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EXPLORING STUDENT PARENT
EXPERIENCES WITH UNIVERSITY
POLICIES AND PRACTICES

A Thesis
presented for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology
The University of Mississippi

by

Chelsea D. Baddley

August 2021

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the experiences of student parents from the University of Mississippi and examines their perceptions of university policies and practices. In addition, this study gathers the perceptions from university staff members that occupy student support roles across the university on the types of issues they think student parents at this university face and the support that is available to student parents through policies and practices. I focus on one case study, the University of Mississippi. A total of 10 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with one current student parent, four recently graduated student parents, and five university staff members. I conducted an extensive review of the existing policies at the University of Mississippi in search of any policy that might relate to or impact a student parent's experience. The policy review contributed to the institutional analysis of this study significantly.

I found the school-family balance and lack of affordable childcare are the biggest issues student parents in this study face. It showcases specific barriers student parents encounter most often and how they are embedded into the structure of this organization. This thesis discusses how supporting student parents is something that is deemed essential and valued by the staff members I interviewed. However, these staff members are limited in the support that they are available to provide. The experiences student parents in this study had reveal how the "ideal student" culture is constructed, maintained, and reinforced through policies and practices. This study found that the University of Mississippi does not consider students "care taking" responsibilities when it comes to making policies and practices. Therefore, student parents must

adjust their caretaking practices around it. Lastly, this thesis concludes with a discussion on the implications and recommendations for the University and potential future studies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first thank the five student parents and five university staff members who participated in this study. The interviews were conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, and many of the participants were working from home during this time while their children were doing schooling from home, as well. I am incredibly thankful for their willingness to take a moment out of their busy days to conduct an interview with me. Each participant truly cared about this topic, and without them this study would have not been possible.

I would like to thank my parents and sisters for their unwavering love and support. If it were not for them, I would not be here today. I especially would like to thank my mother for everything she sacrificed in order for me to achieve my dreams. I want to thank Greg Earnest and Kati Hall for their endless academic help throughout this process. Also, I would like to thank my daughter, Poppy Jean. Her smile alone has kept me going through the hardest of times. I am very thankful to be her mother and to have the opportunity to help improve the lives of other young mothers.

I would like to thank my committee members for their support and incredible patience throughout this process. I would like to thank Dr. John Sonnett for teaching me methods and Dr. John Green for helping me foster a deep passion for policy research. Lastly, I would like to thank my Chair, Dr. Kirsten Dellinger. She has never stopped encouraging me to reach my fullest potential and has gone above and beyond to provide support for me during the pandemic. I am

forever thankful for everything she has taught about gender theories and concepts. However, I am most thankful for Dr. Dellinger teaching me how to believe in myself and my academic abilities.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. METHODS.....	16
III. STUDENT PARENT EXPERIENCES	27
IV. STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT PARENTS.....	58
V. CONCLUSION.....	87
List of References	101
List of Appendices	110
VITA.....	115

I. INTRODUCTION

This thesis project is an examination of how and whether University policies and practices and the staff and students who utilize them address the needs and promote the success of student mothers and fathers. I explore several research questions: Are there University of Mississippi policies that support student parents? What are the experiences of current and former student parents at the University of Mississippi? What are student parents' and university staff's perceptions of the policies and practices at the University of Mississippi?

The context for this research is essential. Mississippi is the state with the second-highest teenage pregnancy rate (Martin et al., 2018). I am therefore doing research in a region where there is a higher population of young mothers and fathers. I have chosen to understand the experiences of mainly mothers who are either current students or have recently graduated from the University of Mississippi, one of the largest public universities in the state. While the experiences of student fathers are equally as important, student mothers, especially single student mothers, make up the majority of student parents in higher education. According to a Fact Sheet by the Institute for Women's Policy Research,

Over a quarter (26 percent) of all undergraduate students, or 4.8 million students, are raising dependent children. Women are disproportionately likely to be balancing college

and parenthood, many without the support of a spouse or partner. Women make up 71 percent of all student parents, and roughly 2 million students, or 43 percent of the total student parent population, are single mothers. Single student fathers make up 11 percent of the student parent population.

I believe that interviewing more student mothers compared to student fathers highlights the ways that universities can become more equitable institutions.

I come to this project for both personal and sociological reasons. An accumulation of experiences and encounters has led me to research educational policies and student parents. Like most college students, I have experienced adversities while trying to achieve my degree. However, it was not until one of my first sociology courses as an undergraduate that I realized some of my struggles and experiences in higher education were a part of a much larger system of power. I, myself, am a student mother and a young one at that. Instead of a wild high school senior trip to the beach, I took a trip directly into motherhood at just 18 years old. It was in the following moments after I had been staring at those two pink lines on the pregnancy test for what seemed like hours that I was positive that in order to provide a good life for my child, I would have to get a college education. I enrolled at a local community college the very next day. It was around the second semester after I transferred from community college to the University of Mississippi that I knew in my heart that I wanted to go to graduate school. So, in proper millennial fashion, I searched online to find anyone who had similar experiences and advice on

going to graduate school as a young mother. Learning that only 2% of teenage mothers get their bachelor's degree by the age of 30 felt like I was standing alone, at the bottom of Mt. Everest with no tools to help me climb to the top (Garcia 2013).

While I was privileged enough to grow up in a middle-class, white, suburban family who supported and still help support my pursuit of higher education, I did not seem to receive the same level of support from the two different institutions of higher learning that I attended in my efforts to finish my undergraduate degree. I remember the front desk worker at the community college who told me that I could pump my breast milk in the faculty bathroom when I asked if there was a private spare office space for this. The security officer refused to let me take my daughter past the front doors of the lobby to print something off in the library, because he said their insurance policy did not allow children in the building. When asked where this policy was located or whom I could talk to regarding this matter, the security guard merely looked at me with disdain. I cannot forget the sinking feeling of emailing the housing department at the University of Mississippi about information on family dorms and finding out there are none. These experiences made me feel like I was not a "real" student.

Policies, lack of knowledge from the people who work for these institutions, and few to no resources helping student mothers directly impacted my relationship with higher education. This study explores the experiences of four student mothers, one student father, and five university staff members. It has provided the opportunity to identify some of the structural and gendered barriers embedded into the foundation of one institution of higher education.

Parenthood and college education are often viewed as separate journeys and are treated as such when it comes to succeeding in one or the other. However, this study moves beyond this either/or framework to seek to understand mothers and fathers as both students and parents. My research examines the connection between these two social phenomena. I aim to contribute to and build upon the existing sociological literature on higher education and parenthood and inform those who make university policies to influence organizational change that will support both student mothers and fathers.

The following section consists of a review of the literature regarding the experiences of student parents in higher education and how university policies and practices impact their experiences. First, I provide an overview of studies showing the barriers and issues that student parents encounter most often. Next, I introduce the theoretical frameworks that guide my research and discuss how the gendered organization perspective (Acker 1990) and concept of the "ideal student" (Madden 2018) are crucial to making sense of the experiences and perceptions of both student parents and working parents in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Issues Student Parents Face

In Moreau's article, "Care in Academia: An Exploration of Student Parents' Experiences" (2015), she breaks down these barriers into specific categories, such as financial, health, and emotional issues, while addressing them as conflicting demands. Her findings show that the

narratives from student mothers primarily consist of an ongoing battle between excelling in both motherhood and education. She argues that “student mothers develop common strategies that include studying when children are in childcare, at school or sleeping, restricting the time dedicated to activities other than studying and parenting, and establishing boundaries in terms of what is 'good enough'” (Moreau 2015: 220-21). Unfortunately, this often results in lack of sleep, feelings of guilt, and missing out on experiences as both a mother and student, leading to depression and other health issues.

On the other hand, she found that student mothers often did not associate or prioritize these feelings as having mental health issues personally. It was evident in the responses that student mothers do not have the luxury to stop and think about themselves or have the time to take care of themselves, even when they want to. Another important finding of her research was that financial issues were among the highest stressors for student mothers from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and international students. Many of the respondents in her study were stuck by having to remain low-income to find financial aid grants or scholarships, while others give up on navigating and meeting the complex landscape of financial aid requirements and processes and opt into more loans or, in some cases, less schooling.

Financial issues for student parents lead to another significant issue that is well documented in the literature - the lack of affordable and accessible childcare and time. In "No Time for College? An Investigation of Time Poverty and Parenthood," Waldis et al. (2018) examines why "postsecondary outcomes are significantly worse for student parents even though

they earn higher GPAs on average” (807). The authors argue that student parents do not finish college at higher rates despite their high-ranking academic achievements due to the substantial amount of time it takes to raise children. They use the concept of time poverty to guide their research, "a byproduct of student parenthood, reduces the quantity and quality of time that student parents can spend on their studies and in turn results in lower college persistence and academic momentum” (801). Additionally, time poverty significantly affects student mothers compared to student fathers. One major finding from this study that relates to my research most significantly is that "greater availability of convenient and affordable childcare (e.g. increased on-campus childcare, revised financial aid formulas that include more accurate estimates of childcare costs) would likely lead to better college outcomes for students with young children” (807).

There is a range of structural and cultural issues that are well documented in the literature on student parents in higher education. Standard and established pedagogical practices that instructors use can cause significant challenges for single student mothers, such as group projects and attending events outside of regular class hours. As a result, Duquaine-Watson (2007) found that single student mothers "avoid classes that incorporate these types of requirements. However, when that is not an option, they must devise ways to cope with the situation” (233). In addition, when single student mothers do not have access to affordable and accessible childcare on campus, the travel time it takes to drop their children off and make it to class creates additional

barriers. As it "complicates single mother students' already hectic schedules and makes it more difficult to juggle their class, parenting, and, in many cases, work schedules" (Duquaine-Watson 2007: 233).

Furthermore, student parents struggle to balance time between their school and caretaking responsibilities. In "Parents in Higher Education: Impacts of University Learning on the Self and the Family," Wainwright and Marandet (2010) found through their questionnaire survey with over seventy-one participants that "84.5% of students with dependent children find it difficult to balance study with their domestic responsibilities" (457). The three top issues associated with time the student parents reported having were centered around balancing different schedules, finding time to study, and juggling the time they devote between their responsibilities. As many studies in the literature show, student mothers face more significant challenges balancing their time between school and family.

Mothers are expected to be the primary caretakers of their children, and in order to be considered a good mother, they must adhere to the cultural ideology of intensive mothering. In the preface to *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996), Hayes argues that intensive mothering is "a gendered model that advises that mothers expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children." However, this ideology creates a high level of conflict for student mothers, as institutions of higher education advise students to spend a considerable amount of time and money to do well in school. Lindsey (2017) argues that "Mothers cannot be totally committed to the institution as they have a number of other

responsibilities present within their lives and conversely, they cannot be totally committed to their children if they are to succeed within the academy” (59). Money and time are major constraints for student parents. Thus, providing affordable and accessible childcare is crucial to helping student parents succeed in higher education because it addresses both factors, time and money. This leads to the discussion on policies and practices in higher education and how student mothers and fathers navigate them in light of the issues outlined above.

University Policies and Practices

In her 2016 article, "Regulating the student body/ies: University policies and student parents," Moreau identified three institutional approaches to support student parents: careblind/universal, target, and mainstreaming. The concept of "care blind" represents minimal policy intervention. Moreau characterizes careblind approach to policy as, "No policy or provision targeting student parents was in place, whether in the form of a specific provision or of the mainstreaming of care in generic policies” (914-15). The concept of care blind is derived from "universal" policies, which are institutional policies that are viewed as beneficial and equal for every student. Moreau argues that "institutional policies constructed as 'universal' and 'neutral' are in reality geared towards childfree students, with, as a result, student parents having to adjust their care practices to fit in” (920).

The second institutional approach is called the target approach. This refers to a specific provision that is implemented directly for student parents. The most common characteristic is

institutions providing childcare facilities on campus or certain loans and financial aid options for student parents. The last approach that Moreau explores is called mainstreaming. She claims that mainstreaming is a “specific provision in place associated with some attempts to mainstream the needs of student parents into policies” (915). Examples include: university websites and other documentation mentioning student parents extensively and designated advisors providing one-on-one support meetings for student parents.

Even with universities that take a "target" or "mainstream" approach to implementing policies and creating supportive resources, student mothers and fathers are often unaware of the policies or do not have access to the resources provided. According to a 2008 report by The Feminists for Life of America, "Perception is Reality,"

A number of colleges and universities have some on-campus resources, and others are taking steps to create a supportive academic environment for pregnant and parenting students. Yet basic resources often go unpublicized, and students remain unaware of the services available to them in the event they face an unplanned pregnancy.

Therefore, this leads the discussion into how the culture of a given university informs the way policies and practices are made. I now turn to the guiding theoretical frameworks that are most important in helping understand the experiences student parents have with policies and practices in higher education.

GUIDING FRAMEWORKS

For this study, the central theoretical perspective used is the gendered organization framework. Joan Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations allows me to explore how

gender is socially constructed at various interacting levels. For example, I examine how policies are implemented on a structural level, how a gendered workplace culture produces discourse and practices surrounding student mothers, and how identities are formed by interactions between staff and student parents.

Joan Acker argues that organizations are gendered in that "advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine" (Acker 1990: 146). In the most recent decades, Acker has evolved and expanded her analysis to incorporate more social identities such as class and race. In "Inequality Regimes Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations" (2006), she argues that most organizations in the United States maintain class inequalities formed through gendered and racialized beliefs and practices. These inequalities are what Acker calls the "normal and natural bedrock of organizing, and white men are the normal top leaders" (Acker 2006: 459).

In "Gendered Organizations: Progress and Prospects" (2008), Britton and Logan discuss how Acker's theory of gendered organizations focuses on gender as a particular part of structures instead of an individual act. Another critical aspect to Acker's theory consists of a multilevel framework that captures gendering processes within organizations. At the cultural level, jobs and organizations are gendered in many ways. Within an organization's culture, there is what Acker (2012) calls the "gendered substructure," which is made up of images, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and values. Britton et al. argue that "they also reflect and reproduce gender through

their policies and practices” (110). Moreover, the level of interactions between workers is gendered, such as men having more time to socialize and network with male supervisors to raise their chances for a promotion or "locker room talk." The final part of the gendering process is centered on how workers shape their identities around the work culture and interactions they have in it.

Ideal Worker

While women have made numerous advancements over the decades in college attainment and management positions, inequalities still exist, even in higher education. According to a 2017 report by the National Center for Education, 54 percent of full-time professors were white men, 27 percent were white women, while black men and women accounted for two percent of these positions. This can be understood through Acker's analysis of organizational logic, where she discusses how jobs and hierarchies are created with "abstract categories" that do not consist of an actual gendered body (Acker 1990: 149). Organizational logic entails that anyone who takes the job is dedicated to their work only. This means that a worker is expected not to have other responsibilities that can limit their work demands. Acker argues that "the closest the disembodied worker doing the abstract job comes to a real worker is the male worker whose life centers on his full-time, life-long job, while his wife or another woman takes care of his personal needs and his children” (1990: 149). This led her to conclude that "a job" is a gendered concept, and the "ideal worker" is a white, heterosexual, middle-class male who is free of parental responsibilities.

Ideal Student

Universities use abstract categories and similar organizational logic when it comes to students. Like the ideal worker, the "ideal student" is constructed through assumptions based on gender, class, race, and sexuality. In Madden's (2018) research on low income pregnant and parenting students in community college, she used "Acker's description of the 'ideal worker' in the theory of gendered organizations to consider how community colleges assume an 'ideal student' who is male and has no familial responsibilities to detract from the work of the affiliated institution" (379).

Higher education maintains a set of cultural norms that make up the ideal college experience, influencing the way universities make their policies and practices. For example, most universities promote institutional pride through collegiate sports, mainly male-dominated sports such as football or baseball. It allows students who attend games to find a sense of belonging. Another example of higher education culture is promoting students joining campus groups such as sororities and fraternities, attending guest lectures, taking summer internships, and studying abroad. These examples are based on assumptions that a student will have the money or extra time to participate in these things and will be welcomed to join regardless of their social identity (gender, race, and sexuality.) Campus activities help students build networks of experience and connections. These are vital for all students who aim to get jobs post-graduation. Unfortunately, these avenues for collegiate growth are often unattainable for many students of color, first-generation students, and student mothers.

From a historical perspective, institutions of higher education are fundamentally structured on around the "bachelor boy." Moreau (2016) describes that "the Cartesian rationalist ideals that

shaped the emergence of modern science drew on the mind/body, object/subject, public/private, and rational/emotional dyads” (907). These ideals consisted of making the mind/body and other dyads exclusively a white masculine one. There have been numerous advancements made by women, who now make up a large portion of college students, including mothers; however, the institution of higher education still maintains a white masculine or "bachelor boy" culture through its gendered and racial hierarchy of positions and student status.

With the foundation of higher education being white and masculine and its continued practice of inequality regimes, we can conclude that student mothers do not fit the abstract categories of the “ideal student.” Societal norms have determined that mothers are expected to be the primary caregivers for their children, and motherhood is highly privatized. They are expected to stay at home, cook, clean, and keep their children healthy. When mothers become students, they disrupt the constructed ideal student culture. As a part of the gendered organization process, university policies and practices are made with the “ideal student” in mind and often leave student mothers to accommodate these norms and shape their own identities around them.

Intersectionality

When discussing policies and research on student mothers, it is of utmost importance that we use an intersectional approach. According to Patricia Hill Collins (2016), intersectionality is a way or a tool for us to understand "the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experience" and that “social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but many axes that work together and influence each other” (11). Because I

intend that my research will bring about organizational change in policies and awareness regarding student mothers, I stand firmly in the belief that it must happen through an intersectional lens. This means that any change within the institutional culture of higher education must take into account gender, race, and sexuality power dynamics. For example, university family-friendly policies and initiatives must be equitable in the sense they do not benefit or exclude one type of student parent over the other.

Regardless of gender, race, class, and sexuality, all students go through similar experiences in dealing with getting good grades and developing time management skills. Universities have departments that directly deal with these types of student services by providing support and mentorship. This is where intersectionality becomes the most crucial. If universities modeled their student services to look beyond the issue of a freshman student not doing well in a class because of poor time management or some other remedial issue and took into account the structural inequalities in society that might contribute to a student's issues, student parents and particularly student parents of color might be able to get the help they need.

Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organization and Madden's (2018) "ideal student" perspective help conceptualize my findings on a structural level by examining the ways that policies and practices at the University of Mississippi contribute to the issues the student parents in this study faced. I analyze the responses from the faculty and staff to determine how and if the culture at the University of Mississippi is gendered and how it might contribute to the experiences student parents have navigating policies and practices here. Lastly, Collins' (2016)

work on intersectionality helps examine how structural barriers do not affect all student parents in the same ways. The next chapter provides a detailed description of the methods used in this study.

II. METHODS

In this thesis, I used a mixed-methods approach, including a policy review and 10 semi-structured in-depth interviews with student parents and student support staff to explore the experiences of student parents in higher education. This research focused on one case study, the University of Mississippi. First, I reviewed the online policy dictionary on the University of Mississippi's website in search of policies and practices relating to student parents. Second, I used a purposive sampling approach for the in-depth interviews, which included five members from various departments related to student services and five student parents who either currently attend or have recently graduated from the University of Mississippi. Third, I used Moreau's and Kerner's (2012) methods from their report on "Supporting Student Parents in Higher Education: A Policy Analysis" to guide my methodological approach. My research questions: Are there University of Mississippi Policies that support student parents? What are the experiences of current and former student parents at the University of Mississippi? What are student parents' and university staff's perceptions of the policies and practices at the University of Mississippi?

Upon gaining approval of my research proposal and application to the University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board, I started recruiting student parents in the Fall of 2020.

I conducted four interviews with student parents during the months of September and October 2020 and one during the month of March in 2021. I started recruiting staff members at the beginning of 2021 and conducted interviews with five staff members during the months of February and March. I chose to interview student parents first so I could have solid insight on their experiences before interviewing the staff members about their perceptions on the matter.

All participants were sent a consent form by email informing them of the purpose of the study and their rights to terminate the interview and refuse to answer any questions at any point during the interview. This consent form also informed the participants that there is no known risk associated with participating in the interviews and ensuring them that all identifiers were going to remain completely confidential. The only other person who would have access to the transcribed interview would be the chair of my thesis committee, Dr. Kirsten Dellinger. The consent form can be reviewed in Appendix A.

No interviews were held in person due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Instead, eight of the interviews were held over Zoom, and two of the interviews were done via phone call. I recorded each interview on my Apple voice recording app on my phone and computer. Both sets of voice recordings are in a locked folder on my laptop that requires a password to open.

Policy Review

I began drafting my research proposal in the Fall of 2019. While things have slightly changed throughout the process, reviewing the existing policies at the University of Mississippi always remained crucial to my research. I originally intended to conduct a formal content analysis on the policies in place at the University of Mississippi. However, due to the lack of policies that target student parents directly I opted for a review of relevant policies that have

either been cited in the literature impacting the experiences of student parents or were mentioned directly during the interviews with student parents. I have spent a considerable number of hours throughout the last year and a half searching through the online policy dictionary. This has allowed me to analyze the perceptions from both student parents and staff members on the policies and practices at this university through a more critical lens. Policies are often written ambiguously and use strategic wording that implies particular messages without stating them outright. I was able to put the experiences student parents had with these policies and practices into perspective with my guiding theoretical framework.

For example, I found attendance policies are made by individual professors that reflect departmental requirements and standards. However, the University of Mississippi has official attendance policies in place that require professors to give accommodations to certain types of students when they are absent from class, such as student athletes and students who attend official university related events. Several student parents in this study mentioned they struggled with attendance policies and running the risk of losing letter grades by missing class when their children were sick or could not find childcare. This relates to Madden's (2018) "ideal student" frame and the idea that universities do not assume students will have to be absent from class for caretaking reasons. Thus, university attendance policies are made with students who do not have children or other caretaking responsibilities in mind.

I examined the online policy dictionary and the University of Mississippi's official *MBook*, which is published annually by the Division of Student Affairs and contains a list of specific policies that are perceived to be the ones most relevant to the student experience and that students might encounter most frequently. I used Saldaña's (2016) approach by writing analytic memos describing the context of the policies I reviewed and how they might relate to the guiding

theoretical frame and data collected. I discuss specific policies and practices more in-depth in the findings chapters 3 and 4. For this research, I define university practices as the way that faculty and staff interact with students within the organizational context including their pedagogical approaches and strategies for providing support. When defining practices, I relied on the work of other scholars who use similar guiding theoretical frameworks to study family-friendly policies and practices in the workplace, such as Swanberg (2004) and Britton and Logan (2008). I struggled to find a concrete definition in the literature on policies and practices in the context of higher education. This led me to search other major public universities who might have clear definitions of “practices” on their policy websites. I discuss the definitions I found of “practices” from other universities websites more in-depth in chapter 3. While the University of Mississippi does give the faculty and staff "suggested" practices in the employee handbook, many of the practices that I found in this study are not formally written or stated.

Positionality

It is imperative that I discuss my positionality as a student mother who is conducting research on the experiences of student mothers and one student father in higher education. Cooper and Rogers (2015) argue, “As researchers, we believe that sociology is a living, organic discipline and the crossover between our experiences and those of our participants adds depth, rather than dilutes our position” (2). The “mom guilt” I experienced over having to miss time with my daughter to finish my thesis, while writing about the “mom guilt” of other student mothers has not been easy. Doucet (1998) describes her experiences as a doctoral student conducting research on gender inequality and care work, “I did not realize it at the time, my life was almost completely taken up with caring and writing about caring” (53). It has prompted me

to embark on a methodological journey of reflexivity as a researcher and understanding my insider and outsider status. I found the feminist strategy of “listening to women talk” by Devault (1990) to be extremely useful. She writes,

As an interviewer who is also a woman—thus, who has also learned to translate—I can listen “as a woman,” filling in from experience to help me understand the things that aren’t completely said. As a researcher, my job is to be alert for these translations, and to analyze the disjunctures that give rise to them. (102)

One of the guiding theoretical perspectives for this study, “ideal student,” from Madden (2018), relied heavily on this approach in her study on low-income pregnant and parenting student mothers in community college. Madden (2018) used her experiences as a pregnant and parenting student mother in higher education to “fill in” during the interviews. I similarly used my experiences as a student mother methodologically to fill in moments during the interview to provide deeper follow up questions. For example, when a student mother mentioned that she would go home to pump her breastmilk instead of doing it on campus, I recalled my negative experiences with breastfeeding while I was in school and asked specifically why she did not pump on campus. Also, I was able to interpret the data with an insider's perspective on the experiences the student parents in this study shared with me, while also maintaining an outsider's position by translating their experiences into the broader social context by using my sociological knowledge on gender, higher education, race, and class.

However, this is not without limitations and concerns. In “Insider / Outsider: Epistemological Privilege and Mothering Work,” by Griffith (1998) describes the experiences of being an insider and outsider with the work she and Dorothy Smith conducted with mothering and education. Both Griffith and Smith were single mothers who had similar experiences as the women they were studying, which helped provide them entry as researchers. Griffith (1998)

says, “At times, the social similarities and differences between our experiences as mothers and as researchers obscured and, at other times, illuminated our research” (374). For perspective, I am a white, middle-class, cis-gendered, student mother who has an abundance of support from family and professors. I worked diligently not to make generalizations or assumptions regarding the data that stem from my own experiences when compared to a small but diverse sample of student parents.

In-depth Interviews: Student Parents

I posted a recruitment status in the UM Working Mothers Support Facebook page on September 6th, 2020. There were approximately 158 members in this group at the time who were either working or student mothers at the University of Mississippi. I received two interviewees from this approach. I suspect this approach had a low response because of there being more working mothers in this group compared to student mothers. Next, I reached out to two former student parents that I had classes with during my undergraduate studies at this university through Facebook and Instagram. I sent direct messages introducing my research and asking if they would be willing to participate. Lastly, I reached out to a student parent who I went to high school with. We did not have a class together, but I was aware that she went to the university and gave birth to her son while she was in school. Once each participant agreed to and settled on a date, I scheduled a private meeting on Zoom™ and sent them a link with the meeting number and password and a copy of the consent form. The interviews lasted anywhere from forty-five minutes to one hour.

I interviewed one current student parent and four recently graduated student parents at the University of Mississippi. Three identified as white, one identified as African American, and the

other identified as bi-racial. All of the participants had young children while they were in college, and at the time of the interviews, the participants' ages ranged from 19-30. Three of the participants got married while they were in college. Two of the participants were single mothers. Three participants attended classes on the main campus at the University of Mississippi, while the other two went to one of the regional campuses about an hour away from the main one. All of the student parents in this study worked at some point while they were in college. Please see Appendix B for a demographic chart.

In-depth Interviews: Staff Members

I used a purposive sampling approach to recruit staff members working in student services roles or provide student support in some capacity across the University of Mississippi. I carefully and extensively searched the university's website for departments, offices, centers, and programs that specifically function as student support services to recruit these members. Due to two student parent participants attending one of the regional campuses, I decided to recruit a staff member from this campus. The regional campus worker is employed through the Division of Outreach and oversees various student-related services. The four staff members from the main campus provide support for students in one of the following areas: Student Affairs, Human Resources, and Student Advising. I sent each staff member an email directly with a brief overview of my research topic, ensured confidentiality, and asked if they would be willing to participate in my interviews. Once they agreed and we settled on a date, I scheduled a private meeting on Zoom™ and sent them a link with the meeting number and password and a copy of the consent form. The interviews lasted anywhere from forty-five minutes to one hour. There

was a total of five interview requests that were not granted from staff members at the University of Mississippi. Please see Appendix C for a demographic chart.

Data and Coding

I coded the student parent interviews first and the staff members second. Following Esterberg's (2011) "making sense of data" guide, I printed off each interview for both sets of participants and open coded them by hand. This approach allowed me to be fully immersed with my data. Going line by line and using different color pens, I highlighted a variety of recurring themes and patterns. Examples of my open codes for the student parents include childcare, stress, policy, and time. The open codes for the staff interviews included similar types as the student parents, such as support, time, policy, and childcare. Next, I made a Google Document consisting of the themes and patterns that developed from my open coding. I numbered and highlighted each theme. Then I copied and pasted the quotes from my transcriptions into the document under the theme it belonged with. While in the open coding process, both sets of data had around twenty different codes. However, following Esterberg's (2011) guide, I created a new Google Document and began the focused coding process by narrowing down and organizing my data into more concise themes and patterns. For example, one major emerging theme for both groups was the issues that not having affordable childcare caused student parents.

Throughout the focus coding process for the student parents, I found four significant and recurring issues they reported having in school. The most common issues they had were finding childcare, altering their degree trajectory, balancing school and family, and breastfeeding on campus. Further into the focus coding process, I coded for the most common perceptions of policies and practices at the University of Mississippi. The student parents in this study mainly

had experiences with attendance policies and a policy at the regional campus that does not allow children into the building. The most common practice included interactions with their professors. Lastly, I coded their perceptions for specific experiences that set them apart from non-student parents. I relied on my guiding theoretical frameworks and several studies from the literature on student parents in higher education as a guide throughout the coding process (Acker 1990, 2006; Britton 2008; Estes 2011; Moreau 2012, 2016; Madden 2018).

Once I finished coding the student parent interviews, I began the open and focused coding process as outlined above on the staff interviews. I used the data from the student parent interviews as a guide for coding the staff member interviews. I coded the staff's perceptions on what issues student parents face most often and the policies and practices in place at the University of Mississippi. One major theme that emerged was the staff being aware of the same four main issues that student parents in this study reported having. The most common challenges the staff mentioned student parents having are with a lack of affordable childcare and balancing the responsibilities of their school and family.

While coding the staff members' perceptions on providing support for student parents, two major themes emerged. First, I found a pattern of staff members expressing the importance of student parents reaching out for help when they need it. Second, the staff members who are working mothers or were once student mothers referred to their experiences often when talking about student mothers' experiences. Lastly, I found a common pattern of women workers at the University of Mississippi being the ones to start initiatives that bring work-family policies and practices to the university. These two major themes relate to my theoretical framework most significantly (Acker 1990, 2006, Britton 2008)

Again, the research questions for this study include: Are there University of Mississippi Policies that support student parents? What are the experiences of current and former student parents at the University of Mississippi? What are student parents' and university staff's perceptions of the policies and practices at the University of Mississippi? In the next chapter, I discuss two major parts of the research questions: the experiences of current and former student parents at the University of Mississippi and their perceptions of the policies and practices at the University of Mississippi. I examine the main issues that student parents in this study encountered, such as the lack of affordable and accessible childcare, having to alter their degree trajectory, and managing the school-family balance. Second, I explore the racial and gendered culture of the University of Mississippi. I include a detailed discussion of the longstanding history of racism and current racial campus climate that is associated with this university. This leads into my analysis of how and who constructs the "ideal student" categories that are found in the culture, policies, and practices at the University of Mississippi. Lastly, I highlight the experiences student parents in this study had with specific policies and practices and instances where they were reminded of or had to adjust to the "ideal student" frame.

In chapter 4, I answer the first and third research questions for this study. I present my findings from the policy review, discuss the limited policies the University of Mississippi has in place to support student parents, and explore the university staff's perceptions of the policies and practices at the University of Mississippi. Specifically, I discuss the staff members' perceptions of the issues that student parents face in higher education. In this chapter, I begin to explore the culture of student parent support at the University of Mississippi. Through the perceptions of the staff members on policies and practices, I provide an in-depth theoretical analysis of the gendered organizational culture and structural inequalities that are maintained and reproduced at

this university. Finally, I conclude this thesis by summarizing my findings, explaining the limitations and implications of this study, and discussing recommendations for future research and organizational change.

III. STUDENT PARENT EXPERIENCES

I am studying the lived experiences of student parents through in-depth interviews with four student mothers and one student father. While the student parents in this study differ from one another demographically, they discuss similar struggles and triumphs in pursuing their degrees. In this chapter, the findings address the important question: What are student parents' perceptions of the policies and practices at the University of Mississippi and how do they describe their experiences as student parents? By gathering the perceptions of one current student mother and four recently graduated student parents, I was able to learn more about the complex and innovative ways that student parents confront structural barriers and make difficult decisions as they navigate the landscape of higher education.

There are two sections in this chapter: Issues Student Parents Face and University Culture. In the first section, I discuss the biggest issues that the student parents I interviewed encountered while pursuing their degree. The majority of participants described having issues balancing the demands of their studies and family, adjusting the timeline of their degrees due to their circumstances as parents, and dealing with the lack of affordable and accessible childcare. While listening to their experiences, their desire to do well and excel as both a student and parent became abundantly clear. This finding relates to what Estes' (2011) calls the student parent dilemma. This concept is primarily focused on the unique ways student parents craft their identities through and around the conflicting and "often contradictory" roles they take on as parents and students (209). Estes' argues

As student-parents construct both identities simultaneously, they sometimes find it difficult to fit themselves into either ideal. This occurs partly because they articulate their identities within an institutional context designed to serve the traditional college student. Because the structure of the academy is not created to deal with the contingencies of parenting, students with children constantly face the possibility of not living up to their expectations as students or parents (209).

My findings are consistent with Estes' in the types of issues that student parents face as a result of the structural barriers that are in place throughout institutions of higher learning. In the last section, I explore the student culture at the University of Mississippi and examine the interactions and experiences the student parents in this study had with university policies and practices. The findings in the last section of this chapter showcase the distinct ways that these student parents disrupted the "ideal student" model at this university and influence the way they shaped their identities.

I build upon Estes' work on the student-parent dilemma by applying Joan Acker's theory of gendered organization and Madden's concept of the ideal student to the experiences and interactions of the student parents in this study. This approach helps us understand structurally why these barriers exist in the first place and how they contribute to making the roles of student parents "conflicted" and "contradictory." Lastly, I explore the role that the ideal student frame plays in creating the student parent dilemma.

Before discussing the experiences of the student parents in this study, it is important that I describe the experiences and observations I gathered from the interviews. I observed the issues with balancing time and emotions in real-time during some of the interviews. For instance, Anna, a bi-racial, 24-year-old, single mother, had to step away several times during our phone interview to soothe her son, as he was crying over not having a popsicle and wanting to play outside. I listened as Anna balanced her time at that moment, adhering to her duties as a parent and as an interviewee. She called out for her grandmother to come help distract her son while she

finished the interview. Family support was mentioned frequently throughout all of the interviews and deemed crucial by most participants in finishing their degrees. The interview with Amber, a white, 27-year-old, married mother, was conducted through Zoom™ late in the evening. She had to pause several times as her children entered the bedroom she was sitting in for the interview to ask questions. Her youngest child sat in the room with her for the last half of the interview. Two other participants, Kira and Hayley, had their children pop up in the interviews, as well.

During the interview with Hayley, she expressed that her degree trajectory was disrupted by not receiving enough support from the father of her first child after the birth of their son. As a result, she withdrew from school entirely and went back after her son started elementary school. I had a couple of classes with Hayley during my time in community college. The regional campus we attended was small. I remember wondering where she went after I stopped seeing her around. I got to meet Hayley's son for the first time during the Zoom™ interview. These observations provide important insight into the lives of each participant. It also aids in understanding the unique ways the student parents confronted the issues they describe having and how they navigate the complex culture of the university.

ISSUES STUDENT PARENTS FACE

The student parents I interviewed all conveyed having difficulties with balancing their schooling and parenting duties. This created an array of different stressors for the participants in this study, including lack of sleep, anxiety, and guilt. Each participant was confronted with having to adjust or speed up the timeline of their degree trajectory for multiple reasons relating to their status as parents. Many discussed how the University of Mississippi could improve the experiences of student parents by providing affordable and accessible childcare on campus. All

of the participants relied heavily on their families for childcare and support due to the lack of affordable and accessible childcare. Only two out of the five participants were breastfeeding at the time of being a student. However, they both reported having significant struggles with breastfeeding and pumping while being students.

Childcare

All of the student parents mentioned the critical importance of affordable and accessible childcare to their success as students. When this topic came up, they were often passionate and adamant about the role that available and affordable childcare would play in their ability to successfully navigate the demands of college. In addition, all of the student parents that I interviewed relied heavily on their families and friends to help watch their children full or part time while they were in school. As mentioned previously, having affordable and accessible childcare on campus was one of the most important suggestions my participants had for improving the experiences of student parents at the University of Mississippi. Many linked the importance of childcare to their financial challenges. Amber stated,

I've been saying that for years. It'll probably never ever happen, but there should be something on campus. Because daycare in Oxford, I'm a local, I married a local, and I pay \$900 a month for my two kids in daycare and that's not even the most expensive daycare. The one we almost went to was going to be almost \$1300 a month, so I think that's why a lot of students don't finish. They don't have that support. I just got lucky and married somebody who's a local who had really great parents who were able to help me while my babies were newborns. But not everybody has that because it's a university and people come from all over the place and they don't have some help, local on-site, to help while they finish up their degree, they're not going to do it. I wouldn't have been able to do it.

Anna, who is not married, expressed how the town of Oxford does not have a lot of daycares to choose from, which made her worried when trying to figure out who was going to watch her son after he was born and while she was in class. She said, "I think everything else I could have

handled. But I was so nervous about the childcare situation and being in college.” Fortunately, she was working at one of the sports offices on campus and the coach's wife offered to watch her son for free while she finished school. Anna expressed, “I wouldn't have been able to do anything without her and what she did and especially doing that for free.”

This perception of not being able to finish school without having childcare support from friends and family is a common thread throughout the interviews with participants in this study. Hayley said, “I definitely had the support of my family, big time, like wouldn't have been able to do it without them because I mean, like. Another thing is just, like, daycare is so expensive.” The most common type of support that student parents received from their families were centered around free and accommodating childcare, meaning they were able to watch their children while they attended a night class or had to study throughout the weekend. While living in Oxford close to the main campus, Anna was only about an hour away from her hometown. She says,

We would end up coming to my grandma's house and I would just sleep the entire weekend. She would watch him in the mornings and stuff like that while I just slept and do stuff from the week. I was super fortunate to be able to do that because I don't think I would have been able to do it.

The student parents that I interviewed often expressed how stressful dealing with the lack of affordable and accessible childcare is. Kira, who is still in her sophomore year of college, stated this about having childcare on campus,

That would be very helpful and would relieve a lot of my stress that I have because that would make me more calm when I go to class and her be on campus and not at home because right now my daughter is babysat at home right now. So I worry a lot.

Going back to work, or in this case, school, and leaving a baby in the care of others can be emotionally hard for any new parent. I believe that an onsite childcare facility would allow new student parents the opportunity to feel more secure throughout the day knowing that they are

closer to their children in proximity. This would also make it easier for nursing mothers to come by on their breaks or in between classes to breastfeed their baby instead of pumping.

It is also important to note how difficult it can be navigating the market of babysitters and daycares, especially in college towns as mentioned by some. Daycare providers have set hours which typically revolve around traditional nine to five jobs. Scott stated, “I had issues finding a good babysitter that could work odd hours, especially if I was only taking night classes.” The struggles associated with finding childcare are a major factor contributing to the student-parent dilemma. This barrier can hinder student parents on a variety of levels--from having to miss a class if they cannot find help on a given day, to not being able to finish their degree all together, as the stress of navigating this barrier can become too much.

School-Family Balance and Conflict

All of the student parents I interviewed had extremely busy daily schedules, which primarily consisted of balancing their time between their schooling duties and parenting responsibilities. For example, Scott, (white, married, male, 29) who graduated in 2018 from one of the regional campuses with a B.A. in secondary education, would wake up at five thirty every morning, get his son and himself ready for the day, take him to the babysitter, attend three to four classes a day, spend an hour after class catching up on school work, pick his son up, and feed him dinner and watch him until his wife came home from work. Then, he would drive to his job as a server at a local restaurant and work until about ten to twelve o'clock at night, and finally come home and attempt to do an hour and a half of schoolwork if he could. Scott expressed, “I think it took a couple of years of my life with as much as I had to do during that time period.” Finding time and not having enough of it was a major struggle for Scott, as he said, “I felt like I

had zero time through all of this.” Self-care and taking time to relax is important for the health and well-being of any individual. However, as most of the student parents in this study shared, they do not have time to relax or participate in hobbies and extracurricular activities due to the competing demands of school and family. As we can see, this can take a toll on their physical and mental health.

Scott was not the only participant who specifically mentioned having issues with time and time management while trying to balance it all. Anna (biracial, single mother, 24) found out she was pregnant with her son during the Spring semester of her junior year and gave birth to him close to the end of the Fall semester of her senior year. Her schedule was almost identical to Scott’s schedule, with the exception of Anna breastfeeding and pumping milk for her son throughout the day. She would often have to leave campus to go home, pump, and take the milk to the babysitter’s house when her son ran out of bottles before heading back to campus. Balancing her daily tasks as a mother and student resulted in a lack of sleep for Anna. She expressed that her biggest struggle in school was “definitely time management and sleep” and said “So like my Monday through Friday, I got virtually no sleep. I was always just tired and then, like, having to make dinner and all that stuff with a newborn and do all of that. It was just, like, a lot.”

Two student mothers that I interviewed specifically expressed having anxiety and being put on medicine for it while they were in school. Amber, (white, married, 29) who graduated with her Master’s in 2019, said

It really was a balance between making sure that my family had what they needed from me while I was trying to reach my academic goals, because I did like to get good grades and I did want to be the best. I graduated at the top of my class, but a lot of it came at a cost emotionally for me. I was the one who had to sacrifice that. I was put on medication

after both of my pregnancies for anxiety. My anxiety is still terrible to this day. It's just completely terrible, and I think it has a lot to do with the fact that where my, that's where it all started like with having a million things to do.

Again, Amber's daily schedule was consistent with the other participants such as waking up around five in the morning, taking children to babysitters, going to class, and working a job on top of everything else. Amber expressed, "I had a really good work/life/school balance, as much as I could." However, there were times that there was no balance, and she would have to make decisions between her schooling and parenting duties. She stated, "If it came down to taking my kid to a doctor's appointment, I did that," and that she would spend most of her lunch breaks and weekends writing papers. Amber even mentioned that she was often likely to be studying during her son's baseball games.

The second student mother that had to be medicated for their anxiety during school was Hayley (white, married, 30), who graduated in 2019 from one of the regional campuses.

According to Hayley, she has had anxiety her whole life, but while she was in school it got worse. She stated,

I have anxiety and everything that I wound up with school, the stress of it all. I had anxiety my whole life, but I was self-medicating and managing for a long time. And then it got to a point where I went to the E.R. like a few times because I could not stop vomiting. And it was like the stress of school and being a mom and everything, like just a ton of bricks hit me at once.

Her schedule was consistent with the other student parents that I interviewed. Towards the end of her degree, going to class became an "all day affair" with student teaching and taking some evening classes. She expressed that "it was a lot of juggling for sure." Juggling and finding a balance between her schoolwork and family for Hayley manifested into what she described as one of her biggest struggles while in school,

That mom guilt of feeling like you can't give your all as a mom when like when you've got so much going on in the background and then maybe you're even snapping at your kid because you're so stressed out, because you've got so much you need to do.

There is an extensive literature on work-family balance (Collins 2020; Budig et al. 2012; Grzywacz et al. 2007). However, there are very few studies that apply the work-family balance concept to the experiences of student parents (Rhijn et al. 2018). When taken at face value, the definition of work-family balance is simple. It means that a person tries to balance their responsibilities as a worker and as a parent. While being a college student, attending classes, and taking care of your family are not considered jobs in the traditional sense, but there is still work to be done every day. Notwithstanding, each student parent in this study had actual paying jobs while they were in school, such as restaurant serving, food delivery, and student jobs on campus. Moreau (2012) argues “parenting, in particular, is never a completed project” and work in academia is becoming increasingly demanding over the past few decades (41). There is no clocking out for student parents.

The student parents in this study strive to balance their time between doing schoolwork and taking care of their family. To maintain a balance and to do well in both domains, they are required to “sacrifice” certain aspects of themselves. The student parents in this study sacrificed sleep, participating in hobbies or extracurricular activities, doing schoolwork during family events, and their physical and emotional well-being while trying to achieve this balance. However, due to the extensive work and demands that are required of them a perfect balance is difficult to achieve. Thus, creating a conflict for student parents by having to choose one over the other, such as withdrawing from school entirely or finding alternate paths to finish their schooling.

Each of the participants described having to alter their classes or adjust the timeline of their degrees. For example, Amber gave birth to her daughter in early November a full month before the semester was over, although her due date was not until the end of the month. She stated, "I just felt like she was coming early, and I think it had a lot to do with the stress I was under." With this feeling, she decided to work extremely hard to finish the class early. This included completing and pre-recording her presentation for the final, just in case she would not be able to show up. Finishing a college course early is not an easy task and could be stressful for any student, regardless of being a parent. However, it is the negative health effects that stress can cause for pregnant mothers that is alarming here. According to a study by Coussons-Read (2013) on prenatal stress outcomes, "Prenatal stress can indirectly affect infant health and development by increasing the risk of the occurrence of adverse birth outcomes which are, in turn, associated with substantial developmental and health consequences" (52).

Hayley decided to quit school all together when her son was young. She expressed that the father of her son did not help her adequately take care of him at the time, which put more pressure on her to be there for her son. She said,

But it's just-- it's hard to balance, you know, and like I said, I have a lot of mom guilt if I don't have that time with him that I feel that he needs. So that was a lot of the reason why I quit when I did and then wound up going back a little bit later, once he was in school and things of that nature.

Later, Hayley got married to a man who she described as being extremely supportive and stressed how she would have not been able to finish her degree in the end without his support. Kira (black, single mother, 19) took the spring semester of her freshman year off after the birth of her daughter at the end of January. She said, "I stayed home that spring semester and I just decided in the fall that I would go back and facing Covid has been a little different, but I am going to get through it and get there." Staying home that semester to care for her newborn made

Kira feel “disengaged” with her studies and experiences at the university. She expressed, “I did feel a little disconnected like oh I am missing out on so much.”

Lastly, taking online classes when possible and summer classes was another common occurrence with the participants in my study. During Anna’s pregnancy, she stated, “I did summer school to kind of get ahead and lessen my load for my senior year because I knew it was going to be kind of tough.” She ended up taking all online classes the first semester of her senior year all the way through the end of her pregnancy.

Having to alter one’s degree trajectory without solid support can introduce many risks such as not returning or not meeting scholarship requirements, having to take out more loans to cover the cost of Summer or accelerated courses, and having to take extra classes in one semester to meet the required hours of one’s major. I discuss this topic more in-depth in the next chapter on the staff perception of student parents.

Breastfeeding

Although only two out of the five participants in this study were breastfeeding at the time of their schooling, it is very important to highlight their experiences in the context of the student parent dilemma. Amber and Anna both breastfed and pumped while they were in college and expressed how important it was for them to be able to do that for their babies at the time. Unfortunately, the struggles they encountered with being able to pump their milk while they were on campus negatively impacted their breastfeeding journeys and physical well-being in significant ways. When Amber was nursing her son during her undergraduate degree, she stated,

So I had to go out to my car between every single class, or I could be in a lot of pain and be sick. It wasn’t something I could casually skip if I didn’t want to. I would go and feed him on my lunch breaks and stuff like that, so I got to see him a good bit in between classes while he was still really little. But it was still really awkward. So I would make

sure I would get the parking spots in the very back to try to make sure nobody could see me. The apparatus was very noisy, too. It was just kind of awkward, but I made it work. I did it for about four months and then couldn't do it anymore.

Anna described having a similar experience of the physical effects pumping took on her body. Instead of pumping in her car she would leave campus entirely to pump in the privacy of her own home, take the breast milk in bottles to her babysitter's house, and then head back to campus. When telling me about her pumping routine, Anna said, "It also went to the point where it's like, it has a big toll on your body, and you have to make sure you're eating right and sleeping right and doing all of that. So obviously, it was hard for me to do all of these things." She ended up having to supplement her son's milk with formula.

In "Factors Influencing Mothers with High-Risk Pregnancies and Babies at High-Risk: Exploratory Analysis from Mississippi and Implications for Breastfeeding Support," Canarios et al. (2017) found that "workplace and school environments" can contribute to a mothers' stress and influence their "decision-making processes" towards breastfeeding (256). I found this to be the case with Anna. It became increasingly difficult for Anna to keep up with pumping and stay on top of schoolwork, therefore she had to make the decision to supplement. The University of Mississippi must work to provide supportive school environments for breastfeeding student mothers.

It is important to mention that in 2010 the University of Mississippi adopted the "Break Time for Nursing Mothers" policy that "provides reasonable break time for an employee to express breast milk as well as provides an appropriate location to express breast milk" (University of Mississippi Policy Directory). Although this policy is aimed at employees of the university, I have been told by numerous professors and human resource workers that students are allowed to use one of the twelve available on-campus lactation rooms.

Anna, who graduated in 2018, was not aware of the lactation rooms on campus. She stated,

I honestly haven't even thought about places where you can go pump, or like, you know, there should be one place in every building. Maybe not in every building, but there should be some place where moms can go and it's just for moms to do what they need to do. Like to pump or take a mental break. I think they need to think about the people there that have kids.

Amber did not know the lactation rooms existed either while she was an undergraduate at the main campus in Oxford from 2015-2017 and assumed that pumping in her car was the only option she had. However, when Amber was breastfeeding and pumping for her second child while in graduate school in 2019, she heard about lactation rooms but was unable to use them. She said,

The breastfeeding rooms, I don't even know, there's like an actual name for them, they weren't very convenient because we had 15 minutes in between classes. I was a really good student and I didn't want to be late. We had to take the bus to the JAC, back on campus. I think we only had like an hour for lunch, so I had to make sure that I did that, and I worked in a place on campus, so I was able to use some of those rooms they have up there. I would just cover up the camera, sign my name next to one of the counseling rooms, and get it done.

The experiences and perceptions about the support that is available to student mothers is crucial to understanding what structural barriers are found in higher education and how they are maintained or resisted. This raises a couple of questions: Is it the student mother's job to have figured out this information on her own, or is it the university's job to let students know what support is available to them? Is there an assumed "ideal type" of student at the University, and if so, does this contribute to the lack of policy and support awareness? These questions will be explored more in-depth in the last section of this chapter on the Non-Ideal Student and continued to be examined in the next chapter in conjunction with the perceptions from the five staff members, who work in student support services roles at the University of Mississippi.

UNIVERSITY CULTURE

In this section, I discuss the perceptions, experiences, and interactions that the participants in this study had with the culture of the University of Mississippi. I explore the University of Mississippi's history of racism and its current gendered, raced, and classed based norms. Using Acker's (1990, 2006) gendered organization frame, inequality regimes perspective, Britton's (2008) gendering in context approach, and Madden's (2018) ideal student assumption, I examine how the University of Mississippi's student and organizational culture shapes the way policies and practices are made and how the student parents in this study navigated their experiences and interactions with them. The participants in my study mainly mentioned having difficult experiences dealing with attendance policies. The two student parents that I interviewed who attended one of the regional campuses had negative experiences with not being able to bring their children with them into the building. This specific regional campus is shared with a local community college, which has a policy in place that does not allow children into the building.

The definition of what exactly a university policy is remains murky in the literature on higher education, and studies on this topic typically focus on specific policies. However, I found several major universities that provided consistent definitions of what a university policy is on their websites. For example, The Office of Policy Development and Management at the University of Pittsburgh defines a university policy as serving one or more functions such as,

- (1) mandates or prohibits behavior in order to express basic values at the University;
- (2) enhances the University's mission;
- (3) improves coordinated compliance with applicable laws or regulations;
- (4) promotes operational efficiency; and/or
- (5) reduces institutional risk.

I define university practices as the way that faculty and staff interact with students within the organizational context, including their pedagogical approaches and strategies for providing

support. For the context of this study, I incorporate a symbolic interactionist approach to examining the interactions the student parents in this study had with policies and practices. Particularly, I discuss how their day-to-day interactions play a crucial role in the way student parents identify and position themselves in the University of Mississippi's student culture.

Student Culture

The culture at the University of Mississippi is complex and complicated. The history of the University of Mississippi and its current campus climate are filled with white supremacy events, rituals, imagery, and symbols. Examples of this include the mob of white supremacists that rioted after James Meredith enrolled as the first Black student in 1962, the UM Band paying its tribute to the confederacy by performing the song Dixie before football games for decades, having a slave owning mascot named Colonel Reb until 2003, and a statue of a confederate soldier that was recently moved (in 2020) from the center of campus after 114 years.

Even with the changes that have been made, structural racism and white supremacy are still present. For example, Combs et al. (2016) conducted a visual analysis of the racist symbols on campus after a group of students tied a noose and Georgia state flag with the Confederate emblem on it around the statue of James Meredith on campus in 2014. They argue, "Our visual analysis demonstrates a university context that supports continued white racial domination" (350). One of participants in this study, Kira, a Black student mother, mentioned that when she chose to go to the University of Mississippi her family had concerns about the way she might be treated. She expressed, "A lot of my family was, like, just chose a HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) because over there [University of Mississippi], they were, like, you will just be another number." Kira's identity is more than a number, she is a Black student

mother, who grew up in the state of Mississippi with big dreams after finishing college. Kira says,

I want to give back to where I come from, because a lot of people just get their education and leave, and I don't really want that. I want to make Mississippi better. I want to help people that are from here get better and help them.

The perceptions that Kira's family has regarding the University of Mississippi further highlights the current racial climate at this university and the urgent call for intersectional approaches to understanding Black and other non-white students' experiences.

The culture of the University of Mississippi is further influenced by its place being deep in the South, where norms surrounding gender and sexuality are predominantly conservative. The Greek life on campus is firmly established in the university culture and makes up a large presence on campus. In the Fall of 2019, there were 6,530 undergraduate students who were Greek community members at the University of Mississippi (Official UM Fall 2019 Scorecard). Based on Fall 2019 enrollment data collected by the Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning, Greek life students accounted for 39% of the total student population. According to a popular college ranking website, Niche.com, The University of Mississippi is ranked as the eighteenth top party school in the United States, first top party school in the state of Mississippi, fourth best Greek life colleges in America, and twenty-sixth most conservative colleges in the country. Two of the regional campus student parents had noteworthy perceptions of the culture at the main campus in Oxford.

Hayley said, "The Oxford campus stressed me out super bad because, like, I'm the opposite of a sorority-type person. And, like, they were very much like that. It's definitely more celebrated there being the young partying type." Scott expressed, "It's just a different lifestyle. It's a different type of atmosphere out there. I don't think it would have been conducive to a

family environment. I don't think I would have stayed there. I would have had to move.” It appears based on their perceptions, that the university culture on the main campus is not ideal for student parents. Instead, it is perceived by them to be an ideal for “sorority-type” and “young parting type” students.

In her senior thesis “Big T-shirts and Running Shorts: A Female Uniform and Southern Womanhood on the Ole Miss Campus”, Abby Abide (2014) provides a glimpse into the gendered and raced culture at the University of Mississippi and the influence Greek life has on campus. Abide states, “Anyone who walks onto the University of Mississippi’s campus for the first time can see that there is an unofficial uniform for white female students. This uniform consists of a large t-shirt and Nike shorts or leggings, depending on the weather” (1). Abide found that while this uniform is a symbol created and maintained by upper-class, white sorority students at the university, non-sorority students feel pressure to conform to this uniform.

I can attest to this personally as an undergraduate student on this campus. I quickly became aware of this uniform on the first day of class, while others stared as I walked in the room with my blue hair, ripped jeans, and knock-off North Face backpack. One of the student mothers in my study shared her experience with feeling out of place on campus. When Amber was pregnant with her son, she pinched a nerve in her back, and it necessitated that she use a rolling backpack instead of a traditional backpack. She expressed, “I looked really funny with a bright blue rolling backpack through campus, but I made it work.” Amber acknowledged that she looked different than other students, and so it appears that she is aware of this uniform. This experience indicates that there is more to the ideal student frame than having no responsibilities outside of school. The ideal student uniform is agreed upon by students on what is considered socially and culturally acceptable to wear in this setting. Like Amber, those who choose to not

wear this uniform or simply cannot due to financial or physical reasons may feel out of place or feel that they look “really funny.” They become cultural outsiders.

There is a blatant lack of representation and visibility of student parents on campus and in images that the University of Mississippi displays on their website. Acker (1990) argues that one step in the gendered organizations process is the “construction of divisions along lines of gender and the construction of symbols and images that explain, reinforce or oppose divisions” (146). Images are a powerful element in the gendered organization frame and inequality regime perspective. Acker (2006) argues that “images of appropriate gendered and racialized bodies influence perceptions and hiring. White bodies are often preferred, as a great deal of research shows. Female bodies are appropriate for some jobs; male bodies for other jobs” (449). I argue that this also remains true for universities.

Currently, as orientation for the Fall semester of 2021 approaches, the front page of the UM website has an image of incoming freshmen sitting on the front steps of the Lyceum building as orientation leaders talk during a small group session. The students in the orientation picture appear young and non-disabled, and only three out of the sixteen pictured are students of color. As images of appropriate bodies “influence perceptions and hiring” in organizations (Acker 2006), university images influence prospective students and their perceptions of the school. The lack of representation in the orientation image and others on their website conveys that visibly pregnant and parenting students are not the “appropriate” bodies that the University of Mississippi prefers.

One of the student parents in this study, Haley, expressed, “I think it would be beneficial to be acknowledged and to know that they [the University of Mississippi] see you and that they're not just there to cater to those who are doing the traditional route.” She went on to explain

how if the university were to acknowledge the difficulties that some students face compared to others and can still put in the work, more student parents would be able to “stick with it.” Several of the student parents in this study had noteworthy perceptions of the experiences childless students have. I highlight how these specific perceptions construct and reinforce the “culturally promulgated image” of the ideal student (Britton et al. 2008: 109). For example, Amber stated, “I was really hard on myself. I thought I had something to prove as a pregnant student, that I was just as serious as everybody else was.” She went on to further describe how she wanted to be taken seriously in her schooling and said, “I wanted to be a young professional.” Here she assumes non-student parents are taken more seriously or seen as more professional than others. Through these experiences and perceptions, Amber is reinforcing the construction of an “ideal student” in higher education.

The “ideal student” perception is pervasive and influences the experiences of students who do not fit the culturally promulgated image, well beyond the classroom and campus. For example, having roommates in college is an established social norm that it is frequently portrayed in movies and television, where characters form lifelong friendships and share unforgettable experiences with each other. Kira said this about why she chose not to have a roommate, “I was like, I don’t want to have to disrupt anybody else’s living or studying with having my daughter with me and school and stuff. So that is why I just opted to room by myself.” She assumes that being college roommates with a student who has a baby would not be an ideal environment for other students to study and live. It would “disrupt” the ideal student experience.

Kira began crying during the interview as she expressed how lonely and hard it feels not knowing other student mothers. Recall, there were several moments where Kira held her

daughter in her arms while sitting on their couch throughout the interview. The layout of her living room and kitchen looked like most of the other standard apartments that this college town has to offer, but it was not the same. There were baby bottles and a box of diapers on the table in the background. From what I observed, there were no red solo cups, empty beer bottles, or any sign that this apartment belonged to a student who attends the 2021 Top Party School in Mississippi and the 18th biggest party school in America (Niche.com).

Another ideal student assumption in higher education culture consists of the importance of social experiences. Anna expressed,

I couldn't go and just hang out with friends anymore. I couldn't go out and have drinks or whatever after class and go out on the weekends. It was, you know, I can't. I have a kid. I wasn't just a student anymore. I was like a student mother. So I had to sacrifice a lot. I couldn't just go over to my friend's house to study anymore or do anything like that.

It is here that Anna identifies herself as no longer being a specific type of student, one who hangs out and drinks with their friends after class or on the weekends and goes over to study at their friend's house. These are all fairly common activities that one might assume a college student engages in. These assumptions about the ideal student and college experience spill over into numerous facets of the university culture. For instance, most social events and activities on campus are meant to foster and encourage students to engage with one another and participate in these types of activities. However, the assumptions about the ideal student and college experience influences the way universities create their policies and practices.

University policymakers assume that the common student experience will revolve around such things as drinking, partying, participating in student organizations or clubs, tailgating and attending sports events, and studying together. This leaves the students whose experiences do not meet these criteria to adjust their lives around the policies and practices that were not designed

for them. Even the physical layout of college spaces is designed with the “ideal student” in mind. When pregnant, Amber said, “I had to show up really early for class to make sure I got the desk that’s detached from the chair, so that I could sit down. Essentially, I had to make sure I sat in the handicapped desk, which was right in front.” This is a prime example of student parents having to adjust to the “ideal student” construct that is maintained in the university culture. I next explore the experiences and interactions that the student parents had in this study with the policies and practices at the University of Mississippi.

Policies

As stated previously, two of the participants in this study attended one of the University of Mississippi’s regional campuses. This particular campus shares a building with a local community college. The University of Mississippi offers what they call a Two Plus Two Partnership with this community college. This partnership provides students with a fully detailed academic degree plan that allows them to transition from two years of classes at the community college to two years of classes at the University of Mississippi’s regional campus. Due to this partnership, students who attend the regional campus are juniors and seniors only.

Madden (2018) states that “U.S. community colleges are considered historical sites of educational access and opportunity for social mobility for nontraditional students” (368). The student parents in my study classify as nontraditional students and four out of the five participants were first generation students. Nevertheless, this community college has a policy in place that forbids small children from entering the building unless there is a designated social event taking place, such as an award ceremony or during registration week. It is necessary to note that this is not an official University of Mississippi policy. Due to the community college

owning the building that this regional campus occupies, they must follow and enforce this policy even for their own students. In fact, there is a University of Mississippi annex office down the street from the main building that contains a few faculty and staff offices. UM students are allowed to bring their children into these buildings, if needed. However, the main building that contains the classrooms and library do not allow children to enter.

Scott said this about his experience with bringing his son to class with him, “I did that one time, and I never did it again. It was like I walked into the classroom and the professor told me that I could not have a kid in the classroom. I thought we were just turning in an assignment that day. But we're actually taking a test.” He had to call his brother, who was also a student there, and ask him to drive his young son around in the car until he finished his test. Scott described the way it made him feel as, “I never took my son there again. It was definitely a little embarrassing, especially when she said that kids can't be in class. I felt like I was in the minority in that class.” Albeit, having a child in a classroom during a test might cause distractions for other students, and the professor in this instance was just following the policy, it still exposes the structural barriers student parents face and negative emotions that are a result due to the lack of family-friendly services on campuses. Mixing up due dates on assignments with test dates happens to the best of students. I am not sure what Scott would have been able to do in this instance without the support of his family. As several of the student parents in this study recommended, a drop-in childcare facility on campus would reduce this issue significantly.

The experiences that Hayley had with this policy at the regional campus differed from Scott's experiences in one major way. The difference is having actual campus police officers involved. The campus police in this building have a little guard box located in the main lobby directly in front of the front doors with multiple tv screens monitoring the cameras around the

building. The first experience she told me took place during one of her evening classes. It was the time that she witnessed campus police come into the room during class and remove one of her classmates for bringing their child with them. This particular classmate happened to have a doctor's appointment before class that took longer than expected, and in an attempt to not be entirely absent the student mother made the decision to bring her young son with her to class.

Hayley described the situation as follows:

They [campus police] pulled her out of class as if she had done something, like, genuinely wrong. And I mean, certain things happen where, you know, like, I realize children are a liability and things of that nature. But if they could put safeguards in place to where, like, if that had to be the case, then, like, they have a daycare set up or something of that nature.

Hayley acknowledges that having children in a college classroom could be distracting or dangerous in certain situations. For instance, a child could hurt themselves and others in a science lab or damage expensive equipment. However, this is another instance where having an affordable and accessible childcare facility on campus could avoid issues as such. The second experience she talked about was the time she left her jacket at school. She went back to campus to grab it and brought her son with her, thinking it would be quick and therefore no problems should arise. She said,

I was followed by a police officer and he was asking what I was doing and everything. And luckily, my son has never met a stranger in his life. So he and this police officer are, like, having this good ole time and everything. And so, like, he just basically escorted us to the classroom, let us look for the jacket and everything. And so, like, they're cutting up together and everything. And like, it wasn't a negative experience because my son was just like, "hey, new best friend", you know, but at the same time, it's like he was trailing us because I had a child with me and that's scary.

It is crucial that I discuss the importance of intersectionality and white privilege in connection with these experiences. All of the student parents that I have mentioned in this section are white.

In the introduction, I discussed having a similar experience at this campus. I angrily stood my ground with one of the officers in the main lobby for several minutes, demanding to see the policy that did not allow me to bring my daughter with me to the library on campus. Beyond the initial barriers this policy created for the white student parents in my study and myself, such as missing class and experiencing negative feelings, I argue that it has the potential to put Black student parents and their children at a higher risk of being subjected to police brutality.

There is a long-standing history of racialized policing and police brutality across college campuses in the United States. In 2018 at Yale University during finals week, a white student called the campus police on a Black student for taking a nap in one of the dormitory's common rooms. The campus police responded and forced her to show them her student ID to confirm that she belonged in that building (Inside Higher Education). In 2019 at Barnard College in New York, campus "safety officers" physically stopped a Black student from trying to enter the front doors of the library (Inside Higher Education). In "Black Students' Lived Experiences with and Perceptions of Law Enforcement," (2019) Thomas et al. found that "many Black students worry about the presence of police when they are on campus at a Predominantly White Institution, even if they have not personally had negative interactions with campus police."

The University of Mississippi is a predominantly white institution that has an extensive history and current campus climate filled with racist practices and attacks. In the article, *The Racism of "Ole Miss" Is Hiding in Plain Sight*, (2020) Becca Andrews talked to many Black members of the campus community about their experiences and perceptions of this university. A Black leader in the community, who runs the Black Alumni Advisory Council at the University of Mississippi told Andrews about the time "when she was manhandled by a campus police officer because she was in the parking area for elite alumni on game day. When she told him she

worked for the university, he wouldn't believe her." Again, I understand that it is not the University of Mississippi that created this policy on their regional campus, and these are not UM campus police removing mothers and fathers from classrooms. However, due to the partnership they have with this community college they must enforce a policy that my findings show negatively impacts the student parents who attend their regional campus, and as data and history show, this policy has the potential to cause more harm to Black student parents.

The other type of policy that the participants in my study expressed having difficult experiences with were attendance policies. Two of the student mothers I interviewed were in programs that had strict attendance policies due to their degree requirements involving internships. Amber described how when she was in graduate school, they were only allowed four absences, and at the time her daughter was having severe allergy problems that required a lot of doctor's appointments. She stated that "I ended up using all of those just for my kids' doctor's appointments. Like, I had the flu and was still at school, because I couldn't afford to miss any. I would've automatically failed, because they don't consider my kids' doctor's appointments an emergency." Amber expressed how she could not be there for a lot of them once she used up her absences.

Being an elementary education major, Hayley also struggled with attendance policies. She said, "With my major, it was a very strict attendance policy and things like that. As parents, we can't always say definitively, oh, I'll be here every day because something could happen." For one of her classes she was only allowed one unexcused absence. She decided to use that absence to go on her son's first school field trip. Hayley expressed how stressful it was dealing with this

policy. She stated, “Me as someone with, like, severe anxiety, migraines, I’m a mother, like my son stays perpetually sick when he’s going to school, there’s a lot going on to where like one absence is, like, intimidating to me.”

Both Amber and Hayley wanted to make good grades and do well in school just like any other student. The two programs that the participants in my study were in had attendance policies that led to points taken off of the final grade in the class if the number of allowed absences were exceeded. The issues student parents face with a policy or lack of one highlight that policy makers do not account for the care taking responsibilities some students may have. The policies put in place for students are based on expectations or abstract ideas of what to expect of a college student, thus reinforcing that policy makers are not expecting their students to be mothers, fathers, or caretakers in general. Organizational logic assumes certain characteristics about their workers, and in turn makes workplace policies around these assumptions. The same applies for institutions of higher education and ideal students.

Practices

The types of practices that came up most often in the interviews I conducted with student parents revolved around interactions they had with their professors. In the context of higher education, university policies are what determine the types of practices faculty and staff utilize when it comes to helping and interacting with students. For example, there are student athletic policies at the University of Mississippi in place that require absences to be excused for participation in athletic events (FedEx Student Athlete Handbook 2019-20). Section 8 of the 2020-21 University of Mississippi Faculty Handbook contains a document titled Class Attendance Guidelines and discusses the responsibilities of instructors. There is a list of seven

“suggested practices” to help them create attendance policies for the course they are teaching.

Number one on the list states,

Better class attendance policies distinguish between anticipated and unanticipated absences. Anticipated absences might be associated with civic responsibilities (e.g., jury duty or military service); official University competitions, performances, or travel; religious observations; or certain scheduled medical procedures. Unanticipated absences might occur due to inclement weather, accidents, illnesses besetting the student or immediate family members, or death of a family member or close friend (pg 1).

The connected example above is important for multiple reasons. First, it highlights the difference between policies and practices. Second, it shows an instance where the ideal student frame is present when the University of Mississippi determines policies and practices. While “illness” of a family member is mentioned, the remaining six suggested practices do not explicitly address a student’s caregiving responsibilities having the potential to make them absent. This relates to the “ideal student” frame and the assumption that a student will not have to miss class for reasons such as not being able to find childcare. The findings from my study also highlight how policies and practices are gendered in the sense that norms and assumptions about gender shape the interactions and experiences the student parents in my study had with faculty and other students.

Continuing our discussion on attendance practices, one student parent I interviewed had to get Title IX involved with appealing the grade she received for her summer internship. She had a whole letter grade taken off her final grade due to taking a week off for a family vacation. Also, it is important to note that she was pregnant with her second child at the time. Amber describes what happened during the meeting she had with her professor, at the time:

She made a comment about people missing internship hours because of birth control problems. I left her office, and I was like 6 months pregnant, so I don’t know how she didn’t figure that out. I just sat there, and I left, and I felt so defeated. I felt like I was misunderstood, because she made me feel like I was lazy because I needed to take a week off to be with my family. She was like, “we even recommend that if you’re having a child that you don’t go through summer internship because of birth control problems.” She

made me feel like I got knocked up in a bar bathroom or something. I've been married to my husband for 3 years. We can have another child if we want to.

Here, Amber is aware of the gendered assumptions that were being made about her. This discourse lines up with common gender norms and stereotypes that are associated with motherhood. For instance, the “good mother” is often seen as married and did not conceive children out of wedlock. This professor subscribes to the assumption that student mothers are not capable of completing the internship and successfully meeting the requirements. By labeling it as “birth control problems,” she is maintaining the belief that the ideal student is responsible and asserts a common gender stereotype that student mothers are in this situation as a result of their deviant behavior. She filed a formal complaint with Title IX because she was pregnant at the time. Amber expressed, “I’m being discriminated against. I had a letter grade taken from me not because of my work but because I had to miss time because of my responsibilities as a parent.” Eventually, the professor added the points back to her final grade. Amber says, “At the end of the day, she ended up saying, ‘I will give you your letter grade.’ I think it was because she didn’t want to be involved in this anymore.”

When it came to interactions with other students, Hayley expressed how she felt about having to do a lot of group assignments in the classes she took for her major. Making students do group assignments is a beneficial teaching practice for numerous reasons. It gives students the opportunity to learn how to work as a team, and it can help lessen the load of grading for instructors. However, group projects come with the assumption that students will be able to schedule time outside of class hours to meet and complete the assignment. Hayley stated, “There was like a 20-year-old girl who would be like, “I can do it at any time, you know?” and then I’m

like, "I have a whole thing outside of here." This finding also highlights how the ideal student frame can be found in practices by reinforcing the belief that students do not have any other responsibilities outside of their schooling.

Another common practice is for instructors to make course material relatable to students by using real life examples that are closest to their life experiences in order to create a conceptual bridge to help students better understand the material. Amber described a regular interaction she had with one of her professors, "Whenever there was a parenting or a child development section, he would point me out specifically. I don't even think he knew my name the whole semester, I was just the pregnant chick." She expressed that this made her feel "really weird." This interaction is gendered in the sense that the professor assumes that because she is pregnant, she must be knowledgeable about child development. It separates her from other students and forces her to represent her identity as a student mother. Practices like this can also be racialized by specifically calling on Black or other minority students to answer questions or discuss class material that relates to racial or ethnic group status as a whole. Walls et al. (2017) states this can lead to microaggressions and "calling on students of color to represent their race, failing to acknowledge systems of oppressions in contemporary society, and reinforcing racial stereotypes," are common experiences for African American students in the classroom (3).

This relates to the racial and gendered inequalities that are embedded into the foundations of higher education and how students experience policies and practices in different ways. Wanzer-Serrano (2019), writing about racism in the academic field of Rhetoric, (2019) states "it's the historical structure of our institutions and norms and policies that have privileged white methods, white theories, white voices, and (at the end of the day) white able-bodied cisgender men" (470). Accounting for the historical and current cultural context of University of

Mississippi, as outlined throughout this section, we are able to understand how structural inequalities shape the distinct experiences and interactions the student parents in this study had. More specifically, we see how these individuals craft their identities around being a student and parent in an organizational context that does not view the duality of their identities.

I argue that student parents' identities are split in two parts by the obligations and responsibilities from school and family. Reflecting on the interviews that I conducted with these five student parents, it became apparent that their entire lives while in school revolved around completing class work and taking care of their family. All of the participants conveyed through their experiences a strong desire to succeed in both areas of their lives. Doing well in both of these areas requires a high level of commitment and time. A few participants explicitly stated not being able to have any hobbies or participate in extracurricular activities. Hayley says, "I didn't really do clubs in school, because I was so burnt out." There was not a lot of room or space leftover to identify as more than a student and a parent. Student parents' caregiving and schooling responsibilities are constantly in competition with one another. Recall, in the literature, it is well documented that raising children requires an extensive amount of time and dedication. Particularly, intensive mothering demands that women essentially dedicate all of their time and energy to their children in order to be considered a good mother or parent. This phenomenon contributes to the split identities student parents experience, as well as the nature of academia.

Throughout this chapter, I showed the ways in which structural barriers, such as the lack of affordable childcare and attendance and child access policies, force student parents to adapt and adjust their lives around these barriers. There are cultural expectations that define a good mother as one whose primary job is to center their lives entirely around taking care of their children, while university culture expects students to center their lives around their studies and

social experiences with collegiate sports and Greek life. Thus, I conclude that the ideal student frame actively reproduces the student parent dilemma and the conflicting and contradicting roles student parents experience in higher education.

In the next chapter, I examine university student support staff's perceptions of the issues student parents face most often and discuss them in connection with my findings on the student parents in this study. I dive deeper into the gendered organizational culture at the University of Mississippi by illustrating the ways university staff interact with policies and practices and thus help make sense of the interactions student parents have with them.

IV. STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT PARENTS

To fully capture the lived experiences of student parents in higher education, it is necessary to include the experiences and perceptions of those who work at the University of Mississippi and occupy student support roles. I conducted five interviews with staff members across the university who provide support for students in various capacities. (See Appendix C staff demographic table) For the sake of confidentiality, I will not list the official job titles of the participants, but instead will provide the general area in which they work. In this chapter, there are two sections, The Issues Student Parents Encounter: Staff's Perceptions and The Culture of Student Parent Support.

The findings throughout this chapter are highly informative regarding what we know about student parent experiences in this study. The university staff members are aware of the common issues student parents face while pursuing their degrees. Several staff members reported that student parents struggle with balancing time between school and family and adjusting degree trajectories due to their parental circumstances. They also cited the issues that arise out of not having affordable and accessible childcare. While identifying similar barriers and challenges, I examine the differences and similarities in the way staff members and student parents define and understand these barriers and challenges.

Next, I explore what the culture of supporting student parents looks like at the University of Mississippi. One central theme that emerged from the interviews was that the university staff

strongly expressed the importance of student parents reaching out and asking for help when they need it. I examine this finding in connection with the level of awareness the student parents in my study had regarding what support is available and how they felt about asking for help.

I found that staff's perceptions of policies and practices are gendered and, in some cases, construct the ideal student frame. Lastly, I discuss the experiences one participant had as a working mother at this university and her part in helping build a support network on campus for working mothers. This specific story provides solid insight into the gendered elements found in the University of Mississippi's culture.

ISSUES STUDENT PARENTS ENCOUNTER: UNIVERSITY STAFF'S PERCEPTIONS

I found that the university staff were aware of the three main issues that the student parents in this study reported having. My findings are consistent with several other studies done on student parents in higher education, including one by Moreau (2012) who similarly interviewed both groups. The staff in this study viewed not having childcare, altering their degree trajectory, and balancing time between their school and family as the main issues.

It is important to note that four of the five staff members identified as female and were mothers themselves. Three of these participants mentioned that they were also student mothers at one point. These specific participants often referred to their own experiences as students and working mothers while discussing the issues at hand. Mr. Johnson (white, male, academic advisor) was the only male staff participant in this study. However, he expressed that many of his coworkers are mothers. He emphasized that experiences and interactions he has had with his coworkers influence his perceptions.

Childcare

Having explored the pressing issues the student parents faced, both groups viewed the lack of affordable and accessible childcare as being most critical. Similar to the student parents' perceptions, the staff noted that financial constraints and class schedule conflicts are also associated with this issue. One staff member said,

I know childcare, of course, is a huge [issue]. I think childcare is expensive in Oxford. I think it's really limited. I think, you know, the schedule that a student may have also may not fall perfectly within, like, a typical childcare center schedule, or they may not need total full day coverage, but they have to pay for that, you know. And so I do see that being a hardship, you know, kind of that financial piece.

Recall two of the student parents in this study described the childcare availability in Oxford as being expensive and hard to navigate. Scott, the student father I interviewed, mentioned how difficult it was to find a babysitter who could work odd hours when he took night classes. Ms. Carter (white, female, regional campus worker) expressed that the financial strain associated with childcare can negatively impact a student parents' studies. She says, "Money's hard. You're paying for a kid, and you're paying to come to school. Maybe that takes away from your work hours if you're trying to work too."

Only a couple of university staff members mentioned solutions to the issue of a lack of affordable and accessible childcare. Mr. Johnson (white, male, academic advisor) argued that,

Having some sort of free or reduced cost child care during the day where you can just stop by while you're on campus for classes or to do whatever work or researching you need to do, you know, that to me would be the better and easier thing to do, to help with offsetting those child care costs while they are pursuing their education.

This specific type of solution was echoed by several student parents that I interviewed, as well.

One student parent, Anna, even mentioned how the university that the father of her child attended has a drop-in daycare service on campus, and top priority is given to those with low socioeconomic backgrounds. Anna expressed how she "thought that was the most amazing thing

ever.” The other solution that a staff worker expressed was focused on extending the services offered by the preschool that is located on the main campus by providing infant care. This school only admits children from the ages of three to five. I could not locate the exact number of children that this school admits through their website. However, from what I have gathered, the waiting list is exceptionally long and top priority is given to the children of faculty and staff members even though student parents are allowed to apply.

The next example highlights how the lack of affordable and accessible childcare not only impact student parents but can have negative effects for university staff as well. One staff member, Ms. Davis (white, female, academic counselor), said when she was trying to get her son into the school, “I did not know much about childcare, and I did not get on the waitlist at the appropriate times and did not really have a place for him to go. So I actually had unpaid maternity leave while I was waiting for a spot to open up.” With her boss's encouragement, this experience prompted her to approach the university about revisiting the childcare issue on campus. Although I plan to discuss her story more in-depth in the last section, I would like to note that Ms. Davis (white, female, academic counselor) expressed how providing affordable and accessible childcare on campus is “something that has been a focus for a variety of different people for probably 30 plus years.”

While Mr. Johnson (white, male, academic advisor) was discussing his views on childcare issues throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, he mentioned that many of the women that he worked with who have children quit their jobs when the schools opened back up in the Fall of 2020. He described that they did not feel safe sending their children back to school, and the option of virtual school was not viable either. They would have had to pay someone to stay home

with their children who could help them with their schoolwork while working partly from home and on campus. Mr. Johnson (white, male, academic advisor) said

It's cheaper for them [faculty] to not work. I think that's astonishing to me, is it is cheaper for people to not work and take care of their child than to work here. And if that's the case for, like, full-time staff and faculty folks, what does that even look like for poor students, because many of them can't work full time jobs? Or maybe they do. But again, it's that same idea. You're wanting to balance the safety of your child versus the safety of your job, like financial safety versus keeping on track of school. It would be beyond stressful, like just a constant state of anxiety about how you're balancing that.

Examining the staff's perceptions and experiences on childcare through the gendered organization framework, we can see this is a predominantly gendered issue that can create disadvantages for the mothers who work for and attend the University of Mississippi. Recall that Joan Acker (1990) argues a gendered organization is composed of the "advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine" (146). Having to take unpaid maternity leave as a worker, dropping out of college like one of the student mothers in my study did, or quitting your job during a global pandemic, all due to the lack of affordable and accessible childcare, are prime examples of gendered disadvantages.

Several of the student parents that I interviewed had explicitly discussed the anxiety and stress they experience due to the lack of affordable and accessible childcare. Mr. Johnson (white, male, academic advisor) was the only staff member that mentioned anxiety specifically in this context. Being aware as a staff member of the mental health issues that student parents face is important when it comes to helping student parents. When it comes to advising students who are not doing well academically, Mr. Johnson (white, male, academic advisor) mentioned, "I always have students who struggle with their mental health." He further explains that it is hard for students to focus on academics when they are having mental health issues. Therefore, he tries to

connect them to other support programs and counseling services first before having conversations about their academic situation. The examples here are instances where action and emotion operate in the processes of gendered organizations. With these cases, it is a lack of action, providing affordable and accessible childcare or better work-family policies that would help ease work/school family conflict. The emotions are the stress and anxiety that come along with this.

School-Family Balance and Conflict

Building upon the work of Acker (1980), Moreau (2012) argues that “academia and the family are both greedy institutions” (40). This means that both academia and the family have an extensive set of tasks and responsibilities that must be fulfilled to succeed. However, as we have seen within this study, the tasks and responsibilities of being a parent and student are not flexible. Therefore, student parents work to maintain a balance between the two. Unfortunately, achieving this balance comes at the expense of a student parent’s mental and physical health and, in some instances, is impossible to maintain, thus resulting in school-family conflict.

I found that staff members in this study are aware of the challenge of school-family balance and some attribute school-family conflict to student parents having to alter their degree trajectory. I found some staff members in this study have gendered perceptions of the school-family balance that stem from cultural norms and their own gendered experiences, such as being a working and student mother themselves. The staff perceptions in this section can help provide a better sense of the ways institutions of higher education contribute to school-family conflict.

When asked about the issues student parents face most often, Ms. Carter (white, female, regional worker) said, “Finding time to study while you have a child and get everything done

that you need to do. I was a student mom. It's hard, and I see it a lot. When you balance home life and balance school.” Here, the staff member directly addresses the school-family balance and expresses how frequently she sees this happening. The way staff members, who were once student mothers, apply their experiences to the perceptions of current student mothers relates to the gendered organization frame by workers bringing their own gendered assumptions into their job.

Moreover, the staff’s gendered experiences inform the work they do. Ms. Williams (white, female, Human Resources worker) recalled her experiences as a student mother while conveying the challenges student mothers face with the balancing issue.

When I was in school, my child got ear infections a lot. I mean, those are some of the things that come with the territory. But I think about the guilt. I felt like I was kind of splitting myself between school and I hear a lot, well, you know, I want to be there for my child, but I don't want to mess up my school. That's challenging for them is trying to figure out how to best care for their child without neglecting their studies.

Taking care of sick children does come with the “territory” of motherhood among many other things, such as attending your child’s first field trip and attending children’s sporting events. However, an institution of higher education has a “territory” and set of obligations that conflicts with motherhood. Higher education and motherhood can both be described as distinct social fields. The staff member in this instance is highlighting how student parents have to split themselves between and figure out how to navigate both social fields simultaneously. As shown by some student parents in this study, student parents often have to choose one over the other and experience “guilt” for not being there for their children and anxiety towards “neglecting their studies.”

As noted in the previous chapter, the work student parents do pertaining to this balance is not considered a job in the traditional sense. However, one staff member explicitly viewed student parents in this context. Ms. Williams (white, female, Human Resources worker) says,

I think honestly, the student mothers and the fathers, or the ones that I've met and talked to here, have a tendency to take things more seriously because they look at the school day as a job, because you have so much to do at night. And I almost think sometimes it can be an advantage because you don't have some of the distraction. Although then there's the flipside of that, you also don't get any time to yourself to decompress and blow off any steam because once you're done with school, it immediately switches to being a mom. So I can sympathize.

This staff member's perception of student parents' work ethic being more serious than non-student parents and the consequences that arise out of student parents', particularly student mothers', taking their school day "as a job" is significant for many reasons. One, by viewing student parents as workers, institutions of higher education can model school-family policies and practices around the work-family policies they might have in place. The University of Mississippi has some work-family policies and practices in place in the form of their Career-Life Connector, which I discuss in more detail in the last section. Secondly, it relates to the "ideal worker" and "ideal student" construction. It highlights the assumptions universities have towards their students as being young and carefree with no parental or caretaking responsibilities that will interfere with the time they spend on schoolwork.

Nonetheless, even with work-family policies and practices aimed to help the balance, work-family conflict still is present in most contemporary organizations (Swanberg 2004). The conflict effects working mothers more significantly than working fathers and is a result of numerous structural, cultural, and institutional factors. According to Moreau (2012), due to gendered cultural norms, women are subjected to "intensive mothering," which means they "are expected to spend considerable time, emotion and energy on their children as well as

demonstrating devotion and self-sacrifice” (41). One staff member, who is also a mother, expressed these dynamics. Ms. Adams (white, female, Student Affairs worker) said

I mean, I've got two kids, and even though my husband has a really flexible schedule, I'm still the one that's like now like I should take the day off and, you know, you should go do your work and, you know, I'll just work from home or figure it out. So I think there's that very natural instinct that moms have anyway to kind of focus, of course, first on the care of their child and letting some of these other things go to the side. And, you know, that doesn't always jive in a university academic calendar or in a class.

The assumption the staff member has about mothers having a “very natural instinct” to put their children first and letting other things “go to the side” highlights the gendered assumptions that women will do more work when it comes to the balancing work and family. While all student parents might struggle with school-family balance, we can see how student mothers face greater difficulties due to societal norms expecting mothers, not fathers, to care for their children first. Additionally, this staff member provided a noteworthy perspective regarding how putting your children first does not always work in an academic setting. She points out two specific areas in higher education specifically that can cause conflict for student parents, academic calendars and the way university classes are structured. This perception reinforces the “greedy” and “ideal student” culture of institutions of higher education.

Furthermore, I found that some of the staff members attribute school-family conflict to interfering with the degree trajectories of student parents. Mr. Johnson, (white, male, academic advisor) says that “Especially with pregnant students and students who are mothers, it's not the academics that cause them to stop out, it's everything else going on in their life.” From his experience working with students who are struggling academically, he describes that student mothers are capable of doing the academic work well, but it is the parental responsibilities and demands in their life that interfere with their academic work. I argue that it is the other way

around. Particularly, it is the structure of academia assuming the “ideal student” model that causes pregnant and parenting mothers to stop out of college or even avoid enrolling in the first place.

Student parents who are not able to achieve this balance and withdraw from college before finishing their degree are subjected to economic disadvantages. Many student parents take out loans to pay for college to achieve their degree and get a job after graduation. According to the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2019, the median weekly earnings for those with bachelor’s degrees is \$415 more than those who have “some college, but no degree.” Moreover, student mothers are most at risk of facing economic issues by not finishing their degree. According to a study done on the gender wage gap by the Pew Research center, “it would take an extra 42 days of work for women to earn what men did in 2020.” Interestingly, the staff members did not address the financial issues student parents face as a result of the school-family balance.

Financial issues only came up when talking about childcare.

Collins (2020) argues that “work-family conflict is detrimental to mental and physical health, workplace experiences, and family relationships” (849). Ms. Adams (white, female, Student Affairs worker) expresses,

I don't know how many students withdraw because they feel like they can't stay enrolled as a student parent or they end up failing a class or just kind of dropping off the radar, because they just feel like they can't do it or they don't want to go to their professors.

What stands out from this staff member’s perception is the way she describes how student parents feel mentally about not being able to finish their degree. This relates to Collins’ (2020) claim about work-family conflict, by school-family conflict being detrimental to student parents’ mental and physical health. This was the case for one student mother in my study, who struggled

with anxiety and guilt. She had to withdraw from the university completely while her son was young due to the limited family support and not being able to devote enough time to her studies.

On the other hand, the fact that Ms. Adams' (white, female, Student Affairs worker) does not appear to be aware of how many student parents are not able to achieve school-family balance is interesting. Going back to an analogy I used earlier, universities keep many statistics on how many "student athletes" graduate with a degree, but is there an office responsible for gathering and widely distributing information about how "student parents" fare? In the next section, I discuss how the staff members I interviewed described the culture of supporting student parents at UM. More specifically, I examine the staff members' perceptions of policies and practices and explore how their perceptions help us better understand the experiences that student parents have with the policies and practices at the University of Mississippi.

THE CULTURE OF STUDENT PARENT SUPPORT

Before we begin, I would like to make note of the compassionate tone that university staff conveyed when discussing their perceptions on support for student parents. It is not my intention to paint the individual staff participants in a negative light. I observed a high level of care and concern when it comes to supporting student parents and students in general. My goal is to place their responses in context with the overall culture of support that the University of Mississippi displays. For this study, one measure of the culture of support consists of the university policies and practices that are in place to help students. I use Joan Acker's (1990) work on gendered organizations as a guide to examine the "gendered subculture" and its influence on constructing the ideal student at this university. According to Acker (2012) the gendered subculture is where the images, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and values of an

organization are found. These components reflect an organization's policies and practices and are beyond any one individual's attitudes, practices, or beliefs.

Asking for Help

One of the most perplexing themes that emerged from the interviews with the university staff was the level of importance they put on student parents asking for help when they need it. When I asked the staff member who works at the regional campus, Ms. Carter (white, female, regional campus worker), how the University of Mississippi can improve the experiences of student parents, she suggested three things. First, she says that having a parent support group would help by giving them the opportunity to feel connected and talk about their struggles. The second suggestion is having an on-site daycare at the regional campus, although she expressed “I don't know if that will ever happen here, but it would be amazing.” The last suggestion Ms. Carter explained was for student mothers to “let us know where they're struggling, what they need, because we don't know to do stuff if we're not being told there's an issue.”

This finding helps to make sense of the organizational layout of support. Staff members in student services or other student support roles are limited in reach to support student parents. What I mean by this is unless the office, center, or department they work for mandates that students come to them for support, they cannot go out of the confines of their position to help students regardless of their awareness of the issues some students face. For example, if a student who has a low grade-point average, transfers from a different school, or takes a semester off and decides to go back to the University of Mississippi, they are required to meet with academic advisors. One staff member, Ms. Davis (white, female, academic counselor), said this about the lack of specific support for student parents,

I would love for there to be a comfortable place for student parents to go to, because you might feel comfortable talking to a faculty member. That faculty member may be knowledgeable about resources on campus or they might not be aware. There's just not a place for people to go.

The lack of a place in the university for student parents to receive support specifically tailored to their experiences implies that the types of student support services that are offered are created under the abstract categories of the ideal student. With this being the case, when student parents need help, they must seek out what services and support might be most helpful. However, I found that most of student parents in my study were not aware of any policies or official university resources that are in place to help them. Only one student parent reported being aware of some type of university support, the break time for breastfeeding mothers' policy and Title IX policy. However, the break time for breastfeeding mothers' policy only protects employees at the university, even though student parents are allowed to use the lactation rooms, and Title IX is a federal policy.

By conducting an extensive search through the University of Mississippi online policy dictionary and interviews with both groups, I have found only one policy that targets student parents. The only staff member aware of this policy stated,

I don't know anything about undergrad level, but the graduate students do have a parental leave policy. It is actually a better policy than faculty and staff receive. So I think that is wonderful, although I don't know if every department head or every graduate advisor is aware of this. So I think getting word out would be important. But there is that. Other than that, I can't really think of anything for students.

Under the University of Mississippi Parental Leave Policy for Graduate Students, full time graduate students who have either a quarter or half-time assistantship are eligible up to six weeks of leave from their program. The policy further states, "the graduate student will continue to be enrolled with appropriate tuition waivers and insurance subsidy and will receive his/her full level

of stipend support” and allows students a four-month extension on time limits. However, under the planning and approval part of this policy it mentions that students should begin discussing their leave with their faculty at least eight weeks prior to giving birth. As the staff member above expressed, not every department head or graduate advisor is aware of the Parental Leave policy. Graduate student mothers might also not be aware of this policy, which can cause issues for them as they are expected to initiate the discussion with their faculty first.

The limited policies that target student parents at the University of Mississippi relates to Moreau’s (2016) work on the types of institutional approaches universities use when it comes to making and implementing policies, as outlined in the literature review. It is clear that the University of Mississippi takes a “care-blind” approach, meaning that there are a lack of policies and provisions in place that target student parents specifically. The university does not recognize students’ caretaking responsibilities in their policies.

According to Moreau (2016), when institutions take a care-blind approach, universal policies are implemented under the guise of being equally beneficial for all students. However, she argues that “institutional policies constructed as ‘universal’ and ‘neutral’ are in reality geared towards childfree students, with, as a result, student parents having to adjust their care practices to fit in” (920). I have shown a multitude of ways the student parents in this study have had to adjust their care practices to fit in, such as going to class when they have the flu due to strict attendance policies and saving their available absences to take their children to the doctor. The limited policies and practices directly aimed at helping student parents is in contradiction with the staff members’ perceptions regarding the importance of student parents reaching out and asking for help when they need it.

Another important finding that emerged from this theme was the staff's perceptions on why or what might keep a student parent from asking for help. Mr. Johnson (white, male, academic advisor) says this about student parents reaching out for help, "it's a vulnerable place to ask for help." He further explains,

When it comes to support, I think it's important to be honest, to be able to ask for help. Also to find your community, because...when you try to do it solo, I think that's where you can get burnt out. I mean, I think that's the case for any personal situation, but especially when raising folks, if you're doing that by yourself and you're struggling to make that work, plus working, plus school, plus everything, it's just a lot. It's unfair to just have that on yourself, and especially when there are some resources that you can be connected to.

I argue that the experiences student parents encounter with the "ideal student" culture make it difficult to ask for help and relates to the vulnerability that Mr. Johnson (white, male, academic advisor) describes. Recall, a student mother in this study expressed how she thought she had something to prove as a pregnant student and that she was just as serious as everyone else in her program. Therefore, asking for help as a student parent is not easy when placed in an "ideal student" university culture. It must be understood by the University of Mississippi that "ideal student" assumptions can obscure student parents' issues so that they go unnoticed by professors, support staff, and most important university policymakers.

Additionally, what Mr. Johnson (white, male, academic advisor) mentioned about doing school alone without help can cause burnout was the case for one of the student parents in my study. The idea of student parents finding a community and creating a support group was mentioned by another staff member. Ms. Davis (white, female, academic advisor) says that her advice for student parents is to,

Talk to people! As many people you are comfortable with, because there are so many people who are willing to help and not everybody knows everything that is available to help. And the more you can talk, the greater your support group will be and the more connection you have.

Having a community and support group was viewed by a few student parents in this study as something that would be beneficial. However, unless the university helps create this community or support group along with a more family-friendly culture, it puts the work on student parents, who are already extremely busy and lack time to do things outside of school and family as it is.

One staff participant mentioned that finding resources is harder for some students. Ms. Adams (white, female, Student Affairs worker) said that first generation students and student parents, who are “just navigating the system for the first time” might face more challenges when it comes to knowing what support is available to them. These findings also provide further insight into the gendered subculture at the University of Mississippi. Ms. Davis (white, female, academic counselor) expressed

I think just because some people are more comfortable talking about their private life in a setting where you don't know if you're going to be judged about your private life, especially since you're in the south, you know, there's still this taboo of unmarried mothers. And while some student parents are married, a lot of them aren't. And so being comfortable, just like I was uncomfortable talking about breastfeeding with my first child. I mean, now I realize that was silly. But, you know, there could be those people who are uncomfortable going up to the office saying, “hey, is there somewhere where I can pump or breastfeed or talking to the professor not knowing whether or not they would be judged or treated unfairly because of their status as a parent?”

The scenario of a student mother not feeling comfortable to ask if there is a place to pump occurred for one of the student mothers in my study who worked for one of the sports offices on campus. I described Anna's experiences with having to leave campus to go home and pump every day in the chapter on Student Parent Experiences. When asked why she chose to go home instead of pumping at school, she said

I would say I probably just felt uncomfortable. Especially, like, where I was working. It was an office with a whole bunch of men. But of course, there would have been no place for me to just pump. Like my boss's office. She's a woman. If I had reached out to her and said something to her about me wanting to do that, I'm sure she would have allowed me to use her office and her fridge when I needed to. But I would just choose to go home and do it, like in the privacy of my own house.

Breastfeeding and pumping in public are highly scrutinized in Western culture due to the sexist and gendered perceptions of women's bodies. Recall that Anna was not aware of the lactation rooms on campus and is also a single mother. Working in an office full of men should not hinder a mother from being able to express her breast milk. However, in a gendered organization Joan Acker (1990) argues that "women's bodies, female sexuality, their ability to procreate and their pregnancy, breast-feeding, and childcare, menstruation, and mythic 'emotionality' are suspect, stigmatized, and used as grounds for control and exclusion" (152). Arguably, Anna felt uncomfortable due to the gendered workplace culture at the University of Mississippi.

Chandra Kelsey, the co-chair of the Connecticut Breastfeeding Coalition, said "Colleges can claim they are breast-feeding-friendly just like any other place, but without building a culture of support and people to hold up that claim, it means nothing." This quote comes from a Washington Post article done on the campus breastfeeding-friendly initiative that Southern Connecticut State University put forth in 2018. The leader of this initiative at this university, Michele Vancour, pointed to some of the issues with breastfeeding on campus that student mothers in my study faced, such as existing lactation rooms not being advertised or promoted enough by the university and student mothers not having enough time to travel to a lactation room on a large campus in between classes. Additionally, breastfeeding and pumping policies on college campuses must be intersectional and acknowledge racial health disparities associated with systemic racism. In an article for the ACLU, Amani Echols states "The societal stigma of

breastfeeding is heightened for Black and brown people.” Furthermore, Echols stresses that the push to normalize breastfeeding has been led by mainly white, middle class, cisgendered women and as a result the focus excludes factors on race and class.

It is also important to highlight what Ms. Davis (white, female, academic counselor) mentioned about the taboo of unmarried mothers in the South. Recall the gendered interaction a student mother in this study had with one of her professors. The professor made a comment about students being absent due to “birth control problems.” Amber said, “She made me feel like I got knocked up in a bar bathroom or something. I’ve been married to my husband for 3 years. We can have another child if we want to.” For context, the University of Mississippi is located deep in the heart of the Bible Belt, where beliefs and politics are intertwined and largely conservative and Christian. Barton (2012) argues, “In the Bible Belt the church community, God, and scripture are powerful external authorities” (29). By this staff member acknowledging how the taboo and stigma attached to unwed mothers and given the place (the South) and space (“ideal student” culture) of the University of Mississippi, we can see why student mothers, especially single mothers, might not reach out for help when they are struggling.

In this section, I discussed a major theme that emerged from the interviews that I conducted with staff members, which was the level of importance they put on student parents to reach out and ask for help when they are struggling. This led me to connect their perceptions regarding seeking help and support with the lack of policies and practices in place at the University of Mississippi. I found that this university takes a “universal approach” to implementing policies, under the assumption that a certain policy or practice will be beneficial to all students, which ignores students who have caretaking responsibilities (Moreau 2016: 920).

Lastly, I highlighted the staff's perceptions on why and what type of student parent would be less likely to ask for help, such as single mothers and first-generation student parents.

Policies and Practices: Staff Perceptions

When it comes to providing support for student parents specifically with the school-family balance, two staff members explain that sometimes they must have “difficult” or “careful” conversations with pregnant students. Ms. Adams (white, Student Affairs worker) describes an example of how some of the pregnant students she works with underestimate the difficulties coming back to class after they give birth in the middle of the semester. Ms. Adams describes having a process that consists of asking them “practical” questions. She starts by asking pregnant student mothers how they are doing overall, how things are going academically, have they been in touch with their professors, and what their course load looks like. Next, she explained what type of conversations she has with pregnant student mothers in this situation, such as showing them options with adjusting their course load, encouraging them to have as much communication they can with their professors, and referring them to other resources on campus.

Mr. Johnson (white, academic advisor) describes a similar process as Ms. Adams when it comes to advising pregnant students, such as asking “practical” questions about how they are doing and what their current situation looks like. He also mentioned the importance of making sure pregnant student mothers understand the challenges that might arise out of jumping back into classes after giving birth during the semester and inform them of their options. Mr. Johnson described this type of situation as, “Oftentimes it’s the more careful conversations that you have to have, because you want to support what their [student mothers] goals are, but also be helping

them, understand what the reality is.” The “reality” is that the “ideal student” culture of higher education does not support or anticipate that students will give birth in the middle of the semester.

The notion that student mothers might “underestimate” the difficulties of giving birth during the semester relates to school family balance/conflict and the “ideal student” frame for several reasons. First, when students become pregnant while in school, they are unaware of the school-family balance/conflict and how they no longer fit the “ideal student” model. Second, these examples described by Mr. Johnson and Ms. Adams show how certain circumstances such as pregnancy and time of birth might heighten the level of school-family conflict for some student parents. Third, it highlights the critical need for universities to provide a concrete system of support that directly targets the types of issues students might face if they were to become pregnant while in school. It must be a system that continues supporting student parents post-birth with this adjustment and balancing their time between school and family.

Furthermore, in the first section on the issues student parents face, I mentioned that school-family conflict relates to work-family conflict. To alleviate the work-family conflict, governments and organizations typically implement family-friendly policies that are aimed to help with work-family balance. Collins (2020) argues, “policies work in tandem with cultural ideals about gender to produce diverse outcomes for women who work and parent. That is, work-family “balance” depends not solely on policies or cultural beliefs, but on the interaction between the two (850).” Therefore, the staff’s perceptions regarding policies at the University of Mississippi are crucial to understanding school-family balance and the barriers to achieving it and the conflicts that arise out of it.

When it comes to the Title IX policy there are two main components that relate to student parents. Ms. Williams (white, female, Human Resources worker) explains that through Title IX, pregnant students are entitled to academic accommodations, such as absences and making up assignments, as long as it is related to their pregnancy. However, this only covers students up to eight weeks after they give birth. She states, “After that eight weeks, there's really no accommodations.” The second component under Title IX, is Title VII, which protects student parents against discrimination based on pregnancy and parenting status. With these cases, it typically involves gender stereotyping. There are circumstances that can make giving accommodations for absences complicated, such as having to be put on bed rest. Ms. Williams (white, female, Human Resource worker) says,

The challenging ones are if you have a high-risk pregnancy and in some of our areas where you have to do on-site clinical work, you know, those have certain certifications and requirements. So, sometimes, we have to put those on hold and work with the professor to see if they can complete that at a later date, because there's so many hours that you have to go.

As we have come to see, the student parents in this study, who were in programs similar to the one Ms. Williams mentioned, struggled significantly with attendance policies long after eight weeks. This example reinforces my argument that attendance policies are “care-blind” and designed around the abstract ideal student, meaning childless students.

Collins (2020) says that policies have different outcomes for women based on cultural beliefs and values attached to motherhood. Title IX is a federal law that reflects national level perceptions of motherhood. This tells us that at the national level of culture, the United States believes that student mothers are fine and do not need federal policies to protect or support them after eight weeks post-childbirth. By extension, the University of Mississippi not implementing a policy that provides student mothers with accommodations after eight weeks post-childbirth is

reflective of their own gendered and care-blind culture. After eight weeks, giving accommodations to student mothers is completely up to the professors. Ms. Carter (white, female, regional campus worker) says,

If a student is struggling with the attendance policy, I'm going to always send them to their professor saying there needs to be a conversation here through the department, because that is not something that any of us [student services] have any say-so on whatsoever. That is between the student and the professor.

I found that most of the student parents in my study reported that they felt as if their professors were supportive and accommodating when they could be. However, there were examples where professors could not be accommodating, even when they wanted to due to policies. For instance, Hayley, the student mother who attended the regional campus, said this about the policy that prohibits children from entering the building, “My professors didn't mind it. It was the overall school policy.” Ms. Carter, who works at the regional campus, expressed a similar perception regarding this policy, “I know for a couple of years some professors could kind of pull that off, but they've gotten really strict. The police stop the children on the way in.” One of the staff participants raised an interesting point regarding support and policies. Ms. Adams (white, female, Student Affairs worker) said,

The policies back up the actions that we may take. So the resources are meant to be a kind of supportive place. I don't think of policies as always totally supportive. They're just kind of like the wording that backs up, you know, almost legally, like ‘is there a policy that backs up the action that we just took? Okay, cool.’ That's what I've learned in the world of higher ed. If you're going to do something, any kind of action, regarding student behavior or anything like that, there needs to be a policy. So that's always a challenge, too. But I do think resource wise, there's a range of resources that could really benefit student parents.

However, the resources that were named, such as the food pantry on campus, do not really address school-family conflict nor tackle the structural barriers in place, like the lack of affordable childcare. Ms. Adams further explains,

I always encourage all students to think about resources in a really open broad way, like you have to think about your faculty as a resource. You have to think about it kind of like it's not just an obvious, like, student parent flashing sign. You know, it's like each kind of have to figure out and make a resource sometimes, you know, and advocate for yourself.

Again, this puts the work on student parents to find support and create support for the issues they face that is mainly due to not having enough support. I would like to express that while having resourceful and accommodating professors is extremely important for the success of student parents, that type of support can only go so far. The University of Mississippi starting with those on top must work to create a robust, family-friendly culture of support for student parents.

There have been a few initiatives put forth to help provide supportive resources for student parents and working mothers at the University of Mississippi. However, I found that these initiatives were started by working mothers and one student mother at the university. This finding is particularly common in gendered organizations. Moreau (2012) made a similar finding with the ten universities she studied and says, “while each organization has its own culture and ethos, which can be more or less family-friendly,” family friendly provisions often begin with “the good will and initiative of a particular individual or of a small group of individuals who are dedicated to the cause of student parents or, more generally, to equality issues” (28).

One initiative was started by a student mother who gave birth in the middle of her undergraduate career. Ms. Davis (white, female, academic counselor) got to know this student mother personally and mentioned that she really “struggled to find other student parents to relate with. She struggled to find resources because her family was not from the area.” So this student mother decided to create a Student Parent Organization at the University of Mississippi. Unfortunately, Ms. Davis explained that “she got an internship that took her from the university for part of it. And then she graduated, and there was nobody else who really picked up the pieces

that she left behind. And that organization has kind of gone idle, I guess you would say, for the time being.” It is also important to highlight that Ms. Davis mentioned that when this student mother was forming the association, she spoke with someone in the Center for Student Success & First-Year Experience about getting the word out during orientation. She says,

I don't think that really went anywhere. But I think it would be great if new students and transfer students were given information about this. I mean, it's not going to be applicable to everybody, but you never know when that one student, who it may not be applicable when they first come, but it could be, later down the line.

This would have been extremely helpful for one of the student mothers in my study. Recall that Kira gave birth during her freshman year of college and expressed how lonely and hard it is not knowing other student mothers. Part of the ideal student framework is the assumption that college freshmen typically do not have caretaking responsibilities and thus information about a student parent association would not be necessary.

One of the university staff in this study has worked on two family initiatives over the years. Ms. Davis (white, female, academic counselor) had been working for the University of Mississippi for only about a year when she gave birth to her first child. She said, “There weren't a lot of resources. I was a nursing mom and at the time very uncomfortable talking about the process of nursing. So I really didn't know who to turn to.” Though after the birth of her second child, she expressed that she became more comfortable with talking about nursing and wanted to start talking about her experiences with other working mothers. She says,

I was actually doing a human training and having to leave the training in order to take pumping breaks and started thinking about wouldn't it be great if human resources had something for nursing mothers similar to the Rebel Well program, that educates people on the health aspects of nursing, whether it's diet, exercise. So I approached someone in Human Resources about that and she took it to the Rebel Well committee and they decided that it was not a good fit for them, but it encouraged me to start a breastfeeding

support group on my own if I wanted it. So I talked to some other mothers on campus that I knew. And I discovered that while breastfeeding was an issue, it wasn't the main issue people wanted to talk about. So we just formed a group for working mothers to be supported in any way possible.

After the establishment of the UM Working Mothers Support Network in 2016, a small group of working mothers began collecting information on an array of family related resources and holding meetings to discuss their mission on making the University of Mississippi more family friendly. They created a website that listed the information they gathered and a private Facebook group where members can post questions and receive support in a timely manner.

The momentum of this group caught the attention of the Associate Provost, who was also passionate about making the university more family friendly. For context, the Office of the Provost website states that they oversee all of the university's academic affairs, such as budgets, faculty matters, policies, planning and strategic issues, student services, research, and minority and diversity support programs. Ms. Davis (white, female, academic counselor) explained that with permission from the group, the Associate Provost created the official Career-Life Connector Initiative. As outlined on their website, "This initiative is designed to help potential and current faculty and staff navigate the university system and learn about policies, practices, and resources available to assist with work-life integration (Careerlife.olemiss.edu)."

One of their main services is to provide potential employees in the recruitment process with a Career-Life Consultant, where they can ask questions or share personal information that they might not otherwise share regarding the work-life balance and family-friendly culture at the University of Mississippi. Ms. Davis (white, female, academic counselor) perceived the work that Associate Provost is doing as,

She [Associate Provost] is working really hard to make sure that there are work-life resources for people on campus, not just people having young children, but people who

are in elder care situations, she hosts lunch and learns. And so. You know, she has taken on as the more formal role of what the working mothers' group initially started out as. We used to hold meetings, and we would do things similar to that. Now, the working mothers' group is more of, especially since the pandemic, a Facebook group. If you have a random question, you could throw it out there and get feedback from other parents. The associate provost is really where the formal process is at.

It is not clear from the research that I have gathered that any new policies have been implemented as a result of this initiative. While it is a valuable resource that addresses the work-family balance for faculty and staff, it does not directly address school-family balance for the student parents at the University of Mississippi. Recall, I discussed how there are multiple similarities between the work-family and school-family balance and conflict. The University of Mississippi could use this initiative as a template by creating a program for student parents that models the goals that the Career-Life Connector has, such as "Expanding and enriching the support network for work-life balance and family caregiving in the academic community."

The start of the working mothers' network and initiative by the university provost are common in gendered organizations. In "Gendered Organizations in the New Economy," Williams et al. (2012) found organizational logic has transformed in the new economy, and along with this transformation is the rise in professional networks where workers have more opportunities to connect with one another and higher ups in a given organization. However, with Acker's (1990) argument of gender inequality being built into the structures of organizations, professional networks primarily benefit the ideal worker, white, cis-gendered male, with no childcare responsibilities. Therefore, Williams et al. found that women workers in the ge-engineering field often are excluded from these networks and end up making their own. Typically these are online family support networks, much like the Facebook group Ms. Davis (white, female, academic counselor) described above. Williams et al. argue that while women

support groups might discuss work-family balance, it is not done in a way that necessarily “challenges the structure or policies of an organization” (566). Moreover, the authors found that these “grass-roots networks” are praised by high ranking managers, thus becoming “institutionalized” (566). This also can be seen with the Career-Life Initiative by using the information that the working mothers network gathered and creating a more “formal process” to support workers at the university and now the group primarily serving as a Facebook support page to ask questions.

One of the student mothers in my study mentioned that this Facebook group was recommended to her by a member of the Ole Miss Women’s Council and was a valuable resource in helping find a good babysitter in town. The point remains that school-family conflict is still a structural issue that the student parents in my study faced. Currently there are several members of the working mothers’ group, who are dedicated to incorporating student parents into the focus of family-friendly support at University of Mississippi. In particular, these members are pushing the university to address the critical need for affordable and accessible childcare on campus. Recall, Ms. Davis (white, female, academic counselor) said that childcare has been a “focus of a variety of different people for probably 30 plus years.”

While, I discuss recommendations and potential implications for this study in the following and final chapter, I must share the perspective of another staff participant who said this about the need for childcare,

Childcare is so expensive or it's limited. I'm sure this is something that's been talked about forever at the university here, is some sort of childcare for students where it's free. You drop your kid off, pick them up when you're done with class. I don't know what the regulations are. I don't know why we don't have one other than just people will probably say funding. They'll probably say, who would use it? But then it's also, who's got the will to make it happen? And it can't just be the middle tier admin and it has to be the president, provost, chancellor, whomever, to get behind those efforts to make them reality.

This sentiment shared by Mr. Johnson (white, male, academic advisor) here is spot on about needing those in the highest-ranking positions of power to get behind the childcare efforts in order to make it a “reality.” As many studies like mine have shown, affordable childcare, supportive work/school-family policies, and creating an overall family-friendly campus culture will greatly benefit working and student parents. However, with an institution that has never had a chancellor that is not a white male, it will take more than those at the top backing a childcare facility on campus to rid the gendered and racial inequality that is built into the foundation of the University of Mississippi.

Following the gendered organizations framework, Acker (1990) says to undo the gendered and racial inequalities that are embedded into the structures of organizations “it would probably require the end of organizations as they exist today, along with a redefinition of work and work relations” (154-55). However, Britton (2000) argues that following this stance by Acker (1990) means new organizational forms would have to be created such as,

Organizations in which hierarchy is abolished, the work of caretaking is valued as highly as economic production, and the rigid barrier between public and private spheres is dissolved, or at least rendered more permeable (Britton 2000: 442).

Given the long list of all white male Chancellors and current racial and gendered campus culture, I agree with Britton (2008) that “change on this scale is a tall order” and viewing the level of change that is needed as outlined in this study “has the potential to create paralysis or obscure less sweeping strategies of resistance” (116). Therefore, Acker (2006) develops a different approach to organizational change and that is to target specific “inequality-producing mechanisms” and work together in the form of social movements and take on legislative action (455).

It is my intention for this study to shine a much-needed light on some of the issues that student parents encounter at the University of Mississippi, help the dedicated individuals at the university who are currently working to provide support for student parents, and encourage scholars to build upon this work at other universities.

V. CONCLUSION

In this conclusion I begin by restating the research questions and theoretical framework for this study. Next, I summarize the findings from the interviews conducted with student parents and university staff. I then discuss the implications of this study and recommendations for improving the experiences of student parents at the University of Mississippi. Here, I pinpoint the structural barriers and mechanisms that reproduce gendered inequalities found in the policies and practices at this university and discuss the possibilities for organizational change. Lastly, I explain the limitations of this study and provide a discussion of future research possibilities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THEORETICAL FRAME

This thesis explores the experiences of five student parents at the University of Mississippi and the interactions they had with policies and practices. To provide a more complete analysis of these experiences and interactions, I also interviewed five staff members about student parents' issues. These staff members occupy a range of student support positions across the university. My research questions are: Are there University of Mississippi Policies that support student parents? What are the experiences of current and former student parents at the University of Mississippi? What are student parents' and university staff's perceptions of the policies and practices at the University of Mississippi?

The overarching theoretical frame used in this study is Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations. To argue that an organization is gendered means "that advantage and

disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine” (Acker 1990:146). Organizational logic determines how workplace policies and practices are made, "which may or may not be formally stated or consciously acted out” (Swanberg 2004: 7). While organizational logic presents itself as "gender neutral," Acker (1990) stresses that "gender is a constitutive element in organizational logic or the underlying assumptions and practices that construct most contemporary work organizations” (147).

When organizations create job listings, they use organizational logic that consists of abstract categories to determine what is expected of the worker and assume that the worker will not have outside responsibilities that interfere with their work to get the job done. Acker argues that “the closest the disembodied worker doing the abstract job comes to a real worker is the male worker whose life centers on his full-time, life-long job, while his wife or another woman takes care of his personal needs and his children” (1990: 149). Therefore, Acker concludes that jobs are gendered and the “ideal worker,” is a white, cis-gendered, middle-class male who is free of parental responsibilities. By applying Acker’s (1990) gendered organization framework and concept of organizational logic to my findings, I was able to highlight the ways the University of Mississippi uses similar logic when it comes to making policies and how the gendered and racial student culture shapes the experiences student parents have here.

Madden (2008) applies the “ideal worker” concept to the way community colleges assume that those who enroll in their college are “ideal students.” Thus, their policies and practices are made around and primarily benefit white, middle-class, cis-gendered students without caretaking responsibilities. Lastly, Acker (1990) maintains that gender is an ongoing process in organizations and happens on various interacting levels. At the cultural level,

gendered norms and assumptions shape workers' interactions with each other and their supervisors. In higher education, the culture of a university shapes the interactions that student parents have with other students, their professors, and the policies and practices in place. Also, the organizational culture influences the way university staff and faculty interact with student parents. Lastly, student parents and "workers themselves may craft their identities in gendered ways through their work" (Britton et al. 2008: 110).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Chapter 3 explores the experiences of five student parents from the University of Mississippi and examines their perceptions of university policies and practices. Here, I discuss the issues that the student parents in this study faced while pursuing their degrees. The overarching issues that this group reported consisted of the lack of affordable and accessible childcare on campus and maintaining a balance between the time they dedicated to their school obligations and parenting responsibilities. I argue that these two main issues are structural barriers resulting from the gendered inequalities built into the foundations of institutions of higher learning.

Busy schedules and lack of onsite childcare created numerous issues for several student parents in my study. For example, one student mother had to leave campus to pump her breast milk, take bottles to the babysitter's house, and return to campus for classes. In addition, the University of Mississippi requires students to buy parking passes before the semester starts. These passes are typically expensive, and students are not guaranteed to get a pass in a parking

lot close to their building. Therefore, the walk from where one parks their car to their class might take up a considerable amount of time. Again, as other studies have shown, affordable and accessible onsite childcare facilities could alleviate the number of issues and barriers that student parents, particularly student mothers, face.

Struggling to find childcare and maintain a healthy school-family balance causes an array of other issues the student parents in this study described. First, I found that the student parents in this study had to alter their degree trajectory at certain times during their schooling. Three of the student mothers who were set to give birth during the semester either had to take the entire semester off, put in extra work to finish early, or take alternate classes online and in the summer to lessen their future course load. It became clear that under these specific circumstances in academia and accounting for the structural issues they faced, a school-family balance was unlikely to be maintained. Therefore, the student mothers were required to make difficult decisions regarding their schooling to meet their family's needs. One student mother had to drop out of the university entirely after the birth of her son due to the lack of childcare support and not being able to devote enough time to her studies. The last student parent reported that he desired to finish his degree as quickly as possible by taking extra hours and summer classes due to the financial strain of being out of the workforce while in school. Additionally, I found that navigating these structural issues had adverse physical and mental health effects on these students, such as exhaustion, sleep deprivation, anxiety, and guilt.

Before discussing the perceptions of policies and practices, I provide an overview of the organizational context at this university by highlighting its racist history and the current gendered, racial, and class-based student culture, shaping the way policies and practices are made here. I found that several of the student parents in this study perceive attendance policies as

strict and unaccommodating to their caretaking responsibilities. The two student parents that attended classes at the regional campus reported having issues with a policy that does not allow children into the main building. This policy is not an official University of Mississippi policy. The regional campus shares a building with a local community college, which owns the property and policy. However, the University of Mississippi regional faculty and staff must enforce it. I want to note the community college that shares a building with one of the regional campuses opened a fitness center equipped with workout machines in 2019 for faculty, staff, and students. However, they do not allow children into the building for liability reasons.

I then discuss the interactions and experiences of this group with university practices from professors such as pedagogical approaches and providing support. I found that both policies and practices at the University of Mississippi are gendered and assume the “ideal student” model for policymaking and university practices. Lastly, I found that the student parents I interviewed shaped their identities around what they considered a “good student” and a “good parent.” Similar to the “doing gender” framework by West and Zimmerman (1987) and their idea of gender being achieved through social interactions, I argue student parents are simultaneously “doing school” and “doing parenthood” through their interactions with the university culture, policies, and practices, to achieve what societal norms deem a good parent and universities consider a good student.

In Chapter 4, I focus on the perceptions from five university staff members on the following: types of issues they think student parents at this university face, the support that is available to student parents through policies and practices, and the experiences they have had as workers in student support roles. I found that overall the five staff members that I interviewed are aware of the same types of issues that the student parents in this study described having. All

five staff members acknowledged that student parents struggle most significantly with the lack of affordable and accessible childcare on campus. A few staff members specifically described the issues that student parents have with balancing their school and parenting duties. It is not clear as to how the staff members are aware of the issues student parents face because the majority of students they provide support for are “traditional” students. The staff members typically described only one specific interaction they had with student parents. It appears that based on the limited interactions the staff members have with student parents, they have to make generalizations regarding the issues that all student parents might face. Additionally, four of the staff members relied on their experiences as student and working mothers to discuss the issues they think student parents face at the University of Mississippi.

Several staff members noted the experiences that pregnant student mothers have regarding the decision to alter their degree trajectory. They expressed that while most student mothers they advise or provide support for are aware of the issues that balancing classes on top of childbirth will be, others are not. Therefore, they described having to have difficult conversations with these particular student mothers to give them a better idea of what to expect and inform them of their options, such as taking a semester off with a plan to come back the next semester and taking summer or online classes.

Following the discussion on the types of issues the staff participants viewed as the most significant, I examine their perceptions of the support available to student parents. One of the most interesting findings consisted of all five staff members expressing the importance of student parents reaching out when struggling and needing help. However, I analyzed this finding in conjunction with the student parents' limited awareness of supportive policies and resources at the University of Mississippi. Recall, the five student parents I interviewed did not know of any

supportive policy or practice that might support for them directly. Therefore, it is arguable that student parents do not know who or where to reach out to when they are struggling. Also, when asking the staff if they are aware of any specific policies that help student parents, all five participants were not aware of any at the undergraduate level. One staff member was aware of the graduate student parental leave policy. For the past year, I have spent countless hours reviewing the University of Mississippi's online policy dictionary, searching for any policy that targets student parents directly. The graduate student leave policy is the only official university policy outside of Title IX (a federal policy) that the university has in place for student parents. To my knowledge, there no official university policy at the undergraduate level that targets student parents directly. With this being the case, I conclude that the University of Mississippi creates "universal" and "neutral" policies under the assumption that all students will benefit and affect them equally. Thus, as Moreau (2016) outlined, the University of Mississippi takes a "care-blind" approach by ignoring students' caretaking responsibilities regarding policies and practices.

The last noteworthy finding from chapter 4 is the gendered experiences that some staff members have had while working with student parents, specifically on family-friendly initiatives at the University of Mississippi. I found that three of the staff members were student mothers themselves at one point, and all of the women staff participants were working mothers at the time of the interviews. The experiences they have as working mothers at the University of Mississippi and had as student mothers influenced their perceptions regarding the experiences student parents have and their interactions with helping student parents. For example, one staff member struggled to find childcare after not getting her son on the waitlist at the appropriate time for the preschool on campus. She recalled her experiences navigating the limited childcare

in the city of Oxford and figured that student mothers would struggle with this, as well. Another staff member mentioned the stress she experienced as a student mother with having a sick child at home and a professor who did not allow cellphones to be out during class. This experience influenced the recommendations she gave on improving the experiences of student parents. She suggested professors should be understanding towards a student parent keeping their phone on the desk.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On-site, Affordable, and Accessible Childcare

The most significant implication of this study is the critical and urgent need for the University of Mississippi to provide an affordable and accessible childcare facility on campus for its student parents. Lindsey Reichlin Cruse studies student parents at the Institute of Women's Policy Research and says in a news article for NPR, that "Childcare is arguably one of the most, if not the most, important support for student parents to be successful in college. Helping students graduate via helping them afford childcare is a real gain; a real benefit for society more broadly."

As of 2019, there is an initiative being pursued to bring childcare to campus for student parents at the University of Mississippi. The university has hired a "childcare fellow," Laura Antonow, a current employee and a UM Working Mothers Network member, to gather data on student parents' enrollment and childcare needs. However, in an article for the Daily Mississippian, the childcare fellow expresses how difficult gathering this information on current student parents at the university is. The current childcare fellow is working on getting the university to apply for the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) Grant,

which gives student parents childcare. She says that she is questioning why the university has not already applied for it, and "if we have that CCAMPIS Grant, there could be a whole new group of students who might give college a second look." I propose that the University Provost's Office make this initiative a higher priority and send a clear message to their student parents that they will do what it takes to support them. They can start by helping the current childcare fellow by creating a sizeable, official task force of trained and dedicated individuals in creating a more family-friendly campus for student parents.

Recall that research finds that only two percent of teenage mothers finish college by the age of 30. The interviews in this study suggest that a significant factor in the success of student parents is sufficient family and other childcare support. The provision of support to the other ninety-eight percent of teenage parents who might want to pursue a college degree, but do not have access to childcare, would be a critical step in increasing equitable access to higher education. Providing childcare for student parents is especially crucial in Mississippi, where the teenage pregnancy rate is the second highest in the country.

Policies and Practices

The National Center for Student Parent Programs at Endicott College released a fact sheet in 2016 with a list of recommendations for programs, practices, and policies that four-year universities can implement to help student parents. Tracking the parental and caretaking status of students is one of their main recommendations for better practices. They also recommend that every university and college should have a designated student parent center on campus. The need for having a place for student parents to go and receive help was echoed by several student

parents and staff members in this study. Next, they argue that universities' "institutional policies for staff and faculty parents should apply to student parents; ensure a clear process for requesting additional accommodations."

I propose that part of the task force should be dedicated to training professors on making their pedagogical practices more family-friendly with attendance policies and group projects and working with them on how to have open and comfortable conversations with these student parents. Also, I propose that the task force work with professors to help them acknowledge student parents' caretaking responsibilities directly and list all family resources, such as lactation rooms on campus in their syllabi.

Theoretical Implications

I think one of the most noteworthy contributions the “ideal student” concept and gendered organizations framework made towards my study was the benefits of viewing students as workers. Student athletes are another prime group that the gendered organizations, ideal worker, and inequality regimes perspective (Acker 1990, 2006) could be applied to. Universities exploit the labor of student athletes by using them in advertisements to boost sales and attendance. The labor of student parents contributes to universities as well, because “One-third of student parents have a GPA of 3.5 or higher, compared with 31 percent of independent nonparents and 26 percent of dependent students” (Institute of Women’s Policy Research). By using these guiding theoretical frames, I highlighted the intensive labor that is required of student parents and how the labor is divided differently between student mothers and fathers.

However, there are limitations to the guiding theoretical frames I used in this study. One limitation is the lack of empirical work in the literature on gendered organizations that applies

the “ideal worker” concept to the students in higher education. As this study has shown, students are similar to workers in many ways. They must perform and meet the requirements that are demanded of them in order to receive their payout. Instead of a paycheck, students are paid for their work with degrees, awards, and honors. Also, the gendered organization frame does not provide enough focus on class and family backgrounds and the ways they shape the identities and outcomes of workers and students. I believe that incorporating Bourdieu’s (1986) forms of capital would be extremely beneficial to understanding the experiences of student parents in higher education. Recall from the literature review, Waldis et al. (2018) examines the post-secondary achievement gap for student mothers in higher education despite having higher grade point averages compared to non-student parents and attributes the gap to time poverty. According to Bourdieu, academic achievement gaps are primarily a result of the lack of “domestic transmission of cultural capital” students have (Bourdieu 1986: 282).

I struggled to analyze the identities of the student parents in this study and their desire to do well in both school and parenthood through the “ideal student” and gender organizations perspective. Parsons (2008) examines the identities of student mothers in college through a classed and gendered lens. She claims that, “The women's negotiations of these complex identities are germane to their educational and economic success, health, and well-being” (136). I did not ask for the socio-economic background of the student parents I interviewed. However, four out of five of the student parents expressed being one of the first people in their family to finish college. Parsons (2008) also argues, “The women with habitus and lives marked by social constraints experienced agency subjectively at times feeling that they were self-determining and

autonomous beings” (143). I believe that incorporating a Bourdieusian perspective would have allowed me to analyze the ways student parents in this study shaped their identities in classed and gendered ways and the level of agency in their experiences with overcoming structural barriers.

Methodological Limitations

The most significant limitation to this study were the challenges I faced while being a student mother to a six-year-old during the global Covid-19 pandemic. For me, the school-family balance during this time consisted of adjusting to remote learning, attending to my teaching assistant duties, learning how to become my child's first-grade teacher overnight, recovering from catching Covid-19 right before final exams, and taking care of my daughter when she tested positive for Covid-19, all while researching the issues student parents face in higher education. My original sample goal was to conduct a total of 7 interviews with student parents and 8 with university staff. However, it became increasingly challenging to recruit student parents and staff members, mainly because they were struggling with this balance as well during this time.

The next limitation with this study was the staff participants being an all-white sample. By conducting interviews with faculty and staff members of color, I would have been able to analyze the racial dynamics within this organization. While the student parent sample was more racially diverse, interviewing more than one student father would have allowed me to examine more of the gendered differences that student parents have with their experiences in higher education. The last limitation includes the sample being mainly heteronormative. Every participant from both groups, except for one staff member, expressed having or being in a heterosexual relationship at some point during the interviews.

Future Research

Future research can build upon this study by including a more diverse sample of student parents based on gender, class, first-generation status, and sexuality. This approach would allow universities and policymakers to understand that not all student parents experience the same issues. Therefore, they would be able to incorporate intersectional policies instead of universal student parent policies and practices. I believe that a mixed-method study that includes both qualitative and quantitative methods would be beneficial for numerous reasons. By conducting surveys on student parents' experiences and what types of support they value the most, researchers would be able to translate and pass on their findings in more transferable ways to institutions searching for numbers and statistics on student parents' experiences. Having quantitative data on student parents' perceptions could also be passed to state and federal programs, which are interested in helping improve the experiences of student parents in higher education.

Final Thoughts

I want to express how important this research is during this moment in time. Covid-19 dissolved the public and private nature of work and family. Employees and university professors were granted direct access to their workers' and students' home lives. Some universities and professors worked diligently to provide accommodations during this unprecedented time. Student mothers and fathers cared for their children during online class lectures. Professors got to meet their students' children and pets via Zoom™. Student parents did not struggle to find a babysitter while they attended classes or worry about transportation. As we attempt to resume a pre-Covid way of life, I urge universities and professors to keep in mind their experiences

witnessing student parents juggle and balance their schoolwork and childcare responsibilities. When classes start back in the Fall of 2021, universities and professors must keep the same energy and perspective regarding accommodating their student parents.

This thesis provides specific areas that the University of Mississippi can look into when it comes to improving the experiences of their student parents. First, it highlights what policies and practices currently in place cause the most difficulties for student parents. Second, it proves that the University of Mississippi must work to provide a more inclusive culture. Third, through my findings, I show how supporting student parents is something that is deemed essential and valued by the staff members I interviewed. However, these staff members are limited in the support that they are available to provide. Lastly, this study shows how resilient and dedicated the student parents at this university are and how worthy they are of receiving support to achieve their dreams and improve the lives of their families.

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List of Appendices

APPENDIX A

Consent Form:

The Two Percent: Exploring the Experiences of University Student Mothers and Supportive Policies

Thank you for showing interest in this research. You are invited to participate in a study that is designed to examine how and whether University policies and the faculty, staff, and students who utilize them address the needs and promote the success of student mothers. I am a graduate student in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Mississippi. This study is being conducted for my master's thesis. There is no known risk for participating in this study. For the faculty and staff, I will list your department name but will not list your job or position title. There is no cost for you to participate. The information that you provide will be used for a qualitative data analysis. The interview will be one hour. The information you provide could potentially help bring awareness to student mothers' experiences in higher education and hopefully promote change in policy.

The interview will be audio recorded. Before the transcription process, you will be given a pseudonym.

You must be 18 years or older and either a faculty, staff member, or current student mother/father at the University of Mississippi. Your participation is strictly voluntary. At any time during the interview, you are free to decline to answer any specific question. You may stop the interview at any time for any reason. Completion of this interview is implied consent to participate. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Chelsea D. Baddley.

Researcher

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IRB Approval

This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or irb@olemiss.edu.

APPENDIX B

Demographic Chart for Student Parents 2020-21				
Student Parent/Age:	Age:	Student Status:	Race:	Gender Pronouns:
Kira	19	Current student - Sophomore	Black	She/Her
Amber	27	Graduated - Master's in 2019, BA in 2017	White	She/Her
Hayley	30	Graduated - BA 2019 (Regional Campus)	White	She/Her
Scott	29	Graduated – BA 2018 (Regional Campus)	White	He/Him
Anna	24	Graduated – BA 2018	Bi-Racial	She/Her

*Note: BA stands for bachelor's degree.

APPENDIX C

Demographic Chart for Staff Members 2020-21			
Staff:	General Area of Work:	Race:	Gender Pronouns:
Ms. Williams	Human Resources	White	She/Her
Ms. Adams	Student Affairs	White	She/Her
Ms. Carter	Division of Outreach (regional worker)	White	She/Her
Mr. Johnson	Academic Advisor	White	He/Him
Ms. Davis	Academic Counselor	White	She/Her

VITA

EDUCATION

Master or Arts, Sociology, August 2021

College of liberal Arts

University of Mississippi

Bachelor of General Studies, Legal Studies, History, Sociology, 2018

University of Mississippi

Areas of Research Interest:

Gender, Family, Policy, Work, Education, Qualitative Methodology

Honors:

2020 Gamma Beta Phi Honors Society 2015 Phi Theta Kappa Honors Society

Grants:

2020 Graduate School Summer Research Assistantship (\$2,500)

Research Experience: Major areas - Policy analysis, Mixed Methodology

Graduate Research 2020-2021

- During my second semester of graduate school, I worked in the Center for Population Studies at the University of Mississippi as a research assistant. I collected quantitative data on low birth weight and preterm birth rates in the state of Mississippi for a research brief led by Dr. John Green. I contributed by analyzing the data based on age, race, and education.

- I participated in an ethnographic project on a small-town LGBTQ+ pride event. My field-notes were accepted by the Queer Mississippi Oral History Project at the University of Mississippi to add to their repository.

Undergraduate Research 2018

- For my Sociology of Methods course, I conducted a quantitative study on what types of formal support universities can offer to help increase college graduation rates for teenage mothers. I surveyed eighty-two teenage mothers about their perceptions regarding a range of supportive policies and programs that colleges can offer.

Teaching Experience: 2020-2021

- I worked as a TA for two Sociology of Gender undergraduate courses. My duties include grading all written work, responding to student emails, overseeing discussion posts from more than forty students, and working closely with the professor in creating projects and essay prompts. I was given the opportunity to give a student lecture on education and the ideal student in the University setting.

Conferences:

2020 10th Annual Graduate Student Council Symposium. I was accepted to give a short presentation on my thesis research. (Event was canceled due to Covid-19).

Positions Held:

2019-2021 Graduate Student Council Senator