism, and ageism) from wider Canadian society, which may contribute to and exacerbate the effects of untended differences, challenges, and barriers within academia. More specifically, the literature about the experiences of those combining academia and parenting (from students to faculty), for instance, shows a limited gender analysis and a reluctance to discuss difference. The Nova Scotia university websites show some influence of sexism, cisheteronormativity, and ableism in the ways supports are discussed and framed; the websites' content highlight the lack of diverse perspectives in the literature, and the inconsistency of supports and relevant policies for student parents also suggests broader structural inequity. The experiences of the Nova Scotia undergraduate student parents who participated in this research also show the influence of some systems of oppression, such as ableism, classism, sexism, cisheteronormativity, and racism/white supremacy. Although university supports have shifted to acknowledge some specific experiences, like those of parents within academia, the lingering generalized assumptions and expectations from systems of oppression – on the websites, in the literature, and in student parents accounts – suggests a pattern of universalizing that leaves many people and their circumstances and experiences out. Lastly, there is a focus on individual responsibility for coping that also works to shift attention away from the need for structural and systemic change.

Earlier, I contextualized this project by briefly discussing statistics showing that marginalized people continue to face exclusions, barriers, and challenges to working and/or studying in academia, and the thus far inadequate measures that have been taken to address these issues. We know that BIPOC and women faculty are underrepresented, and that this gap gets bigger the further up the hierarchy of academic positions one traces (Wolfinger, Mason, & Goulden, 2008; Universities Canada, n.d.a & n.d.b); we know less about how disability is represented and experienced for academic faculty at all levels. There are additional nuances and considerations insofar as issues of representations and equity are concerned, including mismatches between numbers of BIPOC, women, and disabled graduate students and faculty (more visible when categories are broken down) and pay gaps for those who are hired into faculty positions (Universities Canada, n.d.a & n.d.b; Henry et al. 2017). The authors of *The Equity Myth* (Henry et al. 2017) and *On Being Included* (Ahmed, 2012) speak to these nuances in more detail in their books, laying out evidence of some of the effects of systems of oppression within universities, particularly in terms of racism, colonialism, sexism, and to a lesser extent ableism. Ahmed (2012) in particular highlights how the systems and resources within academia that are meant to address inequities often serve to bolster the image of universities more than they help marginalized faculty and students. Thus, universities can point to their (often underfunded and understaffed) diversity initiatives and policy aims to highlight their progressiveness and inclusion and use them as evidence that their work is already done (Ahmed 2012).

While many marginalized groups are underrepresented in the top ranks of academia, the same is not true for students (Universities Canada, n.d.a & n.d.b). Student

demographics vary more, including overrepresentation of some groups and underrepresentation of others in undergraduate and graduate enrollment (Universities Canada, n.d.a & n.d.b), of the categories that are tracked, that is. The small number of demographic categories that are tracked leaves many intersections out of consideration (such as income level), lumps others together (such as for racialized students), and speaks to enrollment only (and not experience, completion, or outcomes). As such, overrepresentation or equal representation of some categories in overall student demographics may still be connected to systems of oppression. This means that even with over or equal representation of those categories we should still be attentive to lingering barriers discouraging enrollment from students in particular circumstances, like those with caregiving responsibilities. We should also pay attention to student experiences while in university (such as encountering racist curriculums or ableist policies) and to students' outcomes after completing their programs (whether that means continuing on to higher ranks within academia or outside of it).

As a group, parents do not face quite the same experiences or the same exclusions from the top ranks of the academic hierarchy as, for example, women and/or racialized individuals do overall. It is not quite clear if the percentage of parents working in academia is or is not representative of the Canadian population, nor what percentage of Canadian academic faculty actually has children. Parenting in academia as faculty is, however, a more common topic in the literature than parenting as a student, particularly for faculty who are mothers. We also know that more male faculty have children than do female faculty (Sallee 2013). Meanwhile, student parents in 2005 accounted for approximately 11% of university students (Van Rhijn, Quosai, and Lero, 2011). It would

not be surprising if student parents made up a smaller percentage than do faculty who are parents. There are likely many factors for why this is, including the factors that will be elaborated in the following discussion section. The obvious reason is likely that faculty are simply older than students on average, and thus are more likely to have children. Relatedly, another factor is undoubtedly that there is a general expectation in Canadian society that people should, and often do, have children when they are older than the typical age of a university student. There is perhaps a connection to ageism in the assumptions that experiencing the university student life stage and the parenting life stage at the same time is an exception rather than just another way of moving through life. Another, connected factor – the one this section focuses on – is the influence of systems of oppression on academia and the parents navigating life within it. As intersectional theory suggests, these factors all overlap and interact.

As a demographic, men with children have not faced the same consequences as women faculty and in 2002 were even the ones most likely to attain tenure (Mason and Goulden 2002). Racialization and other identity intersections were not considered specifically within that data so there is undoubtedly nuance that could be added to the picture if these factors were included. Regardless, the generalization does suggest that it is not that having children creates barriers within academia; the gendered expectations attached to who will do the majority of parenting work in cisheteronormative⁴⁵ relationships is certainly part of it, but is also only one part of the effects of systemic sexism within academia (Sallee 2013; and Wolfinger, Mason, and Goulden's 2008). As mentioned previously, both Henry et al. (2017) and Ahmed (2012) also attest to the

⁴⁵ Cisheteronormative rather than heterosexual because the key point is not the parent's sexuality but the expectations attached to that particular family formulation (i.e. gender roles and the sexist division of labour that puts more responsibilities on mothers and less on fathers).

presence of racism, colonialism, and sexism within academia. In light of this evidence, I suggest more broadly that the barriers parents within academia face are about more than having children, and many of these barriers already exist from the effects of social systems such as sexism, cisheteronormativity, ableism, racism, and ageism, which can alter the experience of those doing the parenting, depending on how they are positioned in relation to said systems of oppression.

I am working from an understanding of marginalized identities as those that, as a group, face the negative effects of systemic oppression, such as racialized, disabled, queer, and/or trans identities. Parenting, on the other hand, is generally an encouraged and expected social norm, albeit under certain conditions, in certain ways, and preferably by certain people. This is because parenting, like many roles and circumstances, is affected by the major systems of supremacy (white, abled, rich, allo-cis-hetero-patriarchy) and oppression (racism, ableism, classism, sexism). While people in general are not systemically oppressed for being parents and having children⁴⁶, being marginalized under systems of oppression does affect the experience of reproduction and parenting. These differential experiences of reproduction are also known as stratified reproduction, which describes, “power relations by which some categories of people are empowered to nurture and reproduce, while others are disempowered” (Ginsburg & Rapp, 1995: 3 in Mamo & Alston-Stepnitz 2015: 522). We can see systems of oppression enacted against marginalized people, parents, children, and families historically and currently in the deliberate and forcible use of sterilization against certain demographics [for instance, disabled people (Chen 2020)], in the ways that non-normative families have

⁴⁶ Regardless of the fact that of course parenting can be challenging at times for any of us, like any interpersonal relationship can be.

had to fight for legitimacy under the law and institutional policies [for example queer and trans parents (Gallagher-Cohoon 2019)], and in the ways that Indigenous children in particular are displaced from their families and homes at very high and disproportionate rates [in foster care now and residential schools historically (Hanson, Gamex, and Manuel 2020; Somos 2021; McKay 2018)], as just a few examples.

I argue that the challenges and barriers facing student parents in academia are not because we are marginalized for being parents, but because we contend with various and intersecting systems of oppression that have differential effects depending on who we are while we parent, student, or enact any of our everyday roles. This does not mean that students (or faculty members) with relatively privileged identities will not face any difficulties during their time combining academia and parenting, but that the intensity, regularity, and consequences are very different from those with more marginalized identities.⁴⁷ We can “simultaneously experience both discrimination and privilege” (Hankivsky 2014: 261), but some people face more of one than the other depending on the intersections of their various identities and circumstances. Marginalized students and student parents are not without agency or hope against these systems. However, the effects of individual determination and coping methods are limited without accompanying systemic change. Thus, we turn this discussion to the presence of various systems of oppression within academia and the ways our attention is drawn away from them.

Earlier, I discussed what an intersectional lens reveals about the literature regarding the experiences of those combining academia and parenting (from students to

⁴⁷ These similarities and differences, at least as far as they pertain to the participants in this study, will be discussed in more detail in the second discussion section.

faculty), and how it tends to reproduce a fairly narrow selection of perspectives, mostly has analysis limited to binary conceptions of gender with little nuance, and focuses mainly on individual responsibility for coping with differences, challenges, and barriers. There is a similar pattern in the data as a whole, with the university texts⁴⁸ and the participants' contributions echoing the themes found in the student parent literature. The limited gender analysis in the literature can be subsumed under a broader discussion of evidence of the effects of systems of oppression, which also includes other ways of ignoring difference within and between identities. The way that narrow perspectives are represented in the literature exemplifies a pattern of universalizing experience, which also shows up within participants' contributions. In contrast, the diversity of student parents represented in texts on the university websites highlight the lack of diverse student parents included in the literature, although universities did pick up the pattern of universalizing experiences in their Covid-19 responses, which did not mention student parents or their needs at all. Finally, a pattern of individualizing responsibility is present in all three areas. The effects of systems of oppression, the pattern of universalizing, and the individualization of responsibility are of course all interconnected, with the latter two working to reinforce and draw attention away from a closer look at the former. By this I mean that when policies and resources are framed as universal and responsibility is shifted to individuals, it can make it harder to see differential treatment and consequences that tie in to systems of oppression. These themes have become more visible through the lens of IBPA, which encourages us to pay attention to who is and is not included, difference alongside similarity, and how supports can actually "reduce inequities"

⁴⁸ "Texts" refers to the policy documents, press releases, blogs, event listing, support listings, etc. that I found on the universities' public websites

(Hankivsky et al. 2012b: 41) and avoid unintentional consequences so that they “do not make things far worse for others” (Oluo 2018: 77-78).

Let us start with literature’s focus on a binary analysis of gender dynamics. While it does make sense to focus on mothers’ experiences from a numbers perspective (Cho, Roy, and Dayne 2021) and because as a group they generally face more negative consequence than fathers, the overwhelming exclusion of the parenting experiences of other genders leaves out important information. For instance, it completely leaves out acknowledgment of trans and nonbinary parents⁴⁹ and generally puts forth and centers only cisheteronormative family formations: what information might these experiences add? While fathers were sometimes included in research samples, their numbers were often far fewer than mothers, which limited comparisons (Brooks, 2012 & 2014; Estes 2011; Van Rhijn, 2011). Even when one study (Scharp et al. 2021) pointed out the unusual overabundance of fathers in their study, little was offered by way of comparative details. I was unable to include any fathers in this study’s focus group, and although I am writing from the perspective of a nonbinary student parent, mine is only one experience. How has this narrow perspective limited the conclusions of researchers, mine included?

Focusing on mothers and their individual strategies has overshadowed the potential of broader approaches to viewing and tackling the effects of sexism within the culture of academia. Arguably, the sexism (among other oppressive systems) woven throughout academia, from those who built the system, expects the offloading of caregiving responsibilities, generally from fathers (often privileged by sexism) to mothers

⁴⁹ To be clear, it is entirely possibly that trans and nonbinary parents were included in studies, however our presence, attention to our experiences, and attention to the systems of oppression that can invisibilize and marginalize us were left unnamed, which leaves more space for cisheteronormative assumptions to go unchecked.

(often marginalized by sexism). This offloading is also related to cisheteronormativity, which is an “ideology [which] refers to the belief that there are two separate and opposing genders with associated natural roles that match their assigned sex, and that heterosexuality is a given” (Van der Toorn, Pliskin, and Morgenroth 2020: n.p).⁵⁰ Van der Toorn, Pliskin, and Morgenroth elaborate that:

Through their descriptive and prescriptive nature, [cis]heteronormative beliefs have far-reaching consequences, not only because they commonly lead to an underestimation of gender and sexual diversity and to backlash against people who deviate from these norms, such as LGBTQI+ people, but also because they may serve as a straightjacket for those adhering to them. As an illustration, a straight cis-gender man who endorses the [cis]heteronormative view that children need a breadwinning father and a caring mother, for example, will likely perceive a same-sex couple as lesser parents but also feel uncomfortable taking up paternity leave himself (2020: n.p.).

This is why Sallee’s (2013) suggestion that changing university culture to make it more father-friendly makes sense⁵¹: by challenging gender roles and norms so that fathers can and are expected to share the responsibilities of parenting, rather than having more policies focused on supporting women to continue juggling more than their fair share. This type of “targeted” (Moreau 2016) approach to including student parents in university policies, which is directed at an unnuanced but limited category such as ‘mothers within

⁵⁰ The article uses the term heteronormativity, though I have added the cis- in front of it here to emphasize the intermingled gender aspects and to match the wording in the rest of this thesis. I feel cisheteronormativity still fits Van der Toorn, Pliskin, and Morgenroth’s (2020) descriptions as they discuss the term in relation to both sexuality and gender.

⁵¹ Sallee’s suggestion was discussed in more detail on pages 28 and 29 of this document.

academia', is admittedly better than nothing. However, it is limited because it does not adequately address the influence of systems of oppression on academic culture and the related expectations that created and continue to feed the problems. An example of this is the sexist and cisheteronormative expectation that fathers offload their parenting responsibilities to spouses, and the way that academia is set up to reward those who do. Even if and/or when these are addressed within academia, these systems of oppression still/also exert influence outside of academia, which means that even the most robust solutions within the university will likely still affect student parents differentially based on outside forces.

As with the gendered focus in the literature, the issue of narrow perspectives is not simply about who is superficially included, but also the content discussed. Whiteness, Canadian citizenship, and neurotypical perspectives, for instance, were demographics shared by most of this project's focus group participants. Although these were commonalities for many, these identities were not discussed by participants during the focus group. I cannot definitively pinpoint a reason for this, and there are certainly many potential and overlapping explanations for the absence, for example that during the focus group I overlooked asking participants directly about why they did not mention these factors. Perhaps I could have included different questions that more clearly and specifically asked about these factors, formulated my questions differently, and/or more explicitly encouraged participants to discuss the differences among their student parent experiences. Regardless, the absence from the discussions fits the pattern of expectations normalized by systems of supremacy and oppression, in this case that we are discouraged from talking about positions of systemic privilege and marginalization.

The student parent literature I discussed earlier demonstrates well the tendency to focus on similarities and stifle discussion of difference; this focus works well towards building and reinforcing some experiences as generalizable and default, particularly if those experiences are connected to a privileged identity group. In that vein, whiteness, Canadian citizenship, and neurotypical perspectives (for example) are identities that many people are not practiced in acknowledging or discussing because of how prevalent, centered, or “default” (Yang 2018) their status is in Canadian culture. Relatedly, discussing privilege, especially acknowledging having access to it, is often seen as “extremely uncomfortable” (Yang 2018) and is thus avoided by many, even if subconsciously.

Many of the expectations normalized by the systems of supremacy and oppression hinge on assumptions that we need to talk about to start dismantling – not talking about them perpetuates the presence and effects of privileges and marginalization and their absence from further discussions. For instance, there are pervasive assumptions that most parents (even student ones) are non-disabled, neurotypical, cisgender, heterosexual, and partnered. From personal experience I have found that these assumptions are often seen as polite, and that assuming otherwise or not assuming at all are considered rude – just as in the literature, where difference is broached reluctantly. Hankivsky notes similarly, though more broadly, “that it is not necessarily human diversity that is the problem but, rather, social constructs that render differences problematic” (2004: 36). In contrast, these seemingly polite presumptions about sexuality, gender, disability, and more are often considered the rude and problematic take by those within the aforementioned communities, in large parts because they invisibilize

our existence and can complicate our access to sought after supports and resources. For student parents this means that it is assumed that we must have a spouse and parents to lean on, that we do not need time or spaces for socializing and making friends because we have our family, that we are not queer and/or trans, or that we are able to disregard our own health (in terms of sleep, rest, nutrition, etc.) in favor of our grades and parenting responsibilities, all of which are examples that I am summarizing from participants' accounts in the focus group. The aforementioned examples also show some ways that the concept of friendship is devalued in relation to romantic and/or sexual partnerships, or that being cisgender and/or heterosexual and/or non-disabled is generally seen as ideal, typical, and default within much of Canadian society (not just within academia).

These assumptions and/or expectations also reinforce our positions as other, and can force us into the position of seeking out individual accommodations – which are often seen as special treatment because these supports and adjustments are not normalized by existing policies and designs that explicitly enable inclusion – over and over again. The universities' websites do little to counter these assumptions and sometimes reinforce them under the influence of systems of oppression, which is visible in the way that supports are presented and framed on the websites I give examples and discuss this in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Although most of the NS universities' websites tended towards the general, for instance using the ungendered term of “parent” for the most part where student parents are mentioned, there are various instances where cisheteronormative gendered assumptions leak through. Some examples of this are: in the Dalhousie breastfeeding policy (see page 32-33 or McNutt 2018 & Dalhousie University N.d.a) which uses a mix

of ungendered language and also refers specifically to mothers (but not also specifically to fathers or nonbinary parents who may also be breast- and/or chestfeeding⁵²), an article about the reactions of StFX students to public breastfeeding which assumes parents doing so to be mothers (see page 37 or St. Francis Xavier University 2014), and the categorization of “reproductive health” specifically and only under the category for women on several universities’ websites. Women are not the only ones who can chest/breastfeed, nor the only ones who may want or need to access reproductive healthcare. Similarly, we can see the effects of sexism in the profiles of student parents, wherein articles about mothers always mention the difficulty of juggling academia and parenting, yet do not echo the sentiment when speaking of the experience of student fathers.

The normalization of ableist expectations around the amount of work student parents are expected to put in is also present in the profiles of some of the student parents, particularly the BIPOC women. Earlier I described ableism in a broad sense as expectations that clashed with the reality that physical and cognitive ability varies and that disability exists, and the fact that space for this variance is often not present. To be clear, it is not describing how hard student parents are working that is ableist in and of itself, but the expectations of individualized responsibility for systemic inaccessibility that are bolstered in the way student parents’ efforts are discussed. The profile discussing the experience of the student parent who was a refugee is particularly striking in this regard, detailing and praising the extreme lengths this single mother had to go to in order to finish her program (see MSVU 2017). While the profile notes that individual

⁵² Chestfeeding is an alternative way to refer to the same act as breastfeeding and is preferred by some nonbinary and trans parents as a way to disrupt the gendered assumptions linked to the more common term.

professors were supportive and “accommodating” (MSVU 2017), it does not point out how unreasonable it is that even with her professors support the mother still had to get herself up at 3 am to squeeze in 5 hours of studying daily (before adding in parenting, classes, and paid work) for 3 months to complete her program. She should absolutely be proud of herself; simultaneously, no one should be expected to work that hard to make up for the inadequacy of systemic supports and lack of design consideration for diverse abilities and circumstances.

Some other ways that expectations and assumptions about student parents show up on the university websites are: that pages dedicated to Covid-19 updates for students do not include references to students who also have caregiving responsibilities or to resources that they may need and use (such as campus daycares); that campus daycares prioritize spaces for full-time childcare which can be difficult for student parents whose schedules are not standardized across semesters, who may require more flexibility in their schedules than faculty who may have more standard on-campus hours, or who would opt for part time childcare for a variety of other reasons including but not limited to costs (this is echoed by the focus group participants in this project); and that searching “pregnancy” brings up info about birth control and sexual assault on many of the websites, but does not bring up options that imply being both a student and parent is also a legitimate option.

It is also interesting that while the literature about student parents tends to leave out discussions about identity, of the six profiles (across three of the seven university websites) on student parents who successfully completed their studies, half of them are BIPOC. This is also an example of why more quantitative demographic data about

student parents would be beneficial, as race is rarely discussed in the existing student parent literature or data and yet made up half of the profiles on the websites. Relatedly, though anecdotally, I have been told by several university contacts in personal conversations that they know of many Indigenous and racialized students with children, yet these groups of student parents do not seem to get mentioned in many studies. The disjuncture between the obvious existence of diverse student parents – visible to some extent even on the universities’ websites – and their lack of explicit inclusion in the literature signals the need for more data.

While difference deserves more attention than it has been given⁵³, commonalities are still important, though perhaps not in the way that is currently pushed in the literature. Despite the fact that the everyday experiences of participants varied in ways that lined up with their privileged and marginalized identities, similarities across their struggles combining undergraduate student and parenting expectations also harken back to the pervasiveness and interconnectedness of systems of oppression. We too often forget that the intersections of “race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics” (Coaston 2019: n.p.) to which Crenshaw referred were not just about the marginalized parts of our identities, but also the privileged ones. They are not just intersecting at separate crossed paths, but part of a whole complex interconnected map that underlies much of our society. So, of course there are commonalities across the experiences of student parents, and between student parents and other non-traditional students, or parents outside of academia, and so on and so forth. All of these systems – of oppression and supremacy – are connected. One implication of this is that it is ripe for coalition building⁵⁴, if we can

⁵³ Similarities and differences are elaborated on in the second discussion section, below.

⁵⁴ This is an implication that I wish I had more time and space to explore in this thesis.

appreciate these similarities without universalizing certain commonalities and invisibilizing the differences woven into them, aiming for “collaboration and literacy rather than unity” (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013: 796) in our approaches to intersectional analysis and action.

For example, from the participants’ contributions within our focus group and its mention in nearly all student parent literature, it is clear that almost everyone struggles in some way with childcare and with juggling parenting and university tasks, excepting those with the most privileges. As mentioned earlier, Cho, Roy, and Dayne contend that the similarities across their participants’ responses suggests “a universal experience for student–parents” (2021: n.p. para 35). While I do not disagree with much of what Cho, Roy, and Dayne (2021) discuss in their article, nor that there are needs that many student parents share, I am not convinced that the way to construct systems and policies aiming for universal accessibility is by building on generalizations about the concept of a universal experience. The concept of a universal experience seems to value sameness over difference, and the implication that sameness is more important is often used to bolster the expectation that, not only should we be able to fit our differences into whatever is determined as the standard to address those similarities, but that we should do so individually on our own time, and has thus yielded poor results in terms of helping those with needs that vary from that standard. Oluo writes that,

[f]eminist movements, for example, often fail to consider the different needs and challenges that many women of color face when they differ from what white women face. ... I’m still surprised at how often reproductive rights groups claim that they are fighting for reproductive

rights for all women, yet consistently ignore the documented racial bias in the medical field (2018: 76).

Having systems and policies aim for universal accessibility – if done with an understanding of intersectionality and the flexibility and responsiveness of design to embrace new understandings that arise – is different from labeling an experience universal.

How can we effectively address the diversity within our experiences and contexts, the intersections that have been overlooked thus far, if we foreground only our similarities? Going back to the childcare example, there are a variety of reasons why students and their children might struggle with what is and is not available for childcare. Perhaps their child is disabled and they struggle to find a space that can properly fill their needs. Making more of the same kinds of childcare available will not necessarily address this lack of inclusive design and space, unless the ableist expectations built into childcare formats – and the minds and habits of the people who interpret and deliver them – are addressed, a task that requires ability to see and make space for differences as well as not assuming there is a particular universal disabled experience. Similarly, while the fact that childcare is valuable and necessary for many, if not most, parents is an important shared point of experience, to be sure, it is at least equally important to not assume that a certain set of childcare guidelines will work for all parents. The new childcare funding agreement between the federal government of Canada and the province of Nova Scotia, for instance, acknowledges this, stating: “[t]he geography, population, and current early learning and child care system in Nova Scotia makes a one-size-fits-all approach impossible, and would not meet the needs of all Nova Scotian families” (Government of

Canada 2021: n.p.). It makes a point of specifically addressing various groups and needs, and further asserts that “we must be flexible and responsive to the needs of families in the province as they are uncovered” (ibid).

Perhaps we can understand the idea of a universal experience as simply signalling aspects that are important to a majority of student parents, however we should still be asking who this majority includes, whose experiences and contexts have been taken into account and are being prioritized, whose and what experiences are in the minority and why? Despite the literature on faculty who are parents going back nearly twenty years to at least 2002 (with Mason and Goulden’s “Do Babies Matter?”),⁵⁵ many of the same issues linger today. Perhaps part of that is due to our reluctance, in both policy and the everyday, to value differences and diversity alongside our similarities.

Of course, there have still been some improvements over the years. Despite the overwhelmingly individual focus in the student parent literature (which we will return our attention to in a bit), most universities have implemented some policies meant to assist faculty and student parents.⁵⁶ The extent of the policies, though, varies from one university to another. This inconsistency is echoed in a study by Moreau wherein universities in the UK were sorted into three categories – (1) “‘universal’ or ‘careblind’”, (2) “‘targeted’”, and (3) “‘mainstreaming’” (2016: n.p.) – according to the types and extent of policies they had relating to student parents. Recall that Moreau describes the first category, as “typified by a minimal policy intervention”, “a prevailing discourse of invisibility”, a lack of relevant policy and only “rare” specific references to student

⁵⁵ There may very well be older ones, however this is the oldest article about academia and parenting I have referenced here.

⁵⁶ It is unclear in the literature to what extent employees who are not faculty also benefit from these policies and resources (such as on campus childcare) because they are rarely if ever mentioned specifically.

parents (2016: n.p.). Moreau's conception of a universal approach to policy is clearly one that assumes it is the individual's responsibility to fit into the university's standards, and not one of a universal accessibility model wherein space is deliberately and openly created for diversity – which is more in line with Moreau's conception of “mainstreaming” (2016: n.p.). The second category, “targeted,” is described as having “some specific provision[s]” (Moreau 2016: n.p.), resources, and references to and for the demographic, like on campus childcare. The third category, mainstreaming, Moreau identifies as having the most potential, as it “tackles the cultures and structures of institutions” (2016: 918). These universities had much more supports relative to the other two categories, including more childcare options, “spaces ... dedicated to student parents”, a dedicated support liaison, as well as “guidelines for students with dependents and for staff dealing with this group” (Moreau 2016: n.p.) which covered an array of relevant topics such as accessing supports and adjustments. The NS universities I analyzed for references to student parents varied similarly. NSCAD for instance had no specifically relevant policies or student parent mentions at all, i.e. what Moreau called a “‘universal’ or ‘careblind’” (2016: n.p.) approach. The other universities had varying amounts and types of mentions, policies, and resources, i.e. mostly what Moreau called “targeted” approaches, though some seem to be angling towards “mainstreaming” (2016). Acadia is an example of a NS university angling towards a mainstreaming approach with the inclusion of student parents in various policy plans, they however are not there yet, especially with the lack of on-campus childcare. All the NS universities show room for improvement.

While the targeted approach is better than the universal approach – as Moreau defines it – in attempting to construct more inclusive policies, it is still quite limited, in that it generally focuses on narrow representations or understandings of issues, such as offering childcare but in a standard way that is mismatched with the realities of student parent needs. In this way targeted approaches still contain much of the same expectations and assumptions that Moreau's (2016) conception of universal approaches do. The problem with this type of “universal” approach – and why we need to keep moving away from it – is similar to that of having narrow representation of perspectives in the student parent literature: it reinforces the assumption that some perspectives are generalizable (usually the most privileged ones), obscures whose perspectives and experiences are left out versus whose are included, and can unwittingly reproduce stereotypes and binary assumptions that are at the root of the inequity to begin with. Moreau describes this category as showing a “prevailing discourse of invisibility as far as student parents [are] concerned” (2016). That invisibility is related to the generalization of privileged perspectives, which normalize expectations that fit the circumstances and access to resources of those with the most influence. An intersectional approach would, by contrast, account for diverse circumstances and needs, particularly from those who are marginalized. The consequences of a non-intersectional universalizing approach play out, for example, in the way that many faculty fathers face fewer issues with incompatibility (Sallee 2013; Mason & Goulden 2002); this is partly because the people and perspectives from whom the academic system was originally generalized were “[t]he ‘old (white) boys club’” (Monture 2010: 31). We can see the persistence of universalizing tendencies in the more targeted approach of the academic parenting literature, wherein the dominating

perspective becomes that of white women faculty, whose experience as mothers marginalized within the sexism built into academia becomes the privileged generalized identity that gives little space to others who may also be marginalized but whose experiences may differ in many ways.

When we pay too much attention to the commonalities, we may more often expect others experiences to match ours without critically considering potential differences and various factors that can play important roles. This pattern of universalizing is especially troublesome when the people making those assumptions hold relatively more privileges and/or power than others (such as those who make policies now and the ones who created the institutions to begin with). However, even if we do not wield much power to make or implement policies, we can still internalize the assumptions within them that are influenced by and uphold systems of supremacy and oppressions.

During the focus group, while speaking about her experience accessing pumping supports on campus, one of the participants stated that she “[doesn’t] think it is fair to expect a need to be met that hasn’t been voiced ... [and/but] that if a policy is in place, the need has been voiced” (P8). Under an intersectional lens, this brings up questions about how responsive universities are and under what conditions: how many times and by who must a need be voiced before it is acknowledged and a response integrated into the system? Is every voiced need considered equally, or are some heard and responded to differently based on who they come from? And what might influence differences in response? Often accessing support is not actually as simple as asking, as participants’ experiences in the focus group attest to, such as when being turned down for a deadline extension or permission to turn off their camera during class in order to more privately

breastfeed. Even just the act of asking can be difficult (Scharp and Hall 2019), which I will elaborate more on later.

The academic system rather seems designed to discourage voicing needs in search of structural supports, and tends to offload such responsibilities to individuals. The idea that all we have to do is ask is a potent redirection from structural and systemic issues that positions agency and the ability to control and change one's circumstances firmly in the individual. For universities whose policies and available resources align with Moreau's conceptions of the "universal" and "targeted" (2016) models, perhaps individualizing offers a sort of coverage to the gaps in both the policies that do exist and the ones that do not. It may also remain unrecognized by many because individualizing can seem to work and even feel empowering if the subject has access to the right resources, i.e. if the person has enough privilege. However, many people do not wield the particular combination of resources, leverage, and/or privileges to make that work for them.

This pattern of individualization can also be seen in the focus on emotions and coping methods highlighted in the existing literature regarding parenting and academia. This is a problem because it shifts attention away from structural and systemic explanations – that need to be addressed with policy and social/cultural change initiatives – toward individual responsibility, which puts the onus on the person struggling to find a way to adjust themselves. Changing ourselves is often not possible when the source of conflict is part of our identities (such as for disabilities, racialization, queerness, etc.), and complicated for issues such as income levels, which are also bound up with identities and the effects of systemic oppression. Finding new ways to organize our already overloaded

schedules or adding another request for particular accommodations to our lists of to-dos is not an effective way to change the institutional and social expectations that are at the root of the conflict between, for example, parent and student roles, in the long term. It is potentially not even effective in the short term, given that there is always the likelihood of having our requests turned down.

This individualization may also be connected to why it can be, as Scharp and Hall (2019) noted, so stressful to seek supports. When one person asks for their need/s to be met, and is turned down, it can seem like a personal failure that places the responsibility back onto us as individuals. In that way, it conveniently obscures the influence of systems of oppression (and supremacy) and the necessity of structural solutions, and draws our attention back to our individual lives and circumstances and what we can do on our own. This individual approach can be seen as characteristic of white supremacy culture in which “white people” believe they “are responsible for and are qualified to solve problems on [their] own,” that any “organization values those who can get things done on their own without needing supervision or guidance,” and within which there is “isolation and loneliness” (Okun, 2021: 20). This is why the classic feminist slogan “the personal is political” was and still is relevant: because issues can seem like unique, personal problems to solve that result from some failure within us as individuals, when there are actually commonalities in and across many of our experiences that require addressing systems of supremacy and oppression, changing social structures, and institutions for the problems to be effectively addressed. Which certainly does not equate to everyone’s experience of these systems being the same, and of course, it is possible for us to come together and see we share similar problems, and still not look outside our own

behaviors for the stimulus nor the solutions. This is why frameworks such as Dorothy Smith's (1987) IE, which addresses this need for us to see and consider the connection between the individual and the structural/institutional in order to find the disjunctures in need of change, and the theory of intersectionality, which offers space to connect identity and larger social forces, are important. The next section discusses the factors participants identified as affecting their experience, and the differences and similarities between participants' experiences of those factors

Institutional Factors

The above section discussed the broader patterns that indicate the influence of systems of oppression on the institution of academia and those within it. This section takes a more specific look at the factors – resources, supports, circumstances, and policies, – tying the institutional level to the individual level. Focus group participants identified many factors salient to their experiences combining academia and parenting, including childcare, finances, family support, and various policies (or the lack of them). There were both differences in the everyday effects of these factors among participants, as well as commonalities across circumstances. Many of these similarities and differences echo those in the existing student parent literature and concerns of parents outside academia as well as non-parent students within, relating to the widespread influence of systems of oppression discussed in the last section.

I am herein defining institutional factors as those factors relating to supports, resources, and policies that are connected to specific institutions (such as any level of government, churches, banks, schools and universities). Here that includes: childcare,

costs/finances, paid work, social activities/extracurricular events, university policies, and changes to policies from Covid-19. I am also including those factors that are institutional in a broader sense in that they are engrained as wider cultural norms, such as the way parenting responsibilities are shared, a hesitance to ask for help and instead strive for independence, the absence of friends, reliance on family supports, and juggling conflicting roles. Many of these in the latter category of factors (and some of the particulars regarding the former category) can also be subsumed under various systems of oppression. Indeed, there is a case to be made that systems of oppression are also institutional factors; they are arguably normalized (Adaway Group 2021) and widespread among particular institutions and structure how they function. However, the first discussion section (above) already addressed this from the wider – macro – scale, and so this section will build on and get more specific about those factors. Suggestions for how to improve some of these factors will follow in the final discussion section (below).

The factor that gets talked about the most when it comes to parents' ability to juggle life and responsibilities outside of raising their children is childcare. Although there are licensed childcare services, as well as unlicensed and unofficial options (including arrangements with friends and family), subsidies, tax rebates, and monthly income-based child benefit payments within Canada and in NS, there persists a wider problem with inadequate availability and access for parents in and outside of academia. Often promises of improvements to childcare systems are carted out before elections (provincially and federally), yet these never seem to materialize. Groups like the national branch of Child Care Now, and its partners across the provinces and territories, including Child Care Now Nova Scotia, have been and continue to advocate for affordable,

inclusive, accessible childcare for all children across circumstances, locations, and identities (Child Care Now 2021). A recent agreement between the federal government and Nova Scotia offers a five-year (2021-2026) plan with many similar goals, including major reductions in costs, more spaces in general, and aims for eventual increases in flexibility and inclusive accessibility, though it does not specifically mention universities or student parents within the lengthy document (Government of Canada 2021). It will be interesting to see how this progresses and which goals are achieved, particularly in the latter areas.

Academic institutions in Nova Scotia reflect the situation in the province and country: there are childcare options, but they are still inadequate to meet all needs. All but one university in Nova Scotia had some childcare available on campus; yet there is still not enough and what there is has many limitations. All the student parents in this study – across identities and circumstances – commented about childcare, and most used multiple types of childcare to cobble together enough time to attend to their classwork and other responsibilities (paid work, self-care). Aside from costs, an area of concern that participants brought up was the inflexible times of childcare availability, particularly when courses necessary for their programs were scheduled outside of standard childcare times; similar was the issue with preferring part-time childcare spots (for various reasons), but not being able to match it to course schedules, schedule changes each semester, or just not being able to get one of the part-time slots as they are even more limited than full-time, and not having access to childcare for events on campus. All of the on campus childcare centres maintained standard opening and closing times that did not reflect the timing of services, extra-curricular events, and classes offered on each campus.

Struggles with inflexibility of childcare hours are not unique to student parents. Anyone who works a “non-standard schedule” (Finding Quality Child Care, n.d.) in various lines of work would find few regulated options across Canada, let alone in Nova Scotia. The website Finding Quality Child Care, set up by the Childcare Resource and Research Unit and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (n.d.) also notes parallel issues with access to childcare for families with disabled children and those in rural areas. Both of these are also potentially relevant to student parents.

While the costs of childcare were a significant part of financial concerns for student parents, those in this study also struggled with the other costs of university such as tuition, books and supplies, time away from paid work, and the usual costs of living (rent, food). University costs are of issue for many across Canada, and especially in Nova Scotia where we have some of the most expensive undergraduate tuition fees across the country (Universities Canada n.d.c). As far as long-term goals, some groups are advocating for free universal postsecondary education across Canada. Shorter term goals include getting rid of interest fees on federal student loans permanently, not just temporarily due to the Covid-19 pandemic, as a step in the right direction (Federation Canadienne des Etudiantes et Etudiants 2021; Yun 2021). Costs were a concern for focus group participants across income levels, although the consequences were very different: from discomfort in a shift of lifestyle, to dependence on the food bank. While all participants were hopeful their financial strains would be temporary and improve once they completed their programs, outcomes after graduation that account for various systemic factors are difficult to locate. For instance, while Liu states that “[t]he difference in employment rates between [disabled people] and [non-disabled people] was lower

among university graduates” (2019), there is no indication of exactly how much it varied from the 30% difference reported among those without university degrees. It does seem likely, however, that while outcomes may improve, disabled graduates will still be affected by the same systems of oppression that challenge us before and during our time in academia, meaning that “better” outcomes are relative.

Many of the participants were using federal and provincial student loan programs to help them deal with the financial pressures of university. However, as noted by participants, although there were additional bursaries meant to help student parents with the extra costs of having children (childcare, higher costs of living), loan programs are also inadequate to address needs across various circumstances. This is partly due to the way that income and calculated need is based on the previous year’s taxes, which can be a problem for students whose job situations change drastically when they return to school or when they are suddenly laid off, issues participants discussed in the focus group. This is also partly related to an assumption within the student loan policies that the money will be supplemented with income earned from paid work. As one participant specified, this is particularly difficult for many parents who are already time-poor and dealing with inadequate – and often expensive – childcare resources; this is also complicated by disability and other identity factors in terms of finding appropriate and accommodating work options as well as getting hired.

Paid work – finding it, keeping it, progressing in it, and making fair and equitable wages when compared to others in their position – is another area within which many groups are advocating for change. In Canada this discussion tends to be more centered on women in general, with the gendered effects of motherhood subsumed into the larger

picture. The Canadian Women's foundation acknowledges "the 'high level of the pay gap' and its disproportionate effect on low-income women, racialized women, and Indigenous women" as well as "newcomer women" (n.d). They currently make no mention of the specific experiences of trans and/or queer women, though other sources note they too are differentially affected (Nath 2018). Some men and nonbinary people may also face inequities in employment from various systems of oppression, including sexism.

This context and its effects are not separate from those within academia: faculty, employees, and students alike. Students in general often struggle with the demands of juggling paid employment with student responsibilities. Studying is arguably a job in and of itself: regardless of their other responsibilities, those taking a full course load of five classes a week are generally expected to be in class or studying for "50-60 hours per week" (The Productive Engineer N.d.) and adding even part time work to that can be challenging. Regardless of these issues, student loans expect students to work and save up their money during the summer when their course loads are usually lighter or paused (Province of Nova Scotia 2013). However, this expectation can be difficult for many who have responsibilities beyond those generally attributed to the ideal student. This includes student parents, who must also juggle the work of parenting and who may not be able to take advantage of programs meant to help students secure summer jobs because of age limits.⁵⁷ Expectations around summer employment also do not account for childcare costs

⁵⁷ The Canada Summer Jobs program, which before 2019 was specifically for students, now provides subsidies to encourage temporary positions for "work experiences for youth" (Government of Canada 2020) between the ages of 15 and 30. This age limit would have made most of the participants in this study ineligible for positions funded by the program.

and the reluctance of employers to hire mothers, especially single ones, as several participants noted during the focus group.

Some universities in Nova Scotia offered various supports meant to assist students in need when their funding is inadequate: such as on campus food banks, student parent Christmas funds, emergency need-based bursaries, various funds through accessibility services for disabled students who need equipment and/or assessments, and links to the provincial housing subsidy program. However, these types of policies varied a lot from one university to the next, and information about them was not centrally located on any of the university websites, but rather scattered across the platforms. This makes things unnecessarily difficult and stressful. A few times during the focus group one person would mention a support or policy and another would indicate that they would like more information on it, or that they had not known it existed and were thankful to learn about it. While these targeted programs can be helpful for the students who are eligible and who know about them, they are inadequate bandages for larger problems with the costs of university and accessibility aids. Perhaps these are well intentioned, but they are inadequate and, like the diversity programs Ahmed (2012) critiques, may draw attention away from making deeper, broader changes to exclusionary academic culture.

I have experienced the confusion and lack of clarity surrounding university policies at a personal level while navigating academia myself, but also during this project while trying to navigate each university's website for information relevant to student parents. Participants, as noted just a moment ago, also indicated various levels of confusion and knowledge regarding policies at their respective universities. When they spoke of issues, such as struggling with professors who would not give extensions, and

the ways they were dealt with, the student parents did not reference specific policies and policies were not referenced to them by those they interacted with, faculty and administrative staff alike. This seems to echo Ahmed's (2012) point regarding the inadequacy of policy changes without cultural changes within academia, where policies can act as signifiers that the fight for equity is well underway or even done (so it would seem to some), which when looking at actual experiences does not compute. This is not to say that policy changes are worthless, but that on their own they are not enough if we are not actively tackling the unwritten rules, assumptions, and expectations that guide all of our actions and reactions in the moment – especially if when these problems arise, we fall back on ideals and not the actual policy documents.

Another factor regarding university policies that participants named and that was obvious in the website searches, was the general lack of policies regarding student parents' and caregivers' specific needs. Indeed, policies overall were quite general, making limited references to exceptions and differences. Given Sallee's (2013) argument about the need for "father-friendly" universities over the typical expectation of 'university-friendly' fathers, it is arguable that the universal approach (as Moreau 2016 describes it) encourages students to take on the responsibility to make themselves more university-friendly and discourages them from seeking or expecting accommodation or acknowledgement. In that vein, participants shared repeatedly about the need for continuous and individual self-advocacy created by the lack of acknowledgement and – although they did not specifically connect the two points – a parallel reluctance to seek help unless unavoidable. While I will return to the reluctance to seek help further down, for now I will point out that this individualization of advocacy reinforces the image of

accommodations as requests for special treatment. In reality, these needs are not particularly special, although they are diverse. There are many different reasons that someone might need accommodations inside and outside academia, parent or not; the accommodation needs of many student parents overlap with other students within academia and with parents who are not students. In this regard, the issues that come up are fairly predictable, even while acknowledging the nuances and differences in everyday experiences and consequences based on our individual circumstances, social locations, and the systems of oppression that apply to us (as argued in the previous section).

While the issues are predictable to those in the know, they may appear to be more personal than they actually are when we fail to acknowledge the effects of wider social issues on academia and those within it. One participant shared that she was struggling to keep up with the work after classes were moved online for the pandemic and various childcare options became unavailable, and when she reached out to explain and request an extension, she was simply told to “try harder” (P4). This response clearly frames the student’s problem as a personal one and not the effect of major shifts in the availability of support structures. Relatedly, there was a complete lack of acknowledgement of student parents or the supports that we use within Nova Scotia universities’ plans in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Even though all but one university had on campus childcare centers, their operational changes were absent from all their respective university pandemic response pages; some of the childcare centers had notices up on their specific pages regarding changes, but not all. This is a huge oversight. While university responses to the pandemic were fairly uniform, Acadia (ironically the only university without onsite

childcare) did include additional information⁵⁸ about their course delivery methods/expectations that would be beneficial for those with outside responsibilities, including parenting.

Changes in university operations that resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic also illuminated other areas of disjuncture for participants with their academic experiences. Their experiences of those changes were varied: some experienced decreases in flexibility due to the consolidation of responsibilities all under their own roof along with the lack of outside childcare supports in particular. Others were more grateful for the flexibility online courses provided them (especially the asynchronous ones), along with the decrease in commute times, and less time spent scrambling trying to find childcare options (particularly for evening classes not typically covered by regulated childcare hours). This variation in responses seems to reinforce the need for more flexibility in policies, rules, expectations, and supports, as it acts as another example of the differential ways we experience academia, parenting, and the combination of the two. Similarly, additional funds disbursed through student loans and through employment programs meant to offset some of the costs associated with the pandemic were helpful to many simply because the regular amounts were inadequate. While most students were initially left out of support programs because they had not made enough employment income in the year prior, the government eventually released a support program for students in particular (Harris 2020). However, I would be remiss not to mention that these pandemic emergency payment programs still left some people out, particularly international students (Quinn, 2020).

⁵⁸ They included a system for categorizing courses regarding whether they were in-person, online, or a combination, as well as if the online portions were asynchronous or live (Keefe 2020).

All of the above has attested to the difficulties in juggling conflicting roles – or rather, roles that are not expected to be combined because of the assumptions inherent in who will hold them, such as for student parents. Focus group participants – all of whom were mothers – all agreed this is a struggle. This was true across their differences, from the single parents to the partnered, at all income levels. Although the picture could certainly use more nuance in terms of racialization, disability, income level, and citizenship, the differences noted in the literature between parents of the binary genders who were both students and faculty echo the difficulties of those in this study. This difficulty for mothers in particular is also noticeable on the university websites, where profiles of student mothers always mention the difficulty of combining parenting and academics, whereas those of the two fathers do not mention this difficulty for them. This gap still needs to be explored more thoroughly in terms of the nuances of identity and systemic oppression on the experiences of being a student as well as a parent.

Although it is clear that the struggle of combining the two identities was a commonality among participants in this project, there were also clear and unsurprising differences in the effects of parenting responsibilities between those who were partnered and those who were single parents. It is no secret that single parents often have less resources and supports and thus more demands placed on them. This is even clearer when we consider that family support was a major factor that participants noted during the discussion group, echoed in other research such as Cho, Roy, and Dayne (2021). While this support was not limited to partners, not having a partner and/or having reduced or no access to a partner's family for support, definitely decreased the number of people those student parents could rely on and increased the amount of parenting responsibilities the

participant shouldered on their own. Having partners and/or co-parenting arrangements, while sharing some of the parenting responsibilities, also presented its own complexity in navigating those relationships and the changes in expectations that came when participants started and/or returned to university. Participants expressed that their partners had difficulty adjusting to new task sharing arrangements and/or that they felt poorly about asking their partners to take on more and make adjustments for them. The existing literature somewhat explored these themes, for instance Brooks' (2012) research on student parents found that mothers were more likely to adjust their schedules and responsibilities for their spouses than the other way around. Regardless of those interpersonal challenges, most of the partnered student parents made it clear that they were very grateful for the support of their spouses and “wouldn't have gone back to school” (P7) without it.

There were some scattered references to single parents across the Nova Scotia university websites – particularly in reference to mothers, and particularly in reference to Indigenous student mothers – and specific supports, such as the “Lone Parent Subsidy” which is actually “subsidized rental units for low income single parents who are attending university” (MSVU 2021b) available through the provincial government. However, acknowledgement of and supports for single parents are clearly inadequate. As mentioned earlier, it is unclear if there is a waitlist – or how long it might be – for these subsidized rental units, though there is for the general public housing programs (Rankin 2020), so it does seem likely. Likewise, while the waitlists for and costs of childcare are difficult for many, they may present even more difficulty for single parents (even with subsidized spaces) who may have less flexibility to accept spots that are less than ideal. Monetary

support from student loans, as a couple of participants attested to, are insufficient, even with additional amounts for single parents. Fisher (2021) also describes the various ways that both welfare and university policies fail single student parents.

While the reasons for inadequate acknowledgement of and support for single parents are no doubt various and complex, it seems to me that they are likely connected to the way systems simply want and expect parents to be partnered – a facet of heteronormativity and amatonormativity. While we might expect single parents to supplement whatever familial support they had with their friends, this did not hold true for the participants in this project. Indeed, none of the participants, partnered or not, mentioned friends as a source of support, whether in terms of hands-on tasks like childcare or simply moral support. Perhaps they simply forgot to bring it up, although I did specifically include friends in the list of possible supports to discuss. Considering the social insistence of the importance of the nuclear family (again, stemming from a mix of cisheteronormativity and amatonormativity) this is not necessarily surprising. Socializing, in my experience, is often deemed a luxury that parents can let go of in favor of focusing on their immediate family. Granted, there are plenty of posts floating around the Internet about how socially isolating parenting – in particular motherhood – can be and how important it is to gather support. Often those are right alongside articles and blog posts about how real friends will wait until all the hard years of parenting are over and how important it is to invest time in your spouse (if you have one, or finding one if you don't), and that is on top of all the projects and events and socializing that needs to be facilitated

for the children. No parent can do it all – and in a society where the type of relationship⁵⁹ between people often affects their interactions and the amount of involvement that is deemed appropriate, and wherein friends are valued less than romantic relationships, it is no surprise that friends are the piece that gets put aside.

This is not helped by the inaccessibility of extracurricular and social activities and groups at the universities, which many participants mentioned. Participants felt this inaccessibility was in large part due to the typical timing of events, which were often scheduled for evenings and weekends when they – and many parents, caregivers, and other students with responsibilities outside of academia – are occupied. This is not helped by the lack of flexible childcare available on campus. Another element of this was that many felt the groups and events were often aimed at younger students, not surprising given that typical students are assumed to be young. While some participants maintained that they were simply not interested in this type of support either way, others were very much. Most were at least interested in a group for student parents in particular, although no one had the time to begin one by themselves – which was a suggestion made by one participant’s university. Relatedly, Cho, Roy, and Dayne report that social isolation experienced by student parents is linked to “higher levels of anxiety and depression” (2021: n.p paragraph 36) and stress. They recommend that universities facilitate spaces for student parents to make social connections and note that this is important for student parents with or without partner and family support (Cho, Roy, and Dayne 2021). Having time for friends is important, regardless of whether they are and directly helping with caregiving tasks.

⁵⁹ By type of relationship, I am referring to often used social categories, such as romantic relationship, familial relationship, or friendship; I am not referring to the variance in levels of comfort that can occur in individual relationships depending on the people in them and their attendance to norms.

A final factor – or at least the final factor that I will discuss here from the focus group, though I am sure there are others I have missed – was participants’ hesitance to ask for help and instead strive for independence. This is unsurprising given the pattern of individualization of responsibility that I discussed earlier. This hesitance persisted alongside and despite discussion of how heavily most depended on their family support systems; they still expressed reluctance to access those supports. While this is on the one hand considerate of the people they obviously cared very much for – they wanted to be sure their family had the rest time they needed, for instance – on the other hand it was not limited to concern for the time of those they had close personal connections too. Rather it seemed to encompass their approach to accessing institutional supports and resources as well: they expressed fear of overusing supports and then finding them unavailable when they most needed it, in some cases because others would be worn out, and in other cases because asking for help perceivably too often would make them seem incompetent and less sympathetic. This reluctance to ask for help and access supports was also noted by Scharp and Hall who listed similar reasons: stigma and “fear [of] negative evaluation”, “disclosure indiscretions”, and “perceived support availability” (2019: 56-57).

No doubt this hesitance to ask for and access help is a topic that could be explored at length in its own paper, but there are a few factors whose influence and interaction with it is particularly relevant to this project. There is of course the influence of sexism that spreads the expectation that women are and/or should be the ones keeping track of the emotional and physical health of others – even at their own disservice. There is also the influence of ableism in the idea that not being able to do everything as expected and/or by yourself and/or without accommodations is somehow lesser. Another is the

lack of policies and supports acknowledging student parents and caregivers – and others outside of the typical student – which necessitates the need for a lot of self-advocacy and individual instances of asking (and hoping) for assistance. This reinforces otherness and the idea that our needs are special. These are not – should not be seen as – special requests. Equally important, however, is that the differences and nuances in experiences and reasons for our needs not to be made invisible under a false front of universality as it works to bury the deeper systemic issues in need of change.

Many of the factors discussed above show connections from participants in this project, to those parents and caregivers outside academia, to students who are not parents. This is to be expected given that systems of supremacy and oppression, differentially targeted but using many similar tools, infuse all of our institutions including academia. Childcare, finances, family supports, work life balance, finding time for friends and social activities, inadequate flexibility and supports in jobs, and problematic or inadequate policies are widespread, well-known issues parents grapple with regardless of whether they are in academia, in another job or career, or not engaged in waged labour. Many of these issues are also relevant to disabled, poor, and variously marginalized students, regardless of whether they are a parent or not. While these are widely applicable issues, the differences within our experiences (some that are discussed above and many I have surely missed due to my own ignorance) are important as well and should be given more consideration than is often the case. Together, the commonalities and differences point to larger forces of oppression and supremacy at play that much of the previous literature about student parents has been reluctant to engage with. While information about individual feelings, coping mechanisms, and navigation techniques are necessary in

the interim, this individual approach as a singular focus can only get us so far, hence the persistence of the issues. Broadening our approach to include policy change in the short term, and deeper social/cultural change in the long term are a better bet at breaking down the barriers and systemic forces that too many of us expend so much of our energy pushing back against. The next section discusses some recommendations in this vein.

Recommendations

This section discusses eight areas where gaps in policies should be addressed to improve the experiences of student parents, including expanding childcare offerings, making extracurricular activities more accessible, and providing more financial supports. These are based on specific suggestions from focus group participants and from themes I noticed in their discussions. This thesis argues above that we cannot only focus on the student parents' parts of our identities, that difference is important to take into account, and that we need to address as many systems of oppression as possible since they are interconnected. In that vein, I have tried to point out some⁶⁰ considerations often left out, where the experiences of student parents marginalized by systems of oppression beyond binary considerations of gender have been excluded and where our experiences as student parents overlap with marginalized non-parent students. Policy changes alone are often not enough, though, and thus I am suggesting that the larger picture also supports and necessitates a move towards more thorough cultural change within academia⁶¹ so as to hopefully mitigate unforeseen and unwanted consequences of policy changes that are too narrowly targeted; to leave room for the unique experiences of those student parents from

⁶⁰ I have undoubtedly missed equally important considerations through my own ignorance of them. This is one reason why we need more diverse perspectives in the literature.

⁶¹ ...and outside it too, but that is outside of the purview of this thesis.

marginalized groups who have thus far been excluded from research nominally “for” them; and to instead spread positive changes to all students, faculty, and university employees alike. For this I suggest we shift towards an intersectional ethic of care approach within academic culture.

When I was still planning this project, I thought there would be a lot of recommendations for policies, rules, regulations, and expectations that needed changes, small things and big ones. I was not expecting the, what seems to me, small number of topics and specific suggestions that came up for this question. There are several possible explanations for this. First, it occurs to me that having the focus group online through a written forum perhaps gave less chance for contributions to develop into more nuanced conversations. Secondly, several of the participants did seem to have solid supports outside of academia that lightened their loads; many are privileged in multiple ways, and thus personally see fewer negative effects from the systems of oppression built into the institution of academia. When we do not experience the problems ourselves, then we have less chance and incentive to notice them.

Third, participants could also be focused on whichever area they are most missing supports from and directing requests to the issue most pressing for them. As I mentioned in the previous section, participants were obviously uncomfortable with asking for help, were used to holding back or lightening their requests to give themselves better chances for a positive outcome. This is an effect of ableism and of the tendency towards targeted policies and individual responsibility, which can make it seem to us like a personal failing when we cannot make do by ourselves.

Lastly, it is important to remember that as changes are made, there will be new issues identified, more requests will appear attainable, more suggestions will – hopefully – be made. We want this. While discussing the role of youth in activism, Oluo wrote that younger generations “often ask for things that we were brainwashed into believing [were] ‘too much to ask for.’ Trigger warnings? Non-ableist language? Inclusive events?” (2018: 187), these are not such big asks now, or at least should not be. She says that while this can be “disconcerting,” it is actually “the way progress works” (2018: 187) and is thus a positive that we should try to embrace and encourage along the way. In light of that, it is important to note that the following suggestions are only starting points for where we currently are; the map will need to be adjusted and broadened as we go. Also, please note that these are not in order of importance.

1. We need more policies that specifically acknowledge the varying realities and needs of students, including student parents.

One suggestion that was voiced by multiple participants, and noted in various ways throughout the focus group, was the need for more policies that acknowledge student parents and caregivers, and the current lack of those policies. The current low number of policies – and the difficulty of finding them – is corroborated by the results from my search of university websites and how few mention student parents or student parent specific concerns (such as space for chest/breastfeeding and/or pumping, childcare, family housing, class attendance and assignment extension rules, etc.). While there are some policies that acknowledge student parents, each university in Nova Scotia

has different amounts of acknowledgments and resources available. All could do better at acknowledging the diversity among student parents as well.

Participants were overall concerned about policies (or the lack of them) and unofficial expectations that made extra work for them and/or that treated them paternalistically. One example of this was the inconsistency and unpredictability of whether accommodations, such as extensions on papers, would be granted or not. The necessity of individualized self-advocacy was seen as a time consuming source of additional stress. Given the emphasis many participants put on planning their schedules thoroughly, and the reality of often having to rearrange them suddenly when the somewhat expected unexpected issues of parenting pop up (such as sick children), having a clearer understanding of the parameters they are working within would be helpful. For example, knowing exactly where you can extend timelines and where you cannot lowers the need to individually negotiate each time something changes. It could help many students, parent or otherwise, to have specific, official, and predictable policies that acknowledge an array of students and their experiences so as to free up the stress of navigating murky general rules.

Currently many university policies are framed in very general ways, leaving room for interpretation without specifying whose circumstances were actually taken into consideration when forming them. While this can seem to leave room for different realities across student demographics, in practice the interpretations end up leaning heavily on unwritten cultural norms which leaves a lot of space for, for instance, individual professors unchecked biases to influence who gets access to accommodations.

While this suggestion for the universities to include more student parent related policies in general certainly includes the big things such as childcare (which we will discuss again below), it also highlights the need for this to cover the rules that currently can change from class to class, like: attendance, work extensions, bringing children to class, having cameras on during distance courses, and using technology⁶² during class to name a few mentioned by participants. Rules that address technology use by students in the classroom are often too general, necessitating that some students either simply break the rule and risk consequences, or take additional time to attempt self-advocacy for bending the rules. While some accommodations can be sought through accessibility departments, this option takes time and is inaccessible to some (Waterfield and Whelan 2017). It is an unfortunate and frustrating assumption that students who use technology during class, or who must bring a child with them, miss a lecture, request an extensions on their assignment, etc., are distracted/distracting and/or not putting in enough effort. More specific policies regarding these diverse circumstances and needs may help.

Focus group participants also suggested a set of policies specifically for student parents. This suggestion matches the more targeted approaches favored by most universities. However, given that I have argued earlier that targeted policies are not enough to tackle the systems of oppression worked into academia and alleviate the struggles of diversely situated student parents, I would tweak this suggestion. Transparent consideration for diverse needs should be included in regular policies. In lieu of specifically targeted sets of policies, I suggest a guide to particularly relevant policies and resources for student parents (and potentially other groups of students), in a similar way

⁶² Cellphones for emergency calls were of particular note to participants in this study, but this also applies to technologies that any students may need to facilitate their learning (i.e. recording lectures, typing notes, using electronic books for course texts, etc.).

that many of the NS universities had guides for parents of students to help them navigate their children's new environment. This might include information on and links to resources such as available childcare; student parent specific scholarships; how to add dependents to student health coverage; campus chest/breastfeeding policies; contacts and locations for student parent spaces and liaison's; and any university wide policies on absences, extensions, web-cameras.

Relatedly, in addition to actually having inclusive and representative official policies, these policies and guides need to be easier to access on university websites. Students need to be aware of them for their own benefits, and more generally because seeing diverse situations acknowledged in policies could challenge preconceptions about who attends university.

2. Student parents and caregiver situations should be acknowledged within crisis management plans.

Another element missing from university policies was the acknowledgement of parents and other non-traditional and/or marginalized students' circumstances and needs within pandemic responses and accommodations. This was not a specific suggestion from the focus group, however the gap was abundantly clear in the website searches as well as in other frustrations the participants discussed. There was, for instance, a participant concerned about the requirement to be on camera during online classes even when breastfeeding and another who was overwhelmed with parenting responsibilities when schools shut down but had a professor suggest she "try harder" (P4) instead of extending some deadline flexibility. None of the university websites mentioned student parents or

updates about their own on-campus childcare centers within their pandemic response pages outlining all the other updates and expectations for students.

This is particularly important at this point in time because Covid-19 has resulted in a lot of changes over the past year and a half, and among its many negative effects has been the additional pressures on parents, and in particular mothers, who are expected to adjust to a significant increase in workload from childcare and facilitating their children's educations through screens (Leclerc 2020). At the time of writing this in the fall of 2021, some of these pandemic driven demands on parents have lifted, and many schools are back to in-person operations. However, there is no guarantee the restrictions will not return, or that new emergencies will not develop, as indeed more Covid-19 adjustments have been necessary for the Omicron wave in the fall of 2021 and winter of 2022. When these types of situations happen, we need to remember to check our assumptions about who we think students are and make sure our plans and updates take into account everyone who they will affect.

Additionally, this point should be considered for smaller scale emergency plans as well, for example those for inclement weather. I personally had a professor once who included the caveat in their syllabus that if public K-12 schools were shut down for weather, then the students in their class would not be marked as absent. This was regardless of whether the university had officially remained open or whether the student was a parent or not, because there are many reasons students would not be able or comfortable coming to campus during a storm including caregiving, illness, disability, not being comfortable driving on messy roads, etc.

3. Provide more chest/breastfeeding and pumping supports.

More inclusive chest/breastfeeding and pumping policies and supports was another participant's suggested change. I was only able to find one university with an explicit policy regarding breastfeeding and/or pumping on campus (that was not particularly inclusive of trans and/or nonbinary parents). Such policies should include having permanent, safe, and private spaces set aside for any who need it while on campus to independently access. They would ideally also have space for cold storage so that pumping students can store their milk. While these specific spaces are important, policies should also clearly support students, faculty, employees, and visitors who are comfortable chest/breastfeeding and/or bottle-feeding their babies during classes or in public areas of the campus.

For inclusivity, policies should also acknowledge that not every chest/breastfeeding or pumping student would be a woman and/or mother. We should not assume the gender of the parent using the resources simply because it may involve anatomy generally presumed to indicate a woman. Trans and nonbinary parents may also require and use chest/breastfeeding and pumping resources.

Additionally, universities should make the presence of these policies and spaces widely known through the student body and easy to find on their websites and campuses. Making this information easier for student parents to find may also aide in normalizing these needs as well as wider assumptions about who needs the resources and who attends universities.

4. Event timing and planning should take diverse accessibility measures into account.

There was general agreement among participants' that extracurricular groups/activities and events taking place on campus during evenings and weekends were largely inaccessible and incompatible with parenting realities. This is especially true for lone parents. This is likely also the case for many others (students, employees, and faculty alike) who have responsibilities outside of academia. Suggestions participants offered for altering this are simple enough: more daytime events, drop-in childcare offered at and during events regardless of time of day/night, and more events that are child-friendly.

The pandemic also highlighted the need to expand in person events to include an online option, which is a change many disabled people would like to see maintained and improved further (Al-Heeti 2021). At the most basic level, broadcasting events online, either live or as a recording, makes space for many more people to access them. It allows distance students, those who cannot leave their homes for whatever reason, and/or those who would like to attend asynchronously to participate and enjoy events as well. At the same time, digital access should not be used as an excuse to disregard in-person accessibility measures.

Event accessibility has many facets; we should strive to be as inclusive and transparent as possible. The childcare offered should strive to be accessible for all children, taking into account some may have disabilities as well, and events should be specific about what is available in terms of childcare. Also, event planning should meet other accessibility needs which parents and non-parents alike may require: making space

for attendees using wheelchairs, providing sign language interpreters, captioning on videos, clear schedules, places for sensory breaks, seating that fits fat bodies, etc. Disability advocate, Nina Tame, on her Instagram account⁶³, has often talked about how important it is to note these things in advertisements for events so that no one has to spend a bunch of time tracking down the answers if they are interested in attending.

5. Provide spaces for student parents to connect.

Most participants indicated they would like to connect with other student parents but did not have the time to actually put together and manage a group themselves. Options include permanent physical space/s student parents can use, an online space where they can informally connect, and/or a social space via the facilitation of a group (with childcare available during meet-ups) that could be run by a university paid liaison person. The latter could function as a source of information of how to navigate policies and situations (such as for complicated student loan applications where custody must be taken into account for example), as well as a place to join planned activities with other student parents. Physical spaces could provide various baby-feeding resources, child friendly play areas, and drop-in short-term childcare. Having dedicated spaces may help student parents feel more connected to the university community, as one participant suggested. Having formal support network may also help instigate informal networks, both of which could be helpful for future research.⁶⁴ These could also be beneficial to

⁶³ Her instagram account is @nina_tame, where they advocate widely for the disability community as well as share about their personal experiences being disabled. She often mentions the issue of events and places noting whether or not – and in what ways – they are accessible.

⁶⁴ Having either formal or informal networks of student parents would have certainly helped with this research.

many student parents in terms of mental health and alleviating isolation, as suggested by Cho, Roy, and Dayne (2021).

One could also interpret these wishes as a broader desire for a more inclusive campus culture, which ties into the need for change towards a more inclusive academic culture that will be discussed further below.

6. The timing and planning of mandatory courses should allow flexibility in schedules and attendance.

Similar to point 4 above about the accessibility of events, mandatory courses that are scheduled for evenings and weekends presented problems for participants, in large part because of the lack of childcare available during those times. However, some participants wanted more evening course options. The suggestions for these seemingly conflicting experiences is simply more flexibility in when courses are available, not having particular courses only available in one time slot over the course of a program, and making childcare available for any time there is a class scheduled (not just during the standard daytime hours).

Some focus group participants also noted their appreciation for the more asynchronous aspects of courses that were available during the pandemic because it allowed more flexibility to deal with unexpected parenting issues such as sick children and childcare cancelations. Expanding the courses that are available online and facilitating professors' ability to provide more of their lecture notes and/or recordings that students can view or review outside of the scheduled class times would also help. These suggestions may also be helpful to non-parenting students who have to combine

university with eldercare, paid work, illnesses, and/or disabilities, among other reasons. This requires that universities support faculty with resources and time to make these additional aspects and flexibility of courses possible.

7. Expand on-campus childcare.

A commonality between many of these suggestions is that childcare matters a lot, which makes it even more frustrating that some universities still do not have any at all, or what they do offer is inadequate. Student parents cannot always fall back on using childcare off campus, because there are supply and cost issues across the whole province. They also cannot depend on informal childcare from family, which many already use in addition to formal childcare. Others may not have family to ask for assistance.

Universities can and should do better for their students, staff, and faculty. The inadequacy of childcare is a longstanding issue in the literature that participants' experiences add to. Analysis of university websites backs this up, for instance with every single campus childcare center noting lengthy waitlists (which are also common off campus). Additionally, the focus on full-time spots over part time ones was incompatible with student class schedules and financial needs.

Participants' suggestions regarding childcare were: more on campus childcare spots, extended hours (especially for night classes and events), more part-time spots, drop in spots, and making the costs lower or free. I will add that more attention to the needs of disabled children and their families is also needed. These suggestions align with the goals of Child Care Now Nova Scotia – to bring accessible and inclusive childcare across the

province (Child Care Now 2021) –, which universities could and should support in addition to taking their own take steps towards more equitable childcare access on their own campuses.

A recent childcare funding agreement between the federal and provincial governments may make these goals easier to attain, as they match up with the 5-year goals for non-profit childcare services as well. Although student parents and universities are demographics/institutions not specifically mentioned in the agreement, universities could potentially petition for funding to build (in the case of Acadia or NSCAD) or expand their current childcare options in line with these province-wide plans. Plans in this agreement include major fee reductions, more spots in general, and “addressing barriers to provide inclusive and flexible childcare” (Government of Canada, 2021: 5).

Even once universities are able to expand childcare resources so that anyone who needs or wants to use them has access, it is important not to retract other flexibility accommodations under the assumptions that parents can depend on a certain number of hours daily when their child is in care. Children still get sick or simply but unpredictably need extra attention from their parents; and sometimes group childcare settings – or the public school system – may not function for all families and/or children, regardless of how inclusive we try to make them.

8. Provide more financial supports.

Financial supports for student parents is perhaps a bigger issue than what universities alone can offer, and requires addressing wider structural issues as well as

academic institutional policy. Governments should also be providing more supports to make university financially accessible to everyone who wants to attend, whether through more supports directly to universities so they can lower costs, to students themselves, or some combination. Participants in the focus group came from a range of income levels and yet still most of them expressed some difficulty with the financial aspects of combining parenting and academia. One participant pointed out that the costs used to calculate financial supports (such as government student loans) need updating to more realistic calculations, because their expectations are so far off. Another was frustrated over the system not having a way to take income changes into account quicker than a year. It was also pointed out that it can be more difficult for a student parent to also hold down a job to supplement loans and/or savings because of time scarcity and/or the cost of childcare making it untenable and/or ineligibility for student job programs because of age cut-offs (for older student parents).

Reducing or erasing the costs of childcare for students would be one way for university to provide more financial supports, which new childcare plans mentioned earlier take a step towards addressing. Universities could also make it easier to search their websites for specific scholarships, such as those for student parents, and other support services.

It is clear that all of these points are interconnected and are not relevant to only parents and/or caregivers (save for childcare). Many will require consideration on the impacts to faculty and staff, and support for them to facilitate and manage certain changes (such as more asynchronous delivery, flexibility in attendance and deadlines, and inclusive classroom policies). These are not changes that can be implemented with no or

little attention to the way they interact with other policies, and the culture within which they function. To that end, we should also shift towards a more inclusive culture.

A Shift in Academic Culture

Policy changes alone are not enough to counter the effects of systems of supremacy and oppression built into the structure of academia. There are a few reasons for this. There are always likely to be oversights, gaps, and unintended consequences that will require attention, updates, and further changes. There are so many ways that identities and circumstances overlap and interact that it is impossible to account for all the possibilities – especially when the research and literature we base decisions on is missing so many of them to begin with; more so again when we target research and policies at a single facet of someone’s experience without considering the rest. The creators of IBPA explain that: “intersectionality warns us of the risks of policies that, by privileging the treatment of some inequities and ignoring the fact that inequalities are often mutually constitutive, end up marginalizing some people, reproducing power mechanisms among groups, and failing to address the creation of categories that are at the root of the constitution of inequities” (Hankivsky et al. 2012: 18). Then there is the tendency we seem to have of expecting policies to do the work of change without us engaging them; as if their presence is enough to change all the oppressive assumptions and expectations woven into the culture and the learned biases we fall back on to judge who should be where and whether they are trying hard enough (Ahmed 2012; Price 2018). As much as I, personally, would prefer a rulebook for every possible interaction, it

is not possible either. This is why I am suggesting that we need cultural change in addition to policy change, to fill those spaces where we lean on the unwritten rules, norms, and expectations, with options that normalize and accommodate difference instead of demanding proximity to privileged and faulty ideas of normal. A cultural shift toward an intersectional ethic of care within universities is one option.

Price (2018) offers examples of how an intersectional EOC could play out between students and professors, although he does not specifically situate them within the framework of EOC. In his essay “Laziness Does Not Exist”, Price (2018) writes about the number of students he has had who behaved in ways that many other professors would classify as lazy – missing classes and assignments, etc. – and how there is always a reason behind the behavior, usually pertaining to the students’ circumstances and the related barriers that make their participation difficult. While shame and punishment are not able to dismantle the barriers, understanding and accommodation often can help the same students turn things around (Price 2018). Student parents’ situations may differ from those Price (2018) relates, however the assumption that anyone who needs help is not trying hard enough and/or the fear and shame students may feel about seeking help, are effects of the same systems of oppression.

Hankivsky (2004) and Price (2018) both suggest, in their own ways, that care and participation are connected, and thus an institutional culture and policy context that favors a care-based approach could recognize that reaching out for help – in the form of a request for an extension, for example – is the student trying to participate in their learning within their personal context, rather than a personal failure they need to “try harder” (P4) to adjust for. EOC does not condone entitlement without participation or reciprocal

caring on the part of the student towards the institutional purpose of learning, but instead acknowledges that there are many different but equally valid methods, timelines, and demonstrations for learning outcomes – and that it is okay for the solutions to acknowledge and accommodate these differences, rather than offloaded to the individual to deal with by themselves.

One of the focus group participants made a comment that sums it up well:

Universities need to catch up to the incoming demographic. They need to offer childcare, flexibility in scheduling, extra support (academic and social) to their parent students. And [not] just throw everything online, that's also just avoiding the parent dilemma. *We shouldn't feel like we are a burden to the university's landscape* [emphasis added] (P2).

Let's reiterate that last point: we should not feel like burdens. No student should. We need to dismantle the oppressive assumptions about who students are and replace it with the assumption that students – their identities, their circumstances, their needs – are diverse and that most, if not all, are at university so they can succeed, not so they can waste their time (Price 2018). Most want to do well, they simply need the resources to do so; in other words “laziness does not exist, but unseen barriers do” (Price 2018: 1). We need to tackle the systems of supremacy and oppression within academia; we need to get rid of the related assumptions and biases that built and retain those barriers.

Transparently acknowledging and making room for diverse realities in university policies, rules, and supports while simultaneously shifting towards an academic culture based in an ethic of care is my suggestion for how to do this.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter will briefly address the key contributions of this thesis, its limitations, and suggestions for future research. There is additionally a brief summary of recommendations for policy and culture change for better supporting parents within academia.

Contributions

There are five main empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions from this project. First, this research adds to the paucity of literature on academia and parenthood, particularly in terms of the underrepresented undergraduate population and the mistaken assumption that such concerns do not match up with the typical undergraduate student life stages. The experiences of parents who are faculty and graduate students have previously made up a bigger portion of the literature, but there are plenty of undergraduate students who are caregivers and in need of space as well. Second, this thesis draws attention to the lack of intersectional research on student parents. It notes that research on student parents is typically focused on gender, and expands on why an intersectional approach is necessary. Relatedly, this thesis draws attention to the pre-existing literatures' focus on individualized feelings, coping methods, and effects; and consequent minimization of structural factors; these are things that intersectional theory can counter.

Additionally, I have combined intersectional theory, specifically IBPA, with institutional ethnography (IE) as an option for addressing the lack of attention to racialized and other differences in IE, and to reinforce the structural perspective that both

frameworks encourage. Last, while Ethic of Care theory is typically used to guide policy development, I have suggested that it could also be used, in combination with intersectional theory, to help challenge the presence of systems of oppression in our day-to-day interactions where we often fall back on unwritten rules, norms, and expectations rather than on official policy.

Limitations

This project tackled a significant subject and tried to bring components of various theories together to begin to take a more structural look at the experiences of undergraduate student parents, as compared to the rather individualistic literature that was already available. This entailed a broad scope that focused on the connections between identities, experiences, and structural and social forces. This broad scope meant less detail on the everyday ways that student parents' individual identities intersect and influence their experiences in ways unique to them. Additionally, the number of participants for this study was low and similar to demographics already commonly included in the literature; a more diverse group of participants would have been beneficial. Similarly, the collection and analysis of university texts was limited to the Nova Scotia, Canada context. I also had to change from specifically analysing universities' policy documents to analysing various types of documents and resources found on their websites that mentioned or otherwise related to student parents. This switch was necessary because there was so little in the way of policy documents that mentioned student parents or their circumstances at all.

Recommendations for Future Research

There is certainly no shortage of areas in need of more research, however I would like to point out just a few suggestions based on my experience with this project. First, more information about the experiences of students and faculty who are parents and who are marginalized and/or underrepresented in the literature about parenting and academia are needed, preferably by those with first-hand experience. Secondly, I suggest more research into who the normative/typical student is within academia,⁶⁵ how this has changed historically, and how/whether changes have been reflected in policy creation and change. Third, research is needed into the structural differences between types of continuing education⁶⁶ (community colleges versus universities in the Nova Scotia context, perhaps by other names or distinctions elsewhere), their student demographics, and how this connects to the construction of the normative student and student outcomes could be beneficial. Fourth, we need more research into the experiences of those parents who wish to be or who have tried to be students but for whom the barriers have proved too daunting to approach or have effectively pushed them out, some of which has begun in Fisher's (2021) thesis about trying to access post-secondary education while on welfare. Lastly, I would suggest more research into the facilitation of and dynamics within asynchronous text-based online focus groups, as this was – prompted by Covid-19 pandemic restrictions – a seemingly novel way to address concurrent concerns of privacy, conflicting and minimal time availability, travel restrictions, and various accessibility measure.

⁶⁵ Perhaps in a similar vein to Brooks, who links understandings of the typical student to “discourses... of ‘future worker’ and ‘hard-worker’” (2017: abstract).

⁶⁶ This suggestion for further research is echoed in Lindsay and Gillum 2019.

Recommendations for Supporting Parents in Academia

There are eight policy suggestions for universities, particularly those within Nova Scotia Canada, to work on in order to support various students whose circumstances and needs overlap with student parents. These suggestions are as follows:

1. More policies that specifically acknowledge the varying realities and needs of students, including student parents.
2. Student parents and caregiver situations should be acknowledged within crisis plans.
3. Provide more chest/breast-feeding and pumping supports.
4. Event timing and planning should take diverse accessibility measures into account.
5. Provide spaces for student parents to connect.
6. The timing and planning of mandatory courses should allow flexibility in schedules and attendance.
7. Expand on-campus childcare options.
8. Provide more financial supports.

A final recommendation for supporting parents within academia – at all stages – is to tackle the current academic culture within which unacknowledged biases, assumptions, expectations, and unwritten rules contribute to unnecessary hardships. This is relevant for many non-traditional students, parents among them, and also including in many ways the varied but often overlapping and shared needs of those with other types of caregiving responsibilities, disabled students, and many diverse students dealing with the

effects of marginalization. The next time someone asks you to picture universities and the students that populate them, as I did at the beginning of this thesis, I want you to see more than a static and limited set of characteristics and circumstances. I want the picture you see to be dynamic, full of possibilities, and I want it to include diverse parents succeeding in all stages and areas of academia.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Focus Group Information Page for Participants

Mount Saint Vincent University
Focus Group Information Page for Participants

Project Details

Title of Project:	Equity for Student Parents: Toward Academic Culture and Policy Change
Human Research Ethics Approval Number:	2020-012

Research Team Contact Details

Main Researcher Details

Erin Esau
Master's Student
Graduate Women and Gender Studies
Email: [redacted]
Telephone: [redacted]

Supervisor Details

Dr. Tammy Findlay
Mount Saint Vincent University
Email: [redacted]
Telephone: [redacted]

Description

This project is being undertaken as part of Master's thesis for the Graduate Women and Gender Studies program at Mount Saint Vincent University. The purpose of the study is to examine the various factors that can influence the undergraduate student experience for those students with children in their care, so that I can develop suggestions for services and policy changes to help break down existing barriers. It is my hope that this study can gather information from as diverse a group of student parents/caregivers as possible so that the proffered solutions can be as inclusive and effective as possible.

I choose to gather information for this project via online focus groups partially because the existing literature about student parents/caregivers is sparse and lacking in diversity. Additionally, it generally addresses the experience of student parents from a different angle than this study. I believe that solutions for breaking down barriers and challenges are much more effective when they are built by and with direct attention to the experiences of those who are experiencing difficulty and exclusion. Your voice and experiences matter! I also hope that the focus group experience will be beneficial in reminding us (as I too am a student parent) that there are others dealing with similar circumstances.

Participation

Your participation will involve contributing your thoughts, experiences, and ideas in an online, text-based group discussion (focus group) format. The process will start with a quick anonymous questionnaire for which the link will be emailed to you. The discussion group portion will take place after that, and will span two weeks. However, you can decide how much time per day (and which days) you spend on it. One to two questions will be posted each morning for the first 8 days, with reminder emails sent. You will be able to answer them as they are posted, and interact with others' answers too. The last 5 days will be for you to catch up on any questions you missed, interact with others answers, or to edit your own answers if you wish to.

The focus group will take place online, through the Microsoft Outlook group site function. You will need a compatible email account to access the group site; your university email, or a live.com or hotmail.com email will work. The group will be private, so that only those participants invited to it will have access, however your name and email will be visible to others within the group. This will not be an anonymous space, however everyone is asked to please respect the privacy of others in the group by not sharing others stories or information outside the focus group. The specific dates of the focus group discussions will be decided at a later date, and you will be informed with plenty of advanced notice. I will also email you an instruction document for accessing and using the group site, and you can of course contact me with any related problems or questions.

The discussion questions posted will ask about your experience juggling student and parenting roles, as well as how these interact with other parts of your identity (racialization, orientation, neurotype, gender, dis/ability, class, citizenship, age, etc.) and with university policies and support services.

Questions will include:

- “Can you tell me about how being a parent/caregiver has affected your time at university?”
- “Can you tell me about your experience with your universities’ and/or your professors’ policies, rules, regulations, and expectations that have come into conflict with your parenting responsibilities?”
- “Can you tell me about the changes to policies/rules and/or expectations that you would like to see in order to make university and parenting more compatible?”

There are no costs associated with participating in this research project, nor will you be paid for participation.

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to take part you are not obliged to. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage. Your contributions to that point will be removed to the best of my ability. If you have concerns about the data collected about you please contact me or my supervisor (contact details at the top of this form).

Your decision whether you take part, do not take part, or to take part and then withdraw, will in no way impact your current or future relationship with Mount Saint Vincent University.

Expected Benefits

Benefits from this study are long-range, meaning that your contributions will help build suggestions for policy change within universities as well as more thorough understanding of the student parent experience in academic literature (something that is currently lacking, particularly from those with diverse backgrounds and identities). You may also experience the relief that comes with hearing others echo similar experiences and struggles to your own.

Risks

Potential risks of participating are low, but may include being negatively affected by the discussion of struggles, and/or the potential for disagreement between participations. All effort will be made to ensure the focus group remains a safe space for participants from diverse groups to discuss their unique experiences as student parents/caregivers. Abusive or violent language used against marginalized groups will not be tolerated, and any comments posted that contain such things will be deleted, and the participant removed from the study. Please be respectful of your fellow participants and their varied experiences.

Sometimes thinking about the sorts of issues raised in the focus group can create some uncomfortable or distressing feelings. If you need to talk to someone about this immediately please contact the Post-Secondary Student Helpline at 1-833-292-3698 regardless of time or day. You may also wish to consider consulting your family doctor, or a doctor at a walk-in clinic for additional support. A list of and links for locally accessible supports will be available on the focus groups website and will also be emailed to you.

Privacy and Confidentiality

The discussions will be saved for later analysis. All identifying information will be removed from the collected materials, and all materials will be stored securely on a password-protected computer to which only I have access. If you wish to read the final thesis, it will be available upon completion through the Mount Saint Vincent University library.

Any and all participants (even those who withdraw or are asked to leave) are asked not to disclose anything others shared within the context of the discussion groups. By signing the consent form (by replying to the consent post on the site in acknowledgment or

having read it), regardless of whether your participation continues, you agree to not disclose to others outside this event anything shared by other participants within the context of the discussion or the identities of the other participants.

Direct quotations from the focus group discussions may be used in the final paper to elaborate and exemplify important points. No names will be used in relation to these quotations, and all effort will be made to ensure that participants' identities remain confidential in the process. Anonymity cannot be guaranteed because of the nature of focus groups. Confidentiality means that your name and identifying information will not be shared with anyone outside of the focus group.

Please be aware that I will keep your information confidential to the extent that the law permits. If you share information about ongoing child abuse, plans to injure yourself, or plans to injure others, then I will have to report it to the appropriate authorities.

Consent to Participate

I will ask you to signify your consent to participate by replying to the consent form post on the group site before answering any other questions for the focus group. There will be time for you to ask questions if needed. A copy of the consent form will be sent to you in to read in advance, but you do not need to reply to that email or send it back to me digitally signed. All you have to do is read the consent form post on the group site and reply that you have read it and agree to participate.

Questions or Further Information about the Project

Please refer to the contact details at the top of the form to have any questions answered or to request further information about this project.

Concerns or Complaints Regarding the Conduct of the Project

If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project, you may contact Brenda Gagne, the Mount Saint Vincent University Research Ethics Coordinator, by e-mail at [redacted] or at the Research Ethics office on the Mount Saint Vincent Campus in Evaristus, room 223A. The Research Ethics Board is not connected with the research project and can facilitate a resolution to your concern in an unbiased manner.

Thank you for taking the time to help with this research project. Please keep this sheet for your information.

Appendix B: Focus Group Consent Form

Consent Form: Focus Groups

Equity for Student Parents: Toward Academic Culture and Policy Change

Researcher: Erin Esau

Graduate Women and Gender Studies

Mount Saint Vincent University

I am a master's student in the Women and Gender Studies program at Mount Saint Vincent University. As part of my master's thesis, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Tammy Findlay, and I am inviting you to participate in my study. The purpose of the study is to examine the various factors that can influence the undergraduate student experience for those students with children in their care, so that I can develop suggestions for services and policy changes to help break down existing barriers. It is my hope that this study can gather information from as diverse a group of student parents/caregivers as possible so that the proffered solutions can be as inclusive and effective as possible.

Information for this study will be gathered through an online anonymous questionnaire and a Microsoft Outlook group site for the discussions. You will have two weeks to complete the questions. The discussion will be guided by a pre-determined list of questions that center on this study's main research questions. You will be given time to discuss related experiences you feel were not covered by the questions. The discussion will be saved for later analysis. All identifying information will be removed from the collected materials, and all materials will be stored securely on a password-protected computer to which only I have access. If at any point you decide you no longer wish to be included in the study you may leave (by exiting the window, not answering the questions, or emailing me a request to delete your answers), and your contributions will be removed to the best of my ability. If you wish to read the final thesis, it will be available upon completion through the Mount Saint Vincent University library.

Benefits from this study are long-range, meaning that your contributions will help build suggestions for policy change within universities as well as more thorough understanding of the student parent experience in academic literature (something that is currently lacking, particularly from those with diverse backgrounds and identities). You may also experience the relief that comes with hearing others echo similar experiences and struggles to your own. I share those potential benefits, as I am also a student parent. Potential risks of participating are low, but may include being negatively affected by the discussion of struggles, and/or the potential for disagreement between participations. Because the student parent population is small, there is a small chance that you could be identified as a participant; this will be mitigated by including participants from across the whole province and by not quoting anything specific enough to identify you. There is also a small chance that we could have at some point been acquainted. If that is the case, know I will not include any previously shared details about you within the focus group or thesis. Any preexisting acquaintance or relationship does not come with the expectation

that you should participate. The decision to participate is entirely your own and I do not wish to pressure anyone. There will be a reminder on the focus group front page of your ability to continue or withdraw consent to participate at any time.

All effort will be made to ensure the focus group remains a safe space for participants from diverse groups to discuss their unique experiences as student parents/caregivers. Abusive or violent language used against marginalized groups will not be tolerated, and any participants who express such things will be asked to leave. Please be respectful of your fellow participants and their varied experiences.

Any and all participants (even those who withdraw or are asked to leave) are asked not to disclose other participants' identities or anything others share within the context of the discussion. By signing this consent form, regardless of whether your participation continues, you agree to not disclose to others outside this event anything shared by other participants within the context of the discussion or the identities of the other participants.

Direct quotations from the focus group discussions may be used in the final paper to elaborate and exemplify important points. No names will be used in relation to these quotations, and all effort will be made to ensure that participants' identities remain confidential in the process. Anonymity cannot be guaranteed because of the nature of focus groups. Confidentiality means that your name and identifying information will not be shared with anyone outside of the focus group.

Please be aware that I will keep your information confidential to the extent that the law permits. If you share information about ongoing child abuse, plans to injure yourself, or plans to injure others, then I will have to report it to the appropriate authorities. Please also note that any data sent electronically or stored online may be legally accessed by domestic or foreign authorities, or by your employer if you access the study from an employer's computer. By consenting to participate in the study you have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study. Rest assured you can still change your mind and discontinue your participation at any time.

Please reply to this post that you have read this post and agree to participate; this will count as your signature.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Erin Esau by email at [redacted] or my supervisor Dr. Tammy Findlay at [redacted]. This research has been reviewed and approved by the Mount Saint Vincent University Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions or concerns about the ethics of this study, you may contact Brenda Gagne, the Mount Saint Vincent University Research Ethics Coordinator, by e-mail at [redacted] or at the Research Ethics office on the Mount Saint Vincent Campus in Evaristus, room 223A. You can also contact Dr. Stephen Maitzen from the Acadia University Research Ethics Board at [redacted].

Appendix C: Demographics Questionnaire

Limesurvey Demographics Questionnaire: For focus group participants

Equity for Student Parents: Toward Academic Culture and Policy Change

Researcher: Erin Esau
Graduate Women and Gender Studies
Mount Saint Vincent University

I am master's student in the Women and Gender Studies program at Mount Saint Vincent University. As part of my master's thesis, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Tammy Findlay, and I am inviting you to participate in my study. The purpose of the study is to examine the various factors that can influence the undergraduate student experience for those students with children in their care, so that I can develop suggestions for services and policy changes to help break down existing barriers. It is my hope that this study can gather information from as diverse a group of student parents/caregivers as possible so that the proffered solutions can be as inclusive and effective as possible.

Information for this study will be gathered through online focus group discussions and through this short demographics questionnaire. Your name will not be attached to the information you contribute through this questionnaire. This information will only be used to give an overview of the demographics of participants within the study and will not be used in combination with quotations, nor in any way that would allow you to be identified within the thesis. If you are uncomfortable answering a question, it's okay to skip it.

If at any point you decide you no longer wish to be included in the study you may exit out of this window at any point before submitting, and/or contact me. If you wish to read the final thesis, it will be available upon completion through the Mount Saint Vincent University library.

Benefits from this study are long-range, meaning that your contributions will help build suggestions for policy change within universities as well as more thorough understanding of the student parent experience in academic literature (something that is currently lacking, particularly from those with diverse backgrounds and identities). You may also experience the relief that comes with hearing others echo similar experiences and struggles to your own. I share those potential benefits, as I am also a student parent. Potential risks of participating are low, but may include being negatively affected by the discussion of struggles, and/or the potential for disagreement between participations during the focus group phase. Because the student parent population is small, there is a small chance that you could be identified as a participant; this will be mitigated by including participants from across the whole province and by not quoting anything specific enough to identify you. There is also a small chance that we could have at some point been acquainted. If that is the case, know I will not include any previously shared details about you within the focus group or thesis. Any preexisting acquaintance or

relationship does not come with the expectation that you should participate. The decision to participate is entirely your own and I do not wish to pressure anyone. Your continuing consent to participate will be checked again at the beginning of the focus group by electronically signing another consent form, and you will also be reminded on the focus group front page that you can at any point withdraw your consent.

Please be aware that I will keep your information confidential to the extent that the law permits. If you share information about ongoing child abuse, plans to injure yourself, or plans to injure others, then I will have to report it to the appropriate authorities. Please also note that any data sent electronically or stored online may be legally accessed by domestic or foreign authorities, or by your employer if you access the study from an employer's computer. By consenting to participate in the study you have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Erin Esau by email at [redacted] or my supervisor Dr. Tammy Findlay at [redacted]. This research has been reviewed and approved by the Mount Saint Vincent University Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions or concerns about the ethics of this study, you may contact Brenda Gagne, the Mount Saint Vincent University Research Ethics Coordinator, by e-mail at [redacted] or at the Research Ethics office on the Mount Saint Vincent Campus in Evaristus, room 223A. You can also contact Dr. Stephen Maitzen from the Acadia University Research Ethics Board at [redacted] or [redacted].

By clicking through and completing the following questionnaire you are indicating that you have read and understood the above information and consent to participate in this study. Rest assured you can still change your mind and discontinue your participation at any time by closing the window.

Undergraduate student: YES or NO

Are you a Part-time or Full-time student?:

Program type (choose one):

- Bachelor of Arts
- Bachelor of Science
- Bachelor of Fine Arts
- Professional Studies
- Other: _____

Your Age:

Number of Children:

Children's ages:

Relationship/marital status:

Gender:

Sexual Orientation:

Race/ethnicity:

Citizenship:

Physical disabilities:

Cognitive conditions/disabilities:

Chronic illness:

What is your family income level?⁶⁷ (Choose one):

- \$29,590 or less / year
- \$29,591 to \$59,180 / year
- \$59,181 to \$93,000 / year
- \$93,001 to \$150,000 / year
- \$150,001 or more / year

Sources of funding (choose all that apply):

- Employed Full-time
- Employed Part-time
- Student loans
- Scholarships
- Grants
- Child Support
- Spouse or partner employed full-time
- Spouse or partner employed part-time
- Spouse or partner's student loans
- Savings
- Parental monetary support
- Inheritance/family money

Other: _____

⁶⁷ Categories based on the Nova Scotia tax brackets for 2018. Reference: Government of Canada. 2019. "Nova Scotia tax and credits." Retrieved November 2019 from <https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/tax/individuals/topics/about-your-tax-return/tax-return/completing-a-tax-return/provincial-territorial-tax-credits-individuals/nova-scotia.html>

Appendix D: Focus Group Questions and Schedule

Focus Group Questions and Schedule

I will post the following clarification on the group site:

Policies, rules, regulations: are or have been spoken, written, or otherwise relayed in a more specific and official way.

Expectations: are more unofficial, and may be unspoken, unspecified, or regarded as ‘common sense’ or ‘common courtesy’.

Focus Group Questions and Posting Schedule:

Day 1 post consent form and two separate questions:

1. Post consent form as available in appendix D, ask participants to reply in the affirmative if they wish to participate
2. Can you tell me about how being a parent/caregiver has affected your time at university?
3. Can you tell me how the other parts of your identity (other than your role as a parent) affect your experience combining study and parenting? (Examples of identities: race/ethnicity, citizenship, income level, marital or relationship status, gender, sexuality, age, disabilities and/or conditions, neurotype, health, etc.)

Day 2 post:

4. Can you tell me about your experience accessing university student resources/supports (accessibility services, mental health services, various clubs and groups, supports for student parents, etc.) as a parent?

While this question focuses on your roles as a student and a parent in the wording, I encourage you to share if you think there are additional layers to your experience from other parts of your identity (i.e. if your race/ethnicity, citizenship, income level, marital or relationship status, gender, sexuality, age,

disabilities and/or conditions, neurotype, health, etc. also come into play and in what way.)

Day 3 post:

1. Can you tell me how or if you think parenting affects your experience with extra-curricular groups or events on campus?

While this question focuses on your roles as a student and a parent in the wording, I encourage you to share if you think there are additional layers to your experience from other parts of your identity (i.e. if your race/ethnicity, citizenship, income level, marital or relationship status, gender, sexuality, age, disabilities and/or conditions, neurotype, health, etc. also come into play and in what way.)

Day 4 post:

2. Can you tell me about your experience with your universities' and/or your professors' policies, rules, regulations, and expectations that have come into conflict with your parenting responsibilities?

While this question focuses on your roles as a student and a parent in the wording, I encourage you to share if you think there are additional layers to your experience from other parts of your identity (i.e. if your race/ethnicity, citizenship, income level, marital or relationship status, gender, sexuality, age, disabilities and/or conditions, neurotype, health, etc. also come into play and in what way.)

Day 5 post:

3. Can you tell me about your experience with supports/systems/programs outside of your university that relate to your ability to combine academia and parenting? (Examples of supports: family, friends, childcare, your children's school, student loans, etc.)

While this question focuses on your roles as a student and a parent in the wording, I encourage you to share if you think there are additional layers to your experience from other parts of your identity (i.e. if your race/ethnicity, citizenship, income level, marital or relationship status, gender, sexuality, age, disabilities and/or conditions, neurotype, health, etc. also come into play and in what way.)

Day 6 post two separate questions:

5. Can you tell me about **any** policies, rules, regulations, or expectations that you have not already mentioned that have made your journey of combining parenting and undergraduate study harder?
6. Can you tell me about any policies, rules, regulations, or expectations that have made your journey of combining parenting and undergraduate study easier?

Day 7 post:

7. Can you tell me about the changes to policies/rules and/or expectations that you would like to see in order to make university and parenting more compatible?

While this question focuses on your roles as a student and a parent in the wording, I encourage you to share if you think there are additional layers to your experience from other parts of your identity (i.e. if your race/ethnicity, citizenship, income level, marital or relationship status, gender, sexuality, age, disabilities and/or conditions, neurotype, health, etc. also come into play and in what way.)

Day 8 post:

8. Is there anything else that you think is relevant that you'd like to discuss?

Day 9:

- I will post and send the following email to participants:

- Hi everyone! If you haven't answered all the questions yet, please do so over the next few days. This is also your time to review what you've posted and make any edits, clarifications, or deletions that you wish. You will have the next 5 days to do this. I will send an email again on the [insert date] to remind you that you have one final day to complete this. Thank you so much for your participation! Erin

Day 14:

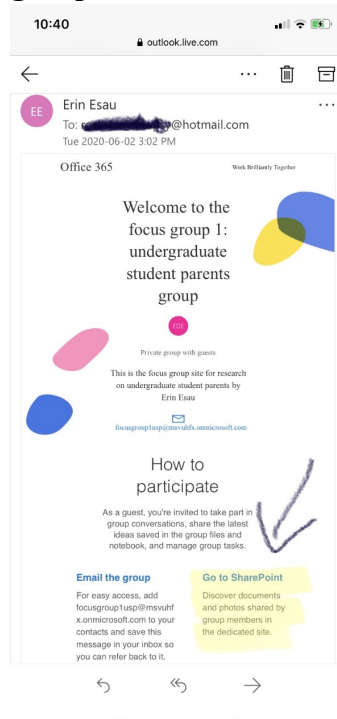
- I will post and send the following email to participants:
- Hi everyone! This is your reminder that you have 24 hours left to answer any questions you haven't yet, and/or make any changes that you wish to before I close the group. Thank you so much for your participation! If you have any questions or concerns after the site is shut down, please don't hesitate to email me at [redacted]. Thanks again! Erin

Appendix E: Instructions for using Outlook Group Site

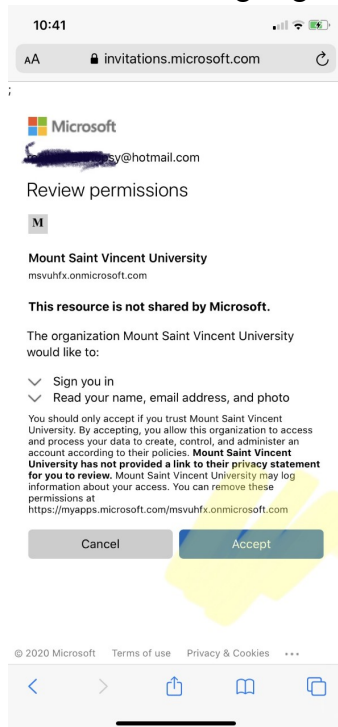
To keep all participants safe and in compliance with social distancing protocols during the Covid-19 pandemic, this focus group will take place online. We will be using a Microsoft Outlook Group Site to facilitate the interaction between you all that is the defining characteristic of typical focus groups. You will be able to answer the questions I post, as well as to reply or refer to others answers. Please note – as mentioned in the information letter and the consent form – that your name and/or email address will be visible to other participants, and thus you will not be anonymous. However, agreeing to participate means that you have also agreed to keep said information confidential and not repeat it to people outside of this study. I will, of course, keep your identities confidential in the write up that will come from the information you provide. Thank you.

Below you will find the steps for how the group will proceed as well as what you will need to do to navigate the group site. If you have any questions you can contact me at [redacted].

1. I will send you an email checking that I have the email you would like me to use to add you to the group site (it could be your school email, or you could create/use a live.com or Hotmail.com email).
2. Once I have the email you would like to use, I will add you to the group site. You will then receive an email welcoming you. **Save it, you will need it to access the group site for the duration of the focus group.** The email will look like this:

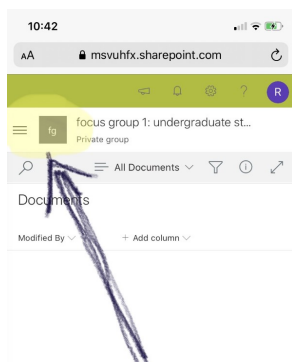


3. Click the part of the email that says “Go to SharePoint”. It is highlighted in the above picture.
4. If your email is compatible, the following window will open. You should click accept if you are comfortable going forward. If your email is not compatible,



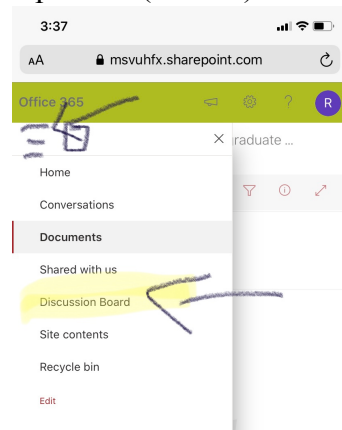
contact me.

5. You may get a screen that says “just a moment”. It’s fine; it will redirect you in a moment.
6. It will take you to the following page. Click on the square (it may be a different color than this picture) in the top left corner to go to the groups home page. There are some instructions and reminders there for you to read.

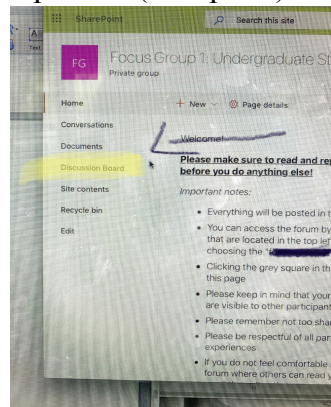


7. How you navigate from the home page to the discussion board depends whether you are on your mobile or on a computer. Option A: if you are on your mobile: you can click on the three lines in the top left, that are next to the square logo (see above photo). A list will pop up, as in the picture below, and you can choose “Discussion Board” to see the focus group questions and answer them. Option B: If you are on a computer, the navigation menu will be located in the left of the window, underneath the square logo. Choose “Discussion Board” to go see the focus group questions and answer them.

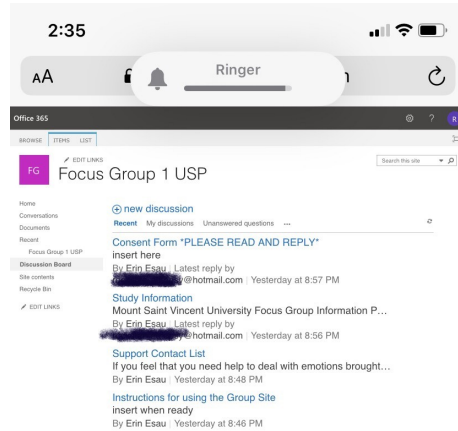
Option A (Mobile):



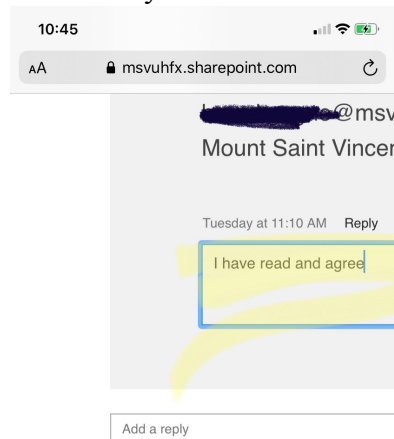
Option B (Computer):



8. You can click the square logo in the top left to get back to the home page if you need to.
9. The discussion page, where the questions will be posted, looks like this:



10. Make sure you click on the consent form post, and reply if you want to take part in the study.



11. I will post one or two questions on the discussion board once a day, for 8 days. I will send an email reminder out each day after doing so. To get into the group site to reply to the day's questions, go back to your original email and access the site the same way you did the first time.
12. You can reply to the individual post with your own experiences and opinions. You can reference others' replies in yours. You can also reply to others' if you have a question for them, if you share an opinion and/or experience, or if and how your experience has differed!
13. Please remember to be respectful to other participants and the ways their experiences and opinions may differ from yours.
14. You will have 6 days after all the questions are posted to reply to anything you have missed, clarify or add to your comments, edit or delete your comments, and

to interact with other participants' comments. I will send several reminder emails during this time, the last one 24 hours before I close down your access to the site.

15. You can edit your own comments by clicking the “edit” option below your comment.
16. You can delete your own comment by clicking on the three dots (...) that are next to the edit option below your comment. Choose delete from the menu that pops up.
17. If you have any trouble navigating the site, you can email me at [redacted].

Appendix F: Support Contacts List for Focus Group

Please Note: due to changes to procedure from Covid-19, this form will be posted on the focus group site. I will also embed links to the associated web pages where the below information originates, so that participants can easily access up to date information straight from the source in regards to their operational changes for covid-19 restrictions.

Support Contacts List

If you feel that you need help to deal with emotions brought up by the focus group discussions you can contact any of the following for support:

Post-Secondary Student Helpline (free and confidential, open 24/7/365): **1-833-292-3698**
The Mental Health Crisis Line (toll free): **1-888-429-8167**

MSVU counselling services:

902-457-6567 or counselling@msvu.ca

visit the front desk in EMF 108 (September – May: 8:30am to 4:30pm, Monday to Friday.)

MSVU Health office (M-Th 9am-430pm, F varies): **902-457-6354**, Assisi Hall Second Floor

Dalhousie/Kings Same-day Counselling Services or to see a doctor: **902-494-2171**, or book online.

SMU Counselling services:

902-420-5615 or counselling@smu.ca

4th Floor Student Centre, Room 406

NSCAD counselling services: **902-494-8260**

Acadia counselling services: **902-585-1246** or counselling@acadiau.ca

St. Francis Xavier counselling services: **902-867-2263** or drop in to The Health & Counselling Centre at room 305 Bloomfield Centre

Cape Breton University counselling services:

call 902-563-1639

visit <https://www.cbu.ca/current-students/student-services/health-wellness/personal-counselling/>

drop in to the learning commons, Wednesday 1-3pm. (Sign up before noon the same day.)

You can also: Make an appointment with your family doctor or visit a walk-in clinic.

Appendix G: Participant Recruitment Material

Email

Subject Line: Students with Children Needed

Email body:

Are you an undergraduate student who is also a parent and/or primary caregiver to any children under 18 years old? Your voice is needed to help build suggestions for policy change and make the university environment more inclusive!

Hi, my name is Erin Esau. I am a master's student in the graduate Women and Gender Studies program at Mount Saint Vincent University. I am also a single parent of two, and was so during part of my undergraduate years as well. I am writing a thesis on the experiences of undergraduate student parents/caregivers, and I am in need of volunteers to share their experience in an online focus group setting.

To participate you must be 18 years or older, be a primary caregiver to one or more dependents under the age of 19 (or previously were and still maintain an involved parental role with the now grown child/ren and/or subsequent grandchildren), and be currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree program in a Nova Scotian university.

Participation will involve online, text-based group discussion (with other student parents/caregivers) about your experience juggling student and parenting roles, as well as how these interact with other parts of your identity (racialization, orientation, neurotype, gender, disability, class, citizenship, age, etc.) and with university policies, rules, and expectations. **All identities are welcome**, though participants with marginalized identities will be given priority in the (however unlikely) event of an overabundance of interest.

If you are interested or have questions please contact me via email at [redacted]. You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Tammy Findlay, at [redacted] if you have any concerns.

If you know anyone who might be interested in participating, please forward this email to them!

Thanks for reading!

Erin Esau

Social Media Post



© Picture Erin Esau

Are you an undergraduate student who is also a parent and/or primary caregiver to any children under 18 years old? Your voice is needed to help build suggestions for policy change and make the university environment more inclusive!

Hi, my name is Erin Esau. I am a master's student in the graduate Women and Gender Studies program at Mount Saint Vincent University. I am also a single parent of two, and was so for part of my undergraduate years as well! I am writing a thesis on the experiences of undergraduate student parents/caregivers, and I am in need of volunteers to share their experience in an online focus group setting.

To participate you must be 19 years or older, be a primary caregiver to one or more dependents under the age of 19 (or previously were and still maintain an involved parental role with the now grown child/ren and/or subsequent grandchildren), and be currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree program in a Nova Scotian university.

Participation will involve online, text-based group discussion (with other student parents/caregivers) about your experience juggling student and parenting/caregiver roles, as well as how these interact with other parts of your identity (racialization, orientation, neurotype, gender, disability, class, citizenship, age, etc.) and with university policies, rules and expectations. **All identities are welcome!** Please note, though, that participants with typically marginalized identities will be given priority in the (however unlikely) event of an overabundance of interest.

If you are interested or have questions please contact me via email at [redacted]. You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Tammy Findlay, at [redacted]. If you know anyone who might be interested in participating, please share this post with them!

Thanks for reading!