Capabilities eroded and childcare dilemmas: A phenomenological study of low-income single student mothers in higher education in the United States and Germany

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Capabilities Eroded and Childcare Dilemmas:
A Phenomenological Study of Low-Income Single Student Mothers in Higher Education in the United States and Germany

by

Katja Robinson

Dissertation

Submitted to the College of Education
Eastern Michigan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
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Concentration in Urban Education

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November 7, 2016
Ypsilanti, MI
Dedication

To my mother.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been possible without the many contributions made by the many people in my life. First of all, I would express my deepest thanks to my professor, advisor, and friend, Valerie Polakow, whose expertise on children and families living in poverty in the United States and around the world and her dedication to advocating for them has inspired my work in becoming an advocate of children and families myself. If it were not for her and her work this dissertation would not have been written. Valerie Polakow’s encouragement, warmth, and guidance shaped me as a person and finally this study. A very special thanks to Professor Paul J. Ramsey for co-chairing this dissertation and always providing thoughtful questions and feedback. I am further deeply thankful for all the student mothers who took their time to share their very personal experiences with me—without them I would not have a story to tell. I am convinced that I would not have made it this far without my husband and dear friend, Dylan Robinson, who has given me strength in times of desperation. Similarly, the love and happiness of my two sons, Nicholas and Emrys, were a major motivator from start to finish—without them an understanding of the lives of the mothers in my study would have been almost impossible. A big thanks to my other committee members, Joe Bishop and Marjorie Ziefert—their feedback and support were of utmost importance. A special thanks to Marjorie Ziefert who has reached out to so many colleagues helping me to find participants for my study. Further, this final project would not have been possible without my doctoral cohort—and a personal thanks to Nigora Erkaeva, who has been of tremendous support during my doctoral studies. A big thanks to all the professors that I have had the privilege of engaging in critical discussions during course work in the past years—you cannot believe how much your work, respect, and encouragement has shaped my doings and beings. A big thanks to all the great caregivers and preschool teachers of
my sons who gave me an ease of mind to concentrate on my study. I would like to thank my friends and my family, with a special thanks to my parents-in-law. Finally, I warmly thank my parents who have impacted my being in many ways and shaped who I am, but who sadly will not be able to experience this part of my educational journey.
Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lifeworlds of low-income, single student mothers in two contrasting welfare regimes, the United States and Germany, to understand how their individual experiences as students and as mothers at the micro-level were shaped by policies regarding childcare and financial support at the macro-level. As single mothers represent a marginalized constituency, the capabilities approach in combination with the concept of defamilisation was used as an analytical framework that focused on their individual and social well-being. The objective of this cross-national study was to provide a deeper understanding of how the issues of childcare, higher education, and work are handled within each society with the overarching goal of promoting public dialogue, informing policy, and improving the quality of life for this marginalized population.

A small sample comprising eight single student mothers enrolled at two different universities and three different community colleges in Michigan, U.S., and eight single student mothers enrolled at three different universities and three different vocational schools in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, were selected. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were utilized as a method for understanding their lived experiences. Their narratives revealed that the capability to pursue a higher education degree is complicated, precarious, time consuming, emotionally draining, and shaped by daily contingencies. Their contingent lifeworlds are influenced by types of employment, the availability and access to high-quality childcare, encounters with the welfare bureaucracy, and support within higher education institutions, all of which are embedded in national and state policies and underlying gendered discourses. Truncated health, the inability to connect and participate in social life, stigmatization, and tragic choices were prominent themes in the narratives of the participants. Findings indicate that the
major difference between these two countries lies in the affordability and equitable provision and quality of childcare. In the United States, childcare is viewed as a family and private responsibility, whereas in Germany childcare has shifted from the family towards a public responsibility with the implementation of childcare as a right. In addition, the affordability of higher education and federal financial support emerged as critical and distinctive findings.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The overall poverty rate in the United States (17.2%) was almost 10% higher than in Germany (9.1%) in 2012. Nevertheless, the dramatic increase of single mothers and their children living in poverty is a phenomenon of concern in both countries, exemplifying two contrasting welfare regimes (OECD, 2013).\(^1\) Thirty-six percent of all single mothers with children under 18 years lived below the poverty line in the U.S. in 2014 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015a). Similarly, with the majority of single-parent households in Germany being female-headed (89%), the proportion of single parents at risk for poverty amounted to 41.9% in 2014—almost four times higher than the risk for two-parent households (Lenze & Funcke, 2016).\(^2\) If the U.S. were to use the same determination of the poverty threshold as Germany, the poverty rate would dramatically increase (see The Women’s Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2011a, 2011b). However, these rates do not provide information on what it actually means to live financially on the edge as a single mother with a child, nor do they depict the depth of poverty, as they are a result of different poverty measures and calculations in each country; but they nevertheless point to alarming gender injustices and what has been identified as the feminization of poverty—in both the U.S. and Germany.

There is a general consensus that higher education\(^3\) is the main exit strategy from poverty and important for upward mobility in a hierarchical society, but women with dependent children in both countries face many obstacles in accessing higher education with a high possibility of

---

\(^1\) Poverty is defined as 50% of the national median income of the total population within the respective country. The income is adjusted for household size and calculated after taxes and transfers.

\(^2\) At risk for poverty is defined as 60% of the national median income of the total population. The income is adjusted for household size and calculated after taxes and transfers.

\(^3\) In this dissertation, the term higher education is defined as education within an institution granting entrance into the workforce through certifications, credentials, and academic degrees. This means that the focus is on community colleges and universities within the U.S. and the German vocational education and training system and universities in Germany.
dropping out without acquiring a degree (Gault, Reichlin, & Román, 2014; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006; Middendorff, Apolinarski, Poskowsky, Kandulla, & Netz, 2013; Polakow & Ziefert, 2002; Polakow, Butler, Stormer Deprez, & Kahn, 2004; Polakow, 2007; Polakow, Robinson, & Ziefert, 2014). In fact, according to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR), more than half of all undergraduate student parents (53%) left their studies without a degree in the U.S. in 2008 (Nelson, Froehner, & Gault, 2013). Thus, in comparison to their fellow students without children, their attrition rate is 20% higher. Similarly in Germany, a large scale survey conducted in 2012 showed that student mothers stopped out six times more often than their fellow female students (Middendorff et al., 2013). Whereas the reconciliation of childcare, study, and work is problematic and challenging for all student parents, data points to the additional challenges faced by low-income single mothers in the U.S. and Germany striving to shoulder all parental responsibilities—especially for those who have young children not yet attending public schools (Meier-Gräwe & Müller, 2008; Polakow, 2007; Polakow et al., 2014; Quiring & Rodriguez Startz, 2014). To understand these disparate graduation rates between students with children and students without children, one needs to focus on obstacles to family sufficiency and family policies in the respective societies. Additionally, it is important to address stigmatizing assumptions about single mothers in poverty as these assumptions further shape and influence policies.

Single motherhood in relation to poverty has been the focus of racialized and gendered discourses in both the social sciences and the media—especially in the U.S.—acquiring prominence during and after the War on Poverty introduced by President Lyndon B. Johnson during his State of the Union address in 1964. Pejorative terms and labels for the poor—the

---

4 Stopped out means taking an official or unofficial break from studying.
undeserving poor, the welfare dependent mother, and the underclass—go back for centuries and
carry an emphasis on the morality of the mother. The prevailing moralistic poverty discourse that
describes poverty as a self-inflicted situation caused by deficient individual values and behaviors
has reinforced the public belief that poverty is the consequence of immoral attributes and
characteristics inherent in families that are in poverty. The emphasis on personal behavior as a
causal factor for poverty is embedded in the myth of the American Dream—that hard work or the
right work ethic would be enough to reach one’s dreams.

The focus on the causes of poverty being rooted in either the individual or the structures
of society contributes to a dichotomy that Schram (1995) describes as the poverty of social
sciences. The neglect or disregard of the interdependency between social structure and the
individual has resulted in a reductionist view that, according to Lister (2004), provided the
groundwork in the late twentieth century for authors, such as Charles Murray, to successfully
establish the “underclass” as the dominant poverty discourse. In response to this discourse, Lister
proposes a counter-narrative that focuses on agency in relation to structure and culture. This
counter-narrative regards people as active agents of their own lives who are embedded in a social
structure and engage in power relations that can either promote or hinder their choices to be the
people they want to be. The interdependence of agency and structure is similarly represented in

According to Rank (2004), poverty is determined by two strands—structural and
individual. At the structural level, family policies are important measures to ameliorate
economically driven disadvantages—especially for single mothers who are saddled with the dual
responsibility of earning and caring for their children. The structural strand aligns with the
capabilities approach by Nussbaum (2011) and Sen (1999), wherein the mix of childcare
policies, time-related leave policies, and child-related cash benefits in combination with work-related policies can either create additional barriers or facilitators for single mothers’ and their children’s capabilities and economic stability.

At the individual level, higher education becomes particularly instrumental as an important human capital investment that allows one the opportunity to exit poverty and access choices for living a life one values. When considered within the capability framework, Nussbaum (2011) and Sen (1999) would argue that education, as a fertile capability and functioning, offers the possibility for development and access of other central capabilities, such as access to employment, access to political participation, access to bodily health, and more. With the established link between parental socio-economic status and their children’s future status (D’Addio, 2007; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006; Gorski, 2013; Kaushal, 2014; Schumacher, 2013), higher education for mothers with dependent children is deemed important to break the cycle of poverty. As the educational attainment of the mother significantly impacts children’s future academic success, higher education for single mothers becomes an important exit from an impoverished existence that increases the likelihood of economic and family stability (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Stormer Deprez, Butler, & Smith, 2004).

Whereas economic stability and the human capital thesis as arguments for the importance of higher education can be characterized as means to an end (to do), the capabilities approach makes a transformative argument for higher education that highlights the end itself (to be; see Sen, 1999). Using the inclusive focus of the capability approach allows one to transpose the rather economic instrumentalist argument for higher education and thus conceptualize the individual as valuable in herself. Therefore, a student parent’s educational journey enables a transformation of the self—where education becomes a facilitator of a positive self-concept,
transforming one’s sense of being and agency—a transformation beyond what can be measured in a cost-benefit analysis (Haleman, 2004; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006; Stormer Deprez et al., 2004).

There are numerous studies that depict a causal relationship between family arrangements and children’s educational outcomes (Fitzgerald Krein & Beller, 1988; Sandefur, McLanahan, & Wojtkiewicz, 1992), studies highlighting a positive relationship between parental and children’s degree attainment and/or children’s future income (D’Addio, 2007; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006; Gorski, 2013; Kaushal, 2014; Schumacher, 2013), and studies that explore the relationship between maternal education and children’s achievement (Harding, Morris, & Hughes, 2015; Korupp, Ganzeboom, & Van Der Lippe, 2002; Magnuson, Sexton, Davis-Keen, & Huston; 2009). However, there is a paucity of research about the hidden reality behind the numbers depicted in these studies regarding the complex lifeworlds of single mothers who are struggling to pursue a higher educational degree in order to exit poverty and provide themselves and their children with economic security and greater educational opportunities. Maternal education has been one of the most important factors contributing to the well-being and educational achievement of children, as well as securing family stability and engendering personal agency (Harding et al., 2015; Haveman & Wolfe, 1994; Korupp et al., 2002; Magnuson, 2007; Magnuson et al., 2009), but little is known about single mothers’ experiences in higher education from their point of view. This qualitative study was designed to fill that gap and contribute to the understanding of single student mothers’ multifaceted realities with the overarching goal of shaping policies that improve the quality of life of single mothers and their children.
Statement of the Problem

Single mothers and their children are highly vulnerable to poverty in Germany and the U.S.—countries that represent the contrasting poles of conservative and liberal welfare regimes. Acknowledging that poverty is a multidimensional concept, Sen (1999) argues that a sole focus on income poverty rates is not sufficient to understand the meaning of policies affecting the poor—or in the case of this research, low-income single mothers and their children. Rather the use of such a measure only provides an idea of how specific policies affect different strata of the society in comparison and thus highlights underlying assumptions about this population and a nation’s priorities.

As Nussbaum (2000a) points out, the issue of care and how it is handled within a society is a dramatic indicator of gender justice/injustice. She claims that group-based policies often treat women and their children as means to an end for others—as “reproducers, caregivers, sexual outlets,” and they generally serve to enhance overall family well-being (Nussbaum, 2000a, p. 220). Group-based policies further bear the possibility of penalizing single mothers for not living up to the ideal family structure. As such, women are not treated with dignity for themselves; they are treated with dignity in relation to other people.

Family policies can have an important impact on women’s independence or dependence from the market and/or family relations and thus indirectly on their economic well-being and capability development. Depending on the underlying assumptions of the role of the welfare state, the role of the mother, and the notion about the “right” childrearing strategies, family policies can either promote or discourage independence from family relation and/or the market. For example, independence may be promoted through the provision of accessible and affordable
quality formal childcare, demonstrating a high degree of positive *defamilisation*. Conversely, independence can be discouraged when childcare is *familised*, which may result in barriers for accessing independent income if the care at home itself is not adequately compensated (Kilkey & Bradshaw, 1999; Lister, 2007).

Thus, underlying assumptions about social citizenship rights as either dependent upon paid work, care, or both are an important factor in structuring and implementing policies at the structural level impacting mothers at the individual level (Kilkey & Bradshaw, 1999). Hence, an understanding of the current state of family policies impacting low-income single mothers in both countries requires a socio-historical focus on ideologies and discourses framing the role of women and mothers—specifically single mothers.

In the U.S., childcare is not viewed as a public entitlement nor a government responsibility. Rather, it is understood as a family and private responsibility where mothers are depicted as neither “caregiver-citizens” nor “parent-workers” (Polakow, 2007, p. 21). This approach to childcare as a private responsibility contributes to the lack of family support policies that assist mothers as student parents, homemakers, or as adult workers reconciling work and family responsibilities (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). Childcare in Germany is currently undergoing a transformation towards the adult-worker model and presently reflects a male-breadwinner/female-homemaker-supplementary earner family model (Hagemann, Jarausch, & Allemann-Ghionda, 2011)—where the approach to childcare is depicted as both a private and public responsibility.

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5 *Defamilisation* explains the degree to which measures, such as child care, are provided by the state independent from family structure and relations.
While education is regarded as an exit strategy from poverty in both the U.S. and Germany, reconciling the demands of higher education, caring for children, and wage employment for single mothers is problematic. In the U.S. almost 27.5% of all undergraduate students enrolled at any postsecondary institution have at least one child, and 11.79% are single mothers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Student mothers in the U.S. are confronted with the challenge of locating affordable and high-quality childcare in addition to securing appropriate housing, managing financial burdens, and coping with emotional stressors (Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006; Miller & Gault, 2011). Since there is very little access to universal subsidized childcare from birth to age six in the U.S., almost every childcare slot has to be bought on the private market. This requires low-income single mothers in higher education to pay tuition (through loans, scholarships, and/or employment) for college enrollment in addition to the cost of childcare. The financial burden of paying for high-quality childcare in some states exceeds the cost of public college tuition (Child Care Aware of America, 2015; Polakow, 2007; Polakow et al., 2014).

Although the number of single student mothers in Germany—a total of 58,000 (2.6% of all female students) were enrolled at institutions granting degrees that qualify for entry into the labor market in 2015 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2015)—is much lower than in the U.S., obstacles to degree completion are similar with regard to the situation surrounding the care of their child/children. While there is a recently established statutory right for childcare for every child one year and older in Germany, geographical variation in childcare availability, accessibility, and flexibility persists (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016; Oliver & Mätzke, 2014). Further, the class and work schedules of a student parent do not necessarily align with the childcare institutions’ scheduled hours of availability. Consequently, the established right to childcare does not
guarantee access and availability that corresponds to students’ needs. For single student mothers, access to childcare and thus access to education is dependent upon a match between the need and the provisions in place to meet this need.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the *lifeworlds* of low-income single mothers in postsecondary education in the U.S. and Germany with a focus on their human *capabilities* and what they are *able to do and to be*. The focus was on exploring and understanding their perceptions and experiences as mothers, students, and workers embedded in two nations representing two contrasting welfare regimes.

**Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following central research questions:

1. What does it mean to be a student, a single mother, and living financially on the edge in the U.S. and Germany—countries reflecting two contrasting welfare regimes?
2. What are the specific challenges and obstacles experienced by low-income single student mothers and their children in the U.S. and Germany?
3. How are the challenges and obstacles of low-income single student mothers embedded in the policies and practices of two different welfare regimes?
4. How do persistence, resistance, and agency relate to capabilities and functionings in the context of low-income, single student mothers’ lives in higher education?

**Significance of the Study**

Higher education is a crucial determinant of economic stability and capability development for everyone but especially for single mothers and their children, as single mothers are the lone caregivers and earners for their families. In this regard, family policies can have an
important impact on women’s capability for accessing, pursuing, and finishing a higher education degree. Numerous studies about single mothers in poverty have reduced the complexity of their lives into a small set of variables either to explain the “deviant” behavior attributed to these women (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), their children’s behavioral problems (Ackerman, D’Eramo, Umylny, Schultz, & Izard, 2001; Hetherington, 2003), or their children’s educational achievement or lack thereof (Fitzgerald Krein & Beller, 1988; Francesconi, Jenkins, & Siedler, 2010; Sandefur et al., 1992). However, little is known about the meaning single mothers, with a particular focus on single student mothers, ascribe to their complex lifeworlds themselves. I argue that it is imperative to explore the lifeworlds of low-income, single student mothers by viewing them as experts and agents of their own lives in order to understand the complexity of their challenges and needs. Thus, this study focused on an in-depth understanding of the lives of a specific group of marginalized women in the U.S and Germany with the overarching goal of informing and shaping public policy and advocating for this marginalized population. Additionally, this research aimed to trace, deconstruct, and challenge historically-grounded stigmatizing myths about single motherhood.

**Theoretical Framework**

A focus on low-income single mothers in higher education—a marginalized constituency, who often fail to fit the normative role of the student and the contested role of the mother—requires both a lifeworld understanding and an analytical approach that highlights their individual experiences and well-being. As such, this study is grounded in a qualitative research paradigm complemented by the capabilities approach developed by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen. The capabilities approach is intended to address inequalities within and across nations. It is a theoretical framework that focuses on the equal dignity of all people with attention
drawn to individuals and what they are actually able to do and to be (Nussbaum, 2000a, 2000b, 2011; Sen, 1994, 1999). As public policies are crucial determinants for many single mothers’ existence—shaping the degree of experienced capabilities and functionings—a socio-historical understanding of the political context in which they are embedded is required to deeply understand their individual lifeworlds. Thus, the concept of defamilisation, the degree to which measures, such as childcare are provided independent of family relations, is used as a lens at the macro-level.

The capabilities approach. The capabilities approach, developed by Amartya Sen (first introduced in his article “Equality of What?” in 1979) and Martha Nussbaum, is an evaluative theoretical framework and normative approach that focuses on individual well-being and agency in relation to poverty and general injustices (Nussbaum, 2000a, 2000b, 2011; Sen, 1994, 1999). Stressing the equal and inherent dignity of all people, this approach draws attention to individual people and what they are actually able to do and to be. Capabilities are described as set of abilities and possibilities that lead to the doings and beings—the functionings—people have reason to value. As such, this approach is intended to address inequalities within and across nations. While rejecting the unidimensional material and income-based definitions of poverty that focus on resource-based or preference-based approaches, within the capabilities approach poverty is conceptualized as capability deprivation or capability failure (Nussbaum, 2000a, 2011; Sen, 1999). Although acknowledging income as a crucial determinant for the development of capabilities, Sen (1999) argues that income poverty measures neglect the differences of the individuals themselves and their varied abilities to transform income into capability development and real functionings—the doings and beings one has reason to value.
In this regard, a student mother with the additional responsibility of caring for her children might have the same income as her fellow childless students, but her capabilities are deprived in the sense that additional time and financial resources are needed for caring that derail her functionings in terms of finishing her degree at the same pace, if at all (see Nussbaum, 2011).

Capabilities, in general, refer to possibility and agency that can lead to real functionings. In contrast to Sen, Nussbaum (2011) argues for a minimal threshold of central capabilities that she emphasizes are universally important for a decent “minimally just society” (p. 28) due to “their removal making a life not worthy of human dignity” (p. 31). She suggests ten broad central capabilities that a decent society should secure for all its citizens at a minimum: life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play, and control over one’s environment. Though Sen (1999) discusses the importance of particular capabilities—such as the capability for political freedom, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security—he rejects “the fixing of a cemented list of capabilities, which is absolutely complete” (Sen, 2004, p. 78).

Further, capabilities leading to a quality life are normative, universal, plural, and should be seen as valuable for every individual in a society—treating each person as an end is an essential principle within this approach. In this regard, it aligns with the concept of defamilisation that is used within feminist comparative welfare theory to assess the degree to which social rights are independent of family relations (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Lister, 2007). A high degree of positive defamilisation aligns with the principle of treating each person as an end. In contrast, group-based policies—such as policies that were built on the homemaker/breadwinner model that assume a family wage will be equally distributed among family members—frequently places women and children or other individuals within the family at
a disadvantage (Lister, 2004). Nussbaum (2000a) argues that the issue of care and how it is handled within a society is an indicator of great gender injustice.

**Core concepts and analytical distinctions.** Nussbaum (2011) distinguishes three different types of capabilities—basic capabilities, internal capabilities, and combined capabilities. While referring to basic capabilities as the “innate faculties”—or the human equipment to be developed by social interaction and nourishment—internal capabilities are generally discussed as developed basic capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 24). They are hence defined as the characteristics of a person, developed through extensive, ongoing interaction with the environment—the parents, family, teachers, school, church, and political and economic landscape. Further, Nussbaum (2011) explicitly distinguishes the internal capabilities from combined capabilities, while pointing to the latter as the political, economic, and social spaces that provide the opportunity for internal capabilities to flourish and function—what Sen (1999) defines as “the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations” (p. 75). Internal capabilities are thus always a part of the combined capabilities, but do not overlap completely with them. For example having the necessary capacities to cast a political vote (internal capability) does not necessarily mean that one actually has a real choice to go and vote—one’s internal capabilities might be restricted by economic and social circumstances that require a single mother to work on election day, leaving her with no time and energy to line up for voting (combined capability).

As a partial theory of justice with its goal of guaranteeing a minimum threshold of central capabilities, the differentiation between combined and internal capabilities undertaken by Nussbaum (2011) is important if one intends to analyze and specify whether the choices for functionings or internal capabilities themselves are derailed. An explorative analysis evaluating
low-enrollment rates of low-income single mothers at German universities, for example, could focus on the socio-political and economic environments that create access barriers for them on the one hand—and the development of internal capabilities regarding their prior educational experiences on the other. It is thus an important and necessary tool for assessing different achievements within or across societies. The vocabulary of internal capabilities, of course, raises further question—what is the threshold of internal capability development that a society should guarantee the individual? Are internal capabilities just the ability to read, write, and do basic math—or is it defined as the capability to intellectually engage in a space of higher education? Nussbaum (2011) would argue that the specific threshold within a society is context-specific—in a society where a higher education degree is essential to avert capability failure, injustices occur when people are excluded from institutions of higher education, as they do not have the internal and combined capability to participate in society and cannot be the person they would like to be. Having the choice or freedom to do and to be are key tenets of the capabilities approach and the aspirations for specific functionings are contextualized and thus relative to the space of commodities and characteristics at a specific point in time.

Wolff and DeShalit (2007) have expanded the capabilities approach with regard to quality of life assessments. In their analysis they included fertile functionings, secure functionings, and corrosive disadvantages as important analytical aspects for assessing where, how, and why disadvantage occurred. Nussbaum (2011) has acknowledged and incorporated the additional concepts introduced by Wolff and DeShalit but suggests a focus on fertile capabilities instead of fertile functionings, as suggested by the two authors. In a response to her amendment to the concept of fertile functioning, Wolff and DeShalit (2013) have defended their focus on functionings and not on capabilities on the grounds that a capability in itself—meaning the
opportunity to reach a specific functioning—cannot be fertile, but it must be analyzed as the realized capability—a functioning that has an impact on further capability development and functionings.

I would argue that it is possible that a capability itself can be fertile, namely the internal capability, which Nussbaum (2011) characterizes as developed basic capabilities. For example having the internal capability to read can be fertile in a sense that it becomes instrumental for being capable of making healthy decisions in the supermarket and many other community locations. Further, the use of fertile capabilities is not exactly a new concept to the capabilities approach as Sen has already talked at length about instrumental freedoms and their worth for development of other capabilities. Sen’s conceptualization can be interpreted in the same way that Wolff and DeShalit (2007) interpreted their concept of fertile functioning. Despite the ambiguity in focus inherent in the terms fertile functioning, fertile capabilities, or instrumental freedoms, the acknowledgment of capabilities and/or functionings that are intrinsically and instrumentally of more worth than others is important for development and overcoming inequalities within societies. It also underlines Nussbaum’s argument for having a list of central capabilities that a decent society should guarantee at minimum. On the other side of fertile capabilities lies the concept of corrosive disadvantage—meaning that a deprivation in particular capabilities, such as the capability to bodily integrity, can have repercussions on many other important capabilities in one’s life (Nussbaum, 2011).

Capability security—or what Wolf and DeShalit (2007) coined as secure functioning—is similarly important for development and well-being. It refers to the political, economic, and social sphere that can either hinder or contribute to a flourishing and full life as a member of a society. Nussbaum (2011) points to the political sphere and argues that a public policy that
inherently supports a particular capability, such as the capability to access higher education by removing financial barriers, has to be secured in the long run to promote real opportunities.

**Arguments against other approaches evaluating the quality of life.** The arguments against the resource and preference-based (Utilitarian) approaches stem from the inherent focus on respect for the individual. Resource-based approaches that use income and wealth as an informational base for the assessment of individual well-being are criticized as they lack an understanding about the diverse conversion of resources into functionings—meaning that an equal distribution of resources, such as financial aid for student parents versus financial aid for students without caring obligations, does not necessarily lead to the functionings one values nor does it lead to the possibility of similar functionings (see Sen, 1999). In other words, people have different starting points and depending on their characteristics, their social environment, and their reference point within a society, they may need different resources to reach a situation within which they are able to choose a life they have reason to value.

Arguments against preference-based approaches are rooted in the method of assessment as well as the neglect of the adaption of preference of the individual. Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011) point out that an aggregation of preferences within and across individuals hides possible disadvantages for the individual in certain elements within her life—and similarly can hide the complete disadvantage of individual lives behind a single aggregate number. Further, a preference-based approach that assesses satisfaction will not capture the adjustment of deprived people to their substandard lifeworlds (Sen, 1999). The phenomena of adaptive preferences wherein the desires and ambitions of individuals get muted by their deprived circumstances cannot be assessed by focusing on a composite number.
Capabilities and poverty. Statistics on poverty are commonly used in media, research, and politics with varying purposes—often without discussing the underlying assumptions about poverty and its conceptualization. According to Lister (2004), the conceptualization of poverty has implications for policy decisions at the structural level and reflects notions about the causes of poverty. A look at the following statistics reveals that there is much more behind the numbers than one might initially assume. Forty-two percent of single parents lived at risk for poverty in Germany in 2014 (Lenze & Funke, 2016). They are four times more likely to live at risk for poverty compared to two-parent households—no matter their location. In the U.S., 36% of single mothers lived in a household with an income under the federal poverty threshold (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015a). But what do these poverty rates actually reveal? Each of these countries calculate their rates with very different measurements and assumption of poverty.

Germany uses a relative approach to assess the rates for people at risk for income poverty. The poverty calculations, commonly used within the European Union, sets the threshold at 60% of the median equivalized disposable income. The U.S. on the other hand uses an absolute measure of poverty developed in the 1960s by the economist Mollie Orshansky that provides fixed poverty thresholds dependent on household size and is applied across the country (Fass, 2009). If the U.S. were to use the same relative approach as the European Union, then the poverty rate would dramatically increase. The Women’s Legal Defense and Education Fund (2011a; 2011b) calculated an increase of 14%—from 36% to 50%—of single mothers living in poverty.

While the relativist approach emphasizes people as interdependent social beings whose participation within society is dependent on more than just physical needs, the absolute measure focuses rather on physical well-being independent of social relations and thus proposes a
threshold of subsistence—people whose income lies under this threshold are deemed then economically deprived (Iceland, 2013). While the measurement of income poverty is regarded as an important starting point for the assessment of poverty, Sen (1999) argues that it should go beyond it, as well as beyond measuring well-being in terms of commodities. In his article “Poor, Relatively Speaking,” Sen (1983) points out that conceptualizing poverty either strictly in a relative sense or as an arbitrary absolute poverty threshold for policy purposes is inadequate to understand the meaning of poverty for the individual who is embedded in a community corresponding to a set of values, commodities, and characteristics. Sen (1983) argues that a pure relativist approach, as is the case with the poverty measure used in Germany and other European countries, can in fact hide greater inequality existing within a society as this poverty measure uses the median as a basis of calculation and focuses only on the bottom 50% of the population. It can further disguise poverty in the absolute sense of physical well-being when income plummets for the majority of people due to recessions and other major economic impacts.

In contrast, Sen (1983) argues for a conceptualization of poverty that focuses on an absolute core when it comes to the capabilities of the individuals—meaning what a person is actually able to do and to be with a specific commodity or internal capacity at a specific point in time and place. He uses the example proposed by Adam Smith (1776/2003) who talks about shame in relation to customs within a society and concludes that if the customs within a nation imposes the wearing of leather shoes over wearing anything else, it would result in a feeling of shame for the individual in sandals. This example is used to highlight the irreducible absolutist core of poverty and states that there is no relativity when looking at a psychological concept such as shame. A person’s goal is not to be less ashamed than another person, a person’s goal is to be not ashamed at all. In this regard he suggests that “poverty is an absolute notion in the space of
capabilities but very often it will take a relative form in the space of commodities or characteristics” (Sen, 1983, p. 161). It is this space of commodities or characteristics that is relative to space and time, and relative to one’s own position and other personal characteristics, but it is the nature of the capability itself that is absolute in its essence. This is what he describes as having the capability to do and to be. For example, this entails having the capability to pursue one’s aspirations for a higher education degree and what this pursuit requires (having the required entry certificate, having the time to attend school, having the financial resources required to go to school, etc.). Thus, it is the informational base for judgment that has to be critically assessed, and a focus on poverty as capability failure/deprivation instead of pure income or wealth insufficiency is suggested. Sen (1999) argues that a “broadening of the informational base from income to basic capabilities enriches our understanding of inequality and poverty in quite radical ways” (p. 97).

Chapter Organization

Chapter 1 has presented the central aspects of the capabilities approach and its relevance in examining the experiences of single mothers in higher education as a marginalized group of people. In this way such a theoretical framework may act as a theoretical “ally.” In Chapter 2, several bodies of literature are reviewed in order to contextualize single mothers’ experiences within the broader structure—the welfare state. Theoretical considerations of the welfare state in relation to social citizenship rights at the nexus of unpaid care and paid work are discussed via specific characteristics of the contrasting welfare regimes of Germany and the United States. This is followed by a brief presentation of the impact of public policy on women during the last century in these countries. This presentation highlights the ways in which discourses about women, childrearing, family structure, and poverty shaped the development of policies and
public assumptions over time. Major current family policies are briefly depicted to show how the U.S. and Germany differ in their notions of caregiving responsibilities in regards to the state, the market, and the family. Finally, the findings of studies that specifically focus on student parents within higher education are provided to show the particular needs, challenges, and obstacles of this population. Chapter 3 encompasses a discussion of methodology—the rationale for utilizing a phenomenological and comparative approach—as well as sampling methods, and participant profiles. Chapters 4 and 5 depict four case studies from each country. Chapter 4 presents the experiences of two single mothers enrolled at public universities and two at community colleges in Michigan, U.S. Chapter 5 provides insight into the lives of two single mothers enrolled at public universities and two enrolled in the dual system of vocational education and training (VET) in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), Germany. This is followed by the thematic analysis in Chapter 6. In this chapter pertinent themes that emerged from the voices of the participants are discussed in greater detail and are contextualized in country-specific policies and corroborated by pertinent literature. Chapter 7 concludes with an analysis of how the capabilities of single student mothers and those of their children are shaped by the availability or absence of policies before addressing research implications and recommendations.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

In this chapter several bodies of interdisciplinary theoretical, historical, and social policy literature are discussed in order to contextualize the lives of low-income mothers in contrasting welfare regimes in Germany and the United States. This examination includes the role of welfare policies, paid and unpaid work, childcare, social citizenship rights, discourses about the poor, and major contemporary policies shaping and impacting the lives of single mothers and their young children.

The Welfare State and Social Citizenship Rights

This study focuses on the comparison of the differences between the German and American welfare states—highlighting dominant ideologies, values, the distribution of rights and obligation, and views on poverty. In order to highlight the particularities and peculiarities of the different welfare states, it is important to highlight how specific actors as well as policies within a nation contribute to the prevailing narrative about single mothers.

While social welfare policies in the form of charity existed long before the emergence of the modern welfare state itself, Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990, 1999), a major welfare theorist, claims that it originated in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. The emergence of the modern welfare state can be characterized as an active intervention in market conditions by the state. According to Esping-Andersen, the welfare state and its provisions were developed as a response to the commodification of labor power and human needs. The onset of unpredictable risks “beyond the control of the individual”—the result of the majority of people existentially depending upon a labor market that was and is characterized by uncertainty—was a driving factor in the development of the state delivering welfare to its people (Esping-Andersen, 1999, p. 37). Esping-Andersen defines the welfare state as a producer and allocator of welfare “between
the state, market, and family,” and asserts that the development of public policies, or their absence, depends upon assumptions and beliefs about which of these three major institutions is responsible (and to what degree) for managing emergent social risks (Esping-Andersen, 1999, p. 35). In this regard, Esping-Andersen (1990) describes the welfare state as a “system of social stratification” affecting and positioning diverse groups of society differently (p. 23).

Furthermore, its functions are of a twofold nature: On the one hand, the welfare state plays an active role in preventing social risks associated with unemployment and sickness, and on the other hand it has regulatory functions for individual behavior and social order (Abramovitz, 1996; Piven & Cloward, 1993).

Thus, public policies can also be characterized as a perpetuator of normative behavior due to the interdependent relationship of assumptions about deservingness and appropriate attitudes impacting the development of policies that perpetuate the original assumptions (Sainsbury, 1999). It is thus not only a response to emerging problems within the society but always a part of it. Or as Schram (1995) points out “Policy, therefore, as an ensemble of discursive practices, does not just create its own politics or become its own cause, but it is a critical contributing factor in making up the reality it confronts” (p. 144).

The underlying assumptions concerning the nexus of state, family, and market that are imprinted in different policies and practices are clustered into three ideal-typical welfare regimes—the liberal, the social-democratic, and the conservative—as defined by Esping-Andersen (1990). According to his comparative analysis focused on social citizenship rights assessed by the degree of decommodification from the market, the process of stratification, and the relationship between state, market, and family. His analysis places the United States—with its minimal safety net and its means-tested assistance schemes that inherently stigmatize the
recipient and result in dependence on the free market—in the liberal welfare regime typology. Thus, vertical redistribution of income from the rich to the poor is very limited. Consequently, inequality is high and is intensified by policies and practices (D’Addio, 2007).

Germany, often seen as a classical social insurance state—focusing on preserving the traditional family with its gendered role responsibilities and existing social positions—while providing a stronger social safety net where social citizenship is relatively *decommodified* and not dependent on the market—is classified as conservative. The emphasis on status-retaining policies results in a moderate vertical income distribution and strong horizontal distribution. Consequently, status stratification is high and inequality is lower when compared to the U.S. (D’Addio, 2007). While rates of inequality are lower overall in Germany, some strata in the country are structurally disadvantaged because of the importance of a stable and uninterrupted career with regard to social security benefits, such as pensions (see Esping-Andersen, 1999).

A critique of Esping-Andersen’s works stems from his neglect in addressing the role and status of women and any consideration of gender relations in his comparative analysis. Additionally, his strong focus on social citizenship rights, based on the work of T.H. Marshall (1950), is criticized because of its gendered assumption about social citizenship rights through wage labor (Kilkey & Bradshaw, 1999). However, his work is important as a starting point, if modified and applied to the experience of single mothers (Sainsbury, 1999).

Citizenship in general can be characterized as the membership to a group—it defines individuals’ legal and social relations to a state or country and other individuals. It also regulates exclusion and inclusion, as well as rights and obligations, and has a profound impact on the lived experiences of the individual (Lister, 2003). T.H. Marshall (1950), one of the most influential

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6 Esping-Andersen (1997) revisited his first classification and clustering of the welfare states and accorded greater recognition to the household as a core concept in welfare variations in subsequent work.
thinkers on postwar citizenship, describes it as “a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess that status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed” (p. 28). Marshall’s work on the development of citizenship in relation to rights in England addresses civil, political, and social rights and can be used as a starting point for analysis with regard to gender injustices represented in current welfare states. Marshall’s introduction of social rights is an important one, as it concerns the relationship between rights, duties, and social services that are in place to meet the social needs of the individual and thus serve as a necessary counterbalance to existing inequalities (Taylor-Gooby, 2009). Marshall also stressed the importance of social rights and argued for an expansion of earlier civil and political rights (at least in the case of the male citizen) that impacted the development of social rights. Similarly Sen (1999) has argued that political participation, and therefore public policies, are influenced by peoples’ capabilities to participate. He stresses the interdependent relationship between social institutions and public political discourse.

In general, citizenship has been interpreted as a status or a process. Citizenship as a status focuses on the rights of the individual that are required to protect individual freedoms (negative and positive notions of freedoms). Citizenship as a process focuses on the obligations and duties of the individual to the society. The rights approach is rooted in the liberal tradition, developed in the seventeenth century, and its realization is dependent on the notion of freedom and its relation to the government (Hobson & Lister, 2001). As Lister (1997) points out, Marshall’s formulation of citizenship that included civil, political, and social rights can be characterized as social liberalism, stressing the importance of social rights needed to protect and support the civil and political elements with the overall goal of full participation in the society. According to Lister (1997), this positive notion of freedom entails active protection by the state in the form of social
right, and has been contested by the New Right and neoliberals who argue for a more negative form of freedom that focuses on the individual and not the collective (Hobson & Lister, 2001). The neoliberal argument asserts that the government should withdraw from interference into the lives of the individual—the consequences of which would include the neglect of social rights in regard to residual social spending and social opportunities, as well as a greater dependency of the individual on the whims of the free market.

A critique of Marshall’s work stems from his gendered assumptions of citizenship where social rights are tied to the wage-earning man in the public sphere, ignoring women’s roles within the private sphere completely, and thus not acknowledging women as full members of a society (Hobson & Lister, 2001). Further, feminists have critiqued the false universalism inherent in the historical development of citizenship scholarship that has excluded women for far too long. These feminists have struggled (and are struggling) to overcome what Pateman (1987) coined the “Wollstonecraft’s dilemma”—the dilemma of conceptualizing citizenship in terms of equality (a gender-neutral approach) with men or conceptualizing it with regard to difference with men (a gender-differentiated approach; Lewis, 1997; Lister et al. 2006). Lister (1997) argues that an exploration of citizenship rights for women cannot exclusively focus on equality in relation to men as this would disregard the particular role of women within society. She further claims that formulating citizenship as gender differentiating—as is the case within the maternalist discourse that focuses on the recognition of care as a contribution to the public sphere—can leave women vulnerable to the benevolence of the state as they are excluded from the cash nexus at the market and other rights flowing from the employment contract, such as pensions. Highlighting the problems that result from a binary focus reflecting the sexual division of labor in the private and public sphere, Lister advocates for a conception of citizenship as both
a practice and a status that goes beyond the either/or approach and represents its dynamic
interrelationship as “fired by the notion of human agency” (p. 196). She suggests a rather
pluralist idea of citizenship that she termed “differentiated universalism”—giving “equal status
to women and men in their diversity” (p. 197).

For example, diversity can relate to the role and value of care-related social rights and how they are handled within a society with regard to citizenship rights and obligation. According to Lister (1997), if women have the same social rights to social insurance that are contingent on waged employment then that does not necessarily mean that they will have access to waged employment in the first place due to other responsibilities, such as caring for children or the elderly. This is particularly relevant for single mothers who are caught in the dilemma of reconciling paid work and unpaid care-work; thus, the role of care becomes an important focus to assess gender injustices within societies. Consequently, this dynamic raises questions, such as to what degree does the welfare state support mothers as caregivers and/or earners? To what degree are social citizenship rights based on earnings and/or caring?

Feminist scholars, such as Lewis (1997), argue that any welfare state analysis that places women at the center needs to focus on the interrelationship between paid and unpaid work. There are different feminist responses to Esping-Andersen’s regime typology that incorporate gender relations (Lewis, 2006; Lister, 2007; Sainsbury, 1999); however, the most salient concept for analyzing cross-national comparisons of family-friendly policies pertaining to the public and private spheres, is the concept of defamilisation (Lister, 2007; Ostner, 2010). Introduced by Lister, the concept of defamilisation takes into account gender relations at the nexus of unpaid care and paid work and, according to Kröger (2011), this can be juxtaposed with the concept of decommodification introduced by Esping-Andersen. While assessing the degree of dependence
and independence from family relations in terms of caring responsibilities—as well as
dependence and independence from the market—the concept of defamilisation is suited for
assessing the degree to which parents, and in particular single mothers, have the choice of being
a full-time caregiver, a full-time earner, or both, and live a life that they have reason to value.
Thus, this concept embeds the idea that a decent life should be guaranteed by the state through
public policies and the market and be independent of family relations. Lister’s focus on the
individual and the disaggregation of the family unit aligns with the capabilities approach outlined

Thus, family policies are a critical factor in promoting women’s social citizenship rights
that, again, impact their civil rights, such as the opportunity to maintain a single household
and/or to pursue employment outside the home. Shaped by notions of rights and obligations and
the role of women, countries either employ a set of policies positively supporting families in
offsetting the cost and time of raising children—to counterbalance the so called “opportunity
costs” of women in particular—or refrain from any kind of involvement in the private sphere
(Lister, 2003, 2007; Mätzke & Ostner, 2010).

A Brief History of the Welfare State: U.S. and Germany

At the birth of the welfare state, whether in Germany or in the U.S., emerging social
risks, such as unemployment, were closely connected to the employment contract of the typical
White wage earning laborer outside the home. Public policies alleviating consequences through
unemployment were entrenched in specific assumptions about the proper family structure—the
wife as mother, housewife, caregiver, and reproducer of the male production worker (Esping-
Andersen, 1999; Grunow, Hofmeister, & Buchholz, 2006). As such, the focus lay predominantly
on the social rights of the White, employed men and less on those of women, and any other
people deviating from this norm. Thus, the question arises on how different welfare states evolved over time with respect to the role of women. How were social citizenship rights defined over time? Which gender and family models prevailed? How has the role of women manifested in and been perpetuated by public policies, practices, and discourses about them?

United States. At the turn of the nineteenth century, women’s normative roles within American society were impacted by the proceeding shift from an agrarian economy to industrialization and capitalism, and the consequent separation of spheres into public and private (Abramovitz, 1996; Gornick & Meyers, 2003). The separation of spheres led to a reorganization of gender roles and family obligations leading to the homemaker/breadwinner family model becoming the norm (Gornick & Meyers, 2003; Polakow, 1993). Nevertheless other family structures—such as families headed by widows, deserted women, unmarried women, and “illegitimate” mothers (mothers giving birth out of wedlock)—were not an uncommon phenomenon (Gordon, 1994). In fact, Gordon (1994) asserts that 9% of children lived with one parent in 1900 with the majority of these parents being widows. One of the first public policies established to alleviate economic instabilities for single mothers due to the absence of a husband/wage earner was the “Mothers’ Pensions,” the forerunner of Aid to Dependent Children (ADC; Abramovitz, 1996; Gordon, 1994; Katz, 1996). This contested cash assistance scheme was put into place in 1908 under the support of progressive era reformers who highlighted that these single mothers were in their situation through no fault of their own and were thus deserving of aid (Abramovitz, 1996, 2006). According to Abramovitz (1996), since child rearing was assumed to be the lone responsibility of a mother, the introduction of Mothers’ Pensions enabled mainly “deserving” White poor women to stay home to care for their children. In return they had
to comply with the proper code of White, chaste female behavior and be subjected to the surveillance of their caseworkers.

Thus, intentional or not, this policy perpetuated a hierarchized dualism and an image of the deserving and undeserving single mother replete with stereotypes and patriarchal norms, eventually impacting further legislation. This social construction of the deserving mother — where deserving was characterized as White and widowed—also enabled and manifested a marginalization or *othering* (see Lister, 2004) of the women deemed unworthy (Abramovitz, 1996; Gordon, 1994; Katz, 1996; Marchevsky & Theoharis, 2000).

In 1935, under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Social Security Act was signed into law. The Social Security Act—seen as the foundation of the welfare state—was designed in response to the unstable capitalist market during the Great Depression. Its programs were advanced to provide a social safety net and aligned with the ideas of Keynesianism/social liberalism (Abramovitz, 2006). With the strong focus on social citizenship rights at the nexus of work and market, the established policies of universal social insurance and means-tested assistance followed dualisms along the line of public/private, contract/charity, working/caregiving, worthy/unworthy, and deserving/undeserving (Abramovitz, 2006; Fraser & Gordon, 1992)—marginalizing women “from social citizenship rights by their very position in society” (Gordon, 1994, p. 291). This two-track system positioned insurance programs (unemployment and old age insurance) as superior to the needs-based programs (i.e., Aid to the Blind, Old Age Assistance and ADC; Fraser & Gordon, 1992; Gordon, 1994; Polakow, 1993).

The ADC program, which later became Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), was the successor to Mothers’ Pensions and intended to support vulnerable mothers (primarily widows and those abandoned by husbands) by allowing them to raise their children at
home (Marchevsky & Theoharis, 2000). During the implementation of these programs, “illegitimate” single mothers and women of color were mostly denied access based on “moral” exclusions such as the infamous “suitable home” provisions (Abramovitz, 1996; Gordon, 1994; Polakow, 1993). Suitable home requirements shifted the focus to individual behavior, with single mothers being perceived as in need of surveillance and rehabilitation, which further stigmatized the program itself along with its recipients—mothers and their children (Gordon, 1994). Thus, welfare policy perpetuated the idealized image of women and their role in society—consequently marginalizing those not fitting in. It is important to note that the welfare state in the U.S. has been historically entrenched in racialized politics, so that debates on welfare regarding who was deserving of assistance and who was not were deeply rooted in racialized and class-based assumptions about the role of the family and the economy (see Gordon, 1994; Quadagno, 1994).

According to Gilens (2003), the ADC program initially excluded many African Americans, but the racial composition of ADC recipients gradually shifted in the decades following its implementation. By 1969 about 45% of ADC recipients were African American women and children. The rapid expansion of ADC to include African American women and their children led to further stigmatizing discourses and a racialization of poverty that consequently opened up pathways for legitimizing a reduction of the welfare state (Gilens, 2003).

The dismantling of the welfare state began in the 1970 with a backlash against the Civil Rights era, the broad expansion of social programs, the onset of high unemployment rates, as well as the anti-welfare rhetoric of President Ronald Reagan. Pfau-Effinger (2009) has argued that the path alteration of welfare states can be initiated from the top, for example, by political actors backed by more or less truthful scientific research, or from the bottom, such as grass roots activism or labor movements. Reagan instilled a public image of welfare cheats who were
predominantly poor women, single, and Black—as he repeatedly projected the story of the “welfare queen” during his campaign as Republican presidential candidate in 1976, stating,

She has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards and is collecting veteran’s benefits on four non-existing deceased husband. And she is collecting Social Security on her cards. She’s got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. (as quoted in Polakow, 2007; “’Welfare Queen’ Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign,” 1976)

President Reagan’s radio address to the nation on welfare reform in 1986 stressed that traditional family values, such as the nuclear family, were breaking apart (Reagan, 1986). He blamed the expanding welfare state for the disruption of families, the increase in out-of-wedlock and teenage births, and opposed increases in the minimum wage that would turn “a shrinking problem [poverty in the U.S.] into a national tragedy” (para. 5). As a publicly legitimized authority figure, President Reagan propagated a negative public discourse on welfare dependency from above. Such discourse enabled, legitimized, and supported a perpetuation of the negative images of welfare dependency, prioritizing only certain family values and arguing that childrearing was a private—not public—responsibility in accordance with neoliberal ideology that focused on the primacy of the market and negative liberty (see Harvey, 2005). The anti-welfare discourse culminated in the so-called “welfare reform” when former President Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) into law in 1996. Clinton (1994) stressed the ultimate responsibility of raising a child lies on the family and that women who lived on welfare had to work to earn any additional support from the government, stating “We will say to teenagers, if you have a child out of
wedlock, we'll no longer give you a check to set up a separate household, we want families to stay together” (Clinton, 1994, para. 29).

Marchevsky and Theoharis (2000) argue that this welfare reform marked the triumph of neoliberal thought. Meritocracy and individualism were used to legitimize the advent of this new legislation. In addition, stereotypes of the undeserving poor and the myth of the underclass were propagated in media and supported by so called *objective* scientific research (Gilens, 2003; Reed, 1990; Schram, 1995). With the focus on behavior as the *explanans* for welfare dependency and/or poverty, this welfare discourse portrayed single mothers in poverty as responsible for their welfare dependency and led to a widespread public perception that poverty is self-inflicted and a private matter—a view often supported, perpetuated, and legitimized by social science “experts” contributing to what Schram (1995) describes as the “poverty of social science” (p. xxvi).

Through legitimizers, such as authoritative politicians, media, and social sciences (Gans, 1995), the public was convinced that welfare hinders the growth of the job market while at the same time diminishing the values of the traditional family. It is clear that the discourse on poverty in general, and single mothers in particular, had a hegemonic impact on the public, generating a broad consensus in favor of the welfare reform in 1996—resulting in an even stronger “primacy of the market and privacy of the family” (Sainsbury, 1999, p. 256). Thus, according to welfare regime theories, the United States could be classified as the prototype of the liberal welfare regime—with a high degree of commodification and the absence of positive defamilisation measures, such as accessible, available, and affordable quality childcare and family leave policies (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Lister, 2007; Sainsbury, 1999).

**Germany.** Germany’s welfare state can be characterized by its strong focus on social insurance policies that were developed in the nineteenth century under Chancellor Otto von
Bismarck, including compulsory sickness insurance (1883), compulsory accident insurance (1884) and compulsory old age and disability insurance (1889)—all based on full-time wage employment that left women at a disadvantage (Ziegelmayer, 2001). Unemployment insurance was introduced in 1927. In Nazi Germany social security was selectively targeted to the able-bodied and members of the society perceived as being productive, resulting in the exclusion of the disabled and the elderly (Butterwegge, 2011; Ziegelmayer, 2001). It was further utilized to promote race-based ideologies—anti-Semitism—as well as the general exclusion of people categorized as asocial, such as paupers, prostitutes, and the homeless (Butterwegge, 2011; Ziegelmayer, 2001).

Similar to the U.S. system, the social security system in Germany was based on a strong breadwinner/homemaker model, leaving women, as the bearers of unpaid family reproduction, dependent on the breadwinner and his status in the market economy (Butterwegge, 2011; Ziegelmayer, 2001). As such, the social welfare state was rather male and marriage-oriented, with social rights based on employment and/or marriage—leaving women, especially single mothers, at a disadvantage (Kuller, 2004; Ziegelmayer, 2001). The logic of the welfare state and the development of family policy, particularly after World War II, were strongly aligned with the conceptualization of the family in West Germany. This was characterized by its active dissociation from Nazi family policy, with its eugenic and race-based ideologies, and its dissociation from communist social policy in East Germany (Kuller, 2004; Veil, 1997). The new family concept was influenced by the church and its principle of subsidiarity—meaning a clear division of gender with women subordinated to men as characterized in the male-breadwinner/female-homemaker model and where state intervention, in the form of policies, would only follow if the family was not able to take care of itself (Mätzke & Ostner, 2010). In
contrast to the Nazi regime, which attempted to influence and control families, and childrearing in particular, the new principle of subsidiarity tried to actively prevent another fascist indoctrination from above (Kuller, 2004).

The notions of the ideal family and the role of the woman were complicated due to the aftermath of the war that resulted in a substantial number of female-headed households. Similar to the deserving/undeserving debate within the U.S., discussions in Germany with respect to the war victims’ pensions, a provision aimed at the restoration of the family, was framed around the notion of the deserving widow—which was similarly in stark contrast to the unwed mothers labeled as “other” (Heineman, 1996; Kuller, 2004). Another discourse focused on early attachment to the child that depicted the importance of the mother’s direct care for the healthy development of her children. The implicated right child-rearing strategy consequently degraded employed women as egocentric and blamed them for caring less for their children (Grunow et al., 2006).

This family ideal after WWII—exemplified in Article 6 of the Grundgesetz (West German Basic Law) of 1949—impacted the goals and strategies of family policy in West Germany as it basically guaranteed the framework for a stable family formation through financial family support, such as Kindergeld (child benefit) introduced in 1954 or Ehegattensplitting (tax reduction benefiting married couples) introduced in 1958.

The economic boom and the need for additional labor made part-time work feasible and socially acceptable for women as it became reconcilable with their duties and accepted as part of their roles as mothers and wives (Hagemann, Jarausch, & Allemann-Ghionda, 2011). Despite the

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7 Article 6 Paragraph 1: “Marriage and the family shall enjoy the special protection of the state.”
8 Kindergeld was only paid to families who had more than two children—meaning that it was paid to the third child and above; in 1961 Kindergeld was paid to the second child and above; in 1975 Kindergeld was paid to the first child.
increased participation of women in the labor market, childcare expansion from part- to full-time did not follow. This was in part due to the Conservative Christian Party (CDU) and the church that strongly opposed these ideas as potentially leading to a breakup of the traditional gender roles that “would alienate children from the family” (Hagemann, 2011, p. 283). Nevertheless, from this period up to the mid-1970s, the patriarchal family ideal was successively replaced by a more partner-oriented family ideal signaling the beginning of a democratic dual-earner and career model. However, it fell out of favor in 1986 with the reemergence of the old family ideal (Butterwegge, 2011; Kuller, 2004). According to Butterwegge (2011), the re-idealization of the breadwinner family ideal was regulated and manifested through the development of policies by the CDU/Liberal governing party (FDP) coalition at that time. The shift from the established Erziehungsurlaub (earnings-related maternity leave regulation) in 1979,⁹ which focused only on employed mothers, to a new Erziehungsgeld (small flat rate benefit for child-rearing) in 1986 was promoted by the CDU/FDP government. This change reiterated the old idea that childcare is a private responsibility within the realm of the family, in particular that of the mother, because the child benefit was paid to the family upon withdrawal from the labor market (Butterwegge, 2011; Leitner, 2010). This new small flat rate benefit of 600 DM (about €300¹⁰) for child-rearing was initially granted for ten months and successively expanded to two years in 1993 (Leitner, 2010). The re-establishment of the mother as the sole caregiver of the family through a set of policies, especially the low flat rate benefit, was interpreted as a strategic response by the governing party to combat rising unemployment (Butterwegge, 2011). Consequently, time-related leave policies in combination with the half-day infrastructure of government-funded

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⁹ The Erziehungsurlaub was introduced by the coalition government of the Social Democratic (SPD) and the Liberal Party (FDP).

¹⁰ $329.19 with a current exchange rate of €1 to $1.10 (October 19, 2016)
childcare promoted mothers and wives as supplementary earners within the male-breadwinner/female-homemaker model—almost 60% of the 53% of women employed in 1988 worked part-time (Hagemann et al., 2011), making them dependent on the benevolence of their husbands.

One major event in the last century impacting the persistent homemaker/breadwinner ideal represented within family policies—though contested through the existence of alternative forms of family structure and growing female participation in the labor market—was the unification of East and West Germany in 1990. While 94% of all 3 to 6-year-olds and 80% of the under-3s attended full-day preschool/childcare in the East, only 79% of the children ages 3 – 6 and 3% of the under-3s were enrolled in childcare settings in the West—and only for half-days. A reconciliation of two different ideas about the role of women and the family in these two states—the West leaning toward the old ideal and the East promoting a dual-worker model—led to legislation in 1992 that entitled every child between 3 and 6 years to enroll in an early childhood institution, and this program was implemented in 1999 (Evers, Lewis, & Riedel, 2005). While the right to childcare was in place, it did not require full-time hours nor regulate the quality of childcare provisions. Thus, while 90% of all 3 to 6-year-olds were enrolled in licensed preschool programs in 2004/2005, only 24% of them were enrolled full-time in the west of the country. Eastern Germany, however, reached almost full coverage for that age range—98% of the 99% of children were enrolled full-time (Morgan, 2011).

Further, similar to the U.S.—though a decade later—Germany’s Hartz IV welfare reform in 2005 also signaled a shift of the welfare state from its former emphasis on social rights to work activation strategies. Stagnant unemployment rates and the assumption that welfare recipients are lazy, unmotivated, and generally did not want to work brought about changes in
the hitherto generous and caring German welfare system. The new *Arbeitslosengeld II/Hartz 4* (ALGII; means-tested basic security benefit) was a consolidation of the former *Arbeitslosenhilfe* (unemployment assistance) and *Sozialhilfe* (welfare assistance) and shifted the focus to personal rather than public responsibility with conditional public benefits. “Fördern und Fordern” (Sanction and Support) are the main principles of the new welfare regime signaling a new balance of social rights and duties. In contrast to the U.S., mothers of young children are excluded from these obligations and a time limit is absent (see SGB II). Further, because of Article 1 in the Basic Law that states in paragraph one “Human dignity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority,” the German state is required to guarantee a life compatible with human dignity—meaning that the amount of basic security benefits is based on the premise that individuals and families have a right to live above subsistence level.

Beginning in 2007, this shift was furthered by legislation addressing childcare access and time-related family policies aimed at greater reconciliation of work and family and, thus, continued to focus away from the traditional breadwinner/homemaker ideology (see Auth, Leiber, & Leitner, 2011; Evers et al., 2005; Leitner, 2010; Oliver & Mätzke, 2014). Nevertheless, according to Asmus and Pabst (2016) more than 70% of all two-parent household are engaged in a combination of full-time and part-time employment—what Hagemann, Jarausch, and Allemann-Ghionda (2011) term the “male-breadwinner/female-homemaker-supplementary earner” family model. While the recent welfare reform signaled a shift of rights and duties with a greater degree of commodification, the enforcement of family-friendly policies that followed—the right to formal childcare and the parental leave regulations—resulted in a greater degree of positive defamilisation on the one hand, and positive familisation on the other.
Thus, caregiving as the private responsibilities of families shifted towards greater public and shared responsibility.

**Contemporary Family Policies in Germany and the U.S. Impacting Single Mothers and Their Children**

Whether in the U.S. or Germany, the prevalence of single-parent families (predominantly female) is an increasing phenomenon. In Germany, 1.64 million families with children under 18 years (20%) are headed by single parents—89% of whom are single mothers (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2014). In the U.S. almost 12 million families (29.5%) are characterized as single-parent families with children 18 years and younger, with more than 83% headed by a mother as the single caregiver (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015b). Further, single mothers and their children, in comparison to single fathers and married couples in both countries, are more vulnerable to poverty. In fact, 36.5% of all single mothers with children under 18 years compared to 7.5% of two-parent households lived below the federal poverty threshold, and 16% lived on incomes below $10,000 a year in the U.S. in 2015 (Tucker & Lowell, 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015a). Further, children in single mother families are three times more likely to live in poverty than children in two-parent household (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015c). It is noteworthy that single mothers of color are far more economically disadvantaged as 39.9% of African American, 41.9% Hispanic, and 48.4% Native American single mothers (in comparison to 30.6% of White single mothers) lived below the poverty threshold in 2015 (Tucker & Lowell, 2015). Similarly, the proportion of single parents at risk for poverty in Germany amounts to 42%—about five times higher than for two-parent households—with 7% of all single mothers living on an income below

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11 The poverty threshold for a single parent family with two children was $19,096 in 2015 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015d).

12 Poverty is based on 60% of the median equivalized income—this was €17,487 for a single parent family with two children under 6 years. There were no numbers available on single mothers at risk for living in poverty.
€10,000 (Lenze & Funcke, 2016; Statistisches Bundesamt, 2014). While these poverty rates have to be interpreted with caution due to the different poverty measurements, they nevertheless point to the fact that single mothers and their children are economically disadvantaged compared to other family groups in both countries.

Family policies are important measures to ameliorate economically driven disadvantages—especially for single mothers who are burdened with the dual responsibility of caring for their children and earning a sustainable family income. The mix of childcare policies, time-related leave policies, and child-related cash benefits in combination with work-related policies can either create an additional barrier or facilitator for single mothers’ and their children’s capabilities; and if facilitative lead to functionings, they have reason to value (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999).

Hence, it is clear that poverty must be viewed as a multidimensional concept, because as Sen (1999) has pointed out in general terms, a sole focus on income poverty rates is not sufficient to understand the ways in which policies shape the lives of individuals. This is particularly relevant to the impact on low-income single mothers and their children’s lives and reveals the ways in which specific policies affect different strata of the society and thus highlights underlying assumptions about a nation’s priorities.

**Childcare policies and their impacts on single mothers and their children.** Childcare policies can have an important impact on women’s *independence* or *dependence* on family relations and thus indirectly on their economic well-being and capability development. Depending on the underlying assumptions of the role of the welfare state, the role of the mother, and the notion about the “right” childcare strategies, childcare policies can either promote independence through the provision of accessible, affordable, and quality childcare—and thus
show a high degree of positive defamilisation, or conversely, childcare can be negatively
familised, which can result in a barrier for accessing independent income if care itself is not
generously compensated for—resulting in greater dependence of family relations (Kilkey &
Bradshaw, 1999; Lister, 2007). Thus, underlying assumptions about social citizenship rights as
either depending on paid work, care, or both are an important factor in structuring and
implementing policies (Kilkey & Bradshaw, 1999).

Shifting the focus onto the child—childcare policies are also important in fostering the
positive and holistic development of young children. The impact of poverty on the development
of children during the first years of life has immediate and far reaching consequences. Poorer
health, toxic stress, compromised cognitive and socio-emotional development, and social
exclusion have far-reaching impacts into adulthood, pointing to what Nussbaum terms capability
failure and leading to the perpetuation of the vicious cycle of poverty (see Duncan & Magnuson,
2011; Holz, Richter, Wüstendörfer, & Giering, 2005; Kamerman, Neuman, Waldfogel, &
Brooks-Gunn, 2003; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014; Rothstein,
2004). Multiple research studies have shown that quality early childhood education boosts
language, literacy, and math skills, and improves health outcomes. As such, it is an important
factor in overcoming inherited poverty and an important catalyst for capability development
(Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Polakow, 2007; Schweinhart et
al., 2005; Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

In alignment with the characteristics of the liberal welfare regime, childcare in the U.S. is
primarily located in the private sector. The high annual childcare costs nationwide range from
$4,804 in South Dakota to $17,842 in the District of Columbia (Child Care Aware of America,
2015; Schulte & Durana, 2016). With average costs of $9,589 a year for center-based care for
one child aged 0 – 4, a single mother working full time at the minimum wage would transfer
two-thirds of her income to her childcare provider or in general terms one-fifth of the median
income (Schulte & Durana, 2016). Major federal policies in place that are intended to support
young children of low-income families are Head Start and the Child Care Development Block
Grant (CCDBG)—nevertheless both programs are underfunded and reach only a fraction of
eligible children. For example, only 4% of the eligible 2.9 million poor infants and toddlers were
enrolled in Early Head Start programs, and the number of children capable of taking advantage
of a childcare subsidy through the CCDBG has dwindled since 2001—only an estimated one out
of six eligible children receive childcare subsidies (Children’s Defense Fund, 2014; Schulman,

Since August of 2013, children one year and older in Germany have had a universal right
to formal childcare that is protected under SGB VIII: Kinder- und Jugendhilfe (Assistance for
Children and Adolescents; § 24a Abs. 5 SGB VIII). Childcare is predominantly (99%) located in
the non-profit and public sector (Bock-Famulla, Lange, & Strunz, 2015). Compared to the U.S.,
childcare in Germany is heavily subsidized with sliding scales available and mostly low or no
tuition for children of low-income families according to the eighth book of the social code (SGB
VIII; Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft Köln, 2010). Funding for childcare is a complicated mix
of states, communes (municipalities), and parental fees. The mix of funding contributes to varied
childcare fees across communes and is dependent on the general wealth of the geographical area.
Despite the heterogeneity of parent fees, a report comparing costs across the largest 100 cities in
Germany found that parents with an income of €45,000 would pay an average amount of €814 a
year for one child, and €935 for two children (Institute der deutschen Wirtschaft, 2010). The
eligibility threshold that exempts parents from tuition fees similarly varied from commune to
commune—for example, Münster, a city in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) does not charge any childcare fees for parents with an income below €37,000 (Stadt Münster, 2016) whereas another city in NRW (Essen) set this threshold at €13,000 (Stadt Essen, 2016). It is noteworthy that the affordability of formal childcare coverage for 3 to 6-year-olds is almost universal—94% of all children in that age range in Germany were enrolled in formal childcare compared to 66% of all 4-year-olds and 38% of all 3-year-olds in the U.S. in 2012 (Bock-Famulla et al., 2015; OECD, 2014).

Similar to the U.S., Germany does not provide a nationally standardized educational framework for early childcare education with the states being responsible for educational standards (Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2009). Quality in early childcare is generally defined as a combination of structural and process quality. The structural aspect of quality encompasses aspects such as staff to child ratios, staff credentials, and group sizes. The process quality, however, focuses on the experience of the child with a strong emphasis on interactions and relationships—for example, teacher-child interactions, child-child interactions, and the type of interactions (Cassidy et al., 2005). Both characteristics of quality are related to each other and the structural characteristics are often utilized as a proxy to assess the degree of overall quality. Whether or not this approach is fully sufficient for accessing the degree of quality, it does provide a minimal level of reference for comparison. Structural quality in Germany—and the corresponding process quality it can imply—is dependent on the geographical location. While in eastern Germany the teacher-child ratio for under-3s was 1:6.1, it was 1:3.6 in western Germany. Similar differences were observed for children three to six years of age—1:12.3 in eastern Germany and 1:8.6 in western Germany. In the United States adult-child ratios similarly vary between states. Teacher-child ratios among
the state-funded public preschools range from 1:6 in Massachusetts to 1:15 in Arizona for 3 and 4-year-olds (Barnett et al., 2015). These data point to the fact that the quality of education for children is to a great extent dependent on geographical location—thus, for many parents, beyond their personal control.

**Time-related leave policies.** Time-related leave policies have to be conceived as interrelated with childcare related policies. They similarly reflect the degree of ideas about the proper role of childrearing, the role of the state in terms of childcare provision, and simply the degree of positive familisation and defamilisation. Thus, depending on generosity, eligibility, and conditionality, these policies have a major impact on gender equality, childcare quality, as well as single mothers’ choice to be a caregiver, an earner, or both (Leitner, 2010).

**United States.** The United States, when compared to other OECD countries, offers relatively little protection for parents and their children regarding time off work, and is the only country that provides no paid parental leave (Adema et al., 2014). With the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) enacted in 1993, workers fulfilling a set of requirements have the right to 12 weeks of unpaid leave. They also have job-protected leave from employment annually for major events, such as serious illness, caring for a sick child, or the birth of a baby (Fass, 2012; Waldfogel, 2001). Due to the conditionality of this provision, such as a company size of at least 50 employees, and the lack of financial compensation in most instances of leave, many potential recipients are left with no choice but to return to work immediately after birth to cover living expenses—especially those who are the sole provider of their family, such as single mothers (Casey & Maldonado, 2012). While the immediate time for bonding after childbirth is regarded as an important factor for children’s healthy development, parental leave legislation favors those already in higher paid employment and stable partnerships, leaving children of
single mothers at a disadvantage and with a higher likelihood of precarious childcare arrangement thwarting children’s internal capabilities.

**Germany.** Germany, in contrast to the United States, is one of the more generous countries with regard to financial replacement coverage as well as the length of job-protected leave. According to the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2012a), the statutory Mutterschutzgesetz (maternal leave policy) directs a 100% financial replacement coverage of 14 weeks for one child. Eligibility criteria are based on prior employment and the length thereof. Accordingly, all women employed with a contract, even in low-wage jobs, are protected under this law. Furthermore, according to the recent parental leave legislation in 2007, parents can choose to move into partially paid and job-protected parental leave until the child’s third birthday following the statutory maternity leave (Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2013). Up to 14 months (if at least two months are taken by the partner) thereof are paid at 67% based on previous net income with a ceiling of €1800 and a minimum of €300 that is not conditional on prior employment. In the case of welfare assistance, this amount is calculated against the replacement coverage for Elterngeld (parental leave), leaving single mothers with an income at risk for poverty (Casey & Maldonado, 2012).

Whereas the new parental leave policies show promise for gender equality for some strata, their impact on single mothers’ economic stability is questionable. This policy further signals a shift that values parental care for children variously depending on the income, and thus, indirectly, the level of education. As a substitute for Erziehungsgeld (the old child rearing benefit) that was paid 24 months following childbirth and was unconditional in terms of employment, the new Elterngeld only rewards parents with prior employment, especially those
with higher wages (Henninger, Wimbauer, & Dombrowski, 2008). As such, this new measure was criticized by several scholars as a pronatalist policy strategy fostering higher birthrates among the better educated, leaving especially low-income single mothers and students at a disadvantage (Henninger et al., 2008). Butterwegge (2011) claims that this policy focused rather on combating “Armut an Kindern” (lack of children) than on “Kinderarmut” (child poverty; Butterwegge, 2011, p. 263). As such, it aimed less at children’s well-being itself; instead, children were treated as means to an end or as an investment in the future. Based on the idea of social citizenship being conditional on full-time employment for women and men—children are now labeled as “opportunity costs” for women (Henninger et al., 2008; Mätzke & Ostner, 2010).

**Student Parents in Higher Education**

**Challenges and childcare needs.** Despite the strong linkage between education and well-being, women with dependent children face many obstacles in accessing and persevering in higher education with a high possibility of dropping out without acquiring a degree—while accruing heavy debt in the U. S. (Gault, Reichlin, & Román, 2014; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006; Polakow, 2007; Polakow, Butler, Stormer, Deprez, & Kahn, 2004; Polakow et al., 2014; Polakow & Ziefert, 2002). In fact, according to IWPR more than half of all student parents (53%) dropped out from community colleges and universities without a degree in the U.S in 2008 (Nelson et al., 2013). Thus, in comparison to their fellow students without children, their attrition rate is 20% higher. While there is no comparable data available on student parents’ retention/attrition rates in Germany, a survey conducted in 2012 at 227 postsecondary institutions that yielded more than 15,000 respondents indicated that student mothers stopped out six times more often than their fellow female students (Middendorff et al., 2013). With student

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13 Forty-four percent of student mothers stopped out for at least one semester.
parents in general pointing to the difficulties in reconciling their caregiving and student responsibilities studies have pointed to the fact that it is even more problematic and challenging for low-income single mothers, and especially for those who have children not yet attending elementary school, whether in the U.S. or Germany (Meier-Gräwe & Müller, 2008; Polakow, 2007; Polakow et al., 2014).

Childcare and childcare related consequences in the United States. Student mothers in the U.S. are confronted with the challenge of locating affordable and high-quality childcare, in addition to the search for appropriate housing, financial burdens, and emotional stressors (Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006; Miller & Gault, 2011). According to a survey conducted by IWPR, childcare availability is named amongst the biggest challenges student parents confront when pursuing higher education (Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006). With campus childcare declining, only 46% of public 2-year institutions and 51% of public 4-year institutions offer on-site childcare that is often quite costly (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014). With the availability of 54,400 on-site childcare slots in 2008, but an estimated need of 633,000 childcare slots for single parents and a total need of 1.1 million childcare slots for all student parents at that time, only 4.8% of all children could be served (Miller & Gault, 2011).

The difficulty in reconciling childcare and study (and often work) leads to a variety of interdependent costs impacting single mothers’ and their children’s capabilities and functionings. Studies by Jones-DeWeever and Gault (2006) and Polakow et al. (2014) depict how student parents, due to their manifold responsibilities, struggle to find enough time for studying. Almost 80% of all single mothers reported lack of study time, 52% missed classes that hurt their grades, and 33% withdrew from classes, likely leading to delays in degree completion as reported by 29% (Polakow et al., 2014). The same study concluded that the presence of children five years
and younger typically led to greater costs in comparison to other student parents with children six years and older.

Single student mothers’ multiple responsibilities—their financial situation coupled with the lack of flexible and affordable quality childcare—can lead to immense stress and has the potential to negatively impact women’s and children’s health and emotional well-being—thus impacting the development of internal capabilities, possibly leading to thwarted functioning options. As a result, single student mothers’ unmet needs are higher than that of student mothers in two-parent households because they are often required to resort to employment, loans, and/or public assistance.

*Childcare and childcare related consequences in Germany.* Although the number of enrolled student parents at postsecondary institutions in Germany is much lower than in the U.S., obstacles to degree completion are similar. While there is a recently established statutory right to childcare for every child one year and older, the geographical variation in childcare availability, accessibility, and flexibility is problematic (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016; Oliver & Mätzke, 2014). Thus on-site childcare is available at two-thirds of all universities in Germany, leading to a varied degree of accessible childcare for student parents striving to balance multiple responsibilities such as the needs of their children and their own needs as students (Kunadt, Schelling, Brodesser, & Samjeske, 2014). Consequently, the established right to childcare does not guarantee availability corresponding to students’ needs. Nussbaum (2011) would argue that as such it is not a secured capability in the sense that access to adequate childcare, and thus access to education, is dependent to some degree upon uncontrollable factors. Single student mothers in Germany who have to reconcile childcare, work, class schedules, and time to study are also prone to capability failure and derailed functioning. Similar to American parenting
students, parenting students—and in particular single mothers—reported lack of time for studying, missing classes, and prolonged study time (Kunadt et al., 2014; Meier-Gräwe & Müller, 2008). Lack of study time and exhaustion were themes frequently mentioned by single mothers in the qualitative study by Meier-Gräwe and Müller (2008).

**The importance of higher education.** Given the vulnerability of single mothers to poverty, education becomes an important facilitator for economic stability (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2013; Jiang, Ekono, & Skinner, 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). There is a positive relationship between income and educational attainment in both countries—in the U.S. for a woman the yearly median income ranged from $19,810 for a high school degree to $45,170 for a bachelor’s degree in 2015 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015e). Similarly in Germany, a bachelor’s degree resulted in an increased income of more than €20,000 in comparison to no higher education degree in 2012 (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2012). Thus, a promotion of combined capabilities to initiate and finish postsecondary education for mothers with dependent children is deemed important to break the cycle of poverty and the diminished social capital that results from it, in order to enable healthy development of their children’s capabilities that builds the basis for future capabilities (see Nussbaum, 2011). As the educational attainment of the mother significantly shapes children’s future academic success, higher education for single mothers becomes an important opportunity to exit an impoverished existence that serves to increase the likelihood of economic and family stability (Stormer Deprez, Butler, & Smith, 2004).

The direct and indirect influence of education on children’s well-being and thus their level of functioning is dependent on the presence or absence of state support. An extensive cross-national comparative report on intergenerational mobility by D’Addio (2007) is conclusive
regarding the lack of mobility in the U.S. and the persistence of socio-economic status across generations. In comparison to other countries, such as Germany, parental income and education are transferred at high rates from one generation to the next. Jones-De Weever and Gault (2006) similarly conclude that children’s future economic stability can be predicted by their parents’ current financial well-being and, thus, indirectly by their level of education, particularly the mother’s level of education (Haveman & Wolfe, 1994)

While economic stability, as one argument for the importance of higher education, can be characterized as a means to an end, the transformative argument for higher education highlights the end itself (Sen, 1999). Similarly, Maxine Greene (1988) promotes the empowering aspect of education, stating that it bears the possibility for people to “make varied sense of their lived worlds” (p. 12). Studies confirm that not only the economic argument for education holds, but that a student parent’s educational journey enables a transformation of the sense of self. Education acts as a facilitator of a positive self-concept and allows one to feel like a contributing member of society. Education also acts as catalyst for agency and community engagement. Given the positive potential of education to foster personal development and community well-being, education is justified as an end in itself (Haleman, 2004; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006; Stormer Deprez et al., 2004).

The Meaning of Poverty for Women, Mothers, and Their Children

The term feminization of poverty has penetrated academic literature since its introduction in 1978 by sociologist Diane Pearce. The feminization of poverty relates to the way in which poverty has been feminized due to women’s solo roles of nurturer and provider in female-headed households with children, the gendered impact of household status, women’s role within the labor force, their relationship to the welfare system, and vulnerability to family violence. While
the distribution of income within a society is important to identify systemic inequalities, it is not sufficient for understanding the real meaning of poverty in the lives of women, mothers, and their children. Nor does it reveal anything about their quality of life in terms of their capabilities—what they are actually able to do and to be.

Studies in the U.S. that have focused on the voices of this marginalized population reveal how the discourse on poverty in relation to single mothers and their children has impacted their lifeworlds (Edin & Shaefer, 2016; Polakow, 1993; 2007; Seccombe, James, & Walters, 1998). In Lives on the Edge, Polakow (1993) shows how the everyday lives of single mothers in poverty are intractably linked to the wider social context and public policies that are impacted by assumptions about the normative family structure, child rearing strategies, being a “deserving” poor mother, and systemic policies that create and perpetuate poverty. Narratives from single mothers in her book reveal how the intersectionality of being the sole caregiver for a child, and being precariously employed, are contextualized in a punitive and residual welfare state that creates enduring struggles and crises for the mother and her children.

In a qualitative study by Seccombe, James, and Walters (1998), findings revealed that the public discourse of poverty and the social construction of welfare dependency is mirrored in the voices of mothers who received welfare. The stories highlight the internalization of the image of the “welfare dependent mother” with all her attributes as a criticism of other women receiving entitlements, while at the same time refusing to ascribe this image to themselves as a coping strategy. The study contributes to an understanding of the way inequalities in the social structure are translated into powerful images to create consensus amongst different strata and different interest groups in the society, with the ultimate goal of keeping the interests of the elites in place at the expense of the interest of subordinate groups, such as single mothers who receive welfare.
Conclusion

The theoretical considerations of the welfare state in relation to social citizenship rights depict how assumptions around these rights have implications for the distribution of responsibility within two different welfare states. A critique of Esping-Andersen’s classical welfare regime typology has demonstrated the lack of emphasis on gender and caregiving-related social rights. Consequently, the alternative analytical concept of defamilisation provides a gender-differentiated analysis that takes account of social rights related to caregiving.

The historical outline of the development of the welfare states as well as the analysis of current policies depict how assumptions about mothers—single mothers in particular—and their children are mirrored in policies that impact their well-being. While overall poverty rates in Germany are much lower than in the U.S., a specific focus on single mothers and their children points to the ways in which family policies discriminate by gender and family structure—implying specific assumptions about women and their caregiving responsibilities. It is clear that the policies and practices of both countries are not sufficient to offset the vulnerability of single mothers and their children to poverty.

With the greater commodification of rights and a strong positive relationship between income and educational degree comes a greater need for higher education to secure a sustainable family life above the poverty threshold, particularly for low-income single mothers. The challenges and obstacles confronting single mothers as they attempt to reconcile the demands of studying, caregiving, and working are highlighted in this study as mothers’ voices reveal the depth of their struggles and their tenacity and resilience in pursuit of higher education.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of my study was to illuminate the lifeworlds of low-income single mothers in higher education—and to explore and understand their perceptions of what it means to be low-income, a student, and a mother in their respective societies. In addition, their embedded lifeworld experiences were analyzed in relation to two contrasting welfare regimes in Germany and the United States. A qualitative approach, and in particular a phenomenological mode of inquiry, was used with an intentional rejection of aggregation that would otherwise obscure the voices and agency of this marginalized population.

Rationale for Choosing a Qualitative Method in General

The methodological approach was grounded in my ontological and epistemological assumptions and my perspective of the world as a conglomerate of numerous subjective realities with the aligning belief that all knowledge is subjective and constructed (Hatch, 2002; Munhall, 2007; Roche, 1973; Seidman, 2013). The epistemological assumption that subjectivity is necessary and inevitable to understanding the meaning of the lived experience stands in strong contradiction to that of a positivist approach, which generally assumes the existence of only one objective reality outside of our consciousness (Hatch, 2002). This results in a rather deterministic and mechanistic view of human beings with the ultimate goal of generalization and explaining patterns of social action independent of the researcher (Bortz & Döring, 2006). Whereas this approach is usually deductive, starting with a theory and hypothesis and disregarding the context and history of people in the study, a qualitative approach favors a bottom-up approach that starts with the people themselves and rejects reducing reality to a set of variables (Patton, 2014; Schram, 2006).
Focusing on the understanding of lived experiences, the qualitative researcher looks at a person with agency and voice, entrenched in her own socio-cultural history and meaning structure of the world, always bound by context (Greene, 1988; Schütz, 1932/1974). Knowing about the impossibility of reconstructing the subjective meaning of the other, as well as the relationality of meaning, Schütz (1932/1974) states, “Der vom Deutenden erfaßte subjektive Sinn ist bestenfalls ein Näherungswert zu dem gemeinten Sinn des Sinnsetzenden, aber niemals dieser selbst, denn dieser hängt von den Auffassungsperspektiven und dem notwendig immer fragmentarischen Vorwissen um die Deutungsschema des Du ab” (p. 181).  

Thus, to generate an empathetic understanding, the researcher is conscious of the importance of accessing the reference stock of knowledge of the participant through in-depth interviews, observations, or other appropriate methods. The researcher further emphasizes thick description to create an intersubjective understanding between the participants and the reader (Geertz, 1974).

As such, a qualitative inquiry aligns with the goal of this research to highlight and understand the lived experiences of low-income single student mothers, where I, as researcher, respected and deemed necessary an understanding of the specifics and variations in the contexts of the participants and their perceptions of reality (See Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002; Schütz, 1932/1974). Acknowledging my relational stock of knowledge and how it impacts my inquiry (Schütz, 1932/1974), I rejected presupposed ideas about a specific phenomenon, and thus also categories utilized for hypothesis testing, and instead critically questioned “the categories that have contained feminine lives” to uncover the “taken-for granted” (Greene, 1988, p. 58). Thus, this mode of inquiry aligns with my theoretical framework, the capabilities approach. As such

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14 The interpretation of the subjective meaning by the interpreter is at best an approximation of the subjective meaning of the first person, but it can never be the same, because this is dependent on the perspectives and the piecemeal knowledge about the reference stock of knowledge of the alter ego. (Own translation)
the phenomenological interview mode was critical and opened up possibilities that highlighted the capabilities that lead to real functioning embedded in a framework of justice that focuses on individual well-being and agency to assess what each individual is actually able to do and to be (Nussbaum, 2011).

**Rationale for choosing a phenomenological approach in particular.** Different ways of seeing are manifested within different modes of inquiry and are guided by different purposes, foci, and methods used. The purpose of research with the underlying mode of phenomenology is to explore and describe the meaning of experience of a particular phenomenon of one or more people (Munhall, 2007; Schram, 2006; Seidman, 2013). A researcher adhering to this mode of inquiry assumes that there is no objective truth and that reality is socially constructed by each individual (Hatch, 2002). An understanding of the lifeworlds and experiences of people is generally advanced through the utilization of in-depth interviews (Seidman, 2013).

In my research study, I wanted to illuminate the individual experiences of low-income mothers within higher education embedded in the German and American welfare regimes. Focusing on the voices of this marginalized population, I intended to deconstruct the historically generated and stigmatizing myths about “poor single mothers” and construct a different way of understanding their lived experience from their point of view. As Greene (1988) states, “Clearly, if the voices of participants or near-participants . . . could be heard, whole dimensions of new understanding would be disclosed” (p. 127). Thus, emphasizing the individual voices of the participants and their prescribed meaning of their lifeworlds, phenomenology was my chosen mode of qualitative inquiry.

**Historical development of phenomenology.** A solid grounding of my rationale for phenomenology required an understanding of phenomenology as a philosophy itself and within a
historical context. Phenomenology, as a branch of philosophy, focuses on the understanding of human experience and consciousness. It was developed in the late nineteenth century as reaction to and rejection of the prevailing dogmatism of the natural sciences (Roche, 1973). Roche depicts the development from transcendental to existential phenomenology, with transcendental phenomenology focusing on the pure essence of consciousness and existential phenomenology grounding the essence of consciousness in actually being in the world.

Phenomenology was first introduced by the German philosopher Franz Brentano. Consciousness, Brentano (1874/1973) claimed, is intentional, and an understanding of human behavior requires an understanding and description of experience and consciousness. According to Roche (1973), Brentano was a critic of “physiological reductionism in psychology” and argued that human beings have a consciousness that is reflected in the world itself (p. 4).

Edmund Husserl (1913), a student of Brentano, focused on pure phenomenology in his early years (classified as transcendental phenomenology). He focused on the description of pure subjectivity and how the essence of an object or phenomenon is developed by intentional consciousness (Husserl, 1913; Roche, 1973). The other concept introduced by Husserl is that of the epoché or phenomenological reduction, the method originally destined to reach pure subjectivity (Husserl, 1913; Roche, 1973). Part of this method is Husserl’s concept of bracketing in which the observer attempts to free herself from every possible preconceived notion regarding a phenomenon with the intention of understanding its very essence (Roche, 1973). This method is closely related to the practice of reflexivity and brings about the unveiling of the natural attitude. It is used by the researcher to critically investigate his/her assumptions and foci with regard to the phenomenon under study.
Husserl’s development and application of the concept of the natural attitude and the epoché to reach this point of pure subjectivity finally led him to reconsider his original pursuit. Thus, he introduced the additional concepts of the *Umwelt* (environing world) and *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) as part of the natural attitude. Instead of suspending the natural attitude to reach the essence of meaning within consciousness, Husserl later focused directly on the lifeworld while suspending the natural sciences (Roche, 1973).

Other post-Husserlians and existential philosophers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, and Alfred Schütz rejected the notion of transcendental phenomenology and claimed existence precedes essence. Consequently, post-Husserlians emphasized, in general, the lifeworlds of the individuals (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002; Roche, 1973).

*Natural attitude – lifeworld – intersubjectivity.* According to Roche (1973), the natural attitude is comprised of a shared common sense—our taken for granted assumptions and logic about the world. As Schütz and Luckmann (2003) pointed out, “In der natürlichen Einstellung finde ich mich immer in einer Welt, die für mich fraglos und selbstverständlich wirklich ist“ (p. 30). In other words, the natural attitude is our intersubjective awareness of a phenomenon. Thus, in this natural attitude, a naïve acceptance of the existence of other people with consciousness is presupposed and not questioned (Schütz & Luckmann, 2003). But since the meaning and interpretation of a phenomenon depends on the perspective of the observer, who is situated in a socio-historical context, the generation of intersubjectivity is problematic. While Husserl, according to Roche (1973), did not further discuss the notion and problem of

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15 The natural attitude comprises the world that is unquestioned and taken for granted for me. (Own translation)
intersubjectivity, Alfred Schütz (1932/1974), a German sociologist and philosopher, concentrated precisely on the natural attitude or the intersubjective lifeworld in his research.

The lifeworld is the existential context in which individual people experience, think, act, and make meaning in their social milieu. The concept of the lifeworld closely relates to the notion of embodiment introduced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a French philosopher and founder of existential phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002; Roche, 1973). In contrast to Husserl, who focused on consciousness as the starting point for analysis, Merleau-Ponty focused on perception as the starting point for any analysis of consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002; Munhall, 2007; Roche, 1973). Merleau-Ponty argued that consciousness is grounded in perception, which again is embodied in being situated in the world. Thus, reality is embodied in everybody’s perception of the world because “only in the world does he [the individual] know himself” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. xii). His concept of embodiment shaped the concept of corporeality as one of Munhall’s (2007) four core aspects of existential lifeworlds. The remaining aspects of lifeworlds—spatiality, temporality, and relationality—originate from the notion of embodiment (Munhall, 2007). Spatiality refers to the environment of the existing phenomenon. The phenomenological researcher has to take into account the specific location of a phenomenon in order to grasp its meaning for the person experiencing it. Temporality accounts for the history of a body with all the behaviors, thoughts, and beliefs it is contingent upon, and relationality refers to the fact that meaning towards a particular phenomenon is dependent on the person experiencing it. Thus, broad generalization is not desirable from the stance of a phenomenologist since it would violate the value of the unique experience and situationality of every person’s experience.
Rationale for a Comparative Design

This research study utilized a comparative design to analyze the lifeworlds of single mothers embedded in two macro-systems—the welfare regimes of Germany and the United States. However, the intent was not to compare individual experiences in terms of seeking broad generalizations. Rather, a modified interpretation and application of Skocpol and Somers’ (1980) “contrast of contexts” as one of three major types of comparative history was used (p. 175). This type of comparative history pursues a rich description of individual country cases, such as the detailed description of the two different and contrasting welfare states exemplified by Germany and the U.S. (see Esping-Andersen, 1990; Sainsbury, 1999). Similar to any qualitative research, the purpose is the “enlargement of the universe of human discourse” (Geertz, 1973, p. 14) and to provide a holistic and complex description in order “to show how different spheres of each society and culture [are] inextricably interrelated” (Skocpol & Somers, 1980, p. 192). Thus, the focus is on contrasting rather than on comparing.

The rationale for contrasting different welfare contexts lies in the inherent possibility for a greater understanding of single mothers’ lifeworlds in both countries. As Skocpol and Somers (1980) point out, a contrasting design can increase visibility and an understanding of structures that would otherwise have been too familiar to be seen. In other words, a comparative lens bears the possibility of unveiling the unquestioned natural attitude for the reader as well as the researcher, to promote critical thinking, and can further reveal limits to established stereotypes (Moss, 2010). Thus, the contrast of contexts further helps to deconstruct myths about poor single mothers.

Further, aligning with the capabilities approach, used as a theoretical framework, and its overarching goal of improving the quality of life for women, and in this case for single mothers,
a comparative design can also promote alternative ways of seeing. As Greene (1988) points out, one needs “to look at things as if they could be otherwise” (p. 3) as this creates the possibility of generating realms of resistance to further a transformation of the given. But the ability to see differently can only happen if some form of awareness of other options is given. Therefore, the reader of this study is presented with the voices of single mothers in Germany and the U.S., countries representing contrasting welfare states with varying degrees of social infrastructures of support, in order to present alternative ways of seeing and generating a greater understanding of this marginalized population.

Finally, Moss (2010) also argues that a comparative approach highlights processes about discourses in relation to policy development. Thus, this study has also attempted to illuminate how the development of policies impacting low-income single mothers is intertwined with specific discourses pertaining to single mothers and their children.

Setting and Sample

**Interview sample.** In comparison to quantitative research, where the sample is usually large, representative, and randomly drawn from a target population with the goal of generalization, the qualitative researcher relies on purposeful sampling of a small number of people who represent “information-rich cases” (Patton, 2014, p. 308). A small sample studied in depth through observation and/or interviews is preferable in order to reveal the meaning of the subjective lifeworlds of the participants. As Geertz (1973) pointed out “small facts speak to large issues” (p. 23)—meaning that the experiences of a small number of single student mothers are exemplaric in understanding how their lives are shaped by the larger political context.

In line with a phenomenological approach that prioritizes an in-depth small sample, the final sample size of this study consisted of eight single student mothers in each country that
represented information-rich cases of low-income single student mothers. Due to the fact that little was known about the number of single mothers at their respective higher education institutions, I used a combination of criterion, convenience, and snowball sampling in alignment with Patton’s proposed sampling techniques (Patton, 2014). The selection criteria for the study were the following: single mother (living without a partner), low-income (receiving some form of financial or in-kind support) with at least one child 7 years or younger, and enrolled at a public university/vocational degree institution in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, or community college/public university in Michigan, United States. The choice of restricting the selection criteria to these two states was justified by geographical accessibility and convenience as well as the fact that both states show similarity with regard to the poverty rates of single-parent families. Almost 42% of single parents were classified at risk for poverty in NRW in 2013 (Ministry for Family, Children, Youth, Culture and Sport of North Rhine Westphalia, 2015). In Michigan, the poverty rate of single-parent families was 39% in 2015 (Kids Count, 2016).

The initial plan to include students from universities and colleges that had a similar proportion of non-traditional female students as well as demographic variations in the location could not be followed due to the challenges of finding enough participants for this study. Interviewees were recruited via flyers that were uploaded to social media sites, sent to possible gatekeepers, and distributed at and around postsecondary institutions, childcare institutions, and community centers in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, and Michigan, U.S.

A total of ten students in Germany and thirteen students in the U.S. were interviewed at least one time. From this sample four single student mothers from three different public universities and four single student mothers enrolled at three different vocational schools in North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany were selected for a follow up interview. Their ages ranged
from 21 to 35 and interviews took place at students’ home or public spaces, such as coffee shops and libraries. The U.S. final sample consisted of four single student mothers from two different public universities and four from three different community colleges in Michigan. Their ages ranged from 26 to 44 years. A brief overview of personal background information of the participants can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, with extended profiles in Appendix A.

Table 1

*Background Information—Single Student Mothers United States*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age of Children</th>
<th>Degree Field of Study</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Estimated Graduation</th>
<th>Student Loans</th>
<th>Work (Hours/Week)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2, 11</td>
<td>BA Business</td>
<td>University A</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>$80,000</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>3, 5, 6</td>
<td>Accelerated Nursing Program</td>
<td>University A</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>$32,000</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeara</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4, 5, 6</td>
<td>BA Social Work</td>
<td>University B</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4, 4</td>
<td>BA Social Work</td>
<td>University B</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>$67,000</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>7, 10, 12, 15, 16, 21</td>
<td>Associate Nursing</td>
<td>Community College C</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Associate Respiratory Health</td>
<td>Community College C</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>$4,500</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3, 5</td>
<td>Associate Cosmetology</td>
<td>Community College D</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5 days a week/hours vary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Associate Nursing</td>
<td>Community College E</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Grey highlighted participants are presented as case studies in Chapter 4.
Table 2

*Background Information—Single Student Mothers Germany*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age of Children</th>
<th>Degree Field of Study</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Estimated Graduation</th>
<th>Student Loans</th>
<th>Work (Hours/Week)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Melanie</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>State Examination Medicine</td>
<td>University A</td>
<td>2018/19</td>
<td>€10,000 (max.)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>BA/MA Theology</td>
<td>University A</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>€10,000 (max.)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabine</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>4, 6</td>
<td>MA Philosophy, History</td>
<td>University B</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>€10,000 (max.)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Astrid</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>BA Social Sciences</td>
<td>University C</td>
<td>Graduated in 2015</td>
<td>€20,000</td>
<td>10-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamila</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3, 5</td>
<td>VET&lt;sup&gt;16&lt;/sup&gt; Civil Service</td>
<td>VET D</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathrin</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>VET Civil Service</td>
<td>VET D</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>VET Carpentry</td>
<td>VET E</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>VET Sales Clerk</td>
<td>VET F</td>
<td>Graduated in 2015</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Grey highlighted participants are presented as case studies in Chapter 5.

The decision for inclusion for the final sample rested on the children’s age of participants, student status, and interview quality—participants with children 8 years and older as well as those who finished their degree more than one year before the interview were excluded. Further, I chose not to include some participants in follow up interviews based on the lack of detail and depth from the first interview. Individual interviews in Germany took place from November of 2015 to December of 2015, and in the U.S. from May of 2016 to August of 2016 and lasted from 37 to 105 minutes (first interviews). The follow-up interviews were generally shorter and lasted up to sixty minutes. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

<sup>16</sup> VET=Vocational Educational Training System
Measures to Ensure Safety, Confidentiality, and Anonymity for Human Subjects

In line with the major principle of qualitative inquiry and my theoretical framework was my commitment to treating each person with dignity and respect. After my study was approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee (see Appendix B), the participants were recruited for the study. Participants were informed about the consent process and particularly their rights, the confidentiality of records, and the use of pseudonyms to protect anonymity before signing consent forms. Almost all interviews in the final sample were transcribed by me—and three interviews were transcribed by a transcriptionist after the signing of a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix B).

Interviews—Understanding Through Dialogue

In this study a modified version of Seidman’s (2013) three step interview process was utilized. Recognizing the problem of time for mothers who are students (and oftentimes also workers), I arranged two in-depth open-ended and semi-structured interviews instead of three as proposed by Seidman. The first interview focused on their life histories to contextualize their experiences, as well as their contemporary particular experiences of being a mother and a student. In an attempt to be both sensitive and attentive to individual needs and the ways in which my participants reacted to this open interview format, my strategy and opening question shifted accordingly. The introductory questions usually began with—“What is it like to be a mother and a student?” “Please try to reconstruct a typical day in your life.” “How did you come to be a student?” “Please describe your experiences of being a mother and a student.”

The follow-up interview emphasized the meaning participants ascribed to what they had disclosed about themselves and their experiences in the first interview, and anything they deemed as important with regard to their status and experiences as a single mother student, and
additional questions raised for clarification based on the first interview. The follow-up interview usually took place one to three weeks after the initial meeting and was dependent on respondents’ availability. This timely gap provided participants more time for reflection about their lifeworlds and gave me time for reflection on the clarity or ambiguity of my understanding. Many participants struggled to find appropriate time to meet personally due to their many obligations of school, work, studying, and caring.

**The Role of the Researcher**

No matter the mode of qualitative research, subjectivity is always the underlying motif of the researcher (Peshkin, 1988). And since an understanding of the lifeworlds of the participants requires an immersion by the researcher, she will also be the main translator of the subjective experience of the participants to the audience of the research project (Seidman, 2013). Thus, in qualitative research it is essential to interrogate and reflect upon the role of the researcher.

The methods and activities used by the qualitative researcher can be traced back to the problem of intersubjectivity as previously outlined. The specific problem to be addressed is the fact that the meaning of a specific phenomenon, or the lifeworld, is grounded in the perceptionality, positionality, and the reference stock of knowledge of the interpreter (Greene, 1988; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002; Schütz, 1932/1974). According to Schütz (1932/1974), a complete understanding of the meaning of the other’s lifeworld is impossible, “was erfaßt werden kann, ist immer nur ein Näherungswert” (p. 150). Thus, the creation of the intersubjective space between the researcher and the participant is problematic.

How will a researcher be able to understand the lifeworlds of her participants in general? And how will I be able to understand the lifeworlds of single mothers in postsecondary education?

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17 That, what a person can possibly understand is always just an approximation. (Own translation)
in the U.S. and Germany in particular? How can I create this intersubjective space in which I approximate an understanding of their lifeworlds from their point of view?

One must be cautious and aware that the interpretation of the participant’s lifeworlds is always an interpretation of the researcher’s point of view and thus is always riddled with a myriad of preconceptions (Peshkin, 1988). The researcher herself is full of historically gained assumptions and specific personal and socio-cultural knowledge about the world and must acknowledge those and set them “out of play” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. xiv). Thus, to gain an understanding of single mothers in postsecondary education, from their point of view, I had to bracket my own experiences, prejudices, preconceptions, stereotypes, and assumptions about them and their lifeworlds (Munhall, 2007). In other words, the unimaginable task of epoché is a decentering of the self in order to reach a state of unknowing—and this can and could only be approximated by a continuous process of reflexivity, while recognizing that complete decentering can never be fully accomplished (Munhall, 2007; Peshkin, 1988; Watt, 2007).

Reflexivity. Reflexivity refers to the process by which the researcher attempts to understand her own subjectivity and mindset towards the research project (Peshkin, 1988; Schram, 2006). To uncover one’s self-awareness is a complex and infinite activity but indispensable for an emic understanding of the participants—an understanding of their lived experiences from their point of view. As Peshkin (1988) states, “Untamed subjectivity mutes the emic voice” (p. 21). Strategies to address one’s subjectivity are displayed by Peshkin (1988), Watt (2007), and Munhall (2007). Peshkin (1988) describes his use of notecards to record emerging sensations that are recognized by discovering and uncovering the multiple overlapping but distinctive perspectives from which he experiences and draws from in the course of a study. Another example of reflexivity in practice is exemplified by Watt (2007). She describes how a
reflective journal supported her understanding about her worldviews within her research study, yielding a bias-reduced understanding of the research phenomena. Munhall (2007) similarly suggests journaling as a practice for reflection on one’s own subjectivity. Following the authors’ approaches, I practiced critical reflection on my subjectivity in relation to the study and participants, and interrogated how my ways of seeing impacted the way I engaged with my participants and how I analyzed the data. Through a combination of journal writing and talking to my advisor as my reflective practice I attempted to keep my subjectivity at bay. Especially at times when I noted strong emotional reactions during the interview as well as when engaging with the transcriptions. During an interview, for example, I received signals in words and posture from one of my participant at the beginning of the interview that clearly showed she was uncomfortable in sharing her story. In order to build greater trust and rapport, I supported her view and experiences through comments that affirmed and showed understanding of her situation towards the end of the interview. Afterwards, however, I critically reflected on my role during this interview—how had my comments impacted the way she presented her experiences? Was this the right place to affirm her thoughts on the punitive welfare system?

**Positionality.** Further, the practice of reflection is also important to understand one’s own positionality, meaning one’s own position in relation to *the other’s* race, class, gender, disability, and other identities deemed important for relationality at a given time (Merriam et al., 2001). The understanding of one’s own positionality is important for acknowledging and possibly influencing a rather unequal power relationship towards a more equitable relationship during an interview (Seidman, 2013). Positionality further relates to the insider/outsider problematic that is concerned with the underlying assumption that an insider has possibly greater access and thus deeper subjective understanding of the lifeworlds of the participants. However,
as vividly displayed by Merriam et al. (2001), there is always the possibility of being an insider on one position but outsider on another. Thus, the researcher has to be aware of his or her own positionality that can be in constant flux during an interview. Consequently, it is important to strive to go beyond dichotomies and overcome asymmetrical power relationships through the expression of the researcher’s vulnerability, empathy, and genuine curiosity and respect.

_Owning my positionality._ I am a mother with two children, and as a student myself, I was aware that I could possibly relate to several aspects of my participants’ lives and they with me, since I generally revealed facts about myself, where and when appropriate. Nevertheless, I was still an outsider in different aspects on my life compared to my study participants. Before the beginning of my study, I contemplated the identities and characteristics that I found to be of importance as a reference for possible group membership comparison. The identities and characteristics that I concluded were important were household status, being a parent, race, financial resources, academic status, citizenship, age, and gender. It was obvious that I would be considered an outsider with regard to my household status (I am married and live in a two-parent household), with regard to my financial resources (our household income is well above the median income in the State of Michigan—though I grew up in a household with little financial resources), my advanced educational status (I was pursuing my PhD—but was a first-generation student), sometimes with regard to race (I am White), and while in the U.S. with regard to citizenship (I am an international student with German citizenship). Right before, but also during the process of my study, I contemplated issues that could arise from these different identities and the possible assigned insider and outsider status by the participants. What would it mean if a participant defined me as an outsider or insider? What would it mean for the conversation in terms of trust and openness? What would it mean for the process of the interview? What would it
mean for the questions that I followed up with or omitted because of my underlying assumptions and interpretation of what was said? What would the insider-outsider problematic mean for the researcher-researched relationship?

Reflecting on my hitherto gained experiences with interviews, where I interviewed student mothers and fathers, I have come to the conclusion that my nationality, for example, was beneficial to my outsider status, since my interviewees were inclined to explain more and not assume I would understand (Polakow et al., 2014). In a sense it was they, who seemed to be eager to create an intersubjective understanding. Overall, reflecting on these questions in relation to my positionality led me to realize that it was not only about the impact of one’s positionality on the participant, but also on oneself. Being aware of the different layers of identity and characteristics that might or might not overlap with the identities and characteristics of my participant, and knowing that there would be an asymmetrical power relationship in our research relationship, I decided to attempt to partially transcend this research relationship in order to develop an ethic of care characterized by respect, trust, empathy, and vulnerability (Kiegelmann, 2009).

Data Analysis

Analyzing lifeworlds. The ultimate goal of this research project was to explore and document an in-depth understanding of the lifeworlds of low-income single mothers embedded in two different welfare states. Initially, the first step was to transcribe the vast amount of audiotaped data. To stay close to my participants’ lifeworlds, I decided to take the time to do the transcriptions myself—only three follow-up interviews of the final sample were transcribed by a third party. Because of the nature of the study, German voices were transcribed in German and only verbatim quotes that were used to corroborate thematic findings were translated into
English. The following analysis and interpretation of the interview data was an inductive process that required an open but close reading of the text.

According to Seidman (2013), there is no recipe for extracting the most meaningful passages, and he suggests highlighting what “catches your intention” (p. 127). As suggested by Seidman (2013), and because of my hitherto gained experience in qualitative research, I similarly engaged in a close reading of the text where I highlighted the most meaningful quotes. Simultaneously, I searched inductively for themes that were pertinent to their experiences as a mother, as a single mother, and as a student. While extracting themes I kept in mind the following questions: What is it like to be a single mother and a student in this particular context? What does it mean to have no financial resources? How is their lived experience shaped by the wider structure? What are the commonalities among the participants? What is the underlying essence of the phenomenon? This strategy was utilized to understand the experiences of my participants—to respect their voices. Initially, themes were written down in my journal, reflected upon, and contrasted across the individual narratives. Once a good grasp of the data was reached I decided on the best possible way of presenting the data. Because of the nature of the themes, a case study design was utilized to show the intricate and coherent nature of their lifeworlds that would have been lost within a composite thematic analysis. Consequently, the narratives of eight participants (four from the U.S. and four from Germany) were presented in detailed case narratives in Chapters 4 and 5. However, findings emanating from their voices are substantiated by the voices of the remaining eight participants. The cases that were included for in-depth analysis are highlighted in grey in Tables 1 and 2.

**Representation of lifeworlds.** The problem of intersubjectivity that was discussed above is also mirrored in the final representation of the findings to the reader. First of all, it is important
to generate an intersubjective understanding between the reader and the study, and second, it is important to show that intersubjectivity was generated between me and the respondents in such a way that I could credibly present my participants’ subjective meanings of their lifeworlds.

In order to create a space of trustworthiness between the reader and me, I utilized thick description as proposed by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973). Borrowed from ethnography, this method lends itself to the description and interpretation of the context, perception, and situationality of my participants. His concept further relates to the concept of structural corroboration, as introduced by Eisner (1997), meaning that themes created by the researcher should be grounded in and presented as a triangulation of data. Because of the small sample size and the subjective nature of qualitative research, it is important to provide substantive evidence supporting the findings. The substantiating evidence serves to guard the findings against being minimized as an exception and rendered insignificant. Therefore, my interpretive findings in this study were substantiated by empirical qualitative and quantitative data underlining the essential characteristic of the phenomenon—yielding an interpretive generalization. Further, Eisner (1997) proposes that for a study to be credible, competent others should be able to come to similar interpretation of the data. As I based interpretation and themes on the verbatim of the participants, disclosed my positionality, and connected findings to outside literature and studies, it is hoped that readers will come to the same conclusion thereby achieving consensual validation and shared meanings (Eisner, 1997). Finally, Eisner suggests another criterion for the evaluation of credibility—referential adequacy. Referential adequacy relates to the way the narrative findings connect to literature in related fields and open up new ways of seeing for the reader. It is anticipated that the contrasting nature of this research study will enable the reader to engage in new conversations regarding assumptions about single mothers in
poverty, the meaning of social rights, and the distribution of responsibility for the well-being of all people.

Conclusion

Emanating from my basic belief that reality is subjective, relative, and socially constructed, a rationale for utilizing a qualitative research approach in general, and a phenomenological approach in particular, was presented. Further, my choice of and argument for particular methods and practices in relation to the philosophical underpinnings of the phenomenological approach were provided. I presented a rationale for using this particular method to develop an experience-near understanding of what it means to be a low-income, single student mother in the U.S. and Germany. Through constant ascription and examination of assumptions, concepts, practices, and examples in relation to the actual research question, I hope to establish an intersubjective understanding and to shed light on the multiple meanings embedded in the existential lifeworlds of my participants.
Chapter 4: Voices from Michigan, U.S.

In this chapter single student mothers’ lived experiences are presented—two single student mothers enrolled at two different public universities and two single student mothers enrolled at two different public community colleges in Michigan. These narrative depict what it means to be a single mother and a student (and sometimes a worker) without having any family or other close-knit support system.

Keeara

You have so many things on your mind that you have to do. You know, I can't miss work or, you know I can't buy food, or can't pay rent, and then, I am obligated to my school, because I committed myself to that. Because I felt that it would help me in the future. . . . I can't miss school, so at some point I have to start paying back those loans. . . . and trying to at least help out with my kids' homework or else they won't progress in school. So, yeah, it is a lot of responsibility at stake. And it is like everything you doing it all by yourself. And I never get a break, like, I never, I never even had, I don't even remember, when I had time for myself.

Thirty-year-old Keeara is a full-time factory worker, a senior in social work at a public Michigan university, and the African American mother of three young children—one 4-year-old girl and two boys aged five and six. She has been separated from the father of the children for about five years. As Keeara describes, “He is not that type of parent that really shows interest or want to be a responsible parent. . . . he doesn’t call them or check on them.” Keeara recognizes the importance of a stable and reliable environment for her children as well as the challenges around school. She has taken charge of the children during the school year and the father has taken care of them in the summer time. Keeara’s struggles and obstacles are vast and complex,
yet she is intrinsically motivated to be a role model for other people in her situation. She has persevered and by “pushing through” has managed to maintain a grade point average (GPA) of 3.5 and will be graduating with her bachelor’s degree in 2017.

Keeara does not have any family support. Her own parents divorced when she was about six and sadly her mother passed away when she was ten. Her grandmother cared for Keeara after her mother’s death, but she never received the loving relationship for which she yearned. She states, “I feel like I was like the favorite of the family, but I really didn’t feel the love that I wanted.”

The lack of emotional, financial, and family support infuses and is represented in her complex experiences as a single mother, a student, and worker. She critically assesses society in general and how various institutions—such as the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) or even universities—are built around the assumption of an existing support network. She describes:

I feel like the way that society, the world is shaped now . . . [is] not really considering . . . [our] life situations . . . even when I do have relatives, you know family and friends. . . . It’s not like I can really depend on their support. Or any kind of help. So it’s like you are all on your own. . . . I feel like, even when you are applying for food stamps, they just automatically assume that you have a family or friend. . . . It is automatically assumed that there is somebody there that will help you when you need it. . . . if I need to graduate, I know that I am required to be in class every day on time, make sure I am doing my assignments, and just doing what I need to do to graduate. And when it comes to a situation where it’s like I have other things going on, other things than just school, that is
not really factored in, . . . ‘cause they think that somebody that you can count on will be
there, but in reality it is not like that, ‘cause we all have our own struggles. . . .

Growing up in poverty, Keeara is aware of the importance of higher education for economic
stability and the opportunities for her children that flow from it. She paints the picture of a future
without a higher degree and states:

When you like, kind of poor, you really don't have a lot of money. It is either you are
going to work two jobs or maybe even three jobs to kind of cover what is needed. You
know, I know that my kids eventually will be active, they want to participate in some
type of extracurricular activities, and that costs and you know, whatever the expense is, I
want to have the money so they can participate in it. And I don't want to be working three
jobs and still try to cover everything else.

To become unstuck from poverty Keeara decided to enroll in a community college to
“take another route” than her family by “getting back to school, and you know further my
education that way.” As a single mother without any family support in a country with meager
means-tested welfare programs that leaves many people without a higher education degree
trapped in low-wage jobs without any outlook for a better future, Keeara knows that she is the
only person that she can rely on to promote any change. She states:

My kids depend on me, so it is not like, somebody else is going to do it, so I don't have
the choice but, you know, do what I have to do or need to do. And I mean that is a
struggle [laughs], but I am determined to fight through it. . . . I almost have to self-talk
myself into it. Because that is all I have is myself. So I have to like to really mentally talk
to myself to kind of empower my own that I can do it.
When Keeara started college in 2010—with an infant and pregnant—she did not have a car. Matching the bus-schedule with bringing her son to childcare, going to school, and volunteering 20 hours in return for a paycheck from MDHHS made her life even more stressful and hectic. Hopping on and off from buses, waiting for buses, catching another bus, and strategically planning every single day so as not to be late required discipline and haste. She states, “Everything had to be fast, fast, fast. And that is how I operate now. It is like everything is fast, I gotta go fast to catch this or that.”

After receiving her associate degree in human services from the community college; Keeara transferred to a university to get her bachelor’s degree. She further transitioned from volunteer work and working part-time at McDonalds, to a 40-hour second shift schedule at a factory. She now has a car, but to add to her concerns, she cannot afford car insurance. Despite her full-time job at the factory, her monthly income of $1581 hardly covers rent, utilities, car payments, and childcare. She relies on Supplemental Nutrition Food Assistance (SNAP) food assistance that amount to $243\textsuperscript{18} a month to cover the family’s subsistence needs and as well as school loans that have accumulated to more than $100,000 dollars in order to cover tuition, books, and other educational expenses. In addition, the ongoing anxiety resulting from unpredictable encounters with MDHHS becomes evident as she describes a recent reassessment of her case. When a scheduled phone interview was not followed through by her case worker, Keeara became concerned that she would not get the needed food assistance for the next months. Tenaciously, she tried to get a hold of the case worker, leaving voicemail after voicemail, without any luck. Finally, she spoke to a supervisor who accused her of not having left her case number on the voicemail. This was not true, but the asymmetrical power relation leaves the

\textsuperscript{18} In a follow up conversation she told me that it has been reduced to $173 now.
distortion of her story unquestioned by this agency upon which she is forced to depend. She anticipates that she will be cut off from food assistance temporarily and looks to the future with dismay:

They [MDHHS] wanna take you to a back step. . . . she is going to send me something, “Oh you need to show proof of this” I have already submitted all the information to them and then I have to go back and wait and see if I am gonna get denied or not. When it should already have been done by now. That’s the kind of thing that goes on, when people need, when people are relying on something that they are eligible for but it’s like, it’s a game!

The descriptions of her encounters with the welfare bureaucracy unveil her powerless, voiceless, and vulnerable position. She states, “They kind of make you feel like you can do nothing, you are so restricted and like you relying on and you need them—but it is like they make it hard for you too as well.”

Now, in addition to attending two courses every semester, Keeara works five days a week from 3:00 to 11:00 p.m. Her odd hours at the factory complicate her childcare situation as she needs care for her three children Monday through Friday until the midnight hours. Keeara does not receive childcare assistance from MDHHS anymore “because I worked a lot of hours, was making too much money, they had to terminate my childcare. Honestly, I don't see how that is even possible.” Thus, she feels lucky and grateful for the licensed family day care as the childcare provider “is very lenient” regarding tuition and payment schedule. The provider usually charges $150 a week per child but makes an exception for Keeara and her children.

Through the established relationship built up over the last years—and gradually increasing hours to accommodate Keeara’s shifting work and school schedule—they arranged a payment schedule
wherein Keeara agreed to transfers all of her tax money—including her Earned Income Tax Credit which usually amounts to around $5,000—to the childcare provider at the beginning of the year to cover her childcare costs. While she considers the flexibility and courtesy of the provider to be a blessing, the second shift work for Keeara in general means extended custodial outside care and disrupted sleep for the children because they are picked up close to midnight every day. Keeara describes a typical day:

Every morning I leave my house around 8:25 a.m. I drop the boys off at school, and [my] daughter, she attends day care. . . . So my classes are on Mondays and Wednesdays from like 9:00 to 2:10 p.m. and right around 2:10 is time for me to go to work. I work second shift and I work from 3:00 to 11:00 p.m. Then, by the time I get off, I pick up my kids at day care, and then I go home try to get them settled. . . . I am back at home around 11:45 p.m. at night . . . And I have to put them back to sleep once I have picked them up. So there is like an hour delay and sometimes they don't go back to sleep until like two o'clock in the morning. I mean they do get up on their own. They get up every morning at 6:00 or 6:30 on their own. . . . I don't get eight hours sleep, sometimes not even four.

Sometimes I have to put some all-nighters to try to work on my assignments for school. Because I am still in the middle of trying to get my son up to trying to get to use the restroom.

Indebted to her childcare provider who secures her capability to pursue a higher education degree, Keeara’s family subsists under minimal economic circumstances, and Keeara expresses her concerns about the quality of care. She is painfully aware of her restricted choices and states, “I am in a situation where I can't complain because you know she is the ground for
me to work and go to school. And I do appreciate that. But . . . she won't help them with their homework.”

Keeara has no choice—she cannot fulfill her aspirations for better outside childcare nor can she provide the bulk of the needed care by herself. She describes, “I know, that I don't have the opportunity to expose my kids to a school environment and I don't really have the opportunity to really take out the time to really prepare them for school.” When her oldest son started kindergarten a year ago she frequently had to pick him up because of behavioral issues and “of course that is kind of cutting into the money thing” as her precarious employment does not provide any paid sick days for children. In addition to feeling guilty about not being able to attend events at her boys’ school, she blames herself for their behavioral issues. The older one shows signs of problems with self-regulation, and the younger one has been retained in kindergarten “because he didn’t have that exposure or that training before entering school.” At the same time, Keeara is irritated that she is paying all the money to a provider who is not supporting her children’s educational needs. She expresses her frustration:

Like, I mean, you’re [the provider] not preparing them for school. I mean you’re not helping them to do the homework, you’re not teaching them the ABCs or recognizing their letters. You are not teaching them how to write. You’re not doing anything but sitting them in front of the TV and then you feed them . . . and then she makes them ready to go for sleep . . . but she does not help them with their homework. . . . I feel like I am paying all that money then I am expecting something that will be better for my kids, and not only for my kids, but for me as well.

Keeara’s lifeworld is intricate and shaped around her lack of financial, family, and state support. Her many responsibilities and obligations as a single mother, worker, and caregiver, leave her
with few choices and a lack of time to provide her children with the care she wants to give them, a lack of time to sleep, and even a lack of time to access possible support, information, and resources that might be available at her university or other places: “I think the support may be out there—it’s just that you have to come and get it.” She concludes:

You got to have money to be able to be mobile. That is the core of life. That is the core of living. That is just the core. And without money you don't have time. You got to make time for your money . . . [But] you are already scrapping at the bottom of the barrel to get your needs met.

Keeara looks forward to some relief in the future and emphasizes her desire to move to a different state when she has finished her bachelor’s degree in 2017. She states, “I look at it, like, Michigan was good but a struggle but I feel it is time to turn in to relief.” Keeara believes that because she has experienced so many obstacles and challenges, like knowing how it feels “to have nothing” and what it means to have “nobody around to support you,” she has become “kind of a strong person.” She knows that such experiences will help her to empathize with others and she stresses her desire to work with youth and “empower them… kind of giving back to the community.”

Keeara’s lifeworld depicts a life alone, without any support of friends and family in the U.S. With no family who could support her in financial or childcare emergencies, no family who could pick up her children when they are sick, no family who could watch her children so she has some time for herself, Keeara is completely dependent on formal outside childcare. Keera also depends on outside financial support through precarious employment that when combined with her responsibilities as a caregiver leaves her with no choice but to place her children in a mediocre but costly family day care. Keeara has few choices at all—on the contrary, she is
compromising a great deal when it comes to her childcare situation in order to hold together her family’s fragile and vulnerable existence. During a conversation after the interview, I pointed out that her daughter might be eligible for the Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP), a high-quality free childcare program for low-income parents at the university’s on-campus childcare. Even though she was not aware of this program, Keeara explains that while she preferred to choose the higher quality program, she would not be able to enroll her daughter there because her own work schedule would not permit her to pick her up in the afternoon and drive her to the other childcare provider.

Denise

My goal one is for security. I would love to work for the government in their human resources department. And in that way I know that I will be paid well. I know there is job security. . . . I am open. I just want to move out of Michigan.

Since 2014, 35-year-old Denise has been a business student at a public Michigan university. Denise is also the African American mother of an 11-year-old daughter and a 2-year-old son. Growing up and living in an urban area in Michigan where more than 41% of people lived in poverty between 2010 and 2014 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.), she desperately wants to move to a different state to provide her children with a better life and, as she puts it, to a life with “more opportunities.” She states, “In this area you don’t have much to choose from unless you gonna pay but I can’t afford to pay to put my [daughter] in a school that is more challenging.” Concerned about the impact of their restricted choices and the lack of opportunities for her children’s future, Denise describes her aspirations for them:
You don’t have to choose to be a hairdresser . . . if that’s what you want to do let’s focus on that. . . . I want you to be open to everything and make an educated decision . . . the world is so much bigger than Flint.

Denise and her two children currently live in subsidized housing and subsist on MDHHS cash and childcare assistance, food assistance, a work-study grant, and student loans that have accumulated to almost $80,000. While both fathers of her children pay minimal child support, “neither one are really involved” and the financial support is counted against her cash assistance of $460 a month.

Denise started college right after high school in 1999. Her love for old houses led her to pursue an architectural degree at a private Midwestern university where tuition and fees amounted to about $10,000 a year. Denise was working and studying with no financial support at that time and this took a great toll on her, in addition to burdening her with a large debt. Denise recollects how difficult it was to keep up with coursework while working: “When I tried architecture. I was going to school and working and that was very hard, and that was without kids.” Denise describes that she had to drop out of the program due to a traumatizing experience two years into the program.

When Denise’s daughter was born in 2004, she moved back to her mother in Flint, Michigan. Enrolling her daughter in a church center-based childcare, Denise worked part-time and enrolled in some courses at a college to follow her passion. She quickly realized that the architectural degree and the project work that it required were not feasible given the demands of raising her young daughter alone while working. She stopped out for a longer period of time, moved to Ohio, and focused on working in a call center and caring for her daughter. However, Denise found it difficult to reconcile the demands of the job with her sense of right and wrong.
She describes this work as selling people “saving accounts that they don’t need and credit cards that they don’t need or want.” She goes on to state, “I don’t like pressure on people . . . I don’t have a good conscience pushing them into other stuff that they don’t need.” Denise got fired after seven years in the call center because she could not keep up with required quotas.

When her grandfather in Michigan passed away Denise decided to move back to the state to take care of her grandmother. Back in Flint, Michigan, and pregnant with her son, Denise found herself working at another low-wage job, and she suddenly realized that she could not go on like that:

It just opened my eyes . . . when they announced that they gave everybody that dollar raise [to $11]. . . . And there were grown people, like people my mother’s age cheering. . . . And I am like this is not much money. How are you guys living? . . . I was in shock and disbelief. Because I was like things were already tight with $15, . . . living with my grandmother on $11 and still struggling, I don’t see how people have houses and cars, and mortgages on $11. . . . that was my motivation to go back to school. . . . with a degree I would be able to provide for my family with no worries. . . . normal worries but not like worries how are we gonna eat.

Denise prays for an opportunity to go back to school without having to worry about working for once. In 2014, she enrolled in a Bachelor of Business program at a public Midwestern university. As many of her credits transferred, she is now a junior with an anticipated graduation in the winter of 2017. She currently lives with her children in subsidized housing that she is very grateful for as it allows her to work part-time instead of full-time. Moving away from her grandmother turned out to be another blessing, as her grandmother’s house is located in Flint. This area was impacted by lead contaminated water, which has had
damaging impacts on many citizens in this part of the city—the scale of the damage was so severe that this scandal reached international attention (Southall, 2015; Zamperoni, 2016). It is especially damaging for young children’s brain development. Fortunately, Denise and her children’s blood lead levels give no cause for concern.

When Denise initially started at her new school, she applied for MDHHS cash assistance and was appreciative that she could just focus on studying without any work requirements. Unfortunately, this arrangement was temporary, as Denise explains, “My caseworker let me know last minute, you can’t count your school as your hours anymore. You can only do 12 months of that. . . . So then now, I am stuck with volunteering and working.”

To continue receiving cash assistance, Denise volunteered at the Women’s Center at the university before she was accepted for a work study program. Being in the work study program proves to be a valuable asset to Denise as it provides the flexibility she needs as a single mother. It qualifies as the internship requirement for her degree, and the $1,000 grant Denise receives per semester is not counted against her cash assistance nor any other benefits she receives. Denise shares that this arrangement “helps a lot.” However, as the work study usually only requires 12 hours of the 20 hours of work a week required by MDHHS, Denise must fill in the gap with volunteer work. She volunteers at different locations, such as “McLaren in a trauma center” or “with community development.” Despite this rare opportunity to work part-time at the university and keep all of her other benefits, Denise’s financial resources are tight and her time for her children is constrained. Denise shares:

It’s been hard. It’s been very hard. Especially financially. . . . the major challenges is balancing—having that balance between work, family, personal struggles. And finding time for myself. Because I don’t have a lot of people who say, “I will watch your kids.”
Denise’s two-year old son is currently enrolled in a church-based center childcare. MDHHS provides her with childcare subsidies but only for the time she is at work (20 hours)—leaving her with additional childcare expenses of about $80 a month. Rules and regulations imposed by MDHHS are partly the reason why she cannot enroll her son in the higher-quality on-campus childcare center as the schedule and payment plan does not align with Denise’s work schedule and MDHHS requirements. Denise explains, “I wanna say they had to be full time [in the on campus childcare] . . . you pick ‘em up early and they still gonna charge you for that slot. . . That doesn’t work for me and my schedule.” Thus, she decides “to stick with that facility [church-based childcare].” Denise explains that she does not trust individual people when it comes to family daycare—a reason why she chose the center-based childcare. She recollects her past childcare experiences when her daughter was young and speaks fondly of the childcare center her daughter attended before they moved to Ohio in 2007: “They had a really wonderful curriculum, she was learning, she was learning sign language.” However, in Ohio Denise worked the second shift at the call center and needed childcare in the evening. Working full-time at $15 an hour, Denise only received a minimal child care subsidy. As the center-based childcare hours did not align with her work schedule, Denise needed additional childcare covering the time between closing hours and the time she leaves work. She states, “I would get a list from them [MDHHS] and I would just call, you know. And it is really a luck of the draw. You just don’t know what you gonna get.”

At that time Denise did not have “the luck of the draw”—she was frustrated and concerned about the quality of care at state licensed provider who also charged her over and above the three hours of care she needed. She recollects:
This lady was not feeding her [daughter] dinner. . . just makes hot dogs . . . put them on a plate. Not on individual plates, on one plate . . . if you missed, if you didn’t hurry up to eat, you didn’t eat . . . It wasn’t vegetables and fruit . . . It was just sad.

The whole situation became alarming when her daughter began showing signs of regression, such as “peeing on herself.” Denise recalls: “I said, ‘No, you are coming out of here, because that is a sign of stress and trauma.’” Denise immediately pulled her daughter out and looked for a different childcare provider. The second person taking care of her daughter showed promise at the beginning, but Denise’s trust in her began to fade when she picked her daughter up one day to find that her face was partly covered in markers—without an explanation or any communication by the provider. Doubtful about the quality of care and worried about her daughter, Denise felt that she had to move her again. And she also faced scheduling problems as “it is hard to find a facility—a licensed facility—that stays open past five or six o’clock.”

Fortunately, Denise finally found another provider who “was a blessing” and “treated her [daughter] like family.”

Denise’s stress regarding these negative experiences with family daycare providers was aggravated by her sister’s refusal to support her with childcare around the Christmas holidays while she was looking for an additional seasonal job. Because of all the negative experiences her daughter experienced in family daycare homes when she was a young child, Denise has decided that she does not want to endure the same experiences with her young son. She explains her decision for choosing a day care center for her son:

So I just refuse to deal with people when it comes to my son and childcare. . . . I know that they [childcare facilities] have their hours listed, they are open during those hours. If they are closed for the holidays they have those listed. They give me time to plan.
Current planning for Denise’s school-age daughter proves to be challenging. Denise is frustrated that information about summer camps in her area is not announced further in advance. With minimal financial resources, she cannot deal with unexpected and short notice events and demands in general. As MDHHS does not cover the costs for most of the summer camps, Denise needs to apply for scholarships for funding—which creates further stress due to the additional time needed to complete and submit applications coupled with the uncertainty of receiving the funding. These uncertainties and stressors are compounded when Denise’s car breaks down. For two months her daily commute from home to childcare to school and back is extended to four hours. Denise explains, “Me and my son had to be at that bus stop at 7:00 a.m. in order for me to be in class at 9:00 a.m.” Fortunately, she gets approved for a car loan and has her car fixed. In addition, her sister agrees to take care of her daughter for a couple of weeks in the summer and her daughter’s father sometimes takes care of her in the summertime. Nevertheless, these options are unpredictable and make it very difficult to plan ahead.

For Denise, childcare has been a major and chronic dilemma and this dilemma appears to be a continuous problem in the near future. At the beginning of our first interview, Denise teared up when talking about the next semester. Denise usually prefers to take advantage of the online courses. Unfortunately, two of her required courses will be held in the evening from 7:00 p.m. to 9:45 p.m. With no drop-in care at the university and her mother not agreeing to take of her kids, not only must Denise find outside care, but she is also concerned about the impact on the children. With tears in her eyes, she expresses her frustration:

I have two small kids out at night. In Flint which I hate being out at night here. And my daughter has to be up at six o’clock in the morning for school. That means they have to fall asleep somewhere. I have to interrupt their sleep, take them home—I don’t know. It’s
gonna be rough. It’s gonna be rough. And I am just like dreading. . . . I have to pay somebody, because, it’s hard to find a night daycare.

Denise’s emotional distress due to the many obstacles and challenges around childcare and parenting in combination with her personal struggles is complicated by the color of her skin. She explains her fears that her children will become victim of racism:

Me as a mother, a single black mother raising a son. I mean, even me coming out of the house, every day. I am terrified. . . . just having those conversations with your children, you know. . . . I had talks with my children, with my daughter especially ‘cause she is at that age where she can talk back. . . . I am not getting on the ground, you know or whatever. So comply, comply, comply! Do what they say! You have the right to remain silent, as soon as you get your phone call, call your mother or your lawyer. That is what you do. You know what I am saying? Do not argue, do not say anything, do what they ask you to do. Come home safe. . . . make sure you make it home safe.

With all the stressors in her life, Denise has considered postponing her studies. Yet after accessing support from a counselor at the university that she had been able to utilize free of charge and that she was made aware of by the Women’s Center, she has decided to continue to strive for her degree. Denise affirms how the counselling helped her to rebuild her self-esteem “as a person and as a mother.” She explains:

I wouldn’t have made it this far . . . [It] helped me balance more. . . . When I get frustrated I have someone with a non-judgmental ear that I can talk to and also can give me tips how to deal with things. . . . It made me realize how low my self-esteem had gotten. It was still from dealing with my son’s father. . . . I can tell the difference in my
semester when I don’t go and take advantage of it—going and talking to the counselor. Because I don’t do as well. I just noticed.

Denise’s case depicts how her chances and opportunities are shaped by place, educational status, and race. Growing up in a place where more than 41% of all people live in poverty, where the median household income does not exceed $25,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.) leaves her with a desire to move to a place with more opportunities for her and her children. Her story reveals how a single mother without a higher educational degree can be stuck in low-wage employment, leaving her children stuck in precarious childcare. Denise’s vulnerable situation and her lack of choices become obvious in her many attempts to escape the poverty stricken area where she grew up—but she is always pulled back into it. Despite the many challenges, there are also a few supports that open up greater possibilities and allow Denise to enroll and persist in a bachelor’s degree in business—such as subsidized housing and MDHHS cash assistance in combination with Denise’s work-study position. These arrangements have opened up time for Denise to focus on studying and caring. The Women’s Center has played an important role in advising Denise and has served as an information outlet for identifying further help, such as the psychological counseling services which has done a great deal to promote Denise’s self-esteem, confidence, and study success.

Laura

My main motivation are my children. And I do like the fact that they see me in school. . . . in a way I think about the future, but a lot of times, in the past couple of years, it’s been like, I gotta get through today! I gotta get through today! You know, physically, emotionally, financially—you just have to keep going!
Forty-year-old Laura is the White mother of two young girls—4-year-old Amy and 6-year-old Ella. Laura returned to community college in the spring of 2015 to enroll for an associate degree in cosmetology management—a degree she had already pursued right after high school in 1995. At that time Laura had to abandon her passion due to financial constraints and instead began to work several service jobs—bartending and waitressing. Laura continued in this line of work for ten years, until she received her cosmetology license twelve years ago. Laura “loves doing hair.” This is one of the reasons she wants to pursue the “business aspect of cosmetology,” the other is to “provide a better life” for her children. In addition to her work as a hairdresser, Laura also helps out in the food pantry of the college she attends. She feels that it is important to help people as she knows what it means to be in need. She explains, “I have picked up cans when I was young.”

When Laura gave birth to her oldest daughter, Ella, six years ago, her husband, who worked in construction, urged Laura “to just quit” her job as a hairdresser. “I went to school for it!” Laura states, indicating her strong opposition to his idea. Although not quitting, Laura reduced her hours to accommodate her daughter’s needs. As a result, Laura lost many of her clients and continues to feel the repercussions of this decision in the present. Laura states, “I did lose a lot of my clients when I went part-time and then when he left I obviously had to try to work more.”

In 2013, when her youngest daughter, Amy, was one year old, Laura’s marriage unexpectedly fell apart. Laura describes how from seemingly out of nowhere her husband, after seven years of marriage, decided that he wanted a separation:
It was like a Saturday night when I got out of work, and he was just like, “Ahm, I am gonna leave. I want a separation. . . . we just put the kids to bed. So when they woke up in the morning, he was gone. And I was left to answer the questions.

The separation left a mark on Laura who states she lost 20 pounds as a consequence. She also shares that it negatively impacted her daughters—especially Ella, who temporarily received therapy “because she was very angry.” Laura has picked up more shifts at work to provide for her children, but she struggles to earn enough income to justify childcare costs: “the more I worked the more childcare costs I have. And so sometimes it's kind of like my sitter makes more than I do.”

Laura works on commission and she depends on actual clients—no clients, no income. She works four to five days a week and explains that she can only work four-hour shifts at a time: either when her children are at childcare or school, in the evening after she picks them up, or on the weekends. She details her financial predicament in the following scenario:

Like Sunday, for example, was really slow—I made $4.40 for four and a half hours. So my babysitter made more than I did—yes—and it’s difficult because it was a six hour shift but I left after four and half hours because when I look at the clock and my sitter is with my kids, you know, it’s kind of like—if I stay I might get another client, make more money, but I might not and I'm already in the hole.

When Laura was married her precarious job and unpredictable income was buffered by the second adult in the household with a decent income as well as the time it provided to avert the cost of outside childcare. Now Laura is raising the children on her own with no child support from the father and no family support nearby, and she depends mostly on babysitters and other
forms of childcare to watch her children while she works. She usually goes to work in the evenings on the days she does not attend classes in college. She states,

So I can get them home, get a snack, the sitter comes over about 20 minutes after we get home and . . . most times I don’t get home until 8:30, 9:30 p.m. So they’ll be in bed when I get home—so I don’t see them all day while they’re at school, see them for like 20 minutes and then I go off to work and go home when they are sleeping.

Laura feels guilty that she cannot spend the time with her daughters that they request from her—time she had when her husband was still around. She elaborates, “It [work] can be very stressful on all of us and I think sometimes they get angry at me? . . . Like my 6-year-old always asks, ‘Do you have work today?’”

Working when her children are not in school or in childcare causes emotional stress for Laura regarding her children’s well-being, and this is exacerbated by the unpredictability of an adequate income. There is always the possibility of losing money as she needs to pay a babysitter in order to access possible income in the first place. While Amy attends Head Start, a federal childcare program, free of charge during the day, Laura needs an additional babysitter for the time she spends at her job on the evening and weekends. Overall, she is satisfied with the quality of her two different childcare providers for her children. While Laura is grateful for the Head Start program, she would prefer to enroll Amy into the same preschool Ella went to because she liked the quality. But as the preschool cannot confirm a schedule and time in advance, Laura has dropped this thought and keeps Amy in Head Start. Still, Laura is concerned about the quality of the Head Start program and wonders “are they going through her letters and numbers, you know things like that.”
Laura is also very content with her current babysitter as she is flexible, lives right down the road, and “the girls love her. . . . she is very sweet.” As a caretaker of her own parents, the 56-year-old babysitter does not have another job and proves to be very reliable and understanding when it comes to payment. She has taken care of Laura’s daughters for the past one and a half years. Before that Laura had three other babysitters—one of which was an 18-year-old girl. She describes this exhausting experience complicated by the babysitter’s lack of personal transportation:

When I get home I had to pack my kids up, even if they were sleeping, put them in my car, drive her home, get back, put them in bed—so it would be 10:00, 10:30 and I would be still in work clothes—[and] have to eat dinner for myself.

Laura currently does not receive MDHHS childcare or cash assistance, nor child support from the father of the children. She subsists on her inadequate income amounting to about $10,000 a year and food assistance. She also has health insurance for herself and the kids and has not yet had any extra expenses regarding college. She receives federal Pell Grants that cover her tuition. Additional costs—like the almost $500 for three books last semester—are defrayed by an additional scholarship which she received because, she says, “my grades are so good.” Laura’s current expenses for childcare account almost for 50% of her entire income as she pays her babysitter between $400 and $500 dollars a month—“I don’t know how I do it. Honestly,” she states.

Laura was relieved that she could keep the house after the divorce—paying the mortgage is cheaper than renting “some place.” Not only is it cheaper, the house also provides a home—it symbolizes the last little bit of security that is left in her and her children’s unstable lives. She emphasizes, “It is the only place they have ever known. And that is my only thing. I try to be as
consistent that I can with the girls. . . . it is their home.” While on the one hand Laura expresses her relief for having this home, on the other hand she feels “kind of trapped.” She desires to live in a better school district for her girls and closer to her mother and friends but cannot move. She explains, “My house isn’t worth what I bought it for—I am kind of stuck.” Laura is relieved that she has a car that she needs to go to college that is 30 minutes away, drive her children back and forth to school as there is no busing, and get to and from work—but she is worried because it is already 14 years old. Laura describes her desperation when her car temporarily broke down:

I was crying and stressing out with tow truck guy, and I was like “I need it fixed. I have to get my kids. I can walk to my one kid’s school. But I have to drive to the other one. I have to pick her up in three hours.”

Laura is all on her own. She is the one who brushes her daughters’ hair in morning; she is the one feeding and washing them; she is the one picking them up from school; she is the one answering all the questions; she is the one putting them to bed; she is the one who is tired of telling them “no all the time.” And Laura is angry—she is angry that the father of her daughters just disappeared, that he does not provide them with needed financial child support, and she is angry about the indifferent attitude by the court system that does not seem to care about her children and their well-being. She tearfully describes:

The court system is failing the kids. That really irritates me. . . . so we went in March [to the court] and they paid some money. . . . Then he stopped paying again. . . . And then we went back in June. And then he paid some more. . . . I said, “So am I supposed to have to take a day off work, pay for gas, pay for parking, pay for childcare, so I can come down here every two months to hopefully get some child support?” And the guy said, “Well he
is making an effort . . . he must not have grown up yet.” You know, I am so tired of
hearing that!

Laura is extremely frustrated—each time she goes to the court she spends more than $50
knowing that nobody has her back. The money is lost—she could file for reimbursement, but that
would be a pointless process as she has not even received any child support from her ex-husband
for eight months—since September of 2015. And before that she only received small amounts
and that very irregularly. Laura received a letter from the court showing that he owes her about
$33,000—but because of his disappearance what does this piece of paper actually mean for
Laura and her children? She concludes:

They [the court] say they’re in the best interests of the child but I don’t think they really
think about the children. . . . because he’s not making the effort he should as the other
parent, I don’t see my kids as much. So basically they lost both their parents. You know
because it’s forcing me to work more or try to—and then also going to school. It is just a
snowball.

Laura’s lack of faith in outside support is reinforced by encounters with the welfare
bureaucracy. Her health insurance contributions have risen from zero to $30 a month—an
expense that Laura cannot tolerate: “Thirty dollars is not a lot for some people, but . . . I am
poverty level.” Talking to her caseworker about this issue Laura felt insulted and degraded by
her attitude and comments. Filled with indignation, she says,

She talks to me like a piece of crap. . . . When I called her and asked her about it, I mean
she basically was like, “Well you have had it for a year—so now you have to pay.” And I
am like, “But I don’t make the money”—and her response was “Well you have better
health care than I do.” . . . I am going to school, I work, I take care of my kids and my
house all by myself, you know. I am not just sitting on the couch eating bonbons and watching TV—it’s so frustrating.

Laura’s attempts to talk to her caseworker’s supervisor are fruitless. Her state of distress shaped by the way she has been treated by her ex-husband, the court system, and the welfare bureaucracy intersects with other stressors resulting from her student status. Concerned, Laura considers the upcoming semester as she has to try to match the two different school schedules of two different schools of her daughters with her own school and work schedule. Laura’s class schedule overlaps with the pickup time of her kids, and while Ella could be picked up from the school by the babysitter, she is currently troubled on how to handle the pickup of Amy, whose childcare is farther away. Laura hopes that “he [the professor] will be understanding, . . . to leave a couple of minutes early . . . because I have to pick up at least one of my children.”

Laura is only four classes away from receiving her degree. She explains that going back to college after being out of school was nerve-racking at the beginning. She shares her feelings of irritation and embarrassment when met by the reactions of some fellow students: “Some people looked at me like I was stupid.” Laura also describes one professor as demeaning: “She was like, ‘Oh it has been a while since you were in school.’” Shrugging off their reactions, working hard, and feeling motivated by her daughters, Laura has persevered despite the many obstacles and the lack of support.

In Laura’s case it is obvious how her lack of supports shapes her lifeworld and leaves her in a very vulnerable and precarious situation where she attempts to balance her different roles as the earner, the student, and the mother. Despite her meager income, Laura only receives state assistance with food and health insurance. Lack of financial support, the emotional baggage from the failed marriage and endless battles for child support, the unpredictability of income due to
her commission based job, her shaming experiences with the welfare bureaucracies and college professors, and her sense of guilt about not fulfilling her role as a mother—a role she fulfilled according to her ideal at the time when she was married—often leaves her in a state of despair.

Erin

Michigan chokes its own citizens. . . . And to only put a cap on a one year education and women are locked into poverty for the rest of their lives. And this is working their butt off to get through that one year try to do something different. So, I am down with Hillary’s free education for the poor—they deserve it—that is how we change things!

Forty-four-year old Erin is the White single mother of six children and currently a student in the nursing program at a public Michigan community college. Her youngest five children are living with her and are between the ages of 7 and 16—her 21-year-old was raised by his father’s relatives. Living in Las Vegas at that time, Erin had been married for 12 years to the father of her children, but she had to pick up what Erin describes as all the broken pieces after their divorce and the “wreckage of a bad marriage.” Her husband was the breadwinner and as Erin had no skills, no education, and no child support, she had to rely on a meager welfare support payment of $200 per month and food stamps for her family’s subsistence. Despite her lack of work and educational experiences, at a critical juncture in her life, Erin was given a job at the City Athletic Club that helped her to get her back on her feet:

I’ll be forever grateful for that man. ‘Cause I worked, you know, he allowed me to stay knowing that I was kind of fragile, and you know, wasn’t really work ready. I learned the skills of being work ready and I worked there for up to two years. And I was able to get my student loan out of default.
Committed to her children and dedicated to creating a better life for them, Erin enrolled in a couple of classes at a community college in Vegas—as she “really wanted to make major changes, . . . to get out of Vegas.”

In 2013, Erin and her children had the opportunity to rent the house of a deceased relative in a suburban area of Michigan. Fortunately, they are able to transfer their Section 8 housing voucher—which Erin describes as a “divine intervention” in their lives. Her haunting fear and apprehension about the future of her children was temporarily put to rest: “I could see what was happening to the other people in my situation, and their children . . . and the streets would get them—you know, they would end up on drugs or—and the cycle would repeat itself.”

In Michigan, Erin began as a full-time student at a community college in the fall of 2013. At that time she also had to deal with finding childcare—in her case a babysitter for her youngest daughter. Now a year later, with her child in kindergarten, she has to juggle her schedule to find time to pick her daughter up from the bus: “So now that creates more stress.”

Erin has had not been to school for over 20 years and describes herself as a typical statistic: a “dropout” from junior high, a “runaway” with a “severe past,” and a “recovering alcoholic,” who received her GED sixteen years ago in 1990. As a single mother who has lived through what she describes as “absolute poverty,” she experiences intense anxiety about her new environment. Erin feels that she is so different from the typical 20-year-old student: “I didn’t even know how to be a college student at first, you know, and I felt like I kind of will be embarrassing myself. . . . and I can’t quite put a finger on it.” She wonders if it has something do with her that makes her “different, or is it them? . . . But they tend to team and then exclude.”

Erin’s anxiety is not calmed by the attitudes of some of her teachers. She describes some of the encounters with professors during her first steps into this new college experience:
I feel really scared sometimes, you know. . . and I don’t know if it was my anxiety that showed but I had my first two teachers that I felt really judged by and personally criticized. . . . I just was made to feel stupid, I guess in classes. . . . It was very hard to function. . . . And I was so afraid, I had so much at stake, you know, I felt very threatened.

With determination, hard work, excellent grades, and academic rigor, Erin has overcome her self-doubts of being in the right place, partially instilled by other positive encounters with student and faculty attitudes towards her. However, her hopes and dreams for a nursing degree—which she perceives as the only viable option for living beyond subsistence—are nearly derailed by her encounter with Michigan’s welfare bureaucracy. During her last semester of prerequisite courses, Erin was taking six classes. On her final stretch, she received a notice from MDHHS “to stop everything and go to community service instead.” She talks about the different pressures the welfare state imposes on her and describes Michigan as “a very cruel place.” Erin painfully learns that Michigan only permits one year of schooling for welfare recipients, and she becomes very desperate, describing the subsequent weeks as “the most stressful times of [her] life.” With four weeks left in the semester, Erin struggles to overcome the burdens imposed by the punitive welfare system after several encounters with her caseworker. Erin’s caseworker refuses to help her, she states the she “would tell me misinformation I knew was not true.” Consequently, she strategically contacts the caseworker’s supervisor who—after repeated requests—eventually listens to her concerns. Erin describes his response:

He [supervisor of the caseworker] is like, “We could have done this for her all along, you know.” So she [caseworker] gave me my time. And I finished my classes and I proved to them that I was doing exactly what I said I was doing.
This stressful and worrisome process—and the unpredictability of its outcome—actually had a bright side in the end. While very uncommon, it led to a decision that secured her welfare benefits for the duration of the time necessary to finish her nursing degree. This is typically not the practice in Michigan. Michigan’s cash assistance program—the Family Independence Program (FIP)—requires eligible single mothers with children under 6 years to work at least 20 hours in return for receiving any benefits from the government (Ruark, 2015). Work activities that count towards work requirements include unsubsidized employment, subsidized private-sector employment, subsidized public-sector employment, work experience, on-the-job training, job search and job readiness assistance, community service program, providing childcare services to an individual who is participating in a community service program, and vocational education training limited to 12 months. With Erin jumping through some more hoops, such as working in the work study program on campus for nine months, her DHHS caseworker’s supervisor made the seemingly impossible, possible, by intervening to permit Erin to focus on her studies without worrying about extra tasks or work requirements in return for her in cash assistance. According to a conversation with Peter Ruark (personal communication, September 8, 2016), senior policy analyst at Michigan League for Public Policy, this exception might have been a result because of Michigan’s work participation rate amongst FIP recipients, which is above the federal mandated 50%. Erin shares her gratitude for this exception:

I am very fortunate that that happened [almost being cut off from welfare] because he [the MDHHS caseworker’s supervisor] told me that if I get into that clinical program, that he would make sure that I could continue my resources. If I got into the nursing program he would get me through the program even though I was in schooling and
violating, he was using some loopholes. So he was able to do that for me and so now I am kind of able to relax and just do what I am doing.

While the supervisor’s intervention provides Erin with enormous relief and a temporary respite from the terror of being cut off from cash assistance, she does not really give the impression of being “relaxed”—her words and tense posture belie her strong fear of failure. In our conversations it becomes obvious that she knows what is at stake, as she describes:

I am terrified. You know, like I said, I have never felt more stressed. It is like a survival mode all the time. . . . If I fail a class, it could snowball into the future. Even just one class, I don’t have the time and the anxiety affects studying. . . . I need to be able to reduce stress, so I can just be at peace . . . Somehow I have been able to manage . . . [But] it’s so detrimental.

Erin currently utilizes some counseling at her college—just to “see what happens.” Completely alone as a single parent, with no family or other support, Erin tearfully talks with great appreciation about her “go-to person” at the college: the coordinator of the special population center, Jane. Erin describes Jane as someone who “always can fix things, she is the high in scenes advocate, she is an incredible resource . . . I am so grateful for her . . . She is a gift to people like me and there need to be more of her.” In Erin’s eyes, Jane not only provides her with much needed emotional support, but also assists her with financial and motivational support that is so vital for her progress and for building up her self-confidence and self-worth. Consequently, as Erin looks ahead, she states, “I think I will approach this next year with more centeredness and more strength and more self-assuredness.”

Strength is needed for coordinating the many different lives in Erin’s household while pursuing a demanding and time-intense degree in nursing. Matching the different bus schedules
of her children with her own responsibilities as a student often becomes problematic and
concentrating on studying while keeping the children busy is tough. In addition, preparing food
for six people, keeping the house clean, washing clothes, and all of the many other domestic
chores imposed on her already busy schedule take a toll on her daily survival. She describes a
day in her life:

When I am in clinicals I have to be up at 4:30 in the morning. . . . All the kids have
responsibilities, . . . they go to three different schools, so my 12-year-old was able to be
responsible for my 10-year old and my 7-year old. And they got on the bus together. Now
this year, I don’t know, I might have to drop them off at daycare, their busses come and
go all at different times. And then I stress about all that . . . If in a perfect world when
things are working out, the kids can take the bus back to the day care in the evening.
Otherwise they come home and they have been there together and they have been
fighting, tearing the house up. Food everywhere, there is a big mess, and they are
watching TV. So then I get home . . . I need to make healthy meals, and I try to clean the
house, and I need to do all that . . . by then I haven’t even be able to focus on studying
because it’s been a long hard day. . . . so that is usually four days a week, and then I have
to spend three days a week doing nothing but studying. It’s super hard because now I
have five children and they are all home together on weekends. And they don’t let me
study. So it’s the most stressful thing.

Erin’s description of her hectic life as a single mother is just a condensed excerpt of her
life—leaving out the consistent actual arguments, questions, and demands made by children—
but it nevertheless vividly describes her frantic schedule and the juggling act she goes through
every day. On top of all the juggling and the anxiety about school, she worries a lot about her
children, especially her 13-year-old son who is anything but interested in school. Lacking the time and energy to attentively support her children’s educational needs, Erin hopes that “the school system can fill in those gaps.” While this approach seems to work for all her daughters, it does not work for her son:

He is not able to find what he needs there [the school]... He wants to try to be ADHD—anything to make excuses for not being very bored with school... wanting to get into trouble... so [we] went that route.

Erin stresses her relief about living in a suburb outside of a city with a poverty rate of almost 42% and worries about s future scenario when could lose her place, wondering, “Would I be stuck in Flint?” Erin recognizes that “a person in my income position should be in a low-income economic place like Flint. That is where I belong.” Erin’s existence and that of her children is barely secured. Living financially and emotionally on the edge, she describes her family situation:

Right now they need school clothes and they need school supplies... I don’t want to touch that. It’s a five, six hundred dollars bill... I have to be really frugal and try to stretch what we have... I spend a third of welfare money they are paying for you paying simply for electricity... You know we pay to get up in the morning in a house every day... the dollars that we stretch—that is paying for us to exist comfortably outside of the shelter. So we have our lights on, we do have our internet, I have a cellphone... [and] I find things that I can do outdoors with them. That’s the nice thing about Michigan as opposed to Vegas is that I can take them to a park.

However, according to Erin, information regarding resources is hard to come by in Michigan in contrast to Vegas. Erin describes her impression that people have the most negative
assumptions about her—“[they] think that I am here to work the system, that I am lying about something, so they are not giving me the information”—and only three years into living in Michigan she finds out “the hard way” that she can actually apply for some financial support regarding her utility bills. She continues talking about the punitive welfare bureaucracy that if “you miss one shred of mail, you can lose your seat, start all over and then it’s like a snowball in your life.” Erin’s continuous fear of losing the necessary cash assistance almost became real on one occasion when she received a letter warning her that she would be cut from her food and cash assistance because she had failed to turn in a missing piece of information. She speedily resolved this situation by turning the missing document in the following day. However, the terror of potentially being cut caused her world to almost fall apart as she knew that even being cut of welfare temporarily would be disastrous: “You can plummet, with one or two months without resources, a family in my situation can lose everything.”

Erin is striving for a better life for her children. She has strategically planned to get out of poverty while fully aware that “the clock is running”—and that all the support resources she receives are contingent on her successfully passing all of her courses. Despite the evolving anxiety, time pressure, and fear of failure—she continues to persevere. In Erin’s case it is clear that the role of college coordinator, Jane, has been essential in facilitating her continued capacity to cope. In addition, despite the harsh Michigan welfare bureaucracy, the flexibility of her MDHHS caseworker’s supervisor has been pivotal in opening doors of educational opportunity for Erin, and his role in strategically applying loophole provisions of a harsh TANF policy has been crucial to her capacity to continue in her postsecondary education program.
Summary

The narrative cases of these single mothers show how policies and practices in Michigan have truncated and restricted the capabilities of these women and their children. Lack of affordable and high quality child care, economic insecurity, unpredictable course schedules, odd hours employment, and fathers who are not involved and in most cases do not care, all limited their choices in being the student and the mother they valued. The narratives further showed the vulnerability of their lifeworlds and how their current fragile arrangements that they have creatively and tenaciously patched together in order to pursue a higher education degree can so easily tumble down. Despite the fact that almost a quarter of all undergraduate students in higher education are currently raising children, the narratives reveal the lack of visibility of their needs within those institutions. Only two mothers reported the support of counselors within the university which was otherwise a generally hostile environment towards non-traditional student mothers. But both of these students mentioned how important the counseling has been for their capabilities to persevere.
Chapter 5: Voices from North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany

In this chapter, four case studies on single student mothers are presented—the first two student mothers are pursuing a degree at a public university in Germany and the latter two are enrolled in a degree in the vocational education and training system/dual training scheme (VET). These four different cases are chosen in order to present the higher (university) and the lower end (VET) of the occupational entrance degrees in Germany, and to show how single mothers’ lifeworlds are shaped by the wider political context no matter the educational context.

German students pursuing a degree at the university must have successfully passed upper secondary education and have either received the Abitur (high school degree) or the Fach-Abitur (vocational oriented entrance degree for certain practice oriented professions, such as social work)—meaning they have attended school until 12th grade. Another very popular and often chosen alternative to a university degree is the pursuit of a vocational degree (VET)—about two-thirds of all school leavers enroll in this type of education every year (Federal Employment Agency, 2013). A degree in the dual training scheme within one of the 350 recognized training occupations is organized as practical training within a company and theoretical training at the vocational schools—usually students will sign an apprenticeship contract with an employer. While there are generally no formal entrance requirements for this kind of degree, the chances of being hired by a company increase with a higher school leaving certificate. It is not uncommon for pupils with an Abitur to enter into the field of vocational training instead of pursuing an academic degree at a university. Germany’s secondary school system is tiered into different tracks that prepares students for different leaving certificates: the Gymnasium lasts to Grade 12 and the exit exam qualifies the students for entry into the university; the Realschule (intermediate school) and the Hauptschule (secondary general school) last to Grade 10. The extended general
education at \textit{Realschule} prepares students for entering either \textit{Fachoberschule} (subject-specific upper-secondary school) or the VET system. Secondary general schools are the lower tier within the tripartite secondary school system. They provide basic general education and the leaving certificate enables students to either enroll in the VET system or other type of educational training at the vocational school (Hippach-Schneider, Krause, & Woll, 2007).

Students enrolled in the VET system—a degree program that lasts about 36 to 42 months—also receive an apprentice pay and are not required to pay any tuition or school fees. The apprentice pay depends on the type of occupation but is paid according to tariff—a student pursuing a vocational degree as carpenter, for example, would receive an income of €517 per month (Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, 2015).

\textbf{Melanie}

“Apart from the financial back and forth, time is the most valuable and the most wanted asset that I have.”

Melanie is 28 years old and the White mother of 7-year-old Christina. She studies medicine at a public university in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), has recently passed the preliminary medical examination, and is currently in her third year of her medical program—right on track.

Melanie dropped out of \textit{Gymnasium} (grammar school) when she was 16 and started the vocational education track that is a popular alternative to a four-year university degree. During her final year of the vocational degree in Graphic design in 2008, Melanie became pregnant. As her birth was scheduled to occur right around the time of her final examination—in addition to experiencing a “very exhausting pregnancy”—Melanie decided to postpone the exam for a year.
During this same period she initiated a separation due to the abusive behavior of her boyfriend who was the father of the unborn child. Melanie describes:

He was—difficult—he hit me when I was pregnant. Then I separated. We still were in contact. . . then he frequently came over and didn’t want to leave my flat, until I had to call the police. Then I separated for good.

After Christina was born Melanie stayed home for two years. Due to maternity and parental leave regulations and the inherent job protected leave, she could have continued her vocational degree at the same company. However, Christina decided to forego the vocational degree, explaining “that was never what I really wanted.” During the two years following the birth of her daughter, Melanie felt isolated and was relieved when Christina was accepted for an in-home daycare at about two years of age. At that time, Melanie finally had the time to think about what she wanted to do with her life and became aware that she could have a second chance to receive her university entrance degree (Abitur). Melanie mentions a community service that provides her with the necessary information about financial support that she could receive while being enrolled for her alternative higher school degree and later at university.

With her daughter enrolled in family daycare Monday through Friday, Melanie took that second chance. However, while enrolled in the three-year program that runs Monday through Friday mornings and afternoons, Melanie struggled with some childcare problems. Childcare for her daughter was suddenly disrupted when her first provider’s license was revoked because of alleged child abuse. Melanie had to quickly find a new caretaker for Christina:

That was a strange situation . . . another child [in the in-home daycare] was identified with strangulation marks by a doctor, and the mother of the child told them that that was the childcare provider which I don’t believe, even though she was very gruff.
As in-home daycare for young children was hard to come by, Melanie compromised her time and enrolled her daughter in another family day care that resulted in an additional 30 minute commute per day, which Melanie describes as “really hard.” Aside from the commute Melanie was also not entirely satisfied with the quality of the provider as it seemed that television was playing a big part in the daily routines of the children:

I don’t know, she [the provider] told me at the beginning that she has the thing that the kids are allowed to watch Sandmännchen\(^{19}\) sometimes, if they have been there for such a long time. But, according to my daughter’s knowledge about TV shows, they must have watched TV the whole day! And she doesn’t watch any TV at home. . . . Other than that she was okay, but there was just the trouble with her living so far away.

The eighth book of the Social Code (SGB VIII) that focuses on assistance for children and youth only provides the basic framework for childcare regulations which results in quality variation across the states and childcare institutions. Family day care providers, for example, who provide care on a regular basis are required to apply for a license at the Youth Welfare Service and prove their competence through participation in certified courses for (see § 23, Abs. 3 SGB VIII). The number of hours that are required for receiving a license, however, vary from state to state. Thus, in 2014 almost 25% of family day care providers had participated in less than 160 hours of subject specific courses. At the time Melanie was experiencing difficulties with her initial family day care provider, this rate was even higher and almost reached 50%—resulting in a higher chance of mediocre to low-quality care (Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2015). Despite the frustrating experiences regarding childcare, Melanie managed to receive her university entrance degree with distinction. Because of her

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19 Iconic television show that only lasts five minutes and is generally broadcasted on public television around 6pm.
exceptional grades, Melanie was immediately accepted into a program for medicine at a prestigious university in NRW which is about a 30-minute drive away from her apartment.

Melanie shares that in 2013, when she started the new and intensive program, she ran into another childcare problem. Melanie’s university schedule was very demanding, time-intensive, and she found that her schedule constantly changed. She needed additional childcare in the late afternoon/early evening hours. Melanie explains:

If you study medicine you don’t have one schedule for the whole semester. It is different every day, and it changes from week to week. Only the lectures in the morning are consistent but the required seminars . . . they are all scheduled in the afternoon, sometimes in the evening.

The unpredictability of the required seminars in the afternoons created a stressful situation with regard to childcare. While Christina attended preschool during the day, Melanie needed additional childcare in the early evening hours in order to attend the required seminars. Attendance policies in her program caused additional stress as she was allowed to miss only one class per semester. Two absences would create a domino effect for her as she would have to retake the whole course. There are no exceptions made—not for a sick child nor for the lack of childcare—attendance is compulsory for passing the course. As Melanie shares:

If something comes up that requires me to stay home, because I don’t have childcare, or my child is sick, and that was the second time, then I had to repeat the whole seminar in the next semester. . . . There are no special accommodations for parents. . . . Fortunately my daughter isn’t sick very often.

With diligent planning Melanie was able to patch together plans to meet her childcare needs. At times Melanie relied upon informal care, as she describes: “I had to arrange a
babysitter for every single day at which I had a required seminar in the afternoon or evening, either my mother, or friends, or other relatives.” The stress of these new intellectual demands, layered by her unpredictable childcare needs and the increased time away from her daughter, took a toll on Melanie. Looking back on that period, Melanie states, “During that time I constantly said, ‘If that is going on like that, I have to drop out. I have the best grades that you can imagine, but cannot continue with my studies.’”

With perseverance, ambition, and support from her mother and friends, Melanie was able to successfully pass the first semester and with some luck, she was even able to secure a spot at an in-home daycare right when her first required internship started. Melanie praises the new childcare setting:

I think they have a great curriculum. . . . I know that my daughter likes it there.

Especially when it is so much [time]. . . . A degree in medicine is really time intensive.

You really have to have a good feeling that your child is in good care. . . . She has a consistent and great attachment figure with the provider. . . . And that is definitely now the case and that makes it so much easier.

Because of the flexible, consistent, and high-quality childcare, Melanie now has relative peace of mind while having her daughter in care for so many hours outside of her home. She is also relieved that the cost of childcare is taken care of by the Jugendamt (Youth Welfare Service) as it falls under their jurisdiction of §24 of the eighth book of the Social Code (SGB VIII). Nevertheless, Melanie talks about the cumbersome conversations with her caseworker where Melanie was expected to prove that she has real study needs requiring financial support:

That was quite a struggle to show them, that I also needed something [childcare] on the days I didn’t have any courses, as I really needed the time for studying until the
evening. . . . and then the comments, “Two or three consecutive hours should be sufficient, nobody can study for longer anyway”. . . and I thought. . . “You might think that I can’t do that but I must do it anyway.”

Melanie has successfully convinced her caseworker of her needs and is appreciative that now she has an “individualized and accommodating solution”—the hours that they agreed upon can be flexibly allocated during the week for childcare. Melanie states, “Regarding my studies that is an ideal solution. And that is so important. Yes, childcare is essential. Everything else comes afterwards.”

Melanie is currently in her fifth semester and at the beginning of her third year. Because of her financial constraints she rarely uses her car to go to the university. Christina is already in the second grade and attends after-school-age care, after which she is picked up by the childcare provider until Melanie arrives. Melanie summarizes a typical day:

We get up at 5:20 a.m., get dressed, and even then we don’t have enough time to have a proper breakfast. . . . we quickly prepare sandwiches. . . . Now my daughter can walk by herself to school. . . . She just needs to cross the street. . . . I take the bus. . . . Now it [lecture] starts at 8:15. Before it was 8:00 a.m. That was much harder, I didn’t make it on time. . . . the buses come every hour. . . . I couldn’t take an earlier bus because I couldn’t send my daughter to school at 6.45 a.m. . . . If the schedule changes I have to take the car again, but I try to avoid that, because I can really not afford driving back and forth with the car. . . . and then I have to search for free parking. . . . so that doesn’t work at all. . . . that [her course schedule] is the whole afternoon until the evening. . . . I pick her up at 7:00 p.m. . . . then we have something for dinner. . . . or we have some time together, but
that is also hard after the whole day at the university. . . you are beat when you are home.

That really is [sigh]. . .

Melanie and her daughter currently subsist on training assistance (German Federal Training Assistance Act—BAföG), in addition to a childcare supplement, *Kindergeld* (child benefit), *Arbeitslosengeld II/Hartz IV* (basic security benefits) for her child, *Kinderzuschlag* (children’s allowance), and housing subsidies. Melanie does not receive *Unterhaltsvorschuss* (advance child support) anymore—that is paid by the government if the father is not able to pay or is untraceable—as the maximum period of 72 months has elapsed; she wonders “Why? – she is still a daughter of a father who does not pay a dime for child support.”

While Melanie does not complain about the amount of the support that she receives which guarantees her a minimally decent living, she is aggravated by the application maze and the lack of information regarding her rights to support services:

And I have to prove so many things. . . and then they [different agencies] need the different proofs from each other. But then I only have an old one here, or only one. . . and it continues like that the whole time. I am still in the application process. And I started many months ago. . . how much time have I invested in the application process? . . . probably 30 to 35 hours. . . and that is no exaggeration. . . . That is a great burden. Especially because I do have so little time.

Further, Melanie is frustrated that she did not know about her right to social security benefits for her daughter and states, “I am still angry about that, because I could have applied for it years ago. . . . But nobody seems to be in the know, not even the consulting services.” She is also irritated by a lack of information and competence when it comes to counseling services in
general and especially at the university. “Nobody could really help me. They didn’t know what to do themselves. . . I had to get the information all by myself.”

Apart from the application jungle, bureaucratic delays, and the resulting temporary funding shortages that Melanie manages to cope with by diligently scrimping and saving, her financial support is minimally guaranteed. Nevertheless, Melanie is frustrated by the impossibility of earning additional income. Because of the nature of the financial support she receives, any additional penny she earns is counted against her housing subsidy. Melanie stresses the valuable experience she would gain by working some hours at the hospital, but she is aware that this would also mean even more hours away from her daughter as well as less money in her pocket.

Melanie already has ambivalent feelings about her daughter being away for such long periods. She is in a dilemma: On the one hand she would like to spend more time with her daughter and fulfill her role as a mother and, and on the other hand, she would like to be an excellent student:

I always have to divide myself, I know that my daughter misses out on me. . . I would like to spend much more time with her. . . anyway, I cannot handle it the way I want to. . . . and then regarding my studies, I am aware that I am far behind my possibilities, though I get good grades. . . I would love to be at the top, and it were possible, but I don’t have the time. So I am just somewhere in the midfield, that really bothers me. . . . I could also prolong my studies but I really don’t want to. . . . I am feeling guilty with respect to my daughter. . . . But then I think finishing as quickly as possible also makes sense for my daughter, as I would soon have a higher income and that opens up
opportunities for her. . . . I have to take so many factors into consideration. . . . you have to think about what is the right thing to do. . . . that takes a lot of energy sometimes.

Lack of time and financial support regulations also keep Melanie from taking advantage of a prestigious scholarship that she was recommended for. But as is the case with employment, it would also have been “counted against” the housing subsidy. Further, the additional scholarship requirements would necessitate more time studying and less time for her daughter.

Melanie has persevered in her studies. She is still on track despite the many obstacles and challenges around childcare and financial support. Her small support network—consisting of her mother and her friends outside from school—have helped her in times of emergencies. She is a strong person, but her calm nature changes when she talks about the father of Christine. While he disappeared and was not in the picture for seven years, Melanie, nevertheless, built a relationship with his parents and emphasizes that it “is really important for the children to have contact with the families of both parents. . . . despite the mistrust I have.” Unfortunately, she has had to cut ties with the grandparents after they did not tell her about the reappearance of Christine’s father during the times her daughter was staying with them. This betrayal greatly fueled her mistrust, as Melanie describes, “I really had to cry hard because I was so angry.” As a consequence, in addition to the demands of her tight schedule and her many responsibilities, Melanie has also had to deal with being unable to trust the promises made by the grandparents and the distress this separation has caused Christine. Melanie admits, “It really hurts me for my daughter.”

Melanie has turned her life around and shares that her daughter is her main motivator. She has gone from a drop-out to a high achieving student, and she has proved that it is possible to persevere when childcare is secured. Due to her additional unmet childcare needs and the time consuming search for financial support, Melanie’s transition into student life was very stressful.
at the beginning. Overall, Melanie’s lived experiences shows how her trajectory as a successful student was made possible due to her perseverance and the availability of a high-quality, trustworthy, and flexible professional caregiver, but was precarious when this was not initially secured. In addition, an understanding caseworker at the Youth Welfare Office, whom she had to persuade to fund her extra childcare needs in the late afternoon hours created stability and security for her and her daughter due to the extra accommodation provided by this office in funding irregular and additional childcare hours. Melanie does not have to pay tuition for childcare, nor does she have to pay for tuition at the university. Once she has finished her medical degree, Melanie can start her life as a doctor with almost no financial burden. She will only need to pay back the subsidized loan that makes up 50% of her training assistance (BAföG), but this debt is capped at €10,000 in total, has no interest rates, and its payments can be deferred if one’s income lies under specific threshold that is dependent on the number of people within the household—the threshold for one person is currently set at €1,145 a month (Bundesverwaltungsamt, 2016).

Ellen

I was always disappointed by the Jobcenter [welfare agency] . . . they advised me at some point to drop out from school to apply for welfare benefits the usual way . . . They did not really support me. . . . they always stressed me out.

Ellen is the 31-year-old White mother of a 2-year-old boy named Emil. She is a first-generation theology student at a public university in North Rhine-Westphalia. After her graduation from the Realschule (intermediate school), Ellen’s wish to continue grammar school in order to graduate with the Abitur (university entrance degree) was not supported by her parents. Ellen resentfully explains:
Because I am a woman. . . I could get a husband. . . what did I want an Abitur for?!

And then my Dad said, “Why don’t you get a degree as a doctor’s receptionist? Your sister has the same degree.”

Ellen’s second choice was to go to nursing school, but this plan was derailed as Ellen would have had to wait another year because of the age requirement of being 17 years old for entering into this profession. Consequently, Erin instead enrolled in a vocational degree program to become a doctoral receptionist. After receiving her degree, Ellen worked for three years in her profession before finally deciding that it was just not her “dream job.” Ellen’s parents were shocked when she told them about her decision to quit her current job and enroll in school to get her university entrance degree, but Ellen shares that now—more than four years later—her parents think it was the best thing she could have ever done. Three years after returning to school, Ellen received her long-awaited degree and enrolled at a public university in Schwerin four hours away from her family home.

In 2013, Ellen became pregnant. During her pregnancy she suffered complications—not only did the father of her unborn child separate from her during her pregnancy, but Ellen was also ordered to bedrest by her doctor for more than four weeks prior to giving birth. Fortunately Ellen had built up a very good social network during the time she lived in Schwerin. Due to the strength of this network, Ellen’s friends initially helped her out a great deal during this difficult time. However, Ellen eventually had to move back with her parents as she could not burden her friends anymore with transporting her to the doctor, cooking food, and more. Shortly after Emil was born, his father suddenly appeared at Ellen’s family home. Ellen describes the tremendous amount of stress that resulted from this encounter:
He exerted pressure on me. I was a new mom who just had given birth, and that was the only thing that I still had. . . . He said if we ever would disagree on something, if I don’t act at his discretion, then he would file for child custody. . . . if I would return to Schwerin [where he lived] then I will never leave that place again because he has the right of contact and access, because he is an attorney certified in family law, he knew all that. If I wanted to move away after my studies to get a job, he would prevent me from doing so, because the father’s right to contact and access is valued higher than a mother’s right to choose a job.

Ellen was scared that she would lose her child to a man who had not “been in contact with her for months,” and she rushed into a decision of quitting everything she had. Ellen withdrew from her degree program and cancelled the lease on her apartment in Schwerin because she would not be able “to continue studying without worry” where the father of the child lived. She later applied to a different public university in NRW (a different state) and after being accepted she moved there in summer 2014.

The following semester, Ellen continued working in her field of study at this new university in a new environment. She also had to make arrangements for her 9-month-old son to begin attending childcare on campus that was open from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Although Ellen enrolled Emil for full-time care five days a week (45 hours), she explains that she felt a great deal of guilt for sending him away for so many hours. Ellen tried to drop him off as late as possible and “to pick him up right after my lectures. . . . because he is still so small. . . [sighs] sometimes that was really hard, but then I think, ‘I don’t have a choice. What shall I do?’ —I just try to do my best.”
As Ellen continues her studies, she is fortunate that she is not burdened with the costs for childcare as she receives a full subsidy from the Youth Welfare Service and only needs to pay for the additional costs of meals for €20 per month. Despite this financial support, the first two semesters at the new university proved to be very tough for Ellen and she thought about quitting several times. Ellen has had to manage a school schedule that does not align with her son’s childcare schedule, in addition to coping with a son who is frequently sick. She also had to rely on a bicycle as her main source of transportation. Ellen relates these difficult circumstances:

During the wintertime—no matter wind, rain, storm, or ice—I needed to bring him to his childcare with my bike, and then go on to the university. . . . that was really hard, no matter if it was pouring outside or if we had freezing temperatures, and I frequently thought, “No, you cannot do this anymore. You have to give up now.”

During Ellen’s first semester, one of her courses was scheduled in the late afternoon—beyond the child care center’s opening hours. While overall, Ellen is satisfied with the quality of the childcare and comments that “the relationship with teachers is really very good there,” she emphasizes the need for more flexibility. Flexible public childcare is hard to come by in her area and while Ellen has put her son on the waiting list at another center-based offsite childcare that provides flexible care until 6:30 p.m., she notes that it “is the only public childcare institution in Münster that offers this kind of flexibility.”

Ellen does not have any family or friends in this new environment who can help her out with caring for her son. Her efforts to reach out to the Youth Welfare Service to inquire about financial support for her additional childcare needs beyond the normal childcare hours were not successful. Ellen shares that the caseworker told her “that is my own problem. I would have to find a way to pay it by myself.” Her efforts to receive additional support from other public and
church-based community services also proved to be in vain. However, Ellen finally managed to find a solution to her childcare problem:

I found a fellow student who would take care of my little one for €5 per hour. Thus, I paid €10 per week. We had a seminar together, then we swapped our bicycles, because my bike has the child seat. Then she picked him up from childcare and went with him to my apartment, until 6:00 p.m. Until I was home. . . . That was quite a financial burden, honestly.

Ellen persevered through her first semester despite the difficult circumstances. She passed her final exam with a really good grade which made her very “proud.” However, she does not know if she “would do that again.” Ellen sometimes contemplates just going back and working in her old profession, but she realizes that she would still need additional financial support from the Jobcenter, the agency responsible for verifying the right to basic security benefits (Arbeitslosengeld II/Hartz IV), if employed as a receptionist at a doctor’s office. Ellen explains, “I wouldn’t be able to live from my earned income. Because it was just too little.”

During her first two semesters Ellen and Emil subsist on her training assistance (BAföG), childcare supplement, child benefit, and children’s allowance, and her parental leave allowance—during that same period she was not aware that she could have applied for housing subsidies as well. Although this university advertises itself with a certificate of being “family friendly,” Ellen is disappointed about the lack of access to information regarding resources and support. She states, “Everything you know you have to find out for yourself. . . . you can download information for students from the internet, but that’s it.” Ellen further describes the long and dreaded application process for the children’s allowance at the Jobcenter: “My
applications were often denied. . . until I went to a social counseling service, she drafted an official letter—and then it worked out.”

After her second semester, Ellen found out about the possibility of taking *Urlaubsemester* (sabbatical leave) while still being allowed to take exams and enroll in courses. Ellen chose to apply for one. The benefit of a sabbatical lay in the fact that Ellen could still apply for basic security benefits *Arbeitslosengeld II/Hartz IV* (ALGII)—also known as *Hartz IV*—instead of training assistance. Because Ellen’s son is still under three years old, there are no work stipulations attached to this cash benefit that is designed to guarantee a basic minimal living standard. Ellen has decided to take a sabbatical until Emil turns three; therefore, she has been able to stop worrying about and spending time on seeking additional supports at different agencies. However, she will have to begin that process once again when her son is three.

Currently, Ellen’s biggest concerns revolve around finding time to study and worrying that her son will get sick and be unable to attend childcare. Ellen emphasizes that she can only study when her son is in childcare because she does not have the energy to stay up much later after having him put to bed after a long day:

*I am too exhausted in the evening. . . You don’t have a break when you are home. . . It is fun to play with your child but you cannot relax while doing it. And when he is in bed then I have to take care of the apartment, doing dishes, washing clothes, everything that you cannot do while he is awake. . . and I always hope that he will sleep through the night.*

Although Ellen has found that her lecturers are understanding and accommodating of her parental responsibilities, she is afraid “that they [lecturers] think I use my child as an excuse.”

During her second semester, Ellen had to stay home with her son for almost four weeks because
he was sick. Ellen shares that after notifying her lecturers several times that she would be absent, she “was afraid, that they would react with, ‘Ah, the child again.’” While none of her lecturers have ever responded to her this way at this university, her fear is grounded in other experiences that occurred at her prior university and at a conference required by her current program.

Ellen’s field of study requires her to take part in conferences. Shortly before one conference, her mother—who had agreed to babysit for Emil—had a heart attack and as her “father was already diagnosed with cancer, he couldn’t do that [babysit] either.” Despite these emotional stressors and the lack of childcare, Ellen decided to attend the conference after being encouraged by a supervisor to bring her son along. Ellen shares: “We didn’t even stay for 24 hours, then I packed my bags and left.” Ellen explains that a woman came up to her during a coffee break and asked “What are you going to do when your child is crying?” Ellen goes on to state:

I replied that if he cries and is disruptive then I will go outside. . . . otherwise I will attend and listen. And then the presentation started, the woman hadn’t even talked for ten minutes and then she kicked me and my son out. . . . I mean she didn’t say that we should leave the room, but [sigh] “Can the child stop with the noise now?” . . . and if he had cried I would have left. But he sat on blanket and just dropped a block. . . . I must confess, I burst into tears.

Ellen shares that she has experienced many humiliating experiences during the last two years. She also describes the stigmatizing experience of applying for benefits at the Jobcenter: You are often treated as a second class citizen. . . . They treat you as you were dumb. They are unfriendly. . . . I cannot just be unfriendly to someone, just because she is going through a rough time. I think that is terrible.
Many things add up in Ellen’s life and her lack of a support network in this new city often leaves her exhausted. Ellen must do everything by herself. Describing the routine of getting her son ready in the morning, Ellen lists, “Getting dressed, diaper change. . . . I try to leave at about 8:00, 8:30 a.m. to drop him off at the childcare—that doesn’t always work. Either he needs another diaper change, or you have forgotten something.” In addition to her caring responsibilities as a single parent, Ellen’s ambition to do excellent work and to be a good student persists. She experiences extreme distress when unable to fulfill the role of the student she aspires to be. Ellen shares that she sought a one-time support from the counseling service at the university:

Because that was so stressful. . . . I just couldn’t cope, that I wasn’t so quick and couldn’t do as much as I wanted to. . . . the counselor said. . . . “You don’t do anything wrong. . . . You just have to realize, that you as a single mother with a child, can only spend 20% of your time for your studies—you have to come to terms with that.”. . . . Afterwards I felt a little better.

While Ellen feels better for the time being, she was also recently diagnosed with chronic exhaustion by her doctor. “Probably a lot of single mothers have that,” she states and explains that because of this diagnosis she has reduced her hours at the university. Ellen is optimistic that she will feel more energized after going to the three-week long Mutter-Kind-Kur (mother-child-health-retreat) following this semester. Recognizing the many stressors of mothers’ everyday lives, this type of retreat is a measure designed to restore mother’s and children’s health and prevent major illnesses that can result from a hectic life. Because it is paid for by public health insurance, Ellen is able to take advantage of this kind of program.
Ellen has dreamed of pursuing a university degree since she was 16 years old, but she has encountered many obstacles on the way. In particular, her sudden move to a different city following the birth of her son had devastating consequences for her emotional well-being as she left her strong social network behind. In this new city, Ellen has no one she can rely on for support. There is no one to take care of Emil in emergency situations, such as when he is sick or when a course is scheduled in the evening hours. Ellen’s family and friends live more than four hours away and the father of her child has not been in contact since her move. Fortunately, Ellen does not need to worry about tuition—neither for the university nor for childcare. Both are taken care of by the government with the exception of the period when she had to pay a babysitter because her course schedule did not align with the childcare schedule. Fortunately, Ellen does not accept “No” for an answer when she navigates the bureaucracy jungle for financial support, and she persists until she finds the right help. Nevertheless, Ellen has also had to endure many degrading encounters with bureaucracies that have been emotionally exhausting. The compounding stress of these experiences have left her with health problems resulting from extreme exhaustion. While the mother-child-health-retreat will provide Ellen with a necessary break from all her responsibilities, the question remains: how she will manage these many stressors in the future? It will still take her at least another three years to finish her degree in theology. What happens if more courses are scheduled in the evening hours and she needs supplemental childcare?

Kamila

“I think it is intolerable to reduce everything to the hijab.”

Kamila is a second-generation immigrant and a 26-year-old single mother of two daughters—3-year-old Samira and 5-year-old Rana. Kamila is also a student in a part-time
vocational degree program training to become a government employee for the city. This part-time program is unique as it was specifically developed as an external program for single mothers and is supported by the *Jobcenter*.

Kamila received *Arbeitslosengeld II/Hartz IV* (basic security benefits)—unconditionally—without being obligated to work in 2013. At an appointment at the *Jobcenter* in October 2013—the agency that is responsible for allocating this benefit—Kamila’s caseworker told her about this unique part-time vocational degree in civil service—but did not push Kamila to apply as she “could still exhaust the three years, because she [Kamila’s daughter] hasn’t turned three years old yet.” Kamila was immediately interested in taking part in the program. She explains, “I wouldn’t get a chance like that again. Because it is really hard to get a job at the city. . . . and a regular full-time vocational degree in administration wouldn’t be feasible. That would be way too much because of the hours.”

Kamila was lucky to have received this offer. She describes encounters with a prior caseworker at the *Jobcenter* in 2012 who was not willing to point to possible employment opportunities. She shares that this caseworker told her that “if I would take off my hijab, then she could get me something, if not, I should stay home being a housewife.” Kamila felt that she could not stand up against her caseworker’s xenophobic and hostile attitude. Discouraged, she stayed home for a period of time. After getting married to her children’s father and changing her last name Kamila was given a new caseworker—one who was willing to help her find a job training program. Unfortunately, Kamila’s marriage did not last long and a separation followed while she is still pregnant with her youngest daughter.

Kamila applied for the program and was invited to a screening test in January of 2014. She passed this screening and was invited to an assessment center starting in June of 2014—
where a decision would be made as to whether or not she would be accepted for the program. Therefore, not yet knowing if she would be accepted into the program Kamila enrolled both of her daughters at a childcare center in order to be able to take part in the assessment center. With concerted effort, she was able to secure two spots at one preschool close to her home—even though they had initially guaranteed just one spot. Kamila describes:

I talked to the director of the preschool, that I don’t understand why the little one has a spot and the oldest one not. The director replied, “There are no free spots.” Then I talked to the city, told them my situation. . . . I already had the written confirmation for the assessment center. . . . They called them [the preschool]. . . . it was a single phone call.

Fortunately, both her children were able to enroll at the same childcare. The assessment center program began in June of 2014 and so did her two daughters’ difficult experience of adapting to the new childcare arrangements. It is also Kamila’s daughter’s first experience in childcare. The time intensive program at the assessment center lasted six weeks. Kamila recalls, “That was really challenging. . . . we had tests. . . . we started with 30 people, then we were screened. Then there were only 20 left.” Every day at 9:00 a.m., before the assessment center’s program started, Kamila had already woken up, dressed, fed her children, and taken them to school—where she spent an additional hour to help provide a smooth transition for them in the new and strange environment. Despite these new childcare arrangements and the struggles to accommodate her difficult schedule, Kamila successfully impressed the evaluators during her time at the assessment center and was granted approval to move along the ladder of evaluation. Kamila shares: “The remaining twenty people were placed in the different municipalities. . . . Then a decision was made, we will take her, we won’t take her.” After another four weeks at an internship at the municipality, Kamila successfully completed her ten weeks of assessment
and proved that she is competent and capable of managing her caring responsibilities with her job obligation: “I did everything they asked for and I got accepted.” After the challenging and stressful process, Kamila is proud that she was selected from a pool of 30 people and explains “that is amazing!”

However, Kamila’s excitement about starting the program quickly dissipated as new financial stressors emerged. Kamila found that she no longer qualified for unemployment benefits II (ALG II) as a student enrolled in this program. She recalls:

That was really difficult. . . . We [people in the program] all sat there with no money. . . . I didn’t know how I should support my children. . . . Yes, I have child benefits. . . I have to pay the rent with it. I don’t have another choice, either I will be evicted or I won’t have anything to eat.

The loss of funding from ALG II and the strenuous process of applying for other financial support proved to be cumbersome and stressful. Kamila describes the application for ALG II as “fast and quick,” where she only needed to go to “one drop-in center” every six months. However, she now had to apply through different departments at many drop-in centers. Kamila describes the difficulty of this process:

Everybody wants something different. . . . the office for housing subsidies doesn’t want to pay until it receives the notification of Bundesausbildungsbihilfe [BAB] (training allowance). And BAB, they need to know the amount of the housing subsidy. That was just a back and forth.

Kamila was three months into the program before all of her applications for different types of financial support were approved. In addition to her monthly work allowance of €325 paid by the Jobcenter, she receives a training allowance amounting to roughly €640, which she
does not need to pay back; *Kindergeld* (child benefits) of €276; advance child support of €288; and a partial housing subsidy to help her payment of €700 rent including gas and electricity.

The initial financial struggles were layered with the challenges of a time consuming commute, learning to manage new routes, going to her daughters’ childcare, going to work and going to vocational school—all without a car. Kamila began working three days a week in civil service at the municipality and attended school twice a week. She describes this phase of her program:

Hopping on and off the bus was super time-consuming, bringing the kids to preschool. . . and my work is four kilometers that direction [points]. . . and then I noticed how much less time I have. . . I couldn’t manage that at the beginning.

Kamila strove to manage her financial struggles and cumbersome commute. In addition to these demands, she faced discrimination at work. Kamila’s hijab was a frequent topic of discussion and this created feelings of distress and anger in her. She describes one situation with a colleague who questioned her religion:

“Are you Catholic or Protestant?” I don’t ask anybody about their religion. I said, “None of them, I am Islamic.” And then there were more questions: “You know that we live in a democracy? You can be really lucky. And you know what democracy means?”

During the initial months of the program Kamila’s lack of personal transportation, the cumbersome application process for financial support, experiences of discrimination, and the need to care for sick children in combination with the daily struggle of everyday demands frequently left Kamila in a state of despair and she considered of dropping out of the program:
At that time my little one was also sick, she had a cold—that happened frequently in the wintertime. I thought, now, now you will drop out, no, tomorrow you will drop out, no next week. . . . then you won’t have any of these problems.

While Kamila could take sick days for her children, she does not feel comfortable doing so as she feels intimidated by her coworkers who frowned upon her in the past when she had to stay home because of her kids. Kamila states, “If you have two children then they will be sick more often. That appears to leave a bad impression. And then you, as a mother, even work when you are sick.” Fortunately, Kamila has a sister who can take care of her daughters in case of an emergency.

Kamila overcame these initial struggles as she resolved herself to remain in the program. She recalls:

You won’t get another chance like that. . . . especially not if you look differently. . . . that is just the stereotype—foreigners/immigrants are useless—but then I thought, “No, I will show you what I can do” and I persisted. . . . Human Resources also talked me a little bit into it [staying].

However, Kamila has had difficulty finding time to study, particularly when her children are sick. Kamila works part-time, six hours a day three days a week at the municipality. Her school schedule is fixed and spans the same hours and curricular expectations as regular students. She attends vocational school twice a week from 8:30/8:45 a.m. to 2:30/3:00 p.m. Kamila describes a typical day:

On school days, I get up earlier, because I have to leave at 7:45 a.m. I would wake up the kids at 6:30 a.m. Breakfast. . . . Getting dressed. . . . bring them to preschool. . . . and I go from there direct to my school. When the school is over I have to hurry to pick them up
as the time is tight. . . the days I work are much more convenient, because I can decide for myself when I start and when I leave. Today I have a bad day then I will leave an hour earlier because I have a flexible work schedule. And I can make it up later. At work I am not stressed or under pressure.

While Kamila is relieved to have a flexible work schedule, she still has a difficult time making room for studying. Lack of study time impacts her well-being, and she does not know how to handle the situation. Kamila confides, “Studying is really hard. . . we had a big intermediate exam. . . many children were sick. . . and if I try to study ‘Mommy, mommy, this and that!’ And when they are asleep. . . then I am too tired to comprehend anything.”

Kamila stresses the important role that the preschool plays in her ability to access and persist in the program:

The biggest support is the preschool. . . And when it is closed, . . . they have spots for emergency, they organize those for me. I really don’t need to rack my mind around it. They do it. So for me it is the best and biggest support I have. I wouldn’t get that anywhere else.

Kamila is fortunate that Germany has established a legal right for childcare for children one year and older, and because of her substandard income, 100% of the costs are subsidized. But while the childcare costs are taken care of and the children attend preschool until 4:00 p.m., Kamila stresses how important it is for her, as a mother, to pick her children up right after work/school: “I always start [work] earlier so I can pick them up earlier. . . . I couldn’t handle my conscience otherwise. . . .as long as they are at school while I am at work I don’t have a problem with that.” And even though Kamila lacks time for studying, she would never ask her
family to watch her children so she could focus on her school work: “I only accept help in emergencies [work], ‘can you please come so I can study?’—no—I wouldn’t do that.”

The unfolding of Kamila’s story provides insight into her life and the ways in which her Muslim religious background has at times influenced her opportunities in German society—as highlighted by the unhelpful nature of her previous caseworker. If she had not been assigned a new and more accommodating caseworker due to the change of her last name following her marriage, Kamila might still be stuck in xenophobic encounters and may never have started her vocational degree program. In addition to depicting the hostility that she frequently experiences, Kamila’s case also illustrates the ways in which the difficult transition from living as a welfare recipient to living as a student was complicated by the immense challenges of navigating the financial application jungle, which almost led to Kamila giving up on her aspirations for a degree. Nevertheless, Kamila’s story also makes clear that once financial support was in place and her commute became less time intensive, she was able to persevere. Kamila generally does not need to worry about childcare costs and quality nor costs of her vocational degree—childcare is free. Additionally, there is no tuition tied to vocational degrees in Germany—on the contrary, a student usually receives a training allowance.

**Esther**

“The biggest problem is time. . . . I have hardly any time with my daughter.”

Esther is the White single 21-year-old mother of a 2-year-old girl named Emma. They do not have any contact with Emma’s father as “he is not interested in that [having a child] and he doesn’t even want that.” Esther is also a student in German vocational education and participates in the training system/dual training scheme (VET) in order to follow her passion of becoming a certified carpenter. The dual training scheme comprises training in a company while
simultaneously attending vocational school. With the successful completion of the program—usually three years—Esther will be able to work anywhere in Germany as a qualified, skilled, and officially recognized carpenter after her graduation in 2017.

After Esther gave birth to Emma, she sought out financial help from the Jobcenter that grants basic security benefits (ALG II)—cash assistance guaranteeing a basic minimal living standard that can be granted to single mothers in need without work stipulations until the youngest child has reached her third birthday. In a conversation with the Jobcenter, Esther was advised to take on a Ein-Euro-Job (One-Euro-Job)—a stigmatized work activation strategy in return for cash assistance, to increase her entry chances into the dual system and gain a vocational degree. Interpreting this measure as a test to prove her capability of juggling her different responsibilities as well as her willingness to work, Esther explains that the Jobcenter wanted to see “that [she] can manage that with a child. It was already assumed that it wouldn’t work. . . that I wouldn’t be punctual. . . . that I wouldn’t even go there [to the job], because it would be too stressful.” Although Esther could have rejected the job and continued taking care of her daughter by herself while receiving ALG II until her daughter had turned three, she describes her strong desire to start working in order to obtain her vocational degree “as fast as possible, because I was already 19, 20 at that time.”

Esther enrolled her daughter at an in-home daycare in Mülheim thirty minutes away. Despite the possibility of selecting a closer provider, Esther decided to go with the provider she liked even though she was father away rather than “choose another provider. . . who I don’t agree with.” After the two months adaptation phase—a usual practice where the mother stays with the child in the new childcare setting to create a smooth transition—Esther starts the One-Euro-Job at a Landscaping Company. At that time, her daughter was about 4-months old. Fortunately,
most of Esther’s childcare costs were taken care of by the Youth Welfare Office and the €15 per month fees were not a burden on her.

Esther’s long commute to Mülheim and her One-Euro-Job were at times difficult to manage as she relied on public transportation. She states: “Sometimes I spent more time on the train and other public transportation than at work.” After four months of work and the complicated juggling act this commitment entailed, Esther was able to successfully prove her strong work ethic to the Jobcenter and was accepted into an external vocational degree program in carpentry. When Esther started her new degree program, she used some of her savings to buy an old car to reduce the time spent on commuting, but the condition of her car has resulted in other enduring concerns:

The car is from ‘93 . . . it is often times not working . . . if the car is in for repair then it is damn hard. . . it takes me an hour to get there [childcare], with bus and tram, and then it takes another 30 to 40 minutes to work. It is really hard because I start at 7:00 a.m. . . . It is almost impossible.

Esther’s current practical training takes place Monday through Friday from 7:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Jugendberufsbeihilfe (Youth Employment Service). Esther stresses her satisfaction with the opportunity to enroll as a part-time student: “It couldn’t be better. . . exactly what I wanted and even part-time with enough time left for my daughter.” With the reformation of the Berufsausbildungsgesetz (Vocational Training Act) in 2005, it became possible to grant an applicant a part-time contract in the case of legitimate needs—such as caring for a child—as a legally embedded right in German labor policy. Studying part-time for her vocational degree means a reduction of work hours in the training component (20 to 30 hours a week), not a
reduction in the hours spent at the vocational school—it also does not mean an extension of the length of time it takes to graduate. Esther describes a typical day:

I get up at 5:00 a.m. . . get the little one ready, brushing teeth, get dressed. . . diaper change, all that. . . then we drive to the childcare provider [30 minutes]. . . it roughly takes another 15 minutes there until I leave. . . then I drive to work [30-40 minutes]. . . I work until 12:30 p.m. and then I drive again to the provider to pick up the little one. . . then playground and preparing dinner. . . washing clothes. . . if all goes well she will be in bed by 7:00 p.m. and I start to work on things for my school or for work. And clean the apartment.

Two to three times a year Esther also attends four weeks of condensed and intensive theoretical schooling at the vocational school from 7:45 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. These weeks are especially demanding as she spends longer hours in school. Esther describes her exhaustion: “It is even more stressful. . . to study after school if you are already worn out. . . you rather have a nap. . . but you have to look after your daughter, then you still have to learn for exams.”

Pursuing the time-intensive degree is made possible only because Esther has childcare for her daughter. Esther is very satisfied with Emma’s childcare, saying, “Emma has a lot of fun. . . and it is so important that she can socialize with other children. . . she has developed well because she could watch the other kids.” After the Youth Employment Service who helped her with filling applications for financial support, she describes her childcare as the most valuable provision “because I really get along with [the provider].” And while Esther could hypothetically leave Emma for longer hours in childcare to have more time for studying, she does not feel comfortable in going beyond the seven hours a day, stating, “That is already a lot. And I don’t
want my daughter to call me Mam [laughs].” Esther also mentions the much needed support she receives from her own mother every second weekend. She explains, “If I don’t have it [her mother taking care of Emma]. . . then my mood shifts to the worst.”

Esther explains that her life becomes complicated when she or her daughter are sick. While she has paid sick days for herself and her daughter as well as an understanding supervisor, Esther describes her dilemma:

On the one hand I know that I will be super behind [training]. . . and as I am part-time, I do have already less time for all the work. . . but to send her [Emma] to childcare doesn’t make any sense at all. . . that wouldn’t be good for the little one. . . because she is extremely attached to me [when sick].

Esther’s training allowance is lower than the amount for a full-time student in the same study program but she recognizes the advantage of flexible time: “I know it is less. But I think one has to make compromises, because I am single, and I am only enrolled part-time.” On the contrary, Esther is really grateful of this opportunity, never complaining about the income as she knows how hard it is to get a spot in the educational/vocational training system as a single mother. She sarcastically relates the scarcity of carpentry teachers who welcome applicants who are also single mothers: “I don’t think that there is a carpentry teacher who says ‘Oh a female applicant, and she is even single, and she wants to be part-time!’”

Esther’s accepting attitude towards the loss of income could partly be explained by the fact that it is supplemented by the Jobcenter. Her little family further subsists on the universal child benefit, and advance child support, a provision granted for a maximum of 72 months in the event the father does not or cannot provide the child support himself. During the long battle to secure the child support to which she was entitled from Emma’s father, Esther was emotionally
exhausted and found she did not have the energy to continue fighting. Esther has settled for the
time-stamped and generally lower advance child support of €145 a month. She describes:

That went on for one and half years, going back and forth with the court, and I don’t
know—but nobody feels responsible to bring him to the book [make him pay] . . . I don’t
have the time for that. . . . I can better use the time for something else. After 72 months I
will probably see that differently, because there will be a big chunk missing. But it is too
stressful for me at the moment.

Esther’s financial situation seems to be stable for now. She cannot splurge on things but
she also does not have to worry about the next paycheck. Her main concerns stem from the lack
of time for her daughter and the juggling act to successfully reconcile work, studying, and
caring:

The biggest problem is time. . . I have hardly any time with my daughter. . . household. . .
grocery shopping. . . You have to plan real carefully otherwise you will never manage. . .

Then it would be impossible, then you might have forgotten something in the end. You
either don’t have any groceries at home, or your child didn’t get enough time, or your
apartment is a mess, or, or, or. . . You have to make compromises. . . you have to find a
middle way that nothing lags behind, that your education does not lag behind.

Due to Esther’s diligent planning, her work ethic, and her stable childcare situation in
combination with her relatively secure financial support, she is on her way to graduation. She
feels confident and looks with optimism into her educational future and aspires to receive a
general entrance diploma and continue studying to become a teacher in a vocational school:
“Because of receiving the degree I will feel encouraged that it is not impossible to aspire higher
with a child.”
In Esther’s case, it was her ambition to become a professional carpenter as soon as possible that made this endeavor possible. While she could have denied the stigmatizing One-Euro-Job, she decided to go for it despite the fact that her daughter was only five months old. While an assessment of Esther’s work ethic through this kind of workfare should be critically highlighted, her decision proved to be strategically important for her in pursuit of the three-year vocational degree. Esther does not currently need to worry about childcare transitions—meaning finding a center-based preschool for Emma. Emma can stay at the in-home day care provider until Esther has finished her degree. Esther, like all the other single mothers in this study, is of course burdened by the many unpredictable events that happen due to having a child, such as the need for additional sick days when children are sick, a prolonged commute, and less study time, but her overall system of support seems to work—for now.

Summary

The German case narratives show how student mothers’ capabilities to pursue a higher educational degree were dependent on their persistence and perseverance in maneuvering the jungle of financial support that created enormous insecurity while simultaneously experiencing stigmatizing encounters with caseworkers in the welfare system. Once the mothers overcame the initial hurdles of the application process, their subsistence was secured—though only minimally. Their stories reveal how the recently established right to childcare has positively supported their and their children’s development of capabilities as they were able to enroll their children in childcare settings free of charge (or with minimal fees). Further, as public higher education institutions do not charge any tuition for participation these mothers did not need to revert to additional employment or excessive loans. Despite the generous public infrastructure in comparison to the U.S., the mothers’ narratives also show how alone they were in their
endeavors to pursue a higher education degree while raising their children and how dependent they were on case worker support or rejection—especially in the cases of the mothers who pursued a vocational education degree. Similar to the U.S., the German mothers reported that their higher educational institutions lacked flexibility with regard to their childcare needs.
Chapter 6: Thematic Narrative Analysis

All the student mothers of this study have strong aspirations to exit poverty and attain financial security in order to improve their own and their children’s well-being. They are determined to follow the promise of higher education and pursue degrees that presumably open up greater possibilities to secure, stable, and higher income jobs and greater educational opportunities for their children. However, as the narratives show, the pursuit of this endeavor is complicated, precarious, time consuming, emotionally draining, and overall shaped by contingencies—often beyond the student mothers’ control. Their lifeworlds and their capability to pursue higher educational degrees resemble a house of cards—with each card representing one of the many important factors a single mother has to juggle—and if one card is missing, taken away, or misaligned, then this precarious house of cards collapses (see Figure 1). Consequently all of the student mothers’ capabilities to pursue higher education and ensure the healthy development of their children are at stake. The contingent lifeworlds of the student mothers in this study are clearly depicted in their case narratives and are influenced by their types of employment, the availability of and access to high-quality childcare, encounters with the welfare bureaucracy, and their encounters with and support from—or lack thereof—their respective higher education institutions. Further, their contingent lives and their capabilities are ultimately shaped by national and state policies and the underlying assumptions about gender roles and single motherhood that inform them—assumptions to which these mothers’ own agency and tenacity forms a strong counter-text. Only through their persistence, perseverance, and diligent planning were they able to manage to come this far in their studies and will soon acquire their desired degree—if their fragile house of cards holds together.
Figure 1. A single student mother’s house of cards—doings and beings shaped by policies

Precarious Employment

Participants in this study emphasized their aspirations for a degree in higher education in order to gain the stability and security afforded by employment opportunities. This was especially true in the case of the U.S. mothers where the need for a higher educational degree was stressed as a pathway out of poverty and as a symbol of security in all narratives. Denise’s narrative (see Chapter 4) is exemplaric of other mothers trapped in low-income employment due to the lack of a higher educational degree. Single mothers who lack a higher education degree, such as Denise, face the compounding challenges of the gender wage gap and the costly burden of childcare in their struggle to make a decent living in low-wage employment in the United
States. According to Vogtman and Schulman (2016), women are overrepresented in low wage employment in the U.S.—and two-thirds of the 23 million low-wage workers are female. Further, according to a report by the National Women’s Law Center (NWLC), almost half of all mothers in the low-wage workforce are single (Entmacher, Frohlich, Robbins, Martin, & Watson, 2014). But working a full-time job at or near minimum wage would still leave a single-parent family in poverty. Denise would need to be employed in a job with an hourly wage of $21 or have an annual income of $44,354 to cover her basic needs—such as rent and utilities, childcare, food, health insurance, and transportation in her city. Denise’s last job paid $11 an hour and she would have needed to work more than 75 hours a week to meet her basic needs and those of her two children (see National Center for Children in Poverty, 2016). Gault, Reichlin, and Román (2014) report that in order to meet basic needs in the U.S., the national average yearly income for a mother of two would have to amount to $61,044.

Due to the deficient social safety net and the lack of social rights, American participants in this study could only rely on themselves and thus were in desperate pursuit of a higher educational degree. As Keeara stated, “My kids depend on me, so it’s not like, somebody else is going to do it.” The needs and aspirations for stability and security were emphasized far more strongly in the American narratives than in the German ones. As most of the single student mothers in the U.S. have experienced poverty and low-wage employment, they were motivated by their children to “better” their life situations as they struggled to create a stable life for their children. Denise, Keeara, and Erin’s lifeworlds vividly depicted that despite their aspirations for a college/university degree in itself, they had no choice but to pursue higher education if they

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20 And 70% of those are 25 years or older.
wanted to live a life with less contingency and more resources. This tremendous burden results in a great deal of anxiety, as we could see in Erin’s case.

In Germany, however, the motivation to pursue higher education was due less to financial desperation and more to an aspiration for a degree in itself. Clearly, there is a similar relationship between income and educational attainment in Germany, but because of the more generous social safety net, the desperation for the higher degree was not as obvious as it was the case in the U.S. Nevertheless, it is clear that due to the gender wage gap and a childcare infrastructure that favors part-time female employment, women in Germany experience an overall disadvantage in the labor market—one reason why many working single mothers need to rely on supplemental welfare benefits. In fact 35% (217,600) of all single parents who received social security benefits (ALGII/Hartz IV) were employed in 2014 (Lenze & Funcke, 2016).

**Welfare policies in the United States:** “Working in this dead-end job that is not gonna go anywhere.” A major policy shift occurred in 1996 with the implementation of PRWORA and its main goals of “work enforcement, marriage promotion, and a smaller welfare state” (Abramovitz, 2006, p. 339). The shift from cash assistance—as in AFDC—to punitive and mandatory work requirements forced single mothers into the labor force. These work requirements often resulted in the neglect of their caregiving obligations and, consequently, in stressful and often traumatic situations for mothers and their children (Lewis, 2006; Polakow, 2007; Polakow, Butler, Stormer Deprez, & Kahn, 2004). New legislation expressed in Title I of PRWORA—the Temporary Aid for Needy Families program (TANF)—provided conditional minimal cash assistance for a maximum lifetime limit of five years, while utilizing a punitive “work first” policy. This requirement limited the assistance provided by the program to only those parents who met the mandatory work requirements (Abramovitz, 2006; Polakow, 2007;
Polakow et al., 2004). As this legislation provided maximum flexibility to the states, states could decide on how they allocated the block grant to their “needy” families. Ruark (2015) reports that, in Michigan, the maximum cash assistance of $492 per month for a family of three (Family Independence Program [FIP] in Michigan)—even in combination with other earnings—is not enough to lift a family out of income poverty. It only lifts a family up to 74% of the poverty threshold. Thus, in addition to its punitive eligibility criteria, FIP is not even designed to support a living above the national poverty threshold. Further, Michigan has implemented a four-year life-time limit on its cash benefits and requires mothers to commence work activities 12 weeks after they have given birth and does not exempt them from mandatory work requirements for a year although it would be possible to do so under existing PRWORA federal legislation (Kahn & Polakow, 2010; Ruark, 2015).

The mandatory work requirements are a condition for receiving cash assistance and may be met through unsubsidized employment, subsidized private-sector and public sector employment, work experience, on-the-job training, job search and job readiness assistance (for a short amount of time), and vocational educational training (limited to 12 months). As postsecondary education does not count toward fulfilling work requirements in most states, many women have had to quit their educational aspirations and drop out of colleges. In fact, Kaufman, Sharp, Miller, and Waltman (2000) reported a decline of students receiving welfare benefits enrolled at Lansing Community College from 1,161 in 1995 – 96 to 603 in 1996 – 97. Further, there was a significant drop in single parent enrollment at Schoolcraft College—from 88 in 1994 – 95 to 17 in 1998 – 99. In addition, Kahn and Polakow (2000) pointed to a 60% decline in retention rates for students on assistance at Mott Community College in Michigan following the inception of PRWORA. A declining enrolment of students receiving welfare was similarly
observed in other states and IWPR (1998) reported an overall “precipitous declines in college enrollment among welfare recipients” ranging from 29% at Baltimore City Community College to 82% at Berkshire Community College (p.2). Further, Ratner (2004) documented an 80% decline in college enrollment for students receiving welfare in New York City following the post-welfare reforms.

Almost twenty years later, following the implementation of PRWORA, only 7.4% of students with children in higher education who lived in deep poverty in 2011 – 12 received any TANF benefits (Gault, Reichlin, & Román, 2014). The “work first” emphasis of TANF and its corresponding denial of access to higher education has pushed many single mothers into precarious employment characterized by low wages, unpredictable work schedules, and no benefits. Thus in 2009, 40% of all single parents were employed in low-income jobs where even full-time employment would leave them stuck in poverty (Casey & Maldonado, 2012). While this work-focused ideology promotes the adult-worker model and makes welfare receipt conditional, there are relatively few policies in place to support access to work in the first place.

There are few supportive policies that could assist families by strengthening their positions as parents and workers and acknowledge the caregiving responsibilities of working families—such as maternity or parental leave, sick child days, and subsidized childcare. The United States is the only country amongst wealthy industrialized nations that has not enacted a statutory right to maternity leave. Whereas member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) provide on average 17.7 weeks of paid maternity leave to mothers, the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 provides only 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave that are conditional under a set of requirements—such as

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21 The replacement coverage ranged from 31.3% of prior income in the United Kingdom to 100% in Austria, Chile, Estonia, Germany, Israel, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain.
the size of the company and the length of prior employment (OECD, 2015; Vogtman & Schulman, 2016). However, the conditionality of this support denies many mothers the possibility for recovery after childbirth and leaves them with no choice but to return to work—potentially jeopardizing their own and their children’s healthy development (see Vogtman & Schulman, 2016).

There are some noteworthy improvements regarding parental leave in some states, such as California, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Washington. All of these states implemented some type of family leave insurance that guaranteed partial wage replacement for a certain amount of time. California’s Paid Family Leave program was established in 2002, and eligible workers can take up to six weeks partially paid leave to recover from childbirth or to care for a seriously ill child or spouse (Gault, Hartmann, Hegewisch, Milli, & Reichlin, 2014). New Jersey implemented a Family Leave insurance policy that guaranteed 66% replacement coverage of an employee’s previous income with a ceiling of $595 per week in case of childbirth or the need to care for a sick relative (Gault, Hartmann, Hegewisch, Milli, & Reichlin, 2014).

Similarly, the U.S. does not have any federal laws in place guaranteeing paid medical leave—leaving family-friendly policies at the discretion of the employer. Only five states, 29 cities, one county, and Washington D.C. have some kind of paid sick day policies in place—however, conditionality also prohibits access for some people in certain types of employment, such as railroad workers in Oregon or in-home care worker in California to name a few (A Better Balance, 2016). According to Vogtman and Schulman (2016), only 12% of all workers had access to paid family leave and 61% had access to paid sick days in the U.S. in 2015—with access rates drastically declining the lower the wages. Only 31% of workers with wages in the lowest 25% bracket received paid sick days in contrast to 84% in the highest 25%.
While federal financial support is an important factor for meeting basic needs there are few, other in-kind support services in place for low-income single mothers. One exception is the provision of food assistance. With less stringent work requirements and a higher income eligibility threshold (130% of the FPL for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and 185% for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)), more student parents can benefit from this kind of support (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2016). According to Gault, Reichlin, and Román (2014), about 40% of student parents in the U.S. were participating in SNAP and 7.2% received WIC. These numbers reflect the findings in the present study, where all but one single mother received some food assistance. However, while SNAP and WIC provide additional valuable support, they are not sufficient to ensure a healthy and nutritious diet, and they involve an onerous application process. The inability to make ends meet means that low-income, single student mothers have to fall back on loans for subsistence—as did the student mothers in this study. In summary, the fragmentized, stigmatized, and insufficient infrastructure of support in the U.S. leaves many mothers in a state of insecurity characterized by chronic stress and desperation.

Welfare policies in Germany: “As a single mother working part-time, it would mean that I still need supplementary benefits from the Jobcenter.” Germany’s welfare reform occurred in 2005. Influenced by lingering neoliberal assumptions that arose in the 1980s, a major paradigm shift of the welfare state occurred with the introduction of Arbeitslosengeld II/Hartz IV (basic security benefits for jobseekers), a stigmatized welfare provision for long-term unemployed and unemployable people. Enacted in January 2005, this welfare reform signaled a new balance of rights and obligations with the tendency towards more commodification and conditional social rights (Dingeldey, 2007). Ostner (2010) argues that declining birthrates, rising
child poverty, and poor results in the first OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 were subsequently discussed as a family failure in the public. This shifting focus on family failure as a cause for society’s ills—especially focusing on low-income mothers who were classified as “non-stimulating”—rendered possible a paradigmatic policy shift that fostered the adult-worker model wherein state support became more and more conditional on employment (workfare)—no matter the family status (Mätzke & Ostner, 2010; Ostner, 2010). Rigid means-tests, a basic allowance, and workfare are characteristics of this new welfare reform, and, depending on the childcare situation, single mothers with children three years and older are now obligated to participate in offered work activation strategies (Dingeldey, 2007). Zabel (2011) points out that single mothers who receive welfare, especially those with young children three and older, are most often pushed into precarious employment situations—the so-called One-Euro-Jobs as part of these work activation strategies—due to their lone caring responsibilities and childcare infrastructure—leaving them stuck with little hope for improvement in their financial situation.

The experiences of single mothers in this study stand in contradiction to the findings by Zabel (2011) as most of the welfare caseworkers did encourage possible degree programs that would enable single mothers to gain greater financial independence in the future instead of pushing them into One-Euro-Jobs. However, this discrepancy is likely a result of my study design because inclusion criteria required single mothers to already be enrolled in a higher education degree program. Consequently, narratives of the single mothers in One-Euro-Jobs are missing from this analysis. However, while none of the mothers in this study were actively pushed into any kind of work activation strategy, Esther was advised by her caseworker to work in a One-Euro-Job for a couple of months to prove her work ethic—revealing underlying
assumptions about her status. And in the case of Kamila, it became clear that the pathways that were shattered or opened up were at the discretion of her caseworker.

Similar to welfare reform in the U.S., Germany’s welfare reform in 2005 implied a work-first ideology. However, the German version is without time limits and was furthered by legislation with respect to childcare access and time-related family policies that aimed to promote greater reconciliation of work and family and, thus, continued to focus away from the traditional breadwinner/homemaker ideology (Auth, Leiber, & Leitner, 2011; Evers et al., 2005; Leitner, 2010; Oliver & Mätzke, 2014). Nevertheless, while employment of single mothers increased as a consequence of the welfare reform—so too did their poverty rates (Asmus & Pabst, 2016). Lenze and Funcke (2016) depict that the poverty rate (60% of the equivalized median income) has increased since 2005 by more than 6% while it decreased for two-parent households. This phenomenon may be the result of the increased low-wage and atypical employment that disproportionately benefits from the cheap labor of women (see Asmus & Pabst, 2016; Betzelt & Bothfeld, 2011; Lenze & Funcke, 2016). Further, because of an insufficient childcare infrastructure that does not align with work arrangements in combination with the persistent belief that child rearing is a responsibility of the mother, many single mothers are left with few options outside of part-time employment. Achatz, Hirseland, and Lietzmann (2013) report that about 45% of single mothers employed part-time mentioned care for children or other people as a reason to be in this type of employment.

While the Hartz IV reform in Germany pushed some mothers into work, the new activation strategies are embedded in a far better infrastructure of social supports in comparison to the U.S. The statutory right to maternity leave with a 100% of replacement coverage is in place. Furthermore, the new parental leave legislation of 2007 allows mothers or fathers to take
12+2 months job protected leave with a replacement wage of 67% of prior income with a maximum of €1800 and minimum of €300 that is not conditional on prior employment. However, mothers receiving basic security benefits did not benefit from this new parental leave scheme—nor did parenting students without any income. Thus, whereas the new parental leave policies show promise for gender equality for some socioeconomic strata in the society, their impact on single mothers’ economic stability is questionable. This policy further signals a shift that values parental care for children differentially dependent on income, and thus indirectly the level of education. As a substitute for the old Erziehungsgeld (child raising benefit) that was paid 24 months following childbirth unconditionally in terms of employment, the new Elterngeld only rewards parents who have prior employment, especially those with higher wages (Henninger, Wimbauer, & Dombrowski, 2008). As such, this new measure was criticized by several scholars as a pronatalist policy strategy that fostered higher birthrates among the better educated, leaving especially low-income single mothers and students at a disadvantage (Henninger et al., 2008).

Besides maternity/parental leave regulations and the questionable impact on low-income single student mothers, Germany has many individual measures in place to promote family and marriage. Amongst the most important for single mothers is the universal child benefit amounting to €2,280 a year for one child. This benefit is unconditional and increases with the number of children. Single parents may also receive the advanced child support that is paid for a maximum of 72 months in circumstances when the second non-caring parent is not paying child support. The government funded advanced child support currently amounts to €1,740 per child 6 years and younger (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2016).

Further, in contrast to the U.S., German workers’ paid sick days are a right and federally regulated under §3 of the Entgeltfortzahlungsgesetz (law that regulates paid sick days)—it is paid
for up to six consecutive weeks (Jung, 2001). Precarious employees, such as part-time workers, however, are often denied the right to paid sick leave in reality as reported by the Confederation of the German Trade Unions (DBG; 2013).

**Childcare Policies**

An important factor shaping participation in higher education and employment is childcare policies. All of the mothers in this study pointed out the importance of access to affordable, reliable, and quality childcare for fulfilling their roles as students and employees—and most of the American and one of the German mothers pointed out their concerns regarding childcare quality they had experienced at some point. Every single student mother needed some form of formal childcare, either before- and after-school-age care for older children and center-based or family day care for the younger children, or a mix thereof. Some quilted a patchwork of formal and informal childcare that met their irregular and unpredictable needs that resulted from their vulnerable situations. For some, childcare needs were compounded because of financial constraints, the number and the ages of children, and were ultimately shaped by local/state/and federal policies and practices.

**Access to affordable childcare.** In Germany, access to affordable childcare was typically not a problem. The majority of German participants did not have any childcare expenses—though some paid lunch money, such as Esther and Ellen. Only Ellen had additional childcare expenses that were not covered by the government—these costs amounted to about €10 per week for one semester. While substantially lower than childcare expenses in the U.S., it was still a burden for Ellen and her son. In the U.S., however, the average childcare costs (remaining after child care subsidies—if any) for the participants in this study amounted to $2,595 a year—with three of the participants
reporting $5,000 and more. Access to affordable childcare was impacted by other circumstances, such as additional employment at odd hours, eligibility regulations for childcare subsidies, and the availability of federally funded childcare—such as Head Start—or state funded preschool programs. Denise’s childcare situation (see Chapter 4), for example, had been impacted by several factors—first, by her precarious employment and her odd work hours, and later by her inability to match the Michigan DHHS childcare assistance regulations with policies and practices at the on-site campus childcare. These circumstances left her with no choice but to enroll her 2-year-old son for twenty hours at a different childcare that cost $760 a year despite subsidies. Findings by two large studies corroborate the documented problems for student parents accessing affordable childcare in the U.S. A study at the University of Cincinnati with 539 participants identified the high cost of childcare as a barrier for student success (Berrymann-Fink, Faaborg, Graviss, Mortimer, & Rinto, 2006). In addition, Polakow et al. (2014) showed that 48.6% of the 1,094 Eastern Michigan University student parents participating in the study had difficulties finding childcare.

Mismatched childcare hours and course or work schedules. Another recurring and dominant theme was the mismatch of formal childcare hours and the course and/or work schedule. Ellen’s narrative from Germany depicted that her additional costs for childcare were a result of the mismatch of regular center-based childcare hours and her university course schedule. She and Melanie both experienced this mismatch and expressed their discontent about the inflexibility of the childcare centers. These findings replicated the results of a project investigating the degree of family-friendliness at German universities conducted by the GESIS Institute for Social Sciences (Kunadt et al., 2014). Kunadt et al. (2014) showed the prevailing mismatch of supply and demand for flexible childcare options at universities, leading to high
dissatisfaction among student parents (Kunadt et al., 2014). A similar conclusion can be drawn from the longitudinal qualitative study by Meier-Gräwe and Müller (2008), who interviewed five low-income single student mothers among a total of 15 undergraduate students. Single mothers, in comparison to partner families, and those with children under six, reported greater difficulties in reconciling their course schedules and childcare, leading in some cases to a mix of childcare arrangements, as well as prolonged study time due to the opening hours of institutionalized childcare and the unavailability of childcare in the late afternoon and evening hours. Melanie in particular needed to patchwork her childcare needs—she relied on after-school-care and family day care provider every day due to the demands of her program.

Thus, while institutionalized childcare is more affordable for German students when compared to American students, availability does not always align with obligatory class schedules at the university. Students in the vocational program, however, did not have unpredictable course and work schedules. As a result, none of the mothers in such a degree programs in this study reported any form of formal childcare access problem. Further, because there are no tuition costs for higher education and minimal or no fees for formal childcare, single student mothers in Germany could live on their training assistance grants and other forms of financial support and, in all but two cases, did not need to revert to additional employment for subsistence. Consequently, single student mothers’ childcare needs and hours were more easily met.

In the U.S., however, due to high university/college tuition and childcare fees, most mothers needed to work 20 – 40 hours in addition to their study and caregiving responsibilities. As a consequence, their childcare needs were generally more acute in addition to very high childcare fees. Keeara and Laura (see Chapter 4), for example, were required to engage in
employment for material subsistence and thus needed formal childcare in the evening hours or on
the weekend. Polakow et al. (2014) depict that more than 500 student parents at Eastern
Michigan University needed childcare in the evening because of course and work schedules. Not
receiving any form of childcare financial support from MDHHS made access to affordable
childcare a cause of great concern to Laura who spent almost 50% of her annual income on a
babysitter. And Keeara settled for less and compromised quality for affordability—leaving her
with feelings of guilt and a state of distress despite paying her family care provider more than
$5,000 per year.

“Settling for less” is also a recurrent theme discussed by Polakow (2007). The mothers in
her study, some of them also single and students, were all living financially on the edge.
Polakow’s study showed how choices for high-quality childcare were often derailed by the lack
of resources and the chronic lack of time. Similarly, Polakow et al. (2014) found that that student
mothers at Eastern Michigan University often lacked the choice for high-quality care due to their
financial constraints. In this study, more than 30% of all 343 participating single student parents
(predominantly female) stressed their concerns about childcare quality and more than 60% of
them paid less than $400 a month. With high-quality care being extremely expensive in the U.S.
the relatively low childcare costs by more than the half of all single mothers point to the dilemma
of compromised quality, affordability, and access. Further, this study showed that a lack of
resources left more than a fifth of the single mothers worried about their children’s safety.

Erratic and odd work hours and course schedules create an even greater need for flexible
and safe childcare. This need could in some cases be buffered by a family support network. In
both countries, single student parents without any kind of social network—such as Ellen in
Germany and Keeara, Laura, and Erin in the U.S—faced greater worries and difficulties in
reconciling their student responsibilities with their caregiving responsibilities compared to those single student parents who could rely on help from relatives. Further, this reconciliation was exacerbated by the absence of a viable social safety net, as in the U.S.

Additional student mothers who were interviewed for this study but whose cases do not appear here, also speak to the need for a support system to ensure family survival. Thus, while Rachel, Tara, and Amy needed to work an additional 40 hours a week for subsistence (see Appendix A: Extended Profiles), they could not have done so without the informal care provided by their relatives. Rachel, the African American single mother of twin 4-year-old daughters realized that her support system is the one factor enabling her to study in the first place. She stated, “I don't know what I would do if I didn't have a support system. Doing this interview makes me think about it—wow—if I didn't have any of them I wouldn't be able to go to school at all.” Tara, the White 26 year-old mother of a 6-year-old son, works the third shift from 7:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. as a receptionist in a nursing home. Because she is able to live with her parents they watch her son during these work hours and at other times. Further, Amy, the White mother of a 7-year-old daughter has always worked second or third shift jobs. While her mother passed away when she was 15, Amy has two older sisters who have provided indispensable support for her in pursuit of a highly demanding degree in respiratory health with an unpredictable course and clinical schedule. She stated:

I do have two sisters who help me out tremendously. . . . Because childcare is so expensive. . . . she [daughter] usually goes to my sisters for the whole weekend. . . . I worked Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, and Sunday. Trying to just not work during the week. But if I did have to work I have either my sister drive out to Fenton and pick her up. . . . and [I] pick her up in the middle of the night.
In contrast to Keeara and Laura (see Chapter 4), Rachel and Amy were both lucky to be able to rely on their relatives as an affordable and safe option for childcare while being at work. While the single student mothers in Germany expressed the importance of the support they received from their relatives, their dependence upon them for informal care was not as great and was often only needed in emergencies, such as when the child was sick.

The experienced struggles regarding childcare access, affordability, availability, and quality were contextualized and informed by the policies and practices within the two different countries—yet they were both embedded in a structure of contingencies. Even for the mothers who had secured satisfactory childcare, all was contingent on the absence of the unexpected: their house of cards could topple down if their car broke down, their relatives were not present, their work schedule changed, their course schedule changed, MDHHS subsidies were slashed, or the babysitter moved.

**Childcare in the U.S.: A Private or Public Responsibility?**

The United States estimates a need for childcare for more than 15 million children under the age of six years, whereas only 7.6 million slots in centers and family childcare were available in 2015 (Childcare Aware of America and Michigan, 2015). Childcare in the U.S. is predominantly located on the private, for-profit market with no right to financial assistance nor a guaranteed spot in formal childcare. Aligning with the logic of the liberal welfare regime, the responsibility of risk prevention is transferred to the unregulated market. Thus, not only do single mothers have to sell their labor on the market without any safety net that would strengthen their bargaining capacity, they also have to resort to low-wage, part-time work in order to care for their children. With no universal subsidized or affordable high-quality childcare (annual fees for a 4-year-old in a center ranged from $4,804 to $17,842 in 2015), almost every childcare slot has
to be competed for in an unfettered and unsaturated private market (Child Care Aware of America, 2015). Childcare costs often exceeded the average annual tuition for a public four-year university of $9,893 in 2012 (Children’s Defense Fund, 2014). As a result, just 41.3% of all 4-year-olds in the U.S. and 39.6% in Michigan were enrolled in state pre-K, preschool special education, and state and federal Head Start programs in 2014/2015 (Barnett et al., 2015). The numbers for 3-year-olds were even smaller—with 15.9% overall enrollment, and 14.3% in Michigan (Barnett et al., 2015).

**Federal childcare programs.** Major federal programs intended to support low-income families with young children are the Childcare and Development Block Grant, Head Start, and Early Head Start. At the federal level the Childcare Development Fund (CCDF) is administered by the Office of Childcare (OCC) within the Department of Health and Human Services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). This fund is intended to support low-income parents’ childcare costs if they are in an approved work or education activity. CCDF was originally enacted under the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990 and then amended and consolidated under PRWORA (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). PRWORA established maximum flexibility for the states, allowing them to spend the federal dollars at their discretion within the guidelines provided by the federal government. As a result, the federally suggested income eligibility limit of 85% of the state median income is generally not followed by the different states (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). The Child Development and Care Program in Michigan has set the income limit at 39% of the national median income threshold—in other words at 122% of the federal poverty level (Children’s Defense Fund, 2014). This means that a family of three in 2013/2014 whose annual income exceeded $23,800 did not receive any childcare subsidy (Schulman & Blank, 2014).
For a single mother of two children below four years of age, an income at this level means that the average cost of childcare for an infant in Michigan ($9,724 in 2014) would consume more than 80% of her paycheck (Child Care Aware America and Michigan, 2014). Because there is generally no reduction in childcare costs for the second or third child, the mother would consequently have to resort to low-cost and low-quality childcare. Her financial constraints resulting from rules and regulations out of her control would leave her with no choice to access better and high-quality childcare. This was especially true for Keeara who, because of her precarious employment situation and the odd hours worked, needed childcare in the evening—and because she earned “too much” money, she did not receive any childcare assistance—leaving her finally stuck with a childcare situation she did not approve of nor feel comfortable with. Her discontent corroborates what Polakow (2007) describes as the appalling lack of regulation in the private childcare sector.

Similarly, the study by Polakow et al. (2014) showed that only 12% of single mothers reported receiving DHHS childcare assistance while more than 60% indicated a monthly income of less than $1,200 and almost 35% made less than $800 a month. Consequently this left many single mothers burdened with the need to compromise childcare quality (Polakow et al., 2014).

Besides this low threshold that already excludes many families from the possibility of taking advantage of child care subsidies—only people in approved work or education activities are eligible and only for the hours they spend in this activity. Furthermore, the reimbursement rates for the provider do not necessarily align with the actual rates, leaving families with the burden of copayments that they might not be able to cover. Helen, another single student mother interviewed for this study (see Appendix A: Extended Profiles) is the White mother of three children (3-, 4- and 6-years old). She needed to pay between $300 and $600 a month on
childcare despite the fact she was receiving childcare subsidies. Because of the limitations of the benefit she had to pay extra, Helen stated, “I had a clinical that was an hour away, but they only cover a half hour transportation time. . . . If it’s not for those hours and I have to pay out of my pocket. It is $12 an hour. It is a huge difference.”

Because of the eligibility criteria, such as the income threshold, those who can take advantage of the childcare subsidies are frequently mothers in low-wage employment with atypical and unpredictable work schedules. Thus, the question arises how a precariously employed mother, who works odd hours, can actually take advantage of this subsidy? She needs to find a childcare provider who grants her the flexibility of covering odd hours as well as agrees to invoice her by the hour—rather than by the day or week. According to Rachidi (2016), MDHHS childcare subsidies are disproportionately used for day care centers. Her study suggests that single mothers with an atypical work schedule were less likely to receive DHHS childcare assistance because they were less likely to have their children enrolled in day care centers.

While the CCDBG is intended to provide a means-tested childcare subsidy that partially supports families, it only reaches 2,177,000 children—an estimated 15% of eligible children under federal rules (Chien, 2015). Although there is currently no waiting list in Michigan this state has deliberately lowered the threshold from 178% of the federal poverty level in 2001 to 121% in 2014 (Schulman & Blank, 2014). Consequently, it can be argued, that “no waiting list” does not mean that childcare is available and affordable. Rather, it is simply a result of a shift in an arbitrarily determined eligibility threshold. This shift renders the real childcare needs of Michigan families invisible on paper. Only a focus on the lifeworld of the individuals can unveil the hidden realities. As we could see in Keeara’s narrative (see Chapter 4), her lifeworld shows
that because her income minimally exceeded the exclusionary eligibility threshold, she had to resort to low-cost, unsatisfactory, and custodial childcare.

The other federally supported program, Head Start, was developed in 1965 and made available to children from birth to age five with varying quality standards. This program usually runs half days and serves less than half of eligible children (Cooper & Costa, 2012). Although free of charge to families, only 4% of eligible infants/toddlers were enrolled in the Early Head Start program in 2012, and only 41% of eligible 3 and 4-years-olds were enrolled in the regular Head Start program (Children’s Defense Fund, 2014).

Two of the single student parents reported having their children enrolled in a Head Start program and both of them were not entirely satisfied with the quality. Dissatisfied with the quality and afraid for the safety of her children, Helen (see Appendix A: Extended Profiles) decided to withdraw her children, while Laura (see Chapter 4) was left with no choice but to be stuck with it. Helen stated:

When I moved here I put the kids in the Head Start, which is a free program. . . . you almost felt like they only took her in the door so that they get a mark that they were there. . . . my youngest was getting bitten, pinched, her hair pulled out by one child . . . . And like biting happens at that age, it happens. But it shouldn’t be happening several times a week. And I don't blame the child. It’s the adults that need to supervise that and I just, I couldn't put it. . . . Here are my two year olds crying about going to school. . . . So I switched.

State pre-kindergarten initiatives. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (Barnett et al., 2015), 42 states plus Washington D.C. have funded prekindergarten programs in 2014-2015 (Barnett et al., 2015). Despite an increased spending,
only 29% of 4-year-olds and just 5% of 3-year-olds were served by these initiatives in the United States. When Head Start programs are included, a total of 41% of 4-year-olds and 16% of 3-year-olds were enrolled in funded programs. Like Head Start, state-funded prekindergarten program quality is regularly monitored but varies from state to state (Barnett et al., 2015).

The Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP), Michigan’s state Pre-K program, began in 1985 as the Michigan School Readiness Program. In 2014 – 2015 32% (37,112 children) of 4-year-olds were served by the state program that generally operates 6.5 hours a day and four days a week (Barnett et al., 2015). While research evidently shows the benefits of the high-quality GSRPs (Schweinhart, Xiang, Daniel-Echols, Browning, & Wakabayashi, 2012), for low-income working parents whose works/school schedule does not align with the pre-K schedule, it is not always a viable option—assuming that they know about the program in the first place. Keeara (see Chapter 4), for example, could not enroll her daughter at the GSRP program offered at the on-site campus childcare because the pick-up time was right in the middle of her working hours. Without transportation from the center to the family day care provider her child could not participate. Organized around the underlying assumption of a support system put in place for low-income parents and their children, there is a great need to critically assess whether these programs are creating the actual opportunities that they are designed for.

The inadequate and unaffordable childcare infrastructure leaves one unsurprised by the finding of an IWPR study that childcare availability is named amongst the biggest challenge student parents are confronted with when pursuing higher education (Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006). With campus childcare declining, only 46% of public two-year institutions and 51% of public four-year institutions offer care on-site, and it is often costly childcare that serves 4.8% of all student parents’ children (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014; Miller & Gault,
2011). None of the participants in this study had their children enrolled at the on-site childcare facilities that were available at their universities at any point during their studies. For Denise it was impossible to align MDHHS childcare assistance regulations with the on-site childcare policies, for others the additional work responsibilities complicated their access to childcare in general. Keeara as well as Rachel (see Appendix A: Extended Profiles) could not take advantage of the Great Start Readiness Program at the on-site childcare because she had to work the second shift at the hospital three times a week—meaning she would have needed someone to pick up the children in the afternoon. Consequently, she chose a part-time public preschool close to her grandmother’s house. Rachel shares:

> I think that sometimes utilizing family has like a plus and a minus to it. I am very grateful that is my grandmother, and that I know her, and that I feel like we are safe with her. . . . But there is not as much stimulation as I feel like they being maybe more babied, and you know I am sure, she is not like counting and doing numbers and things like that. . . . they would normally do at school or in a childcare center. This mismatch of supply and demand leads to an unfair disadvantage for a very vulnerable population so that those with the highest need, but lowest means, are left in the predicament of leaving their children in low-quality, unstable, and irregular caring arrangements—a predicament that Nussbaum (2011) would term “tragic choice” (p.37). This was especially true for Keeara and Denise who—because of the lack of family support—did heavily rely on formal childcare and experienced a form of tragic choice. While the latter aspect consequently induces anxiety and guilt for the mother, it possibly hits their children the hardest—emotionally and developmentally (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014).
The indifference of American public policy towards the development of all young children in the nation has resulted in a dynamic wherein the young children of poor mothers in the U.S. are held captive in the privatized childcare market that limits access to nurturing care and education—thus one’s worth is determined, as one young mother in Polakow’s study put it, in “shades of green” (Polakow, 2007, p. 64). As such, people are not treated with equal worth—their dignity is derailed by a dismantled welfare state failing to render assistance in the disguise of negative liberty where privatization fosters “a separate and unequal education—a pedagogy of the poor” (Polakow, 1993, p. 129).

**Childcare in Germany: A Private or Public Responsibility?**

Since 2013 children one year and older have a right to formal childcare in Germany. Because of the principle of subsidiarity childcare is mainly maintained by non-profit organizations, such as the church, or social democratic welfare organizations (*Arbeiterwohlfahrt*), the Red Cross, and other non-profit agencies. About two-thirds of all childcare institutions are run by these non-profits, another third is public, and less than 1% is privately organized. Because of the federative political system, school and childcare are state and community responsibilities (Bock-Famulla et al., 2015).

After unification in 1990, Germany successively moved away from childcare being a private/family matter to a public responsibility. Ideas about childrearing—as a mother’s responsibility—shifted with the welfare reform in 2006 (ALG II/Hartz 4) and the Child Promotion Act (*Kinderförderungsgesetz*) of 2008 that included the enactment of the statutory right to childcare for every child one year and older in 2013 (Oliver & Mätzke, 2014). The transformative shift from stay-at-home mothers bearing primary childcare responsibilities in the
early years with a child-centered preschool (Kindergarten\textsuperscript{22}) that was half-day and focused on early childhood education, to childcare as an arrangement facilitating women’s employment signaled a trend towards the adult-worker model. As a consequence, the Child Promotion Act in Germany has greatly invested in the development of the formal childcare infrastructure for children three years and younger—more than six billion dollars\textsuperscript{23} of federal funds were funneled into the development of childcare for the under threes since 2014. Consequently, enrollment in formal childcare for the under threes rose from 13.6% in 2006 to 32.9% in 2015. More precisely, 59.7% of 2-year-olds, 89.3% of all 3-year-olds; and about 94% of all children between three and six attended formal preschool in 2015—thus, almost universal coverage has been attained for this age group (Bock-Famulla et al., 2015)

While these rates are higher than in the U.S., there are still about 185,000 families who have unmet childcare needs for their children three years and younger—so that the goal of 100% coverage of childcare has not been completely accomplished (Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2015). While a statutory right for early childcare is in place, the hours of guaranteed care are not federally mandated. Consequently, some states in Germany, such as Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saarland, and Sachsen have not defined the amount of hours guaranteed for formal care. The quality and availability of hours for care vary from region to region, making a reconciliation of care and work—as well as the quality of care—dependent on the geographic location (Bock-Famulla et al., 2015).

Childcare in Germany falls under the jurisdiction of the Länder (states) but is locally administered by the Youth Welfare Service of the local communes/municipalities. It is regulated

\footnote{22 A Kindergarten is an early childhood education center for children between 3 – 6 years. It is comparable to preschool education in the United States.}

\footnote{23 5.4 billion euros}
by the eight books of the social code that focuses on the welfare of the children and their families. It is recommended that parents apply for childcare six months in advance at the Youth Welfare Service that is responsible for the allocation of children to childcare centers and family day care (see SGB VIII).

There are different types of childcare available in Germany. The most common one is the typical Kindergarten, a professional center-based program for children between 3 and 6-years-old (as formal schooling in Germany starts at the age of 6). Krippen, a center-based alternative provides childcare for younger children, and Tagesmütter/Tagesväter are paraprofessional family day care providers. The latter ones mostly provide care for children three years and younger, are more flexible, and also care for older children at a-typical times. Family day care providers in NRW receive 160 hours of training, are inspected before initial licensing, and are monitored by the Youth Welfare Service (Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2015). Funding for childcare is a complicated mix of Länder (states), Kommunen (municipalities), and parents. Childcare centers are run by public and non-profit organizations, such as churches. Further, the fees for formal childcare are not federally regulated and are dependent on state regulations and municipalities (Bock-Famulla et al. 2015). Some states, such as Hamburg, provide a guaranteed five hours of care daily free of charge from birth to public school entry. Others, such as NRW, exempt all parents from contributions the last year before public school. While the fees are not regulated and vary from municipality to municipality, they are relatively low on average and are dependent on hours and parental income. A study by the Institut der deutschen Wirtschaft Köln (Institute of the German Economy Cologne; 2010) reported that the average annual tuition for a 4-year-old amounts to about €814. However,

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24 The federal government has funded the development of more childcare centers and family day care providers because of the Child Promotion Act.
according to § 90 SGB VIII, parents can be fully exempt from childcare costs in licensed childcare settings if the financial burdens are deemed too high and definition of financial burdens vary and are subject to state law. Regarding students, Middendorff et al. (2013) identified that 68% of student mothers have average annual childcare costs of €1,932. This number reflects the additional childcare needs of student parents, who cannot solely rely on childcare spots in formal childcare institutions, but need additional childcare in the evening hours and weekends that is not covered by the Youth Welfare Service.

Most of the German single student mothers in this study reported that they were exempt from formal childcare costs, and some had to pay a small portion of the lunch money—only Esther and Ellen had these extra childcare expenses that did not exceed €240 a year. Besides that, Ellen had to pay for a babysitter at some point during her course of study because the childcare center hours where her son was enrolled did not align with her course schedule.

**Fighting Their Way Through the Information Jungle**

While childcare was the most critical element in single student mothers’ lives, financial support was essential for the successful pursuit of higher education; therefore, most of the mothers discussed their encounters with caseworkers in the welfare system. Lack of information regarding financial and in-kind support services, as well as burdensome application processes, were issues frequently mentioned by mothers in the U.S. and Germany. Because students in higher education are generally excluded from welfare support, they need to resort to other kinds of financial support for subsistence in both countries.

Many mothers did not feel informed about the possible support they would qualify for as a student and a mother. This was complicated by a lack of knowledge and unfamiliarity with regulations, as well as stigmatizing attitudes by the case workers themselves. Because of the
intricate, uncertain, and complex nature of financial support for students in the U.S. and Germany, the narratives portrayed an information jungle that the women were often left to navigate alone. Melanie in NRW (see Chapter 5), for example, described the timely burden of the application maze running from one agency to the next: “and I have to prove so many things . . . and then they [different agencies] need the different proofs from each other. But then I only have an old one here, or only one. . . and it continues like that the whole time.” Financial challenges in collaboration with the application jungle were corroborated by the findings of Quiring and Rodriguez Startz (2014), who interviewed seven single mothers enrolled in a part-time vocational program in Schwäbisch Gmünd, Germany. Similarly, in the U.S., Erin’s case (see Chapter 4) depicted that only through her diligence and persistence demonstrating her agency and determination to pursue higher education was she able to secure the needed financial support—despite misleading information by the caseworker. Erin explained that applying for welfare assistance was terrifying and states, “I was like I only got four more weeks that I need and I can finish these classes that I am passing. . . . and she wouldn’t let me do it. I was, like losing it. And her supervisor came in and I had already called him a couple of times, and he gave me that four weeks.” The stigmatizing and onerous welfare maze—never knowing if, what, and when one will receive any support—has been likewise depicted by Polakow (2007) where a young, 21-year old single mother in New York speaks exactly to the same application jungle experienced by many single mothers in this study.

**Marginalization and othering in the U.S. and Germany.** The encounters with the welfare bureaucracies in Germany and the U.S. depicted pervasive asymmetrical power-relationships and unveiled underlying assumptions about welfare recipients as individuals with an eroded work ethic, a lack of educational aspirations, and a dependency on government
support—this emerged in both the German and American narratives. Esther’s and Kamila’s (see Chapter 5) encounters with the welfare bureaucracy vividly depicted the stereotypes about single and welfare dependent mothers in Germany. Both had to undergo a “fitness test” to prove their work-readiness so they would qualify for the educational program. While both of them expressed gratitude for the chance to enter the vocational education program, the extra hurdles they had to jump through should be critically examined. Neither the typical vocational degree nor the typical university degree requires an initial assessment of “character.” A hidden character test was similarly present in the American narratives. Almost cut off from cash assistance, Erin (see Chapter 4) vividly described how, “I proved to them [DHHS-Caseworker] that I was doing exactly what I said I was doing.”

Marginalization and othering through practices and regulation mediated by caseworkers was similarly pertinent in other studies. McLean Taylor (2006) for example interviewed student mothers on welfare in the U.S. and New Zealand and similarly found that the women in the U.S. described stigmatizing experiences with their caseworkers. These women were assumed to be “lazy and unwilling to work.” (p. 12). Othering, because of household status, age, race, or religion, was exacerbated for some by their experiences within higher education and/or the workplace. Erin and Laura both experienced shaming by professors at their colleges in Michigan. Laura, for example, described how she was singled out by a professor for not being aware of common formatting and style guides used for writing papers. While plucking up her courage and asking for clarification, she was ridiculed by her professor. Shaming and othering of single mothers in the university was a finding also discussed by Duquaine-Watson (2007), who interviewed 13 single mothers at a community college in the Midwest U.S. Internalized stigmatization due to discriminatory behavior by professors, caseworkers, and others led many
mothers to be hesitant in discussing their identities with professors if they had not decided to conceal them in the first place.

Further, not only were stigmatizing practices and attitudes emotionally damaging to the participants in this study, but it was also apparent that their lifeworlds and future pathways were dependent on the luck of the draw in terms of their case workers at the welfare agency. In Germany and the U.S., student mother pathways were dramatically impacted by caseworkers conveying or withholding of information (deliberately or not). In Germany, Kamila (see Chapter 5) was denied information because of her hijab—luckily her pathway changed for the better with a new caseworker whose practices seemed not to be influenced by xenophobic attitudes. Laura (see Chapter 4) in the U.S. was not as lucky with her case worker as she was denied childcare subsidies despite living in extreme poverty. Kahn and Polakow (2000) also pointed out how misleading information from caseworkers severely impacted student mothers’ trajectories. In their interviews of a small sample of ten student mothers in Michigan, eight were at some point given false or misleading information regarding work requirements.

Most of the student mothers in this study are on the final stretch—they continuously overcame the odds stacked against them. Their narratives show that it was particularly important to successfully finish the first semester as this was a tipping point. Many experienced the heavy burden of fulfilling new requirements as a student, while patching together work schedules, time-consuming and stressful childcare arrangements, and financial support. With diligence and a strong will for a higher educational degree in order to exit poverty, most of the single mothers did not take no for an answer and negotiated the information and financial support jungle. But how many single student mothers have been left behind? Thoughts about “quitting” or “giving
up” were ever-present on the minds of the German and American single student mothers in this study and were shaped by the many obstacles they had to overcome all alone.

**Time-Related Conflicts**

Never having enough time in the day was a recurring theme amongst all participants in both countries. Not having enough time to study and not having enough time to spend with their children was a source of major distress for all participants and was compounded by many factors, such as employment needs as well as institutional regulations and support. These concerns were shaped by cultural norms about motherhood and the assumptions of correct childrearing strategies, as well as the welfare state in general.

**Time for studying.** The difficulty in reconciling childcare and study (and often work) led to a variety of interdependent costs impacting single mothers’ and their children’s capabilities and functionings—especially in the U.S. where time scarcity was much greater overall compared to Germany. Moreau and Kerner (2015) have discussed higher education and the family as “greedy institutions” where there is always room for improvement (p. 220)—resulting in feelings of guilt directed towards their children or toward their studies for most German and American participants in this study. Compounding financial restrictions and the high cost of education (both for participants and their children) left many single U.S. mothers in this study with no choice but to work—reducing the truncated time they had for studying and spending time with their children. Studying for school was mostly restricted to times when the children were asleep or at school in order not to compromise the little quality time they had with them—or because they did not have any other choice. However, this strategy often left these mothers in a state of exhaustion. Keeara (see Chapter 4), for example, sacrificed her sleep to study. She stated: “The majority of time I don’t even get 8 hours, I barely get four, ‘cause I have to study.” Studies by
Jones-DeWeever and Gault (2006) and Polakow et al. (2014) depict how student parents, due to their multiple responsibilities, are burdened with finding enough time for studying. Almost 80% of all single mothers reported lack of study time, 52% missed classes that hurt their grades, and 33% withdrew from classes, likely leading to delayed degree completion as reported by 29% (Polakow et al., 2014).

In Germany, single mothers similarly depicted their lack of time for studying and the resulting exhaustion from the different responsibilities they had. While the necessity for additional employment was absent in most of the cases, the need for adequate time to study similarly presented a great burden to the mothers—as most of them had to realize that their caregiving responsibilities impacted the high demands for achievement they had set upon themselves. For Ellen (see Chapter 5), her high demands culminated in a state of exhaustion that required attention by a physician. Ellen explained that her extreme state of exhaustion “probably happened because one is too ambitious that, at the end, you don’t really pay attention to your own well-being. But at some point it will come back to you.” These findings were corroborated by Kunadt et al. (2014), Meier-Gräwe & Müller (2008), and Quiring and Rodriguez Startz (2014). In their studies, parenting students, in particular single mothers in Germany, reported lack of time for studying, missing classes, and prolonged study time (Kunadt et al., 2014; Meier-Gräwe & Müller, 2008; Quiring & Rodriguez Startz, 2014). Lack of study time and exhaustion were themes frequently mentioned by single mothers in the qualitative studies by Meier-Gräwe and Müller (2008) that focused on single mothers enrolled at a university and by Quiring and Rodriguez Startz (2014) that focused on single mothers enrolled in a part-time vocational degree.

**Time for studying—Unpredictable events.** Lack of time for studying due to regular responsibilities was exacerbated by unpredictable events, such as the sickness of a child. While it
is common knowledge that children occasionally get sick, the way this common knowledge is interpreted and presented in labor policies is different in both countries. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015), 44.4% of parents reported four or more health care visits for children five years and younger in the U.S. in 2014. While these numbers only reflect actual health care visits and not the less serious conditions that would prevent children from attending family—or center-based care—they nevertheless give an idea of how frequently low-income single mothers have to deal with the consequences of a sick child. As we could see in this study, sick children were problematic for many working students in the U.S. who reported a lack of income due to the absence from work. Some working student parents like Rachel and Amy (see Appendix A: Extended Profiles) were lucky to have at least some paid sick days as part of their employer’s employment policies. Nevertheless Rachel, for example, only had a specific number of paid sick days and had to constantly debate whether or not to use them for different situations. Rachel stated, “I work in the ER, so it is not really good for me to be sick. But there are times that I have to go to work being sick because I have to allot my sick days for them [her twin daughters].”

In Germany, Melanie was the only single mother student who reported on her fortunate circumstances of rarely having to deal with sickness when it came to her daughter or herself. She stated, “I have to say that is really great [her daughter not being sick]—I know that others are not that lucky.” But she is also aware that because of her field of study missing two classes would have repercussion for timely degree completion: “Then I would have to repeat the whole course in another semester.” All of the other German mothers, however, frequently had to deal with sick children and most of them were afraid of the reactions of their professors or colleagues at work. While single mothers in this study who were enrolled in the vocational track benefited from paid
sick days for both themselves and their children, Kamila (see Chapter 5) in particular was anxious about being judged by her colleagues and consequently used her paid leave days when her children were sick. Ellen’s narrative similarly reported on her constant fear of missing classes as result of her child getting sick. These findings were substantiated by Kunadt et al. (2014) who reported that single mothers in Germany had to miss classes due to childcare problems at times when their children were ill. Accordingly, their study identified 84% of student parents who wanted alternative regulations, such as more flexible assignment options, in the case of the sickness of their child. Thus, single student mothers in Germany who struggle to reconcile childcare, work, class schedules, and time to study are also prone to capability failure and derailed functioning as are their American counterparts.

**Higher education in the United States—Additional financial barriers.** The American higher education landscape is generally characterized by high tuition fees. As a consequence of the welfare reform of 1996, low-income student parents can rarely rely on cash assistance from the state. Further, workfare and burdensome application processes vary from state to state and create high barriers for student mothers intending to invest in their human capital with aspirations for economic stability (Gault, Reichlin, & Román, 2014; Polakow, 2007; Polakow et al., 2004).

**Student aid in the U.S.—Will loans pay off in the long run?** The U.S. has a complex system of financial support available for students enrolled in higher education—located at the federal and state level, at the college/university, and through private loans. The different forms of financial aid include grants, loans, scholarships, and work-study (Federal Student Aid, 2016). Grants, scholarship, and work-study are types of financial aid that do not have to be repaid—loans on the other hand do. Federal loans and Pell Grants are first used to cover costs associated
with higher education, such as tuition and fees. The Federal Pell Grant program (Pell Grants) is intended to support low-income students—thus, eligibility criteria and the grant amount are, amongst other factors, dependent on Expected Family Contribution (EFC), the resulting financial need that is calculated as the difference between cost of tuition and EFC, and part-time or full-time enrollment. Undergraduate students can receive a maximum amount of $5,815. All of the single mothers in this study received Pell Grants. Nevertheless their financial needs were greater than Pell Grants could cover, leaving many with a substantial amount of student loans. With average center-based childcare costs of $9,589 and an average annual tuition of $7,701 in a four-year public university in the U.S., a maximum Federal Pell Grant for undergraduate students of $5,815 leaves a single mother with a financial gap of at least $11,475 annually—and shelter, food, clothing, and health care must also be taken into consideration (Children's Defense Fund, 2014; Federal Student Aid, 2016; Schulte & Durana, 2016). Gault, Reichlin, and Román (2014) estimate that low-income student mothers’ unmet yearly needs amount to $5,836.

There are in general two different types of federal loans available to undergraduate students—direct subsidized and direct unsubsidized loans. The major difference between these two loans are the eligibility criteria and the ways in which interest rates are handled during school attendance. While only undergraduate students with financial needs can apply for federal subsidized loans, students applying for unsubsidized loans do not need to prove financial needs. Further the interest rates for federal subsidized loans are paid for by the government during the time students are enrolled in school—interest rates of unsubsidized loans, however, have to be covered by the recipients. Independent students can receive a maximum of $9,500 to $12,500 in subsidized and unsubsidized loans depending on student status with a total limit of $57,000 for undergraduates. Student loans were an important source for financing educational expenses for
most of the U.S. mothers in this study. Lack of financial assistance combined with high university tuition and the high cost of childcare leaves many single mothers no choice but to work and resort to loans.

Thus, in addition to taking classes, studying, and caring for their children, the majority of all American single mothers in this study were employed for more than 20 hours per week and most of them full-time. Similarly Gault, Reichlin, and Román (2014) reported that more than 50% of single mothers who enrolled in community colleges in 2008 were also engaged in full-time work due to unmet needs not covered by financial aid packages. Polakow et al. (2014) also found that 56% of all single mothers were employed for more than 20 hours a week. Despite employment and Pell Grants, students in this study reported an accumulation of loans of $40,000 on average—with three of the participants reporting more than $65,000 of student debt. Gault, Reichlin, and Román (2014) showed that student mothers who finished their bachelor’s degree in 2008 in the United States accumulated debt amounting to almost $30,000 on average. The inadequacy of Pell Grants is also illustrated by the annual report by The College Board, which reported that only 61% of tuition and fees at public four-year universities were covered in 2015 (Baum, Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2015). They further stated that 29% of independent students with dependents borrowed more than $40,000.

Another type of aid is the Federal Work-Study program—it enables students with financial needs to earn extra money in part-time work and ideally secure study-related employment on or off campus. Higher education institutions have to be part of the Federal Work-Study program in order for students at that university or college to take advantage of this support. In this study, Denise was the only participant in a Work-Study program. She significantly benefited from this opportunity, as it provided her the flexibility she needed for
caregiving and studying, it counted towards the work requirement for cash assistance while at the same time did not reduce her food assistance, and it further exempted her from a program required internship.

**Higher education in Germany—A supportive infrastructure?** In Germany higher education at public universities or within the dual system is tuition-free. Universities usually charge a small administration semester fee that varies from place to place—for example Ellen’s university charges €532 per year in 2016 and it also covers public transportation costs. Tuition was in place in some Länder (states) in the last decade. The introduction of fees was partly supported by the constitutional court which declared a previous enactment of a federal law prohibiting universal tuition fees as unconstitutional. Beginning in 2005, strong pressure from the public finally led to their successful abolition once again (Achelpöhler, Bender, Himpele, & Keller, 2007).

Learning in the dual vocational system in Germany takes part in companies and in vocational schools. Students participating in the dual training program enter into a contract with the employer, who is also responsible for reimbursing the student with an apprentice’s pay according to tariff (Hippach-Schneider et al., 2007). The average apprentice’s pay for a full-time student amounted to approximately €832 a months in 2015 (Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, 2015). In the case of part-time employment, the employer has the right to reduce the amount accordingly—typically by 25% (Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2012b). Thus, in comparison to the career and educational programs offered at community colleges in the U.S. where students have to pay tuition, German students in similar degree programs not only pay no tuition, they even get a small stipend for pursuing a degree.
Students at universities or in the dual vocational system generally do not have the right to receive welfare benefits (ALG II/Hartz IV) for themselves—but can receive it for their children. Thus, while free tuition or receiving an apprentice’s pay is not sufficient to access higher education without additional work for low-income student mothers, there are two federal programs in place providing financial support dedicated to students in higher education—the federal training assistance (BAföG) for students at universities and the federal training allowance (BAB) for students within the dual vocational system.

**Federal training assistance (BAföG).** With the Bundesausbildungsförderungsgesetz (BAföG), a federal training assistance act that regulates financial aid/grants for students from low-income families, 46% of all student mothers at universities were granted an average annual amount of €7,476 in 2012—currently half of the amount is awarded as a grant and the other half as an interest-free loan (Middendorff et al., 2013). With the goal of establishing greater equality of opportunity regarding access to higher education, the establishment of BAföG in 1971 promoted increased participation of students from blue-collar working families because it was fully paid as a grant (Achelpöhler et al., 2007). During the course of its existence, BAföG underwent different phases of support that consequently affected participation rates of low-income families. According to Achelpöhler, Bender, Himpele, and Keller (2007), the shift from grants to full loan payments after 1982 led to a declining participation rates as BAföG debts could amount to 70,000 DM (more than €35,000).

After unification another shift occurred from loans to the current standards—half grant-half loan. The current maximum training assistance amounts to €8,820 per year and can be increased with a supplemental child benefit of €1,356 for the first child per year and €1,020 for every other child. The training assistance is generally granted for the prescribed period of study,
meaning nine semesters for a typical degree at the university. Under certain circumstances, students have the right to increase the length of time. Thus, for example, students who are pregnant would receive an additional semester of training assistance and students who raise a child five years or younger would receive one semester for every year of the children’s life. In addition, the interest free loan is capped at a maximum of €10,000—this means that the increased length of benefits does not mean an increased amount of debt.

Melanie and Ellen25 both received the yearly maximum amount of €8,040 plus the additional childcare supplement of €1,356 per child (Kinderbetreuungszuschlag). Coupled with the maximum childcare cost of about €240 and the administration fees of €532, as depicted in Ellen’s case, she would have a yearly income of at least €8,624—not an annual income gap of $11,475 as in the U.S.—but this still would not include rent, personal transportation, food, and other expenses. While the financial burdens are not as high in Germany when compared to the U.S., single mothers still have to resort to employment or other financial resources for their and their children’s subsistence if they are not eligible for the maximum BAföG assistance. Middendorff, Apolinarski, Poskowsky, Kandulla, and Netz, (2013) report that in their study a total of 47% of single mothers were engaged in employment, in addition to taking responsibility for childcare in and outside the home, taking classes, and studying. These mothers further expressed great uncertainty about the financial security of their course of study—in fact 49% of single parents were concerned about their financial security. This again points to the sociopolitical and economic circumstances impacting single mothers’ feeling of security in terms of their combined capabilities. With their capability of accessing higher education dependent upon their financial resources and childcare availability, their functionings—finding time to

25 Ellen currently receives basic security benefits because she on a sabbatical. But prior to that and once her son is three year old she will receive BAföG again.
study and successfully complete their degree—are immensely dependent on the degree of capability security, the degree to which financial resources and childcare are guaranteed in the future.

While Germany also has federal education loans in place (Federal Governments Bildungskredit) they are less popular and in the majority of cases not used for funding education—only 1.96% (53,000 students) of all students enrolled in 2014 – 2015 applied for a loan in 2015 (Müller, 2016; Statistisches Bundesamt, 2016). Only Astrid (see Appendix A: Extended Profiles), the 31-year-old White mother of a seven-year-old son, who studied social sciences at a university, needed to apply for a loan because she did not receive the maximum amount of BAföG—her loans have accumulated to €20,000.

**Federal training allowance (BAB).** In addition to the apprentice’s pay, independent students with children enrolled in the dual vocational system have the right to receive a training allowance (BAB) if they do not reside with their own parents. The amount of the training allowance varies and is dependent on the financial needs of the applicants—Kamila, for example received €640 per month. BAB is paid as a grant as long as the student is enrolled in her vocational program (see Federal Employment Agency, 2016).

**Conclusion**

The thematic narrative analysis revealed that participants’ lifeworlds were shaped by the degree of defamilisation of childcare, and the affordability of higher education in combination with available financial support (see Appendix C for a detailed overview of the sources of support). Childcare in the U.S. is negatively familised—meaning that the responsibility of provision is predominantly located in the individual or the family with some exceptions. As a consequence, the *triple burden* of low-income working parents and students in the U.S.—as
workers, caregivers, and students—and the absence of quality and affordable childcare and other financial supports, left single mothers living precarious lives, deprived of time and energy, that often resulted in guilt and toxic stress for them and their children. Their vulnerable lifeworlds and weak patchwork of arrangement to be able to survive and strive for greater economic stability through a higher educational degree could easily break apart—but with agency, resilience, and tenacity they managed to cope (so far) on little sleep, deprived energy, and at the same time compromising their childcare situations.

In Germany, childcare is more positively defamilised—meaning the responsibility for childcare provisions lies to a greater degree within the public realm. Single student mothers are similarly deprived of time for studying and energy. However, this deprivation is more embedded in the particular assumptions of motherhood and the right child rearing strategy, characterized as intensive mothering that leaves some of the mother in a state of total exhaustion. It is noteworthy, however, that their financial situations never resulted in a state of extreme desperation—consequently toxic stress as a result of erratic work schedules and fear of falling into deep poverty, as seen in some of the American narratives, was not part of their existence due to a greater social safety net in place. However, their lives were similarly prone to capability failure and only because of their persistence and active agency were they able to secure financial support for their endeavors in higher education.

Overall, it is clear that economically disadvantaged single mothers and their children’s capabilities and choices were shaped by many factors that were out of their control. Capability erosion or flourishing was further dependent on case worker support or rejection. Compromising sleep, quality childcare, and time to socialize, these mothers have managed to overcome, and continue to manage and overcome, obstacles and challenges on their pathways to a degree higher
education, with determination and the hope that this will possibly open up greater economic stability for their family’s future.
Chapter 7: The Capabilities Approach and Implications for the Future

The capability framework is significant when analyzing a marginalized population, such as low-income single mothers with children who aspire to a higher education degree in order to choose to live a life they have reason to value. Focusing on combined capabilities that contextualize an individual’s agency in the socioeconomic and political context, the capability framework provides us with an analytic focus that unveils the structural barriers impeding single student mothers’ valued capabilities and functionings. How are their aspirations for degree completion challenged? At what point and how are their capabilities and functionings and those of their children obstructed? The narratives of the participants in this study revealed how their caring responsibilities and the availability, affordability, and quality of childcare in combination with their financial resources created the tipping point for capability development and the possibility of capability failure. An application of the capabilities framework to the mothers’ lifeworlds requires consideration of the following questions:

- What were their substantial freedoms/combined capabilities?
- What choices did they have?
- How were their choices restricted and impacted by circumstances beyond their control?
- Were the choices they valued guaranteed over time?

All the mothers in this study aspired to a degree in higher education—but their capability to access higher education in the first place and their capability to persevere through their program were shaped by the absence or presence of policies and institutional supports in both countries. The thematic narrative analysis revealed how the availability of time for participation in higher education and participation in their children’s lives was a crucial dimension of their
aspirations as student and mother. Having time for studying and caring, however, was impacted by many other factors, such as the availability of affordable childcare, financial resources, institutional regulations, transportation, and social/emotional support. The voices of the mothers in this study revealed that not only was their access to education shaped by policies at the macro-level, but so, too, was their children’s access to childcare. Children’s capability development, and their access to high-quality childcare that fostered their social-emotional and cognitive development, was often dependent on policies and practices that mirrored negative and demeaning discourses about low-income single mother families.

**Capability Development in Two Contrasting Welfare Regimes**

The pertinent questions to raise when considering capability development are: What choices did the mothers have? Further, what were their combined capabilities as students and mothers (to use the terminology proposed by Nussbaum)? Did they have the choice to enroll their children in high-quality childcare? Did they have the choice to take care of their children by themselves? Did they have the choice to enroll in more classes in order to receive their degrees as soon as possible? Did they have the choice to prepare for classes in a timely fashion? Did they have the choice not to worry about their children’s educational progress? Did they have a choice with regard to their employment situations? This focus on lifeworld choices—their combined capabilities—reveal how capability gaps or their absence relate to the politics of distribution or redistribution and the corresponding rights and obligations within these countries.

**Eroded capabilities in the U.S.: A liberal welfare regime.** The case narratives in this study provided us with information on how the mothers’ lifeworlds and those of their children were shaped by the many structural deficits that characterize the American liberal welfare regime—lack of financial support, lack of affordable and quality childcare, and lack of
affordable higher education. A society where social rights with regard to caregiving are negative familised means that caregiving is considered the responsibility of the individual/family. A society where the social right to social security benefits is based on a formal employment contract and where there is no actual social right to access higher education or child care leaves low-income, single student mothers at a severe disadvantage where they can rely only on themselves. Despite systemic inequality and a lack of public policies that support single mothers and their children, all of these single student mothers have demonstrated agency and resiliency and managed to come very close to receiving their bachelor’s or associate degree. But at what costs?

Most of the single mothers voiced their concern about not being the student they aspired to be—they did not have as much time to prepare for school as their fellow students. Persevering through school for them involved a lot of juggling of responsibilities, compromises, stress, planning, and reacting to unforeseeable events. Some students, like Laura (see Chapter 4) for example, did not have the choice to take more classes per semester and this unnecessarily increased her time to degree completion—thus her functionings (studying for school) were derailed by her additional responsibilities as the sole caregiver and earner of her family. While all mothers received student aid in the form of Pell Grants and federal loans, the majority needed to work for subsistence as their unmet needs were substantially higher compared to their childless fellow students. Accordingly, their capabilities to fulfill their student duties were eroded as their time diminished. Coping strategies for their situations ranged from reduced class enrollment to foregoing sleep—impacting the time to degree completion and their health. These were doings and beings the student mothers did not aspire to but nevertheless chose in order to not compromise being excellent students with excellent grades. In order to achieve similar
functionings as the typical student, such as finishing at the same pace, they probably would have needed three times the financial aid of a regular student. But as they did not receive sufficient financial support that would have enabled their capabilities to just focus on their studies and their children, their access to education was continuously under threat.

Further, higher education has been described as a fertile capability that opens up other possible capabilities and functionings, such as access to better paying jobs or access to other social networks. There is a direct positive relationship between type of educational degrees and income—but what is excluded from this relationship is the amount of debt that college students from low-income families accumulate over their course of study. Thus, the question arises: what real choices will the mothers in this study have after receiving their associate or bachelor’s degrees while being under pressure to repay their educational debt that in some cases exceeded $65,000? Will they have the time to look for a job or will they be stuck in their current precarious employment situations? Will a job in a typical female occupation be sufficient to repay the loans and still provide economic stability? And what about their children? Paying back these loans will have ramifications for their children—will Keeara (see Chapter 4), for example, be able to save money for her children’s education? Will her children have to relive their mother’s life?

And what happens if these mothers become unemployed? What happens if their childcare situation suddenly changes—what if Rachel’s grandma is suddenly unable to take care of her twin daughters anymore? What happens if Keeara’s family day care provider stops accepting her children or increases the fees? What happens if Amy’s sisters are not available? What happens if nobody is able to pick up Laura’s children from school when she has classes? Living financially on the edge in a welfare state, where caring responsibilities are to be dealt with by the individual
and where institutionalized childcare is often unregulated, low-quality, and situated in the private market, means that their fragile house of cards was, and is, always prone to topple down. Thus, the flourishing or thwarting of their internal capabilities is dependent on the childcare market and finally, their financial means. In this regard, Nussbaum (2011) argues for the importance of capability security, which relates to the degree to which combined capabilities are protected from the unpredictability of the market. Clearly, capability security with regard to their childcare situation was not at all a given. On the contrary, the narratives of Keeara and Laura depicted that they were often in the predicament of compromising quality childcare for affordability and flexibility—a predicament of what Nussbaum calls “tragic choice” (2011, p. 37). Because of the absence of a guaranteed minimum threshold of capability security and development in the U.S.—characterized by the lack of sufficient financial support and the lack of equitable opportunity in early childhood education—single mothers and their children are placed at a structural disadvantage where tragic choices, as seen in this study, can lead to a situation where children’s internal capabilities are truncated early on in life.

The mothers’ combined capabilities—or having the time and energy to persevere through their studies—is less than guaranteed. It hinges on the fact that somebody takes care of their children and it depends on their financial situation. While all students’ access to education can be obstructed by the lack of financial resources, these mothers’ access and stamina were additionally affected by the availability or absence of quality and affordable childcare for their children and was further complicated by additional work requirements. Although the availability of benefits, such as food assistance, was of help, these benefits were usually not sufficient for subsistence alone and did not allow one to forego or reduce additional employment. Further, welfare benefits contributed in many cases to other forms of emotional turmoil due to the
stigmatizing and unpredictable application process. The two students in this study who received FIP—Michigan’s DHHS cash assistance—had more time to concentrate on their studies though still living below the federal poverty line. Nevertheless, as they did not have any guaranteed right to FIP their capabilities were contingent on the willingness and extra special accommodation of their caseworker or welfare agency supervisor. Their capabilities were not secured in the long run and their capabilities to focus on their studies were always under threat. This can in some cases lead to a tremendous state of anxiety and, as we could see in Erin’s narrative (see Chapter 4), compromise one’s well-being. Fortunately, the threats to Erin’s capabilities were buffered by the strong counseling support she received at her university. To summarize, the choices these mothers had were contingent and precarious in relation to their doings and beings as a mother and a student (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Capabilities and functionings in the liberal welfare regime.](image)

**Eroded capabilities in Germany: A conservative welfare regime.** Single mothers enrolled in higher education in Germany similarly emphasized their lack of time to study and to
care for their children. Their time constraints however were not shaped as much by additional work requirements for subsistence, but rather by the normative assumptions about the right child caring strategies defined as “intensive mothering.” While there is no constitutionally guaranteed right to higher education in place, Germany grants tuition-free education at all public universities and vocational schools. In combination with other training assistance/allowances and other federal financial support, all but one mother and her children were able to subsist on this kind of support. This support was coupled with the established social right to childcare—all mothers expressed their satisfaction with their current childcare situations. Nevertheless, many mothers, such as Melanie (see Chapter 5), had experienced precarious childcare situations that put their children’s development of internal capabilities at risk—she further experienced childcare problems during her first semester due to the geographical variations in childcare availability that almost derailed her functionings as a student. Fortunately for all of the German students in this study, initial childcare problems were temporary and worked out for the better—nevertheless pointing to the fact that the right to childcare is not actually secured if it does not always guarantee access to high-quality childcare.

Further, student mothers emphasized that the availability of childcare did not always align with their course/work schedule, requiring some students to patch their childcare needs. Time for studying and attending courses was dependent on the timely availability of their childcare provider—their childcare situation thus impacted their capability to function effectively—and not necessarily in the way that they seemed to value. Coping strategies with courses offered outside their childcare hours ranged from course schedule adaptation to hiring a babysitter—one required creating a schedule that fit the childcare schedule and the other led to additional expenses that created added financial burdens—both functionings they did not
necessarily aspire to. Additionally, excessive demands from their higher education institutions in combination with their doubts about living up to the image of the idealized mother, led in some cases to extreme exhaustion eroding their capabilities to a healthy life—such as we saw in Ellen’s case (see Chapter 5) where her psychological well-being was on the edge.

While low-income student mothers in this study could subsist on the financial support that they received from various agencies, the application process was tiring, uncertain, and stigmatizing at times. Not being treated with respect and recognition left the mothers with a feeling of humiliation (see Figure 3).

![Diagram of Capabilities and Functionings]

**Figure 3.** Capabilities and functionings in the conservative welfare regime.

**Eroded Capabilities: Implications for Low-Income Single Student Mothers in Two Contrasting Welfare Regimes**

The challenges and childcare needs of low-income single mothers depicted what policies at the macro-level, such as childcare policies and financial aid, mean for single mothers and their children in their micro-worlds. The ways in which policies and general assumptions about
motherhood and childcare relate to capability development or failure was presented in greater
detail by means of case study analysis of a total of eight low-income single student mothers in
Germany and the U.S. The analysis pointed to the fact that the additional caring responsibility of
single student mothers created immense barriers and challenges for them, leading to capability
erosion in some parts of their lives. Compromised health, the inability to connect and participate
in social life, stigmatization, and tragic choices were prominent themes in the case studies,
supporting the general findings derived from other studies on this particular population (Jones-
DeWeever & Gault, 2006; Kunadt et al., 2014; Meier-Gräwe & Müller, 2008; Middendorff et al.,
2013; Miller & Gault, 2011; Polakow, 2007; Polakow et al., 2004, 2014; Polakow & Ziefert,
2002).

Findings indicate that the major difference between these two countries lies in the
affordability and equitable quality of childcare, the affordability of higher education, and federal
financial support. The privatization of childcare in the U.S. leads to an unequal distribution of
quality childcare that Nussbaum (2011) would argue is “an insult to the dignity of the unequal”
(p. 41). This unequal distribution also means inferior childcare for children of low-income
families, which again leads to a truncated development of their internal capabilities—manifested
in the lack of upward mobility in the U.S. The right to childcare in Germany, on the other hand,
guarantees a minimum of equitable quality childcare for every child, no matter what the income.
While childcare availability similarly does not align with the course, study, and work schedules
of single student mothers, the quality thereof is not dependent on parental income. It thus
provides more equitable educational opportunities for every child in the society.

Further, due to high tuition costs and the lack of financial support in the U.S., American
single mothers’ capability development was negatively impacted by their needs to secure
employment that intensified their time constraints that consequently derailed their choices.

Access to future financial security by the means of an associate or bachelor’s degree seems to be a big gamble without insurance that the financial investment—the accumulation of loans for a degree—will actually pay off in the long run. The peculiarity of this situation is that there are no alternatives in the U.S—to become unstuck from poverty, higher education is the only way out as most jobs that only require a high school degree are not sufficient for survival. In Germany, a degree in higher education is more promising for financial security—however, due to the prevailing idea of motherhood in combination with the lacking childcare infrastructure, part-time work is still the preferred mode of occupation. This leaves many women dependent on supplemental welfare benefits (Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut, 2013).

Limitations and Possibilities for Future Research

This study was grounded in a qualitative paradigm and generalization is not the goal, rather the focus, consistent with a phenomenological approach, was an in-depth understanding of the lives of a particular marginalized group of people within two different countries, hence the use of a small sample. However, this study was also bounded by some geographic, institutional, and lifeworld limitations, such as the fact that there were too few mothers participating from the same institutions, making an understanding of the institutional context more difficult and only one state from each country was used. Further, the inclusion criteria to participate in this study were very broad, leading to a greater array of themes that did not necessarily overlap amongst participants. However, the limitations of this study also provide many pathways into new research questions. As I have only looked at the conservative and the liberal welfare regimes, it would be of interest to investigate how caregiving is handled in social democratic welfare regimes, such as Norway, Denmark, or Sweden. Further, research that focuses on immigrant
mothers in both Europe and the U.S., where xenophobia is on the rise, would provide a fruitful area for further research. Lastly, it would be of great interest to understand how the idealized role of motherhood relates to class and ethnicity within and across countries.

**Recommendations**

**Recommendations at the institutional level—United States and Germany.** Flexible and affordable childcare arrangements are vital to the success of student parents. There is a great need for programs that would enhance single mothers’ capabilities as students and promote capability development for their children and access to high-quality childcare programs. Student parents need reliable, affordable, high-quality childcare in order to concentrate on their studies. Thus, it is recommended that on-site childcare programs that are already in place should give precedence to students with children at their university. Further, in the U.S. on-site childcare institutions should accommodate to the payment schedules of state child care subsidies, so that children of student parents can participate in these higher-quality child care environments at affordable rates. Further, on-site childcare programs should, if they do not already do so, participate in the Great Start Readiness Program, so 4-year-old children of low-income student parents can participate for free in the program. Information about the Great Start Readiness Program should be actively distributed by the on-site childcare institutions.

**Drop-in childcare at higher education institutions.** For students who are required to take evening classes at the university or need to work on projects, a no-cost supervised evening enrichment program is proposed. A program like this can be housed in the library for example. Students would need to register their children for the whole semester, during the time they have classes or need to work on a project. Spaces for flexible drop-in care should be available and
should work on a first come, first serve basis. This program could be run by volunteers who
would be coordinated and coached by a family resource coordinator.

**Childcare grant/scholarships.** Grants and scholarships that support the cost of childcare
off-campus and other expenses should be made available to student parents.

**Family resource coordinator.** Student mothers at one community college in the U.S.
appreciatively articulated the tremendous emotional and financial support they received from a
“Special Population Coordinator” located at their institution. An analog to this position, a family
resource coordinator, is recommended for supporting student parents’ needs at higher
educational institutions. Both the childcare grant program and the enrichment program would
answer that need and would require a dedicated person, with expertise in the area of children and
families, to shape and coordinate the initiatives.

**Other institutional policies that would meet student parents’ needs are the following:**

- Provide alternative course options in case of specific need—Flexible course
  scheduling options (see Denmark provision for example)

- Extend deadlines for course work

- Make course schedules more predictable

- Privilege student mothers to enroll earlier in courses

- Increase participation in work study programs and raise awareness of the possibility of
  using work study as work requirement for FIP-cash assistance (U.S. Only)

**Recommendations at the state/national level—United States.**

**Universal high-quality childcare for every child paid by taxes.** This proposal entails
promoting childcare as a social right and making high-quality childcare accessible to all children
five years and younger in the U.S. Different proposals have been formulated in this regard, for
example one by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research provided a model that would serve all 3- to 5-year-olds in a high-quality childcare setting. Under the assumptions that a state preschool program is in place—which is true for 42 states plus Washington D.C.—the annual costs are estimated to be at around $967 million dollars (Golin, Mitchell, & Gault, 2004). By comparison the U.S. discretionary spending on the military amounted to almost $600 billion dollars in 2015 (National Priorities Project, n.d.).

*Tuition free higher education at public universities and colleges.* The double burden of paying for childcare and tuition for higher education means that many single mothers must engage in full-time employment in addition to studying and caring for their children. This puts them under a lot of time pressure and leaves them little time and energy to focus on their studies. Thus, tuition-free education would relieve some of the time constraints. Hillary Clinton’s plan, influenced by Senator Bernie Sanders, to make public college and universities free is a step in the right direction. The plan includes free higher education for families whose income is below $85,000 (“Making College Debt-Free and Taking on Student Debt,” 2016)

*Implement universal child benefit.* Implement a cash benefit for children regardless of income and working status. In contrast to the child tax credit this benefit would also support children from the lower end of the socioeconomic strata whose income is too low to be eligible for the child tax credit. Garfinkel, Harris, Waldfogel, and Wimer (2016) calculated that a $2,500 universal child benefit would lift 5.5 million children out of poverty and would reduce the deep poverty rate by 2.3%. They further depicted that an investment in a child benefit would yield better results with regard to poverty compared to an investment in the child tax credit.

*Implement advanced child support.* Many mothers in this study did not receive any financial child support from the father of the children. Implementing a benefit where child
support is paid by the state/government would buffer at least some of the stressors associated with single parenting, in society where financial support is already residual.

**Recommendations at the state/national level—Germany.**

*Increase quality of early childcare providers.* Implement childcare quality standards through implementation of state-wide certificates. Childcare setting should be regularly audited for complying with certain standards. Certain efforts in this direction are underway (see Bock-Famulla, 2015). But the mothers’ stories in this study reveal how urgent and important these measures are—especially in the family day care home sector.

*Childcare center hours.* Childcare hours do not align with work or course schedules. Increase opening hours so it aligns with full-time employment schedules. Provide greater flexibility in terms of childcare needs.

*Increase length of advanced child support to 18 years.* The benefits of advanced child support are very well documented. However, children do not need the financial support for only 72 months but beyond that. Thus, an extension of the length of this support measure is recommended. This necessity was recently acknowledged. And from January 2017, advanced child support will be paid up to the age of 18 years and the cap of the 72-month limit is lifted (Verband alleinerziehender Frauen und Väter Bundesverband e.V., 2016).

*Increase public awareness of available financial support.* Many mothers in this study pointed to the fact that they were not aware about their entitlements to different forms of support. The lack of information with regard to financial support was substantiated by other studies (see Lenze & Funcke, 2016). Thus, it is necessary to increase awareness about their rights to financial subsistence.
**Implement universal cash assistance while in higher education.** To avoid burdensome and stigmatizing application processes, I would recommend universal cash assistance while in higher education. This could be modeled after the Danish Students’ Grants and Loans Scheme that provides about $880 a month to every student in higher education regardless of socio-economic status (Uddannelses- og Forskningsministeriet, 2016). This recommendation would be equally beneficial in the U.S.

**Conclusion**

Social rights to a dignified life, to care, and to education imply a different balance of rights and duties in Germany and the U.S. While Germany has recently recognized the risks associated with caring for a child—namely the possible loss of income and consequently reduced retirement benefits—the American residual welfare regime has dismantled social rights throughout the last decades. Much of the risk prevention is either shifted to the market or the individual. In the U.S., childcare is viewed as a family and private responsibility where mothers are depicted as neither “caregiver-citizens” nor “parent-workers” and require some form of benefits to either support themselves as homemakers or as adult workers reconciling work and family (Polakow, 2007, p. 21). These circumstances point to a high degree of commodification and a low degree of defamilisation.

Basing social rights solely on certain forms of full-time employment, without the provision of adequate affordable, high-quality, accessible caring arrangements for young children, leaves single mothers and their children at a great disadvantage and vulnerable to poverty and other forms of exclusion. This often results in disastrous childcare arrangements with children’s development and functionings thwarted, when left in the hands of the free market. The high cost of high-quality childcare, the time-imposed burden due to motherhood,
and the current/future gender wage gap leave single mothers at greater structural disadvantage in the U.S. Further, this condition increases the likelihood of the reproduction of inequality. The strong focus on individual responsibility implied in the “American Dream” neglects structural disadvantages and fosters the illusion that people’s disadvantages are a result of their own doings.

However, D’Addio (2007) has pointed out that the inheritance of poverty and the transmission of earnings are higher in the U.S. than in many other high income countries. Consequently, chances of upward mobility are not only a result of the doings of the individual but rather structurally enforced. Limited choices and limited combined capabilities restrict beings and doings, leaving many stuck in their desperate situation.

Childcare in Germany is undergoing a transformation, currently characterized by a mix of private and social responsibility pointing to a moderate degree of defamilisation and decommodification. With its newly established statutory right to childcare, Germany shows promise, if full coverage can be achieved, to converge towards an earner and caregiving recognition which could potentially improve the well-being of single mothers and their children. While there is not yet full coverage for children in public childcare in Germany, childcare is more affordable than in the U.S.—resulting in greater access to the same quality care for every strata of the society—which again provides greater educational opportunity for all children, at least until middle school.

However, income mobility in Germany is far from perfect. Because of its social security system that is designed to maintain hierarchical structures and status, upward mobility is also strongly restricted and can be partially explained by the tiered public education system tracking students according to their ability after grade four in most states (see D’Addio, 2007). Schraad-
Tischler and Kroll (2014) depict that socioeconomic background still predicts to a great degree the educational opportunities and outcomes for children and Germany only ranks in the middle field amongst all EU countries. Nevertheless, inequality is much lower than in the U.S—and deep poverty is almost non-existent—and the right to minimum cash support is in place, as the right to a dignified life is embedded in the constitution. However, one could also critically question the loss of dignity entailed in receiving welfare benefits in Germany in the first place.

The recognition of social rights for women with regard to their caregiving responsibilities, or the lack thereof, has serious implication for single mothers and their children in both countries. In the United States, single student mothers’ capabilities were truncated and constantly under threat due to their diminished social rights. In Germany, however, capability development was somewhat supported and their lived experiences were not suffused with the state of strong desperation that characterized American mothers’ lifeworlds. Nevertheless, as the responsibility for caregiving has just recently shifted, especially for the under-3s, the caregiving infrastructure still lacks alignment with full-time employment hours. Further, ideas about the right child rearing strategies as part of the mother’s responsibility has ramifications for how mothers approach their dual responsibilities of caregiving and earning, leaving many single mothers with no choice about pursuing employment beyond the poverty threshold. Misra, Moller, and Budig (2007) point out, countries such as Finland, Sweden, and Norway, where citizenship is based on earning and caregiving, show very low poverty rates of less than 5% for single mothers. They conclude that childcare (especially for young children under three) is an important factor for reducing income-driven poverty.

Finally, we have to ask—who is responsible for the well-being of families? Everybody for themselves or the community? Is it a private or shared responsibility? Can we imagine a
society in which everyone is treated with respect and dignity? A society that guarantees the development of capabilities for all its people—all adults and all children? A society where social rights are inherent and where the dignity of all is promoted? Both Sen and Nussbaum depict that individuals exist within a set of relations and regulations that are beyond their control. They both argue that nations and/or institutions contribute to and shape capabilities and freedoms. As institutions within a society are active agents in this regard, it can be reasonably argued that they are also responsible for the development or thwarting of their peoples’ capabilities and ultimately their well-being. Consequently, I argue that it is time to change the discourse on social rights, obligations, and duties, and to speak up and advocate for marginalized student single mothers and children who are those with the least time and resources and who have the most silenced voices. This dissertation is written to change the narrative and to ally with single student mothers—by making what was invisible, visible—in order to create socially and educationally just policies and practices that lead to a significant transformation of their lived realities.
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Appendices
### Appendix A: Extended Profiles

**Extended Profiles—United States**

#### Background Information

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<td>Associate</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Associate</td>
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<td>Respiratory Health</td>
<td>Cosmetology</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
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<td><strong>Institution</strong></td>
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<td>University B</td>
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<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5 days a week/hours vary</td>
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Note. Grey highlighted participants are presented as case studies in Chapter 4.
### Federal/State Supports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Denise</th>
<th>Helen</th>
<th>Keeara</th>
<th>Rachel</th>
<th>Erin</th>
<th>Amy</th>
<th>Laura</th>
<th>Tara</th>
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<td>X (Part-time Preschool)</td>
<td>X (Head Start)</td>
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Note. Grey highlighted participants are presented as case studies in Chapter 4.
### Child Care Arrangements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Denise</th>
<th>Helen</th>
<th>Keeara</th>
<th>Rachel</th>
<th>Erin</th>
<th>Amy</th>
<th>Laura</th>
<th>Tara</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Center-Based</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Family Childcare Provider</strong></td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Informal Unpaid Child Care (&gt;10 hours)</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>(Parents)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Parents)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Sisters)</td>
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<td>(Parents)</td>
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<td>X (Grand-mother)</td>
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<td>X (Babysitter)</td>
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Note. Grey highlighted participants are presented as case studies in Chapter 4.
Extended Profiles—Germany

**Background Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Melanie</th>
<th>Ellen</th>
<th>Sabine</th>
<th>Astrid</th>
<th>Kamila</th>
<th>Kathrin</th>
<th>Esther</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>4, 6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3, 5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
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<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; Generation Immigrant, Kazakhstan</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Degree**       | Staats-
examen (State Examination Programme) | Magister (BA/MA equivalent) | MA | BA | VET* | VET | VET | VET |
| **Field of Study** | Medicine | Theology | Philosophy, History | Social Sciences | Civil Service | Civil Service | Carpenter | Sales Clerk |
| **Institution**  | University A | University A | University B | University C | VET D | VET D | VET E | VET F |
| **Student Loans** | Not more than €10,000 | Not more than €10,000 | Not more than €20,000 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Employment (Hours/Week)** | 0 | 0 | 10 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Note. Grey highlighted participants are presented as case studies in Chapter 5.

*Vocational Education Training
### Federal/State Support

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<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>Ellen</th>
<th>Sabine</th>
<th>Astrid</th>
<th>Kamila</th>
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Note. Grey highlighted participants are presented as case studies in Chapter 5.
### Childcare Arrangements

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<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>Ellen</th>
<th>Sabine</th>
<th>Astrid</th>
<th>Kamila</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Center-Based</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. Grey highlighted participants are presented as case studies in Chapter 5.
Appendix B: Human Subjects Approval, Consent and Confidentiality Agreements

RESEARCH @ EMU

UHSRC Determination: EXEMPT

DATE: November 6, 2015

TO: Katja Robinson
Department of Teacher Education
Eastern Michigan University

Re: UHSRC: # 819013-1
Category: Exempt category 2
Approval Date: November 6, 2015

Title: A Phenomenological Study of Low-Income Single Mothers in Higher Education in Two Contrasting Welfare Regimes – Germany and the United States

Your research project, entitled A Phenomenological Study of Low-Income Single Mothers in Higher Education in Two Contrasting Welfare Regimes – Germany and the United States, has been determined Exempt in accordance with federal regulation 45 CFR 46.102. UHSRC policy states that you, as the Principal Investigator, are responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of your research subjects and conducting your research as described in your protocol.

Renewals: Exempt protocols do not need to be renewed. When the project is completed, please submit the Human Subjects Study Completion Form (access through IRBNet on the UHSRC website).

Modifications: You may make minor changes (e.g., study staff changes, sample size changes, contact information changes, etc.) without submitting for review. However, if you plan to make changes that alter study design or any study instruments, you must submit a Human Subjects Approval Request Form and obtain approval prior to implementation. The form is available through IRBNet on the UHSRC website.

Problems: All major deviations from the reviewed protocol, unanticipated problems, adverse events, subject complaints, or other problems that may increase the risk to human subjects or change the category of review must be reported to the UHSRC via an Event Report form, available through IRBNet on the UHSRC website.

Follow-up: If your Exempt project is not completed and closed after three years, the UHSRC office will contact you regarding the status of the project.

Please use the UHSRC number listed above on any forms submitted that relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the UHSRC office.

Good luck in your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact us at 734-487-3090 or via e-mail at human.subjects@emich.edu. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Beth Kubitskey
Chair
COE Human Subjects Review Committee
INFORMED CONSENT AGREEMENT

Principal Investigator/Interviewer: Katja Robinson
Project Study: Dissertation Study
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Valerie Polakow
Institution: Eastern Michigan University

Purpose: I am a doctoral student in the Educational Studies Doctoral Program at Eastern Michigan University. In my dissertation I will explore single mothers’ experiences in higher education in two different countries – the USA and Germany. The purpose of these individual interviews is to provide an understanding of the complex experiences of being a single mother and a student. I anticipate that the individual interviews will illuminate single student mothers’ situations in higher education from their point of view. The focus on their experiences will further provide a better understanding of how student mothers cope with the challenges of childcare, school, and work within each country; with the overarching goal of promoting public dialogue, informing policy, and improving the quality of life for single mothers and their children.

Procedure: Two individual interviews are scheduled for one hour each. Questions about your experiences of being a mother and a student in higher education will be asked during the first interview. You will be asked to reconstruct a typical day or week that you have experienced as a student parent. After the first interview you will be asked to use the time until the second interview to think about issues that are really important to you. Those will then be discussed at the second scheduled interview.

Risks: There are no foreseeable risks for participants in these individual interviews. You may choose to answer or not answer any questions during your time in the individual interview and you may discontinue your participation at any time without any penalty.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits. However, based on your experiences, you will get to provide input into future dialogue about the needs, aspirations, obstacles, and challenges for single student mothers in higher education.
Audio-recording of individual interviews and confidentiality: I agree to allow the individual interviews to be audio recorded. I understand that my confidentiality will be protected at all times and that a fictitious name will be assigned to me after the interviews are completed, and that any identifying characteristics about me or my family will be deleted. The transcripts of the tapes will be assigned a numerical code and kept in password protected computer file on a password protected computer of the principal investigator. I further understand that if I decide at any point after the interview that I do not wish to participate, my recordings and transcripts will be destroyed and no material will be used from the interviews.

Other groups may have access to your research information for quality control or safety purposes. These groups include the University Human Subjects Review Committee, the Office of Research Development, and my dissertation committee at Eastern Michigan University. The University Human Subjects Review Committee is responsible for the safety and protection of people who participate in research studies.

I understand that my participation in this interview and the follow-up interview is completely voluntary, that I may choose not to answer certain questions, and that I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time with no negative consequences, no penalty, nor loss of benefits.

I agree to allow these confidential interview findings from my interview(s) to be anonymously disseminated with my confidentiality fully protected at all times, in presentations and/or disseminated in future publications, conferences, and professional settings.

If you have questions: If you have any questions about your participation in these individual interviews for my dissertation study please contact either:

Katja Robinson krobin37@emich.edu; (734) 272-1125

Dr. Valerie Polakow vpolakow@emich.edu; (734) 487-7120
The individual interview protocol for this dissertation study has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee (UHSRC). For information about your rights as a participant in research, you can contact the Eastern Michigan University Office of Research Compliance at 734-487-3090 or human.subjects@emich.edu.

If you wish to receive a summary of the findings once the study is completed please check the following box and provide an email address to which the summary can be sent.

[ ] ________________________ (Email)
Statement of Consent

I have read this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and am satisfied with the answers I received. I give my consent to participate in this research study.

Name of participant ____________________________________________________________

Signature of participant: _______________________________ Date:____________________

I agree to be AUDIO recorded for this study.

Signature of participant _______________________________ Date:____________________

I have explained the research to the subject and answered all his/her questions. I will give a copy of the signed consent form to the subject.

Name of the Interviewer _________________________________________________________

Signature: _______________________________ Date:____________________
Einverständniserklärung zum Interview

Forschungsprojekt: Dissertationsstudie
Projektleitung/Interviewerin: Katja Robinson
Doktoranden Betreuerin: Prof. Dr. Valerie Polakow
Durchführende Institution: Eastern Michigan University, USA


Risiken: Es gibt keine vorhersehbaren Risiken für Teilnehmer in diesen individuellen Interviews. Sie haben jederzeit die Wahl Fragen zu beantworten oder nicht zu beantworten. Als Teilnehmerin können Sie jederzeit das Interview ohne jeglicher Nachteile für Sie abbrechen.

Nutzen/Vorteil: Der primäre Vorteil der Teilnahme ist die Möglichkeit zu einem öffentlichen Dialog über die Ambitionen, Bedürfnisse, Herausforderungen und Hindernisse von alleinerziehenden Studentinnen/ Auszubildenden beizutragen.


Mir wird außerdem versichert, dass das Interview in wissenschaftlichen Veröffentlichung nur in Ausschnitten zitiert wird, um gegenüber Dritten sicherzustellen, dass der in den Interviews mit meinen Erzählung entstehende Gesamtzusammenhang von Ereignissen mich nicht als Person erkennbar machen.
Ich erkläre mich dazu bereit, im Rahmen des genannten Forschungsprojekts an einem Interview/ an mehreren Interviews teilzunehmen. Ich bin damit einverstanden, dass die anonymisierten Interviewdaten/Interviewergebnisse in Presentationen, Publikationen, Konferenzen oder anderen professionellen Gegebenheiten benutzt werden, unter der Voraussetzung, dass die Vertraulichkeit meiner Daten zu jederzeit geschützt ist.

Weitere Fragen: Bitte richten sie weitere Fragen über die Teilnahme an den individuellen Interviews für mein Dissertationsvorhaben an:

Katja Robinson krobin37@emich.edu

Professor Dr. Valerie Polakow vpolakow@emich.edu

Das Interview Protokoll für diese Dissertationsstudie wurde durchgesehen und genehmigt von der Ethikkommision der Eastern Michigan University (Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee; UHSRC). Bei weiteren Fragen zu Ihren Rechten wenden Sie sich bitte an Eastern Michigan University Office of Research Compliance humansubjects@emich.edu oder +001 (734) 487-0042.

Falls Sie eine Zusammenfassung der Ergebnisse meiner Studie nach Vollendung wünschen, bitte ich Sie die nachfolgende Box anzukreuzen und eine Emailadresse bereitzustellen, an die, die Zusammenfassung geschickt werden kann.

_______________________________ (Email)
Einverständniserklärung

Ich habe die Einverständniserklärung gelesen. Ich hatte die Möglichkeit Fragen zu stellen und bin mit den Antworten zufrieden. Ich gebe mein Einverständnis an dieser Studie teilzunehmen.

Name der Teilnehmerin

______________________________

Unterschrift: _________________ Datum: __________

Ich bin damit einverstanden, dass diese Interviews mit einem Aufnahmegerät aufgezeichnet werden.

Unterschrift: _________________ Datum: __________

Ich habe die Teilnehmerin über den Inhalt und das Ziel der Studie aufgeklärt und alle ihre Fragen beantwortet. Ich habe der Teilnehmerin eine Kopie der unterschriebenen Einverständniserklärung gegeben.

Name der Interviewerin

______________________________

Unterschrift: _________________ Datum: __________
Confidentiality Agreement: Transcriptionist

I, ____________________________________, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards, to any and all audio recordings and documentation received from Katja Robinson related to her research study. Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be revealed during the transcription of audio recorded interviews, or in any associated documents.

2. To not make copies of any audiotapes or computerized files of the transcribed interview texts.

3. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any backup devices at the end of my work in this study.

Transcriptionist’s Name: ____________________________________________________

Signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________

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Appendix C: Sources of Support

Sources of Support for Student Parents in the U.S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Support</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional Characteristics</strong></td>
<td><strong>Tuition Fees</strong>&lt;br&gt;$10,527 (average fees in Michigan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Financial Support</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Pell Grants</strong> (Training Assistance)&lt;br&gt;$5,775 (maximum amount)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Loans</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Other Financial Support</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Housing Subsidy</strong> (income-based and contingent cap)&lt;br&gt;<strong>DHHS Cash Assistance - FIP</strong> (Family Independence Program—means-tested)&lt;br&gt;($5,904 maximum annual amount for a family of three in Michigan)&lt;br&gt;<strong>Earned Income Tax Credit</strong>&lt;br&gt;$5,548 (maximum amount for a family of three, income-based)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Child Support</strong>&lt;br&gt;No advanced child support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Flexible Modes of Studying</strong>&lt;br&gt;At the discretion of the academic staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Childcare provision</strong>&lt;br&gt;Varies by institution, mostly privatized, high costs, some targeted programs, such as Head Start, State Preschools but not available for all eligible children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2016; Children’s Defense Fund, 2014; Ruark, 2015;
Sources of Support for Student Parents in Germany

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Characteristics</th>
<th>Germany University and Vocational School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Tuition Fees at Universities</td>
<td>No Tuition Fees at Vocational Schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(low program fees at universities)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial Support</th>
<th>University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BAföG (Training Assistance)</td>
<td>€8,820 (maximum amount)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Supplemental Child Benefit</td>
<td>€1,356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VET</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprentice Pay</td>
<td>€9,984 (average)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAB (Training Allowance)</td>
<td>€4,464 (maximum)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other Financial Support</th>
<th>Housing Subsidy (income based)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic Security Benefits (Hartz IV)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(needs-based—no work requirements when children are three years or younger) only possible when student is taking a sabbatical</td>
<td>€4,848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ housing and utilities coverage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Security Benefits for Children (income-based and amount depends on age of child)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>€2,844 (6 years and younger)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Benefit (universal)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>€2,280 (1st and 2nd Child)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>€2,352 (3rd child)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>€2,652 (4th and each additional child)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Benefit for student if the student is under 25 years old</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced child support max. of six years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>€1,740 (6 years and younger)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>€2,328 (6 to 12 years)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flexible Modes of Studying</th>
<th>University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At the discretion of the academic staff and no compulsory attendance for most courses (exceptions are labs …)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VET</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the discretion of the academic staff and the company</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Childcare provision</th>
<th>Varies by universities, extensive provision by the state depending on age; low to no cost.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not available at vocational schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: BAFöG Aktuell, 2016; Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, 2015; Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2016;
Appendix D: German Participants’ Interview Narrative Quotes

Melanie

- Der war, äh, (pause), also schwierig, äh, der hat mich als ich schwanger war geschlagen. Dann hatte ich mich schon von ihm getrennt. Dann hatten wir zwar noch Kontakt, hat mich dann aber, dann ist er halt ständig gekommen und nicht mehr aus meiner Wohnung rausgegangen, bis ich die Polizei rufen musste und so. Und dann habe ich mich halt endgültig getrennt.
- Das war sowieso nie so meins
- . . . , dass war sowieso eine ganz ominöse Sache. Da wurde der, ähm, diese Zulassung vom Jugendamt entzogen, weil ein anderes Kind beim Arzt Würgemale aufgewiesen hat und ähm, die Mutter des Kindes gesagt hat, dass wäre die Tagesmutter gewesen. Was ich nicht glaube; sie hat zwar eine sehr direkt eher ruppige Art,
- . . . das war schon sehr schwierig
- Aber, die zweite, ja, ja, ich weiß nicht, die hat z.B. am Anfang gesagt, ja, dass ist halt bei ihr so, dass die Kinder auch abends mal das Sandmännchen gucken dürfen, wenn sie solange da sind. Aber so, von dem Serienwissen meiner Tochter herzuschließen, haben die da den ganzen Tag Fernsehen geguckt. Und meine Tochter guckt bei mir zu Hause gar kein Fernsehen. . . . Ansonsten war sie halt ganz nett, das war halt auch dieser Umstand, dass sie soweit weg wohnt.
- Die Sache ist ja, man hat ja hier, wenn man Medizin studiert, auch nicht einen Studenplan, der dann wieder jede Woche geht. Sondern man hat jeden Tag was anderes. Und das ist von Woche zu Woche verschieden. Ähm, das einzige was so gleich bleibt ist das vormittags die Vorlesungen sind. Aber diese ganzen Pflichtveranstaltungen, davon hat man im
vorklinischen Abschnitt, den habe ich ja jetzt hinter mir, ähm, relative viele. Und die sind alle nachmittags, teilweise abends.


- . . . da habe ich auch die ganze Zeit gesagt, dass wenn das so weiter geht, kann ich aufhören zu studieren. Ich habe die besten Noten, die man sich vorstellen kann, aber ich kann nicht mehr studieren dann.

- Ich finde die haben auch ein super pädagogisches Konzept . . . Also da fühle ich, ich merke ja auch, dass sich meine Tochter dort sehr wohl fühlt. Das ist ja vor allem, wenn es so viel ist. Also, ich sehe ja meine Tochter selbst, also so, mal mehr mal weniger, also es ist meißt so, dass sie nicht jeden Tag bei der Tagesmutter ist, aber schon die meißten Tage in der Woche. Und wenn Klausuren anstehen, dann ist das auch meißt jeden Tag bis abends in der Woche. Weil selbst an den Tagen, an denen ich dann nachmittags oder abends keine Veranstaltung habe, auch noch lernen muss. Also ein Medizinstudium ist ja auch unglaublich lernintensiv. So, und, ja, dann muss man natürlich auch schon das Gefühl haben, dass das Kind auch gut aufgehoben. Und dass sich das Kind da wohlfühlt . . . auch in diesen neuen Tageseltern auch wirklich, so, konsistente gute Bezugspersonen hat. . . . Und das ist halt jetzt der Fall und gegeben und das macht es auch eine gan
war das ein kleiner Kampf den beibringen zu müssen, dass ich an diesen Tagen, wo ich am Nachmittag nichts habe auch wirklich trotzdem bis abends brauche um zu lernen. . . dann kamen dann so Kommentare von der zuständigen Sachbearbeiterin, "och so zwei, drei Stunden am Stück, mehr kann man doch sowieso nicht lernen. Da können Sie doch Ihre Tochter abholen. . . Wo ich mir dann denke, "ah, schön, dass man das nicht kann, ich muss es trotzdem."

individual zuvorkommende Regelung

dass ist ja jetzt schon, also wirklich, relative, was das Studium angeht, optimal geregelt. Ähm, das ist, ja ganz wichtig. Ja, also, Betreuung ist das A und O eigentlich. Alles andere steht dahinter zurück.

wirklich den kompletten Nachmittag lang bis spät abends um acht. Je nachdem... ich hole sie so um 19.00 Uhr ab. . .

- Dementsprechend kann ich dann entweder mit meiner Tochter noch zu abend essen, . . . oder wir haben vielleicht noch einen Moment ruhe, wobei man nach einem ganzen Tag hier -- das ist halt auch sehr anstrengend, . . . dann ist man dann auch abends wenn man zu Hause ist tot. Das ist wirklich, hach....

- . . . warum -- jetzt ist sie immer noch ein Kind von einem Vater, der kein Unterhalt zahl.

- Und da muss ich auch alles möglich nachweisen, um die Betreuung bezahlt zu bekommen und dann wollen die ja auch unterschiedliche, gegenseitig voneinander die ganzen Bescheid. Aber ja, dann habe ich ja immer nur erst die alten, oder nur einen, . . . so läuft das im Prinzip die ganze Zeit. Ich bin jetzt noch am beantragen. Ich bin angefangen vor wievielen MOnaten . . .wieviel ich jetzt alleine in dieser Artragszeitperiode schon alleine in Arbeitszeit investiert habe. Das sind bestimmt alleine an Arbeitszeit schon so dreissig bis fünfundreissig Stunden, wo ich dann nur damit beschäftigt war. Und das ist nicht übertrieben, . . . Und das ist einfach eine unglaubliche Belastung, wo ich eh schon so wenig Zeit dafür habe.


- . . . aber die konnten mir auch gar nicht helfen. Die hatten da selber gar keinen Durchblick. . . . dass musste, dass habe ich mir alles selbstrecherchiert.

- Das ist halt auch die Sache, ich muss mich immer irgendwie so ein bisschen zerreissen, weil ich auf der einen Seite merke, dass meine Tochter, mitunter, also jetzt nicht grundsätzlich, also streckenweise zu kurz kommt, wenn ich z.B. für Klausuren lernen muss. Dann weiß ich,
das dann einfach. Und allgemein würde ich einfach viel lieber mehr Zeit mit meiner Tochter verbringen, sehr viel mehr von ihrer Jugend mitbekommen. Also wir haben ein sehr sehr enges Verhältnis, aber, ähm, also auch enger als normal, so würde ich das einschätzen. Das bleibt wahrscheinlich auch nicht aus, wenn man alleinerziehend ist. Ähm, aber, trotzdem kann ich da, das nicht so handhaben, wie ich möchte, und das so ausleben, wie ich möchte, und auf der anderen Seite merke ich natürlich in der Uni, das, obwohl ich in der Regelstudienzeit bin auch keine schlechten Ergebnisse bekomme, dass ich weit hinter meinen Möglichkeiten zurückbleibe. . . . und irgendwie möchte ich dann so ganz an der Spitze oben sein, was mir möglich wäre, aber einfach zeitlich nicht geht, dann schwimme ich immer so Mittelfeld rum und das stört mich hier total. . . . Also das stände mir ja eigentlich frei mein Studium ein bisschen in die Länge zu ziehen, aber ich will es ja auch einfach nicht. . . . dann habe ich schon ein schlechtes Gewissen meiner Tochter gegenüber, . . . Aber ich denke mir auch wiederum, dass es ja auch für meine Tochter sinnvoll ist, dass ich das möglich schnell durchziehe, und ich möglich schnell Geld verdiene, dann, weil ich dann ihr natürlich auch viel mehr ermöglichen kann. da gibt es so viele Faktoren, die man immer wieder bedenken und immer wieder miteinbeziehen muss, . . . was man denkt, was das richtige ist, was man da machen muss... Kostet auch ein bisschen Kraft manchmal.

- . . . das eigentlich auch sehr wichtig für Kinder zu beiden Elternteilen und Familienzweigen Kontakt zu haben, . . . Egal, wieviel argwohnen oder so von meiner Seite da aus besteht.

- . . . musste ich richtig weinen, weil ich war so sauer,...

- . . . dass tut mir unglaublich weh für die [Tochter]...
Ellen

- ... weil ich ja ne Frau bin. ... Ich könnte mir ja einen Mann suchen und heiraten, ... Was ich denn mit Abitur will.

- Traumberuf

- Fing an mich unter Druck zu setzen. Ich war gerade, ich war ne Mutter, die gerade ein Baby geboren hatte und das war das einzige, was ich noch hatte. ... Und dann fing er an, ja, falls wir uns einmal streiten sollten, ich nicht nach seinem Ermessen entscheide, wird er sofort das gemeinsam Sorgerecht beantragen. ... wenn ich erstmal da bin, dann komme ich nie wieder aus Rostock weg, weil er hat dann ja das Umgangsrecht und er, er ist ja Anwalt, er wüsste das alles, wenn ich dann nach dem Studium wegziehen will um meinen Job anzutreten, dann würde er mich daran hindern, weil das Umgangsrecht des Vaters wird höher berechnet wird, als das Recht der Frau auf eigene Arbeitsplatzwahl.

- der sich monatelang nicht gemeldet hatte.

- Ich kann nicht in Ruhe weiterstudieren.

- Und ich versuche dann schon, so nach meinen Vorlesungen ihn sofort abzuholen. ... wo er noch so klein ist. ... Ach zeitweise war das schwer, und dann zeitweise denk ich so, ich kanns nicht ändern. Also, was soll ich machen - ich versuche eben halt mein bestes und ähm. ja

- und musste ihn dann im Winter bei Wind und Wetter und Regen und Sturm und Eis mit dem Fahrrad zur Kita fahren, ihn da abliefern, und dann weiter zu Uni. Und dann natürlich auch wieder zur Kita hin und wieder abholen. Also, das war schon hart für mich, egal ob es in Strömen gegossen hatte oder ob es minus Grade oder gefroren hatte, und ich war auch glaube ich schon tausendmal davor gewesen zu sagen, neh, du gibts jetzt auf.
• Das ist aber die einzige Kita in Münster, die das anbietet.

• Nein, gar nichts, das wäre mein eigenes Problem. Ich müsste halt sehen wie ich das finanziere.


• Oh, so war ich da auch manchmal wütend und dann, ich habe das dann durchgezogen und Prüfung dann auch ziemlich gut bestanden. Danach war ich natürlich stolz, aber das war so, wow, ich weiß nicht, ob ich das wieder machen würde. Doch ich würde es glaube ich wieder machen, aber..

• . . . wenn ich einen 30Stunden Job annehme immer noch vom Jobcenter aufstocken. Ich könnte nicht selbstständig von diesem Geld, was ich erarbeiten könnte leben. Weil es einfach so wenig ist, was ich verdienen würde.

• Es gibt Brochuren für Studenten, die man sich im Internet runterladen kann - aber das jetzt mal jemand an die Hand genommen hat und mir geholfen hat - nö, dass würde ich nicht sagen, alles was man weiß muss man sich irgendwie selbst aneignen.
Also es wurde ganz oft, z.B. Anträge abgelehnt, . . . bis ich dann zu einer Sozialberatung gegangen bin, die dann eine offizielles Schreiben aufgesetzt hat - dann funktionierte das auf einmal.

. . . mein Vater war schon an Krebs erkrankt, der konnte das auch nicht.

. . . wir waren nicht mal 24 STunden da, bis ich meine Sachen gepackt habe und wieder gegangen bin.

. . . dass der erste Vortrag gehalten wurde von einer Frau, die beim Kaffeetrinken dann schon zu mir kam und mich fragte, ja was machen sie denn wenn ihr Kind weint? . . . wenn er weint und wirklich stört, dann gehe ich mit ihm raus . . . und ansonsten setze ich mich hin und hör zu. Und dann fing dieser Vortrag an, die Frau hatte nicht mal zehn Minuten gesprochen, da hat die mich und meinen Sohn rausgeworfen . . . Naja, sie hat nicht gesagt wir sollen bitte den Raum verlassen, hach kann mal das Kind aufhören zu stören? . . . und wenn der wirklich geheult hätte oder geweint hätte, dann wäre ich natürlich rausgegangen, Aber er saß auf einer Decke und ließ einen Stein fallen. . . . ich muss zugeben, ich habe auch ziemlich geheult dann,

. . . man wird halt behandelt als wär man doof - die sind unfreundlich, die sind salopp, die sind, die werden doch genauso gut für ihre Arbeit bezahlt, wie alle anderen Menschen auch, ich kann doch auch nicht unfreundlich zu irgendjemandem sein, nur weil der gerade mal ne schwierige Situation durchmacht. Das finde ich schlimm.

Na ja, gut, wir stehen morgens auf, machen uns fertig. Also ich mache erst immer ihn fertig, anziehen, wickeln, dann mache ich mich fertig. Dann fängt es schon an. Mutti muss duschen (lacht), der kleine will das natürlich nicht. Dann muss er immer halt neben der Dusche stehen und zugucken, und dann so zwischen 8 und 8.30 Uhr versuche ich ihn dann in die Kita zu
bringen. Also wir versuchen immer zwischen 6 und 6.30 Uhr aufzustehen, ich versuche ihn dann gegen 8/8.30 Uhr in die Kita zu bringen - das ist nie genau abzupassen. Dann hat er mal noch die Windel voll, hat was vergessen, sie kennen das ja. Und dann bringe ich ihn in die Kita

Kamila

- Aber ich könnte ja noch meine 3 Jahre ausnutzen, weil sie ja jetzt noch keine drei ist. . . .Und so eine Chance bekomme ich doch nie wieder. Weil bis man in die Stadt wirklich reinkommt, ist schon, ein harter Brocken. . . jetzt ne normale Ausbildung als Verwaltungsfachangestellte käme jetzt für mich nicht in Frage. Das wäre von der Zeit her zu viel.

- . . . wenn ich mein Kopftuch ausziehe, dann könnte sie mir was besorgen, wenn nicht, dann sollte ich Hausfrau bleiben.

- Ja und dann habe ich dann mit dem Kiga gesprochen, dass die kleine jetzt einen Platz hat und die große nicht und ich das nicht verstehe. Ja, neh, das können wir so nicht machen. Es gibt halt keine Plätze. Ja und dann bin ich zur Stadt gegangen, habe da vor gesprochen und denen das so erzählt, und denen dann auch gesagt, dass ich alleinerziehend bin und nächstes Jahr geht ja dieses Projekt los. Ich hatte auch schon die Unterlagen, dass ich daran teilnehme im Juni. Und die haben das dann, also das war ein einziger Anruf, die haben dort angerufen

- Und die 20 wurden dann alle in die verschiedenen Kommunen eingesetzt, . . . Dann wurde entschieden, die nehmen wir und die nehmen wir nicht.

- Ich habe alles gemacht und wurde angenommen.

- Das ist toll

- Das war total schwierig. . . . Das wir dann alle da saßen, huch, jetzt haben wir alle kein Geld zur Verfügung. ich weiß nicht wie ich meine Kinder jetzt versorgen soll. . . . ja dann vom Kindergeld, ja okay, . . . damit bezahle ich die Miete. Ne andere Wahl habe ich ja nicht, entweder werde ich von der Wohnung rausgeschmissen, oder ich hab halt jetzt was gegessen.
• Und jeder verlangt was anderes. Die Wohngeldstelle, die will mir nix auszahlen, bis die den BAB Bescheid bekommt. Und die BAB Stelle sagt, ne, die müssen wissen wieviel ich Wohngeld bekomme, und das war dann halt ein hin und her.

• das war total Zeitaufwendig dem Bus hinterherzurenennen, die Kinder wegbringen, dahin laufen und hier, also bis zum Kiga ist es ungefähr ein Km hier lang und mein Arbeitsplatz ist 4 km da lang. Also das ist schon ein hin und her. . . . Und dass ich dann da merke, dass mein Zeit da verschwindet irgendwie, ich hatte das erstmal nicht unter Kontrolle

• Eine Frage sind sie katholisch oder evangelisch? Ich frage ja keinen nach seiner Religion. Ich sagte weder noch, ich bin islamisch. Und dann gab es dann immer wieder fragen. Sind sie sich denn wirklich bewusst, dass wir in einer Demokratie leben. Sie können richtig froh sein. Und sie wissen doch was eine Demokratie ist?

• Das war dann auch noch so eine Zeit wo die kleine Magen Darm hatten, ne Erkältung, dass ist so immer diese Winterzeit gewesen. Ja, dachte ich mir, jetzt komm, jetzt hörst du auf, nein morgen hörst du auf, nein nächste Woche. . . . dann hast du diese Probleme nicht mehr.

• . . .wenn man zwei Kinder hat, die sind dann häufiger krank als ein Kind. Und das kommt halt nicht so gut rüber. Und dann geht man halt auch als Mutter, auch wenn man krank ist, in den Betrieb.

• so ne chance bekommst du nie mehr wieder. . . . Vor allem als andersaussehender . . . da ist halt immer diese Klischee, Ausländer können nix, da habe ich mir gedacht, nö, jetzt zeige ich euch, was ich da kann. Ich habe es durchgezogen . . . Der Personalleiter hat mir dann auch ein bisschen reingesprochen hat.

• Wir haben es total schwer mit dem Lernen. . . . Wir hatten auch ne Zwischenprüfung gehabt, dann mit Pauken, Lernen., und viele Kinder sind dann krank, und wenn ich jetzt sitze und
lerne, "Mama, mama, dies, das, jenes. . . und wenn die Kinder dann schlafen, . . . dann bin ich schon kaputt, da bekomme ich nichts mehr rein.


- Ich fang dann auch früher an, dass ich die Kinder auch früher abhole. . . . das kann ich mit meinem Gewissen irgendwie nicht vereinbaren, . . . wenn die Kinder in der Betreuung sind während ich arbeite, das empfinde ich jetzt als kein Problem, . . . Also, am Anfang war es halt schwierig die da da zu lassen. Aber da habe ich mir gedacht, andere Elternteile arbeiten nicht und lassen die Kinder bis vier und ich arbeite und hole die früher ab als andere Eltern. Deswegen gibt mir das schon ein bisschen so ein gutes Gefühl.

- ich nehme dann nur die Hilfe in Notfällen an (nicht zum lernen), neh komm mal her ich muss lernen, neh, das wäre für mich nichts. . . .
Esther

- Also der hat da gar kein Bock drauf und der will das auch nicht.

- Ein Euro Job machen sollte, damit man überhaupt sieht, dass ich das auf die Kette krieg.


- . . . ich bringe die lieber nach M., bevor ich irgend ne andere Tagesmutter in Essen oder in der Nähe nehme, die mir dann aber nicht zusagt, weil das ganze gar nicht passt.


- . . . das ist ein Auto von 93 . . . da geht öfter mal was dadran kaputt, . . . wenn das Auto in der Werkstatt ist ist das verdammt schwierig überhaupt zu bewerkstelligen, . . . ähm, da fahr ich mit dem Bus ne gute Stunde hoch - mit Bus und Straßenbahn, und von da aus halt dann noch zur ARbeit an die 30-40 Minuten, dadurch dass ich um sieben Uhr anfange, ist das halt echt schwer, . . . das ist eigentlich so gut wie unmöglich.

- Ich stehe um 5 Uhr auf . . . mach die Klene fertig, Zähne putzen, anziehen, . . . Wickeln, alles, . . . fahren dann zu der Tagesmutter hoch . . . die beansprucht dann meistens auch noch so 15 MInuten, bis ich mich richtig von der verabschiedet haben. . . . dann fahre ich zur ARbeit, dann fange ich hier an zu arbeiten.

. wenn alles gut läuft, dann ist die dann so um 19 Uhr im Bett und ich fange dann an Sachen für die Schule zu machen oder für die Arbeit zu machen. Und halt den Haushalt zu machen.

- Berufsschule hat ist das noch stressiger. . . dann noch irgendwas zu machen, wenn man eh schon total fertig ist . . . sich am liebsten hinlegen würde. . . Weil man muss sich um die Tochter kümmern, muss abends aber irgendwie noch lernen, weil es werden ja auch Klausuren geschrieben,

- Also die hat da superspass, , dass ist auch verdammt wichtig, dass gerade auch in dem Alter schon, dass da soziale Kontakte zu anderen Kindern usw. bestehen, . . . Weil die einfach so weit und gut entwickelt ist, dadurch, dass sie sich halt viel abguckt von den anderen.

- Weil ich mich halt supergut mit der Tagesmutter verstehe. . .

- . . . das ist schon verdammt viel. Und ich möchte ja auch nicht, dass meine Tochter anfängt mich zu siezen (lacht)

- Habe ich das nicht, . . . dann werde ich ganz unerträglich.


- Ich glaube nicht, dass da ein Tischler sagt, oh eine Frau, und dann auch noch alleinerziehend, und dann auch noch auf Teilzeit, also neh.

Das größte Problem ist die Zeit. . . . man hat kaum zeit mit seiner Tochter. . . Haushalt . . . Einkäufe . . . Man muss dann halt gut strukturieren sonst kriegt man das auf keinen Fall hin. Dann ist das unmöglich, dann steht man hier hinterher und hat irgendwas vergessen. Dann hat man entweder keine Einkäufe zu Hause, oder das Kind ist nicht ausgelastet, oder die Wohnung ist dreckig, oder, oder, oder - . . . man muss halt auch Abstriche setzen, . . . man muss halt gucken, dass man so einen Mittelweg findet. Das nichts hinterher hängt, dass die Ausbildung nicht hinterher hängt

Dadurch, dass ich jetzt dann die Ausbildung habe auf jeden Fall noch mal bestärkt bin. dass das auf jeden Fall nicht unmöglich was zu erreichen mit Kind.