



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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THE LIBERAL MOTHERS STAGE: A PARADIGM FOR THE SINGLE MOTHER COLLEGE STUDENT

Family is considered the basic institution of most societies, and for most societies, marriage is the starting point of a family. Over the last 40 years, the structure of American marriages and their resulting families have changed substantially. Past research has documented a growing population of educated single mothers by choice. Thus, the role for single mothers has dynamically expanded, and it is appropriate to inaugurate a positive perception of the group. Socially, the behaviors of these women have altered the family-life cycle stage of *coupling and marriage*, leading to an emergent stage in the family life cycle called the “liberal mothers stage,” as I refer to it, on the basis of their multi-task roles. The liberal mothers stage, is a transitional stage for women who have yet to meet a desirable mate for marriage and are working, completing their college education, and rearing their children independently. Studies of human behavior document the resilience of these women.

The liberal mothers stage (LMS) should be considered a stage within the family life cycle—single mothers who are obtaining, or who may have attained college education or higher, are employed, and who are not involved in cohabiting relationships. They are progressive in their roles and dedicated to building a solid foundation for themselves and their families. When interviewed about their perceptions of marriage and bearing children, some of these women reported that being a mother is more important than being married at this time in their life.

Practice in therapeutic services has led me to believe that counseling in higher education is a safety net procedure which entails student behavior modification. Counseling is a valuable asset for students to become educated on positive mental health practices, which will help them to balance better their academic loads along with their personal issues. Counseling is a non-judgmental process that accepts students for who they

are and allows them to express their realities, as well as become cognizant of their own behaviors and how they impact their environment. Faculty counselors assist with fostering concentration skills, using eclectic counseling strategies to reduce temperamental experiences while keeping the student grounded academically.

Most important, when a student is confronted with multiple roles and has few or no support systems available, then confusion, depression, and child neglect may become major problems. From a classical perspective, symbolic interaction theory implies that individuals should be educated about various role expectations. So, when these mothers are educated about what is expected for parenthood and academia, they encounter less strain and conflict. Also, by educating these mothers about strategies for managing family life, academics, and work, a healthy level of self-esteem and academic success can be achieved.

As educators, we know that self-esteem is a viable factor in academic success. I created a paradigm for counselors working with students who are in the liberal mothers stage. It is based on brief therapy and incorporates a family systems (circular) approach. Brief therapy usually consists of several counseling sessions. The family systems approach works with all family members; if the child is present, the counselor should interact with parent and child.

Venting

This process allows the student to explore her concerns. She may be overwhelmed with stressors, including financial hardship, depression, overwhelming responsibilities, time management, childcare concerns, and housing resources. If her child is present, it is recommended that the counselor ask the child how he/she feels about what the mother is expressing. The child is absorbing all of the information and processing it, so it is important that his or her feelings and thoughts are heard, as well. It is necessary to listen to what the student is saying and not intervene with a quick remedy to resolve the problem.



Social-Constructionist Approach

During this process, the student should begin to identify ways of solving the problem, and the counselor should help the student identify possible strategies for problem resolution. The student should have options and not be offered a single problem-solving approach. The student should write out goals and keep them as a reference. It is important for counselors to go over homework assignments and review after the student completes them. A one-week appointment should be scheduled with the student for follow-up.

Reflections

During this process, the student discusses what has happened since the last meeting and the steps that were taken toward the goals discussed earlier with the counselor. The counselor probes how her child was affected by the changes (or asks the child if he/she is present). The counselor should praise the student for any milestones achieved and discuss any revisions to goals. The counselor should determine further follow-up.

This approach has proven to be a successful strategy helping single-parent mothers navigate through academic waters.

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