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## BALANCING GRADUATE SCHOOL AND MOTHERING: IS THERE A CHOICE?

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### ABSTRACT

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Aim/Purpose	Multiple emotional and cognitive resources are needed for graduate students to overcome stress associated with balancing studies and personal life. This research aimed to explore the difficulties, which <i>graduate student-mothers</i> face while balancing school and parenting, and describe mechanisms of the balancing process.
Background	Graduate student-mothers need to structure their time so that they can equally distribute their energy between their children and graduate school work. Mothers face challenges in balancing graduate school and parenting, making choices between school and family responsibilities. This paper addresses the perceptions and experiences of graduate student-mothers who navigate coping with multiple role responsibilities.
Methodology	Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with eight graduate student-mothers who studied at a research-intensive university. Thematic analysis was used to explore the process of balancing graduate school and mothering.
Contribution	In this paper we describe the mechanisms of the balancing process among graduate student-mothers and lay a foundation for the future research on coping strategies utilized by this population.
Findings	Student-mothers may perceive balancing graduate school and mothering as a challenge, feeling guilty for not spending enough time at school and with their children, and experiencing stress choosing between school and mothering responsibilities. The coping mechanisms for balancing graduate school and parenting roles are compartmentalization, changing behavior, and changing thoughts.

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Recommendations for Practitioners	Graduate student-mothers could benefit from specific psychotherapeutic services within their institutions, learning to deal with the stress of balancing graduate school and mothering. Compartmentalization is a balancing mechanism that mothers may learn to use in counseling, separating life experiences of school and family in their mind and preventing feelings from one area of life – graduate school – to intervene with emotions related to mothering.
Impact on Society	Current research highlights the necessity of counseling services tailored specifically for graduate student-mothers, who may have increased levels of stress due to multiple responsibilities.
Future Research	The research on the effectiveness of suggested counseling strategies should follow.
Keywords	graduate school, student-mothers, intensive mothering

## INTRODUCTION

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Graduate student-mothers experience high levels of stress related to multiple role conflicts (Haynes et al., 2012; Johnson, Greaves, & Repta, 2007; Wellington & Sikes, 2006), which increase risk for lower academic self-efficacy and decrease wellbeing (Green, 2015). Additionally, multiple role conflicts may evoke cognitive dissonance (CD) – a subjective perception of incompatibility between two self-relevant beliefs, attitudes, values, emotions, interests, or behaviors. Negative consequences of CD manifest in feeling more uncomfortable, tense, distressed, irritable, and nervous (Harmon-Jones, 2000). Moreover, CD experiences can affect work performance, increasing absenteeism and withdrawal. Graduate student-mothers are frequently having thoughts about leaving school (Markle, 2015); these thoughts may be related to challenges mothers face as students and as parents in the modern society. On-campus counselors may provide services to this student population helping to deal with multiple role conflicts and stress of balancing graduate school and parenting, so that these thoughts about quitting school could be managed appropriately without adding even more pressure.

Additionally, graduate student-mothers tend to experience guilt and shame (Brown & Watson, 2010). These emotions are tied to so-called intensive parenting attitudes (IPA) – prescriptive norms of how people should parent. IPA include the idea that parenting is challenging, needs to be child-centered, involves specific cognitive development of children (for instance, including early childhood education), and is better performed by women than men (Hays, 1996; Schiffrin et al., 2013). Concurrently, mothers who believe that they are the primary caregivers for their children, and do not use social support, are more prone to developing mental health illnesses (Schiffrin et al., 2013). Intensive mothering ideology may intensify stress of balancing multiple responsibilities among graduate student-mothers, increasing guilt and decreasing wellbeing.

There are no studies that examine the mechanisms of balancing graduate school and mothering in combination with maternal guilt and cognitive dissonance in the paradigm of intensive mothering. Additionally, the amount of studies with recommendations for counselors on specific interventions for graduate student-mothers is scarce (Kaplan-Levy, 2017). Therefore, we believe that graduate student-mothers as a group need investigation due to the following reasons: (a) lack of knowledge about existing mechanisms of the balancing graduate school and parenting process, (b) need to find working balancing strategies, (c) need to suggest specific interventions for mental health professionals who work with this population.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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### *MULTIPLE ROLES CONFLICT*

Being a mother and a graduate student is challenging due to multiple role and time conflicts between school and parenting that become a source of stress, anxiety and depression among students (Concerto et al., 2017; Deutsch, & Schmertz, 2011; Jang, Kim, & Kim, 2017; Munn, 2017). Researchers emphasize the difficulties of being a caretaker along with completing graduate school requirements. Researchers showed that graduate student-mothers experience high levels of stress related to multiple role conflicts while they try to be both a good student and a good parent (Haynes et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2007; Wellington & Sikes, 2006). Haynes et al. (2012) explored the well-being of female graduate students and proved that this population experienced pressure and stress when feeling that they did not measure up to their peers. Additionally, Giancola, Grawitch, and Borchert (2009) tested a stress model that included cognitive evaluation and coping as mediators between stressors and multiple roles conflicts of adult women learners. Researchers found that family-school and school-work conflicts were severe stressors for the participants. Moreover, they discovered that family-school conflicts were negatively related to life satisfaction. However, parents resolved these conflicts through adaptive coping strategies such as planning and positive cognitive reappraisal. McCutcheon and Morrison (2017) indicated that the need to choose between work and family intervenes with academic success; these authors highlighted the need to examine academic culture to support graduate student-parents.

Green (2015) developed a model of dual-role conflict for student-parents, showing that the multiple roles conflict negatively affects students' class attendance and academic self-efficacy. Thus, the researcher advocates for the additional support for student-parents to lessen the multiple roles conflicts they encounter while being in a stressful graduate school environment. In this study, we will provide ideas on how counselors can help graduate student-mothers to cope with balancing roles of a mother and a student.

Meanwhile, graduate students, who are women, develop coping mechanisms to overcome multiple role conflicts. Even though they consider withdrawing from graduate school more often than male students, they continue studies, because for the majority of women obtaining a degree is a transformative experience that raises their self-esteem and makes them feel respected for earning a degree despite all the challenges they face (Markle, 2015). Additionally, in one study nontraditional students (mostly females, who had spouses and children) were more successful academically than traditional students (who had no families and transitioned to college from high school) and were no different in their psychological functioning (Carney-Crompton, & Tan, 2002). One of the explanations may be that there are intervening variables such as the age of a child (the younger the child, the more challenging school is for a mother) and the year in the program (if researchers collected data in the first year, graduate student-mothers would show higher levels of stress and anxiety).

Nonetheless, graduate student-mothers face problems that are part of a broader concept of adult learning that has specific barriers to managing graduate school (Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2016). Conflicts come from the role overload or preoccupation with one role while performing another. The latter may give rise to the CD that may lead to anxiety (Harmon-Jones, 2000).

### *COGNITIVE DISSONANCE*

The phenomenon of CD describes tendency to feel discomfort when individual's beliefs are not in line with actions. CD arises when a person is having two conflicting attitudes, related to his or her actions. Festinger (1957) argued that this feeling of uneasiness causes us to adjust our behaviors or beliefs to justify our actions and, thus, restore personal harmony. There is a paucity of research regarding CD and parenting. Eibach and Mock (2011) state that in the modern society children have less economic value compared to the past; for example, children are not involved in labor. These au-

thors view the decrease in children's economic value as a reason for parents' exaggeration of children's emotional value. They support their ideas with the dissonance theory, arguing that people tend to see their investments as rewarding when external incentives are low. The researchers showed that mothers and fathers idealize parenthood to rationalize their investment in their children. Additionally, Bornstein et al. (2003) conducted a multivariate ecological analysis examining variations in maternal parenting perceptions. They found that dissonance between ideal and actual maternal parenting styles affected maternal self-perceptions related to their satisfaction with parenting.

Mothers' perceptions of their parenting styles are also shaped by the dominant ideology of child-rearing that prescribes spending all your free time with your child, which, in turn, may evoke maternal guilt for not giving enough time and energy to children among working mothers.

### ***GUILT AND INTENSIVE MOTHERING PARADIGM***

Maternal guilt may be explained as a consequence of the discrepancy between mothers' actual senses of self and their ideal senses of who they believe they should be as mothers. This self-discrepancy is tied to social standards for parenting that prescribe being an ideal mother and is called *Intensive mothering* (IM) or *Intensive parenting* (IP) (Elvin-Nowak, 1999; Hays, 1996; Sutherland, 2010; Tummala-Narra, 2009). The ideology of IM demands extra amounts of effort regarding physical, emotional, and economic resources in child-rearing (Hays, 1996). According to this mothering ideal, (a) the mother must be the primary caregiver for children because men cannot be relied upon for rearing children; (b) child rearing requires extensive time, energy, and material resources; and (c) children are priceless and incomparable with paid labor (Hays, 1996; Liss, Schiffrin, & Rizzo, 2012; Liss, Schiffrin, Mackintosh, Miles-McLean, & Erchull, 2012). Liss, Schiffrin, Mackintosh, et al. (2012) developed and validated a quantitative questionnaire for IM attitudes; however, they named the measure Intensive Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire (IPAQ), planning to utilize it with both mothers and fathers. They argue that both mothers and fathers may hold these attitudes, therefore, the word *mothering* can be changed for *parenting*. In this paper we will use abbreviations IM and IP interchangeably. Liss, Schiffrin, Mackintosh et al. (2012) assessed various aspects of IP attitudes and showed that this concept is made up of five components that express the following ideas: (a) women are inherently better at parenting than men (Essentialism), (b) parenting should be fulfilling (Fulfillment), (c) children should be cognitively stimulated by parents (Stimulation), (d) mothering is difficult (Challenging), and (e) parents should prioritize the needs of the child (Child-Centered).

When a mother feels that she doesn't align with the IP standards while having IP attitudes, she may feel guilty for not being a good mother. When it comes to graduate students, they may also feel that they are not good enough at school. Therefore, a graduate student-mother may be trapped in intensive guilt both at school and in her family. Markle (2015) states that many women get into a cycle of guilt, thinking they do not study well enough as they have family obligations, and feeling guilty for not devoting enough time to their children, because they have to fulfill school obligations, which are tied to external evaluation. Thus, graduate student-mothers may feel constantly evaluated both at school for not performing well enough, and at home for not being a good enough parent.

Liss, Schiffrin, and Rizzo (2012) found guilt and shame being related to maternal self-discrepancy and the fear of negative evaluation. Self-discrepancy is a mismatch between internal self-representations, which Higgins (1997) calls self-guides. Self-discrepancy theory is most often used to distinguish among incompatible self-beliefs and the negative emotions they induce. For example, a mother may have internalized an ideal image of a mother – self-guide one – and her perception of her real mothering behavior – self-guide two; she observes discrepancies between these two internal images and experiences negative emotions, such as guilt, shame and anxiety.

However, some researchers conceptualize guilt as having both positive and negative consequences for mothers and parent-child relationships. For instance, E. Cho and Allen (2012) argue that parental guilt is beneficial for the work-interference-with-family behavior. They assert that guilt can motivate

working parents to interact more with their children. However, Judge, Ilies, and Scott (2006) found guilt to be positively associated with work-family conflict, which affects emotional experiences of people who score high on the guilt trait. Rotkirch and Jahnunen (2010) studied maternal guilt as related to the amount of resources mothers provide to their children using content analysis of guilt-inducing situations. These authors state that guilt comes when a mother has to negotiate something with a child, for example, a child wants a toy that a mother cannot buy, their interests differ and the mother may feel guilty for not satisfying her child's needs. That guilt, in turn, may lead to stress and anxiety. Additionally, intense guilt is related to depressive symptoms and perfectionism (Kim, Thibodeau, & Jorgensen, 2011; Stoeber, Harris, & Moon, 2007).

The number of graduate student-mothers significantly increased in the last decades (Giancola, Grawtich, & Borchert, 2009; Haynes et al., 2012). However, there are no studies that explore the relationship between CD and maternal guilt in the context of IM that modern mothers endorse. Additionally, mental health professionals who work with the student population could benefit from research that would suggest counseling interventions that could be used with graduate student-mothers concerning the IM ideology they strive to follow. There is a need to research the mechanisms of balancing dual roles: a graduate student and a mother. Therefore, the central question guiding this research study was "What are the mechanisms underlying the process of mothers balancing graduate school and parenting responsibilities?"

## RESEARCH DESIGN

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This study began as a class project of seven graduate students under the guidance of a faculty member. This initial research group created research questions and an interview guide. Each group member conducted an interview with a graduate student-mother. The lead researcher conducted three additional interviews and started to analyze the data with the guidance of the second author. The final research team consisted of two individuals, of which the following descriptors applied: one female, White/European international student who is a mother of a son and one White/American male who does not identify as a parent.

### *RESEARCH PARADIGM*

This study uses a constructionism epistemology and a constructivist theoretical perspective to guide its research design (Merriam, 2009). This approach to understanding the nature of knowledge is tied to the idea that reality is socially constructed, and that no single reality exists. As Crotty (1998, p. 9) states, "...subject and object emerge as partners in the generation of meaning." Since a constructivist study is designed to explore how individuals experience their own world through their vantage points (Hatch, 2002), the current study of the experiences of doctoral students who are also parents fits within this research design.

### *SAMPLING*

The sampling method used in this research was the criterion-based (Merriam, 2009), in which we selected criteria for participation to identify participants whose experiences can best answer the research question. To be eligible to participate in the study, participants had to be over 18 years old, be current graduate students, and self-identify as parents.

While there were some men involved in the larger study, this article focuses on the experiences of the women only. Table 1 is a demographical summary of the participants.

**Table 1: Demographical summary of participants**

PSEYDONYM	YEAR IN PROGRAM	TYPE OF PROGRAM	AGE RANGE	RACE	MARITAL STATUS
Mary	3	Masters	20-30	White	Married
Rosa	1	Doctoral	30-40	White	Divorced
Kate	3	Doctoral	30-40	White	Married
Lorna	4	Doctoral	30-40	White	Married
Jessica	1	Doctoral	30-40	White	Divorced
Garcelle	2	Doctoral	30-40	Black	Married
Jemma	2	Doctoral	30-40	Black	Married
Michelle	6	Doctoral	30-40	White	Married

### ***DATA COLLECTION***

Since a constructivist study is designed to explore how individuals experience their own world through their vantage points, the use of interviews allows the researchers to describe the experience of participants using their own words. The semi-structured interviews give researchers some flexibility with the interview structure and allow them to go deeper when they experience answers to be superficial (Hatch, 2002). Interviews were conducted on campus, in interviewers' offices, campus cafes, classrooms, and outside of the University buildings. We received IRB approval and obtained written consent to digitally record the interviews. All interviews lasted from 20 to 40 minutes and were transcribed by the researcher who conducted the interviews.

We used relevant literature to develop guiding questions that were designed to capture the essence of the balancing process for graduate student-parents. Some of the questions posed were:

- How would you define the role of a parent?
- Describe your experiences balancing both roles.
- What responsibilities do you fulfill?

### ***DATA ANALYSIS***

Thematic data analysis was used in this research (Saldaña, 2013). Thematic analysis is a search for themes that appear to be pivotal in the description of the research subject. The process involves the identification of themes through precise reading and re-reading of the data. Thematic analysis lets a researcher recognize a pattern within the data, and then the themes, which underlie these patterns, are brought out (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

To conduct the analysis, we used the sequence of steps for data analysis suggested by Charmaz (2006). The analysis started with the open coding line-by-line looking for gerunds. Open codes were then grouped into axial codes, which were then grouped into categories that became the conceptual themes.

### ***RIGOR AND TRUSTWORTHINESS***

Rigor was established through a range of validation strategies. First of all, we used the method of bracketing (Tufford, & Newman, 2012). This involves acknowledging personal beliefs, values, and possible biases that may shape the inquiry in order to mitigate the negative effects of biases and preconceptions that may contaminate the research process. As researchers engaged in this study, we have experiences that have shaped the view of graduate student-mothers and the balancing process. The

lead author has a research agenda on mothers as subjects and was a graduate student-mother at the time when the study was conducted and analyzed. She was challenged multiple times with the hazards of balancing complexity. The other researcher has extensive experience in conducting qualitative studies and has published research on the well-being among graduate students.

Second, following the discussion of our stances, we provide descriptions of how the epistemology is maintained consistent throughout the study (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002; Koro-Ljungberg, Yendol-Hoppey, Smith, & Hayes, 2009). In an effort to be transparent about our data analysis process, we provided an audit by clear description of the sampling strategy, data collection, transcription conventions, and individual steps of analysis, as well as the description of changes made to the research design (Lincoln & Guba, 1999). This establishes credibility with readers by allowing them to serve as credibility auditors of our research process.

Third, grounding of the interpretation was achieved through intensive engagement with the material (Merriam, 2009) and providing thick descriptions to support the interpretation (J. Cho & Trent, 2006). Finally, we engaged in peer review. Peers who were not associated with the data collection process in any way were presented with the data. This peer review allowed us to consider alternative interpretations and to determine if our interpretations were the most probable and reasonable conclusions to make (Golafshani, 2003).

## RESULTS

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Four main themes emerged from the study regarding how graduate students-mothers conceptualized balancing graduate school and mothering: (a) experiencing cognitive dissonance in the balancing process, (b) feeling guilt, (c) using compartmentalization as a balancing mechanism, and (d) coping with perfectionism. In the following sections we explore the context of each of these themes in more detail by providing a discussion of the theme and presenting exemplars of indicating text.

### *EXPERIENCING COGNITIVE DISSONANCE IN THE BALANCING PROCESS*

The first theme was that participants experience CD in the balancing process of being both a graduate student and a mother. The participants' comments reflected aspects of CD as feeling being torn and stressed when trying to do two things at the same time. As Lorna said, describing her thoughts about being with her child and doing her school work: "You want to be doing two different things at the same time, and it hurts sometimes." Rosa also noted the feeling of being torn between two tasks when she said, "I knew I had to make a decision and say either I am going to be a student I want to be, and not be the mom I want be, or I am going to be the mom I want be, and not be the student I want to be. It was just like I had a decision to make."

Typical ways of resolving CD include (a) changing behavior or cognition, and (b) justifying behavior or cognition by adding new cognitions (Festinger, 1957). We can see that one of the ways students were reducing CD was through changing behavior. Jessica said: "My daughter made it all the way into the school spelling bee...and there was a very prominent speaker in educational policy [at a different event]. I decided to go to the spelling bee [the event where the child performed]. It's interesting, it didn't feel [like] a torturous choice." Jessica changed her behavior, choosing her daughter helped her to cope with the unpleasant feelings related to cognitive dissonance.

The decisions to be made were not torturous because the participants used special strategies that helped them to deal with the desire to be in two places at the same time. For example, Jessica realized that some professional event will occur again, but a school event of her child will never happen again. "There'll be more policy talks, but I will never get my daughter's fifth grade spelling bee back". This strategy refers to changing behavior. Another behavioral approach mentioned by participants was using each and every free moment doing school work while being around kids, here is what Michelle said: "Being at all these places at the same time you [carry] your homework with you in a bag. Whenever there is a spare moment you sit down, you open it and you do a little bit."

Another way to deal with the CD would be through changing cognitions using cognitive reappraisal. Participants talked about beliefs that helped them to overcome the challenging duality of being both a student and a mother. Overcoming irrational thoughts can be viewed as a coping strategy at the cognitive level. Another cognitive phenomenon worth mentioning is related to the IM perceiving a mother as someone who is putting children's and family needs first at the same time being an expert in child-rearing (Hays, 1996). This focus on the household and children being a priority helps to overcome CD for some graduate student-mothers, as Lorna mentioned: "Family comes first. If there is a crisis, if my children actually do need me for something – I will put my studies aside because they come before I do". Therefore, prioritizing may be a useful instrument in dealing with the stress of dissonance. The way participants justify their choices in avoiding unpleasant feelings of CD through choosing a child instead of a school is through thinking about missing their offsprings' childhood. That "missing" is related to the feeling of guilt, which is another mechanism in the balancing process.

### ***FEELING GUILT***

The second theme was that participants felt guilt while balancing the responsibilities of being both a graduate student and a mother. According to the interpersonal theory of guilt (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994), people tend to feel guilty for the harm they made and try to compensate for the damage. Therefore, justification of choice to attend the school play may be related to the perceived harm of missing episodes of a child's life; Jessica pointed out: "I have already missed out so much of her childhood, I've been in school for the most of it." Guilt belongs to the family of socio-moral emotions and arises when a person thinks that he/she oversteps internal moral rules (Liss, Schiffrin, & Rizzo, 2012). The dissonance here is related to the belief of being responsible for school and children 24 hours per day; Jessica stated: "I think, I sometimes feel guilty when I'm working. And when I am with her, sometimes I feel guilty when I'm not working." Here we see how the feeling of guilt accompanies the CD.

Guilt is often related to the amount of time mothers spend with children (Sutherland, 2010). Looking at the feeling of guilt from the IM perspective, we see that it aligns with the idea that a mother needs to devote all her spare time to her children (Elvin-Nowak, 1999; Liss, Schiffrin, Mackintosh, et al., 2012). As Michelle mentioned, "I feel guilty sometimes that I'm putting him in care for so long and...I do feel like it trumps mom, like my mom is watching him right now, and she will go, can't you just get off a little bit earlier." Here the feeling of guilt toward not spending enough time with a child is accompanied by thinking about the relative who is watching the child. In this situation the mother feels judged for not coming home earlier.

Participants also believed that not spending enough time with their children could be harmful for the children, as Michelle said: "I feel like if I just give everything to graduate school like I initially wanted to do, it's going to be detrimental for my son in a way." And Rosa mentioned, "there were moments when it felt like I was not doing what I was supposed to be doing as a mom because they were in a day-care all day. And when they come home I am, you know, busy reading or writing, hard feeling guilt." The idea of not spending enough time with the children was dominant factor in the guilt evoking process.

Overall, the guilt for not spending enough time with children is related to "just feeling kind of like I abandon" them, said Rosa. However, guilt became a driving force for the desire to resolve CD through compensating the harm and making a choice towards spending special time with a child. Another mechanism of the balancing process is what mothers named "compartmentalization."

### ***USING COMPARTMENTALIZATION AS A BALANCING MECHANISM***

The third theme of the study was that participants used compartmentalization during the balancing process. According to the compartmentalization model of self-structure, people construct context-

alized selves that contain positive and negative beliefs about the self to achieve various self-goals (Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2007). If an individual has only negative or only positive self-beliefs, then the self-concept is compartmentalized (Showers, 1992).

Participants used words “compartmentalize” and “compartmentalization” when they talked about their abilities to compartmentalize as a way to balance graduate school and parenting. For instance, Jessica said: “I have had a hard time compartmentalizing: turning one off and turning on the other.” Participants discussed compartmentalizing as a strategy to separate school and family. However, student-mothers rarely described their self-aspects of a student and a parent in only positive or only negative words, although compartmentalization was seen by them as a way to deal with the stress of CD.

Mary described the process of compartmentalization as a conscious effort to balance the school and the parenting: “there is a lot of times when I am home and I am thinking about all the things I need to do for school, and at that point I have to make a decision, [whether I am going to] do that stuff now, or be with [my] daughter right now. Always balancing, trying to stay present.” In order to be a good mother she needs to be present with her daughter and have no school in her mind when she is with the child.

Compartmentalizing can decrease the significance of school when student-mothers come home to their children. Mary mentioned that it was hard for her: “it’s very hard to care that much about graduate school right now. When I am in it, and I am there, I care a lot. And the moment I leave...that’s hard.” She described herself thinking about quitting graduate school when she was with her child. At the same time she cared about school when she was staying there. Thus, compartmentalizing for her represented a total shift from one self-aspect of her identity to another.

Compartmentalization becomes an integration when a student is capable of describing both positive and negative features of their self-concept, “if each self-aspect category tends to contain a mixture of positive and negative beliefs, then the self-concept is relatively integrative” (Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2007, p. 1183). For example, a graduate student with an integrative self-concept structure may have a self-aspect corresponding to “myself at school” that contains both positive (e.g., doing research, being on time) and negative beliefs (e.g., being in rush, missing readings). Participants in this study described themselves as good parents and students when they were able to compartmentalize. The compartmentalization strategy may be a way to have positive self-evaluation for graduate student-mothers while coping with the CD. Perceiving oneself as a good student and parent was very important for graduate student-mothers, who described themselves as having high standards for school and being perfectionists.

### ***COPING WITH PERFECTIONISM***

The final theme of the study was that participants coped with perfectionism while balancing the various responsibilities of being both a student and a mother. Answering a question about barriers that hindered a participant from balancing responsibilities, Jessica said, “Pretty much internal personality traits. Perfectionism, workaholism.” Perfectionism pushed participants towards becoming ideal students, provoking guilt, and anxiety. Students discussed high standards regarding graduate school. Rosa said, “I had to do everything up to my standard. And it was hard starting to realize that I [was not able to] get all the reading done.” The idea of being able to “get it all done” evoked stress among participants, making them willing to do the impossible. Garcelle mentioned the concept of a superwoman she couldn’t be, “so, what I had planned, my plans were not working... I am not a superwoman.” She concluded that the reality of balancing graduate school and mothering differed from her anticipations.

However, some of the participants learned to encompass the reality, developing coping skills in balancing graduate school and mothering, enhancing awareness of their perfectionism. Mary mentioned, “and I keep telling myself just relax a little bit with your standards for school. B's get degrees, it's ok,

you'll survive but I can't do that." The struggle of lowering standards for school to balance it with parenting sometimes adds additional stress to the life of a graduate student-mother, being related to CD. As Rosa noted, "I felt like I wasn't living up to my own standard but at the same time if I lived up to my own standard I would be ignoring my kids." Perfectionism can be regulated through embracing the unrealistic expectations to fulfill the standards set up too high or becoming more efficient, and apt to move up to those high standards set up for oneself as a student and as a parent.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

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The central question guiding this research study is "What are the mechanisms underlying the process of mothers balancing graduate school and parenting responsibilities?" The research questions of this study are: do mothers experience CD when trying to find a balance between family and graduate school? How do they cope with CD? What is the role of maternal guilt in the balancing process and what are other mechanisms of the balancing process among graduate student-mothers?

This study adds to the research on IM (Liss, Schiffirin, & Rizzo, 2012) by exploring the aspect of attending school instead of paid labor. IM not only adds to stress of a student-mother but also has a positive side. It becomes a sort of exchange process, where the family knows that it is the priority for the mother and responds with positive feedback, providing support and understanding. Similar to the work of Kohler, Giancola, and Grawitch (2009), our participants noted the advantages of positive appraisal as a helping resource for overcoming challenges of role overload. When a mother does something for her family and expects the family to help her in return, IM stops being a source of discomfort.

We have found some evidence of graduate student-mothers having CD, related to the discomfort of choosing between attitudes and behaviors tied to roles of a mother and a student. Mothers overcome this discomfort through either changing their behavior or changing their cognitions. It is interesting, though, that sometimes mothers deal with the dissonance through the feeling of guilt when they say that they are choosing to interact with a child, because they have already missed a significant part of his/her life and do not want to miss it anymore. When a student assesses school related activity being less important than parental task, they may rationalize a logical reason in order to accept an event or their own actions they find challenging.

In this study we show that graduate student-mothers are dealing with CD and lack support. Their support systems most often consist of their relatives and friends. However, it seems reasonable to provide specialized counseling services to help graduate student-mothers to deal with the complexity of the balancing process. We suggest cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) as a resource for the counseling support. CBT theory embraces the rationality and irrationality of particular beliefs along with finding emotions that affect irrational ideas about life.

The findings of this research may benefit university-counseling centers that provide services to graduate students. We found that graduate student-mothers experience discomfort in the form of guilt while balancing their roles. The CBT approach may aid graduate student-mothers to work through the psychological discomfort using the following sequence of steps: (a) identifying thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that evoke guilt and increase stress level, including those related to IM ideology, (b) understanding connections between these thoughts, feelings and behaviors, (c) making changes in behaviors, and (d) educating student-mothers on emotion regulation strategies they can use to balance school and mothering.

Mothers may benefit from raising awareness of their thoughts and beliefs that provoke negative emotions like guilt, along with becoming more realistic when setting high standards of perfectionism at school and in mothering. Moreover, the most important goal of the therapy would be moving towards the integrative self-concept that includes both positive and negative aspects of the compartmentalized parts of the self. Thus, the counseling goal would be helping individuals to move from

compartmentalization to an integration of self-concept developing working strategies of emotion regulation and exploring irrational beliefs about oneself as a mother.

## LIMITATIONS

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By addressing the limitations of this study, we are attempting to ensure that this study is not interpreted beyond the bounds of the eight participants. This study focused on the experiences of students at one institution; thus, the findings may not be transferrable to all such students within four-year institutions. The use of semi-structured interviews allows the participants to describe their experience in their own words; however, the findings provide snapshots of the aspects inherent to this group of students at the time of data collection. Although the present study had several limitations, the study was worthwhile in spite of them.

A limitation of this research was focusing only on mothers as study participants. In the future researchers could explore how fathers navigate the difficulties of the balancing process in order to fill a gap in the literature. Additionally, holistic comparisons of mothers and fathers graduate students could be done through comparative qualitative analysis.

Another limitation dealt with the data collection method. The use of semi-structured interviews allows the participants to describe their experience in their own words. Because this method relies on memory recall and because “the meanings of life events are not fixed or constant; rather, they evolve, influenced by subsequent life events” (Reissman, 2003, p. 341), the interviews provide truths of personal positionality and subjectivity. For instance, if participants provided only positive accounts of their experience, then the findings of this study might have provided different results if they had also included negative accounts.

## CONCLUSION

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Multiple role conflicts, balancing processes, and contemporary parenting ideals make the life of graduate student-mothers stressful when they strive to become ideal parents and struggle with perfectionism. This study showed that graduate student-mothers encounter CD that they overcome utilizing a variety of strategies. The support they receive could be enhanced at the institutional level by offering special counseling programs aimed at shifting from the unrealistic and idealistic views of balancing graduate school and parenting to the normalized understanding of the inability to be in two places at the same time. Additionally, CBT interventions may help graduate student-mothers to learn how to avoid extensive guilt while balancing multiple responsibilities.

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