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FEATURE

**The Portrait of a Superwoman: Finding
Compatibility and Balance Between
Motherhood and Graduate School**

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Abstract. *The number of female students has increased at the tertiary level especially in the graduate and post-graduate levels (Perry, 2018). Women, after earning their college and master's degrees, finding employment, and having family, are coming back to universities to go through their doctorate programs. These women are students and, at the same time, wives and mothers of young children. Negotiating between these demanding and conflicting roles and finding compatibility and balance, these women lead phenomenal lives, making their life stories inspirational and exemplary to those who may want to emulate them. We used narrative research, which utilizes storytelling as a device, and portraiture, which employs artistry and aesthetic portrayals of experiences and captures richness in narrative texts (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The study focused on the participants' experiences of the phenomenon to sketch a composite portrait of a superwoman. The participants were seven students of an international Christian higher education institution who (a) had young children (infant to elementary school age), (b) were pursuing their PhD degrees, (c) were full-time students, and (d) were willing to participate. Data yielded the following major themes: (a) images and voices of the past, (b) images and voices of the present, and (c) images of the future. The images and voices of the past were positive and empowering. The images and voices of the present were both positive and negative. The participants, at this time, were confronted with questions about how well they could juggle their multiple roles and satisfactorily perform each of them. Images of the future were positive. The portrait that emerged is a woman who has found balance among her multiple roles through dependence on the*

providence of God, a strong support system especially that of the husband, and a high level of self-efficacy.

Keywords: superwoman, portraiture, narrative research, doctoral student mothers, international Christian higher education, Philippines

Introduction

The number of female students has increased at the tertiary level especially in the graduate and post-graduate levels (Perry, 2018). For many years, doctorate male students in the United States had higher enrolment figures than female students. However, according to the Council of Graduate Schools (Jaschik, 2010), in 2008-2009, the figures changed. For the first time, female doctorate students outnumbered their male counterparts. Based on the 2016-2017 data, enrolment in doctorate degrees showed these figures: 47% males and 53% females. Specifically, in the field of education, females took the lead with 68.8%; in the health and medical sciences, females had an enrolment of 70.3%. In the business courses, though, males had a slightly higher enrolment (51.1%) compared to females (48.9%). Like the United States, Asia has seen increasing enrolment trends in higher education among females (Dunrong, n. d.).

The women's exodus to universities to earn doctorate degrees has brought positive rewards not only to the women themselves but also to their families and communities. These women, however, are challenged with how to successfully navigate themselves through conflicting roles. Many of these women are mothers in their childbearing years. For many women, earning a master's or a doctorate degree coincides with their childbearing period (Ellis, 2014; Paksi, 2015). This is the time when these women are between the ages of 30-40. Researchers call these women by different names: doctorate student mothers (Wu, 2013), women in PhD parenting (Grove, 2016), female/women doctoral students (Alhajj, 2016; Hyun, 2009; Maher & Thompson, 2004; Riser, 2013; Schmidt & Umans, 2014), graduate or post-graduate student mothers (Anaya, 2011; Bosch, 2013; Ellis, 2014; Maitland, 2002), academic mothers (Wu, 2013), and supermom or superwoman (Ellis, 2014). In this study, we used the term *superwoman* and *doctoral student mothers* interchangeably. Negotiating between demanding and conflicting roles—being a mother and being a student in a graduate school—these women lead phenomenal lives, making their life stories inspirational and exemplary, especially to those who may want to emulate them.

Several studies have been conducted on doctoral student mothers (Anaya, 2011; Bireda, 2015; Bosch, 2013; Brown & Watson, 2010; Haynes et al., 2012; Maitland, 2002; Moghadan, Khiaban, Esmaili, & Salsali, 2017; Padula & Miller, 1999; Springer, Parker, Leviten-Reid, 2009; Wu, 2013). Most studies on doctoral

student mothers focused on their challenges and the strategies that they used to overcome them (Anaya, 2011; Alajjaj, 2016; Berida, 2015; Brown & Watson, 2010; Ellis, 2011; Hyun, 2009; Maher & Thompson, 2004; Moghadan et al., 2017; Onwuegbuzie, Rosli, Ingram, & Frels, 2014; Padula & Miller, 1999; Schmidt & Umans, 2014). Based on our literature search, however, exploring the experiences of these women through portraiture and the images and voices that shaped them had not yet been attempted. This study aimed to bring into life a work of art that would reveal what and how a superwoman could be seen by the world in a portrait.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to explore the experiences of superwomen and find out the images and voices that shaped them. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions: (a) What were the experiences of superwomen in an international Christian higher education institution? What images and voices shaped them to be a superwoman? (b) How did they find compatibility and balance between their role as mother and student? (c) What is the portrait of a superwoman?

Review of Literature

What is a superwoman? She is “a woman who succeeds in having a career and raising a family” (Superwoman, n. d.). Sumra and Schillaci (2015) identified the concept of a superwoman as a female identity construct, which projects the woman as a performer of multiple roles. Thornton, Leo, and Alberg (1991) described the superwoman as one who aims to attain an attractive physical appearance, succeed in interpersonal relationships, gain independent achievement, and perform well in her multiple roles. These multiple roles are being a wife, a mother, a career woman, a homemaker, and a caregiver (Sumra & Schillaci, 2015). In addition, this superwoman engages an active part in her community which can include church and charitable activities (Cruea, 2013). Navigating through these multiple roles, the superwoman is faced with daunting challenges. Consequently, graduate student mothers, especially those whose children are young, are challenged with a demanding family life (Berida, 2015; Bosch, 2013; Ellis, 2014; Lovik, 2004; Schmidt & Umans, 2014).

Experiences of Doctoral Student Mothers

According to the literature, doctoral student mothers are faced with many and overwhelming challenges, the solutions of which are not always easy. Among these challenges are financial issues (Ellis, 2014; Moghadan et al., 2017); inadequate academic skills (Bireda, 2015; Maher & Thompson, 2004); cultural expectations (good mother, good student); childcare (Bosch, 2013; Ellis, 2014; Grant, Kennedy, & Ward, as cited in Wu, 2013); struggle to be present in the lives of their children (Berida, 2015; Brown & Watson, 2010; Ellis, 2014; Mason, as cited in Wu, 2013; Paksi, 2015); relationship strain with spouse (Ellis, 2014; Padula & Miller, 1999);

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lack of support (Bosch, 2013; Padula & Miller, 1999); frustrations and difficulty (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2014; Padula & Miller, 1999). Hence, a doctoral student mother, who rises above these challenges and eventually succeeds to earn her academic degree, can be acclaimed as a superwoman.

Strategies in Finding Compatibility and Balance

Research studies reveal that doctoral student mothers use different strategies to find compatibility and balance (Alhajjaj, 2016; Anaya, 2011; Le et al., 2016; Maher & Thompson, 2004; Moghadan et al., 2017; Schmidt & Umans, 2014). Among these strategies are university initiated (Ellis, 2014; Maitland, 2002). For example, some universities have instituted considerate attendance policies, and professors give consideration when doctoral student mothers missed classes (Ellis, 2014). In addition, they are given voice for policymaking, a mentoring program is set up for them, affordable childcare support is provided, healthy balanced lives and relationships are fostered, class schedules are accommodating, more tenured women faculty are hired (Ellis, 2014; Maitland, 2002), organization and time-management skills are developed (Alhajjaj, 2016; Bosch, 2013; Padula & Miller, 1999), and partner support is encouraged (Anaya, 2011; Bosch, 2013; Hyun, 2009; Mokhtar & Hassan, 2014; White, 2004). On their end, these doctoral student mothers sacrifice their personal time to meet the demands of school and home (Bosch, 2013; Ellis, 2014).

Ellis (2014) found out that doctoral student mothers felt pride in their ability to manage all commitments in spite of their demanding schedules. These women admit they experience multiple role engagement at a relatively high level. But studies show that in spite of their engagement in multiple roles they experience satisfaction (Anaya, 2011; Sumra & Schillaci, 2015).

Motivation and Rewards

With the increase in enrolment of female married students in doctorate programs, the question is raised—Why do these women stake so much to get a doctorate degree? Several answers have been proposed: personal achievement and professional identity (Bosch, 2013; Le et al., 2016; Padula & Miller, 1999) and gaining new relationships (Padula & Miller, 1999). The pull to come back to the universities has become so strong that in spite of all the setbacks, these women are willing to go through the ordeal of balancing multiple roles.

Theoretical Frameworks

Three theories guided this study. Gottfredson's (1981) circumscription theory posits that girls and women have the power to achieve their occupational goals and create a future that they desire to attain. The academic resiliency theory, which was developed by Morales (2008) in his study with at-risk minority students, explains how students with evident risk factor or factors can succeed in their educational aspirations. The compensatory model of resilience (Werner & Smith, as cited in Ledesma, 2014) suggests four characteristics of resilient young adults—"active approach toward problem-solving, a tendency to perceive [negative] experiences in a positive light, . . . the ability to gain other people's positive attention, and a strong reliance on faith to maintain a positive life view" (p. 2).

Methodology

This study was based on a qualitative paradigm that answered the research questions. The specific qualitative research design used was narrative inquiry. Details of the design and other methodological descriptions are given in the sections below.

Research Design

Anchored on "interpretivism which is to see the world through the eyes of the people being studied" (Chowdhury, 2014, p. 433), this study used the qualitative approach specifically portraiture, which is a type of narrative inquiry. One distinctive feature of narrative inquiry is restorying, which is constructing the story as told by the participant in a chronological manner (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, as cited in Creswell, 2013). Portraiture combines "rigorous empirical description and artfulness of the doing of it and the displaying of it" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p. 19). It aims "to capture the complexity and aesthetic of human experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 4). To explain portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis use "The Girl Before the Mirror" by Picasso. They expound,

The girl looks in the mirror and does not see her likeness. Instead, she comes face to face with a more penetrating image—one that is both revelatory and disturbing. She does not see the literal portrayal that she expects, the smiling prettiness that she anticipates. Rather she perceives, in the refracted forms and surprising colors, a deeper, more authentic reflection of who she is. She sees and reaches out to her essence. (p. xvii)

Lawrence-Lightfoot continues that she "wanted to develop a document, a text that came as close as possible to painting with words," that she "wanted the written pieces to convey the authority, wisdom, and perspective of the subjects, but I wanted them to feel . . . that the portrait did not look like them, but somehow managed to reveal their essence" (p. 4).

Selection of the Participants

In portraiture, the selection of the participants is considered a very important step (Muccio, Reybold, & Kidd, 2015). The engagements of the researcher/s with them can be repeated several times. Hence, they must be able to give time and cooperate through the different steps of data collection.

Seven participants were selected through purposive random sampling. The selection criteria are the following: (a) They were doctoral student mothers. (b) They were studying full time. (c) They had young children (infant to elementary school age). (d) They were willing to participate in the study. Two of the participants were pursuing a PhD in Business and five were pursuing a PhD in Education. The number of their children ranged from 1 to 4, with ages from 1 to 12 years old.

Table 1

Profile of the Participants

Participants (not their real names)	Husband's Information	Number of Children	Ages of Children	Religious Affiliation	Nationalities
Ruth	Deceased	2	Preschool	Christian	The seven participants came from six countries, representing four continents.
Delight	Full-time doctorate student	2	Elementary	Christian	
Faith	Full-time doctorate student	4	Toddler to elementary	Christian	
Glory	Full-time doctorate student	3	Toddler to elementary	Christian	
Sunshine	Full-time employee	1	Elementary	Christian	
Love	Full-time doctorate student	3	Toddler to elementary	Christian	
Hope	Full-time doctorate student	3	Elementary	Christian	

Research Setting

This study was conducted in an international Christian institution of higher learning in Asia. This institution aimed for the holistic development of its students so that there was a balanced blend of the mental, social, physical, and spiritual aspects of a person's life (White, 1952). Faculty and students came from different countries. All faculty and most of the students lived inside the campus, where they were ensured of safety, comfort, and easy access to facilities and services. Faculty and students were organized into communities according to their countries of origin. Strong study groups existed. More so, faculty and students regularly came together for religious and social programs, physical exercise, and community engagements. The institution also provided scholarships through work-study programs to financially disadvantaged students.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study were in-depth interviews, aesthetic portrayals, and observation. There were two series of interviews. During the first in-depth interview, the focus was on the experiences and reflections of the participants. Muccio et al. (2015) likened this step to "taking a photo [which] a painter uses as the basis for the portrait" (p. 9). We asked the participants to narrate highlights of their life experiences—as a child, as an adolescent, as a young adult, and as a graduate student, to put together their biographical sketch. On the second in-depth interview, we engaged the participants in the process of "co-constructing the narrative," evoking their voices, "gathering artifacts . . . and gain[ing] insight into their contexts," and asking them to "represent their experiences through metaphor" (p. 9). At this stage, we asked our participants to represent their experiences as a doctorate student mother through aesthetic portrayals such as poetry, painting/drawing, photo essay, personal diaries, and others. Each of them explained to us the meaning of their aesthetic portrayals. We also had opportunities to observe the participants on several occasions such as their involvement in the activities of their community groups and in church, with their friends and families, in their classes and with their classmates, while they engaged in physical exercise and others.

For data analysis, we used the data analysis framework proposed by Muccio et al. (2017). We coded repetitive refrains and resonant metaphors used by the participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) and identified emergent themes through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 201). Then we proceeded to data representation, which involves discussing the themes, writing restoried narratives of the participants, and transforming the narratives into poetic portraits (Muccio et al., 2015). We also asked an artist to draw a portrait of a superwoman according to our composite description based on the narratives and poetic portraits.

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, specifically the four components—credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability, we took several
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measures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Enumerated below are some of the measures that we used. We (a) adopted a specific qualitative research design, which was portraiture, a type of narrative research; (b) employed triangulation through the use of multiple researchers (there were two of us in the research team), multiple data sources (two series of in-depth interviews, aesthetic portrayals, and observation), and multiple theories; (c) had prolonged engagement with the participants; (d) did member check by allowing our participants to review the transcript of our interviews with them and asking follow up questions to ensure we understood the data they shared with us; (e) provided thick description of the phenomenon and the steps that we undertook in the data collection methods and data analysis; and (f) presented this study in research conferences in the Philippines, United States, and in Brazil—venues that provided for peer scrutiny and discussion.

Findings and Discussion

We reconstructed narrative portraits of each participant and transformed one of these narrative portraits into a poetic representation. Here is the story of Ruth, whose father died when she was a child and whose husband, when their two children were between the ages of 1 and 3, also died.

*Two men, two great loves, two deaths—
 Father departing—forever,
 Mother leaving, entering another man's door.
 She's left—alone, only a child
 To walk through tomorrow's door.*

*Husband departing—forever
 She's left—alone
 Two daughters, blond curls tumbling
 Over drooping shoulders
 Thumb-sucking away life's pain.*

*The wind blows—bitingly
 Yet the sun chases—slowly
 The dark shadows and the cold
 And she walks and walks and walks
 And steps—boldly
 Through tomorrow's door.*

The themes that were extracted from the data were organized into the following: (a) images and voices of the past, (b) images and voices of the present, and (c) images of the present and the future. The participants attested that they

were shaped by what they had seen and heard during their childhood and adolescent years. From the past and the present, they clearly saw a picture of who were and who they could be in the future.

Images and Voices of the Past

From their past, the participants saw images and heard voices. As they narrated their life experiences, they drew from memories of early childhood. Most of their pictures were of their mother. While they recalled some painful memories—father dying, mother dying, growing up without a father or a mother—they described their childhood as generally happy.

Images of the past. The participants identified the following images of their past. Images of (a) an empowered mother; (b) a large, close-knit family; (c) a happy childhood; (d) their love for education; and (e) their family’s devotion to God flashed in their mind. The participants saw their mother as a model of an empowered woman. Sunshine spoke highly of her mother: “My mom is a superwoman.” She testified how her mom took care of her and her siblings—six children—and, at the same time, worked full time as a teacher. She added that they did not have a *yaya* (governess). “Still,” she said, “my mother could organize a *rondalla*, a choir, cottage meetings where she was the speaker.” Faith lost her mother when she was still a child. But she had a clear picture of her as a hardworking person. She shared that her mom was the one who took care of their farm, making sure that there was food on the table. Hope’s mother decided to leave her father, who was an alcoholic when she was only a few months old. Since then, her mother raised her and sent her to school, singlehandedly. Hope described her mom as a strong woman who was able to provide her guidance and help her attain her dreams.

Aside from the influence of their mothers, they also benefited from having a large, close-knit family. Six of the participants said they grew up surrounded by family and relatives. “Relatives are all around to give me so much love” (Hope). Faith and Lovely are the youngest, with many older brothers and sisters. Faith treasured memories of being well taken care of by her sisters. “I am the 11th child. You can feel how comfortable it was for me.”

Even at a young age, the participants felt a strong love for education. Lovely, whose mother was a principal of a school, insisted on joining the first-grade class when she was only 4 years old. “When I was 5, I could not be accepted to Grade 2. I told my mom, ‘I am smart. I can do what others do.’” She was accepted and continued to excel. Glory looked back to her childhood days and described herself as a high achiever. “I was first in my class,” she recalled with a smile. Having acquired disciplined habits from her parents and from an Adventist boarding school, she set aside time for study and work. Faith knew what she wanted to be since childhood. “I wanted to be a teacher since I was three years old.”

Above all, the participants underscored their early training on spiritual matters. According to Glory, “We were trained to start the day with devotion.” She received the same emphasis on the importance of spiritual disciplines from her home and from the boarding school. Delight could not help but radiate a glow in her face when she spoke of her memories with her parents. She said there were lots of singing religious songs in her home and her parents gave them lots of opportunities to sing also for others. Sunshine was exposed to many church activities in which her parents were involved. The participants attested that they continue to draw strength from their spiritual training and engagement in religious activities during their childhood.

In her study, Rosario (2010) found out that her participants, who were women university presidents, had mothers who were empowered and empowering. Her participants credited their parents, especially their mothers, for what they had become. In addition, her participants attested that their homes served as the cradle where their love for education was born. Also, most of her participants had a happy childhood, surrounded by family and relatives. Fidel Ramos, former president of the Philippines, wrote in a family memoir: “The memory of home is always a call to values and all that the home encompasses, particularly family and loved ones, which is the greatest source of love made available to us in our lifetimes” (Velasco, 2006, p. 41).

The participants did not mention any negative voices of the past. Instead, they highlighted the empowering messages they had heard from their parents and the significant persons in their lives. Ruth, whose father died when she was young and whose mother remarried, still recalled the voice of her uncle with whom she grew up telling her: “You have to be a great woman.” When she decided to study towards a doctorate degree, her uncle saw it as a fulfillment of what he had said. For Lovely, the voices of her teachers continue to ring. She said she was the youngest in the class, but her teachers always encouraged her. “You are a good girl; you are smart.”

Several authors affirm that childhood experiences have an essential and enduring effect on a person’s adult life. Those who have a happy childhood are more able to successfully navigate through life (Azarcon-de la Cruz, 2007; Madsen, 2007; Rosario, 2010). Hence, Haiman (2012) underscores the need for the positive relationships between the child and the caregiver, whom he identifies as preferably the mother.

Images and Voices of the Present

While the participants highlighted positive images and voices of the past, they acknowledged that those of the present was a mix of positive and negative experiences. In their storytelling, when they narrated their graduate student life, they began with negative metaphors—juggling, puzzles. At times, they expressed

frustration and helplessness. But as they proceeded, the images and voices they described were hopeful and bright.

Images of the present. The participants saw themselves engaging in varied and competing roles. In the home, they were mothers and wives; at school, they were students. They were also members of their community groups, which at times required their participation for social events and outreach programs, and of the church where they were involved in many ways. These demands, at times, could heavily weigh upon them. Hope, for example, a mother of two elementary girls and one preschool son, sighed that she had just too much in her hands. Her husband was also a post-graduate student who, at the time of the study, was beating his deadline for final defense. Hence, Hope despaired, “Why am I in such a crazy life?” In a poem she wrote, Delight asked herself: “How am I doing? . . . By doing so much, am I doing nothing?” Glory, who always projected a sense of serenity about her and moved about with measured steps, disclosed in her diary: “I have a big puzzle to fix.” This puzzle metaphor was echoed by Hope, who said, “The life of a mother, wife, and student is like a puzzle. In fact, not only one puzzle but multiple puzzles.”

Voices of the present. In unison, the participants chorused: “We don’t have time.” All of them wished they had more than 24 hours in their hands. They said the demands of school and of the home and other areas seemed too overwhelming for them to handle. Their concern resonated with those of other doctorate student mothers (see Berida, 2015; Ellis, 2014; Moghadan et al., 2017; Schmidt & Umans, 2014).

These images and voices seemed negative. But the participants saw something else. Hope took a picture of an intricate design in her daughter’s drawing book. She explained, “This is my busy life—dealing with small details. Yet, it is interesting how these small details add beauty to life.” Sunshine did a painting that was inspired by the work of Octavio Ocampo. With the painting, she penned a poem which she titled *Superwoman* to describe her present life.

*Like a flower she adds color and beauty
Her scent of influence leaves a legacy
She moves with grace
Amidst strong winds of busy days
Her roots touch the dirt.*

*She’s strong yet fragile
She’s multi-functional yet dependent.*

*Water her with love
Cultivate her with care
Give her the sunshine of happiness
And she will bloom at her best.*



Indeed, time was the issue for these women. Were they able to find the balance? If so, how did they do it? The participants said they may not have found the perfect balance, but they were able to make sense of their situation and even sometimes enjoy life as they had it presently. In their diaries, poems, and photo essays, they enumerated what they had done. Among these strategies are (a) being organized, (b) carving out family time, (c) making to-do lists for the next day the night before, (d) finding time to rest, and (e) engaging in hobbies. Glory said, “I find time to do my work, time to take care of my family—my husband and my children—and time with God.” Delight, who had two teens, shared that she and her husband, who was also pursuing a doctorate degree, decided that “everything stops at 5:00 p.m. until the children sleep. It’s family time.” Faith, in her photo essay, included pictures of herself taking care of her vegetable garden, cooking, and feeding her four children. She reflected that doing these activities “reminds me of my childhood and creates in me a good feeling and hope for my future. It helps me think I am a good mother and a wise woman.” Sunshine underscores the maxim: “Slow down to speed up.”

The participants claimed that the reason why they were able to navigate through their multiple roles was because of the support they had received—from their professors, classmates and friends, house helpers, and children. But they underscored that the biggest plus factor for them was the support of their husband. Lovely spoke of her husband very highly: “My husband is like a wife. Whatever I can do, my husband can do. I am a superwoman because my husband is a superman.” Several of these women came from cultures where it is unacceptable for the husband to help in the kitchen because it is considered as a wife’s domain. But in the setting where these couples were, they adopted strategies so both of them and their children could succeed.

Above all, the participants acknowledged the reality of God in their lives. Werner and Smith (as cited in Ledesma, 2014) posit in their compensatory model of resilience that one of the four core characteristics of resilient young adults is having “a strong reliance on faith to maintain a positive life view” (p. 2). Sunshine attributed God as the giver of life, power, and strength. Delight testified, “I have a God who keeps me strong.” Hope claimed, “My secret is God. He is my defense.” Ruth, who has two children and without a husband and adequate support, testified: “I can see the hands of God in my life.”

Reflecting on their life purpose as a woman, the participants penned: “My purpose in life as a woman—to make people happy, especially my family, and to leave a legacy” (Sunshine). “My husband and children—to see Christ in me and glorify God because of my presence” (Glory). “Studying for me is a gift from God. God has a purpose for me to study” (Faith). “My husband praises the Lord for creating me” (Lovely) All of them mentioned that their mission is to fulfill God’s purpose for their lives—to grow, to become whole, for the glory of God.

The findings in this study were corroborated by other studies. Schmidt and Umans (2014) found out one theme—being in the sphere of influence—which means that doctorate student mothers can greatly benefit from a supportive community which includes the academic advisor and other professors, peers, and family members (see also (Alhajj, 2016; Anaya, 2011; Ellis, 2014; Maher & Thompson, 2004; Mokhtar & Hassan, 2014). From our literature search, we found only one study that concludes on the importance of the doctoral student mothers' spiritual foundations and the role of faith in one's pursuit for a desirable goal (see Riser, 2013).

Images of the Future

The images that the participants had of the future were closely intertwined with the present. We summarized their statements and put them together into a poetic representation.

*A smart student
A loving wife, filled with courage
A homemaker, toiling with love
A woman of faith, doing the will of God.
A powerful woman, among the best, a leader
A wise woman, making good life choices
An organized, multi-tasking person
A model to own children and other women
Leaving legacy and a heritage
Living a happy and full life.
We are the superwomen.*

The Composite Image of a Superwoman

From the narrative and poetic portraits, we composed a poetic representation of the superwoman. Most of the images and voices focused on the present and the ideal that they aspired to be. We also asked an artist to depict the poem in a charcoal drawing.



*She is the woman in the classroom,
Her fingers dancing in the keys,
or caressing furrowed brows or tracing blurred lines.*

*She is the woman in the home,
Her hands soiled or burned
Or simply full.*

*She is the woman before the cross,
Her knees bended and calloused,
Her head bowed.*

*She is the woman
Whose heart's embers ever glow,
In the ebbing and heaving of life.*

*She is the woman who daily basks
In the warmth and freshness of love's rays
In the strength that flows from vein to vein.*

*She is the woman whose hands are clasped
In the strong and firm grip of Life and Strength and Power
In the Presence that is ever near
In the Love that is ever real.*

She is the superwoman.

Conclusion

A doctorate student mother, who in this study is defined as a superwoman, can succeed both as a student and as a mother. Her success is propelled by empowering images and voices of her past, which enable her to rise above or regulate the tension created by the demands of her multiple roles at the present, and by positive images of the future. She is able to find balance and compatibility between motherhood and graduate school through a strong support system from inside her home, specifically her husband; from the graduate school; and from a power above and beyond her, that is, God. Gottfredson's theory (1981) affirms that women are able to become what they want to be. More so, the academic resiliency theory (Morales, 2008) supports the findings of this study, that at-risk students, in this case, the doctorate student mother can succeed in their educational aspirations. Furthermore, the participants in this study exhibited the characteristics of a resilient person such as having the ability to solve problems proactively, to rise above negative experiences, to gain support from others, and to anchor one's life on faith in God (Werner & Smith, as cited in Ledesma, 2014).

Recommendations

Below are suggested recommendations to providers of graduate school education, to superwomen, to their family members, and further research:

1. Graduate Schools: That graduate schools provide a supportive and conducive environment. Support can come through study groups, accommodating class schedules, supportive and encouraging professors and academic advisors, use of blended learning, and regular dialogues between school leaders and students to promote better understanding of the needs of superwomen.
2. Superwomen: That superwomen rally support from their husband and children for household chores and other demands of home life; join support groups that can provide them academic assistance and friendship; and find strength in a Supreme Being, whom the participants claimed as a “Presence that is ever near” and whose love “is ever real.”

For further research: Since this study focused only on the perspective of the superwomen, other perspectives such as those of the husbands and the children, and of school leaders and professors may be explored. Moreover, other qualitative research methodologies such as phenomenology may be used as a means to deepen our understanding on the phenomenon of women who pursue advanced degrees while having a family, specifically during their childrearing years.

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