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## College Students' Attitude Toward Single Mothers in Poverty

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## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

### **Abstract**

Poverty in the United States is a huge problem, and it becomes bigger each year, as millions of single mothers are the ones who are suffering the most. The debate on how to solve poverty has continued for a very long time. It has been fixed temporarily, but not completely remedied.

**Literature:** Attitudes are forecasters of how and why individuals take action in specific ways. Some people believe in social attributions (e.g., societal responsibility); others have confidence in individualistic attributions (e.g., a single person's responsibility); and others rely on fatalistic attributions (e.g., luck). Individuals' attitudes towards single mothers in poverty alter when people perceive the disadvantaged group as dissimilar to themselves.

**Methods:** This study was designed as a convenient sampling, examining the differences between students' attitudes during single interviews. The intended aim of this study was to examine the attitude of college students at Montclair State University, located in the northeastern section of the United States, towards poor single mothers. Volunteer students were recruited from classes which deal with poverty and families. This is a qualitative study based on face-to-face interviews. The data were collected from 17 students who were interviewed with open-ended questions.

**Findings:** Students' attitudes towards poor single mothers are based on four main themes: effect of stigmatization based on stigma as part of the cycle; factors that influence attitudes before taking the class, and change in attitude during the semester; higher education as a path out of poverty; and systematic support based on government intervention, employment availability, and awareness of resources. Direct quotes from

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

participants and subthemes are given for every main theme to sustain the data. Findings show that participants taking courses in social issues such as poverty seem to be motivated to grasp a self-confident understanding of people in poverty in FCST445 which goes further than individualistic supremacy. Limitations and suggestions are discussed for future studies.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

/ College Students' Attitude Toward Single Mothers in Poverty /

by

Rocco Placenti

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

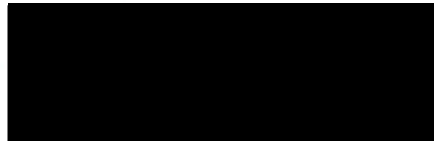
Master of Arts

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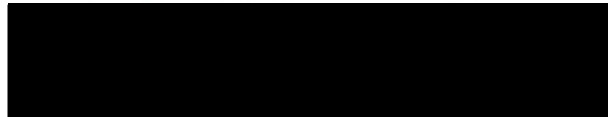
College of Education and Human Service

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SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

COLLEGE STUDENT'S ATTITUDE TOWARD SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

by

ROCCO PLACENTI

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

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**Table of Contents**

Chapter 1. Introduction .....	6
Chapter 2. Literature Review .....	08
History of Welfare .....	08
Beliefs about Poverty.....	11
Individualism .....	11
Social structural .....	12
Fatalism .....	13
College Students' Attitude toward Poverty .....	14
Stereotypes and Stigmatization .....	16
Using Curriculum to Influence Attitudes .....	19
Theoretical Perspective.....	20
Chapter 3. Methods .....	23
Design .....	23
Participants .....	23
Table 1 – Demographic Information .....	25
Procedure .....	26
Data Analysis .....	26
Chapter 4. Results .....	28
Theme 1: Effect of Stigmatization .....	28
Stigma as part of the cycle .....	28
Theme 2: Factors that Influence Attitudes.....	31
Influence of media on students' attitudes .....	31



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

Student's attitudes before class .....	33
Student's attitude change .....	35
Theme 3: Higher Education.....	39
Higher education as path out of poverty .....	39
Theme 4: Systematic Support .....	41
Chapter 5. Discussion .....	45
Theme 1: Effect of Stigmatization.....	45
Theme 2: Factors that Influence Attitudes.....	46
Changing attitudes .....	47
Theme 3: Higher Education.....	49
Theme 4: Systematic Support.....	51
Limitations .....	52
Chapter 6. Conclusion and Implications .....	54
References .....	55
Appendix 1. Consent Form for Adults.....	66
Appendix 2. Student's and Family's Demographic Information .....	68
Appendix 3. Counseling and Psychological Services.....	70

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

According to The World Bank (2013), the U. S. is the wealthiest country in the world; however, it also has a high poverty rate. Demographic estimates from the year 2000 suggest that there were 31 million individuals in poverty, or approximately 11% of people in the U.S., and in 2013 there were 45.3 million people (14.5%) living below the poverty threshold (U. S. Department of Commerce, 2014). In 2013, there were 14.1 million individuals younger than 18 living in poor circumstances, equal to 19.5% of all children living in poverty, and 22.2% of these children were under six years old (U. S. Department of Commerce, 2014). Compared to the year 2000, this represents an increase of 4.4%. In 2013, the number of poor single mothers was 4.6 million, which equals 30.6% of all people in poverty (U. S. Department of Commerce, 2014). Specific to New Jersey, the poverty rate for all people has increased from 10.8 percent to 11.4% between 2012 and 2013 (Astudillo, 2014).

Given the extent of poverty in the United States, it is important to examine the attitudes of various groups toward those in poverty. Coryn (2010) emphasized that some perceive those who are not wealthy less favorably than those who are wealthy. Students' decisions are also based on the information passed on by the traditional media (Yamamoto & Kushin, 2014). This may help them formulate attitudes toward the issue of poverty and the impact it has on families, single mothers, and children (Child Poverty in U. S., 2013) regarding the cause of economic inferiority (Sun, 2001), unemployment, and who is to blame (Guimond, Begin, & Palmer, 1989) for the increase of poverty. Maybe it is the system (Guimond et al., 1989) that is to be blamed for unemployment because



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

private industries do not provide enough jobs, which means that poverty becomes a more complex problem than most people believe. In fact, researchers seem to be divided on the reason why there are so many poor single mothers in this country. Some people recommend decreasing costs to support single mothers who are called the undeserving poor (Katz, 1990). Others recommend understanding that it is unfair to disrespect single mothers in poverty (Bloom, 2001) and that an increase in the minimum wage for working single mothers who are on welfare is necessary (Polakow, 1993).

Conducting research that seeks to understand prevailing attitudes, matters. It provides an incentive and encouragement to change political views (Coryn, 2010) for decreasing poverty and specifically for helping poor single mothers. As Coryn (2010) suggested, attitudes are easily formed, but they stand firm against change. The study will examine the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of college students taking a course on families and poverty.

The two questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. What attitudes do college students have about single mothers in poverty?
2. How did your attitude toward people and/or single mothers in poverty change over the course of the semester?

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

This literature review will address a number of areas relevant to college students' attitudes toward single mothers in poverty. First, since many of the attitudes held toward those in poverty seem centered on issues of morality or on the allocation of public resources, this literature review begins with a brief history of government cash assistance programs (Seccombe, 2007). Second, beliefs about the causes of poverty and the link between those beliefs and attitudes toward the poor will be examined. Third, an overview of stereotypes and stigmatization as it relates to single mothers in poverty will be presented. Finally, the use of curriculum to change college student attitudes will be examined.

#### History of welfare

Government efforts to address the needs of impoverished populations are long established in United States history. While the initial motives for those efforts were based on feelings of empathy for those in need, the need to impose some group's brand of morality and particular modes of behavior often followed as ongoing requirements to receive aid (Lee, 2012). The Progressive Era (1896 -1914) produced the Mothers' Pensions Plan, which is considered the first program of cash assistance in the United States (Seccombe, 2007). It was available almost exclusively to white, non-Hispanic widows, and was based on the belief that women should remain at home to nurture their children (Seccombe, 2007). They were expected to meet the standards of morality imposed by the organizations offering aid (Lee, 2012). This moral reform continued through the 1920s and 1930s (Seccombe, 2007, p. 108). In 1935, the government



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

established Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), also called “Welfare,” as part of the New Deal (Seccombe, 2007). In the 1930s and 1940s, many people rejected government assistance to females of color in an effort to ensure that they continue to work as farm laborers, domestic servants, or staff. President F. D. Roosevelt (1937), in his inaugural speech to the nation proposed giving help to the poor.

After 1943 (World War II), low wage work that depended mainly on women increased, and through the 1950s the welfare programs started to alter because the states enforced disciplinary policies to reject as many recipients as possible (Seccombe, 2007). In the 1950s, the government provided resources exclusively for offspring while offering no support to the parents (e.g., mothers). In the 1950s and the 1960s, obligatory work requirements (e.g., Work Incentive Program) were imposed because mothers in poverty would go to work if they were forced. In the first half of the 1960s, the government not only denied help for mothers, but also its almost obvious purpose was to create a system hated by the receivers, instead of being viewed as a driving force for better policies (Withorn, 1996). The system created by the government discouraged single mothers in poverty from receiving assistance (Withorn, 1996).

With President Kennedy in 1962, the Social Service Amendments increased national subsidy for social services (e.g., rehabilitation instead of relief and training for useful work instead prolong dependency) (Seccombe, 2007). With President Johnson, the war on poverty was unconditional, and in 1966, the government provided acceptable housing for the needy and acceptable incomes for poor single mothers (Quadagno, 1995). Seccombe (2007) and Moffitt (2015) indicated that in the 1970s many social changes occurred that guided many individuals to question whether poor mothers represent the

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

worthy impoverished at all. In the 1980s, for the women, the situation became worse than 1950s when the first welfare cuts occurred because of the fact that the new programs did not help single mothers; instead, those programs became setups for the elimination of resources for helping many women in poverty (Katz, 1990).

In the 1980s with President Regan and the early 1990s with President Bush (Senior), many thousands of families lost the eligibility of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) as well as food stamps, Medicaid, and other benefits (Seccombe, 2007). According to Withorn (1996), with the welfare reform of 1996 (still enforced now), the programs became the responsibility of each individual state, without any guarantee from the federal government; the real reason for these new changes was to cut spending rather than to protect or prevent the negative consequences of poverty.

In 1996, President W. J. (Bill) Clinton removed the AFDC from the poor. With this welfare reform, President Clinton claimed that people on welfare should go back to work because employment could give hope and importance to the lives of these individuals. It looked good on paper, and yet the reform happened to be too punitive and insufficient to provide for poor families. Then, the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) was created in 1996, which was authorized until 2002, and G. W. Bush reauthorized it in 2006 until 2010 with a significant work requirement (Seccombe, 2007). As Steinbrook (2012) indicated, Obamacare is concerned with putting into practice the Affordable Care Act (ACA) by the year 2018. As Wijnberg and Weinger (1998) reported, the recommendations of politicians to change the welfare system in cutting the costs will not help poor single mothers who need the existing limited assistance.



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

### **Beliefs about Poverty**

Individual and community attitudes influence both policy and personal response to those individuals and families in poverty. These beliefs are attached to a number of factors such as political affiliation, age, life experience or generalized belief systems (Seccombe, 2007). The nation's response to the poor has been largely negative (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001). The work of Cozzarelli, et al. (2001) and Seccombe (2007) have identified three general belief systems about the reasons for poverty, as well as how these beliefs shape attitudes toward the poor.

***Individualism.*** In the United States, many demonstrate individualistic perspectives, blaming the individual for their economic situation and social position (Coryn, 2010; Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Furnham, 1982; Seccombe, 2007). The individualistic/internal attributions may be described as those that connect with personal or private aspects of people in poverty as causes for impoverishment (e.g., alcoholism, and immorality). As suggested by Moorman and Wicks-Smith (2012), a significant number of individuals in the U.S. are convinced that individualistic factors (e.g., laziness, drug addiction and alcoholism) are largely better than societal considerations (e.g., absence of education, and a poor economy) as explanations for poverty.

People's affiliation with a political party was also connected to their beliefs about the reason for poverty. For example, members of the Republican Party attributed more to the abilities of the poor as causes of poverty than those who belong to the Democratic Party (Pandey, Sinha, Prakash, & Tripathi, 1982). Conservatives tend to hold responsible the people in poverty because they adopt the individualist explanation. As Blair, Brown, Schoepfin, and Taylor (2014) suggested, the Americans' attitudes in regards to the people



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

living in impoverished conditions come from the conception that the United States is a place in which the destiny of an individual is based on the decisions she/he makes. That includes the assurance that the possibility to move forward is accessible to everyone and a person's richness is the outcome of an individual's attempts and capacities (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). In addition, as suggested by Coryn (2010), individuals want to consider the world as being the right location to live, in which people obtain exactly what they earn and obviously earn what they obtain. Consequently, if individuals are in poverty, they in some way are held responsible for being poor. What people in poverty do is the result of their mess (Coryn, 2010). In spite of the fact that attributions for being poor are consistent with socio demographic differences (e.g., ethnicity, gender, and age), the latest research has made people aware that individuals in the United States are generally inclined to prefer individualistic/internal causes in giving reasons for poverty (Cozzarelli et al., 2001). The poor do not want to get up early in the morning, are satisfied with the way they are living, or also possibly blame their situation on alcoholism (Loignon et al., 2012).

***Social structuralism.*** The social structuralist perspective takes the opposite view, which blames social imbalance for a lack of opportunity leading to poverty (Secombe, 2007). The structural/external attributions (e.g., prejudice, inequality, and social environment) go beyond the capacity of the person in power (Cozzarelli, et al., 2001). In contrast, the activists from the political left attributed more responsibility to government policies and business activities of the country. For example, some industries rely on manual labor and they need a steady supply of workers with few choices other than to work for low wages. Similar results were found in the study conducted by Furnham

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

(1982), who reported that the employed and poor people blame the general policy because they favor the societal explanation. As suggested by Coryn (2010), some people believe that poverty contributes to a societal purpose, and it is a necessary part of our societal framework. As mentioned by Nickols and Nielsen (2011) a significant amount of people in poverty are struggling to survive not because they do not want to work, but because they do not have enough resources and/or enough education. These are seen as some of the most important factors in eliminating poverty.

***Fatalism.*** The fatalistic reasoning explains the reasons for wealth and poverty as reasons out of people's control. Fatalistic attributions (e.g., luck and fate) identify terrible fortune (Cozzarelli, et al., 2001). Some people believe that financial inequality is destined to exist in a capitalistic nation, and the rich provide to the financial system in means that can be helpful for everyone (Coryn, 2010).

These three overarching belief systems regarding poverty join with specific attributes of impoverished individuals or groups to articulate attitudes toward those in poverty. Further, the media plays an important role in linking certain stereotypes with poverty. For example, African Americans are often associated, on television and in magazines, with images of poverty. Any information given by the media is considered complete, and thus, some young students and the population in general do not seek additional sources for more pieces of information (Yamamoto & Kushin, 2014). For college students, the information provided with the use of online media is not always factual. It can do more harm than good, can create distrust, a lack of enthusiasm, and pessimism to their attitudes and opinions. According to Hopkins (2009), people's attitudes toward poverty change negatively when they consider the poor groups involved



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

as being different from themselves. In fact, it is suggested that 74% of people are willing to increase spending on the poor in general, but only 43% are willing to increase spending on African Americans in poverty (Hopkins, 2009). The reason very well may be that since the media focuses on African Americans as being the only ethnic group on welfare, people are reluctant to increase the spending for poor African American families. That sounds like prejudice/racism, specifically concerning socioeconomic status as related to ethnicity. Hopkins (2009) also found that those who live in places where people in poverty are predominantly not white are not inclined to blame poverty on the imperfections of poor individuals.

*College students' attitude toward poverty.* Boylston and O'Rourke (2013) suggested that students enter college with predetermined attitudes concerning a number of topics. Those attitudes may be linked to a number of factors such as degree choice. According to Guimond and Palmer (1990), college students' attitudes are important because they represent the new generation and the possibility for change. Seider, Rabinowicz, and Gillmor (2011) indicated that the college years could be regarded as an expedient time to expose students to the problems and ramifications of poverty. During the traditional timing of college attendance (18-23 years old), the student is open to development or refinement of personal identity (Arnett, 2000).

There is evidence that a student's course of study is connected to attitudes toward those in poverty. Guimond et al. (1989) noticed that those majoring in business develop an attitude that tends to blame inequality and poverty on individualistic factors, whereas those majoring in the social sciences focus more on allocating inequality and poverty to organizational causes. Willems, Swinnen, and De Maeseneer's (2005) research explored

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

the perceptions and attitudes of general medical practitioner students in dealing with the problem of poverty, and they observed that some doctors blamed poor people's convictions, but others stressed the importance of giving to the poor a sense of confidence and self-esteem. As reported by Sun (2001), for students majoring in social work, poverty is an outcome resulting from a political and economic structure. In other words, the students do not perceive poverty as an individualistic factor, but instead, hold society more responsible for the phenomenon of poverty.

College is a time when students are apt to discover and begin engagement in activism around a number of issues. Americans who live in poverty wield little or no political influence, while college students will go on to exercise a significant effect on their representatives when the topics of poverty and disparity are discussed (Seider et al., 2011). For Boylston and O'Rourke (2013), college students can make a difference in the lives of impoverished people by becoming teachers, social workers, therapists, and community leaders. Students can concentrate on altering a system with protests, demonstrations, political participation, dissemination, and volunteerism. In being concerned for defenseless people, students can guide the way to change and reform the system, and in numbers alone, students have the ability to have an impact on human rights and justice.

Many Americans think that individualistic considerations are the most important reasons for economic inequality (Cozzarelli et al., 2001). However, this kind of education has also been observed to impact college students' attitudes about inequality. Particularly, Guimond, et al. (1989) noticed that fighting for poor people and disparity in this country is not necessary to form different programs that already exist, but many are encouraged to



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

support these and the already existing programs. The interpretation of Guimond and Palmer (1990) is that students blame the social structure and similar results are reported in Furnham's study (1982), in which poor and working people blame the system as being responsible for the existence of poverty whereas the upper class holds responsible the unemployed and the poor for being in poverty.

### **Stereotypes and Stigmatization**

A number of stereotypes are applied to impoverished single mothers. The stigma attached to those stereotypes has produced negative attitudes and negative behaviors toward those women. There are two types of stigma. The first is *internalized stigma*, identified with personal and negative feeling about their poverty. The second type of stigma is *experienced stigma* identified with people who have anxiety of being considered poor by other individuals (Collins, 2005; Mickelson & Williams, 2008; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006). As described by Broussard, Joseph, and Thompson (2012), the two types of stigma are connected to unhappiness (e.g., poverty, depression, internalized stigma, low self-esteem), and to reduced amount of social provisions and increased concern toward refusal for plead assistance (e.g., experienced stigma).

Jarrett (1996) indicated that unmarried mothers are the most stigmatized of all the poor in the U. S. Some of the women are stigmatized by being called names (e.g., deviant, reluctant workers, irresponsible parents, and ghetto welfare mothers), by welfare staff, media, and employers (Jarrett, 1996). The stereotypes define them as sexually indiscriminate, promiscuous individuals who get pregnant solely to receive additional monetary assistance from welfare and related programs (Jarrett, 1996; Wijnberg & Weinger, 1998). Single mothers in poverty receiving assistance from the federal



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

government were seen as undeserving recipients who must be forced to return to work under the threat of severe penalties (Katz, 1990; Wijnberg & Weinger, 1998).

For Polakow (1993), poor, single mothers on welfare or working for minimum wage are labeled and regarded in degrading ways by those in power. Poor mothers are criticized in the public discussion, and are stereotyped as *welfare queens* (Zucchino, 1997). Ronald Reagan used this degrading term for the first time in a 1976 campaign speech about a woman who was a criminal and a murderer (Demby, 2013). Those like her were undeserving poor (Katz, 1990) whose indecent conduct must be controlled, must be under continual observation, and managed by the federal government (Polakow, 1993). As Kaplan (1997) mentioned, poor young mothers are singled out as being dirty merchandise like articles for sale, and adult mothers with pregnant children are classified as unfavorable mothers.

Young poor mothers are blamed for being the driving source of poverty. This conceals the frequent exploitation of teenage mothers by adults. The reality is that poverty may be the cause of teenage single motherhood rather than the result of that motherhood. (Polakow, 1993). The perception attached to the phrase “welfare mother” is very powerful because it gives a sense of accepting no responsibility for actions, being sexually indiscriminate, and being morally wrong (McCormack, 2005). As Mavity Maddalena (2013) indicated, single mothers in poverty are insulted in the U.S. and the attention is given to the cause of stigmatization on changes in the welfare system, which frequently mentions the significance of poor mothers' independence (e.g., self-sufficiency) (Coutere, 1993).

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

The expression "single mothers" usually evokes a mental image of poor, welfare dependent, minority women who have insufficient education and labor expertise and who lack the motivation to obtain them (Haleman, 2004). As these images mainly encourage stereotypes, they continue to influence recent concepts of single parenthood (e.g., motherhood), and by concentrating on single deficiencies, these standard/conventional images divert liability away from the wide societal and financial considerations that have an effect on welfare beneficiaries (Haleman, 2004). Social policy resolutions that concern the living of single mothers in poverty and their families are often used in stereotypes of poor single parenthood instead of considering the struggles of those mothers and their families (Polakow, 1993).

It is noteworthy that regardless of the number of White females who have received social assistance (e.g., welfare), the media incessantly pictures welfare beneficiaries as African American, concurring to the racial characterization of welfare beneficiaries (Quadagno, 1995). Stating these inaccurate, invasive, and controlled descriptions of poor single mothers, it should not come as a surprise that a population that persists in positioning poor single mothers as unfit (Bloom, 2001), also perceives their parenting as questionable. The stigma attached to being an African American, single mother is particularly harsh and may affect not only the mother, but also her extended family. There is a widely held social opinion that African Americans allow out-of-matrimony birth. Kaplan (1997) asserted that Black families' households firmly try to stop this kind of conduct. Past events of racism as a cruel form of racial domination had a strong effect on mothers' emotional responses to the pregnancy of their female children (Jennings, 2004; Kaplan, 1997).



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

### **Using Curriculum to Influence Attitudes**

Teaching students of any level of education, beginning in elementary school, about the enormous problem of poverty and especially about poor single mothers, is crucial for social justice (Sigelman, 2012). The formation of attitudes starts at a very young age and attitudes can change over time depending upon exposure (Sigelman, 2012). Though the actual acculturation process needs some time for development, instructors with courses of study intentionally centered on poverty issues have a distinct chance to have an effect on the growth of positive ideas and the avoidance of moral judgmental attitudes (Boylston & O'Rourke, 2013).

The literature reports a number of specific tools used to create such exposure in an educational setting. As Reid and Evanson (2016) indicated, there are many tools to help students acquire familiarity, expertise, and attitudes on a diversity of destitution. Understanding issues related to poverty is essential to effective work in any number of fields (Bennett, 2008; Cho, Covertino, & Bower 2015). Using case studies and experiential exercises that bring students into contact with impoverished populations and/or the environments in which they live promotes awareness of the daily struggles faced by those in poverty (Bennett, 2008). The use of poverty simulation exercises also serve to promote understanding of the daily experience of poverty (Cox, Watts, & Horton, 2012). Smith-Campbell (2005) indicated that having experience with people in poverty might help the students become aware that the poor are not so much unlike those who are not poor. One of the tools is the Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS) in which nursing students explore the lives of poor families with actual settings and deadlines (Nickols & Nielsen (2011). Another tool is the "paper bag play" in which the

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

aim is to simulate living in India and play as a real family, earning money by making paper bags. The bags are sold to a local store, which sells the bags to the community using the cost-of-living prices (Davidson, DuPreez, Gibb, & Nell, 2009).

Then, Reid and Evanson (2016) reported that there is the on-line game, SPEND, in which students discover that a single negative change in life can cause a series of unfortunate events which can lead directly to poverty. Dickinson (2015) assessed social service, college students' attitudes toward poor people, and homelessness; then, she let the students work on different assignments (read a book associated with poor individuals; simulate temporary residence in a homeless shelter or low-income home; and work in a childcare center office). She noticed that the semester transformed the students' attitudes toward poverty.

As for Orfield and Lee (2006), financial discrimination is indicated in various parts of the U.S. population, as well as schools all over the country, and financial exclusion is a big problem for poor single mothers. This leads to rude disparities especially in young students' learning and teaching exposure to events (White, Mistry, & Chow, 2013). White, Mistry, and Chow (2013) also reported that schools need specific strategies particularly to speak about socioeconomic status (SES) dissimilarities along with undergraduates involving economic and social factors.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This study is concerned with the attitudes of college students toward single mothers in poverty and the ways in which those attitudes develop and change. Since the participants of the study are all college students with an average age of 22.1 years, this study will consider the results with respect to an Emerging Adulthood framework.



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

Emerging adulthood has arisen as a unique stage in human development that occurs when an individual has completed the tasks of adolescence but has not yet fully assumed the roles and obligations of an adult (Arnett, 2000, Gutierrez, & Park, 2015). Most identify this phase of development with ages 18-25 (Arnett, 2000; Gutierrez & Park, 2015) though some extend the age to 29 years.

Individuals in this life phase may question beliefs and knowledge that have shaped their lives previously as they strive to develop a sense of independence and delineate an individual personality (Arnett, 2000). College educations, along with significant life experiences, prime the young adults to change their perspective of the world and the people within it. According to Gutierrez and Park (2015) in the phase of emerging adulthood, the individual identity contains a plasticity that can be influenced by a collection of essential principals and conclusions concerning the soul, the human race, and more, globe force identity which notify policymaking, welfare, and values: all concepts that are explored in a college setting. From life and educational experiences, the emerging adult college students then form their own attitudes and vision for the future to be ready for adulthood. Arnett (2000), Gutierrez and Park (2015) agreed with that position, which indicated that worldview could be altered among emerging adults, and that this is a normal process. Emerging adults can articulate how their beliefs are developing. The researchers suggested that emerging adults cross-examine and investigate their world-views while chasing a steady and fully developed self. They suggested that the demographic, individual vision, and self-discoveries, grant access to the very plentiful information on the uniqueness of emerging adulthood.



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

This study intends to show that when college students take a course in education and human services (e.g., poverty and families), they will be inclined to have a less stereotyped understanding of single mothers in poverty in terms of structural/external attributions that go beyond the individual in power. The following section will describe the methods used to conduct the interviews with students and to assess their attitude toward single mothers in poverty.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

#### **Design**

A qualitative design was employed to gather data for this study. As Corbin and Strauss (2015) suggested, qualitative research makes the most of an open and adaptable design, in which open-ended, semi-structured questions are asked. This study used a convenience sample. Students were interviewed face-to-face in the same building in which they met for class lectures and in which their faculty department was located.

The initial interview instrument was developed using extant information regarding beliefs about the causes of poverty and individual/societal attitudes toward those living in poverty. Of particular interest in this process was the literature about college students' attitudes. The questions developed can be found on the Consent Form (Appendix 1).

#### **Participants**

The demographic information of the participants and their families is presented in Table 1. In brief, the participants in the present study were students from Montclair State University (MSU) in New Jersey. MSU is a mid-sized public university in the northeastern United States. When the study was conducted, the participants were students enrolled in 2015 spring and summer courses. The participants consisted of 17 undergraduate students (junior or senior) from FCST445, which is a course focused on families and poverty. Reading and audiovisual materials were chosen carefully for this course, with the aim of putting a face on poverty. These materials reflected firsthand accounts of the lives of people in poverty. These materials were combined with a variety

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

of experiential exercises including poverty simulation experiences and visits to agencies and sites serving those who live in poverty.

The average family's annual income before tax was less or equal than \$100,000 (n=16, 94.12%). More than one and a half of the parents' marital status was married (n=10, 58.8%). The parents were primarily white (n=12, 70.6%), the majority of participants were full time students, and more than half of the students were living with their parents (n=10, 58.8%).



SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

**TABLE 1**

**Demographic Information (N = 17; Female Students)**

Characteristics	M	SD	Range
Age (In years)	22.1	7.7	19 - 27
Family size	3.8	1.1	2 - 6
	Frequency		%
2014 Family annual income before tax			
Less or equal to \$50,000	9		52.94
\$50,001 - \$75,000	2		11.77
\$75,001 - \$100,000	5		29.41
More than 100,000	1		5.88
Parents Marital Status			
Married	10		58.82
Divorced	2		11.77
Remarried	3		17.64
Single	2		11.77
Race/Ethnicity			
White	12		70.59
Hispanic	3		17.65
African American	1		5.88
Asian	1		5.88
Occupation			
Full Time Students	11		64.71
Part Time Students	6		35.29
Students Living with			
Both Parents	11		64.71
Mothers	4		23.53
Fathers	1		5.88
Girl Friend	1		5.88
Social Class			
Middle Class	11		64.71
Working Class	6		35.29

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

### **Procedure**

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received; the PI made in-class and email pleas; then, followed by scheduling interviews. Seventeen participants agreed to the use of audiotape. One participant preferred not to be audiotaped but agreed to the use of notes from the interview. All interviews were conducted on the MSU campus prior to the end of the spring and summer semesters.

After arriving at the interview location, participants were asked to take a seat, read a consent form (Appendix 1), and sign it. Each participant provided demographic information for themselves and their family (Appendix 2). Then, the researcher made sure to give the participants copies of consent forms and copies containing information about CAPS (Counseling and Psychological Services) (Appendix 3) in case participants needed their services in the future.

Interviews were conducted and recorded (except one that was not recorded). There were many questions on the first page of the consent form (see Appendix 1) that the facilitator asked to the interviewees to continue the conversation. In addition, spontaneous questions that were responses to what the participants were saying plus a final question asking if the participants wanted to add on to what they had been discussing up to that point. Participants, offhand, were encouraged to tell the facilitator what they really felt and/or to let others know about their personal experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were examined using approaches suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998) after word-for-word transcription of the interview. The facilitator initiated by impartially coding every interview one line at a time. This approach, which is named open coding,

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

was applied to categorize continuing and clear concepts inside the data. Concepts were associated both inside each interview and throughout all the interviews. Codes occurred while examining previous interviews and were utilized to lead the analysis of subsequent interviews, but the facilitator was always open to creating additions to the codebook. Axial coding was employed to recognize connections between the open codes and expanded categories that contribute to greater themes in the data. The facilitator analyzed coding on a regular basis to evaluate specific findings, themes and the relevance of those themes in the participants' responses. The facilitator was aware of the effect of reflexivity in producing partialities in the gathering and examination of the data (Patton, 2002). Vigilant and repeated analysis of the data was considered vital to reduce the influence of pre-existent partialities during the time of planning on the distinctive perceptions supplied by knowledge of and coming into contact with the pertinent social circumstances.



## Chapter 4

### Results

The objective of this study was to determine students' attitudes toward impoverished single mothers. An analysis of interviews from 17 students illuminated four themes: 1) Effect of stigmatization, 2) Factors that influence attitudes, 3) Higher education, and 4) Systematic support. In addition, subthemes and quotes will be provided for every main theme to support the data. Pseudonyms were used to identify the participants.

#### **Theme 1: Effect of Stigmatization**

##### **Stigma as part of a cycle**

It was evident that when participants were exposed to the conditions of people in poverty, they were sensitive enough to put themselves in the shoes of the poor, single mothers and try to understand how difficult it is for mothers to provide for their children while balancing other areas of their lives. In class, the films depicting first-hand experiences, articles discussing the complexity of social issues, and discussions where students openly shared their feelings and thoughts, facilitated this kind of identification. Various experiential exercises such as poverty simulations and visits to agencies serving impoverished populations provided experiences that expanded the worldview of the students.

Students interviewed for this study identified stigmatization as a barrier for single impoverished women. They spoke of significant levels of stress caused by criticism about modes of dress and communication styles and stereotypes to be abolished. For Yenia, the stigmatization of poor single mothers is harmful to them and any opportunities they may

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

have. She described the way every element of these women's lives are judged by the public,

You are denied a lot of time from by the way you look, the way you speak, the way you smell, and there is a lot of stigma on that on people [in] poverty.

Tania also mentioned the intense power of the stigma and felt that we should practice empathy when considering stigmatization and insisted,

There's still a very large stigma placed on poverty; people are embarrassed to take out their Families First card at the supermarket because they don't want to be seen using that because welfare is like, "Oh my gosh, you're on welfare!" Like it's worst thing ever.

Hannah reinforced this idea, and goes further to state that we should not just offer empathy, but support. She explained: "And I think we should at least reach out a hand to give them this little boost to put them back up on their feet."

The students interviewed identified stigmatization as an obstacle to overcoming the state in which single mothers find themselves. However, they believe that people can practice empathy as a way to increase the self-esteem of poor single mothers. They also feel that with the will of the people, there is the possibility that single mothers in poverty can improve, in getting help from social agencies and from their communities and being able to break the cycle of poverty.

Even as students recognize the impact of stigma on mothers in poverty, they are aware of ways in which those negative impacts could be addressed. Participants described a cycle that involved the single mothers, their communities and the workers charged with providing aid and support. For Sophia, the attitude toward single mothers in



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

poverty is upsetting, but it is possible to improve with help and care from others, including the government. She said communities could help to break the cycle of poverty and stigma by valuing single mothers and helping them to feel wanted and important:

They can have low self-esteem, and it's important that maybe people work with them and let them know they're important in their community and in their life.

And you know, they can find something to do, or go back to study for their needs and [get] help from the government to go back and study. But they need to get rid of that cycle and that means they need to find help from others. I mean, the community needs to help them and it's very important because they are going to feel that there are people that care about them.

For Yenia, the perception is that poor people do not choose to be poor and they are unfairly stigmatized. However, Yenia, like Sophia, emphasized the way the cycle of poverty is connected to the cycle of stigmatization and negative self-esteem:

I think it's a very sad to face or dealing with it because don't choose to be poor.

You choose to find different ways to get out of it but it is very hard for you to move out of it unless you receive help, but a lot of time [it] is not there for you.

Tania also spoke about the same issues that Yenia explained. However, Tania went further to address the need to abolish stereotypes, practice empathy, and remember that there are various reasons for poverty. She felt that each situation should be viewed individually rather than generalizing the entire population of poor single mothers:

I think everything is just a cycle that repeats itself... Maybe their mothers were also single mothers and then they become single mothers... a society, we need to stop being so judgmental and we need to abolish stereotypes of families In this



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

class, we've talked so much about the stereotypes that are behind the people on welfare assistance, and in fact people are placed into these large categories and that's not the truth. Sure, there might be the people that fall through the cracks that might be cheating the system, but the majority of people on welfare are in fact not. They generalize, and if we stop generalizing and just take a look at every situation individually for what it is, things would be better.

Students made a connection between stigmatization and the cycle of poverty. Hannah believed single mothers live in poverty because desperation in the face of unemployment causes them to seek the same low-paying jobs because they are the only ones available to them. This kept the women in a cycle of job loss that perpetuated their poverty. She described the continual cycle of "... getting let go from a job and not being able to maintain it ... because their job didn't pay enough ... lose a job ... build up their resume so that can get a simple job to start up their life..." They also recognized the necessity for the government and citizens to view the mothers' self-esteem as a priority for exiting the situation.

### **Theme 2: Factors that Influence Attitudes**

Participants in the study spoke of factors that influenced their attitudes toward single mothers in poverty. Those factors were: 1) the media, 2) personal experience, and 3) the class from which the participants were drawn.

**Influence of media on students' attitudes.** The media played a critical role in the formation of attitudes prior the class. Participants demonstrated that professional and social media had a significant influence on people due to their overwhelming presence and repetition in our lives, "I feel like the media has a [great] effect - you know like

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

Facebook, Instagram”. Similarly, Sarina indicated, “everything is driven by the media these days,” and Alia implied, “awareness in the media, I think, is the center of everything.”

The majority of respondents indicated that information from the class caused them to be more aware or even critical of the media’s negative attitudes towards single mothers in poverty, and poverty in general. Alia believed that the media’s negative stereotypes of single mothers in poverty could be overcome if a child understands that they are capable of achieving a better life. She pointed out:

Awareness in the media, I think, is the center of everything. ... Just showing one kid that you *can* make a difference, you *can* go to school and become a doctor, [or] become the next president, ... Say that child is living in poverty because their [his or her] mother is a single mother. As long as the child of the single mother knows that he or she is not going to follow in their mother’s footsteps, they can get out.

Imma acknowledged the stereotypes Alia discussed, and suggests that the media’s images of single mothers in poverty are powerful and influential, but the class has helped her become more self-aware and critical of the way stereotypes influence her attitudes. She said,

I still have stereotypes in my head when I hear about welfare and about single mothers. A lot of the time a black woman does pop up into my head because that’s what we’re force-fed through our communities and the media and stuff. We’re force-fed the “facts” of minorities are mostly the people on welfare when in fact white people are the largest number of people on welfare.



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

Sarina also believed that the media is responsible for the negative stereotypes of those in poverty, but citizens can work to reduce the stigma and help single mothers instead:

We need to get more people on board and explain to them what poverty really is because everything is driven by the media these days. [They say] "Poverty people are lazy, they're drug addicts, they're prostitutes. Once that stigma, that stereotype is broken, people will realize and be like, "Wow! Let's help them, let's figure out a way to do this... The media drives it all. ... I think, every time I have a class, it's "Wow! Oh my God, really? Ok. Now what can I do?" I think everyone is guilty of falling under the media's stereotype and stigma of poverty. I have learned so much.

**Students' attitudes before class.** The students' attitudes before taking the course on poverty and families were shaped by the media and a number of other factors. The positive or negative nature of those attitudes seemed linked to whether or not that poverty was viewed as the result of personal choice or actions. Alia provided an example of poverty due to a disability. She said,

The only type of poverty I've known is people who kind of, in a way, didn't choose to be there. The type of poverty I know is a family member who was born not able to work. She's living in poverty, but if it wasn't for certain people and the support she had, she'd be living on the street, literally.

Franca came to the class with a more negative view of impoverished people. She admitted to being judgmental towards single mothers in poverty based upon her ideas about personal choice. She said,



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

I definitely always looked at single moms, like it's so easy to judge, and just say, well, you chose that, you picked that, you could have done something else. Maybe you should have used protection. You could have had an abortion."

In addition to Alia's and Franca's perspectives, Helen's past perceptions came from her parents, who even though they experienced poverty, still had a negative view. She said, "Even though my parents were born in poverty, they still stigmatize people in poverty, they still stigmatize single mothers, and I was raised to think that they did something wrong or are bad people."

Imma feels that her perception was influenced by multiple sources, acknowledging that it was impossible to isolate her own views from those of the larger culture. The image of a minority woman is particularly strong. She explained,

I still have stereotypes in my head when I hear about welfare and about single mothers. A lot of the time a black woman does pop up into my head because that's what we're force-fed through our communities and the media and stuff Jane's perceptions are more complex, and she feels that their choices led them to be in poverty; however, they do not choose to be in poverty. She stated,

I mean I've always had complex thoughts about single mothers, so I'm curious to see how it will evolve again with this class. So far it's like, I want to help them, I know that a lot of them are strong enough to help themselves, but then a lot of times they just need a little push...they get in relationships and have kids and they know it's just not going to be good but it happens anyway. But either way they're not evil. They're not sitting behind a chair stroking a cat saying, "I want to have

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

kids so I can be in poverty.” No, no, no. Unfortunately, the choices aren’t so good.

While many indicate that the class brought a more nuanced view of social issues surrounding poverty, changing these ideas still takes time. Jenny’s perceptions have not changed yet, because the interview was conducted at the beginning of the semester. She stated, “Not really, it hasn’t changed yet. I just started...I’ve only been in two classes so far and this is just the beginning for me.”

**Student’s attitude change.** During the semester, the participants changed their past positions regarding people in poverty and have now more respect for them. Hannah reports that her perception changed during the semester: “because there were other preconceived ideas I had before because I wasn’t educated on [about] them. But now so far as I’m learning I’m getting more ideas about what it [poverty] is and what I think about it.” Alia and several others voiced similar thoughts about having been uninformed about issues related to poverty prior to this class. Those thoughts about single mothers changed as students became aware of different types of poverty and the steps taken to address that poverty. Alia’s perception of single mothers in poverty also changed during the semester because she now understands that there is more than one type of poverty, and that our country could do more to support the poor:

I think I’ve learned that there’s so many different types of poverty. We just read a story now, there’s people living on [in] the dirt, and I’ve seen in New York City people living in the Port Authority, sleeping in the bathrooms. I’ve definitely opened my eyes to all of this. We’re the country of opportunities? I don’t really think we are. We’re not standing up to what our founding fathers said we were



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

going to be...It's all about the steps you take, into it, but this class has opened my eyes.

Jemmy's point of view definitely changed, especially when she considers the reasons that many single mothers are in poverty. She even reflects on her previous attitude towards the poor. She stated:

I definitely believed the stigma a little more than I should have of certain people. That it's always because the dad leaves, and they're careless with their money, or they're on drugs...and in some cases it is. But [however,] in a lot of cases it's just that the economy went down or they lost their job because of it, they got ill and they don't have the money to pay [expenses] and don't have health insurance, so it's just a spiral. So yeah, my opinion has definitely changed.

Prior to the class, Katy's perception featured the belief individuals were to blame for their own poverty, has since changed to a belief that situations influence poverty. She explained,

I think sometimes that people [in poverty] do it to themselves, but I'm starting to realize that the way that I think has changed. A lot of people don't do it to themselves; it's just their situations, what they're around, is what influences what happens, too.

Lily also felt awakened to new knowledge, but emphasized that she had no idea that this type of poverty existed prior to taking the course and watching in-class documentaries on poverty in the United States and in other countries. She said,

Then we watched the documentary of like Southern states and the poverty in Mississippi is awful, and I never knew that existed. Because oftentimes in our



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

country, they only show us videos of other countries and their poverty; they don't show us our videos and our poverty and I was like oblivious and now it really opened my eyes

Tania's perception during the semester changed, as she realized that the government does not offer as much support as she had previously thought to poor single mothers. There are faults in the programs that are offered. She said:

I've learned so much from this class...for being so well established, they have so many flaws and they really don't offer much "support," and I use quotation marks because they have so many flaws in the system, they don't offer as much support as they say they do on paper.

Amelia's perception of poverty has also changed because she understood that single mothers depend on government support in order to survive. Amelia also realized that when poor single mothers make choices, they are making choices for not just themselves, but their children, as well. She said:

Yes, it has changed because I've seen that these single mothers are doing it by themselves and they're depending on welfare and they're depending on food stamps. They have to think if their choices just affect them, or do they affect everybody around them, which [are] the children?

Helen's view of single mothers in poverty has also changed to understand that single mothers in poverty are no different from those who are not. She explained:

This semester has changed my thoughts so much: just because they're single mothers does not mean they are bad people. If a woman is single and she has four kids, maybe at one time she could afford to have that many kids and now

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

she can't. She's not doing it [having children] just to get assistance. I learned to really take [this] into consideration and realize that everyone has a different situation [that leads them into poverty].

Imma's perception of poverty changed as well, due to being exposed to her friend's experience as well as learning about the stereotypes against poor single mothers. She reevaluated her approach and opinions after taking the course and had this to say:

It [my perception] has [changed], especially with this course I'm learning ... I also have a friend whose baby is turning one this year. She gets food stamps from [Women Infants and Children] WIC and so that made me also kind of look at what my stereotypes are [reevaluate my stereotypes] because she's a single mother now... She needs the food stamps and stuff and so witnessing that and definitely this class [has] helped to change my perception to...it's not like, [as] a lot of people say, "oh poor people are lazy or unmotivated" but that's not necessarily the truth. It's just that sometimes we get stuck in circumstances beyond our control and it turns out for the worst.

Yenia thinks that the material she learned in the class on Poverty and Families (FCST-445) makes her realize that people can help those poor mothers. She emphasizes her new awareness of personal engagement, and she stated, "Like we said in class, we can donate stuff. We can go to churches, [go] to organizations. Donate a bag of clothes that you [we] don't wear, shoes, jacket." Alia similarly indicated a new identification with those in the cycle of poverty: "This course has definitely opened my eyes to see the ways that they got there, possibly, or what other countries don't have that we have. This country isn't really what it says it is."



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

### **Theme 3: Higher Education**

Throughout these interviews, participants spoke of the importance and influence of higher education as a means to break the cycle of poverty. Even as they acknowledged that people with a college education can lose their jobs in extreme social or economic situations, these participants stated that information, education, and jobs remain essential components for avoiding or eliminating poverty in the lives of single, impoverished mothers

**Higher education as path out of poverty.** Some had experienced the cycle as the child of an impoverished single mother. These participants spoke of parental sacrifice and efforts to prepare their children to access higher education. Tania reflected upon her own experiences growing up with a single mother who worked to provide her with assistance with her schooling. This experience helped her to form her own view that she would go to school in order to help her children in the same way, if she found herself in the position of being a single mother in poverty. She stated:

My mother, she has a high school diploma, right? So she doesn't have a college diploma. So, when I was in a school, ever since grammar school, she always paid for a tutor. She made it her life's goal to put money aside each week for me for a tutor to help me with my homework, because she felt like she couldn't fulfill that need, so she worked hard to do that... I would put my children first and get their education out of the way, and even if it might take me longer, I would try to go back to school to set an example for them and to show them that even through all of these hard situations, you can still come out on top.



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

For Sarina, in order to get out of poverty, it is necessary to have a high level of education. She was aware that high school, an associate degree, and at times even a bachelor's degree, are insufficient to overcome impoverishment. She also acknowledged the difficulty of balancing schoolwork with other obligations:

Right now we need education to get by with everything. [A] high school diploma is not enough. [An] associate's degree is also not enough, so now we're talking about a bachelor degree and sometimes that is not even enough. So, to be able to go through an education system is really hard today. It's very time consuming and financially [difficult]. If you already have kids and other financial difficulties, it's hard to get going and put yourself through education [school]. So I think a big cause is people can't get that right [higher] education ...

As a single mother, Alia confirmed the emphasis others placed on education, and discussed how education is her main priority so as not to remain in the vicious cycle of poverty. She has confidence in higher education as a way out of poverty, and a way for people to achieve anything they want in life. She proposed:

I would push to get an education, no matter what. I'm informed that there is education out there for people who can't afford it. I would make sure I would get educated because again, education is [the] key in [to] everything, but I would push my children to also get an education, because that's also very important. I would make sure that there is food on the table. ... A lot of the single parents...I feel like they may not care about their education, because maybe they didn't have an education, so [we should] always keep education there, [in the] present.

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

Others spoke more broadly about the need for higher education and the barriers that might exist. Jemmy felt that the poor could get out of poverty by accessing higher education if more opportunities were made available. She said:

I think it's really important that we start providing them with more opportunities to get an education. Obviously a lot of people need more education, even if it's paid for, because if they want to be provided for [by] the economy. I would want to further my education so that, somehow, I could get out of poverty.

Tania discussed the implications of the lack of education in relation to poverty. She mentions that there appears to be a willingness to obtain a higher education, an idea that was also indicated by a number of participants. However, those in poverty do not have the means to achieve their aspirations:

I mean, if one family starts off poor, it's a cycle that repeats itself unfortunately, because kids that come out of single mothers, divorced mothers, widowed mothers [who] have no way to provide adequate living [conditions], food...all the necessities that they need, even to pay for a college education. If they don't have the means to be able to provide that for their children, then their children are going to be forced into living that same life [of poverty]. ... It's sad to say that more minorities, I'm thinking about African Americans, are more prone to it.

Tania also believed that the reason minorities cannot pursue higher education is because there are not enough resources. This creates barriers to access. She said, "Why? Because of a lack of education, [and] a lack of resources, even though we have programs, but they're not adequate or sufficient really."

### **Theme 4: Systematic Support**



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

After having utilized information and activities from class to identify major issues in the lives of single impoverished mothers, many participants moved forward to contemplate solutions. Their thinking about poverty shifted from seeing it as an individual dilemma that could be overcome by determination and hard work to the idea that more systemic interventions are in order. Tania believed that the government could do more in terms of support for single mothers not just financially, but mentally and emotionally, as well in order to increase their self-esteem. She believed that the programs that are in place could be looked at more critically in order to assist poor single mothers in obtaining a job and feeling more confident. She stated:

I think in terms of psychological [mental health], and therapy, support groups and things like that would be able to support these mothers to get out of poverty. I think that self-esteem is part of it: if they don't feel good about who they are, how can they progress? And I think that the government doesn't think about areas like that, but they need to. These programs, yes, they provide a home, [and] they provide food, but sometimes they don't even provide toiletries; it doesn't include soap and things of that nature, things that you need... If a woman isn't clean and doesn't have proper clothing to go to a job interview, how is she going to flourish in an environment like that?

Lily indicated that government assistance is crucial for single mothers to get out of poverty as it happens in other parts of the world in which poor single mothers are helped much better than in the U.S:

I think our country can do a lot to help people to get out of poverty. Like looking at all the other countries, how they have different laws that help with welfare,



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

maternity leave and it's paid so you're guaranteed to come back to a job and they give you a lot more time off than America does so that you have time to go and watch your children have their milestones. ... It's our government and our country that just don't [give] people the most that they can do to.

Helene indicated that to have the opportunity to have a job is essential for everyone, especially for single mothers in poverty, in order to think and provide for themselves and for their children. Like others, she acknowledged the central role employment often plays in self-esteem, and recognized the difficulties lack of confidence poses to many in poverty:

I feel like if ... they [single mothers] ... can have job training programs and [to] help them learn the skills but [if] it can also provide them with good clothing. ...they're too scared to go on interviews because they are concerned about their appearance, they don't like their looks, they have cracked teeth ... As long as they can get that one minimal job, that's what they need, and then while they're working they can ... get a degree, then get a job, or maybe do it [college] part-time. Like my mom worked during the day and went to school at night. So she got her diploma and then she went to nursing school, so we all benefitted.

These participants articulated specific services and supports that could be helpful to the long-term success of single mothers in poverty. They discussed the resources available to assist those in poverty. Donna focused specifically on the support of childcare. She viewed the link between childcare and work critically, and understood that in order to be able to earn money, single mothers in poverty must be able to have adequate childcare. She explained:

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

Offering childcare [is another way to help] because we are one of the only countries without free childcare [and that is] it's crazy. Even when the children are in a preschool, they still have half-day, and even that, after three, you cannot work because you have to pick up the kids and free childcare would definitely help, that's quality child care, too.

Katy stated that she believes that people in poverty are not aware of many of the resources available. She indicated:

I think it's people that...they don't know about the right resources to support themselves. And then they fall into poverty. ... I think also having, not fundraisers, but meetings throughout different places in town, from local schools, I think would help; just information sessions of certain resources [that are] available, I think will help, hopefully; something like that would help.

It was obvious that the respondents were concerned with finding solutions for poor single mothers after the information they gathered from class. They rearranged their attitude from personal problem to systemic solutions (e.g., help from government to assist the needy) to get single mothers out of impoverishment. Respondents were interested in how other countries were assisting single mothers in poverty with specific programs such as childcare and maternity leave. They had specific concerns regarding the impoverished women's ability to feed their children and gain self-respect. There was also an emphasis on the need for durable success by providing poor single mothers with information and resources.



## Chapter 5

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine students' attitudes toward single mothers in poverty. In addition to describing attitudes and the changes in attitude, this study considered various aspects of the Emerging Adulthood Paradigm in relation to those changes. This seemed an appropriate lens given the age and educational status of the participants. The particular characteristic to be examined was the concept of changing worldviews. It was apparent that these emerging adult college students had brought with them a worldview developed during childhood and adolescence (Arnett, 2000). These participants felt free to choose, not necessarily follow accepted patterns, but to make their own decisions based on information and experiences gained in the class they were taking.

The two questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. What attitudes do college students have about single mothers in poverty?
2. How did your attitude toward people and/or single mothers in poverty change over the course of the semester?

The analysis of the interviews demonstrated the following themes: 1) effect of stigmatization, 2) factors that influence attitudes, 3) higher education, and 4) systematic support.

#### **Theme 1: Effect of Stigmatization**

It became especially clear that during the semester the emerging adult participants felt they were able to reflect on previous attitudes and more importantly, change their attitudes toward single mothers in poverty and on poverty in general. Much of their initial thinking was about stereotypes applied to impoverished single mothers and the stigma



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

attached to those stereotypes. Haleman (2004) reported that the expression *single mothers* calls to mind an image of being poor, on welfare, a minority woman who is uneducated, without work experience, and the lack of will to find a job. McCormack (2005) indicated that the phrase *welfare mothers* is strong in its portrayal of a woman who is irresponsible, erotic, and immoral. A number of these participants voiced their awareness of such stereotypes and some acknowledged acceptance of this stereotype at the start of the semester. They also were in agreement with the findings of Collins (2005), and Mickelson and Williams (2008) who found that constant scrutiny and negative feedback reduced the self-esteem of these mothers. Participants in the Brossard's (2012) study reported being unwilling to seek any assistance at all given their previous experiences of being stigmatized by those charged with providing that assistance. The participants also recognized stigmatization as an obstacle for poor single mothers. They addressed the intensity of stress inflicted by individual and societal disapproval about how the poor dress and communicate. Several of the participants believed that the stigmatization of single mothers in poverty was detrimental to them and to any good opportunities they might have. Participants were also concerned about the way every element of these women's lives was judged by the public.

### **Theme 2: Factors that Influence Attitudes**

A variety of factors coalesced to shape the attitudes and worldview of these participants prior to their taking the poverty and families' class (FCST-445). The media, family belief systems and personal experiences provided the participants with the information and with the lens through which they interpreted that information.

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

The reasons for people's perceptions of the poor are varied; however, media are largely responsible for these perceptions. Yamamoto and Kushin (2014) indicated that the news given by the established media affects the conclusion of the people (e.g. students) in every home. The media can help individuals to originate an attitude towards poor people and the influence it has on everyone (e.g., children, single mothers, and families) (Child Poverty in U.S., 2013). Almost 30% of these participants specifically spoke of professions and social media as such as Facebook and Instagram, having great power and influence and acting as the center of our daily lives. Hopkins (2009) implied that the media has a share in supporting particular stereotypes as it portrays minorities (African Americans) who are characterized in magazines and on television with metaphors of poverty. Participants also spoke of ways in which media reinforced these stereotypes.

One of the factors that influence college students' attitudes is lack of information about the problem of people in poverty and especially single mothers who are treated and considered by the media as third class citizens and whose children are suffering the most. The participants' attitude towards the poor throughout the semester in the class, poverty and families, led toward optimistic understandings of poor, (e.g., single mothers in poverty, and children) in relationship to societal attributions that go further than the person does in power. While Loignon et al. (2012) found many people blame the poor as being unwilling to get a job, the personal experiences of some participants refute those findings. They attributed individual poverty to women who work more than one job and they did not have time to help children to look at and help with their homework.

**Changing attitudes.** The participants' attitudes toward single mothers in poverty, which were previously influenced by the media and overall lack of information, shifted



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

during the semester as their knowledge about poverty increased. Similarly, Smith-Campbell (2005) suggested that knowing about poverty could help anyone to become conscious that people in poverty are not very different from those who are privileged. As Moorman and Wicks-Smith (2012) indicated, the problem of poverty, which increases every year, is that a significant amount of individuals in the nation judge individualistic justifications as more important than public causes; they also suggested that in general, people describe poverty as a personal affair and place the least amount of responsibility on the communal aspects. Participants confirmed that many individuals care only about what happens in their home and do not look after anyone else; people decide not to say anything and keep silent. Further, some individuals make the decision even with knowledge to remain silent and do nothing about poverty.

When students are educated on the real status of poor individuals, they position themselves in poor people's shoes and imagine how problematic it is for poor single mothers to take care of their children and at the same time balance their work hours to make sure they do not lose their jobs. The information in class led students to be aware of mothers in poverty who tried to better their existing conditions. The information that participants got from their class guided them to recognize that single mothers in poverty aimed to improve their inadequate financial situation. Single mother participants used the knowledge from the class with their daughters and others.

Varieties of techniques were employed to promote those changes in attitude. Participants spoke of the influence of these techniques in helping them to relate to those in poverty. Similar techniques were employed in a study conducted by Dickinson (2015), in which college students read a book concerning poverty, pretended to be in a homeless



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

shelter, and worked in a childcare facility. The researcher observed that the class changed the students' attitudes toward poor individuals. Other instruments (e.g., CAPS, paper bag play, and on line SPEND) may assist students in obtaining awareness, skills, and attitudes on a diversity of impoverishment (Davidson et al., 2009; Reid & Evanson, 2016). For the participants of this study, the work done in class such as movies, open discussions, and research presentations, dealing with poverty had a positive impact on their attitudes toward poor single mothers. Participants believed that what they absorbed from the class on poverty and families helped them become conscious that individuals should be of assistance to mothers in poverty. They also showed a new empathy with individuals in the circle of poor people.

### **Theme 3: Higher Education**

Throughout these interviews, participants spoke of the importance and influence of higher education as a means to break the cycle of poverty and stigma. Because the media is so influential, the student volunteers in this study emphasized concern about education. While their intent was to speak about higher education for impoverished women, they sometimes spoke about the benefit for them personally. They viewed education for themselves as necessary to overcome media driven perceptions about poverty. The ability of a class or a single experience in a class to shape or reshape their attitudes was noted. During emerging adulthood, an individual's worldview is in flux. This provides an opportunity to shape identity and influence decision making in the long and short terms (Gutierrez & Park, 2015). In addition, higher education was seen as an essential tool for impoverished mothers as they work to overcome poverty. Without it, they will remain in an intergenerational cycle of poverty. Without exception, these

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

participants identified education as a pillar in their changing worldview. Varieties of scholars have recognized the college environment as an important venue for the exposure to differing value systems and new ideas (Arnett, 2000, Gutierrez, & Park, 2015).

Some had experienced the cycle as a child of an impoverished single mother. These participants spoke of parental sacrifice and efforts to prepare their children to access higher education even if they (the mothers') were not able to access such opportunities. These personal experiences affected their attitudes toward poor single mothers. Considering each student's responses, they have similarities with what has been reported in the literature. Bennett, (2008) and Smith-Campbell (2005) confirm that personal experience assists in formulating more positive attitude towards poor single mothers.

Participants who were themselves single mothers, believed that to get away from poverty and have enough money was crucial to attain a higher education. That is the reason that they came back to school after a couple of years away, and what they were trying to accomplish was not only for themselves but also for their children, who could understand through their example that getting a college degree was essential in life. They also felt that because of the cycle of poverty, their parents could not help them to obtain an education, though they wanted to. Therefore, they were trying to provide a higher education for their children to break the cycle of poverty.

A number of participants said specifically that higher education for single mothers in poverty was essential to rise above impoverishment and keep out of the poverty cycle. Additionally, the student respondents also confirmed the importance of education to any individual to stay out of poverty and they went even beyond the individual's belief and



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

considered families' belief in higher education as a priority. Faul (2012) indicated that the availability of university preparation is a way by which economically underprivileged lone mothers possibly could turn out to be valuable members of society. For the respondents, education was the foremost priority, not only for them, but also for their children. Nickols and Nielsen (2011) mentioned that many individuals are struggling in poverty because they are without access to higher education and higher income. Likewise, participants believed that it is a struggle for the poor because society does not help them and they are without any support and adequate education. In fact, those who spoke of this need suggested the government do more by way of providing access none seemed aware that there are actually barriers to college attendance in current Welfare Reform policy (Austin, 2003-2004; Katz, 2012).

### **Theme 4: Systematic Support**

Wijnberg and Weinger (1998) indicated that the politicians' suggestions to modify the welfare bureaucracy in reducing costs would not do any good for single mothers in poverty. In fact, respondents reported that the government was not doing the most to help single mothers. As Willems et al. (2005) implied, to minimize the economic disparity in this nation, the solution would be taking care of the people in poverty with equity in income and social involvement. Additionally, respondents insisted that the government should do more to assist poor single mothers and it could provide different occupational markets for them. As Speirs, Vesely, and Roy (2015) also suggested, assets, transport, and accessibility of care in the course of the time that single mothers are at their jobs were significant factors for assisting mothers in obtaining and retaining ideal care planning. Their findings revealed implications for the improvement of procedure and

## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

plans to assist the poor to ensure superior care for children and, at the same time, help single mothers retain steady jobs.

The notion of individualism guides our policy about the provision of supports to impoverished mothers (Coryn, 2010; Coutere, 1993; Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Furnham, 1982; Seccombe, 2007). The attitude has led to the introduction of additional obstacles for those who desire to access support (Faul, 2012). Past studies suggested that many persons believe that social considerations (e.g., poor economy and lack provisions for education) are less important than individualistic reasons (e.g., heavy drinking, drug addiction, and laziness) (Moorman & Wicks-Smith, 2012). The respondents in this study believed that the community and government should get involved to help the poor single mothers because it is matter of societal and not individual factors.

Participants accentuated the importance of government support to single mothers in poverty. They also pointed out that stigmatization adds to the physical and mental stressors already present in the lives of these poor single mothers. The impoverished mothers face hard situations, but receive inadequate assistance, and they recognized that social support influences interventions. For example, Bassuk, Browne, and Buckner (1996) indicated that single mothers in poverty are generally isolated, with less emotional support, and friendless.

### **Limitations**

Even though this study provides information to begin a dialogue about college student's attitudes toward impoverished single mothers, there are several limitations to the study. First, the sample is small (N=17) and non-representative. This limits the generalization of the data. Second, all of the participants are female, thus there is not



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

information about male attitudes. Finally, there is little racial/ethnic diversity in this sample, though the level of diversity does approximate that in the university from which these students are drawn.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion and Implications

This study has implications for curriculum development at a variety of developmental stages. Emerging adulthood presents a number of teachable moments given the malleability of student identity and worldview at this stage of development but one must be aware that the formation of attitudes begins much younger (Sigelman, 2012). The techniques discussed here were designed for use with college age students. However, educating students concerning poverty could start in primary schools since literature and models for social engagement are available or can be developed for all age groups. If universities offer community facilities for educational opportunities, their students may show an elevated awareness of the structural components of society, thus creating the opportunity for more important change in antipoverty community policies in the U.S. (Seider et al., 2011).

Future work in this area can include studies with more participants and samples with more variation in gender and race/ethnicity. Race is a particularly important variable because the intersection of race with any other variable can influence worldview. Future studies may also employ a pre-test/post-test model where students are interviewed at the beginning of the class and again after completing the class. The information gained in this course has the potential to revolutionize the way that we perceive and deal with poverty in this country. If we can change attitudes about poverty, maybe we can change people's attitudes towards other important issues concerning social justice. These problems are what all of us (e.g., educators, the government, and researchers) should focus on creating a better society and better, future generations.



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APPENDIX 1

**CONSENT FORM FOR ADULTS**

Please read below with care. You may ask questions at any time. You can talk to other people before you sign this form.

**Study Title:** College Students' Attitudes Toward Single Mothers in Poverty.

**Why is this study being done?** The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of students' attitudes toward single mothers in poverty. In particular, we will explore the following questions:

1. What do you think causes poverty?
2. What do you think about people in poverty?
3. How do you think poverty affects the children of single mothers?
4. Why do you believe so many single mothers live in poverty?
5. How do you think they can get out of poverty?
6. If you were a poor single mother, what do you think would be your priority for you and for your child (children)?
7. Has your perception of people and/or single mothers in poverty particularly changed over the course of the semester?

**What will happen while you are in the study?**

You will participate in a one on one interview.

After the interview, the data recorded will be transcribed and I will look for similarities and differences among you and the other participants in the study.

**Time:** The individual interview will last 45-60 minutes.

**Risks:** There is no more than minimal risk involved while participating in this study. You may experience some inconvenience due to time commitments and scheduling issues. In addition, there may be some discomfort because of discussion of details of your thoughts and feelings regarding single mothers in poverty. Attached to the consent form you will find a copy of Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) contact information.

**Benefits:** It is believed that your participation in this study will help me and others to understand the students' attitude toward single mothers in poverty.

**Who will know that you are in this study?** Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym for the purpose of any presentation of this material. Your identity will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

**Do you have to be in the study?** Your participation in the study is voluntary. You can refuse to answer any question or stop participating at any time. Your refusal to participate



## SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

or discontinuation will not result in any negative consequences for you. Your professor will not know whether you choose to participate and will not impact your grades.

**Do you have any questions about this study?** If you have any questions about the study, feel free to contact:

Rocco Placenti - [placentir1@mail.montclair.edu](mailto:placentir1@mail.montclair.edu)  
Pearl Stewart - [stewartp@mail.montclair.edu](mailto:stewartp@mail.montclair.edu)

**Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant?** Phone or email the IRB Chair, Dr. Katrina Bulkley, at 973-655-5189 or [reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu](mailto:reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu)

### **Future Studies**

It is okay to use my data in other studies:

Please initial: \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

As part of this study, it is okay to audiotape me:

Please initial: \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

**One copy of this consent form is for you to keep.**

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I am 18 years of age or older and have received a copy of this consent form.

_____	_____	_____
Print your name here	Sign your name here	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Principal Investigator	Signature	
Date		
_____	_____	_____
Name of Faculty Sponsor	Signature	Date

# SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

## APPENDIX 2

### Student's and Family's Demographic Information

#### Student's Demographic Information

1. Age -----
2. Gender: M \_\_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your total annual own family income (including your spouse's earnings or any child support)? \$ \_\_\_\_\_ .
4. What is your marital status?  
\_\_ Now married; \_\_ Widowed; \_\_ Divorced; \_\_ Separated; \_\_ Never married
5. How many persons are in your household? (Family size) # \_\_\_\_\_
6. Race/ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_
7. What is your occupation? \_\_\_\_\_
8. Who do you live with? \_\_\_\_\_
9. How would you identify yourself (poor, working class, middle class, and upper class)?  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### Family's Demographic Information

1. Age of Parents/Caretakers:  
Mother/Female Caretakers: \_\_\_\_\_  
Father/Male Caretakers: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Family income of Parents/Caretakers: \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your Parents'/Caretakers' marital status (single, married, widowed, and divorced)?  
Mother/Female Caretakers: \_\_\_\_\_  
Father/Male Caretakers: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Race/ethnicity:  
Mother/Female Caretakers: \_\_\_\_\_  
Father/Male Caretakers: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Education:  
Mother/Female Caretakers: \_\_\_\_\_  
Father/Male Caretakers: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Occupation:



SINGLE MOTHERS IN POVERTY

Mother/Female Caretakers: \_\_\_\_\_

Father/Male Caretakers: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX 3**

**Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)**

It offers short-term individual and group counseling to students, as well as a variety of educational and consultative services designed to promote wellness in the campus community.

*We are located in Russ Hall. The entrance to our office is on the west side of the building.*

All counseling services are free, voluntary and confidential. Please call (973) 655-5211 or stop by Russ Hall for an appointment. CAPS hours are:

Monday 8:30-6:00

Tuesday 8:30-6:00

Wednesday 8:30-6:00

Thursday 8:30-6:00

Friday 8:30-5:00