

**PURSUING A 'REFORMED' DREAM:
CALWORKS MOTHERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION
AFTER "ENDING WELFARE AS WE KNOW IT"**

By

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To the amazing women who shared their lives with me
and
To my parents and Ryan for your infinite encouragement

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
LIST OF TABLES	ix
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	x
I. WELFARE AND HIGHER EDUCATION BEFORE AND AFTER ‘ENDING WELFARE AS WE KNOW IT’	1
History of Welfare in the United States: Creating a National Social Safety Net for Mothers with Dependent Children.....	7
“Ending Welfare as We Know It:” Assumptions Underlying Welfare Reform	13
Benefits of Higher Education for Mothers on Welfare.....	17
Barriers to Higher Education and the Role of Advocacy	25
Creating Poverty Theory that Reflects Lived Experiences.....	31
II. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	39
Data Collection Method: Qualitative Interviews and Focus Groups	42
Location	45
Population	51
Data Collection: Recruitment	55
Data Collection: Interviews and Focus Groups	60
Sample.....	64
Data: Treatment and Analysis.....	65
Feminist Research and Methodological Reflection	70
III. CALWORKS MOTHERS PATHWAYS ONTO WELFARE AND INTO HIGHER EDUCATION	76
Domestic Violence.....	83
Unexpected Pregnancy.....	95
Substance Abuse	110
Unemployment.....	117
Unmarried Partners	120
Conclusion	124

IV. ‘JUST GIVE US A CHANCE TO GET AN EDUCATION:’ CALWORKS MOTHERS’ SURVIVAL NARRATIVES AND STRATEGIES	126
Costs of Survival.....	129
Constructing Survival Narratives.....	133
Survival Strategies	139
Critiquing a Welfare System that Necessitates Survival Narratives.....	149
Survival Narratives Illustrate the Failure of Welfare ‘Reform’	152
 V. MY EDUCATION MEANS EVERYTHING TO ME: CALWORKS MOTHERS’ RATIONALES FOR PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION	 154
Meanings of Education	158
Family Perspectives on Their Education	177
 VI. ‘POVERTY DOESN’T HAVE A TIME LIMIT:’ CALWORKS MOTHERS’ INVOLVEMENT WITH LIFETIME.....	 191
LIFETIME and Grassroots Politics	193
Levels of Engagement.....	197
Differences in Narratives	218
 VII. ENVISIONING ANOTHER WORLD: CHANGING PUBLIC POLICY TOGETHER	 226
Poverty Theory and Poverty Policy	230
The Diversity of Policy Suggestions.....	238
Creating Policy Together	241
Pursuing a ‘Reformed’ Dream: Implications for Sociology	247
Closing Thoughts	252
 ENDNOTES	 253
 Appendix	
A. PROFILES OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS.....	259
B. DEMOGRAPHICS OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS.....	262
C. INTERVIEW GUIDE	264
D. FOCUS GROUP GUIDE.....	270
E. RECRUITMENT MATERIALS.....	271
F. INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM	275
G. FOCUS GROUP CONSENT FORM	277
 REFERENCES	 279

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
2.1 Schools, Degrees, and Programs in Alameda County (Oakland)	56
2.2 Schools, Degrees, and Programs in San Francisco County (San Francisco)	56
7.1 Policy Suggestions from LIFETIME Mothers.....	239
7.2 Policy Suggestions from Non-LIFETIME Mothers	239

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AFDC: Aid to Families with Dependent Children, started as the Aid to Dependent Children program as part of the Social Security Act of 1935, it was the national welfare program from 1935 until 1996.

JOBS: Job Opportunities and Basic Skills, program created in the Family Support Act of 1988 to encourage higher education, job training, and work for welfare participants.

PRWORA: Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity and Reconciliation Act of 1996, the bill that abolished the AFDC program and replaced it with the block grants administered to the states through the TANF program.

TANF: Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, also known as ‘welfare reform,’ the national program that replaced AFDC and instructed each state to create its own ‘work first’ program.

CalWORKs: California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids, California’s TANF welfare program.

CDSS: California Department of Social Services, the state department that administers the health and human service programs, including CalWORKs.

EOPS: Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, program at the community and state universities to support low-income and non-traditional college students.

CARE: Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education, sub-program of EOPS specifically for single parents.

LIFETIME: Low-Income Families’ Empowerment through Education (it is not an exact acronym), advocacy and activist organization of and for low-income parents focused on welfare rights and access to education issues.

CHAPTER I

WELFARE AND HIGHER EDUCATION BEFORE AND AFTER “ENDING WELFARE AS WE KNOW IT”

On a chilly September afternoon in 2006, I met Keisha, a 20 year old black community college student and CalWORKs mother of one who was six months pregnant with her second child. The afternoon had been particularly stressful for both of us: I had a morning interview that went longer than I anticipated on another campus; Keisha was running late to the interview because her 2 year old daughter was sick, and we almost missed each other outside the campus library. Also, she brought her daughter with her to the interview and the little girl was fussy all during the interview. However, at the end of the interview as we were packing up, Keisha grabbed my arm, took a deep breath, and said “I really liked this interview, people are always asking me questions, the welfare workers want to know all my business, all my numbers, but they never want to know my story. You wanted to know my story.” She squeezed my arm and left. That moment, and countless others throughout the course of this research, illustrates the lived reality of women’s lives after welfare reform: the ‘reformed’ welfare system was more interested in women’s ‘numbers’ than their stories. However, on that September afternoon, Keisha told her story, not just her numbers. In the pages that follow, 63 mothers on welfare in the San Francisco Bay Area explore how and why they pursue their dream of completing higher education while participating in the ‘reformed’ welfare system.

Sweeping changes in 1996 to the U.S. national welfare system prioritized “work first” policies and restricted educational opportunities for mothers on welfare. Even

though most other aspects of American culture value higher education and recognize the necessity of education for upward mobility, this opportunity is not readily available to mothers on welfare. Despite a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” discourse, the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)¹ program devalues and severely restricts higher educational opportunities for mothers on welfare. Because the reformed welfare system explicitly limits higher education options for welfare participants, women must learn how to survive the system in order to complete their education. My dissertation focuses on the narratives of mothers on welfare pursuing higher education after President Bill Clinton fulfilled his promise to “end welfare as we know it.”

In August 1996, H.R. 3734, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was signed into law by President Clinton. PRWORA directed states to replace AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) and JOBS (Job Opportunities and Basic Skills) with block grants to states called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). TANF directed states to use these block grants to create new state-implemented welfare programs that emphasized paid work and required half of its participants to engage in ‘work activities.’ This policy shift, widely referred to as welfare reform, ended welfare as an entitlement program and focused on time limits for receipt of aid and moving participants into work as quickly as possible. Consequently, this ‘work first’ emphasis restricted participants’ access to higher education and job training programs. In response to federal requirements, California implemented the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program on January 1, 1998.

In addition, the TANF program is required by federal law to be reauthorized every five years. The first reauthorization was scheduled for late 2001, which was delayed due to the events of and national response to September 11. After eleven temporary extensions over five years, TANF was reauthorized on February 6, 2006 as part of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005. Therefore, the data collection for this study occurred during ongoing policy uncertainty surrounding the temporary extensions and eventual reauthorization.

The research questions this study explores are (a) what can the narratives of mothers pursuing higher education while on welfare tell us?; (b) what are the rationales that mothers on welfare cite for pursuing higher education, particularly after TANF implementation made this route very difficult?; and (c) how does involvement with LIFETIME, a grassroots welfare-rights and advocacy organization, affect women's narratives? I conducted this research in the San Francisco Bay Area from November 2005 through June 2007 through qualitative interviews and focus groups with 63 women receiving cash assistance from CalWORKs. All research participants are mothers with dependent children who are enrolled in higher educational programs as their welfare-to-work activity. This research explores the dynamics of gender and poverty. Given the gendered nature of various institutions in this society—such as education, the labor market, social policy, and the family—poverty is a gendered phenomenon which disproportionately disadvantages women. Therefore, this research focuses on women's experiences in these various institutions as gendered actors trying to escape poverty.

This study addresses three primary gaps in the current literature. First, this study addresses a gap in the gendered poverty literature: although the role of education and

training programs is often mentioned by other studies, the narratives of women who pursue higher educational programs as a route out of poverty have not been a central focus of inquiry. Second, because the opportunity to pursue educational strategies changed drastically in the transition from AFDC to TANF policies, very limited research exists on how the current welfare policies shape women's rationales for using educational strategies, and no study addresses these issues in the time of policy uncertainty during the temporary extensions to TANF. Finally, little previous research has been conducted about the role of grassroots welfare rights and advocacy organizations for welfare mothers in higher education. Below, I address each gap and the contribution of this study in more detail.

First, this study addresses a gap in the gendered poverty literature: the narratives of women in higher educational programs while participating in the welfare system have not been a central focus of inquiry. While a handful of studies have focused on the outcomes of women on welfare in higher education (Gittell, Gross, and Holdaway 1993; Mathur 2004; Wolfe and Tucker 2001), these studies did not investigate the process by which women negotiate welfare and higher education. However, "in addition to comparing well-being outcomes...we need to focus on the processes behind these outcomes" (Jackson and Palmer-Jones 1999:557). My study is the first to specifically explore the narratives used by individual women on welfare to explain the processes by which they pursue higher education.

Many studies published since 1996 explore women's narratives about poverty and the welfare system (just a few of the many: Edin and Lein 1997; Hays 2003; Kaplan 1997; Luttrell 2003). Higher education is acknowledged by several of these studies, but

women's uses of higher educational programs are not fully explored by any of them. For example, in their study of how single mothers make ends meet on low-wage work and welfare, Edin and Lein (1997:229) find that "most mothers firmly believed that education represented their best hope of breaking out of the \$5-an-hour job ghetto...mothers favored high-quality two- or four-year programs that prepared them for occupations paying a living wage," but they do not explore whether or not women pursued higher education or the processes used by those who did. Also, Luttrell (2003), in a study of poor and working class pregnant teens, includes discussion of the process by which teens stay in high school and make decisions about their future, but does not focus on adult mothers who are enrolling in higher education programs. My study fills a gap in the gendered poverty literature by using women's narratives to explore the process by which mothers on welfare pursue higher education.

The second gap that my study addresses is that the opportunity to pursue educational strategies changed drastically in the transition from AFDC to TANF policies. Existing research focuses on two primary individual-level strategies women use to leave welfare rolls and attempt to move out of poverty: marriage or getting a self-sufficient wage job. Bane and Ellwood (1994:152) explain: "it should come as no surprise that only a minority of women leaving welfare actually 'earn' their way off...no wonder the most common way to leave welfare permanently is via marriage, not work." The other strategy is for women to "earn" their way off welfare, but in order to do that women must obtain living wage jobs. However, in order to get living wage jobs women need higher education, specifically Bachelor's degrees. Yet, very limited research exists on how the current welfare policy shapes women's educational strategies; therefore, the second gap

this study addresses is understanding the rationales that women on welfare offer for pursuing higher education after the implementation of TANF.

Finally, there is a dearth of research that examines the role of grassroots welfare rights and advocacy organizations for welfare mothers in higher educational programs. Since one important avenue for assisting mothers on welfare gain higher education has been the intervention of advocacy organizations (Wolfe and Tucker 2001), this study addresses this gap in the literature by gauging the impact of one advocacy organization upon these women's lives and their narratives. Previous research suggests that many of the women on welfare who enrolled in higher education "received much better information about TANF rules and negotiating the welfare system from community based organizations and their colleges than from caseworkers and welfare offices" (Wolfe and Tucker 2001:12). In particular, my study focuses on a unique advocacy organization, LIFETIME, which is designed by and for mothers on welfare in higher education, with the notable purpose of helping mothers on welfare use educational strategies to get out of poverty. One of the ways that they accomplish their goals is through peer advocates, who are themselves currently or very recently mothers on welfare in higher education programs, to help other mothers enroll in, continue in, or finish higher education programs while they are on welfare. Through my study, the final gap in the previous research about the role of advocacy organizations for welfare mothers in higher educational program is addressed.

History of Welfare in the United States: Creating a National Social Safety Net for Mothers with Dependent Children

Briefly, I explore the history of welfare policy in the United States to illustrate two points: first, that welfare policy has always distinguished between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ poor, and second, that as the welfare debate focused more on the ‘undeserving poor,’ the policy shifted from monetary supports to a system that required participants to ‘earn’ their welfare check. When the Social Security Act of 1935 was signed into law by President Roosevelt, the act included the first federal grants to states to create what we now refer to as ‘welfare.’ The Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program was created to provide federal support for maternal and child welfare services. The intent of this program was originally to provide aid to widows to care for their dependent children. However, the ADC program was based on the mothers’ pension policies that many state and localities had enacted in the twenty years leading up to the Social Security Act. These policies “yielded two enduring legacies: one was that while all mothers performed the work of caregiving, the value of that work depended on the culture, race, and morality of the caregiver; the other was that even mothers who enjoyed social approbation and support had to earn and defend it by submitting to social controls” (Mink and Solinger 2003:2).

The original welfare policy was based on the idea that women are dependents, in much the same way that children are, and if they are not supported by men’s wages, they need to be supported, or dependent on the government to provide for them. Yet, this was tied to the ‘deserving’ poor argument; it was white widows only who were viewed as dependents and worthy of being supported. Therefore, the concept of the ‘deserving’ poor was implicit to the original welfare policy and mothers who did not meet specific racial,

cultural, or moral criteria were often excluded (Abramovitz 1996). The 1939 amendment to the Social Security Act created the Survivors' Insurance Program, which gave benefits to widows and their minor children after the death of a socially insured worker (Mink and Solinger 2003). Those amendments essentially separated single mothers into two categories: widows and everyone else. The ADC program now provided benefits to women who were divorced or never married, which further cemented the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor distinction. Furthermore, the ADC program's benefits were significantly lower than in any of the other programs under the Social Security Act.

By the end of the 1940s, welfare had become the "sharply and overtly politicized" topic that it remains today (Mink and Solinger 2003). Although Roosevelt meant for the Social Security Act to ensure economic security for all, welfare very quickly became the focus of vicious debate it remains today. These debates center on arguments about who is the 'deserving poor.' The welfare rolls increased slowly in the 1940s, mainly due to overt efforts to keep African Americans, especially those in the south, off welfare (Quadagno 1994). By the early 1950s, states' discriminatory policies and exclusionary practices kept many African Americans from applying for or receiving welfare aid for which they would have otherwise been eligible, further illustrating the cultural bias in which many believed that African Americans were the undeserving poor. As those on welfare shifted from white widows with children to a more racially diverse group of women with varying reasons for needing aid, issues of who was 'deserving' remained at the center of conversation. "[O]nce women seen as out of role came to dominate the caseload, racism and sexism made it more difficult to distinguish among women as 'deserving' and

‘undeserving’ of aid based on their compliance with the family ethic” (Abramovitz 1996:320).

In 1950, Congress finally added benefits to the ADC program for mothers; until then, families received money only for their children. Also, in the 1950s, two contradictory measures were taken. States enacted exclusionary policies to limit welfare receipt to “suitable” families and monitored men in the households, illegitimate births, and the everyday household management of women who were on welfare through “man in the house” rules², residency laws, home inspections and midnight raids (Abramovitz 1996). This further regulated and subjugated women who were receiving aid and prevented many from applying. However, federal efforts to expand welfare eligibility and allocations, such as allowing agricultural and domestic workers to apply, occurred at the same time. Those efforts had the rolls increasing each year, and many of the new recipients were African American. Furthermore, the 1956 amendments to the Social Security Act included efforts to “rehabilitate” poor people and began shifting the ADC program from a focus on income support to one that included social services (Mink and Solinger 2003).

The 1960s illustrate how the federal government and the states were out of sync on welfare policies. The 1962 Social Security amendments stressed women’s employment and rehabilitating poor families through social services; “ADC receipt was for the first time, defined as a brief state, temporary assistance while the mother prepared for a job” (Mink and Solinger 2003:196). It also provided child care assistance funding. However, at the same time as the federal government expected women to go to work, “many state and local welfare regulations in the early 1960s were predicated on the

notion of women as fully dependent persons” (Mink and Solinger 2003:196). These opposing views caused confusion for those on welfare as well as those implementing the policies. As a result, employment for mothers on welfare was never fully emphasized.

During the growing welfare rights movements in the late 1960s, changes to the federal program, now called Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), rejected ADC’s original purpose of providing assistance so that mothers could stay home with their children, and instead focused on work incentives and training. Also during the late 1960s, a grassroots response to welfare policy began to build in response to the conflicting, demeaning, and judgmental welfare policies at the state and federal levels. Welfare rights groups across the country organized under the umbrella of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO). At the same time, in the first Supreme Court case ever heard about welfare, *King vs. Smith*, the Court’s ruling abolished Alabama’s man-in-the-house rules, outlawing similar rules in all states. The grassroots efforts of NWRO, combined with the efforts of activist lawyers litigating welfare rights cases, began to increase the basic rights of those receiving welfare (Kornbluh 2007). The welfare rolls grew as activists helped families who were eligible apply, many of whom had previously been excluded or discouraged from applying by county welfare offices (Mink and Solinger 2003).

The first work requirements were put into the AFDC program in 1967, but with no funding or enforcement, they went largely ignored (DeParle 2004). The 1970s also saw a shift in the perspectives of many middle class Americans and politicians in their views toward welfare participants; their new perspectives depicted mothers on welfare as dependent upon federal programs and causing an increased tax burden for the middle

class (Mink and Solinger 2003). No major shift in welfare policy was accomplished in the 1970s, but hostility towards welfare policy grew at the same time as the national economy was in recession and wages decreased. The election of Ronald Reagan and his depiction of women on welfare as “welfare queens” helped to solidify the tendency to view all welfare recipients as part of the undeserving poor. This shift “would pave the way for a series of welfare-policy reforms aimed at reducing welfare dependency, rather than reducing poverty itself” (Shaw, Goldrick-Rab, Mazzeo, and Jacobs 2006:21).

However, those policy changes also brought the idea of education and job training to the welfare population. AFDC had traditionally been targeted toward women and children as dependents, and job training programs had focused on the economic circumstances of men; however, this changed for a brief period in the 1980s (Shaw et al. 2006). Welfare mothers were encouraged to seek adult basic education, community college, and job training courses. Shaw et al. point out that “today education and training strategies are advocated only by the most liberal politicians, although a short generation ago they seemed like rather mild and limited measures” to alleviate poverty (2006:24). However, simultaneously in the 1980s, as access to education and training programs was expanded for low-income adults, a growing conservative movement focused on welfare as a system that created dependency for participants who were morally different from other Americans. Charles Murray, with the 1984 publication of *Losing Ground*, was one leader of this faction. His central argument was that “welfare had ruined the poor” and he advocated that it be abolished altogether (DeParle 2004).

The movement to radically change the welfare system grew from both directions, the right and the left. In 1988, the Family Support Act was passed as an attempt to reform

the AFDC system in the most comprehensive way since its passage in 1935 (Bane and Ellwood 1994). The law accomplished several things: one, it was ‘work first’ focused with the goal of moving participants into jobs; second, it made two-parent families federally eligible for welfare; and third, it expanded access to higher education and job training through the Job Opportunity and Basic Skills program (JOBS) (Shaw et al. 2006). The Family Support Act required states to have twenty percent of their caseloads participating in work activities, and as DeParle (2004:100) explains, the law focused on a simple philosophy of “spend more, demand more.” Under the Family Support Act, welfare rolls increased to a historic high of over 5 million families by the spring of 2004.³ However, even before this new policy was fully implemented, Bill Clinton, while campaigning for President in October of 1991, pledged that “in a Clinton administration we’re going to put an end to welfare as we know it” (DeParle 2004:4).

After his election, Clinton was under political pressure to keep his pledge and worked with aides to craft a new policy. This process occurred in a climate in which “the human-capital ideals that were vital parts to the 1980s consensus on poverty became increasingly discredited” and the work-first idea was further developed and took root (Shaw et al. 2006:28). Conservatives, most notably Lawrence Mead, argued that education and training only delayed work for welfare participants and “shielded the poor from the realities of the labor market and permitt[ed] them to aspire to jobs that were beyond their reach, rather than accept the ‘menial jobs actually available to them’” (Shaw et al. 2006:28). In a climate in which “everybody hates welfare” (Ellwood 1988:4), the concept of ‘work first’ prevailed amid heated political debates and state demonstration projects. Republicans gained control of Congress in 1994 and saw this as their moment to

make a “radical conservative reform of welfare” at a time when “Clinton supported a moderate reform but felt bound to sign the more radical PRWORA” because “otherwise his chances of reelection in 1996 might have been threatened” (Mead 202:209). Although Clinton declared that “our goal must be nothing less than to make the thirteenth and fourteenth years of education as universal to all of Americans as the first twelve are today,” in the same year, he signed a welfare bill that eroded access to higher education for millions of low-income women in the welfare system (Shaw et al. 2006:1).

“Ending Welfare as We Know It:” Assumptions Underlying Welfare Reform

In August 1996, H.R. 3734, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Clinton. PRWORA directed replaced AFDC with a state-implemented block grant program called TANF. The conservative rhetoric about welfare drove the welfare reform in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This rhetoric characterizes welfare mothers as dependent, lazy, and unwilling to work or to better themselves and primarily interested in having more children to increase their welfare checks. This rhetoric dominated the debate on both sides of the aisle and led to a policy whose primary focus was on work and marriage as routes off welfare. The four goals of H.R. 3734 (PROWRA 1996) were to: 1) provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives; 2) end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage; 3) prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and 4) encourage the

formation of two parent [married, heterosexual]⁴ families.⁵ As the four goals illuminate, policymakers and existing research focused on two primary individual-level strategies for women to leave welfare rolls after the passage of PRWORA, which are to get married or get a job. The marriage strategy is considered critical by policymakers and is the primary objective of PRWORA (Mink 2002). Even the Healthy Marriage Initiative Website states that “in order to encourage States to strengthen marriages, Congress stipulated that three of the four purposes of the TANF block grant to states be either directly or indirectly related to promoting healthy marriages.”⁶ States may use TANF block grant money to give cash incentives to mothers who get married while on welfare (as in Pennsylvania or Wisconsin) and grants to organizations that engage in marriage promotion such as providing relationship classes.⁷

Furthermore, “the major changes under the PRWORA include the end of welfare as an entitlement to individuals, the creation of time limits, and the addition of a work requirement” (Pandey, Zhan, Neely-Barnes, and Menon 2000:115). These 1996 policy changes are built on two primary assumptions about welfare and work: 1) welfare participants are not working now; they only need to find and keep jobs to get out of poverty; and that (2) full-time, year-round work leads to economic self-sufficiency (Corcoran, Danzinger, Kalil, and Seefeldt 2000). These assumptions are not supported by the research literature, and neither assumption included education as a central component to leaving welfare.

The first assumption depicts the relationship between welfare and work as mutually exclusive: a family is either on welfare or working. In fact, welfare and work co-exist, since many jobs pay wages that are so low that a family still qualifies for cash

welfare aid in most states. In California during January 2005, 30.3% of the 177,104 families on CalWORKs were working in unsubsidized employment *and* receiving cash welfare.⁸ Cocoran et al. (2000: 249) argue that “about half of all AFDC mothers worked at some point while receiving welfare, with work accounting for about one half to two thirds of all welfare exits.” As O’Conner (2000:551) puts it “the reality...is that welfare recipients have always worked” and that for most “welfare is a temporary stopgap, part of a broader income strategy that takes them between paid, low-wage, low-benefit employment and the welfare rolls.”

The second assumption is that full-time year-round work leads to economic self-sufficiency. It assumes that welfare families just need to get jobs to get out of poverty. Yet, between 25 and 40% of women who left AFDC program in the early 1990s for a job returned within a year, and approximately 70% returned within 5 years (Cocoran et al. 2000). Thus, a more accurate understanding of the relationship of welfare to work recognizes that welfare and low-wage work are *transient states* (Corcoran et al. 2000).

Furthermore, in a recent study of families in California using CPS and Census data, Pearce (2003:17) found that “more than one out of four households with one full-time, year-round worker have an income that is below economic self-sufficiency” and “one out of five households with two working adults have an income that is inadequate to meet basic needs.” Acs, Phillips, and McKenzie (2000b:2) found that “one half of all non-elderly persons living in families with incomes below twice the poverty line are in working poor families” and “on average, the primary earner in a working poor family works full-time, year-round.” The U.S. Department of Labor (2005:1) classifies 7.4 million adults in the U.S. as “working poor,” which they define as “individuals who spent

at least 27 weeks in the labor force, but whose incomes fall below the official poverty level.”

Over ten years after the passage of PRWORA, many are calling welfare reform a “success.” One of the main reasons for this claim is that the number of families on welfare have decreased by over half since TANF was enacted, from over 5 million families on welfare in 1996, to just over 2 million families on TANF in 2007. Yet, if we look at the trends in the national poverty rate, we find that over the same time period, poverty was not reduced significantly, and in some years actually increased. The number of families in poverty in 1996 was around 36 million, and today is slightly higher at 36.5 million (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, Smith 2007). The poverty rate in 1996 was around 14%, and was slightly lower in 2006, at 12.3% (DeNavas-Walt et al. 2007). Since *poverty* is not decreasing significantly, but the number of families on *welfare* is decreasing dramatically, some researchers question the logic of calling welfare reform a success.

Moreover, of the four stated goals of welfare reform as explained in the PRWORA, not one of them focuses on reducing or ending poverty for the *five million people* who received assistance when TANF was created. Clinton’s promise to “end welfare as we know it” did occur by changing the policy assumptions that the program was built on; but the consequence of these changes did not end poverty as we know it. Instead it “pushed many a dependent family into the already swelled ranks of the working poor” without a safety net to fall back on (O’Connor 2000:548). TANF was created on the assumption that ‘work first’ ends poverty. PRWORA focuses on women getting any job to get off welfare as quickly as possible, no matter how low the wages. Yet the program consequence is that welfare participants get jobs paying poverty-level wages

(i.e. wages below the self-sufficiency level) with no health insurance, no opportunity for career advancement, and no opportunity to achieve long-term economic self-sufficiency (Negrey, Golin, Lee, Mead, and Gault 2001; California Budget Project 2003). As Moffitt (2002:1) finds “the incomes of women leaving welfare [for work] are only slightly above what they were when the women were on welfare.” Furthermore, welfare reform included time limits on the maximum length of time that a participant can receive aid over her lifetime. These time limits are capped at 60 months by federal TANF regulations, and in some states these time limits are as low as 24 months.

When women leaving welfare take low-wage jobs with little or no education beyond high school, they do not become economically self-sufficient (Cancian, Haveman, Kaplan, Meyer, Wolfe 1999 and Golonka and Matus-Grossman 2001, among many). As a consequence, mothers on welfare are caught fluctuating between low-wage work that is insufficient, at best, for economic survival, and a welfare system that is much worse. “This volatility means that only a minority of recipients establish long-term full-time work patterns” (Corcoran et al. 2000:250). In order for women to permanently “earn” their way off welfare, women must obtain living wage jobs. Stevens (2003:7) explains: “jobs that provide an income sufficient to support a family are located in a labor market requiring workers with sophisticated skills that, for the most part, can be obtained only through post-secondary education.”

Benefits of Higher Education for Mothers on Welfare⁹

Women’s wages are generally so low that in order for women with children to earn enough to be self-sufficient, most need at least a Bachelor’s degree. With only a

high school diploma, women's annual earnings are, on average, only \$20,650 (Webster and Bishaw 2007). At this educational level, women are barely over the federal poverty level of \$16,600 for a family of three.¹⁰ Higher education is a critical way individual women can raise their wages to a self-sufficient level. For example, the self-sufficiency wage for Alameda County (Oakland, CA), where this study occurs, is approximately \$37,000 for a family of three (Pearce and Brooks 2003). According to the US Census Bureau, women with a Bachelor's degree, on average, earn \$36,875 (2007). Therefore, women need *at least* a Bachelor's degree to become self-sufficient.

The existing research finds that higher education for women on welfare leads to increased wages and employment opportunities, usually leading to economic self-sufficiency (Gittell et al. 1993; Mathur 2004). Under the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, which allowed for a variety of educational programs for adults, including higher education, studies consistently concluded that the majority of women on AFDC who pursued Associate's and Bachelor's degrees were able to get off and stay off welfare. Gittell et al. (1993:6-7) found "those who completed a four-year degree were most likely to have left welfare for stable employment and to be earning enough to support a family." The same study found that a 100% of Bachelor's degree graduates were off welfare (Price 1999). Kates (1991) found all of the graduates of a Smith College program for nontraditional female students who were fully employed were out of poverty and those who were not fully employed were in graduate school. Additionally, 79% of those employed were making more than \$20,000 in 1991. Indeed, in the most comprehensive study done to date, Gittell et al. (1993) interviewed students on AFDC from six states (New York, Tennessee, Illinois, Wyoming, Pennsylvania, and

Washington), finding 81% of participants had been employed since graduation and that 70% of participants consider their college degree essential in securing their current job.

Thus, post-secondary school education while on AFDC that resulted in mothers earning Associate's or Bachelor's degrees appears to have increased wages for mothers on welfare. Research further indicates that the level of education matters, especially the difference between Bachelor's and sub-Bachelor's education. Gittell et al. (1993:11) found that the difference between getting a two year degree and a four year degree appears to be especially important; "women with four year degrees are not only more likely to be off welfare, they also earn considerably more than two year graduates." Even though mothers who earn a Bachelor's degree earn the most, Mathur (2004) found that even women with two-year Associate's degrees experienced significant earnings increases and welfare mothers who earned Associate's degrees increased their wages by an average of five times over what they earned prior to entering college.

Furthermore, Mathur (2004) found that the type of Associate's degree students earn influences wages. "Vocational Associate degree holders have approximately 25% greater median annual earnings than non-vocational Associate degree holders," especially nursing/dental and business Associate's degrees, which pay the most for graduates (Mathur 2004:21). In addition, Associate's degrees have a higher economic payoff than vocational certificates, and in terms of economic self-sufficiency, only the longer certificate programs (more than 30 units) have proven to raise wages above self-sufficiency levels (Mathur 2004).

Since the rhetoric surrounding welfare reform is "work first," one of the main arguments against higher education for welfare participants is that they delay working

and do not build a work ethic or work history while they are in school. Yet, research shows that—rather than delaying employment—welfare participants do work while attending college. For example, Mathur (2004:16) found “student welfare participants had higher employment rates (56%) the last quarter they were in school than the general welfare population in the same quarter (44%).” In addition to working while in school, welfare participants are actually earning more than welfare participants who are also employed, but not in school: “while attending school, earnings for employed welfare participants were greater than those of the general California welfare population who were employed during the same period” (Mathur 2004:26).

In addition to improved economic and labor market outcomes from higher education, higher education for mothers on welfare increases self-esteem and self-confidence (Kates 1991; Stevens 2003; Wolfe and Tucker 2001), and increases their children’s likelihood of going to college and avoiding poverty (Gittell and Moore 1989; Kates 1991; Wrigley 1992). Existing research suggests that higher education leads to empowerment for women and self-esteem and self-confidence were often cited as improving after attending college. Stevens (2003:5) found that “participants identified poor self-confidence as an initial barrier to higher education and 92% of all participants reported a striking improvement in self-confidence as a result of attending college.” Gittell et al. (1993:14) also found in their multi-state study that “respondents in all states said that the growth of self-esteem was the most important long-term consequence of attending college.”

Higher education for welfare mothers also benefits family members and especially children. Wrigley (1992) finds that mothers with higher education are

investing both in their own careers and their children's careers. Parents of younger children are able to "provide educationally stimulating environments" while parents of older children "invest time and bureaucratic know-how as educational managers" (Wrigley 1992:7). Kates (1991:17) found 43% of participants thought relationships, especially with their family and children, improved and "their own enhanced feelings of self-respect influenced their families." They believe higher education helps them become more effective role models for their children (Wolfe and Tucker 2001). Gittell and Moore (1989) found that mothers on welfare believe that pursuing education sets a positive example for their children and increases the likelihood that their children will also pursue higher education. Jones-DeWeever and Gault (2006:28) found, in a study of California welfare participants in higher educational programs, that 65% "indicated that their children were more likely to express a desire to go to college" and 32% "said their children were now making better grades."

However, being able to pursue a Bachelor's degree is no longer possible in most states after welfare "reform." This "work first" ideology of TANF has the additional program consequence that "makes any kind of work a higher priority than women's educational attainment and future economic self-sufficiency" (Wolfe and Tucker 2001:7). So, despite these improved outcomes for mothers on welfare who pursue higher education, the message mothers on welfare receive from TANF is "work first, education last" (Wolfe and Tucker 2001:7). Price (1999:6) argues "the 1996 TANF legislation described as 'welfare reform' constituted a step backwards in opportunities for college for low income people" and found that in the first three years after the TANF legislation was enacted, the number of welfare participants enrolled as students in colleges and

universities nationally plummeted by half from 650,000 in 1996 to around 358,000 in 1999.

TANF strongly discourages education and job training as a welfare-to-work activity. TANF program requirements for minimum weekly work hours have increased since 1996; yet, at the same time, hours spent in education and job training programs which count towards weekly work requirements have been reduced. Pandey et al. (2000) observed that the TANF policy limited the percent of participants who could pursue education and increased the number of hours participants had to participate in work activities each week. Consequently, “because of statutes that limit their access to education and training, particularly at the post-secondary level, millions of would-be students have been blocked from these programs, making welfare one of the few contexts in modern American life in which education is explicitly discouraged” (Ratner 2004: 45-46). Therefore, “limiting access to higher education forces them [women] to accept low-wage jobs, often providing incomes below the poverty line, thus continuing the devastating effects of poverty” (Stevens 2003:7) Opportunities for higher education continue to decrease; after almost ten years of TANF, Jones-DeWeever and Gault (2006:8) found that “faced with the pressure of balancing work and child care responsibilities, bureaucratic hurdles, and college classes, tens of thousands of welfare participants abandoned their aspirations for higher education altogether only to face a cycle of low-wage work and perpetual poverty.”

In conclusion, the first gap is that the previous research focuses on actions and effectiveness, usually economic outcomes, and gives almost no attention to the rationales or motivations that welfare mothers use to explain why they chose an educational

strategy to get out of poverty and why they choose particular educational programs. Little is known about why women choose to pursue higher education while on welfare or about how they come to be both on welfare and enrolled in school. Studies cited in the discussion above do not address the process of mothers on welfare going to school. Gittell et al. (1993:18) comment, in one of the most comprehensive studies done on outcomes to date, that “respondents were not directly asked why they originally became recipients of AFDC, or about the details of their family circumstances;” they go on to explain that their survey did not address how women came to pursue higher education once on welfare. Of all the previous research, the Mathur (2004) study is of particular importance to this research because it studied the outcomes of CalWORKs students and found that education can be an effective strategy for CalWORKs student parents because it increases their earnings and work rate. While she comes closer to answering some of the research questions I raise, even her study does not put the “on the ground” experiences of welfare mothers at the center of the analysis. Instead it relies on large datasets to describe mothers’ outcomes at the Associate’s degree level through the California Community Colleges. She fails to examine Bachelor’s degree students.

Additionally, there are studies in which the narratives of low-income workers and welfare mothers are explored. Eden and Lein (1997) explored the narratives of welfare mothers about the process by they survived economically in *Making Ends Meet*. Kaplan (1997) explored the narratives of teen mothers about pregnancy and welfare in *Not Our Kind of Girl*. Hays (2003) explored the narratives of mothers on welfare in two Midwestern offices as welfare reform was implemented in *Flat Broke With Children*. Naples (1998b) explored the narratives of activist mothers on welfare during the War on

Poverty in *Grassroots Warriors*. Edin and Kefalas (2005), in *Promises I Can Keep*, explored women's narratives about mothering and marriage, and many participants were on welfare. These are just a few of the many examples of recent research that used women's narratives about poverty and welfare at the center of their analysis, as my study does. None of these, however, explores in any detail how women come to pursue higher education while participating in welfare.

Despite TANF's message of "work first, education last," higher education remains an important strategy for getting out of poverty and women still pursue higher education under TANF's strict policies. Wolfe and Tucker (2001:6), in a very small study of TANF participants, found women "wanted to leave TANF as quickly as possible—and they saw a college education as the most important strategy to move from welfare to economic self-sufficiency and to permanently leave poverty." However, currently no research has been done to explore the rationales or motivations of TANF mothers who pursue higher education. As I wrote earlier in the chapter, the second gap in the existing literature is that studies have, thus far, focused mainly on AFDC mothers and little is known about TANF mothers who face a more restrictive, punitive policy that includes sanctions and time-limits. We do not know how these current policies affect the rationales that the mothers cite for pursuing higher education. Since the opportunity for higher education changed dramatically and became very difficult under TANF, we must determine how TANF's restrictive policies and time-limits affect welfare mothers, specifically when they use educational strategies.

Further, the levels of education studied in previous research are not comprehensive, usually limited to one or two degrees or programs studied. Studies focus

on Associate's and Bachelor's degrees (Gittell et al. 1993; Wolfe and Tucker 2001; Kates 1991) or on job training certificates and Associate's degrees (Mathur 2004). However, there is no comprehensive study on the multiple levels of higher education pursued by women on TANF. My study focused on more levels of education than any other previous study by interviewing women from three higher educational levels (Associate's degrees, Bachelor's degrees, and Master's degrees¹¹) and examined the narratives they use to explain their educational strategies. By being able to compare women who enroll in programs ranging from Associate's degrees to Master's degrees, I explored how women of different educational goals choose education as a strategy and choose their particular program, and I determined whether there are differences among the various educational groups. In the next section, I explore the third gap in current research on women welfare participants: limited attention to the role of advocacy organizations.

Barriers to Higher Education and the Role of Advocacy

Consistent with previous research, mothers accessing higher education under TANF experience systemic barriers (Stevens 2003). One way to overcome these barriers is through the help of advocacy organizations. Yet, little research exists on the role of those advocacy organizations on the mothers' narratives about pursuing higher education; this is the third gap that this study addresses. The barriers women experience while pursuing higher education while on welfare include restrictive welfare regulations (Deprez and Butler 2001; Pandey et al. 2000; Wolfe and Tucker 2001), work requirements (Deprez and Butler 2001; Stevens 2003), unhelpful caseworkers (Stevens 2003; Gittell et al. 1993), problems with child care (Gittell and Moore 1990; Kates 1991),

lack of transportation (Gittell and Moore 1990; Kates 1991; Stevens 2003), minimal family or community support (Kates 1991), and insufficient financial aid (Kates 1994). The barriers discussed in the previous research can be divided into four categories: (1) welfare regulations that restrict access; (2) unfair or unknowledgeable implementation of the rules by caseworkers; (3) different institutional goals of welfare agencies and universities; and (4) insufficient resources necessary for higher education (such as financial aid, child care, transportation, family or community support).

TANF created a barrier for participants pursuing higher education by enacting policies to explicitly limit access to higher education. TANF limited cash aid to a maximum of 60 months, limited the length of time welfare participants can take part in higher education programs, and limited the percentage of participants in a state who may be enrolled in education and training programs. States also had to meet work participation rates of up to half of their caseloads by 2002, which most states met through caseload reduction credits instead of actually increasing the number of participants in work programs. If states failed to enact any of these policies or meet the work participation goals, they faced millions of dollars in federal fines and lost federal grants. PRWORA only allows for up to 12 months of vocational training while on welfare, although a few states allow additional time (Pandey et al. 2000). Although my study takes place in a state, California, that allows for longer access to higher education than the TANF regulations allow, the federal regulations and policy priorities are still a consideration because they affect funding and set overall priorities for the states.

Caseworkers also prove to be a significant barrier. Research finds that they are often unhelpful or actively working against the higher education option (Gittell, et al

1993; Kates 1994; Stevens 2003). Gittell et al. (1993:21) found that “many caseworkers were hostile to women who wanted to get an education.” Wolfe and Tucker (2001) found that even within the regulations of TANF, many caseworkers were unhelpful or unknowledgeable about how to help their clients reach their educational goals; for example, welfare participants were not informed that higher education may, in some circumstances, count as a welfare-to-work activity or they received incorrect information when they inquired about it. In some cases participants felt caseworkers intentionally sabotaged their efforts to go to school by scheduling meetings or other mandatory requirements during their class hours (Gittell et al. 1993). Stevens (2003:6) found “examples of both positive and negative relationships [with caseworkers]... paired with findings from other research, [results] indicate that a non-supportive caseworker can have a debilitating impact on welfare recipient’s educational goals or conversely, provide the support and advocacy needed to propel a women forward.”

Another barrier is the culture of universities, which is extremely different from the culture of welfare agencies, creating tremendous conflict for welfare mothers (Kates 1995). The culture of universities protects students’ rights and privacy with a focus on building self-esteem and economic empowerment. In contrast, welfare agencies are focused on a culture of shame, exposing clients’ lives to public scrutiny and examination, and ultimately stigmatizing a person for being on welfare. The differences between the culture of welfare agencies and universities are evidenced in areas that range from student confidentiality, the pace at which students progress toward a degree, choice of programs or majors, the method by which goals are assessed, and the resources necessary to complete coursework (Kates 1994, 1995; Gittell et al. 1993; Naples 1998a). Kates

(1994:47) found there is a “divergence of culture between educational institutions and caseworkers” that disadvantages welfare parents. Mothers on welfare who are enrolled in universities get caught between these two cultures, and often struggle to meet welfare regulations while not trying to draw too much attention or shame to themselves on campus as students on welfare (Kates 1995). Yet, the irony is, as Kates (1995:17) explains, “were the welfare system’s culture to adopt more of the values and aims of the culture of institutions of higher education, the result would be more than a ‘self-sufficiency’ culture for welfare; it could approach empowerment.”

An additional barrier is the insufficient material or support resources available for higher education to low-income students, especially those with children (Naples 1998a). These include financial aid, child care, transportation, and family or community support, among others. Lacking these resources, welfare students experience hardships that most institutions of higher education, such as community colleges or universities, are ill-equipped to handle (Kates 1994). These institutions are constructed with assumptions about what it means to be a student and which do not account for the variety of responsibilities many mothers on welfare face. Naples (1998a:46) states “when we shift to the arena of higher education we find that college campuses and academic policies are built upon the assumption that students are unencumbered with caretaking responsibilities in the home.” The policies of academia and the regulations of being on welfare are often incongruent (Kates 1995), so that students “must creatively fill in the gaps between the expectations of these conflicting policy arenas and their daily lives,” yet “oftentimes these efforts are met with sanctions or other forms of disapproval as they confront the

competing demands and contradictions within and across the policy arenas” (Naples 1998a:46).

Some universities have tried to adapt to meet the needs of a diverse student population, including low-income students, nontraditional age students, students who have children, and student who are on welfare. Some universities have developed centers or offices to try meet the extra or specific needs of these students. For example, mothers who had access to a center dedicated to nontraditional students, “all reported that they utilized the Adult Students Center at one point or another for information, support, or to access resources such as the computer” (Naples 1998s:42-43). However, these centers often lack the additional resources that welfare student parents need; for example, “the Center did not have the resources to deal with the more complex material needs of the women students on AFDC” which include “child care, emergency loans or personal computers for home use” (Naples 1998a:43). While these offices or centers may provide some of the additional resources for nontraditional students, they are unable to fully provide the resources that welfare students needs, and they are not advocacy organizations. They just have resources to meet students’ academic needs, but students on welfare usually have many other needs because they are simultaneously low-income, are older, have children, and have to meet the welfare regulations in addition to class work.

One avenue for assisting mothers on welfare gain higher education has been the intervention of advocacy organizations. The previous research on the role of organizations advocating for welfare mothers is limited, although what little we know suggests that many of the women on welfare who enrolled in higher education “received much better information about TANF rules and negotiating the welfare system from

community based organizations and their colleges than from caseworkers and welfare offices” (Wolfe and Tucker 2001:12). Gittel et al. (1993) also found women with access to community-based organizations or campus centers were more enthusiastic about the assistance and support they received and those efforts were significant factors in their success. Mathur (2004) suggests one campus office, California Community Colleges’ CalWORKs Office, helps make education an effective strategy, but she does not include the possible effects of LIFETIME, other specialized advocacy organizations, or the effects of students using both the campus resources and advocacy organization.

Thus, the third gap in the previous research is that almost no research has been conducted about the role of advocacy organizations for welfare mothers pursuing higher education, and of the research that exists, the role of campus centers or community based organizations was not a central part of the studies. Of the research discussed above, only a few studies examine the role of these organizations in welfare mothers’ narratives. In contrast, this study focuses on a unique advocacy organization, LIFETIME, which is designed by and for mothers on welfare in education and job training programs. Most notably, LIFETIME is specifically designed to help mothers on welfare use educational strategies to get out of poverty. LIFETIME uses peer-advocates to help other mothers on welfare pursue higher education programs.

Therefore, my study addresses these three primary gaps in the current literature. First, this study addresses a gap in the gendered poverty literature: although the role of education and training programs is often mentioned by other studies, the narratives of women in higher educational programs while on welfare have not been a central focus of inquiry. Second, although the outcomes of women on welfare in higher education have

been studied, how the current TANF policies affect women's rationales for pursuing higher education has not. Finally, my study will address the gap in the literature about the role of welfare advocacy organizations on the mother's narratives about pursuing higher education. My study will fill these gaps by examining the narratives of TANF mothers in higher education to explore why they pursue higher education and what role such advocacy organizations play in their narratives.

Creating Poverty Theory that Reflects Lived Experiences

In addition to addressing the three primary gaps in the literature, this study also focuses on examining how mothers on welfare themselves create narratives out of which theory can be built. This study involved using a grounded theory research design from which the appropriate theory emerges to capture mothers' narratives about pursuing higher education while in the welfare system. The data guided theoretical development instead of vice versa. Charmaz (2001:351) explains that "the purpose of grounded theory is to develop a theoretical analysis of the data that fits the data and has relevance to the area of study" and a "fundamental premise of grounded theory is to let the key issues emerge rather than to force them into preconceived categories." I am interested in how the participants explain their choices in the context of their daily lives, and although I am using a grounded theory approach, I entered this study informed by two sometimes competing theoretical frameworks. These theories have dominated the study of low-income women, mothers on welfare, and specifically mothers on welfare in educational programs.

Two academic theories of poverty— human capital theory and structural theories of poverty—are relevant in attempting to explain the “on the ground” experiences of mothers on welfare as they pursue education and job training programs as a route to economic independence. Briefly, as I will further explore each theory in the sections that follow, human capital theory offers an explanation of how individuals’ investments in skill acquisition can translate into higher salaries and other returns. It suggests that poor women who invest in improving their human capital through additional education, extended work experiences, and the acquisition of “hard skills,” such as degrees and training certificates, and “soft skills,” such as time management and dressing and speaking professionally, are more likely to move out of poverty. On the other hand, the structural explanations of poverty point to many labor market and economic factors that account for the persistence of poverty. Structural factors include gaps between the number of jobs needed for full employment and those that are available, occupational sex-segregation, the devaluation of female-dominated occupations, discrimination, differential educational opportunities, institutional racism and sexism, residential segregation, job decentralization and suburbanization, high unemployment in urban areas, decreases in manufacturing jobs and rising service sector jobs, outsourcing of jobs, privatization, and the elimination and ‘reform’ of social programs. I expected that each of these theories would contribute to the understanding of poverty by mothers on welfare.

Human Capital Theory

Previous research on mothers on welfare in higher education relies almost exclusively on human capital explanations (Gittell et al. 1993; Naples 1998a; and Wolfe

and Tucker 2001). Becker (1970:62), the economic theorist who identified the relationship between investing in human capital and increasing worker earnings, defines human capital as “activities that influence future monetary and psychic income by increasing the resources in people.” Becker (1993:17) contends that “education and training are the most important investments in human capital” and his studies show “high school and college education in the United States greatly raise a person’s income, even after netting out direct and indirect costs of schooling, and after adjusting for the better family backgrounds and greater abilities of more educated people.” He argues that the basic assumption that “human capital investments tend to respond rationally to benefits and costs” is proved by the fact that the changes in the investment in women’s human capital in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States paralleled increases in women’s earnings relative to those of men (Becker 1993:18).

Despite the widespread acceptance of human capital theory, it is not applied to all Americans equally in social policy. Gittell et al. find that “even though human capital theory is widely accepted in America, few have noted its relevance to the welfare population;” therefore, although the research recognizes the value in a human capital approach to welfare policy, recent policy shifts “have strained to separate the domains of education and welfare at all levels of public debate and policy making” (Gittell et al. 1993:2). Further, “the irony of [PRWORA] is that the theory of investing in human capital through education is well documented and rarely questioned in our society, until it is applied to the welfare population;” and, “with the passage of PRWORA, policymakers who were promoting education for everyone else in society eschewed the benefits of higher education for low-income women with children” (Smith, Butler, and Deprez

2002:216). Shaw et al. (2006:4) write further: “the work-first ideology now driving federal and state policy directed at the poor ignores, and effectively contradicts, the human-capital approach characterizing most post-secondary educational policy.”

Notwithstanding the recent policy shift away from using human capital approaches to help women escape poverty, this theory, as Gittell et al. (1993) pointed out, is emphasized in existing research on welfare mothers in higher education. Recent research on welfare mothers in higher education applies human capital theory specifically to welfare participants and assumes that, even for welfare participants, an increase in human capital will result in higher wages. Gittell et al. (1993:2) argue “many welfare recipients are caught in a trap; even if they want to become self-supporting, they lack the skills to get a job which pays enough to support their family and has the stability and benefits they need. For some of the 30% of welfare recipients who have a high school diploma, all the evidence suggests that a college education can be the answer.” Wolfe and Tucker (2001) illustrated that welfare mothers who attend college are able to earn a living wage upon graduation and the increase in human capital also improves their family life and their children’s educational satisfaction. Naples (1998a) also uses human capital theory in her research on the experiences of rural white women in community colleges.

However, in the studies cited above, researchers also discuss the structural determinants of poverty and the role those play in women’s lives. These studies acknowledge that welfare mothers face many barriers, and that they choose to try to change their educational level as a way to overcome these structural barriers. However, one of the problems with human capital theory is that human capital investments do not respond rationally to benefits and costs—and human capital theory focuses on the social

structure as rational and without barriers. This is not accurate, and structural theorists contend that there are irrational barriers.

Structural Theories of Poverty

Structural theories of poverty focus on how the institutions in society are organized to advantage some groups of people over other groups and to block the opportunities of the less advantaged, regardless of their individual efforts to improve themselves. While human capital theory assumes a social structure that responds rationally to increases in individuals' human capital, structural theories acknowledge the many irrational barriers that prevent people from benefiting fully from human capital investments and, more specifically, from leaving poverty. Structural theories of poverty attribute the persistence of poverty to educational and labor market characteristics such as job gaps for low-skilled workers, occupational sex-segregation, the devaluation of female-dominated occupations, race and sex discrimination in the labor market, differential educational opportunities, declining real wages, and disinvestment in public assistance programs. A structural analysis of the causes of poverty explicates why working welfare participants remain poor or why any job alone, and especially those available to mothers on welfare, is not enough to raise a worker out of poverty.

The American belief in meritocracy, or the idea that hard work results in financial security, does not hold true for those on welfare or for the poor who are working hard but are far from financial security. Structural shifts in the economy over the last twenty years have moved many of the low-skilled (but decently compensated) jobs out of the United States to third world countries with less stringent labor laws and lower wages. Even when

poor women are able to find jobs, those earnings alone are not another to lift a family out of poverty, despite full-time year-round work; and those wages for the least skilled workers have been declining for the last 35 years” (Blank 1997). “Both the unavailability of jobs for less-skilled workers and the decreasing returns to work mean that ‘find a job’ is no longer by itself an adequate injunction to many who are poor (Blank 1997:82). In addition, as Wilson (1996:xviii) points out, the poor are exposed to “different structural influences” and there are “overwhelming obstacles” that the poor need to overcome “just to live up to mainstream expectations involving work, the family, and the law” and these “expectations are taken for granted in middle-class society.”

Moreover, whether they are on welfare or not, poor working women consistently earn less than working poor men regardless of skill level. The situation of women in the labor market and within families continues to reflect the institutional sexism that is widespread in our society. “Working single mothers...are the most likely to be poor—the poverty rate of families supported by single mothers is almost four times that of married-couple families with at least one worker;” additionally, “single parent families with mothers at the helm are almost twice as likely to be poor as families maintained solely by men, a reflection of the weak position of women in the labor market” (Newman 1999:42-43).

Structural theories of poverty focus on the barriers facing low-income women who seek economic independence. However, the role of individual agency in overcoming those structural barriers is often overlooked. The biggest disconnect between the previous uses of the structural theory of poverty and my study is that many of the studies do not explain the patterns in the on-the-ground experiences in women’s lives pursuing higher

education. These studies illustrate the broader economic picture and they are able to shape broad social policies. For this study, with my focus on how mothers on welfare discuss their experiences, the structural barriers that are present in their daily lives will be considered as they strive to improve their human capital.

Research that Reflects Welfare Mothers' Experiences

This research is along the lines of what Kates (2004) calls the “nontraditional approach” to welfare research. Instead of focusing on personal barriers through the examination of large datasets, my research centers its analysis in women’s lived experiences and challenges the current approach to welfare policy. In this study, I focus on individual women’s experiences in attempting to improve their human capital and how they do so in the face of structural barriers. This study highlights how these women frame these barriers and overcome them. In answering the research questions for this study, this study uses a grounded theory approach to consider two academic perspectives on poverty—structural theories and human capital theory—as mothers on welfare explain their “on the ground” experiences in higher education. This allows the theory to emerge from the data to see which aspects of these women’s lives, if any, support the theories discussed above. Through this exploration, I also make conclusions about theoretical approaches to poverty that women use in their narratives.

As I ascertain what theoretical approach best reflects women’s lived experiences, in the chapters that follow, I also explore women’s narratives about pursuing higher education while in the ‘reformed’ welfare system. Chapter 2 outlines this study’s design and methodology. In Chapter 3, I uncover the five common pathways by which women

come to pursue higher education while participating in the welfare system. In Chapter 4, I explore how women create survival narratives and survival strategies for completing their degrees. Chapter 5 discovers the rationales and meanings that women give for their education and how their children, partners, and families react to their educational aspirations. Chapter 6 examine the way that CalWORKs mothers engage in LIFETIME's grassroots politics to challenge welfare policy and how the narratives of LIFETIME mothers differ from those who are not involved. Finally, in Chapter 7, I explore the mothers' suggestions for social policy that reflect their lived experiences and discuss the sociological implications of my research.

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Over the last four and a half years, I have lived and conducted this research in the San Francisco Bay Area. It is important to understand how I, a Vanderbilt graduate student, came to live and do research in the San Francisco Bay Area. In June 2001, I attended a session at the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) Conference; the room was packed with academics, policy researchers, and activists from across the U.S. debating what could be done to expand access to education and training for women on welfare under the upcoming reauthorization of TANF. Among those presenting were the founders of LIFETIME, and this was the first that I learned about this organization. The TANF program was due for its first reauthorization later that year and hearings were set on Capitol Hill for September to start this process. However, on September 11th of 2001, the day the hearings to reauthorize TANF were to start, they were postponed indefinitely. Over the next two years my research interests in gender, women's access to higher education, and poverty came together and I knew that I was interested in women's narratives about pursuing higher education while on welfare for my dissertation. However, for two primary reasons—Tennessee state laws that do not allow welfare participants to pursue higher education and my personal life—I was unable to pursue this research in Tennessee.

In June 2003, many of the same women from June 2001 found ourselves back at the biannual IWPR conference having a very similar conversation about TANF

reauthorization and expanding access to education and training for mothers on welfare. Again, LIFETIME was among those leading the conversation. Coincidentally, also in the spring of 2003, my spouse and I had made the decision to move to the Bay Area, and so in June 2003, I went back to the IWPR conference hoping to connect with the LIFETIME women. Also around this time, Congress was finally starting to turn its attention back to reauthorizing TANF and other postponed domestic affairs. After the conference session on TANF reauthorization, I meet with the founders of LIFETIME and a few of the parent leaders; among them was Jasmine. During the session, Jasmine told her story of how she came to enroll in her Associate's degree program, despite having three young children and surviving severe domestic violence. She and I talked after the session about her experiences and the work that LIFETIME was doing in California and nationally around welfare reauthorization. In addition, I talked with the founder of LIFETIME and she was open to me contacting them once I moved to California. In the fall of 2003, after I moved to Berkeley, I contacted LIFETIME and started volunteering and working part-time for them. I also started getting to know the complex terrain that is California welfare policy, the work that LIFETIME was doing, the local and national debate around welfare reauthorization, and the options for higher education for welfare parents in the San Francisco Bay Area. It took me two full years learning this terrain and, at the same time, gaining the trust of the members of this community for the research to move forward. In the fall of 2005, in the midst of the ongoing uncertainty around TANF reauthorization, this study began.

I will address this study's research questions by examining data collected from November 2005 through June 2007 through qualitative interviews and focus groups with

63 women receiving cash assistance from CalWORKs who live and go to school in the San Francisco Bay Area. All research participants are mothers with dependent children who were enrolled in higher educational programs as their welfare-to-work activity. My sample is further varied by type of educational program, status in the program, and involvement in a local advocacy organization. Participants vary in number of children, racial and ethnic background, age, presence of the children's fathers, and family economic background. I recruited participants through community colleges and universities in San Francisco and Alameda (Oakland) Counties, through the centers on campuses that serve low-income student parents. In Alameda County, I recruited at three sites: Chabot Community College, located in the southern, suburban part of the county; Laney Community College, located in downtown Oakland; and the University of California Berkeley, located just east of downtown Oakland, in Berkeley. In San Francisco County, I recruited at two sites: City College of San Francisco on the Ocean/Phelan campus in the Ingleside neighborhood of San Francisco, and at San Francisco State University, located just east of City College at the southern edge of San Francisco. I also recruited through LIFETIME, a specialized constituent-led advocacy organization that helps mothers on welfare access and complete higher education while in the CalWORKs program. The interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, and entered into qualitative data software for coding and analysis. In the discussion that follows I will discuss in detail the method of data collection, the selection of the location, the study's population, recruitment strategies, data collection, sample, data treatment and analysis, and a feminist reflection on the research.

Data Collection Method: Qualitative Interviews and Focus Groups

My study's research questions are answered through in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups with California mothers pursuing higher education while participating in the welfare system in San Francisco and Alameda Counties. Qualitative interviewing is the most appropriate tool for this study because it best captures the "on the ground" narratives and experiences of welfare mothers. Weiss argues that qualitative "interviewing gives us access to the observations of others...most of the significant events of people's lives can become known to others only through interview...[and] we can establish an understanding with the respondents that it is their full story we want and not simply answers to standardized questions" (1994: 2-3). Since the purpose of this study is to uncover why and how mothers on welfare pursue higher education after welfare reform, there are three primary ways that qualitative interviewing allows me to most effectively answer these questions. First, to uncover their observations, the significant events in their lives, and their perspectives on higher education and welfare reform, qualitative interviewing allows participants to tell their stories. As Keisha observed at the beginning of Chapter 1, the welfare system is not interested in women's stories; caseworkers only want their numbers. However, qualitative interviewing uncovers those stories, which then gives insight into larger sociological issues; "an individual life, and the role it plays in the larger community, is best understood through story" (Atkinson, 1998:7).

Second, qualitative interviewing "takes us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world" (McCracken 1988: 9). Again, the rationales as to why women pursue higher education can only be addressed

through the logic that participants give to them, which is best uncovered through qualitative interviewing. However, in order to completely address the research questions, it is not simply a matter of designing the ideal research tool, the interview guide; it is also to be aware of the interactions that occur during qualitative interviewing. The key to qualitative interviewing is the interaction that occurs during the interview and that allows the full story to evolve. Therefore, the third rationale for using qualitative interviews for this study is to allow those interactions to occur because through those interactions, participants are more fully able to tell their whole stories. Although most qualitative researchers enter the field with an interview guide (see Appendix C for my Interview Guide), the process of qualitative interviewing is fluid, changing, and varied. The interview guide informs the direction of the interview, but qualitative interviews are interactions and active processes. It is the interaction between the interviewer and the participant which creates rich qualitative data. No two interviews are the same, as no two interactions between two people are the same. Holstein and Gubrium (1995:3) argue that “the interview conversation is thus framed as a potential source of bias, error, misunderstanding, or misdirection, a persistent set of problems to be minimized. The [presumed] corrective is simple: If the interviewer merely asks questions properly, the respondent will emit the desired information.” However, they argue that instead, interviews are active sites in which the participant and the interviewer are active and involved in “meaning-making work” and that participants “are not so much repositories of knowledge—treasuries of information awaiting excavation—as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with the interviewers” (1995: 4). Feminist reflections on interviewing techniques also acknowledge this active role of the researcher (see Oakley

1981 or Reinharz 1992). Researchers are more than just an instrument of data collection during qualitative interviewing; the interactions during the qualitative interview lead to knowledge construction. This knowledge construction, or meaning making, yields different data than do surveys or lengthy questionnaires. Given the three reasons discussed above, qualitative interviews yield data that are better situated to answer my research questions.

While the interviews will tell individual mothers' narratives to address my study's research questions, the focus groups benefited my research by evoking a deeper understanding of a subset of the issues covered in the interviews (see Appendix D for my Focus Group Guide). The focus groups enabled participants to interact with each other, sometimes agreeing and adding to a perspective, or disagreeing and articulating a different perception. The interaction in the group context is what makes the data gathered from focus groups distinct from the data gathered from individual interviews.

The additional depth that focus groups provided enhanced the research on these issues in two ways. One, because of the interactive nature of focus groups, participants heard other women's stories and felt moved to relate their own stories, or recall an incident linked to another woman's experiences. During the focus groups, I asked questions to encourage participants to explore issues such as their experiences with caseworkers and the welfare system, in the classroom and on campus, and in interactions with other CalWORKs students. In the interviews I heard women's personal narratives, which are very rich, but the interactions in the focus groups among mothers who are in the similar circumstances helped them remember experiences that might have otherwise gone untold. Further, focus groups are an ideal way to gather several different

perspectives on the same issue or type of experience. Examples for my study include women's varied experiences with caseworkers, on campus, or with the advocacy organization.

The focus groups also added breadth to my study because the interactive nature of focus groups provided an ideal setting for discussions of social policy changes. Welfare policy has undergone many changes in the last ten years and interview participants have commented on these changes in the individual interviews and made suggestions for policy changes. In the focus group discussion of these policies, however, more diverse and varied suggestions for social policy changes emerged. Especially interesting for my research were the policy suggestions that were developed collaboratively within the group context. As mothers discussed possible policy changes, they worked together to develop ideas for social change and public policies.

Location

This study was conducted in the San Francisco Bay Area, primarily in San Francisco and Alameda (Oakland) Counties. I chose California as the site of this study for four reasons. First, the specific counties in California are practical since I live in the community and work/volunteer with LIFETIME. Second, California has laws and social policies that are representative of other feasible state-based education and job training programs and have been used as model for policy changes that would include greater access to education and training for welfare participants. Third, California has an education and job training program that is similar to the previous JOBS¹² program during

AFDC. Fourth, LIFETIME is located in Oakland, California, with the goal of helping parents throughout California pursue higher education while on welfare.

The first reason for basing this study in the San Francisco Bay Area is a practical one; I live in the community¹³ and work/volunteer with the advocacy organization whose impact I am studying. I have been living in the community and working with the group for almost five years, as outlined in the introduction to this chapter.

The second reason for basing this study in the San Francisco Bay Area is that California has laws and social policies among the more generous in allowing educational programs to count as a welfare-to-work activity (Kahn, Butler, Deprez, and Polakow 2004). Historically, higher education and advanced job training programs have been a strategy for moving towards self-sufficiency under national welfare policies. Following the 1996 shift to work first policies, however, access to higher education programs under TANF policy was severely limited. TANF only allows states to count participants' first twelve months of vocational education toward the state's work participation requirements, but some states allow participants to pursue post-secondary education beyond twelve months. There are three general categories of state policies for education and training programs. First, 18 states allow only up to the 12 months of vocational education allowed under TANF federal guidelines. Second, 22 states allow participants to combine work and education hours towards post-secondary education or training programs beyond the 12 month TANF limit, but within time frames, usually less than 24 months, that are not long enough for participants to start and finish Associate's or Bachelor's degree programs. The third category is the ten states with policies which allow participants to start and finish two- and four-year post-secondary education and

training programs while receiving TANF support. (For a complete discussion of state policies see Pandey et al. 2000, or Greenberg, Strawn, and Plimpton 2000). Yet, even within this third category there is some variation. California is one of these ten states.

Of the ten states that allow participants access to comprehensive education and training programs, only four—Maine, Illinois, Wyoming, and Hawaii—have educational policies which allow participants to start and finish four-year degrees while on welfare. These states' policies are exceptional because they provide state-level resources such as cash aid after the federal 60-month time-limit and other financial assistance for participation in educational programs that are not present in other areas (see Pandey et al. 2000 and Greenberg, Strawn, and Plimpton 2000). These four states stop the 60-month “clock” for the lifetime limit on cash aid for some or all of the time mothers are in school. They also have very low work requirements while mothers are in school; for example Wyoming has no work hour requirements while in school, and Hawaii requires mothers to work 8 hours a week their first year in school, and 20 hours a week the rest of the time in school. All four states provide supportive services such as child care and transportation allowances while the parents are in school (Pandey et al. 2000). While these are model policies, if education and training programs are to be expanded under future rounds of TANF reauthorization (which is next scheduled for 2011), these programs will not likely be considered because they are too expensive and extensive. These states are not suitable locations for this study because they provide additional resources for education and job training that have never been considered under the federal welfare policy.

In the remaining six states—California, New York, New Jersey, Vermont, Iowa, and Kentucky—policies are fairly similar in that they allow participants to start and finish

two- and four-year post-secondary education and training programs, while providing some supportive services and reduced work hours while in school. Collectively, the policies in these six states are more restrictive than in the four model states, but these six states have policies that make it possible for mothers on welfare to start and finish education and job training programs. The key components to the policies in these six states that make it possible for mothers on welfare to finish their educational programs are allowing for education and job training of at least 24 months, but no more than 60 months; providing child care and transportation supportive services; and reducing work hours while in school (Pandey et al. 2000).

The third rationale for this study's location is that California has an education and job training program that is reminiscent of the JOBS program during AFDC, which was also called GAIN in California. California's education and training regulations are not the most lenient of the six states discussed above, but they do allow higher education and many types of job training programs to count as a work activity. In 1998, California created the CalWORKs program and under CalWORKs, an adult on welfare was initially allowed a maximum of 24 months for education or job training programs (Spatz, Berger, and Hamed 2000). However, in late 2004, Governor Schwarzenegger allowed participants to pursue higher education for their entire 60 months on welfare by abolishing the 24 month time limit on education and training.¹⁴ Most importantly, California has policies that are similar to the increased access to educational programs that was allowed under the JOBS program during the last 8 years of AFDC. During that time, California started coordinating most educational programs that welfare participants pursue through California's comprehensive community college system. The California

Community Colleges system continued that program after welfare reform through a CalWORKs program, with an office on most individual campuses dedicated to advising services to students on welfare. These CalWORKs offices are designed to help students coordinate their educational plans within welfare requirements. These offices also help students utilize supportive services such as child care and book reimbursements, obtain work-study jobs, and provide informative workshops and advocacy services.

The policies of California, and the other five similar states, are especially relevant because of the possibility that if access to post-secondary education and job training programs is expanded under welfare policy, the new programs might resemble the ones used in these six states. Even though the current national policies and perspectives make it seem that education and job training may never be a priority of the TANF policy, there are progressive politicians who would like to introduce or discuss amendments to the TANF bill that would increase access to education and job training.

The fourth reason for conducting this study in California is the existence of a specialized advocacy organization for mothers on welfare in education and job training programs that I became familiar with in 2001. As discussed above, California has policies for education and training programs under TANF that are similar to those in five other states, but none of the other states has a grassroots political advocacy organization. This group helps mothers on welfare fight for access to any level of education and job training programs that is legally available to them under the CalWORKs program. Founded in 1996, Low-Income Families' Empowerment through Education (LIFETIME), is an independent nongovernmental organization started as a support group for and by mothers on AFDC who attended U.C. Berkeley, and it has grown into a statewide grassroots

political advocacy organization. Its mission is “to empower low-income parents to determine, pursue and achieve their goals for education, employment and economic security.”¹⁵ It works in two ways to accomplish this mission: direct advocacy for clients to gain access to educational programs and welfare services, and grassroots organizing to change county, state, and federal welfare policies. They serve over 300 clients at a time, and their organizing work includes about 200 active members and over 2000 inactive members. I have personal experience with the organization: I first met the founders in 2001 at the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) conference and got to know the founders and some of the parent leaders—including Jasmine—better at a the same conference in 2003. My interest in LIFETIME’s work emerged from my long standing interests in gender, education, and poverty. Their presentation at the 2001 IWPR conference was a crystallizing moment in the development of my research interests and spurred me to think about the tension between the ‘work first’ policy rhetoric and higher education. When I moved to the Bay Area and started to work with the organization, the research questions for this study evolved. As will be further discussed in Chapter 6, Jasmine and other parent leaders involved with the organization frequently discussed their experiences with LIFETIME as transformative and cited LIFETIME’s advocacy work as critical to their pursuit of higher education.

LIFETIME is distinctive because it is one of the few, and currently the largest, grassroots welfare-rights advocacy organization in the United States, and focuses primarily on expanding access to education and job training programs for welfare participants. LIFETIME uses peer-advocates, who are themselves currently or very recently mothers on welfare in higher education programs, to help other mothers on

welfare enroll in, continue in, or finish higher education programs while they are on welfare. LIFETIME's peer-advocacy system allows mothers to help and empower each other. The founder of LIFETIME believes that women can use their "on the ground" experiences to help one another gain services through the welfare system. Each peer-advocate goes through extensive training and usually keeps a client the entire time the client is with LIFETIME. LIFETIME's direct advocacy services include working one-on-one with the clients in person or over the phone, filing appeals for clients, working with campus resources for clients, and helping clients learn how to advocate on their own behalf.¹⁶

Even though LIFETIME serves clients throughout California, the advocacy group is located in Oakland, and most (about 60%) of LIFETIME's clients, members, and leaders either live or go to school in Alameda and San Francisco Counties. I chose to focus specifically on Alameda and San Francisco Counties after observing the context in which low-income families go to school, find jobs, move to new apartments, and become involved in their communities. Also, these counties were selected to ensure that enough LIFETIME participants are recruited. The concentration of LIFETIME's clients in these two counties may be because low-income families seem to commute, move, and travel between them more than other counties in the San Francisco Bay area.

Population

The population for this study is welfare-participant single mothers enrolled in higher education programs, and who live in Alameda or San Francisco Counties. In November 2005, at the beginning of this study, there were 274,086 families (cases)

enrolled in California's Welfare-to-Work program.¹⁷ The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) classifies families as either "two-parent" or "other" families; 77.5% of welfare-to-work cases are classified as "other" which includes single parent families or families with a grandparent as the adult on the grant. In Alameda County, 79.7% are classified as "other" families, and in San Francisco County, 71.5% are "other" families. Recent research estimates that 4 to 8% of CalWORKs participants are families other than female single parent families.¹⁸ Thus, single mother families in California account for approximately 70% of the state's welfare caseload and all adults on CalWORKs have dependent children. Therefore, another reason to study only women is that single mothers are the largest category of adults on welfare.

Two-parent families are not included in this study for two reasons. One, in California, single-parent welfare families are demographically different from two-parent families; the latter are most frequently immigrants with limited English proficiency and therefore have different educational needs. Second, two-parent families are covered under a separate state program because the state only requires one adult at a time in the household to participate in welfare-to-work activities and requires the other adult to watch the children with no access to services or childcare.

From the population of CalWORKs single mothers in San Francisco and Alameda counties, I am interested in women who are enrolled at least half time in education and job training programs as their welfare to work activity.¹⁹ The participants in my study vary by type of educational program and their status in the program (currently enrolled or completed) and their involvement in a local advocacy program (no/minimal involvement or client/member/leader). The two types of higher educational programs are the central

focus of this study: Associate's degrees and Bachelor's degrees. The Associate's degree is a 60 credit hour degree and students also can elect to transfer their credit hours to a four-year institution. Common Associate's degrees are in nursing (students then either take the Licensed Vocational Nursing examination or go on to a four-year Registered Nursing program), EMT, or child development. These degrees are offered in each county through the local community college campuses. California coordinates most educational programs that welfare participants pursue, especially those leading to an Associate's degree, through California Community Colleges, the state's comprehensive community college system. In Alameda County there are seven community colleges that offer a variety of Associate's degrees. In San Francisco County, there is one community college that has nine campuses, the City College of San Francisco. City College of San Francisco also offers a variety of Associate's degrees, with the Phelan/Ocean campus being the main campus.

California has a nationally recognized support system on community college campuses that is specifically designed to assist low-income students, student parents, or first generation college students. These resources are one of the reasons that California's community college system is nationally recognized as a supportive environment for mothers on welfare to pursue higher education. I focused my recruitment to campuses that had all of these resources for students: the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) offices and its sub-program for single parents, Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE), and the CalWORKs office.²⁰ Although the campus offices are not advocacy organizations, they do provide limited assistance or services to help students on campus. Furthermore, these offices are generally open to groups,

advocates, and researchers to meet with welfare parents, give workshops in the meetings, hang flyers in the office, or set up information booths outside the office. Many of the non-governmental advocacy organizations network through these offices and recruit clients and members through the offices.

The Bachelor's degree requires at least 120 credit hours and is available in a wide range of majors from humanities, social sciences, biological and physical sciences, and so forth. Most participants pursue Bachelor's degrees through the University of California or the California State University systems, or through private universities in the area. The main public universities in Alameda County are the University of California Berkeley, and California State University at Hayward.²¹ Both campuses have small populations of students on CalWORKs. In San Francisco County, the San Francisco State University is the primary public university that has a population of CalWORKs students, which is also very small. The public universities do not have the social service agencies on campus like the CalWORKs offices that the community colleges have, but do have other campus organizations for student parents, low-income students, and re-entry students. All three of these categories include mothers on welfare. At the University of California Berkeley, the Center for Transfer, Re-entry, and Student Parents is a center for non-traditional age students and has special resources for low-income student parents, many of whom are on CalWORKs. At San Francisco State University, the primary resource is the Stay in School Family Resource Center. This center is run for and by CalWORKs parents to help them complete their educational goals.

In conclusion, the population for this study is CalWORKs single mothers who are pursuing higher education in Alameda or San Francisco Counties. The mothers are

enrolled in or have recently completed their degrees at community colleges or universities in these two counties. The mothers vary by the level of the degrees that are pursuing, the school they attend, and by their participation in LIFETIME.

Data Collection: Recruitment

I recruited interview participants on an ongoing basis from early fall 2005 to late fall 2006 through the community colleges and universities located within each county and through LIFETIME. I focused my recruitment through the office on each campus that serves students on CalWORKs: the CalWORKs and EOPS/CARE office at the community colleges and the special centers for student parents at the universities. In each county I selected one or two campuses in each category that have offices that serve students on CalWORKs on which to focus my recruitment efforts. (See tables 2.1 and 2.2 for the schools that I targeted to recruit participants in Alameda County (four sites) and in San Francisco County (three sites).) As an incentive to participate in my study, interview participants were entered into a drawing for two \$50 Target gift cards.²² This incentive was listed on all the recruitment materials (see Appendix F for recruitment materials for the interviews and the focus groups).

Table 2.1 Schools, Degrees, and Programs in Alameda County (Oakland)

Degree Offered	Type of School/Group	Name	Program
Associate's Degrees	Community College	Laney	EOPS/CARE and CalWORKs
Associate's Degrees	Community College	Chabot	EOPS/CARE and CalWORKs
Bachelor's Degrees	University	University of CA Berkeley	Center for Transfer, Re-entry, and Student Parents
--	Advocacy Organization	LIFETIME	Advocacy for CalWORKs students

Table 2.2 Schools, Degrees, and Programs in San Francisco County (San Francisco)

Degree Offered	Type of School/Group	Name	Program
Associate's Degrees	Community College	City College of San Francisco	EOPS/CARE and CalWORKs
Bachelor's Degrees	University	San Francisco State University	Stay In School Family Resource Center
--	Advocacy Organization	LIFETIME	Advocacy for CalWORKs students

For Associate's degree students, I recruited through the California Community Colleges in the two counties. In Alameda County, there are several community colleges that have similar resources to serve CalWORKs students, so I selected schools that are located in different parts of the county and where I have contacts. The two community colleges where I focused my recruitment efforts for interview participants are Laney and Chabot. Laney Community College is in downtown Oakland (central area of county) and is the most comprehensive community college in the area. I know the director of the Laney CARE program. Chabot Community College is in the southeast part of the county. I also know the director of the CalWORKs office, and she granted me access to their

office and office space for my interviews. In San Francisco, only the Phelan/Ocean campus of the City College of San Francisco has a CalWORKs or CARE office, so I limited my recruitment to that campus and through the Family Resource Center.

For Bachelor's degree students, the recruitment process was a little more difficult because there are so few students on welfare at this level. In Alameda County, I focused recruitment through the Center for Transfer, Re-entry, and Student Parents at the University of California Berkeley. In San Francisco County, I focused recruitment at San Francisco State University's Stay in School Family Resource Center, which is run for and by CalWORKs parents to help parents complete higher education. Since I was concerned about getting enough participants at the Bachelor's degree level, I visited both places several times and sent more than one email to the center's list-serves in order to reach prospective participants.

In each location, I focused my recruitment at the beginning and end of the semesters. I anticipated that this is when the offices would be the busiest since students have the most paperwork to turn in and they often meet with advisors during these times. I sought participants at each location by sending an email to the list-serves of the offices or groups, posting flyers in the offices or centers, and hanging around at the site. San Francisco State University was the only site where the email approach yielded participants, and it only yielded two. At each site I was allowed to leave a pile of flyers for mothers to pick up during visits to the offices. This method proved very effective at Chabot College, and less effective at other sites.²³ For the other sites, I was allowed to drop in periodically to the office and attend workshops to hand out flyers in person. During office visits to each site, the staff at the centers introduced me to the mothers who

were in the center or who came in while I was there. I briefly introduced myself and the study and gave women a recruitment flyer and contact information sheet (a small slip that asked for name, phone number, and email address). In most cases, the mothers read the flyer and filled out the contact sheet and gave it back to me. On a few occasions, the mothers took the flyers, and either called me later or I never heard from them.

I also passed out flyers at mandatory workshops at Chabot College and Laney College, and at a resource fair at the City College of San Francisco. I made a brief announcement at the beginning or end of the workshop about the research, and passed out flyers and contact sheets after the announcement. This method proved the most effective, and many mothers came up to me after the workshop to give me the contact sheet back and to talk about the research. All but one of the Laney College participants was recruited this way. At City College, I recruited through visits to the family resources center and by making an announcement to participants attending a resource fair. I had a small table at the resource fair, and women who were interested in participating in the research approached me at the table.²⁴ In addition to recruiting participants directly through these methods, I also used snowball sampling and asked participants to refer me to other women they knew who were in higher educational programs. The advantage of snowball sampling is that it helped me reach respondents that might not otherwise be included in the sample, such as those who do not use the CalWORKs offices frequently.

In addition to recruiting participants through the schools, I recruited volunteers, members, or clients of the non-governmental advocacy organization, LIFETIME, who were pursuing higher education. Recruitment through LIFETIME occurred through meeting parents at LIFETIME events and sending announcements by email to the

member list-serve. Several times interview participants introduced me to prospective interviewees at LIFETIME events. These introductions were invaluable to my recruitment efforts and usually involved the past interview participant conveying how much she enjoyed participating in the interview and how that I am “cool” and I “get it” when discussing welfare issues. This was very important, especially when recruiting parents at the Bachelor’s degree level, or those with more complicated paths onto welfare and into higher education because many of them were very cautious about participating in academic research about welfare.

Recruitment for the focus groups happened in much the same way as it did with the interviews, through contacts I had at the local community colleges and with LIFETIME, with a few variations due to the need to get all participants in the same place at the same time. Participants in the focus groups were paid \$40 for their time and this incentive was mentioned on the recruitment materials. The first two focus groups were stratified by county, with one to be held at City College of San Francisco and one held at Berkeley City College in Alameda County. It was unreasonable to expect low-income parents to travel from Alameda County to go into San Francisco or vice versa, so by design the location chosen for one group will have an over-representation of mothers from that county.

For the Alameda County focus group, I focused my recruitment at Berkeley City College, instead of at the other community colleges, in order to draw from a new group of participants and to avoid having to turn away women who had already participated in the dissertation interviews.²⁵ For the San Francisco focus group, I recruited through the Family Resource Center at the City College of San Francisco and worked with the

coordinator to plan the focus group. Since it was June, she suggested that I have the group after a mandatory parent meeting that they had planned for later in the month.²⁶

The third focus group was with parent members of LIFETIME, a welfare advocacy organization. It was important to conduct a separate focus group for LIFETIME parents for the primary reason that LIFETIME parents have participated in welfare-rights trainings, leadership activities, speaking events, protests, political hearings, policy briefings, and other activities that make them more aware of and outspoken about the issues surrounding poverty, the welfare system, public policies, and the institution of higher education. One of the central research questions of my dissertation is how the experiences and narratives of mothers who are involved with LIFETIME vary from those who are not; therefore, having separate focus groups allows me to compare their group narratives. Unfortunately the LIFETIME focus group was the smallest with only four participants, and again one of the mothers had participated in my dissertation interview. I decided to allow her to participate because her personal interview had been cut short by a call from her son's school. However, the data from this small group are very rich, because the four participants were very interested in these issues and the smaller group size gave them the chance to elaborate on the themes.

Data Collection: Interviews and Focus Groups

From November 2005 until November 2006, I interviewed 45 Welfare-to-Work single mothers²⁷ enrolled in higher education programs in the San Francisco Bay Area in California. The interviews lasted from a half hour to over three hours. During the interviews, I asked participants questions about their demographic characteristics, routes

into poverty and onto welfare, educational goals and expectations, the actions they took to enroll in education as a welfare-to-work activity, their experiences in the labor market before they decided to go back to school, their experiences with the specialized advocacy organization, and why they chose their particular educational program (see Appendix C for the interview guide). I piloted the interviews with five participants in November 2005 before finalizing the interview guide. After the pilot interviews I restructured the interview guide slightly with more open-ended questions, and I moved the demographic questions to the end of the interview. However, since these were semi-structured interviews, the guide was simply that: it guided the interview process, but often the participants took the interviews in their own directions, and ended up answering the questions more fully than if I had tried to structure the interviews more tightly. Issues often arose that were relevant to the research questions, and I followed those leads. Usually when following leads, the interview covered material that I was going to ask about anyway. When those leads did not focus on the topic at hand, I tried to let the mother guide the discussion back to the question that was originally asked, and only in a few circumstances did I need to specifically guide the discussion back to the initial question.

The interviews were conducted in a variety of locations, depending upon what was convenient for the participant, and what facilities I had access to. I worked with participants to choose the locations for the interviews. I strove for places that allowed privacy; however, when that was not possible, public places where anonymity created privacy were used. Most often, the interviews were conducted on the campuses in the CalWORKs office, in the study rooms at the libraries, in the cafeteria, in student lounges,

and, in one case, on the long, wide steps outside the school's main entrance. Interviews also occurred at local restaurants and coffee shops. A few interviews were conducted at either my house or the participant's home. Two interviews were conducted at the participant's place of work. Finally, a few interviews were conducted at LIFETIME's office, in the sound-isolated case-management room.²⁸ Often children were present during the interviews, and on several occasions they can be heard on the recordings. All but two of the interviews were audio-recorded,²⁹ and only twice did a participant request that the recording be turned off for a few moments.³⁰

The interviews were intense experiences, both for me and for the mothers interviewed as they related their histories with domestic violence, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, divorce, and educational or employment disappointments. I tried, as much as possible, to make the interviews informal spaces that were non-intimidating. I did this in several ways: through the way that I dressed (casual, plain, but neat); introducing myself as a fellow student; chatting for several minutes about their children, their classes, or current events before starting the interview; and by allowing the women to direct where we sat or how we arranged ourselves in the interview space. The interviews, as discussed earlier, sometimes followed the interview guide quite closely, but more often than not, I started with the first question and participants took the lead from there. It was often several minutes before I needed to ask another question, and then usually only to gently guide their account of their history. At the end of the interviews, I asked if there was anything the participant wanted to add, and these discussions often contained more specific policy suggestions or comments on the research process itself.

In order to more fully understand women's experiences pursuing higher education while on welfare, I also conducted three focus groups with four to eleven participants each (for a total of eighteen additional participants, excluding the three repeats) who were mothers on welfare pursuing higher education but not participating in the interviews. The three focus groups lasted from 1.75 to 2.5 hours each. The focus groups were also very intense experiences, yet very different from the individual interviews. The focus group discussions centered on experiences under welfare reform, use of resources, and policy suggestions, and although not directly covering the women's life histories, brought up many of their experiences in the process (See Appendix D for the focus group guide).

I saw my role as a facilitator of the discussion, not a leader. I hoped that participants would speak to each other and respond to each other's points. For the most part, that was what happened in the focus groups. The large group seemed to accomplish this best, even though there were a few dominant participants. However, in this case the women knew each other well and they seemed to have no problem overtly interrupting the frequent speakers and they also engaged in more subtle ways of ensuring that all had a chance to speak. Strangely, the focus group at LIFETIME seemed to be the discussion in which I was least able to let the participants guide the discussion, and they looked to me to direct the conversation. I think there were two reasons for this. One, the group was very small with only four participants. Two, the women knew me the best, and they were very concerned that I get "the information that I needed" as one participant said before the recording started. I was not able to fully de-center myself as the leader of the discussion, but they did respond with enthusiasm and at length on the topics that we

covered. They also responded to one another, but often glanced at me before interrupting someone, as if to check if it was okay.

Sample

All participants in my study were women who along with their children received cash assistance from CalWORKs while they were enrolled in a higher education program. Forty-five women participated in the qualitative interviews (three of these also participated in focus groups) and 18 additional women participated in one of three focus groups. See Appendix A for profiles of the study participants and Appendix B for descriptions of the sample demographics. The participants in my study ranged in age from 18 to 51, with a median age of 33. The median number of children that participants have is two. Twenty percent (n=13) of my participants identify as white, 48% (n=30) as black or African American, 20% (n=13) as Latina or Hispanic, 7% (n=4) as Asian Pacific Islander, and 5% (n=3) as another ethnic identity. The racial and ethnic background of my participants closely resembles the racial and ethnic background of welfare participants in both counties with the exception of Chinese-American and Vietnamese-American participants, of which I have none. I think this absence is largely due to the fact that many of those families are on two-parent grants and have different educational needs, mainly focused on Vocational English as a Second Language programs.

The interview participants were enrolled in or had recently completed Associate's degree (62%, n=28), Bachelor's degree (32%, n=14), and Master's degree (6%, n=3) programs at California Community Colleges and public universities through the California State University or the University of California systems throughout Alameda

and San Francisco Counties. In addition, a few study participants attended private schools in the area: Mills College or St. Mary's College. Furthermore, one mother was finishing her degree at San Jose State University, in Santa Clara County, which is part of the California State University System. Approximately half of the participants were involved in the advocacy organization (53%, n=24) as members, clients, or leaders and half (47%, n=21) had no or minimal involvement with the organization.

The focus group participants were enrolled in or had recently completed Associate's degree (83%, n=15) or Bachelor's degree (17%, n=3) programs at California Community Colleges and public universities through the California State University. Focus Group participants that a few were involved in the advocacy organization (17%, n=3) as parent leaders and most (83%, n=15) had no or minimal involvement with the organization.

Data: Treatment and Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and the text entered into the qualitative data software package, Atlas-ti, for coding and analysis (Atlas-ti Scientific Software Development GmbH 2004). Atlas.ti allows textual coding of the qualitative data. As Weiss (1994: 3) explains, because "the fuller responses obtained by the qualitative study cannot be easily categorized, their analysis will rely less on counting and correlating and more on interpretation, summary, and integration." Therefore, coding allows the qualitative researcher to organize the data; once organized, themes and relationships in the data can be identified. Usually themes and relationships develop from the occurrence of codes with other codes or several codes being grouped together to

create code “families,” which are indications of broader phenomena. Qualitative data analysis centers on seeking out patterns in the data to build theory or test hypotheses based on existing sociological theories.

Key areas of investigation are the rationales and actions of welfare mothers and the role of LIFETIME, the advocacy organization. Answers to some of the questions, such as demographic information or educational programs and goals, were easily coded into categories I created in advance. However, most of the coding was done inductively with variable categories and coding emerging from participants’ responses. This study involves using grounded theory research design from which the appropriate theory will emerge to capture mothers’ experiences in higher education while participating in the welfare system. The qualitative data guided theoretical development instead of vice versa. Charmaz (2001:335) defines grounded theory method as “a set of inductive strategies for analyzing data” in which a researcher starts “with individual cases, incidents, or experiences and develop[s] progressively more abstract conceptual categories to synthesize, to explain, and to understand [her] data and to identify patterned relationships within it.” Charmaz (2001:351) explains that “the purpose of grounded theory is to develop a theoretical analysis of the data that fits the data and has relevance to the area of study” and a “fundamental premise of grounded theory is to let the key issues emerge rather than to force them into preconceived categories.” I used this approach in the coding of answers examining such issues as educational expectations, routes into poverty and onto welfare, labor market experiences, experiences on welfare, and suggestions for social policy changes. I am interested in how the participants explained their choices in the context of their daily lives. Charmaz (2001:339) states that

“the interaction between the researcher and the researched produces the data, and therefore, the meanings that the researcher observes and defines.” Therefore, in order to allow issues to emerge, and meanings to be observed, the qualitative interviews were conducted first, and then I conducted the three focus groups. The interviews informed the focus group questions by focusing on issues that needed greater clarification from the interviews and by focusing on issues of public policy allow collaborative ideas to be generated.

I also used a grounded theory approach to coding, in that I moved back and forth between the field and my coding. Halfway through my data collection, I began coding. For my initial coding I selected a few interviews and coded them by focusing on the actions that were present in their narratives (i.e. applying for welfare, enrolling in higher education, fighting with their caseworker, engaging in grassroots politics), many of which I made into codes. I developed those codes through ‘in vivo coding’ by using participants’ terms for phenomena as the code names, which “preserves participants’ meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself” (Charmaz 2006:55). Through this process I generated an initial code list. I refined the initial code list by intensively coding and recoding five interviews until I felt that I had a static code list.³¹ I intentionally selected five interviews that represented a wide range of perspectives and experiences to get the largest possible variety of themes and concepts during this round of coding. From this process, there were several themes that I wanted to further explore in subsequent interviews (these included participants’ ideas around survival, shame, and use of resources). Next, I engaged in focused coding in which I returned to the codes to determine what themes were present and determined how to describe those themes.

Through focused coding, I developed more specific categories of the coded data; these were guided by the interpretations and analysis of the participants themselves. The themes and patterns that emerged from the focused coding are the findings that are discussed in Chapters 3 through 7.

Questions of validity and reliability are often answered slightly differently for qualitative research than they are for quantitative research. Morgan (1988: 20) contends that by conducting both group and individual interviews with the same population, the data gathered from the interviews and focus groups work to “cross-validate” each other. This triangulation increases the validity of the research. Furthermore, qualitative research is a method that “is unusually sensitive to discrepancies between the meanings presumed by investigators and those understood by the target population...because of this built-in sensitivity, field research intrinsically possesses certain kinds of validities not ordinarily possessed by nonqualitative methods” (Kirk and Miller 1986:30-31). Therefore, this study addresses the issues of validity primarily by conducting two different types of research that will “check” the validity of the data gathered from the other method. I also addressed validity by being present in the field site over a few years in many of the same ways that anthropologic field researchers work in exotic locations. I have lived and worked with the population that I am studying for almost five years, and have come observed many of the themes that I found in this research.

Similarly, issues of reliability are often raised about qualitative data. Although “by nature of the method, no two researchers will record a life story in a completely replicable way, and no two researchers will analyze the life story data in a replicable way either” (Atkinson 1998: 59), “the problem of reliability is handled by documented

ethnographic decision making” (Kirk and Miller, 1986:73). This “documented ethnographic decision making” is particularly easy to accomplish through the use of Atlas.ti during the data collection and analysis phases. Through Atlas.ti, memos and comments can be created by researchers and attached to project data files to document the decisions made during the course of the research. These memos and comments guide the reader/reviewer through the researcher’s decision making about how codes are created or evolve (i.e. what led up to creating a certain code or why codes are attached to certain text, or when code names are changed or merged with other codes, the rationale behind the shift), to documents (memos about what happened in interviews, the context of the interview, or notes about particular questions or directions the interview took), and during the analysis.

In addition, to address issues of reliability, qualitative researchers can work together in small coding groups to check coder reliability. I and two other students coded several documents of each other’s work in Atlas.ti to test each other’s coding rationales. In Atlas.ti, researchers can select “consensus coding,” which will show how often the different coders code the text the same way. We conducted this check in January 2007. During the coding check, my rationales were supported by the other coders. One change in my coding that resulted from the coding check was a refinement of my coding method to select smaller sections of text. I initially had the tendency to code large blocks of text, and the other coders encouraged me to focus on the main concept being coded and select smaller segments of text per code incident.

Feminist Research and Methodological Reflection

Over the last four and a half years, I have lived, worked, hung out, engaged in political protest, participated in social justice trainings, and traveled to conferences and events with low-income families, including many of the participants in my research. Together we have worked on several projects that aim to expand access to education and job training programs, including two state bills, working to ensure affordable student housing and child care, fighting state budget cuts on social programs and higher education, and working nationally on TANF reauthorization with local and national organizations. The issue in feminist research that is very salient to this study is the power dynamics in my relationship with the mothers on welfare, the advocacy organization, and the community. As Reinharz (1992:65) explains, “even though feminists try to study women from the standpoint of women and generally have access to women’s settings, the women they study do not always trust them. Feminists’ access to women is potentially [problematic]... particularly when there are differences of social class, race, [or] ethnicity.” I was very aware that I am a white woman who is married with no children and a graduate student (at an elite institution) when working with women at LIFETIME and conducting this research. As Gorelick (1996:40) explains, “our relationship to oppression, as either privileged or oppressed, has implications for the quality of our research, but our relationship to it is contradictory, complex, and to some degree, up to us.” I was, and remain, very concerned about the power relationship between myself and the women who participated in my study. I attempted to deal with them by acknowledging these dynamics, discussing them with women in the study who are open to it, and trying to minimize them. My concerns about navigating these relationships were

based on the history of research with low-income students or mothers on welfare. As Adair and Dahlberg (2003:5) point out “often in academic inquiry, more validity or status is accorded to the ‘disinterested’ observer than to the active participant. In the case of poverty and the evaluation of higher education, this practice has too often resulted in a false inference that there is only one truth, one lens, by which the efficacy of higher education can be analyzed: the lens of the middle-class perspective.” Therefore, I was not a ‘disinterested observer’ in this research, and tried, as much as possible to be an active participant.

As I interviewed the participants, I tried as much as possible to be an active participant and in the same social setting as the women being interviewed. For example, I lived in the university’s family housing, I participated in social actions and trainings with the women, I attended workshops and mandatory campus meetings, and I was a student while conducting the study. By participating in these activities, I gained access to the community as a resident and as someone who is involved with the community, not in an outsider research role, but as an active member who cares about its well-being. Since I am involved in LIFETIME as a participant and as a researcher, one of the ways I can minimize the researcher power dynamic is by participating in the organization as fully as possible. These include going to activities and supporting campaigns, giving financially to the organization (as a dues-paying member), and using my skills when possible to help the organization. While some may question whether this makes me “biased,” as a feminist qualitative researcher, I think it minimizes the ‘outsider’ role and allows me to more deeply understand the “on the ground” experiences of the mothers on welfare in school.

On the other hand, even though I have participated with members of these communities on these activities, I am still an ‘outsider’ in many ways and I struggled with that complex reality and with how to present myself. I am a white, married, childless graduate student who owns a car and is financially stable. As Luttrell (2003:xiv) explains in her study of low-income pregnant teens, when a researcher is situating herself in relationship to the women she is studying “all of these labels are problematic and incomplete.” I navigated these labels and identity differences the best I could, and oftentimes that meant verbally acknowledging the differences between how the mothers perceived me and my actual identity. It was important to me, and I believe in line with feminist methodologies, not to deceive the mothers about who I am. The most common misconception is that I was also a mother; and when I was able to, without interrupting the flow of the interview or interaction, I explained that I did not (yet) have children. My experience doing this research both as an outsider and becoming an insider through my work with LIFETIME reflects Luttrell’s (2003:xiv) point that “fitting in and belonging are elusive and fluid.” Some days I was part of the community, and other days I was acutely aware or reminded that I was a ‘supporter’ of their work and activism, but I was not a grassroots member of this organization (because I was not a mother on welfare).

Furthermore, my study used qualitative interviewing and focus groups, which as discussed earlier are the most appropriate tools for this study because they capture the “on the ground” perspectives and strategies of welfare mothers using education as a route out of poverty. This is the major focus of this project. Moreover, these methods are consistent with feminist sociology and feminist research. I collected data that are drawn from and reflect women’s experiences, in a study conducted for the women, with the goal

of adding to the literature available to policymakers who seek to aid low-income women. Too often low-income women's experiences, beliefs, and perceptions have been left out of policy analysis and the policymaking process. By contrast, in feminist research, the participants are at the center of the research, with their experiences and perspectives driving the analysis. At this critical time during welfare reauthorization and higher education policymaking, in California and at the national level, welfare mothers' knowledge, experiences, and perspectives must be heard, documented, and used to influence the policy debate. While the likelihood that the current administration and policymakers will rely on the voices of mothers on welfare is minimal, it is nonetheless essential that mothers' perspectives on the policies and issues that affect their lives be part of the research literature and available to those policymakers, and to future policymakers.

A critical part of feminist research is the concept of "giving voice" (Gottfried 1996:6). However, it is not enough just to "give voice" to oppressed groups if the groups themselves do not gain anything from the research process or grow as a result of participating in the research (Gorelick 1996). As Gorelick (1996:26) comments, the "use of such techniques as interviews, participant observation, and oral histories helps to describe the world as perceived by the persons studied, but it may remain confined within their perceptions and thus not be able to provide them with much that they do not already know." Therefore, this research is not only feminist, but also embodies activist advocacy orientations. It is "activist" research in line with Cancian's definition (1996:187) of research that "aims at empowering the powerless, exposing inequalities of the status quo, and promoting social changes that equalize the distribution of resources." This research

was done with the cooperation of LIFETIME, and one of LIFETIME's goals is to empower low-income families to become self-advocates, to participate in social change, and to challenge institutional discrimination. Therefore, because I participate in those activities and supported those goals through my research, this is activist research.

This study also embodies characteristics of advocacy research by containing elements that distinguish it from conventional academic research: its purpose, the context, and who controls the results (Steinberg 1996). The purpose of this study is mixed: it is a dissertation written to complete a degree requirement, but I selected this particular subject matter and research questions with an explicit social change agenda. The context of the research is very political because the current discussions around the implementation of welfare reauthorization and social programs in general are not supportive of research that is done from a feminist perspective or that may help low-income women. As for "controlling" of the results of this research, while the formal result will again be the dissertation, the results of the study will really belong to the women of the community and the advocacy organization. I hope to work with them to disseminate the results to members of the organization and in meaningful ways to policymakers.

In the chapters that follow, I hope to achieve some of the goals that feminist research strives to accomplish. The next five chapters are crafted with the mothers' narratives at the center of the discussion by relying heavily on their voices in my writing. These quotes are verbatim from the interview transcripts and only occasionally have I omitted segments for space consideration. In the next chapter, I explore the pathways by which the mothers come to apply for welfare and pursue higher education. MMM begins

this journey with her narrative of how she came from being a teenage mother to prison inmate to student at the University of California Berkeley and my neighbor in the UC Village.

CHAPTER III

CALWORKS MOTHERS' PATHWAYS ONTO WELFARE AND INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

MMM is a 31 year old Latina mother of four, who recently completed her Associate's degree at a Southern California community college, and is in her first semester at the University of California Berkeley. She became pregnant at 15, and her narrative traces her complex path to pursue her education: "Well, I dropped out of 7th grade... I probably got pregnant by 15 and had him by 16. Because I'm 31 now, and he's 15 now. So I dropped out, and then a year after that I had my daughter, so I had 2 children, no education (laughs), with their father, who was an abuser, he liked to beat me up. And it didn't take long, well, it took about 6 years when I finally like separated from him... We separated because the abuse became so much, even though without the education, I just knew that I couldn't go on like this." She further explains "I need help, but at the same time without having family, without having education, without having any resources when I kind of broke free, because I was with him when I was so young, I went into party mode (laughs). And I went like girls gone wild (laughs). I went wild. I just started hanging out, partying a lot, using a lot of drugs. So it didn't take me long for DCFS to come in and remove my children, which was a horrible thing, but I think it was the best thing for them because they didn't need to see all that stuff." After DCFS removed her children, she turned to crime; for which she was convicted and sentenced to prison. During the two years MMM spent in prison, she completed her GED and received some vocational training, but she returned to her old neighborhood because: "that's all I

really knew...When I got out of prison, I met my [youngest] daughter's father, a little home boy from the neighborhood, you know (laughs), we kind of like hooked up and we had [her], and everything was good. And at the time he was actually trying to go to school, but I was like, ah, that's stupid, blah, blah, blah, and I just had that mentality...we kind of separated because we had different goals." After they separated: "and that's when I met [my husband], my [youngest] son's father, who is my ex-husband. And we kind of hooked up and we married and everything, and I was like, ok, maybe it'll all start working out you know, like I'm putting my life right, instead of being with somebody without being married, we got married, we did the whole thing." Unfortunately, her marriage did not last because her husband, a former gang member: "wanted to start selling drugs again to make ends meet and I was like no, no, no, no, you know? I have 2 more children now, and I have 2 children that are away from me, I would be really stupid to allow you to do that. I go, considering my situation, my background, and you don't have that, I'll be the one to go to jail and you'll be out here partying (laughs). I was like, no thank you, so he left." After her husband left because she would not tolerate his drug selling, she felt that: "the only alternative at the time was to go and apply for county benefits, so I went and applied. And it just wasn't cutting it, you know? There was just no way, I have a total of four [children]." However, a friend introduced the idea of enrolling in a community college. MMM persevered into school despite caseworkers: "telling me no, you can't, and I fought my way through to get it, I was basically like, oh no, forget it, I don't care, I'm going." MMM only planned to pursue her Associate's degree, but supportive college staff encouraged her to continue: "because this was a foreign language because nobody in my family has ever done anything, so those aren't typical questions,

it's kind of like 'when are you going to be done with school?' 'when are you going to get a job?' (nervous laugh)" However, at her friend's and advisor's insistence, MMM starting thinking about her Bachelor's degree. Despite not knowing the significance of UC Berkeley, MMM applied to UC Berkeley and several other schools and was accepted, but: "my heart was UCLA all the way... and I started getting all my acceptance letters back, and I got into UCLA too, and then I got into UC Berkeley, and everyone was like, well, you're going to go right? And I was like, why? (laughs)...I was like bombarded, everybody I worked with, you cannot [pass up Berkeley], like UCLA's great, but those are the little bears and you have to go with the big bears (laughs)...you can't tell Berkeley no, what's wrong with you?" However, despite everyone she knew encouraging her to go to Berkeley, MMM says that she "didn't really understand the significance of it...the counselors, they're like 'listen, you have to go, you don't understand how important it is for you to go to that school.' And I kind of understood, and sometimes I still don't understand, but I know that I need to be here...here I am, and I love it, but I'm also scared and intimidated a little bit. But I know that if I have to do it one step at a time, I'm going to do it one class at a time (laughs). Nothing's going to stop me from doing what I want to do."

MMM's story covers several of the pathways that will be discussed in this chapter: she was a teen parent, a domestic violence survivor, and addicted to drugs, the last of which caused the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to remove her two older children. She also served time in prison for armed robbery and has been married and divorced. However, she is now pursuing her Bachelor's degree at the University of California Berkeley and has at least partial custody of all four of her

children (she shares custody of the two older children with their father). As MMM's narrative illustrates, pathways onto welfare and into higher education can be very winding roads. Although MMM was the only woman that I interviewed who did significant time in prison (some other mothers have jail experience), she was able to take that time in prison to finish her high school education. Despite many barriers and obstacles to higher education, MMM was able, while on welfare, to pursue higher education at one of the most prestigious schools in the country.

The women in this study fluctuate between participating in the institutions of work, welfare, and education. These are 'gendered institutions' which means that "gender is present in the processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power in the various sectors of social life" (Acker 1992:567). These gendered institutions are intertwined in such a way that they become fluid in the lives of many low-income women, including those in this study. Their participation in each gendered institution is not a fixed state but a constantly changing existence and illustrates the structural influences on their lives. The women are, sometimes simultaneously, working, on welfare, or going to school throughout their adult lives. Structural constraints such as labor market and economic factors, as discussed in Chapter 1, affect the women's economic struggle daily and make it difficult to leave poverty. The 1996 welfare reform laws were passed based on core assumptions about women's work and work ethic, mainly that welfare mothers just need to get a job, any job, and this will lead to self-sufficiency; those laws severely restricted education opportunities for low-income mothers (Shaw et al. 2006). However, as this chapter will illustrate, most of the mothers in this study were working before they applied for welfare; yet, these jobs could not bring

self-sufficiency and economic stability to their lives. The dynamics of poverty play out in these women's lives and eventually put them on trajectories that led them to applying for welfare and enrolling in school. Themes that illustrate social structural influences emerge when examining these women's trajectories and rationales for applying for welfare and enrolling in higher education. This chapter focuses on the women's common trajectories onto welfare and into higher education and explores how welfare reform impacted these routes.

There are five common routes, which I call pathways, which the women interviewed cite as their central reason why they came to enroll in higher education and apply for welfare. These pathways are not individual routes taken by individual women, but instead illustrate the structural influences that affect low-income women experiences. The pathways demonstrate women's opportunities and constraints in the gendered institutions in which their lives are embedded. In addition, these pathways are not preconceived categories that I "tested," but emerged from the data using grounded theory, as discussed in the previous chapter. All of the women interviewed in this study, with only slight variations, followed one of these five pathways into higher education and onto welfare. These common pathways illuminate the ways that the social structure intersects with individual agency in the everyday lives of low-income women with children. Low-income women's lived experiences with domestic violence, drug addiction, teen and unexpected pregnancies, bouts of unemployment, and unmarried partnerships all play important roles along the path. As Sharon Hays (2003:29) adeptly says: "welfare mothers weren't flown in from Mars, and they did not emerge fully formed from their mothers'

wombs. Their lives, like our lives, are shaped by their experiences and by the economic, cultural, and political structures of this society.”

The mothers’ pathways onto welfare and into higher education also critique a commonly used frame in post-welfare reform research: the ‘barriers to employment’ construction. One of the most widespread ways for post-PRWORA welfare literature to frame how and why women seek welfare assistance is through a lens that highlights personal ‘barriers to employment’ (Kates 2004; DeParle 2004). This research finds that many welfare families have “multiple barriers” to employment and economic self-sufficiency, with a focus on these as individual deficiencies rather than as structural inequalities that are exacerbated by the current welfare policies. The prevailing policy idea is that each woman’s barriers must be outlined and addressed sequentially as if they were equal forces in the women’s lives. For example, Olson and Pavetti (1996) found that 30% of welfare participants had at least one of the “barriers” to employment: alcohol or drug addiction, low basic skills, mental health problems such as depression, or poor health of the mother or child. Additionally, a 2008 study of CalWORKs participants who were sanctioned or had timed-off welfare found that 89% of mothers interviewed faced multiple barriers to employment, and “any more than one barrier substantially reduced the likelihood of getting and keeping a job” (Speiglmán 2008).

The ‘barriers’ frame is also very prominent in large-scale welfare research projects, especially the studies done by MDRC³² (Kates 2004), and they even call their welfare policy research concentration ‘welfare and barriers to employment.’³³ However, as DeParle (2004:191) explains: “the focus on barriers goes only partway in explaining who works and who doesn’t...the more barriers a poor mother has, the less likely she is

to work: yet plenty of women work despite multiple obstacles.” Within this frame, DeParle (2004:191) continues “the implicit logic [is] you fix the barriers and then go to work.” However, as DeParle mentions, many women work despite multiple barriers, and as the Speigleman (2008) study also shows, even among the mothers who did not identify any barriers, only half were working.

As this chapter will illustrate, the mothers in this study had multiple barriers to self-sufficiency, yet they were able to enroll in and in some cases complete, higher education, these barriers notwithstanding. Kates (2004:35) argues that the way that the barriers to employment frame guides research is a “small shift in perception [that] is important, because how the barriers are framed shapes the type and scope of potential policy solutions...personal barriers are obviously significant factors and should be addressed, but so should the lack of resources and the constraints imposed by the current policies.” Despite much of the focus on the barriers frame in the research, TANF’s “work first” policy assumption allows for only minimal program support to alleviate barriers, especially those pertaining to education or job training, mental health counseling or domestic violence services, or work supports such as affordable child care, transportation assistance, or health insurance.

The women in this study found themselves at a crossroads at which they recognized that they were not overcoming the multiple ‘barriers’ to self-sufficiency and that they wanted to change course. This led them to apply for welfare and enroll in higher education. As we will see from the discussion to follow, these two events happen in either order, sometimes very close together in time, and sometimes years apart. Many of the barriers that are often cited in the post-reform welfare literature are actually central to

the routes that the women in this study describe as to how they came to pursue higher education while on welfare. The role that these 'barriers' played in the women's lives was more of a turning point that got them started along the pathway to higher education. These events were not seen as 'barriers' by the mothers, but instead, as necessary steps on their pathways to pursuing higher education. The five pathways onto welfare and into higher education are domestic violence, substance abuse, unexpected pregnancy, unemployment, and unmarried partnerships.

Domestic Violence

Research shows that the most common characteristic for mothers on welfare is not race, age, educational background, number of children, or family economic background, but is instead experience with domestic violence (Raphael and Tolman 1997). Mothers in the welfare system experience domestic violence at double the rate of all American women (Lyon 2000). Nationally, about two-thirds of mothers receiving welfare have been victims of domestic violence at some point in their lives (Raphael and Tolman 2000). In a 2003 study of mothers on welfare in two California counties, the California Institute for Mental Health found that as many as 83% were survivors of domestic violence (Meisel, Chandler, and Rienzi, 2003). Moreover, during the two years that that study took place, nearly two-thirds of the mothers interviewed were beaten or abused.

Domestic violence is one of the most commonly mentioned barriers to employment because it can have drastic implications for the physical, emotional, and economic well being of low-income women and their children. In terms of health, higher rates of depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are found among mothers

on welfare who have experienced abuse than those who have not (Lyon 2000).

Additionally, mothers on welfare who have experienced domestic violence are almost twice as likely to report a “physical limitation” or rate their health as “poor” as those who have never been abused (Allard, Tolman, & Rosen 2003).

Domestic violence can also derail a mother’s efforts to obtain self-sufficient employment and move off welfare. Domestic violence is frequently exacerbated when mothers seek education, training, or work (Tolman and Raphael 2000). Batterers often sabotage mothers’ efforts to work or study by making threats, inflicting injuries before tests or interviews, preventing women from sleeping or studying, stalking women on campus or at work, or refusing at the last minute to provide promised childcare that mothers need to work or attend school (Beechey and Payne 2002; Davis 1999; Raphael 1999). A 1999 study of welfare mothers in Wisconsin found that 63% were fired or forced to quit their jobs due to domestic violence (Moore and Selkove 1999). Furthermore, a 1999 study of Colorado welfare mothers found that 44% were prevented from working by abusive ex-partners (Pearson, Theonnes and Griswold 1999). Even when mothers are able to secure employment, domestic violence makes sustained employment more difficult and greatly affects the employment options, quality of the employment, and earnings potential for domestic violence victims with children in the welfare system (Lyon 2000).

In this study, the most common pathway for women to apply for welfare and enroll in higher education is experience with domestic violence. Domestic violence is identified as the primary pathway that thirteen of the forty-five interview participants traveled to apply for welfare and enroll in higher education. The typical sequence of

events for this pathway is that participants completed high school, got married or entered into a significant relationship, had children, and the marriage or relationship was very abusive and eventually ended because of domestic violence. The women often worked during this time.

Nine of the thirteen mothers experienced abuse during their marriages. The others were in serious relationships, but not married to their abusers. Some relationships were abusive from the beginning and some become abusive later. There was often also substance abuse or drug dealing by the partner. After escaping the violence and abuse, the mother went onto welfare, sometimes cycling between welfare and the abusive partner for many years. Eventually she left for the last time, and it is usually then that she enrolled in higher education, often at the suggestion of a friend, relative, domestic violence advocate or shelter counselor, therapist, or caseworker.³⁴

Among the women I interviewed, Tony, Mercedes, Jasmine, Sydney, Lele, D, Gloria, Princess, Kelly, T, Grace, Twitch and Phoebe followed this path. Although domestic violence is present in many more of the participants' lives than just the thirteen listed above, the mothers discussed in this section identify domestic violence as the primary pathway that led them to apply for welfare and/or enroll in higher education. Their narratives further include discussions of the job market and how their lack of education, in combination with their experience with domestic violence, made them more vulnerable while working, and unable to become economically self-sufficient. This led them to enroll in higher education once they left the abuse. Additionally, two of the mothers, Jasmine and Mercedes, still struggled with domestic violence even after applying for welfare and pursuing higher education.

D, the oldest participant interviewed in this study, first applied for welfare in the late 1980s, while she was pregnant and trying for the first time to escape her abusive partner. As she related her story, she talked about the cycle of violence that is familiar to most domestic violence survivors and is often cited in the literature:³⁵

I first applied for CalWORKs, I remember that I left my ex husband for the final time in 1991, because we'd go through this cycle, the honeymoon period, he's regretful, and then I'd go back with him. So I think I applied for first time in 1988, when I was pregnant with my last child and I was staying in the domestic violence shelter so I applied for [welfare] then, and then I got back with him. I went back to work and then when I left him again in 1991, I had a full time job and I didn't apply for any assistance until 1992 when I had to leave that job because of him threatening to take my life on the job. So I needed some type of support, also the issue that influenced me into quitting the job too was that my child care was \$700 a month, now I made good money. But he also had the truck repo'ed, so he also had money garnishing my check to the truck he'd repo'ed so I was getting eaten up alive. So I needed something that was not garnishable and something where I could stay home with my kids and not have to pay that high childcare, in addition to being safe and not wondering if I would be there to see my kids grow up. So those are the three reasons that I decided to go back to [welfare] at the time.

D related in her narrative many of the major themes that are present in domestic violence research. Domestic violence tends to occur in cycles, with women often returning to abusers several times before they are able to permanently leave. If women secure decent jobs, threats from abusers can derail their efforts at economic self-sufficiency and can lead them to returning to the abusive situation for economic reasons. Even when physically separated, women may still have economic ties to abusive partners, as seen in D's story. D was finally successful in leaving him, but she was unable to keep the job because of his threats, especially while she was at work, and the economic drain of her paycheck being garnished for a truck that he had had repossessed. Therefore, after she lost her job due to the consequences of domestic violence, D applied for welfare and shortly after enrolled in her higher education program. Shortly after our interview, D,

because she was timing off welfare, applied for and was approved to receive Social Security Disability due to her severe PTSD due to the domestic violence. Although Social Security Disability provided a slightly higher monthly check, the strange catch to the transition was that she lost access to her mental health services for a year due to the health care rules surrounding the two systems. Despite being approved for Social Security Disability due to a severe mental illness, she did not have access to the very services that she needed most.

Another mother, Lele, related her pathway onto welfare and how domestic violence influenced her trajectory. For Lele, a 37 year old black mother of five and community college student,³⁶ her cycle of violence included leaving one abusive relationship for another and cycling between the abuse and welfare:

My ex-husband, we parted when I was twenty-five and it was a terrible parting. We parted, and shortly afterwards he went to prison for like 90 days...I had my two oldest kids at that time, so when he got out of prison, I was in another relationship with my younger kids' dad. So, it ended up that he wasn't going for that. So, he physically took my two older kids from me. So, it was just really bad. And I was afraid because this new relationship that I was in, it wasn't a good relationship either. The guy sold drugs, he was a drug dealer. And my ex-husband he was a loose cannon, so it was kinda like I was in the middle of a really heated situation. It was not good on that end at all, my ex-husband. And then, my kids, my youngest kids, the [man] that I was not married to, we ended up in three years, having three kids together, we stayed together for seven years. He was abusive, very, very abusive. Umm, [he was a] drug dealer, prison felon, never had a job. I was in that whole relationship, the entire almost seven years, being very much abused, mentally and physically, so, the relationship is not good between us two...When I left him, I fled to a battered women's shelter. And they helped, like okay, we're gonna help you go apply for welfare, get a restraining order and all that. So, what I did is, they helped me with all that stuff and I ended up going back to my abuser. Then I got off of welfare again and started working temp jobs, here and there, for about, that lasted until about '99. Probably about a year and a half I worked temp jobs...1999 was the bout that I said that I wasn't going to take it anymore. It was around Christmas, and I got me and my two boys at the time, because my two oldest kids were gone with my ex-husband, and so that's when I went to, I just got on a bus and went to Sacramento to a battered women's shelter. And they helped me get on my feet, I was on welfare again, that's when I got on

again. And then I was pregnant with my six year old at the time... Yeah, they helped a lot. Tremendously. And then, I was afraid to have my baby away from everybody. I was out there, I was doing good, I was safe. But I was afraid because I didn't have nobody, it was like dang, I'm nine months pregnant, and who's gonna keep my boys. So, I came back out here and moved in with my mom to have my baby. And as soon as I had my baby, well, two months later, I went to job club through the CalWORKs and whatever and got a job... So, I was off welfare again... And even though I was off the cash aid, and then I was off the food stamps too, I was still getting child care, and then for about a year, they gave me the transportation money... At that time too, I was having to pay child support for my two oldest kids, because they were taken but, it's a long story. My in-laws they had gotten them, because my husband, my ex-husband went to prison within all of this time, he murdered his girlfriend, so he went to prison, my in-laws got my kids, and they started getting welfare. So, I ended up owing child support, so my checks started getting garnished, and all this other stuff, so I am like, I need a raise... So, I approached my boss and told him that I needed a raise. He told me that he would get back to me within a week. And he got back to me and said that we don't have any money to give you a raise. And at that time, I was just like, okay, I am just gonna quit my job and I am gonna get another job. I am just not gonna tell him. So I was looking. I thought I could do it, because all of those years before I just looked for a job and I would get a job. I don't know if something must have happened with the job market, 'cause I was looking on the job search vehicles, and I wasn't qualified for any jobs. And initially, I was like wow, and all the jobs I was seeing, I needed a certain level of education, and I was like, I gotta go to school. I can't, you know, I gotta go to school. How am I gonna go to school and keep down a full-time job, cause I can't do it? And, how am I gonna go to school and have a job, cause I can't pay for school, having a job. I can't get financial aid, I can't get anything. It was a big catch-22...

Lele's narrative illustrated a point that is also common among mothers on welfare: she left one abusive relationship for another, unable to break the cycle of violence even though she was no longer with her first abuser. Lele's situation, being required to pay child support for children she lost custody of because she was a victim of domestic violence, is also not that unusual. Child Protective Services (CPS), part of the California Department of Social Services, can declare a mother unfit if she refuses to leave an abusive relationship and the children can be placed in foster care or with another family member, sometimes the paternal grandparents, often with visitation granted to the father.³⁷ Then the mother, the victim of the abuse, must pay child support to the CDSS

for their children. This policy leaves many women unable to become financially stable after losing custody of their children, and without being financially stable they are unable to get their children back. Since mothers often have younger children in their custody, they go onto welfare and fight for custody of their older children.

Also, the work support resources that Lele and many other low-income mothers need, such as childcare, transportation assistance, low-cost housing, food stamps, are being eliminated or time-limited. As her narrative showed, Lele, like many women on welfare, was unable to find a job at a higher salary given her educational background. Women are stuck between deciding to stay in jobs that do not allow them to make ends meet or going back onto welfare. Once back on welfare, they are urged to engage in “work first” activities, but they know that these are not jobs that will be any better than the ones that they just left. Therefore, they enroll in community college programs, many times simultaneously with going on welfare, as Lele did.

Another important aspect of this pathway is the experience of immigrants; a large number of immigrants identify domestic violence as their pathway. Over a third of the thirteen domestic violence pathway participants were immigrants, either as children (Tony), or as adults (Phoebe, Gloria, Kelly, and Grace). Also, out of the seven immigrants in this study, five identify domestic violence as the primary pathway as to welfare. The stresses of immigration—including leaving behind familial supports, moving great distances, and experiencing prejudice and discrimination—can be very traumatic experiences for both men and women, and can contribute to domestic violence (Sheety and Kaguyutan 2002). There are multiple obstacles for immigrant women to overcome in order to leave abusive partners, including economic, language, social

isolation, and immigration status (Orloff and Little 1999). These obstacles may also include a lack of trust when seeking assistance from official institutions, such as welfare, that may be based on experiences with institutions in their home country (Erez 2000). In addition, after the 1996 welfare reform laws, only certain classifications of immigrants are eligible for welfare benefits, and many immigrants are unsure about the exact regulations. Therefore, their immigration status and the belief that they are not eligible for social service benefits can be deterrents to leaving their abusers.³⁸

Tony, who emigrated as a child from Eritrea, is a 33 year old mother of two and recent UC Berkeley³⁹ graduate. She related her trajectory:

I got married at 22, a little too young. But I got married to someone who wasn't from this country, expected things that, that just, I don't know, that I wasn't used to. He was another African man, so I thought that, there would be a lot of basic things that were understood between us, that didn't need a lot of discussion. But it turns out that he had ulterior motives, he just really wanted to get his papers, so he married someone and had a couple kids with them, and as soon as he got his papers, he was pretty much, a year before he left, he started putting money in and destroying everything, destroying the family, he was super verbally and emotionally abusive, [physically] attacking me a couple of times, and I just, in hind sight I realized that he was trying to end the marriage quickly because he got what he wanted. But while I was going through it with two very small children, 'cause the kids at the time, my son was two months old and my daughter was 18 months old. Because they are only 16 months apart so it was really crazy to deal with. And I would hear threats from him all the time. I would constantly have to be looking around and over my shoulder because he would say look, I have plenty of people who would take care of the kids in Africa. So, threatened me that he would steal them and go. So, also, I would have to, everyplace that the kids were, I would specifically put down, don't release the children to x, y, z. And I went through all kinds of drama getting restraining orders, and getting orders delivered to various police departments, because my mom lived in [city name], and my aunt lived in [city name], and I lived in [city name], and he lived in [city name]. So all the police departments had to have copies so that he wouldn't be allowed to take them anywhere...I had left my ex-husband in June and from June to January, I hadn't received any help from [welfare]. And was basically raising the kids on the last bit of disability insurance that I had and staying with my parents. So, that pretty much ran out...I filed [for divorce] in (laughs), I filed in October of 1999...That January I had no other means to income and nothing else that I could possibly do. So, I went back to school, and I applied for welfare.

As Tony related in her narrative and as discussed above, gaining a greencard can be a primary motivation for immigrant men to seek marriage and children, and unfortunately, can lead to abusive relationships. Furthermore, separations and divorces are more complicated given immigration issues and the possibility that one parent may want to return to their country of origin with the children. This can work either way. In Tony's case, she was fighting to keep custody of the children and flee the abuse, but to remain in the Bay Area. However, in Kelly's case, she desired to flee the abuse and return to her home country, but was prevented from doing so.

Kelly, who at eleven years old immigrated to Israel from Soviet Georgia, moved to Berkeley as an adult with her husband and their one year old son. After arriving in the U.S., her husband, who is a U.S. citizen from the Bay Area, became abusive. She finally could not take the abuse any longer, but was stuck in the United States by a court order that would not allow her to take her son back to Israel. Her grown daughter also moved to the U.S. with her initially, but did not remain once the violence started. Kelly's desire to return to Israel to be with her family, and her sense of isolation due to the abuse came through in her narrative of why she enrolled in education and applied for welfare:

But, you know, erm, my oldest daughter, she didn't want to stay here, so she went back after a few months, so I stayed here with my new baby and my new husband. And, like, three years later we had a domestic violence case, and then we went [apart]. Yeah, I wanted to go back home, but I couldn't, the court system wouldn't allow me...Because he's American, and he demanded to have my son to be raised here. He didn't want me to go back. And I was like torn between my daughter who's there and my whole family who's there, and I was like all by myself here. So I kind of, in my first years, I was really spent with my baby, and I still my language was very poor, I couldn't find a job as a graphic artist to go back and have my own money, so I was kind of very dependent on him suddenly, and it didn't work out. He just fell under the stress of having a family and providing for us, and he just couldn't do it, and he got sick [and violent]. So here I am, I couldn't go back home, so I had to do something myself. And the only thing was

going back to school and working on my language skills which were very poor. I mean, I could go to office, and I couldn't fill a form in... but somehow with my poor language I managed to do it. I managed to get onto welfare, I managed to go to school, I managed to... at some point we were evicted from our house, so I managed to get a section 8 [voucher for rental housing], and, you know, like building again my foundation...I lost everything through my marriage and through my transition, and at the age of 40, I had to start everything over.

As illustrated in Kelly's narrative, her husband became violent under the pressures of immigration and family. So, Kelly left the relationship and applied for emergency aid then CalWORKs and applied for school at the same time, in August of 2003. Kelly's struggle to find work in the U.S. that was comparable to her work in her home country was a theme that was also experienced by Phoebe and by Tony's parents. Kelly's poor English language skills, as is often the case with immigrants to the U.S., also added to her struggle. (Later, she found out that she is probably dyslexic, but the testing was unable to give a full diagnosis because English is her fourth language after Georgian, Russian, and Hebrew.) Through domestic violence after immigration, Kelly, like so many other women, lost everything that she had worked for and had to literally start her life over.

Mercedes and Jasmine also both dealt with issues of immigration in their narratives; although they are both Americans, their partners were immigrants. These two women, unlike the others in this pathway, continued to experience domestic violence after they were already on welfare and while they were in school. As their narratives below will illustrate, they were a slight variation along this pathway, as they continued their struggle with domestic violence. They identified their pathway as domestic violence, because the domestic violence became the reason that they were unable to get off welfare.

Mercedes, 38 year old mother of four and recent graduate with her Bachelor's degree, was a first generation Latina American. Her boyfriend, and father of her two youngest children, was jailed and then deported after she filed charges against him when the domestic violence escalated to the point of her spending time in the hospital. She grappled with her feelings for him, remaining committed to him even after he was deported, as she related in the incident below, which happened just before her college graduation. Her response to my request to tell me about her graduation day:

It wasn't, it was happy, I was really happy and excited, I was kind of sad though because right, a week before graduation, her dad [indicates to her daughter in her lap] and I had a fight, an awful fight. I was inside the car and he punched the window. He said he was punching the window, regardless, the glass broke and it cut my eye. So I was, just like, really crazy, I was in the hospital, got stitches here and here. My mom saw everything, which is what I didn't want. She knew we had troubles, but I didn't want her to see that. And he ran, it was just really crazy. That was a whole week before graduation, because up until that time, he was going to be there. So, it was kind of weird for me. Everyone was, well my mom was there and important people...but he was the one person that wasn't there. Deep down, I mean, this is the weird part of the whole domestic violence stuff, but deep down, I wanted him to be there, but I knew he couldn't because I had pressed charges. I had this scar on my face; it just wasn't the right thing.

Mercedes struggled with her happiness at completing her degree and graduating from college, and the pain of the continued abuse from her partner. She eventually reported the abuse, which added to her partner's ongoing INS issues. Despite the abuse, she remains committed to him as seen in the exchange below:

SK: Are you still with their father?

Yeah. He was deported, so we're still committed, it's just hard because of the distances and the legal divide. We're working on seeing if there's any loopholes he can fit into and come back or anything so he can come back or at least visit us.

SK: When was he deported?

At the end of 2003.

SK: So she was just born? [indicating the child that Mercedes is holding]

Yeah, she was born in June 2003, and it was December he was deported, but he was in jail the whole time I was pregnant.

The struggle to leave abusive partners is felt by all victims of domestic violence, and for low-income women, issues of economic security and child care add to the concerns about leaving the abuse. Jasmine, a 39 year old white/Latina mother of three who recently finished her Associate's degree, first applied for welfare in February 1999. She found a low-wage job quickly and got off welfare, only to have the job exacerbate an existing back problem, and she returned to the abusive situation. She talked about her efforts to leave her abusive partner, and her pathway to welfare through her issues with low-wage work, housing, and domestic violence:

At that same time in January of 2000, I moved out of the store front where I was living with [partner]. Because I was in a relationship with him since 1999, and I moved in with him, but because of his alcohol problem and his domestic violence I ended up in the Salvation Army homeless shelter for like a month. And during that time, I went out and looked for work again, and I landed another job in the beginning of March of 2000. And I was pregnant, and I didn't know, but at the time I landed a job as an office manager at \$10 in San Leandro for a security company doing alarms. And I thought, I was told it was going to be long term with benefits and promotion and potential for career advancement, 7 months later, I would be told that the company was closing down and that they sold the company and I was out of a job, and that was with a week's notice. I was about 7 months pregnant at the time when they let me go and I was forced to go on unemployment and welfare. And during that time I had to wait about 3 weeks to get my first unemployment check and I had to wait about a month and a half to get back on my welfare. So during that time I really didn't have very much money, and I had rented a room while I was working for three months off somebody I knew, and I was, I had to give the room up and move back into the store front because I couldn't afford to pay for the room with the money that I was getting from unemployment and welfare. And I was pregnant (laughs).

Jasmine, even though she tried to make light of her bleak situation, at seven months pregnant, with a 7 year old daughter, moved back into the illegal storefront apartment that she and her abusive partner were squatting in. Although she tried to escape the abuse

through work and welfare, due to the high cost of housing in the Bay Area, she saw no other choice but to return to him. She remained in this situation for several more years, eventually moving to a section 8 apartment with him and having another child as well. I saw Jasmine on the day that she received her diploma for her Associate's degree in the mail, which was the same day she went to the county courthouse to get a move out and restraining order for her partner. It was a jubilant moment for her to have completed her degree and to finally have enforceable court documents requiring her partner to leave their apartment. However, three years later as I write this, he is still living with her.

Jasmine and Mercedes, although they both identified domestic violence as their primary pathway onto welfare, were unable to leave the cycle of violence even once they completed higher education. In Mercedes' case she remained committed to her partner, even after he was deported, and believed that they might be able to work things out if he were allowed to come back. Jasmine cited her lack of child care as the primary reason that she and her partner remained together. So, in most of the domestic violence pathways, welfare and higher education were routes that led participants permanently away from abuse and from future relationships with abusive partners. However, domestic violence is a cycle that often takes years to break. Unfortunately, not all who follow this pathway were able to make a permanent escape.

Unexpected Pregnancy

Unexpected pregnancy is the next most common pathway that women in this study cited in describing how they came to enroll in higher education and apply for welfare. Although these pregnancies are 'unexpected,' they may not have been entirely

accidental. Edin and Kefalas (2005:37) find that “most conceptions are hardly pure accidents” and that of the low-income women in their study only a small percentage were using contraception when their “unplanned child was conceived.” In this pathway, many of the mothers were in significant relationships with their children’s father, and although they were not planning to get pregnant, they may not have been fully avoiding it altogether by using consistent contraception. Especially as relationships got more serious; Edin and Kefalas (2005:47) find that “many practiced contraception in the early days of their relationships to their children’s fathers; however, when the relationship moves to a higher level of trust and commitment, they typically abandon these practices or begin to engage in them inconsistently.” As discussed below, this pathway has three variations depending upon the mother’s age when she got pregnant for the first time: teen pregnancy, mid-life pregnancy, and later-life pregnancy.

Teen Pregnancy

Teen pregnancy is often cited by researchers and policymakers as a central pathway onto welfare and “current concern over teen motherhood centers partly on the real possibility of long-term dependence on public welfare as well as on the tragedy of wasted potential of human life faced by both the adolescent mother and her offspring” (Farber 1989:519). However, Furstenberg (1:2008), in a recent longitudinal study of teen mothers on welfare over the past 30 years in Baltimore, finds that “having a child as a teen, which most policymakers believe to be a powerful source of disadvantage, had only modest effects on their educational and economic achievement later in life, after taking into account their economic circumstances prior to becoming pregnant...the teen mothers

in Baltimore did better than most observers would have predicted in continuing their education, and did not fare substantially worse than their counterparts who postponed parenthood until their twenties.” In order to encourage teen mothers to finish high school, TANF prohibits states from granting assistance to mothers who are under 18, who have not graduated from high school or completed their GED and who are not enrolled in school. Often called “learnfare,” this policy encourages states to focus on the educational needs of teen parents, often in nontraditional settings such as alternative high schools or adult schools (Cohen 1998). In California, this policy is implemented through the Cal-Learn program, which is mandatory for all pregnant or parenting teens until they complete high school. However, many teens continue in school once they complete their Cal-Learn program.

Teenage pregnancy, therefore, is a one of the sub-pathways of unexpected pregnancy that women in this study cited as how they came to enroll in higher education and apply for welfare. Among the mothers that I interviewed, LaToya, Angela, Keisha, MMM, Taz and Faith followed this course. Most were also raised on welfare, each got pregnant before her 18th birthday and decided to keep the baby. At the time of their pregnancies some were still in high school (Taz, LaToya, Faith and Keisha) and some had already dropped out of high school (Angela and MMM). They applied for welfare while pregnant and either were required to participate in the Cal-Learn program to finish their GED or high school diploma or they enrolled in a community college as their welfare to work activity.

The three youngest women interviewed in this study, Keisha, LaToya and Angela, all followed this pathway. Angela was an 18 year old Latina mother of an infant and first

semester community college student. She was raised off and on in the foster care system, because her mother was in prison for a portion of her childhood, and then she dropped out of high school at 15 and sold drugs and became involved in gangs. Angela talks about when she found out she was pregnant and how she came to enroll at the community college and apply for welfare:

I found out I was pregnant, I mean, you'd ask anybody who knows me and she would be the last person you think would get pregnant, you know what I mean. I got pregnant, I decided to have her, because like I am not going to punish her for my irresponsibilities, I am going to try to be responsible...I decided to do what I felt was right. And then, we'll be fine, we'll make it. I'm working hard for daughter. So, let me think, I got pregnant, and then, let's see, I enrolled in school right away. And then...I enrolled myself in TANF and got a hold of a good case manager. And she helped me out a lot. So, and then from there, my boyfriend, well, he was supportive throughout the whole pregnancy, he was pregnant not me (laughs). I think so. And...I then received my GED and I decided to make a transition, I was making a transition from the city to over here... After I had her, I relaxed for a month. And then, I started everything, I moved down here, because I had wanted to have her in the city, and then we tapped into all our resources... Then I first enrolled in school and then I applied for CalWORKs...I got into school, the first things I hooked up with were financial aid, and then, umm, my friend showed me EOPS, and told me that if I signed up with the city they would help me with my rent and school. And what else, pretty much it helps me take care of my child and go to school, so I am trying to take advantage of it, the best way that I can.

For Angela, getting pregnant was a turning point in her life and made her reevaluate the direction that her life was going in. She had the support of her boyfriend, who moved with her from San Francisco to suburban Alameda County; they both enrolled in school, and they were raising their daughter together.

Angela's boyfriend was six years older than she was; and that was not uncommon. Several of the other mothers in this pathway—Faith, Keisha, and LaToya—also became pregnant as teenagers with men who were significantly older, usually five to eight years older than they were. The age difference, especially when a woman is 14 to

16 years old, often the woman feeling pressured to begin having sex or to have unprotected sex. Most of the women in this pathway got pregnant with the man with whom they had their first significant sexual experience. The National Campaign to End Teen Pregnancy (2004:4), in a study of sexually active urban youth, found many relationships between young girls and adult men and that “older guys are viewed as more independent –financially and socially—and, consequently, have more to offer. It is also noted that the unequal balance of power between older men and younger girls means that these young girls may feel less able to say ‘no’ to sex or to ask her partner to use protection. Many teen girls feel that sex is expected in a relationship with an older guy.”

Keisha, a 20 year old black mother of one and six months pregnant with her second, got pregnant her senior year of high school while dating an older man. Her mother encouraged her to stay in school and graduate. I asked Keisha to tell me about getting pregnant:

Ooof that was hard. Actually I was with her dad for 2 years before I got pregnant with her. My whole high school years, then I got pregnant with her. It was like I didn't want to tell my mom, I was in 12th grade and I was like how still I get pregnant the last year of high school but I was like scared of abortion thing because I read so much about it and side effects and you can die, and all. It just kind of like scared me so I didn't really want to kill my baby and my mom, she didn't really have no problem she just said graduate, get out of school first. Keep your baby but just get out of school and I was like ok that's what I'm gonna do but it was hard. It was real hard...He broke my virginity and so I was like he was happy and he wanted to keep the baby. Then we found out that it was a girl he really wanted to keep the baby so I was like wow...Her dad he went, he got incarcerated for a year umm she was 4 months. He went to jail for a long time, a year is a long, very long time when you are dealing with a child by yourself... I didn't want to [go on welfare], I did not want to, ohh I didn't, I really didn't but at the time I was staying with my sister and she needed help too so that's why I really signed up for it and she needed extra little money from me. She had 3 sons and she needed extra little help like for food and money. She was working and doing everything and she was on CalWORKs too...So that's why I really signed up for her and the extra little money I needed to get a prom dress because I went to my prom pregnant...So after I had her, I got me a job and I got off umm when I

got off and I was working at Bed, Bath and Beyond for like 9 months. Then [my daughter] had to go to the hospital...but after 2 weeks in the hospital, you know I lost my job...They fired me because they said I missed too many days but I was getting them calls in, I was showing them hospital papers and everything...I got back on [on aid] because I wasn't working no more and I was paying rent. And I was paying rent by myself because her daddy was gone too.

SK: Was that when he was in jail?

Yeah. I had to get back on it which I really didn't want to, I really didn't, so yeah that's why, I really didn't want to...umm, well then I enrolled here about 3 semesters ago, umm I was trying to you know umm, go to school, take care of my daughter.

Two of the mothers, Taz and Faith, have routes that were different from the others because they were slightly older than the other mothers in this pathway at the time of the interview, have more than one child, worked in their field for a while, and were pursuing additional education to get further in their careers. Even though they had been teenage mothers, they finished Associate's degrees, had career-track jobs, and spent several years off welfare. However, since they were on welfare when they earned their Associate's degrees, they knew that going to school while on welfare was possible, and when they found themselves in need of welfare again, they decided to go back to school and continue their education. Taz, a 28 year old black mother of two with an Associate's Degree in Dental Assisting, is back in school pursuing her prerequisites to transfer to a Bachelor's degree program. However, the first time she applied for welfare and enrolled in higher education was due to teen pregnancy. Taz relates how she became pregnant her senior year, and had her son two months early:

My son, me and his father we were just, we weren't sort of like in a relationship, it was just something like, friends, and then like sex. You know, we would go out then we'd have sex, and I really didn't see him as a boyfriend at the time, probably I should have, but I was young then, and I really didn't think about having boyfriends. I was just too busy just trying to hang out with him and I thought it was cool. And of course, I ended up getting pregnant and I had [my

son] when I was 17 years old, when I was in 12th grade. A week later, I did turn 18. During the time of my pregnancy it was actually stressful because I was worried about how I'm going to finish the 12th grade, I was thinking about prom, you know, what's going to happen, is this guy going to stay with me, if he doesn't, will anybody else want to deal with me when I have a baby? So I ended up going into labor early and I had [my son] at 7 ½ months, he was supposed to be due in August, and I had him in June, so I had him June 10th. He was of course premature, he was a 3lb baby... The first time I applied for CalWORKs I was pregnant with [my son], so it was in '96, and I was still in school, so I was trying to figure out how could I get money, or get on a WIC program to help me with food and the housing, I was staying with my mother at the time. I guess a friend of mine told my mother that there's a program, it was called AFDC at the time, and she told me I could apply for AFDC when I'm pregnant I can at least get food stamps and cash aid. So I applied, but they didn't give me cash aid at the time, they just gave me food stamps and MediCal. And they told me once the baby comes I'll be able to receive cash aid also. That was in '96 when I first applied...well, my son was born when I was 17, he was born in '96, I waited a whole year before I started [community college], so when I attended [community college] it was in '97 in August, so he was a year old already, that's when actually I started [college], so about a year after. And when I started working and graduated from [community college], that's when I got off, well, actually they kicked me off because I was making so much money, so I actually got off 4 years later...I attended from '97, and I graduated from [community college] in 2000, with an AS degree and a certificate in dental assistance.

Taz started dating her current partner when she was 3 months pregnant with her son and has been with him for over 10 years. She worked as a dental assistant for four years and then decided to have another child when her son was 8 years old. Her second pregnancy was also a high risk pregnancy and she has been on welfare since the 6th month of her pregnant, when she had to quit her job. She went back to school after her daughter was born to pursue her prerequisites in dental hygiene to transfer to pursue her Bachelor's degree. Taz's and Faith's paths both led them back to welfare to finish their education, which they knew was possible because that is where they started their education.

As MMM, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, and the other mothers in this pathway illustrate, teen pregnancy does not have to be an end to a woman's education. Mothers' motivations for their education will be discussed fully in Chapter 5, but many

teen mothers cite getting pregnant as a turning point that caused them to look seriously at the possibility of higher education. Edin and Kefalas (2005:171-172) talk about motherhood, especially among teen parents, as a “turning point” which offers the mothers “a reason to get up in the morning” or a way to organize their lives. In this study, the mothers recognized this effect as well, and participants discuss how having a baby at a young age made them grow up quickly and focus on their future goals. On this pathway, the mothers felt like they could not fail their children and had to provide for them, which led them to pursue higher education instead of the ‘work first’ activities while on welfare.

Mid-life Pregnancy

Even among somewhat older women, unexpected pregnancy, like teenage pregnancy, can cause significant disruption to women’s education and work paths. Among the mothers that I interviewed, Jane, Jade, Alexis, Daria, Marie, Nicole, Vanessa followed this course. Some were in college pursuing higher education when they got pregnant (Jane, Daria, Marie, Nicole, and Vanessa). The other two participants were essentially homeless with a marginal attachment to the labor market (Alexis and Jade). Most of these women graduated from high school and went straight into college or went to work, and some were doing both. After some time, they became pregnant and had to go onto welfare because of the unexpected pregnancy. For the women who were in school full-time when they became pregnant, they continued school, but for the women who were working and/or going to school part-time, this was a chance for them to enroll in school full-time while they were on welfare.

Jane, a 23 year old black mother of one, got pregnant during her second year of college: “we were dating right after my first year, I didn’t date really in high school and I met him right when I started college and we started dating back in the first year of college, and almost a year later I got pregnant.” Her education was interrupted by the pregnancy, but after she had her daughter, she transferred from the four year-university that she was attending to the community college nearby at the strong suggestion of her caseworker. It was not uncommon for the mothers in this pathway to downsize their educational goals after getting pregnant, as Jane did.

However, Daria, a 29 year old white mother of one, who also got pregnant while in school, continued attending the university she was at before getting pregnant. She also dealt with domestic violence and her partner’s escalating substance abuse just after she found out she was pregnant and ended up going on to welfare to stay in school and escape the violence:

It really surprised me that he wanted to have the baby, and that he wanted us to have the baby. And it was actually, he was saying, you don’t have to raise her, just have her, and I’ll raise her. Our relationship was not really that serious, I wasn’t really that interested in being that serious about him, because he is a heavy drinker. And not one of us were prepared, I’m not prepared, and he is not in any way kind of way to be a parent. But he was adamant, and he said, you know, I’ll get straight, I’ll clean up, I’ll move here to San Francisco, I’ll move in, you really can’t do this by yourself. And I really wasn’t interested in having him move in, I’ve never lived with a man before, I wasn’t interested in letting a man who isn’t really the most stable person in the world, and let him move into my house just because I am pregnant. That what ended up happening for three weeks, it was bad. Because he would disappear, or not go to work because he had been drinking all day, so, seven months pregnant, I had to [move out]... I found out that he was using, had started using crack cocaine. And I think it was right around that time of major crises, of finding out lots of stuff about his past that I didn’t know, that I wasn’t aware of until I was seven months pregnant. He had left Santa Cruz because he was involved in a theft of drugs and money, and because his life was in danger. I mean, just lots of stuff that you don’t ever want to hear about the father of your child’s being involved with, let alone feeling like I was forced to have this baby because he told me that I couldn’t put the baby up for adoption and

he was going to be in the place for the baby, and then he wasn't available to, and it never occurred to me that this was going to be this nightmare pregnancy, moving and being in school... I immediately went into survival mode, of okay, how are we going to do this. And I think I was seven and a half months pregnant, when I finally realized that adoption just wasn't going to work... And when I went down to CalWORKs, my intake officer was pretty good. She was young and pretty understanding, and then, to be honest with you, there was so much going on at that time, I was just on autopilot. I was just going, I knew I needed to do it, I knew I needed to be persistent about it, and I wouldn't take no for an answer, I kept calling back and saying, I don't know what this means, can you tell me what this means. I know that in life, if you are persistent enough, then you usually get your way, what you need. And I knew that my situation, was bad news, I got assigned to my caseworker, and ever since that it has been a dream. It has been an absolute dream. My caseworker is awesome.

One of the main reasons that Daria was able to stay in school at her university was her caseworker, who was very supportive of her education. Daria frequently mentioned in her interview that she thought she was a "special" welfare case and did not have a "typical" experience on welfare because of her race, and previous education, and her educational goals. She felt that in other circumstances that mothers are discouraged from pursuing educational goals or like Jane, are encouraged to downsize their goals to community college education.

Some of the mothers in this pathway were drifting along in low-wage jobs and going to school part-time at local community colleges. Three of the mothers, Nicole, Vanessa, and Marie, were both working and going to school part-time. Marie, a 30 year old white mother of two, related how she was going to school and working, but not really advancing in school until her oldest son was born:

When I finally found a job in [central valley city], I wound up enrolling in the [community] college...I think I attended about 3 semesters there. But it was when I was in [another central valley city], that's when I became pregnant with [my son]...when I was working at [a store at the mall], my supervisor says, you know, you should really go on welfare. But I did NOT want to go on welfare...and me and [my boyfriend] we'd always been on shaky ground with our relationship, but I was still attending college and everything...and I attended classes there at the

[central valley community college] I think for about 3 or 4 semesters, but they weren't consecutive semesters... Always part time, yeah, my entire junior college career was part time. Then after [my son] was born, I headed back to [an East Bay city], my dad offered to rent out the house that he had to me and my older sister. After [my son] was born I took a semester off, I think it was the summer, but then I wanted to go back right away and pick up on my education because I figured I'm not going to get any help from his father. So then I started back at [the local community college], I actually transferred from the [central valley community college] to [the local community college]... I think that was in the Spring of '97, which is when I finally came back to [the local community] college.

Marie eventually graduated from the community college and transferred to the University of California Berkeley, where she graduated a few years later. Applying for welfare allowed Nicole and Vanessa, as it did Marie, the opportunity to pursue education full-time, and having a child provided the motivation for these mothers to get serious about their education.

Alexis and Jade were both essentially homeless and had spotty work histories when they got pregnant. Alexis, a 25 year old Latina mother of one, got married and attended the University of California Berkeley right out of high school. However, after her divorce she moved to Miami to be closer to her mother. Alexis worked in customer service positions until she became pregnant from a very brief relationship, and then went onto welfare:

I was a customer service representative for [a local company for] wireless for almost two years, and then I got pregnant. So, I didn't want to work when I had my baby [so I applied for welfare]... I was a living on welfare and I was pretty much homeless, like I was bouncing from place to place, from one relative to another relative's house. And, I was living with my mom, but then my mom meet this guy, and he got in a fight with my sister, so then, my mom got up and left with him, and like I was pretty much stranded. So, I was just tired of going from one relative's house to another relative's house... And, I didn't feel like I wanted to be there, you know, that I was really welcome, so I figured might as well go back to UCB, because I left in good standing. And I knew that I was gonna be guaranteed a house or a place to live at, here, and then I wanted a better a future for [my daughter] and me. And then I was like, I might as well go back and get my degree and finish school. So that I can have a place to stay.

Alexis's decision to move back to the Bay Area and reenroll at UC Berkeley was primarily so that she could live in the lower-cost family student housing that the university offers. Although she did want to complete her education, her primary concern was about being homeless with an infant. However, like the other mothers in this pathway, the unexpected pregnancy encouraged her to consider how she planned to provide for herself and her child, which led her to apply for welfare and further pursue her higher education. As illustrated by the narratives of the mothers in this pathway, and like those in the teen pregnancy pathway, becoming a mother encourages them to take their education more seriously and gives meaning and structure to their goals, which now included providing for a baby.

Nonmarital births, especially those to low-income women, have been given a lot of attention by policymakers and increased recent research interest. Around one third of all children in America are born to parents who are not married, which is almost double the 1980 percent of nonmarital births. Although much attention is also given to teen pregnancy, only 27% of nonmarital births are to teen mothers (House Ways and Means Committee 2003). However, one of the explicit goals of the TANF policy is to reduce out-of-wedlock births, and Congress intended with the PRWORA bill to "initiate a national attack on nonmarital births" (House Ways and Means Committee 2003). This attention and subsequent funding for programs designed to decrease nonmarital births was initiated through funding for abstinence only education and marriage promotion policies. The marriage promotion policies were designed to encourage women on welfare to marry the fathers of their children by providing cash bonuses; yet, as discussed in Chapter 1, there were no bonuses available for women to pursue higher education.

However, these marriage promotion programs might not change the behavior of low-income women; Edin and Kefelas (2005) found that having children gives meaning to low-income women's lives and offers fulfillment in way that may not be available to them through marriages or professional careers. Furthermore, they found that low-income women believe in the middle-class ideals of marriage so strongly that they believe "that is it better to have children outside of marriage than to marry foolishly and risk divorce, for divorce desecrates the institution of marriage" (2005:207). So, the conservative rhetoric around "marriage promotion" may be working too well; low-income women believe so strongly in the institution that they have children outside marriage instead of rushing to marriage and risking divorce. As a pathway in this study, women choose to invest in their own human capital after having their children to ensure that—whether or not they get married in the future—they will be able to support themselves and their children.

Later-life Pregnancy

The last variation in the unexpected pregnancy pathway is later-life pregnancy. Unlike teen pregnancy, virtually no attention in the welfare literature has been paid to this pathway. The three women in this pathway have varied life-experiences leading up to applying for welfare and enrolling in higher education, but the common thread is that they had a later-life pregnancy, and afterwards were unable to regain their previous economic position. Although this pathway is similar to the unemployment pathway that will be discussed later in this chapter, these women were different because they were either comfortably middle-class before getting pregnant or had significantly more education than the mothers in the other two pregnancy-linked pathways. They applied for

welfare because they were having trouble regaining their previous economic position, and saw welfare as the opportunity to pursue a drastically different career. All three women were surprised that they got pregnant so late in life, and when they decided to keep their babies, they were unable to regain their economic positions after the birth.

Nancy, a 45 year old Latina mother of one, related how she came to apply for welfare and re-enroll in school:

So I ended up going to Loyola University in Chicago. So I finished my college over there, and then I came over [to the west coast], I went to law school for a year, and I hated it, it was just not what I wanted, I had colitis, there were all these other personal problems that came about, and then after that I came here to SF, I needed a change of pace, and when I came over to SF I loved it, and basically I just worked in the restaurant business.... Basically [then] how I had my child was, I had anonymous sex, basically. We did use birth control, we used a condom, and I still got pregnant. I saw him 2 times afterwards. He's very, very young. So I told him the situation, and I told him if he wanted to be in the situation fine, and if he didn't that was fine. From the time I knew I was pregnant I really did a lot of soul searching. I was 41 when I got pregnant, and I knew that this was probably going to be the last opportunity if ever I was going to have a child, so after a lot of soul searching I decided I was going to do it. For some reason this child is in my life, to wear a condom and still get pregnant and be my age, it's like, what are the odds? So I said, I know it's going to be hard, but I'm going to do it, and I expressed that to him, and I said if you want to be involved, fine, if you don't fine, but I don't want a part-time daddy....And I didn't want my child to be in that position, knowing her father, but why isn't dad here, so I said you're either in or out, but you're not half way in. And so he never showed up after that...I had my child then, and I just found out, I could not support my child with what I was making. Especially after 9-11 I was working as a bartender, my tips went from 100 to \$30 a day. Supporting a child, it was impossible. So I [went onto welfare and] decided that I was just going to go to [community] college, get a couple of skills under my belt, computer skills because I never learned to do any computer work, and from there it just slowly progressed into my becoming more involved in public health issues and community health, so I got a certificate as a community health outreach worker at City College, they offered those certificates there, I got one in HIV education outreach skills, HIV education and food facilitation...because my next step in education would be to get my Master's.

Dena's pathway onto welfare was very similar to Nancy's, in that she did not plan to get pregnant, was amazed to get pregnant at her age, and applied for CalWORKs to pursue a

different career. Unlike the mothers in the unexpected pregnancy pathway, who, like those that Edin and Ketzalas (2005: 37) interviewed, viewed their pregnancies “as ‘not exactly planned,’ yet ‘not exactly avoided’ either,” Dena and Nancy both discussed being surprised at getting pregnant despite their age and use of contraceptives.

Unlike the other two mothers in this pathway, Robin’s pregnancy was not unplanned. She had undergone a fertility procedure, which was covered by her health insurance, to unblock her fallopian tubes because she was having trouble getting pregnant. She was not married, but was in her late 30s and wanted to have children. So, despite not being in a serious relationship, Robin had unprotected sex with several boyfriends before getting pregnant two years after the procedure. She was upfront with all the men she was dating about her situation, and she did finally become pregnant. Shortly after she had her son, she moved to the Bay Area for a career opportunity that did not work out. So, she found herself living in San Francisco with a young child and unable to find employment in her field. She went onto welfare, because she was not eligible for unemployment, and found out that she could go back to school while on welfare. At that time, the welfare policy allowed her to pursue her Master’s in Social Work under a loophole that has since been eliminated. However, she was able to complete her MSW in two years and now works as a social worker for a public school system. Her experience, along with that of the other two mothers in this pathway, illustrates that previous higher education is not always a buffer to needing to use welfare. However, all three mothers believed in higher education enough to choose to pursue additional education when they found themselves on welfare after previously being economically secure. It is fairly rare for women who have Bachelor’s degrees to need

welfare; it is estimated that only around one percent of women on welfare have Bachelor's degrees (Gruber 1998). Having a Bachelor's degree usually prevents families from being low-income: only about 10% of low-income working heads of family are college graduates (Acs, Phillips, and McKenzie 2000b). However, for these women, having a later-life pregnancy temporarily off-set their educational achievements and they applied for welfare. However, once on welfare, each decided to pursue a different career path for which they needed an additional degree that they completed while on welfare.

Substance Abuse

Drug and alcohol abuse is another barrier to self-sufficiency and a common reason why low-income mothers turn to welfare. In a study of CalWORKs mothers in two California counties, around one fifth of those interviewed needed alcohol or drug dependence services, yet only one to five percent of those who needed them reported receiving those services (Chandler and Meisel 2002). In addition, alcohol and drug dependence are highly correlated with the need for mental health services; a third of welfare mothers from that study who identified themselves as alcohol or drug dependent, also met the criteria for needing mental health services. Findings from the National Household Survey of Drug Use found that 12% of TANF participant single mothers have alcohol (7.5%) or drug (4.5%) dependence (Pollack, Danziger, Seefeldt, and Jayakody 2002). However, alcohol and drug abuse is highly under reported and other research using nationally representative data suggests around 20% of TANF participants have drug or alcohol dependence or abuse issues (Pollack et al. 2002).

Not surprisingly then, the next most common pathway onto welfare and into higher education is recovery from substance abuse. Among the mothers that I interviewed, Betty, Sally, Trisha, Courtney, Jewel, Michelle, and Mindy followed this course. One additional mother, Rebecca, left her husband because of his severe substance abuse issues and went onto welfare and enrolled in higher education to escape his addiction. For the rest of the mothers, this pathway has two common variants, one where the mother's substance abuse led to her children being permanently removed from her custody (Michelle and Mindy) and one where the mother was able to regain (or retain) custody of her children after she was clean (Courtney, Jewel, Sally, Betty and Trisha). Substance abuse, like domestic violence, was experienced by more than just these participants; however, these mothers identified recovery from substance abuse as their primary pathway onto welfare and into higher education.

Betty, a 39 year old white mother of one, recently completed her Bachelor's degree at a local state university. She had been a drug addict for over 15 years before getting pregnant with her daughter at 32. Once her daughter was born, she realized that she needed to get clean in order to retain custody of her child. Her pathway, like others in recovery, had many twists and turns:

I sold drugs and robbed people and did a lot of bad stuff until I had [my daughter] and then when I had [her], they took her from me in the hospital when she was 2 days old and put her in foster care and told me if you don't get into a drug program and get your life together you'll never get your kid back. So I went to a program for a while it was an out patient's program called [name of program] in Oakland, I was still getting up and shooting speed every day and going to the drug program, nobody could even, I was very good at hiding my addiction, that was the thing...So I went back to court with my little [treatment program] binder, saying yeah, I'm still going, and I hadn't gone, I'd quit going for about a month and a half, so I'm sitting at the court in Berkeley, [my daughter] is at my friend's house which is where I'd been up all night partying, and I could tell they were calling the drug program, and I was like in my mind I'm debating, should I just leave, but

if I leave they're going to have a warrant out for my arrest, like I didn't know what to do. So I just stayed, of course they threw me in fucking jail.... I had never been to a regular jail, I had been to Berkeley jail, which they have cable TV and TV dinners (laughs), that's nothing compared to like a real jail, and what was hard. The judge said you need to find a drug treatment center, and for me I had to find on that I could bring my kid, or I wouldn't get my kid back...so my sister was the one that found [name of second treatment program] because I was like you have to find a program, [name of sister], that I can go and I can bring [my daughter]. And I had to do it fast. So I got lucky because my sister found [the treatment program] which was close to my mom's house in Oakland right where I grew up. I was able to go there, that's how I got on welfare. So they actually came and picked me up from [jail]. My sister met them, went to Berkeley court with them, they gave the papers to the judge so the judge said that I could get out of jail and go to [the treatment program], and this lady, [name of treatment center counselor] and one of the other girls that were in the drug program came and picked me up. I still remember, and drove me to Oakland and I didn't even have a blanket the first night, you have to get some of your own stuff, but I was able to apply for welfare, first time I was on welfare for me, and um...and that's where I remember I first learned about welfare reform too because while I was there somebody came, and I'm not even sure where she came from, but somebody had come and really talked about the changes, but nobody there really cared at the time...this is probably...January of '98...so they took me to the welfare office, I signed up for welfare, and I had to wait 30 days before [my daughter] could come with me because I guess a lot of times women get out of jail say they're going to go to a program and ditch the program. So I had to wait 30 days, so my mom and my sister were taking care of her at that point. And then I got to [treatment]. Like I said, I lived there for a year, and then I had to do, I think it was 7 months of outpatient, and part of what I had to do was enroll in school, and here I am.

Betty's path was similar to other recovering mothers' paths; the treatment program required her to apply for welfare and since she had not finished high school, required her to enroll in school. Betty's efforts to get clean were successful, and once in school, she found that she enjoyed it. She completed two Associate's degrees, her Bachelor's degree, and was currently finishing her Master's degree.⁴⁰ She wants to work with other mothers on welfare in recovery or pursuing higher education.

Jewel, a 37 year old white mother of one, had just finished her inpatient and outpatient drug treatment programs, a job training program, and was enrolling in an

Associate's degree program. She related how she was finally able to get clean and how she came to apply for welfare and enroll in school:

This is it. I'm done. I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired (laughs). So I put everything in storage, I moved out of my friend's house, my son went to stay with his dad and I tried to get into a program. So it takes 30 to 90 days to get into a program and I didn't know that. I thought I'd just go and get in tomorrow and it's ok, so I didn't end up getting in until August 10th, and then I find out it's a 90 day program so I have to make arrangements for my son to come back and stay with somebody who's clean...I signed over temporary custody, which was like, oh my god, because it's always been me and him and that's basically where all my drive comes from. He never saw me through my addiction and he didn't even know, I had to tell him I was on drugs...so when I told him he didn't believe me, he didn't know that that's what it was, he was like, no, and I said yes...I told him look, I was on drugs, this is what I did I started doing this when I was young and it escalated, I took acid, I did this I did this I told him the whole, I just laid it out. And he's like, ok. He's like, is that why you were so hard to get up in the morning? And I was like, yeah, that would be part of the reason. And so, but I never locked him in the bedroom so I could get high, I never locked him outside so I could get high we never got high with him in the room, I hear a lot of girls... not that it makes me better, I just isolated him more so it didn't take, um, because that was really important to me so that it didn't wear off on him. So it was a good thing that I had explained it to him that he didn't say, oh yeah, I already knew. You hear a lot of the people in the program say, I went to tell my child and they were like, oh, we already knew. And I was hoping that wasn't true and it was, he didn't know...So I told him about that stuff and I went through my program and that's when I heard about [the education program], and I thought that's great, something I could fall back on...you know, I need something that I can support my son today. So I decided to go into [the education program] and I laid out my plan, my case manager's like, you need to lay out a plan, tell me what you think you're going to do or what you want to do, so I said ok, this is what I'm gonna do, I'm going to do this and this and this and so he calls me his number one student, he says, because you do everything, you lay it out you know where you're going and then you do it. And then you follow through it. That's the best compliment anyone can give me because is that I follow through because I never did that before...I'm like, it's time to start thinking about the future hello, because the future is here. I got a little side tracked (laughs), but I'm doing much better now (laugh).

Jewel was much earlier along her path of recovery and education, but was optimistic that she would succeed. Jewel was fortunate that she was able to retain custody of her son

during her addiction and recovery process. However, not all mothers were able to keep their children through the process.

Two mothers in my study (Michelle and Mindy) permanently lost custody of their children due to their substance abuse. In both cases, there was also significant domestic violence which contributed to the loss of their children. Mindy, a 41 year old mother of two, recently finished her Associate's degree. She permanently lost custody of her oldest child due to her substance abuse and experience with domestic violence; she related how this impacted her life:

On 9/29/2006, I will share with you, I have 10 years recovery from an abusive addiction...My one son, who I love to brag about, is 14, he is legally adopted...he was removed from my custody, then was adopted out by the state of California...so when he turned 2 years old, my aunt became a foster mother, her and her husband became foster parents and decided to raise my son. At age 5 he was adopted through the state of California, they found prospective adoptive parents, and I have not seen him since age 5, and he's 14 today.

SK: And you said that you had struggled with substance abuse issues, is that why he was removed?

Yes, yes. And another part of that story is that they told me to let go of this man, and I didn't let go of him. Currently that was my daughter's father before I was pregnant with my daughter. I was living with this man, and, you know, the laws have changed so severe with reunification services, adoption, CPS, and all that. So I mean, years, back then, it was like, what are they going to do to me? So the reunification services are much different today than back then, and you know, a person can only get so many chances and they've gotta make a decision, and at that time, I honestly have to say there was too much in my life going on, and I was working, trying to get into the program, but I do have to say, once I let go of that man, it was the best thing on this earth. The best thing. Life started happening...That was my daughter's father...I broke up with him when my daughter was about a year, a year and a half...Well, in '98 I was 3 years sober, August of '98, August 13th, just about, my son was legally adopted through the State of California, September 17th I lost my job. '98 [and I had to go onto welfare]. So '98 was a really bad year...

SK: so that was the year you started school as well?

'99. January of '99. I started school.

Mindy's narrative sheds light on a darker aspect of the welfare reforms. After the 1996 welfare reform laws, many of the states also restructured their Child Protective Services (CPS) programs. CPS gets cash bonuses from the federal government for improving their adoption rate of foster children, so California's CPS significantly lowered the amount of time children are required to be separated from their parents, and in foster care, before being eligible for adoption. Children then can be permanently adopted out, severing a mother's legal rights, before the mother is stable enough to fight for custody. The mothers then have no legal rights or visitation to their children, which is what happened in Mindy's case. Although this policy changes does not relate directly to this study, this was experienced by two of the mothers in this pathway. Substance abuse was a major 'barrier' for these women to providing for their families. They discussed that, even though it was too late to regain custody of the children who were adopted out, by pursuing higher education, the mothers were trying to provide a future for the children they still had.

Fortunately in Trisha's case, she was able to regain custody of her children before they were eligible for adoption. Trisha, a late 40s black mother of four and community college student, dealt with ongoing domestic violence and severe addiction problems until the father of her youngest child was able to help her get clean:

Then somehow I got in contact with my husband now. He was in jail again. He had a raunchy past himself, and he kept telling me to get my life together cause he knew what I was doing and he had saw me, I mean this was my boyfriend at 15 years old, and that I needed to get my life together, you know. He would give me good sound advice. You know, you got good conversation when you're locked up. But anyhoot, he came, and when he got out of jail he came and lived with us, he got me off of crack cocaine, and taking care of my boys, and he always promised that he would be their dad, no matter what...And, I had, knowing that [he] was just abstinent from crack cocaine too, so starting using again. And I got

pregnant and had a baby, and wow, my son died, he lived for 7 months, then I had a girl baby [daughter's name]. And, [my boyfriend] and I we lived together, he was on drugs for a good while, for years, and erm, (big pause) [he] would go in and out of jail. He would always get busted for some reason (laughs) but, it was finally my addiction had progressed, far worse than [his]...I would be out there and [he] never knew that I would prostitute and all of this to get drugs, and would always tell him, oh, I got this from somebody, or somebody gave me some money. I knew a lot of people, but I think, I never asked him or we'd never even talk about that part of our addiction, but I wondered if he knew that. But I think he does, I really think he does. But we'd just never talk about it. Let's see, I had [my daughter], my addiction had gotten so bad, [he] went to jail, he was the only one who could keep me sane, keep me from doing too much. He went to jail, man. By that time I was really strung out, I think at that time I wore maybe a size 7. And he went to jail. And my dad called CPS on me because I was leaving the kids, and not just for a few minutes I would leave them all night and come back in the morning, or some parts of that day, and I was really abusing the welfare money at this point. So my dad called CPS on me. And what he thought was that they'd take the kids, but they'd give them to him, but he couldn't get them since he was the person who initially made the phone call. So my kids were in the system. My mom's sister had my two boys, [my boyfriend's] mother had my daughter. So when [my boyfriend] came home from jail I was really, really scared. He came home from jail and he told me that I needed a program, what I needed to do and that he would go with me. We got high for well, maybe a year, my kids were in the system for a year, no I take that back, maybe two years, and then I actually went into a program. And um, CPS kept telling me all I needed was six months in a program and it would all be ok. And actually it ended up being like 22 months.

SK: You were in a program for 22 months?

In patient, residential, actually. So, after than I went to transitional living for 11 months. Um, got my kids back, but the hurtenest part was that my oldest boy, [name], he didn't want to come back with me at first, it took him like 4 months. 4 months to come back... And so I maxed out of the CPS program, got my kids back...

SK: And when did you first apply for welfare?

Right after I got all the kids back. CPS actually gave me the paper work to take to them to let them know that they were in my custody again. Because they were in my custody when they were taken, I mean I was on aid when they were taken from me, so they stopped the aid, and so CPS had to give me this authorization paper saying that the kids were back in my custody.

Shortly after she got her kids back, Trisha enrolled in a substance abuse counseling

Associate's degree program at a local community college. As in Trisha's case, those who

identify as recovering from substance abuse often have extensive experiences with Child Protective Services, most of them citing those experiences as negative. Along with recovery from substance abuse, many also experienced significant domestic violence and mental health issues, as Trisha and others mention in their narratives. Speiglman (2008) names drug and alcohol dependence as the most important of the ‘high impact barriers’ to employment, which along with domestic violence/partner control and mental health (the other two high impact barriers) significantly decrease a mother’s likelihood of working once leaving welfare. CalWORKs often addresses alcohol and drug dependence, domestic violence, and mental health issues by placing the participant on a waiver from participating in welfare-to-work programs. Once on a waiver, some participants are blocked from voluntarily participating in those welfare-to-work programs, which includes pursuing higher education. Therefore, participants with drug and alcohol dependency, experiences with domestic violence, and mental health problems are often strongly discouraged or overtly blocked from pursuing higher education by their caseworkers. This can make this pathway one of the most difficult because of the bureaucratic challenges that occur in addition to the personal challenges that overcoming drug and alcohol dependence, dealing with domestic violence or mental health problems present. Speiglman (2008) recommends that counties reverse those policies that prevent parents who are on waivers from pursuing education and training programs.

Unemployment

The next pathway is experience with unemployment. Although some of the mothers in this pathway had an unexpected pregnancy, they continued to work and did

not apply for welfare until they experienced a long spell of unemployment. As discussed at length in Chapter 1, many women who pursued education while on welfare were previously vulnerable in the labor market due to limited education and many were in jobs that barely paid more than welfare. However, as their narratives will show, until they lost their jobs, they were managing to get by, although most were living paycheck to paycheck. As McKernan and Ratcliffe (2002) found in their study of transition events that lead to poverty, unemployment is the most common event associated with entering poverty, and 40% of their participants entered poverty after a member of the household lost their job. For single mothers, there is no other wage earner in the household, so when they lose their job, there is no cushion. Also, many single mothers are in industries that were hardest hit by the recession in 2001 and those industries continued to lose jobs until late in 2003; this caused the unemployment rate of single mothers, many of whom have limited education, to remain high (Boushey and Rosnick 2004). Therefore, the women in this pathway turned to welfare after they were laid off or downsized. Six mothers—Lele J., RBS, Misha, Monique, Barbara, and Mariposa—followed this pathway. All of the mothers, except Mariposa, graduated from high school and went to work immediately. Some also had prior community college experience, but for the most part were working and surviving before they were laid off, and were unable to find another job after their unemployment. They became unemployed for a variety of reasons: companies relocating (Monique and Mariposa), companies going out of business or drastically downsizing (Lele J, RBS and Misha), or being self-employed in an economic downturn (Barbara).

Misha's story was typical of their experiences. Misha, a 29 year old black mother of one, when asked what led up to her applying for welfare, replied:

Um, being broke. My unemployment ran out and I was really thinking that I would find a job. I mean I never had a hard time finding a job, never, I was always the person like was I lost my job, I'll get a job next week. And then when this didn't happen, it was just was like, I have to go do this, but to me, that is the most degrading thing that you can do.... I came to Chabot to further myself. I have worked ever since I graduated from high school... I just got tired of getting laid off. And I said this is the time for me to just go back to school.

Misha was unable to find a job after being laid off; after recession, Boushey and Rosnick find that low-income single mothers were among the first to be laid off, and when they lost their jobs, had a harder time finding re-employment than the average worker (2004). Although Misha had in the past been able to find another job quickly, the economic conditions changed and made her unemployment stint more difficult to overcome, particularly given her level of education.

Like Misha, Mariposa was working a job that was allowing her to get by until she was laid-off when the company relocated; she was seven months pregnant:

I worked in the Montgomery Ward business office and then at Bank of America. I got that job through an agency, a temp to hire situation to deal with the 2000 millennium turnover. Then they were hiring within, so I applied-I interviewed for customer service but was hired as an ATM troubleshooter with credit card machines...The departments combined for helping customers with statements. Then I moved out of customer service to working with interactive online banking. The department was being taken over by another company-they moved to Seattle and laid everyone off with severance packages. I was 7 months pregnant and the health insurance did cover the birth. Then when the severance ran out, I went on unemployment. That lasted two years then I applied for CalWORKs when it ran out.

Mariposa enrolled in classes at the community college, shortly after going on welfare, at the urging of her caseworker and best friend. The women in this pathway viewed enrolling in school and pursuing higher education as a way to decrease their chances of experiencing extended unemployment in the future. They felt more vulnerable in the workplace than their coworkers who had more extensive education, and in their

narratives related experiences of being directly passed over in favor of coworkers with degrees. Therefore, when they were unable to find another job while on unemployment, they applied for welfare when their unemployment benefits ran out and enrolled in school. This pathway is most consistent with the human capital approach to poverty. By increasing their human capital, these mothers hoped that they would be able to get better jobs to support their families. While in the other pathways the human capital approach to poverty could also be cited, in this pathway, this is the mothers' main focus. Their experiences have led them to conclude that they need additional education to prevent future unemployment and to become economically stable. The role of education is crucial for low-income parents, even when in two parent families, as discussed below.

Unmarried Partners with a Crisis of Care

The issue of marriage for low-income mothers is one that has created tremendous debate over the last 15 years, as discussed in Chapter 1. Marriage is often cited as a key way to decrease poverty for low-income woman. However, not all women who are in long-term committed relationships believe that marriage will solve their economic problems. In addition, research shows that many women bear children outside of marriage because of a decrease in the stigma attached to these births (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Cherlin, Cross-Barnett, Burton, and Garrett-Peters 2007). The last pathway I describe is one in which the mother and father were living together, but were not married and they experienced a crisis of care. Nicole C. and Lucy have each been with a partner for many years, having children and living together, but not getting married. Their paths led them to welfare when they were unable to make ends meet as a family caring for

young children, so the woman went onto welfare, while the man worked for unreported cash. This option was available to the couple *because* they were unmarried. If they had been married, they would not be eligible for welfare because their combined income would be too large.

Lucy, a 30 year old Latina mother of three, had been working part-time and going to the local state university for several years until her youngest son was born with health issues. She stopped going to school, continued working part-time, and took care of her son. Her partner was the father of her three sons and she has been with him since she was 14, but they were not married. He was recently injured on the job. She applied for welfare after he lost his job because they needed the extra income and the child care benefits that come with welfare. Once her son's health improved, she decided it was time to finish her last few classes to earn her Bachelor's degree:

Basically my sons' father has been in and out of jobs ever since the budget cuts. He used to be security on loan [like rent-a-cop], and he hurt his back from a moving company. So he's been out of work and it was hard for him to find a new job because most security jobs need a guard card. And he didn't want to go back into the moving company to qualify, because I wasn't working...As far as me, I had many obstacles [when I applied for welfare] because they didn't want to give me day care, they didn't want to approve my school because I had to get it approved by them, although...I was basically 7 classes from finishing [the Bachelor's degree]. Um, so basically um it was for me kind of ludicrous, but they had to give me, I had to get their special permission to continue with my career objective, it was just really, I mean, I took their, luckily, my worker kind of gave me a hassle, and I was like: I need to speak to your supervisor then because I'm not going through no 8 week training either, I don't need that, so when I met up with the supervisor, they were very nice, I didn't argue with them because I know that doesn't get you anywhere but I told them that I'm not going to do that, I can't do that and I need a day care.... I had said that I wanted to be a probation officer and it was only approved because I'm so far already in school they would never have approved a BA program. So, it was approved and I was given finally day care coverage in the summer 2005 I guess.

However, Lucy planned to marry her partner once she was done with school and they were both working and financially able to host a wedding. She would like to have a small ceremony in a park with a celebration for friends and family. Although she claimed that she did not want a ‘big’ wedding, she was explicit in her description of a ‘proper’ wedding: she wanted more than a justice of the peace ceremony at the county courthouse. As Edin and Kefalas (2005:115) discuss, “hosting a ‘proper’ wedding is a sign that the couple only plans to do it once, given the obvious financial sacrifice required” and that a “wedding is a vivid display that the couple has achieved enough financial security to do more than live from paycheck to paycheck, a stressful situation that most believe leads almost inevitably to divorce.” Although Lucy and her partner have been together almost fifteen years and have three children together, they planned to marry after they were more financially secure, which is a practice documented by other research (Edin and Kefalas 2005).

The other mother in this pathway, Nicole C., had a similar narrative, with child care at the heart of why she needed welfare. Nicole C., a 35 year old white mother of two, and her partner were both pursuing Associate’s degrees but having trouble finding child care for her two toddlers while she and her partner were in class. She went to a resource fair at the suggestion of an advocate on campus and found out about CalWORKs:

So we went to the resource fair and found out about CalWORKs and everything. So, and then I can go to school full time, and then they would help with child care and all of this stuff, so it’s like that’s what I’m going to do. So I had talked to somebody downstairs [in the campus CalWORKs office] because I had gone there before previously and applied and they had told me no, you can’t go to school, no you can’t do this, you can’t do that, no, no, no, no. They just told me no to everything, so I was just like, ok, what’s the use. I don’t want you to just give me some money today and that’s it’s not going to fix the problem, I need to be able to do things myself. So the resource center here and the resource fair just gave me a lot of connections with people and through that they told me about the talk line

and all kinds of places that I had no idea about. So then I applied for CalWORKs, and I went back, and I was like ok, but knowing that I could tell them no, this is what you need to do for me because I know, now, that it's my right.

Nicole C., similarly to Lucy, considered marrying her partner in the future, but that was not a high priority at the moment. Nicole C. was more concerned about providing for her children to have food to eat, a safe place to live, and completing her education. There were actually more economic opportunities for these mothers because they are not married, which helped them deal with a 'crisis of care' in ways that are not available to low-income married couples. They used the identity of "single parent" to gain access to resources when necessary, but in other instances, they used the power of having a man in the house to look like a traditional family and access resources available to the 'deserving' poor. Many of the mothers in the study had their boyfriends or children's fathers living with them, but Nicole C. and Lucy followed a more traditional family formation route of being with a partner, moving in together, and then planning for children. In many ways they mirror many working class families, but they just happen to not be married. This allowed the woman to apply for welfare in tough economic times to help support the family and provide free child care. Although much of the welfare rhetoric focuses on women marrying their children's fathers, Lucy and Nicole C. both recognize the marriage penalty that is inherent to welfare policy. If they married their partner, their welfare benefits would be recalculated. For only about \$100 increase in monthly grant, they would have to double their required weekly work participation hours and lose access to child care. In most cases, the welfare policies' emphasis on marriage seems hollow to women trying to make ends meet. It penalizes married recipient families,

and leaves many opting instead for cohabitation in order to survive (Hays 2003; Edin and Kefalas 2005).

Conclusion

These five pathways—domestic violence, substance abuse, unexpected pregnancy, unemployment, and unmarried partners—illustrate the primary ways that the mothers in this study came to apply for welfare and enroll in higher education. Although their narratives can be complex and their routes winding, these pathways demonstrate the central elements to how these low-income mothers come to pursue higher education while in the welfare system. Some of the pathways in this chapter are also present in other studies of how women come to apply for welfare; yet, this is the first study to examine the pathways that mothers took to the intersection of applying for welfare and enrolling in higher education. The pathways could be viewed through the ‘barriers’ lens that is often applied to welfare participants—by examining barriers to employment for these women. However, for these mothers, their education is so important to them that they view their experiences as crucial trail markers that led them to their current educational path. So, their histories were not ‘barriers’ to them, but instead were important events along their path that eventually led them to seriously pursuing an education, even if while on welfare. Furthermore, as will be discussed in Chapter 7, one of the primary policy suggestions offered by mothers in this study illustrates their critique of the barriers research: these women suggest that the welfare policy have more flexibility and a better recognition of mothers’ individual paths to self-sufficiency. They suggested that policymakers create a welfare policy that accommodates mothers’ distinct

experiences. If this happens, participants felt that women would leave welfare more quickly, especially for those who were pursuing higher education. As I will explore in the next chapter, their pathways once they are pursuing higher education while on welfare are not easy, and the mothers create survival narratives to explain how they stay in school.

CHAPTER IV

‘JUST GIVE US A CHANCE TO GET AN EDUCATION:’ CALWORKS MOTHERS’ SURVIVAL NARRATIVES AND STRATEGIES

Betty, who was raised on welfare after her mother had her at 15, had been in and out of school since her sixth grade graduation, and finally dropped out of high school after she got her first job. She moved out of her mom’s house, in with some friends, and started taking drugs shortly afterwards. Over the next ten years her use and addiction escalated, but she worked off and on in the service industry. Along her path, as discussed in the last chapter, she got pregnant, had her daughter, was jailed and had her two-day-old daughter taken away from her. With the support of her family, Betty sought out treatment, and first enrolled in a community college as a requirement of her drug treatment facility, which also helped her get onto welfare. Despite never graduating from high school, Betty completed two Associate’s degrees, and gained enough confidence in her academic abilities that she transferred to a local state university. Notwithstanding her learning disability, Betty completed her Bachelor’s degree and started her Master’s degree. Through all of this Betty participated in the CalWORKs system and worked part-time as an advocate helping other mothers.

A white, 39 year old mother of one, Betty explains: "survival to me means knowing that I will be able to pay my rent and bills to have a roof over our heads, be able to go to school and deal with the welfare system, and stay sane and not get depressed as I get through this whole process." Since the current welfare policy explicitly limits higher education, women must learn how to survive the system in order to complete their

education. To Betty, and the other CalWORKs mothers who participated in this study, survival means engaging in whatever activity they can to provide for them and their children, within their moral framework, while using available resources to complete school and participate in the welfare system. CalWORKs mothers construct “survival narratives” to give meaning to their struggles to pursue higher education while on welfare. The Oxford English Dictionary defines survival as “the continuing to live after some event.” In this case, the survival narratives of CalWORKs mothers are their narratives about pursuing higher education after the implementation of the 1996 welfare reform laws. This chapter focuses on those narratives.

Studying the narratives that mothers construct about pursuing higher education while participating in the welfare system is useful for examining systems of oppression and exploring how current welfare policy necessitates these narratives. Riessman (1993:5) finds that for “the sociologically oriented investigator, studying narratives is additionally useful for what they reveal about social life—culture ‘speaks itself’ through an individual’s story” and “it is possible to examine gender inequalities, racial oppression, and other practices of power that may be taken for granted by individual speakers.” However, the “survival narratives” presented here are different from other “survival of poverty” stories because of these women’s unique position of trying to change their economic status by pursuing higher education while on welfare.⁴¹ These are not the “typical” poverty stories of trying to find jobs at higher wages or enduring spells of unemployment. Many of the women in my study tried the ‘work first’ route, but were still poor while working or quickly returned to welfare because of their vulnerable status in the labor market. Since these ‘work first’ strategies were not successful, they believe

pursuing higher education will make them less vulnerable in the labor market, a belief robustly supported by research (Gittell et al. 1993; Jones-DeWeever and Gault, 2006; Mathur 2004; Gruber 1998; Deprez and Butler 2001). These survival narratives are significant because mothers on welfare pursuing higher education are severely penalized by the welfare system for being so “motivated” while on welfare, and must fight every step of the way to stay in school. Oftentimes described by policymakers as the most “motivated” of the women on welfare,⁴² these mothers are attempting to change their economic status and position in the social structure by enrolling in higher education for the limited time that they are eligible for welfare benefits. They have to survive their attempts to change economic status and they construct survival narratives to give meaning to their struggles.

Furthermore, these survival narrative are significant because, as Hays (2003:139) found in her research with mothers on welfare, the women in her research would survive with or without welfare, but they were interested in telling their stories not to “convince listeners that they were worthy of continued welfare receipt” but instead, “with the hope that they would be recognized not simply as a composite of clichés, but as whole persons.” Through telling their stories about welfare, poverty, and higher education, the women in my study are striving to be recognized as ‘whole persons,’ who are allowed to dream and strive for the same opportunity that many other Americans desire—a higher education.

In addition, the survival narratives and the on-the-ground strategies employed by the mothers are consistent with the idea of “hidden transcripts” that James Scott discusses in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990). Scott (1990:21) contends that “like

most large-scale structures of domination, the subordinate group has a fairly extensive offstage social existence which, in principle, affords it the opportunity to develop a shared critique of power.” Constructing narratives about their survival strategies has two primary purposes. One, through their ‘extensive offstage existence,’ the mothers network with other mothers to develop and share a wide range of survival strategies. Two, through their survival narratives, the mothers “develop a shared critique of power” which conveys the irony of welfare reform: the ‘reform’ created a system that necessitates survival strategies—and the narratives that accompany those strategies—of its most motivated participants.

This chapter explores how mothers outline the costs of pursuing higher education while on welfare through constructing “survival narratives” that give meaning to their experiences. They also discuss how they implement survival strategies that help them persevere through school. Finally, they examine how their survival strategies give them a lens through which to critically assess TANF implementation.

Costs of Survival

Surviving in school post-welfare reform has real costs to mothers on welfare. In their survival narratives, mothers discussed the multiple personal costs of pursuing a higher education while in the welfare system. These costs include sacrifices of their mental health, greater financial aid debt, and lost time with their families. The primary personal cost of going to school while on welfare was damage to their mental health. Participants led very stressful, fragile lives, and attending school while on welfare took a toll. Jasmine was a 39 year old who identifies her ethnicity as white/Latina, is a mother of

three and domestic violence survivor who recently completed her Associate's degree. She revealed:

I suffer from extreme anxiety and depression, and the depression kicked in shortly after I got on welfare...I find it extremely challenging and every day is like a delicate balance for me to sustain this momentum...it's creating tremendous extreme anxiety and stress upon me. So to be honest with you, it would be a hell of a lot easier, people, if I went out and found a decent job than go to school and do all the things that I do in my life. But unfortunately there's no work out there for someone with my qualifications right now, so I have to take the long road and have to juggle a delicate balance in my life every day.

Nicole C, a 35 year old, white mother of two toddlers who was pursuing an Associate's degree, also described the impact on her mental health:

I just don't think it should be this much of a stress and this difficult to just do, I mean you have x amount of time [on welfare], right, they tell you, you only have this much time, so why are you trying to sabotage the time that I have? I feel that I get headaches, I don't sleep at night because I'm worried about stuff, I'm stressed out because of all these notices that I get saying you're going to get cut off, you're not getting this, not getting this, no housing, no childcare... And it only makes sense to me logically that if I can get through this short time here, then I won't need [welfare] again. And it'll make me better, it'll make my kids better, it'll make, everything will benefit for it, so why are you making it so difficult?... And it's hard for me to do that because I feel like a failure...it really seems as though you're just trying to run me into the ground, so I quit, and it's really frustrating. I mean, I cried...because it's ridiculous...they say that they're helping people, but if you were truly helping people then they would be better off afterwards instead of (pause), I don't know, it's really frustrating...I think we come out a lot stronger and everything in the end...but that's only if we make it, and I know that I'm really determined, and I know that this is my only chance, and I know that. And so I'm trying everything I can to make it, I'm trying to be patient, and I'm trying to...and it's so hard.

Nicole C. and Jasmine, and most of the other women interviewed, struggled with the cost to their mental health, wondering if they should quit school. These mothers identified the emotional cost of being in school as severe and detrimental to their mental health, but they believed that if they can survive this time in school, they would have greater opportunities in the labor market to benefit them and their families. In addition, as will be

further explored in Chapter 5, the women who finished school cited increased self-esteem as one of the meanings of their education. Therefore, while in school, the mothers struggled with their mental health, but once they finished, many felt that their self-esteem increased.

Another personal cost of going to school while in the welfare system was incurring significant financial aid debt. Mothers rely on financial aid and loans to pay educational and living expenses; however, many types of federal and state educational financial aid do not cover additional costs for students who have dependent children (Spatz, et al. 2000). Michelle, a 29 year old, white mother of one, who was pregnant with her second child while enrolled in community college, disclosed that she and her daughter were actually going hungry until her financial aid check came: “So I’m kind of struggling on the food side right now because I’ve still got the same amount of money, I’ve only been surviving because I’ve recently got my school money, so that’s kind of balancing me out.” Student financial aid, whether from grants or loans, is often cited by the women as critical to their financial survival. However, financial aid checks, like welfare grants, are often late, smaller than anticipated, or are loans that create substantial debt that the mothers will eventually have to repay.

Furthermore, the systems of financial aid and welfare do not always integrate as required by regulations (Kates 1991). In most cases, state or federal financial aid for education does not count as income; therefore, financial aid should not affect the amount of a welfare cash grant. In practice, how these systems interact is left to the individual caseworkers in the welfare system and the individual financial aid officers at each campus. Each of these line staff can be wholly unfamiliar with the rules and regulations

of the other system and much misinformation is generated (Rees 2006). Unfortunately, this misinformation has a real cost to the already vulnerable mothers who are in or attempting to go to school while on welfare. Jewel, a 37 year old, white mother of a teenage son and a recovering drug addict, was in the process of enrolling in a local community college. She related her struggle between welfare and financial aid: “As soon as [the welfare system] hear you’re getting [financial aid] money they cut you off. Which don’t make no sense to me because we don’t even have enough money to survive on.” Although this was not “supposed” to happen, often the welfare system counted financial aid as “income” and decreased participants’ welfare cash grants. The participants who know this was not “supposed” to happen often fought the mistake with caseworkers to have their welfare grants reinstated. However, like many caseworkers, some mothers in this study also did not know the exact regulation; and this misinformation could have discouraged others from pursuing education.

The struggle between time with their children and study time is another cost of survival for the mothers. One often comes at the expense of the other. Courtney, a 28 year old, white community college student, examines her struggle between time with her son and time for her homework:

I’m losing time with my son. All the reading and all the homework doesn’t mean anything, because how are you going to get there unless you do it? You have to do it. If you’ve made up your mind that you’re going to go to school, then you have to make up your mind that this is what you’re going to do. So the major disadvantage is not being with my son as much, always having to shoo him away because I’m in the middle of a paragraph. I mean that’s tough. So I mean balancing that is tough, because my son is important, but also is school.

Courtney’s struggle revealed what was felt by most of the mothers interviewed: going to school on welfare created a daily battle in which mothers must decide between their own

school work and time with their children. Although this conflict was not unfamiliar to any mother in school and/or working, because of the precarious balance women on welfare must achieve to stay in school, their struggle between time with their children and time for studying was perhaps more acute. While the mothers acknowledged that there were costs to being a parent while in school on welfare, they constructed their narratives of survival to give meaning to their struggle and empower themselves to keep going in a system that is convinced that they will fail.

Constructing Survival Narratives

In their narratives, mothers examined their efforts to stay in school and discussed how they responded to the multiple problems they experienced in their daily lives. Their narratives of survival are both personal ‘hidden transcripts’ in that they were the messages that they tell themselves to convince themselves to persevere, and through this study, these hidden transcripts become public narratives of survival. These mothers identified the varied techniques they used to survive, and constructed their narratives by convincing themselves that failure is not an option, guarding against losing themselves, accessing available resources, outsmarting the system, and doing whatever is necessary to make ends meet. Often they have to survive one day at a time. These are the common themes that appeared throughout the mothers’ narratives of survival. Many times several of these themes appeared simultaneously interwoven in the mothers’ narratives, and the complexity of this will be illustrated in the discussion below. Betty’s narrative exemplified her determination to finish school: “Sometimes I feel as though I’ve been struggling for so long and it’s never going to get better and not just I should say fuck it,

but I keep telling myself, Betty, you have made it this far, you've got into this program, you're not as smart as some of the other people there, but I just have to remind myself maybe I'm smarter in other ways and I have more experience, so I just have to keep saying that and I know that I've come this far and I can't give up, but you know, it's hard." In Betty's survival narrative she reminded herself of how far she has come, and that she must continue because failure was not an option. She acknowledged her frustrations and her daily struggle, but she used her narrative as a motivation to push herself forward toward her goal of completing her degree.

Another mother, T, a black mother of three and community college student, expressed her determination to finish school as quickly as possible because of her animosity towards the welfare system: "You have to have a strong will. I am determined that this is what I am going to do, it is not at all easy, it's not. I hate it every day, but I guess that I hate it enough that I want to hurry up and get finished with it." Her discussion of getting finished with school, and the struggles that it entailed, illustrated her strong will and determination not to fail, but it also demonstrated another aspect of the narratives: guarding against losing yourself. T expressed her aversion for the welfare system because of its intrusion into her life.

Like T, Sydney, a black mother of three who recently finished her Bachelor's degree and was now working full-time in her field and off welfare, warns against losing yourself in the welfare system: "I'd say it is worth whatever fight that you have to put up to finish school. And in whatever degree that you decide to be in. Be it however you have to work the system, don't lose yourself because of the welfare system, because it is easy to do. It's easy to lose what you want and who you are in the welfare system." Sydney

focused on her determination to stay in school, yet she warned “don’t lose yourself because of the welfare system.” Interactions with the welfare system and pressures to choose between welfare and their educational goals force many of the mothers to make hard decisions, often at the expense of their self-esteem, personal goals, or core beliefs. Throughout her experience on welfare, Sydney struggled with the welfare system to stay in school and major in accounting, since caseworkers tried to force her to change majors or quit school. Her technique for guarding against “losing yourself” focused on mothers remembering their values and determination to accomplish their educational goals, while at the same time resisting the welfare system’s idea of what women on welfare should aspire to do.

In their narratives, the mothers’ determination and belief that failure was unacceptable was crucial to accessing the resources they needed to survive. For Angela, a 19 year old Latina community college student with an infant, her survival narrative included advice to other students on welfare. She illustrated her determination to find and utilize resources as key elements to her survival: “To not give up. Just, I mean, look, people might push you away, say they can’t help you, there is some people who will tell you that they can’t help you, when they can help you. You just need to move and ask the next person, just don’t give up with the person. Check your resources, move on to the next person. If someone won’t help you, you are bound to click with somebody else. Somebody is bound to give you that helping hand. You can’t give up. Because if you give up, you give up on yourself.” Through Angela’s emphasis on finding available resources, she encouraged mothers to persist in order to locate the wherewithal they needed to survive. Angela’s comments combine three elements of the survival narratives: she

determined that failure is not an option, so she must persevere to discover the necessary resources, and she must stay on guard against losing herself to the welfare system.

Michelle, in her determination to finish school, highlighted these elements again and an additional element of the survival narratives: outsmarting the system. “(Going to school) has to do with your dedication and determination. If you think you can do it, you can do it. And there are resources out there, but you have to know the ins and outs.”

Outsmarting the system, for mothers, included not only learning the rules and regulations, but also the loopholes—as Michelle put it, ‘the ins and outs’—in the welfare system in order to pursue a higher education. As Michelle pointed out, finding and gaining access to available resources was related to outsmarting the welfare system. Sometimes the resources that mothers accessed were external to the welfare system; sometimes they were internal to the system. Therefore, their narratives included ways to navigate and outsmart the welfare system in order to obtain needed resources.

Dena, a 42 year old, white mother of one completing her last semester of her Associate’s degree, talked about how she learned to outsmart the welfare system despite its labyrinth of ever-changing rules which created new obstacles for her:

I’ve gotten smarter and I’ve seen how it works. I’m doing what is necessary for me to get where I am, because I don’t feel like I have them supporting me, at all. I feel more like they’re going, ok, we’re going to take this and this, because I went through that with them a little bit and I’ve seen how they are. And I’m like, ok, I have to be smarter, and I have to be smarter than the system. Right now, and the more that you try to get like this they pull and they change the rules. You start to go in this direction they’re going to try to pull back and change the rules again...It’s really hard. I feel that they make it more difficult than it needs to be...some people just give up because school’s hard enough alone, you don’t need extra stress from a service that’s supposed to be there supporting you. And you know, it happens way too much and way too often, and that’s I think is the most frustrating.

Sometimes survival was as straightforward as using available resources or learning to outsmart the system; sometimes in order to survive, mothers contemplated and/or engaged in illicit activities to make ends meet. These activities included taking a cash paying job, not reporting finances correctly to the welfare office, dealing drugs, stripping, prostitution, or selling food stamps. However, most of the women in this study who mentioned illegal activity were just contemplating it, while discussing their feelings of being entrapped into making hard survival decisions.⁴³ Misha, a 29 year old, black mother of one, pursuing her Associate's degree, speculated on making ends meet in any way necessary: "But I have contemplated, can I be a stripper, I knew, I mean, I contemplated, and then I think about, I know that I couldn't be a prostitute, I know that is wrong, but, I do need this money, because of my daughter...what am I gonna to do, what can I do? So, all these like degrading thoughts come through your head, like what can I do?" Misha's struggle to make ends meet led her to consider stripping for cash or even prostitution just to be able to provide for her daughter, pay her rent, and stay in school. Many mothers interviewed discussed making ends meet, in ways that are not approved by the welfare system, just to be able to survive while continuing their education. Their narratives demonstrate their "hidden transcripts," as Scott (1990) calls them, which portray an intimate struggle with these hard choices in order to stay in school.

These narratives also emphasized surviving one day at a time. The concept of long term survival often seems ephemeral and the idea of surviving for "this time" was woven throughout the survival narratives. The mothers discuss needing to survive this day, this semester, or just this period that they were on welfare. They held onto the belief that they will have a better life soon or after they graduate. Betty focused on dealing with

a semester at a time: “I focus on getting through each semester by dealing with all my paperwork, everything for welfare, all the financial aid paperwork, so that at least I know I can make it through *this* semester. And then I deal with next semester, *next semester*.” Her narrative illustrates the importance for these women of getting through a finite amount of time, and worrying later about what is to come. Her statements reflected feeling overwhelmed when she considered all of the obstacles that she must overcome to finish her education. Her coping strategy was to focus on a manageable amount of time to endure her daily struggles.

D, a 46 year old black mother of three who was finishing her Associate’s degree, gave this advice: “The biggest tip that I’d give you or anyone is that it’ll pass. Everything seems so real for the moment...you hear all these things, it’ll pass. Don’t freak out. It’ll pass. You’re going to get what you need, just don’t let that control you, you control it.” This advice by D and Betty focused not only on how to survive one day at a time, or one semester at a time, but also illustrated the theme of not losing yourself.

These aspects of women’s survival narratives—convincing themselves that failure is not an option, guarding against losing themselves, accessing available resources, outsmarting the system, doing whatever is necessary to make ends meet, and taking one day at a time—illustrated how the mothers struggled within a welfare system that was intentionally designed to discourage their educational goals. By constructing their narratives, women were telling themselves and others like them how to survive to finish school.

Survival Strategies

The mothers constructed their survival narratives to give meaning to their experience, but they must also materially survive day to day and provide for their families. Participating in the welfare system does not provide adequate resources for mothers who are pursuing higher education. Participants often talked about the barriers they encountered and listed what they need to survive. The women's survival through school focused on meeting the basic needs of their families, meeting their own and their families' emotional and physical health requirements, and also meeting their needs as students, such as allowing time to study and do their homework. The needs that the mothers faced can be divided into five basic categories: physical and material, which includes housing, utilities, food, cash, clothing, transportation; educational, which includes books and supplies, tutoring, remedial assistance, study time or space, access to technology or a computer, and accommodations for learning dis/abilities; health, which includes access to ongoing health care for themselves and their children, dental and eye care, and accommodation for physical disabilities; emotional, which includes therapy, support groups or networks, sense of belonging or contact with other student parents or low-income students, and accommodations for mental health issues; and family, which includes ongoing child care, drop-in or sick child care, and family-friendly study options. In addition, student needs were greatest at the beginning and end of the semesters, because these were the times when students were dealing with a tremendous amount of paperwork and negotiations with caseworkers and counselors, adjusting to new schedules and classes, meshing their child care needs to their new schedules, and had increased educational materials needs such as new books and supplies for the semester. The August

'back to school' phenomenon was particularly hard because mothers and their children both had all of these increased needs, on a finite amount of family resources. This time was also problematic for caseworkers, who were not often situated to handle the increased amount of paperwork and needs that families had.

The mothers identified the multiple resources they used simultaneously to pursue higher education. These resources included public assistance from the county or state, including CalWORKs, food stamps, section 8, MediCal, SSI, child support enforcement, and sometimes help from supportive caseworkers or supervisors. Mothers used campus resources such as the EOPS/CARE or CalWORKs counselors, career counselors, tutoring centers, library resources, supportive faculty, and student parent campus centers. Additionally, local community organizations provided a variety of resources through churches, nonprofits, charities, advocacy or grassroots groups. Furthermore, many relied on financial aid assistance and this aid can come from federal, state, campus, work study, and private scholarships. Finally, immediate and extended family or children's father(s) helped fill in the remaining gaps by providing money and more intangible resources such as time and emotional support. Friends, such as other women on CalWORKs or fellow students who were not parents, also provided support and resources. The women in my study also used individual coping strategies which focused on time management, taking time for one's self, and knowing one's limits.

In order to survive, the mothers had individual and collective strategies to get by. As they constructed their narratives, they also developed and networked with other mothers to share their survival strategies. Collins (1991:92-3) contends that there is a "private, hidden space of Black women's consciousness, the 'inside' ideas that allow

Black women to cope with, and in most cases, transcend the confines of race, class, and gender oppression.” These ‘inside’ ideas are both theoretical and practical. These ideas are critical to building theories that reflect women’s on-the-ground experiences challenging oppression, such as the survival narratives constructed by mothers on welfare pursuing a higher education; these theories will be further explored in Chapter 7. However, concrete, practical strategies helped women endure their daily struggles, and the narratives about those strategies will be explored in this section. By relating their individual survival narratives and strategies to me in the interviews, to other women, and through their participation in grassroots organizations, the mothers were both helping themselves and each other survive day to day and challenging systems of oppression. By exposing how they have to construct narratives of survival, the women questioned the social policies in which they, living in the richest nation in the world, must create narratives and strategies of survival in order to ‘participate’ in the program.

When I asked the women what practical strategies they used to attend school while on welfare, many of their first responses focused on individual coping strategies, specifically time management and scheduling. Faith, a 31 year old black mother of three and university student says: “I’m a time management freak, so organization that’s one thing, I have two planners in my purse right now, so I pretty much stay organized and those are like my bibles and that’s how I get things accomplished, without that I couldn’t do anything.” And D, a 49 year old black mother of three, related how she focuses on time management and that means prioritizing her time as well:

Well I sit down, I have a calendar, and I live by that calendar, I write everything down on that calendar: all my appointments, the kids’ appointments, my bill deadlines. I’ve got to do that, otherwise I get discombobulated and I’ll forget something, and sometimes I just say no to some things, and I have to say no, and I

feel guilty, but I just have to feel guilty because I can't do everything at one time. So I pick out the most important and I do those things, and if by a miracle I have time left over then I'll go to the secondary things.

D and Faith, along with many other mothers, focused on their time management as one of the keys to their practical survival strategies. They recognized that time management was important both as a parent and as a student.

Lele was a 37 year old black mother of five, and community college student. As Lele related, managing her time while she was going to school was different than when she was working, and some of her survival was based on her individual coping strategies:

And when I first went into this, I thought school was going to be easy, I was really, I deceived myself because I thought, I am working 55 hours a week at my job. I can go to school for four hours a day, thank you, and it is much more than that. It is more strenuous to go to school, than it was for me to work. Because it was mainly repetition, but, umm, I just have to have time management, like my GPA has been progressive. I am in my fourth semester, and when I started out my GPA was 2.0, went up to 2.3, 2.4, it is up to 2.8 now. And it has to get up to at least 3.4 before I can get into Berkeley. But, it will. Anyways, in the beginning, it was like, I was just, I didn't have a clue. Now, through experience, I know that I have to have my schedule, and I have to stick to it. There are a certain amount of hours that I have to allot to this, otherwise I am not going to get the grade. And then, I used to just think in those terms, to where I would just put everything to my school work. But then, my kids, were before I looked at it, it's like, gosh, they don't have clean clothes, they don't have nothing to eat. So, then I have to balance that too. And I have to take some me time too. I have to have at least 30 minutes, I tell my kids, they now know, they don't say anything to me anymore, but when we first get home, give me 30 minutes. That's when I go into my room and meditate, and I sit there, and I do whatever it is that I have to do. If I have to burn incense, if I have to stare at the wall, and I need those 30 minutes for me. So, it is just about prioritizing, and organizing the time, there are 24 hours in a day, and each minute has to be allotted for something.

Another personal coping strategy that many women mentioned dealt with the problem of how to fit in study time when their children were asleep, but they (the adults) were still fresh enough to learn. As Nicole C., a 35 year old white mother of two, explained, "by the time night time comes and I've got them fed and in bed and everything I'm so tired,

I've tried to stay up and do homework, but my eyes are burning and I'm falling asleep and I'm not, it's just not happening for me, so I started going to sleep with them early and getting up at 2 and 4 o'clock in the morning to try to do my homework." This strategy, of doing their homework and studying in the middle of the night, was often not sustainable. Nicole later said, the advantage is "I have the time all to myself, it's quiet, I've have rested, but then I get burned. I can only do it for so long at a time, so I get burned out and then I just crash." Because of the strain placed on the mothers, many of the individual coping strategies have the same result: they were only a temporary fix, to be used for a short period of time, and sometimes caused burn-out.

Furthermore, time management and other individual coping strategies were combined with other practical survival strategies. The idea of being able to say 'no' is explored by both D and Nancy. Nancy, a 45 year old Latina mother of one, just completed her Associate's degree. She related her individual coping strategies, like time management, knowing your limits, saying 'no', and also how she networked to meet her needs:

Yeah, I would say first get a schedule out for yourself, second of all prioritize, going to school has taught me to say no, as a woman, especially as a Latina woman, you're supposed to say yes to everything, you're supposed to take care of the children, you're supposed to take care of the man and your grandmother and everybody, take care of everybody, but you know what? Sometimes it's ok to say no, it's okay to say no, I don't have time for this, so learning how to prioritize, doing your schedule and get supportive, get your friends and build a network of friends and family, people who you can exchange play dates with or just people in your class, maybe you can't go to this one class, can you take the notes for me. Just network, that's really the important thing, and keep in mind that this is your goal, have one goal, and then all the little ones to catch that goal, but don't try to do everything at once or you'll go crazy.

Networking can provide both emotional support and material support. The members of these networks were sometimes personal friends and family, or were contacts met

through organizations. As D explained, her tenure in the area provided her with an extensive network of both personal contacts and organizational contacts: “well, I go through my phone book because I have a list, I’ve been out here 28 years, I have a church family, which is somewhat supportive because I left and never went back, so I have to rebuild that rapport, and then of course the family that I have at [name of local organization], I get on the phone in a minute, and say ‘can you guys do this for me?’ and they are mostly rides (laughs). I still don’t have a car (laughs).” D’s lack of a car had her reaching out through her networks to find resources to get her, literally, where she needed to go.

Campus resources were often mentioned, both as very helpful and as insufficient. There are many campus resources, especially at the community colleges, that are designed to help low-income, first generation, or returning students, and the mothers stressed the importance of those formal resources. For example, Monique, a 25 year old black mother of one, said that CalWORKs students should “use all the programs in school, all the ones that you qualify for, apply, use them, cause they can be helpful, you can get extra money for books you can, you know, they will help you with tutoring. I know I have tutors coming up, I need a tutor next semester. They are going to help me with a tutor. And, I just say that all the programs that you qualify for, apply and use them, put them to use, that’s what they are there for.” Keisha was a 20 year old black mother of one and pregnant with her second. Keisha echoed Monique’s sentiment in the need to use all the programs at school; she also used the faculty and their office hours as an additional campus resource, saying “plus the teachers I have they are nice, they have a little time you can come to their office and they help you do everything.” So in addition to the

formal campus resources, the informal help of a staff member or faculty can really make a difference in meeting a student's needs.

Unfortunately, not all of the campuses have equal resources; specifically, the UC and Cal State schools do not have EOPS/CARE or CalWORKs programs. This is very unfortunate because the CalWORKs students' needs are greater as they progress through higher degrees. As Tony, a 33 year old black mother of two who just finished her Bachelor's degree at the University of California Berkeley, pointed out:

My experience at Cal could have been a lot better if, if the mechanisms to support students like me, that are single parents or reentry students, were enclaves. They have a center for re-entry, and student parents, etc, older transfer students, or whatever that may be, but it is not at the level that I think you would need for it to be effective. So, it is almost like, every agency that provides some sort of service, some sort of direct service agency, even on campus, wants you to jump through 18 hoops just to qualify or be able to receive their service, so, after a while you get tired of it. Because you have school, and you have got all this other stuff to kinda deal with, and you can't be involved in every organization and every everything. So, Cal, I mean, I could tell you from the top down, admissions, they are admitting transfer students, and reentry or whatever, I find that not enough people get extra support. I mean if you have a 4.0 or 4.5 when you come in, or when you transfer in, you may be put in the pool of people who may qualify for the regent scholarships, but that is a very, very small pool of people. And there are lots of other scholarships and lots of other programs that you might be qualified for, but for some reason, I don't ever see it hitting those parents, I see it hitting traditional age students, in all of my time there.

The students who transferred from the community colleges to the state universities were often surprised at how few resources, financial and emotional, were available for them at the larger schools. They also did not feel like they had the emotional support that was present in the community colleges, even when there were campus organizations and spaces dedicated to that purpose at the universities. Additionally, the California State University to which most of the students transferred in Alameda County did not even have a center on campus for student parents.

Mothers also used community resources to fill their needs. Many used local foodbanks, clothing closets, advocacy and legal aid organizations, free clinics, and most participated in at least one program during the winter holidays for food and gifts. One of the most common needs was fresh fruits, vegetables, meats, and dairy, which are expensive on food stamps, and only a few of the local foodbanks stock fresh items. As Michelle, a 29 year old white mother of one and pregnant with her second child, explained:

We go over to the church on Fruitvale and sometimes if you go there on Tuesday, sometimes it just depends on what they have, sometimes it's fruits and vegetables, sometimes it's canned goods or you know, they give out donations to the community, so you sign your name and you sign on the line and they give you some items, and it's not necessarily enough to make a meal out of, but it definitely adds to your meals. So I had some tomatoes or onions, so that's really helpful, and it's not a giant amount, but it adds to what you've got and it helps. Helps spread it out a little bit. And especially the fruits and vegetables is nice when they do that.

Unlike the one Michelle mentioned, some of the community organizations required parents to be active participants in order to use the resources they offer. These resources were still important to the mothers, but as Angela puts it "there was so much things that I was trying to put on my plate, I got involved in so much, and I had just finished having a baby, so I just dropped some of the programs regardless [of the need for the resource]."

Besides participation requirements, another obstacle to accessing resources was the availability and women's knowledge of resources, which was important to how the mothers were able to utilize them. If a mother did not know about a resource, it did not 'exist' to her. As Phoebe, a 39 year old black mother of one and MBA student, said, "I tap into things, whether it's online or whether it's face to face or just through reading some literature that I pick up, that's distributed publicly, you know, and I think all of

those are resources in a way, you're not actually sitting down with somebody and you've made an appointment to see them, but I think you're still tapping into resources. So I'd probably say I am using a lot of resources." The access points for resources were important for mothers who were busy and often did not have time to make additional appointments in their schedules. Mothers needed resources that were easy to access when they had time to search for them, which was often outside regular business hours. Therefore, resource centers, online access, and distribution through existing networks helped connect parents to resources that they need to survive. Some of the mothers compiled information about available resources, all in one place, to have when they had various needs. As this excerpt from the focus group at LIFETIME illustrated:

Shonda: And it's summer time coming too, and there's some times like in the winter time that I slack off, I just try to make sure to be there for the Thanksgiving and Halloween, you know, those things, to get the food. But summer time, you know, spring, summer, I don't know what makes kids eat more during that time (laughs), but you think it would be the comfort food in the winter, so anyway, I go to, I go there and make sure, because the first thing I do when I move into a new community, I find out, I locate my resources. Because I know I'm going to need them and I might as well get to know it, have them get to know me. But mainly all of my resources, I keep them, I've known them for like 10 years now, so they know me...and as far as education, I access whatever's available on campus...[if] you have learning disabilities or something like that, because they can also help and make it easier for your life. And just recently I started accessing my VA you know, which god, I don't know, I was in the air force when I was just out of high school in '79, but I'm just now accessing the resources, because I've got kids going to college, and they're helping with this and that, and then not only that, the medical benefits over there as far as for me personally is better, so I just started accessing those but every day I'm always trying to find another resource outside of the county because I don't put all my eggs in one basket. My parents taught me that a long time ago. And then there's always with the VA they also have what resources you can go to, but mainly I'm going to the churches, my community centers, I'm accessing the city, just all the resources I can do for all of my basic needs, you know? It's eating, PG&E [Pacific Gas and Electric], housing, clothing, shoes for my kids, school for my kids, that's what school programs all about. Because I keep a book of it, I call it my survival bible.

Jade: I know I kind of went on about my education situation and the CalWORKS situation but I wanted to be more specific in terms of the resources that I utilize to try to help me. I survive on handouts and I use, I call it a self care binder, but I only use it for my domestic violence and mental health, but I like how she, how you expand it [referring to Shonda] like to include everything in your survival bible.

Both women were engaging in similar practices of compiling resources, but they also learned how to do it more effectively from each other during the focus group conversation. Sharing these survival practices through sharing their narratives occurred in all three focus groups.

Family and friends, and less often the children's father(s), can provide additional resources either as mother's first call or as a last resort. Daria, a 29 year old white mother of one and university student, explained that she felt like she was very lucky to have a supportive family and friends:

Family is probably the biggest. The thing that comes to my mind first is financial resources, 'cause CalWORKs is obviously not enough to pay rent. So, thankfully, I have a lot of friends and family that I can rely on, who call and ask, are you doing okay? Do you need any extra money? Which is usually yes. And those friends who say, you haven't had a night off, why don't you bring [her daughter] over and we'll have a slumber night, and you can go out, have a night off and get to have some adult time. Which is really important just for emotional respite, so that I am not [her daughter]'s mom, I get to be me.

Daria's situation can be juxtaposed with Jasmine's:

Basically my advice to anybody who's going through what I'm going through is to try to get as many friends and family to help support you through this time in your life, because I don't have that, and it makes it very difficult to be isolated and not have those things. My parents are extremely unsupportive, my brothers are unsupportive, my friends they like me for entertainment, they help me here and there, but they have their own lives to live and they can't be as supportive as they would like to be, so it's good if you have a real good solid base of people to help you, I don't have that, and that's been one of the biggest problems for me, is not having that. A lot of times I don't like to burden people with my problems because I know a lot of people that I know don't have the time to be burdened, so that isolates me ever the more sometimes, so for people who are going through what I'm going through, get a good support system behind you.

Although both recognized the utmost importance of supportive friends and family, especially those with resources, one mother had them and the other did not. The difference was access to those familial resources and was notable in three regards as it related to Daria's and Jasmine's lives: housing, child care, and transportation. For Daria, her housing issues were easily resolved by her grandfather who frequently helped with her rent; her child care issues were resolved by friends who were willing to take care of her daughter for the night; and her transportation issues were remedied by her mother, who bought Daria a brand-new car because she was sick of Daria's car breaking down. Jasmine, whose family was middle-class but did not have the financial resources of Daria's, did not have their support. She experienced long bouts of homelessness, continued domestic violence, and ongoing transportation issues with her very old car.

Constructing survival narratives were important to the mothers, but so also was sharing those narratives with other mothers. One of the most common statements in the interviews, which will be further explored in Chapter 7, was the mothers' request that other women know that they, too, can pursue higher education while on welfare. They shared their stories with me, in hopes that other mothers could use some of the information contained in their narratives to help them survive higher education as well. Therefore, narratives were also constructed to share the survival strategies so that more mothers can reach their educational goals.

Critiquing a Welfare System that Necessitates Survival Narratives

Another central component of these narratives is the mothers' assessment of TANF implementation and the welfare system. In an effort to understand and overcome

the barriers to pursuing higher education while on welfare, these mothers speculated about the objectives of the welfare ‘reform’ laws that have created a system in which its participants must construct survival strategies, and the narratives that result, in order to use the benefits that welfare offers. The mothers identified the intentionality of the policymakers in constructing a system they must “survive.” They expressed their frustration with policymakers who have constructed a system filled with structural barriers to their success and that contributed to a culture of shame and failure for its participants. As Misha, a 29 year old black mother of one, explained: “I think they, I think they kinda, in a way, think that you are gonna fail. I really do, I really do... You know, I don't think they care. I don't think they see the importance that some of these girls have that are here on campus. It's really detrimental for them. It's like life and death. This is the only way that I can live. I have to get this. And they don't care. I really don't think they care.” Misha deconstructed the irony of welfare reform for parents in school: the system wanted them to fail.

To these mothers it appeared that the system was designed by policymakers to encourage their failure so that they would be forced to drop out of higher education and engage instead in ‘work first’ activities. By creating structural barriers for mothers who were pursuing higher education—such as sanctioning them for not quitting school, dictating what majors they can pursue, or withholding support services while they were in school—the welfare system created a self-fulfilling prophecy. Previous research shows that only a fraction of women who enroll in school were able to survive and complete their higher education while on welfare (Jones DeWeever and Gault 2006). These structural barriers are especially interesting given that these are implemented

simultaneously with policymakers referring to the same group of welfare participants as the most “motivated.” This paradox did not go unnoticed by participants; Dena adamantly illustrated:

The one thing that I wish that they would do is target the people that *don't do shit* (emphasizes last 3 words by tapping table). Excuse my language but... target people that start school and drop out, target the people that don't really do crap. Target the ones who are getting sanctioned. Target them first. The ones that are doing well, they could look and see every month and say, look at that, she's got a 3.8 average GPA, leave this girl alone, let her do her thing. Why mess with me? They mess with me, they mess with me, and it makes me so angry. Target the people that just aren't doing it, that go work for a week and then quit, that's where I think it's appropriate, reform that bad apple first.

Marie, a 30 year old white mother of two children, who recently finished her Bachelor's degree, added: “when recipients *are* trying to better their life *by* going to college, putting strict timelines on them when they are making progress, or limiting what areas they can go into, I just think that stinks. If they're going to go and get a Bachelor's degree, regardless of what it's in, that's going to help them be more employable...so it seems a bummer that recipients tend to get the short end of the stick or they want to make all these restrictions on them to make it harder.”

Dena and Marie furthered emphasize how policymakers discouraged school for mothers on welfare and targeted women who were in school for punitive action. Instead of creating a system that helps people get out of poverty, welfare reform created a punitive system based on mythical stereotypes of the welfare mother and a culture of shame. This system now regards any activity other than “work first” as punishable and at odds with the goal of the “reform.”

Moreover, the 2006 reauthorization of TANF further tightened the rules for pursuing higher education while on welfare. Betty targeted these policy changes in her

survival narrative: “They keep talking about how welfare’s not a scholarship program, and it’s like well what would you rather do, let us be on welfare for 5 years and not do a fucking thing? Yes, sometimes I think that’s what they want, you know, give us drugs because of our mental health problems and put us in a comatose state so that once we get kicked out of welfare we can go to the loony bin, I don’t know. Just give us a chance to get an education.”

Survival Narratives Illustrate the Failure of Welfare ‘Reform’

The mothers in my study and others like them pursuing higher education while on welfare are held up as “model” welfare participants by policymakers, as the “success” stories of welfare reform. The policymakers and their staff individually praise the mothers’ hard work to change their economic position and think of them as examples of the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” rhetoric of welfare reform. At the same time, they tell the mothers to avoid emphasizing their roles as students when testifying for budget hearings on welfare issues or talking with the more conservative policymakers.⁴⁴ Many studies show that women’s desire to enroll in and complete higher education helps them “earn” their way off welfare in jobs with wages that support their families and makes them economically stable. *Most never need welfare again* (Gittell et al. 1993; Mathur 2004; Jones-DeWeever 2006). Simultaneously with being called “model” welfare participants, they are also severely penalized for being so “motivated” by a welfare system that explicitly devalues higher education. Therefore, these mothers fight every step of the way to finish their education while on welfare; they must learn how to survive the system in order to finish school. Instead of supporting the rhetoric of welfare reform

as a 'success', the mothers in this study constructed survival narratives to expose their hidden transcripts as participants in the welfare system. The mothers used their narratives to motivate and energize themselves and others like them, despite the structural obstacles to their pursuit of higher education while in the welfare system. These narratives were also directed at policymakers. Scott (1990:4) emphasizes the need for uncovering these hidden transcripts, because "any analysis based exclusively on the public transcript is likely to conclude that subordinate groups endorse the terms of their subordination and are willing, even enthusiastic, partners in that subordination." Instead of being enthusiastic partners in the proclamation that welfare reform is a success, these mothers critiqued the 'reform' that created a system that necessitates survival narratives of the most motivated of its participants. Their critique illustrates the central failure of welfare reform: If the most "motivated" must create survival narratives in order to use public assistance, how can welfare 'reform' be deemed a 'success'?

CHAPTER V

‘MY EDUCATION MEANS EVERYTHING TO ME’: CALWORKS MOTHERS’ RATIONALES FOR PURSUING HIGHER EDUCATION

Rebecca graduated from high school in 1990 and got married the next year at 19 years old. She attended a local private job training institute, also called a ‘career college,’ and earned a certificate in medical assisting. She worked off and on at entry level in her field for a few years but did not feel that she was building the experience she needed to move ahead in the field. She had her first child at 22 and her second at 24, and was a “stay at home mom by choice,” as she puts it, after her daughters were born. After their second child was born, her husband’s recreational drug use escalated into a major addiction. She was concerned about his addiction, the people he was bringing into their lives, the situations that he put the children into, and she encouraged him to seek help. When her husband, whom she had been with since she was 14, refused to get help for his drug addiction, she felt she had no choice but to file for divorce. At 26, Rebecca was divorced, with two toddlers, no income, and limited post-secondary education. She moved back in with her parents, went down to the county office and applied for welfare. During her intake and orientation procedures after applying for welfare, Rebecca, like all other applicants in that office at that time, attended a presentation about a special program called the Family Service Team. Even though the opportunity to participate in the Family Service Team was made to all attending welfare orientation that day, Rebecca was the only one, out of the thirty people in the room, who volunteered to participate. She

believes this choice made all the difference in her opportunity to go to college. Through this program she found out about pursuing higher education while on welfare and the extra resources available to her while she is in school. Rebecca enrolled in a community college shortly after going on welfare and completed her Associate's degree in two years. She is now off welfare, working three-quarters time at a job she loves, at a good wage, and is pursuing her Bachelor's degree part-time. When I asked her what her education meant to her, she answered: "It means everything to me. I mean, like I said before, it's not about the degree, it's about the experience. And it means that I can have freedom, you know, and so for me it means everything, without that I feel like I'm kind of stagnant. I feel like continuing to learn and grow and change is kind of dependent upon educating yourself, maybe not in the classroom, but like just learning every day. So education's just very important to me."

To Rebecca and most of the other mothers interviewed, their education is very important; in Rebecca's words and those of many others, their education means everything to them. They have persevered through many obstacles in order to pursue education while on welfare, and the value of this opportunity is not overlooked by the mothers. The mothers viewed applying for welfare as a last resort; they hit rock bottom and had no other options. However, pursuing a higher education once they are on welfare, in many cases, is a positive choice and they feel that it redeems, both to themselves and to society, their need for public assistance. They are deliberately changing their pathway through life by pursuing a higher education and trying to change their structural position.

However, the conservative, yet prevailing, discourse of welfare reform focuses how ‘welfare mothers’ are culturally different from Americans not on welfare and that they need to take responsibility for their children; low-income mothers are often described as having ‘deviant’ views of work, marriage, and ‘personal responsibility.’ This view took shape from works such as Charles Murray’s *Losing Ground* (1984) and Lawrence Mead’s *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligation of Citizenship* (1986). Critiques of this perspective point out that conservatives “named the poor as the problem, and the moral failings of the poor as the central set of behaviors that needed to be changed” (Shaw et al. 2006:26). The conservatives’ solution, as promoted in the 1996 welfare reforms, is to require those assumed to have ‘deviant’ views of work, marriage, and personal responsibility to engage in ‘work first’ in order to receive public assistance (Shaw et al. 2006). However, this assumption that welfare mothers have non-normative morality is not supported by extensive research done about the everyday lives and expectations of mothers on public assistance (Hays 2003; Kaplan 1997; DeParle 2004; Zucchino 1997).

This chapter will illustrate that mothers on welfare do not seem to have deviant views of work, marriage, and personal responsibility, and that they pursue higher education in order to pursue the normative ideals of the American Dream. Hochschild (1995) argues that “the American dream consists of tenets about achieving success” (17) and these four tenets are: “that everyone may always pursue their dream” (18); “that one may reasonably anticipate success” (19); that “the will to succeed is part of the American spirit” (21); and “that the pursuit of success warrants so much fervor because it is associated with virtue” (23). In her study of low-income African Americans, she found

that “most poor blacks...see two paths to achieving their dreams: education and work” (159). As discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, most of the women in this study had worked at some point before going onto welfare, and that work was not helping them achieve their dreams. And as this chapter will explore, the women’s motivations and rationales for pursuing higher education are the same as those present in the current cultural explanations implicit to the American Dream and the discourse about the importance of education for that dream.

As Shaw et al. (2006:3) point out: “a clear and consistent narrative permeates American discourse regarding education. A college education is increasingly viewed as the gateway to the American Dream—a necessary prerequisite of social mobility.” Recent studies show that 98% of Americans think that all people should have equal access to higher education (National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good 2003). Not only do academics and policymakers believe that education is a central tenet of the American dream, so do students pursuing higher education. In the school newspaper at one of the California Community Colleges, Brian Day (2004:2) wrote his view of pursuing the American dream: “the community college system is undeniably one of the greatest things that’s ever happened to this state...it is the American dream in action.” The mothers in this study also believed that education is the best way to achieve the American dream for themselves and their children. The cultural conversation about why people pursue higher education centers on the expectation that higher education will provide better opportunities for their families, to get ahead in the labor market, and to expand their knowledge and experiences. Mothers on welfare have similar expectations for higher education, and therefore, their rationales for pursuing higher education are

similar to other people's rationales about higher education. They assert that because they were in poverty, without much of a safety net, their educations were even more critical to them to be able to achieve that dream, or at a minimum be able to provide for their families after time-limited welfare assistance ends.

Through their narratives and their rationales for pursuing higher education, the women in my study want, as Hays (2003:139) puts it, "the opportunity to make their case" as to why society should invest in them, their education, and supporting their families while they are in school. They believe that after their graduation that they will be better able to support their families and that they will not need welfare again. Although circumstances, many of them beyond their control, have brought them to welfare and public assistance, they intentionally choose to pursue higher education. In many of the ways that Chapter 3 explores the pathways onto welfare and into higher education, this chapter explores the individual pathways that the mothers believe their education has opened to them and those that they expect will open to them. This chapter examines two central ways the mothers explore the meaning of their education: the meaning of their education to their future and the meaning that their family (children, partners, and extended family) give to their educational journey.

Meanings of Education

Education means many things to the mothers, but more than any one quality or characteristic, their education "means everything to them." In some ways this is literal and immediate, as for the mothers escaping domestic violence, hunger, or homelessness. Without enrolling in school while on welfare, some of the mothers said that they would

not have housing, food, or would feel forced to go back to their abusive partners. For example, as Alexis, a 25 year old Latina mother of a toddler, and UC Berkeley student said, her education “means a lot, without it, I would probably be homeless. And I wouldn’t have enough resources for my daughter. Without it, I would probably be working full-time minimum wage. So, it means a lot to me.” Before going on welfare and reenrolling in school, Alexis was working in dead-end minimum wage jobs, homeless, with an infant. She might still be homeless if she had not reenrolled in school, which allowed her to live in the student family housing. Her education means access to resources that enabled her to provide for her child at the same time as planning for their future as a family. As illustrated by Alexis and which will be further explored below, one of the meanings the mothers describe is that their education helps to provide concrete resources for their family. In other ways, the meaning of their education is more abstract yet rooted in opportunities to expand their minds and experiences or their expectations about the future. For example, Kelly, a 42 year old Russian Israeli with one young child who was a community college student, reflected “what does education mean to me? (pause) It’s like being rich. The more I know, the more I have, my arts and my creative work, it’s so much richer. It is so much more.” Kelly’s metaphor about being rich emphasizes the power that the women believe their education has, and this power gives them hope for their future.

When I asked the mothers in my study about the meaning of their education, their responses focused around several key themes that I will explore in this section: expectations about the labor market and increasing their chances at earning wages that will support their family; improving their children’s lives and education; expanding their

knowledge, opportunities, and experiences; increasing their self-esteem or determination; and enabling them to help people more effectively. As seen with these themes, the meaning of education encompasses both what their education has concretely done for them so far and what they expect their education to do for them in the future. No matter how far along the educational pathway each mother was, pursuing higher education had already made a difference in her life. They recognized the many immediate advantages of pursuing higher education, such as increased self-esteem, improving their children's performance in school, working at higher wage part-time jobs, and having opportunities and new experiences. They also had long term expectations about what their education will do for them and their families in the future. These expectations centered on their hopes for better economic positions, increased likelihood that their children will attend college, and desire to help other people and be valued leaders in their communities. In the discussion that follows, I will explore the meaning that their education has to the women in this study and how those expectations explain their rationales for pursuing higher education. More often than not, the mothers did not focus on just one of these themes or times, but instead, many of them appear simultaneously in their answers to my question, "what does your education mean to you?"

'My education is a labor market necessity'

The most common theme present in the mothers' narratives about the meaning of their education is advancement in the labor market. They focused on the opportunities that their education will give them in the labor market and which will allow them to provide for their families. Most participants believe that by pursuing higher education

they will be able to get better jobs after they graduate. However, their rationales range from ‘my education is a leg up to getting a better job’ to ‘my education is my passport to financial freedom;’ in other words, the mothers’ narratives ranged from focusing on education as a step up into a slightly better job at a slightly higher wage all the way to viewing their education as the opportunity for financial freedom and financial security.

Jane, a 23 year old black mother of one and community college student, explained:

If I didn’t have Chabot, I’d be working at McDonald’s or Wal-Mart or whatever kind of sales shop that there is. And that’s not ok. Even if I stopped going to school after I get my AA from Chabot I’m still a step above that. I’m above that, I can do something better than that. Not that working at MacDonald’s is bad, for people that want to do that, but who can support a family on McDonald’s wages, or Wal-Mart wages or working at the mall, or any other just sales job? I mean besides, like working as far as like cleaning people’s houses, besides those mediocre jobs, there’s a lot of different levels of jobs. At least, if you just complete your AA you can get pushed up to that second level. And it might not seem like a lot to some people, but for a lot of us that’s a lot, because that’s going from minimum wage to maybe \$12-15 an hour, and that’s enough to provide for your family. That’s enough, yes, you might be living pay check to pay check but you are providing for your family, when you’re down here at MacDonald’s you’re not providing for anyone, I mean, maybe yourself, and maybe you’re, it’s helping out, but I definitely think that education is that leg up to getting you a better job.

Jane’s rationale, like that of many other mothers, especially at the community college level, focused on getting a slightly better job than she had before, and she expected education to give her a ‘leg up’ to those jobs. Taz, a 27 year old black mother of two and community college student, further explained Jane’s point:

[Getting off welfare or out of poverty is difficult] especially if you don’t have any skills or a trade, because they’re not offering enough money to survive. I mean minimum wage is only, what is it, \$6.75 or something like that. I mean you don’t survive on \$6.75 working 8 hours a day and having a kid or two; it’s just not going to happen because you’ve got to think about rent, you’ve got to think about clothing, food. All that stuff costs, so I feel that if you don’t have a trade, a license to do something, or you know it’s not going to happen. You have to have something to fall behind you to get at least a good wage.

In addition to her concern that minimum wage does not provide enough income to support a family, Taz articulated another important aspect of education for the labor market, the idea that education provides mothers on welfare something to fall back on. This theme—the need to have a ‘back-up’ to help them in the labor market—is present in other mothers’ narratives. By using the common definition of a ‘back-up’ as an alternative in case their first plan did not work, they were not minimizing the importance of education in their labor market aspirations. In contrast, the mothers had a slightly different conception of ‘back-up.’ They focused on education as a ‘back-up’ by emphasizing the role that their education played in giving them support, courage, or strength to go out and apply for the better jobs. They believed that their education supported their labor market aspirations, so they sought better jobs. Nicole, a 33 year old black mother of one and community college student, illustrated this point in her rationale for pursuing higher education: “because you work in dead-end jobs, you have women on welfare, and they are working, and then they are off welfare, but they are still going back to the old job we had, the dead-end job. You have an education back-up, you can use that education to put you in a position where you can go, that will help you, and that will kinda fill out your position. And that’s the way I see, that’s why I say that education is always the key.” Nicole’s view of education as a ‘back-up’ and ‘the key’ are two sentiments that illuminated the expectations that participants have for the power of their education in the labor market. They believed that without it, they do not have a safety net or self-confidence to pursue better jobs in the labor market, and the lack of both were also contributing factors to many of their pathways onto welfare.

The theme of education being the ‘key’ to better jobs and a brighter economic future, as indicated by Nicole and other mothers, is further elaborated by D, a 46 year old black mother of three and community college student. D emphasized the power of education for African Americans and others who are in ‘disadvantageous situations,’ such as being on welfare. She argued that “education, my parents drummed it into me, being of African American descent during the civil rights movement, it has been shown over and over again, even if you’re in a disadvantageous situation, if you have the skills to think it through, you slowly attack it and overcome it. Education is the *only* tool within our system that will give you that long term edge and will keep you at that long term edge.” Although the power of education to ‘give you that long term edge’ is not limited to African Americans, D’s racial history played an important role in her rationale for pursuing education. Her rationale for pursuing a higher education was that she will have the tools necessary in the system to overcome disadvantageous situations such as being on welfare or challenging racial labor market dynamics, such as discrimination.

Jasmine, a 39 year old white/Latina mother of three who recently finished her Associate’s degree, continued the discussion about education as the key to getting out of poverty in her rationale for pursuing higher education. However, Jasmine focused the conversation not just on ‘education’ as a broadly conceived idea, but on the specific type of education that is necessary to get ahead:

Education the primary key to getting out of poverty and having the ability to not only have access to the education but to continue with it and get the qualifications that the job market are looking for out there...it’s extremely competitive, especially for someone like myself who’s coming off of welfare with three children, it’s extremely competitive. I’m going to be 40, I’m not exactly in my 20s, I know they prefer younger people with no children. And so for me that even makes it more difficult, so to have that education behind me really does make the world of difference than just going out there and looking for work. It is the key to

finding work, absolutely...you need 'the' education that the jobs are seeking, such as the BA, the Bachelor's...they want Bachelor's degrees. So, this is why I'm continuing my education plan, not so much by choice, it's because that's what they want, and that's what I need. Absolutely, it's a labor market necessity in every way.

As discussed above by the other participants and further articulated here by Jasmine, education is a labor market necessity; however, the mothers recognize that some degrees do have more power than other degrees.

Increased expectations in the labor market linked to a Bachelor's degree are often noted by the participants who are pursuing or have recently completed it. The idea of education being a 'leg up' in the labor market which enables mothers to access entry-level jobs that are still not enough for financial independence was more common among the community college students. By contrast, the Bachelor's degree students expected their education to lead to careers at above living-wage levels. Faith, a 31 year old black mother of three who is finishing her Bachelor's degree at a local university, replied that her education means: "everything, because my education is basically my passport to financial freedom and knowledge, so the learning doesn't stop, you have to keep learning, even with my degree and licenses I have to continue with education, so it's never going to be done." Faith's idea of a financial passport was echoed by other mothers and their focus was on providing for their families without the need for welfare or other forms of public assistance. They recognized that without their education, their opportunities in the labor market were typically restricted to jobs that did not pay living wages. However, for Faith, and other mothers pursuing the Bachelor's degree, they do expect, more so than the community college students, that their education will lead to financial security and independence.

For the mothers who have finished their degrees, especially the ones who have finished Bachelor's degrees, this belief has been borne out.⁴⁵ Marie, a 30 year old white mother of two and recent graduate from UC Berkeley, said that her expectation about her education came true:

Right now I'm making the most money I've every made in my life per hour, and I can see the big difference. There's some people, yes, they do get a halfway decent paying job without an education, but those people are few and far between. Most of the halfway decent paying entry level jobs, they want some type of degree. If you do have an AA degree, I've noticed, significantly, ok, now that I have a Bachelor's degree, I can end this, but it does increase my rate of pay. When they look at pay scales they have a little formula most of the time that they go by, your educational level and your experience level. You know, the higher the educational level and your experience, the more pay that you get, so absolutely...I highly recommend it to anybody. The experience itself, yes, you have a higher earning potential that paper does count for a lot. It says a lot about you. But just the experience itself. Everybody should go to college, I think, because the way I thought before I went to college versus the after going through the experience, it's just my world has been so expanded, and that in itself is priceless.

The most often cited rationale for pursuing higher education while on welfare is the mothers' expectations that their education will help them in the labor market. The mothers want to be qualified for better jobs, and many believe that having the 'piece of paper' to prove they were qualified and learning concrete skills will increase their chances to move out of minimum wage work. The meaning that participants give to their education focused on themes such as education being 'a labor market necessity,' 'the key,' 'a back-up,' 'a leg up,' and a 'passport to financial freedom.' Through these themes, the mothers outlined their labor market rationales as to why they pursue higher education.

These themes are similar to discussions of welfare mothers needing to increase their human capital that is pervasive in the welfare research. As discussed in Chapter 1, human capital theory is the primary theory used in research on welfare mothers pursuing

higher education (Gittell et al 1993; Kates 1991; Mathur 2004; Wolfe and Tucker 2001). In the 1970s and 1980s, many in government, social services, and academia realized that education and job training for welfare participants might be a way for the government to reduce poverty (Shaw et al. 2006). However, this was a short lived policy strategy that saw its greatest support in the Family Support Act of 1988, but ended just eight years later with PRWORA's passage in 1996. However, despite the official policy emphasis changing, the mothers still believe in education as a strategy to get out of poverty. They cite this rationale as the most important reason to pursue higher education.

'My education makes me a role model for my children'

Mothers also focus on improving their children's lives and educations in explaining their rationales as to why they pursue higher education. They believe that pursuing higher education impacts their children's lives in many ways, including being able to provide better financially for their children in the future; however, participants often focus on how their pursuit of higher education impacts their children's education. This was discussed in two ways. One, because the women became role models for their children, their children did better in school while their mothers were pursuing higher education. Second, mothers hoped that their own college attendance would pique their children's interest in going to college. Research supports the mothers' beliefs: children do better academically when mothers on welfare increase their educational level (Magnuson 2003). There has been significant literature that shows that parental educational achievement is important to predicting children's educational achievement (among many: Jencks 1981 and Havemen and Wolfe 1995), and for families on welfare, the best

determinant of children's educational level is the mother's educational level (Magnuson 2003). Mothers' belief that they are good role models for their children's educational aspirations is also supported by the research (Cohen 1989).

Although it is unlikely that the mothers are familiar with the relevant research, through their on-the-ground experience they believe this to be true. Nicole, a 33 year old black mother of one and community college student, said "I have a daughter, so I want to be my daughter's role model, see what I am doing. So that she gets to see, not struggle, like what I have to go through, as far as being on assistance, I really don't want her to depend on assistance really...but education, to me, is important because I feel like my parents didn't get the education that they wanted while they were growing up, so they urged me to go ahead, go to college. So, then, that's why it is really important to me and for my daughter." Nicole's education was important to her, and like many mothers in this study, she wanted her daughter to achieve more than she was able to and with fewer struggles. This sentiment is part of the American Dream: parents want a better life for their children than they had, and education plays a key role in this philosophy.

Taz echoed Nicole's view. Taz, a 27 year old black mother of two and community college student, replied:

Advantages for me are being a, how would you say, being a role model for my kids. They will see that school, education is important, it's a big part of their lives, it's part of my life, my son, my daughter she doesn't know, but at least my son he can see mommy's going to school, I guess that is important, college is important. So it doesn't have to be, you know, 12 grades, you don't have to be 15 to go to school. You can be 30 years old and still go to school. So I think this is showing, being a role model for them, showing that education is a big part of life and school is very important. I'd say it's being a role model.

Although her daughter is too young to understand that she is going to school, Taz hoped that she was a role model for her son and that will encourage him to go to college as well.

Many participants focused on the importance of being a good role model for their kids, and through pursuing higher education, they felt that they were being better role models than when they were working in low-wage jobs. Although they acknowledged that being on welfare may not be a desirable role model, they were using this time to make sure that when they get off welfare, they will never need it again.

Also, these women often said that their priorities changed after their first child was born. For those mothers who were in school before having their children, school remained a priority for them, but the rationales as to why they pursued their education shifted slightly. Jane illustrated this point in her narrative. Jane, a 23 year old black mother of one, and community college student, expressed that school is important, but when she became a mother, her priorities shifted slightly, and her education remains important to her new goals: “school has always been a number one priority for me, but then I had a daughter and then she became number one. And I know that money is not happiness or anything like that, but love is not going to feed her every day, so money is going to get her the things that she needs to keep her happy and well... It does mean a lot to me because I do want my daughter to have something to look up to and I want her to go to college.” Providing for and loving her child was now Jane’s top priority, yet she saw her education as a way to fulfill her responsibility. As I have described previously, Jane sees going to school as enabling her to pursue the resources to provide for her family. The mothers’ rationales for pursuing higher education while on welfare included because they love their children, they want to provide a good life for them, and are responsible for their well-being. Through their labor market rationales about pursuing higher education (discussed above) and their goal to be good role models for their

children, the mothers strive for what most Americans desire: a better life for their children than they had themselves.

‘My education is knowledge that no one can take away from me’

The women also often described their education as the opportunity to expand their knowledge and have new experiences. This often presented itself alongside discussions of financial security and better job opportunities. Mercedes, a 38 year old Latina mother of four and recent graduate with her Bachelor’s degree, replied:

It means a lot. (Pause) (Sigh). It just means that I have the, now I have more opportunities; more doors open to me than before. Like before when I was a legal secretary, you know, I could do that job, but I couldn’t because I didn’t have a degree, or even working on, or even going through job announcements, like I would read the descriptions and say, oh, I could do that, and then it came to qualifications, and it was like, forget that one, move onto the next. And now that I have a formal education I don’t have to flip the page, I can apply. I mean I may not be hired but I can apply, but before I couldn’t consider it, I could just dream about it. So that’s what it means to me - access to more and hopefully, be an example to my kids that you can do it, you know, there’s a lot more out there.

In addition, some of the mothers felt that in their lives much had been taken away from them. Yet, the knowledge, opportunities, and experiences that their education brings was something that is intimately theirs and no one is able to take that knowledge or those experiences away from them. As Misha, a 29 year old black mother of one and community college student, explained:

I mean to me it means, like, the opportunity to make some real money. It means knowledge that can never be taken away from me. Really, it just means like professionalism to me, it means commitment, I feel that when you graduated college that that is really a milestone, because you really committed to your self like I want to do this and I think that sometimes is hard for people they don't know how to follow-through with things, they know how to start it, they have all this drive, but then like something happens, where they just start dumping on them self or whatever, and then they just stop. So, I think it is a challenge within yourself to say hey, this is what I gotta do and I gonna do it... the education that

you acquire, the knowledge that you acquire is something that can never be taken away. It is always yours. It is always something that can be used.

Vanessa, a 30 year old white mother of one and community college student, focused on many of the above discussed qualities of the meaning of education and her rationales for pursuing higher education in her answer:

I believe it really means a lot to me because it's something that I feel like it opened the door for opportunities to get a job that somebody else might want as well, but if they didn't have that higher level of education they might not be given the position. And I think more importantly I want to be a good role model for my daughter, and the same time that I she started going to kindergarten, that's when I started going to school also, and I think that that's helped her also... So that's a good one, and also I feel like that once I finish, there's really no one who can take it away from me. This is something that I genuinely worked hard for and really no one can take it away from me.

Several rationales came together in Vanessa's narrative, specifically the opportunity for a good job, being a role model for her daughter, the realization that no one can take her education away from her. When the mothers focused on building knowledge that 'no one can take away from me,' they were acknowledging the loss that they have experienced in the past and their desire to create a future for themselves and their children.

'My education has given me more self-esteem'

Due to their experiences with domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment, divorce, and other personal crises, the participants' self-esteem and belief in their abilities was often very low. Through education, they were able to rebuild their self-esteem. Their rationales for pursuing higher education may not have initially included higher self-esteem as a primary goal; however, when examining their narratives about what their education means to them, I find that it was often cited as being important to them. Phoebe was a 39 year old black mother of a teenager and a domestic violence

survivor who just recently finished her Bachelor's degree and was now pursuing her Master's degree. When asked what her education meant to her, she said: "Everything...so I think my education for me has been an eye-opener, my education has given me more self esteem, it's added to my self esteem, so it's allowed me to be a better person... what education does is make me glow. I think that's what it does, it makes me happy." The mothers like Phoebe have experienced a variety of hardships in their lives, such as domestic violence, recovery from substance abuse, traumatic childhoods, and many also suffer from a lack of confidence in their educational abilities, so they view their experiences in education as crucial to increasing their self-esteem, self-confidence, and personal determination. This was further illustrated by Nancy, a 45 year old Latina mother of one, who recently completed her Associate's degree. She said: "[my education means] a lot. Expanding my mind, broadening my mind to what's out there instead of wasting time. It gives me the ability to be a stronger person and handle whatever task comes to me—and to talk my way through it." Her discussion of being a stronger person and being able to handle whatever comes to her is found in other mothers' narratives as well. Self-esteem and the ability to navigate obstacles are among the 'lessons learned' while pursuing higher education.

Twitch, a 30 year old black mother of one and recent university graduate, emphasized that her education has given her confidence in her own abilities through her reply that education means "independence, it gets makes you a whole new person. You learn so much, you know? One of the best things was like things that you think about, that you feel are like true, maybe you're a little bit insecure about, but you're sure, when you hear it coming from a book, when you hear that people have researched it you're

like, oh, I knew that! And it just feels really good, and you feel like you know what you're talking about, because you learn stuff and it's nice just to not be stupid (laughs)."

The meaning of education for the mothers was often discussed in relationship to their own self-esteem, self-confidence, and independence; they also recognized that through developing self-esteem, they also realized their leadership skills. Lele, a 37 year old black mother of five and recent community college graduate, responded that education was:

Definitely empowerment and it has sharpened my leadership skills to the tenth power. It's like I didn't know that I could really, that my voice is so influential to people, you know... I believe that it is one of the main components to getting out of poverty. You increase your knowledge, you know, you are more respected among people in society.

Participants like Lele and Twitch emphasized the importance of education for their self-esteem and self-confidence, which has also allowed them to realize their leadership skills. As discussed in this section and in the sections below, the importance of education to the mothers goes far beyond giving them the ability to get ahead in the labor market or provide for their children. Instead, the meaning of education given by the mothers included healing from their past, building a foundation for the future, believing in themselves, connecting them to their broader world, and allowing them to help other people.

Building their self-esteem can also be seen in how the mothers plan for their future. RBS, a 27 year old Filipina mother of one and community college student, explained: "it means a lot. It is like my future. Gives me hope, I mean I know that, I know that I would be a much happier person because I am fulfilling my educational goals. And not just that I want to be able to have a job where I know that I am going to be

happy doing what I do, which is helping other people, whether it is little kids or elder people, or whatever, and also have the time to still spend, as far as building a family.” They believed that fulfilling their educational goals would allow them to move out of poverty and into jobs that were better than the ones that they had before. As all of the points discussed above put together created a space in which the mothers felt better about themselves and believe that their education allowed them the freedom to hope, dream, and plan. Their pathways to this point have been winding and filled with obstacles to overcome, and although they recognized that the future will not be perfect, they were optimistic about the power of hope.

‘My education allowed me to learn that I am not alone, I am connected to the universe’

Through their education, the mothers discussed learning more about the world around them, being involved in their communities, learning about different people and cultures, and learning that they are not alone but instead connected to their world. Nancy, a 45 year old Latina mother of one and recent community college graduate, explored her rationales for pursuing higher education and how that made her more aware of the world that she is part of:

Oh my god, there are so many...Oh, well, besides the fact that you can learn a skill that you can later on use to support your family, you just learn about yourself, you learn that you’re not alone, you’re so connected with the universe. You learn that buying a cup of coffee is not just buying a cup of coffee. You learn this, at least in public health, the beans that that coffee came to, if it’s not fair trade, what they’re doing to the land if it’s not fair trade, putting pesticides all over, killing children, making children work. And I learned about myself, ok, I have certain qualities which are good, and some that I need to work on. Education is a never-ending process and you learn about yourself, your challenges, what you’re good at, the positive, the negative and how that relates to other people.

Being connected to and aware of that world is very important, especially to women who may not have always felt that they were a part of the world around them. As Jasmine, a 39 year old white/Latina mother of three and recent community college graduate, explained:

The advantages of going to school is acquiring not only your self esteem back, but acquiring the ability to be in a social atmosphere again, learn how to be in a social atmosphere and you also learn about a lot of social things all the way around. Having an instructor, being with other students, being around other adults, seeing what the updated opportunities are out there, what's out on the market, and most importantly acquiring new skills, and academic skills too. Refreshing your academic ability which allows you to have that true ability to feel a little more educated in the way you speak and the way you present yourself. You're a little more knowledgeable on the current events in the world and in your community, politically. It really opens a lot of doors for you to have the opportunity to kinda blend back into society, because when you're on welfare you really feel marginalized and isolated, and that's been my experience on welfare.

Jasmine's feeling of isolation was also echoed by other mothers. They also felt that being on welfare and participating in the welfare system closed them off from many of the opportunities of middle-class life and community involvement. Through their education, they felt that they were able to actively participate in that life again or for the first time. In some cases, like Jasmine's, mothers felt very isolated during their experiences with homelessness and severe domestic violence. In pursuing higher education, they were able to feel connected with a community and reassimilated into society.

Some mothers were raised on welfare, and through education, they felt that they were able to learn about aspects of society that they were not familiar with. Betty, a 39 year old white mother of one and recent university graduate who was pursuing her Master's degree, explained: "you just get to see a whole different side of things, I mean being, personally for myself growing up on welfare and coming from a family where a lot of people didn't work, I mean you get to meet other people and see different things, I

mean you get to see all these different views and different people, and of course hopefully you'll get a good job, but I think it just helps you see things in a different light and you just learn different things." 'Learning those things' was invaluable to the mothers and made them feel connected to society and their community.

'My education allows me to help people, like somebody helped me'

Despite their treatment in the welfare system, or perhaps because of it, many of the mothers were interested in going into "helping" careers, mostly in the social services like social worker, caseworker, teacher, domestic violence advocate, and community organizer. Their education means fulfilling their goals of helping other people, as many of them were helped by someone along the path to completing their education. Betty, again, replied:

It means a lot. I mean, I'm the first person in my family to go to college, so I proved to myself that I could finish something and you know, I want to be able to get a good job and take care of my kid, and my kid sees me going to school so you know I'm hoping she's going to follow in my footsteps and it means a lot to me just because of my past experience, and I can use that and the stuff I learned from LIFETIME and everywhere to help other people, because there's still so many people that don't even know that they can go to school...I just want to use it, of course to have a better life, but to help make change and help people, like somebody helped me. That's what I want to do.

Along with Betty, Lele J. was also interested in continuing her work as a community advocate after completing her education. Her rationale for pursuing higher education was both personal and intricately tied to her existing work in the community. Lele J., a 40 year old black mother of two who is a community college student, explained:

The education means the world to me at this point in my life. Without it I can't help anybody, I can't go anywhere, I can't do anything. So right now it's the most important aspect of who I'm trying to become and what I'm trying to do

because I'm going to need that in order to say hey, I can do this, I can say this, because I am qualified. And that's the, it means everything. It's very important.

The mothers' desires and plans to use their education not only for their own personal gain, but also to help improve their communities and other people's lives were central to their explanations of why their education was so important to them. Many of the mothers were involved with LIFETIME, or other advocacy organizations, and they have received help at some point and they want to be able to pass that assistance on to others. They recognized the value of those helping hands along their path, and want to participate in their communities to be the helping hand along other people's pathways.

The many meanings that mothers on welfare give to education indicate both their instrumental rationales for pursuing education in the first place (increase their human capital in order to be more competitive in the labor market and being role models for their children), but the mothers also discovered additional benefits that they realized along their path through higher education. These realizations along the way are as important to the women as their original goals of getting better jobs and improving their children's lives. Their awareness about the meaning of their education includes understanding the impact on their self-esteem, gaining knowledge that will always be with them, increasing their connections to their broader communities, being able to help other people more effectively, and having a deep hope for their future. Their original rationales for pursuing higher education and these additional realizations found along the path are profoundly important to the mothers' individual goals of getting out of poverty and making a better life for their children, but they also empower the mothers to become involved in helping others along their paths and working collectively to make the path easier for all.

Family Perspectives on Their Education

In addition to the mothers' personal accounts of the meaning of their education, many also commented on what their children, partners, and families said about them pursuing higher education while participating in the welfare system. In this section, I will explore what the mothers felt their families believed about their education.

'My children are proud of me'

As discussed in the section above, one of the primary rationales that mothers give for pursuing higher education while on welfare is to provide a better life for and serve as a role model for their children. The children also motivated the mothers to keep going and were often described as being proud of their mothers, being their biggest cheerleaders, and providing the support so that mothers could achieve their educational goals. As Mariposa, a 34 year old Latina mother of a three year old, and community college student, explained: "he motivates me. When I look at him, I think I can't fail him." Jewel's son was her biggest supporter. A 37 year old white mother of a 13 year old, Jewel related that her son had supported her through so much, especially her recovery from substance abuse and her pursuit of higher education⁴⁶: "I thanked him for being my number one cheerleader, because he's always like, 'Go mom! You can do it! Go mom!' I take him to get my birthday chips for clean time,⁴⁷ and when I first got in the program he came and the director who hands out the chips gave him my 30 day chip and my son got to stand up and give it to me for my 30 days. So I was like all excited, you know, so that's emotional too." The children motivated and supported the women's educational

and personal aspirations, often in ways that the participants' partners and family did not, as we will see below in the next two sections. No mothers in my research described their children as unsupportive. A few of the mothers commented that their kids said that they wish they could spend more time with their mothers or that their mothers were always busy with school, as discussed in Chapter 4. Even these mothers emphasized that their children were supportive, just aware of the time constraints.

The children also seemed to understand the importance of their mothers' education, and to provide support and encouragement at key moments. Misha, a 29 year old black mother and community college student, explained how her ten year old daughter pushed her:

My daughter, she pushes me, she really is my motivation. She is so understanding, she is just a very understanding child. And she doesn't want to be, she knows, she tells me, 'mama you know, you have a lotta get right about yourself, mama, and you know, and I know that you like nice things, and I know that you are going to keep doing this.'

Monique, Misha, and many other moms were kept on track by their children's constant questioning and checking up on them to encourage them to do well in school. Monique, a 25 year old black mother of a four year old, and community college student, related how her daughter's questions encouraged her: "she just says: (in a baby voice) 'we gotta go to school mommy, we gotta go to school, you going to school, did you go to school?' (in normal voice) So, I think I set a good example for her, 'cause like I do homework, I have her sit down and do some homework, she likes to write and color and stuff like that. Just feel like I am setting a good example, school is good, go to school, it is fun, you know." Monique's example illustrated how the children encouraged the mothers, and in turn how

the mothers were good role models for their children. This cycle encouraged everyone in the family to achieve academically, no matter how old the children were.

The emphasis on the mother pursuing higher education also encouraged the children in the way they talk about higher education. As discussed above, the mothers believed that by going to college, their children were then more likely to pursue higher education. This then comes across in what their children had to say about the mothers' education and their own educational aspirations. As Rebecca, a 34 year old white mother of two who was pursuing her Bachelor's degree, related:

Right, I think that they're proud of me, and I think that they know that for them it's not you know, if they're going to go to college, it's where they're going to go to college. And you know, they know that they're on their road right now. You know, my 4th grader knows that she's on the road to college, and that you can't start too early. You don't wait until you're in high school to decide 'ok, am I going to go to college or not?' you need to be working every day towards that, you know, and it's important that they see me making that choice, whether it was before, early in my life, or now, just me showing that it's important and being a role model to them is (pause) it's just so valuable. I mean, they really know that education is important, not because I told them, but because I am showing them.

For Rebecca and other mothers with young children, this realization was influential for their children at a young age; however, as D discovered, even though her children were late in high school and had already graduated from high school, her educational goals encouraged them to go back to school and give higher education a chance. D, a 46 year old black mother of three older teenagers and community college student herself, explained that her children: "they say one thing with their mouth, which is mom, you're too old to be in school, but I noticed they all want to do what I want to do, they want to go to college, and they came to [my college], so they say with their actions that they're very proud of me, so I really feel good about that." Sometimes, the children, although it is

through love and admiration, teased their mothers about going to school; however, their educational actions and aspirations mirrored those of their mothers.

When the mothers graduated, their children were often their biggest fans and their support was felt most acutely by the mothers. Mindy, a 41 year old white mother of a ten year old, and recent community college graduate, explained her daughter's experience: "she loves it!...when they're little they see you, they watch you, they want to follow your footsteps. My daughter was at my graduation. When I graduated she was crying. She wore my cap and gown at home because she wants to graduate." In addition to being proud of their mothers through school and during graduation, some of the children also went to work with their mothers. The mothers wanted their kids to see what they worked so hard to achieve. Nicole, a 33 year old black mother, related that her ten year old daughter: "likes the fact that she see me out there going and doing what I need to do. And, she loves the work that I love to do. I bring her along with me because she gets to see, and it affects her, whatever I am doing affects her life. And she knows that. So what I am doing is part of her, and she sees me modeling what I need to do. So when she gets older, she'll do the same thing as well."

Through school, graduation, and into their careers, the mothers were striving to provide for their children. However, this was not a one-way street; the children, without direct information from their mothers, seemed to understand their mothers' aspirations. The children's understanding, encouragement, motivation, and inspiration provided the foundation that the mothers needed to keep going through school, even when they were struggling. The children's role was central to the mothers' rationales for pursuing

education in the first place, and their role in getting the mothers through school was also important.

‘My partner is supportive, but...’

The women’s boyfriends, children’s fathers, and partners provided a more complex picture of support. In some cases, their partners were wholly supportive and provided a significant amount of encouragement. For example, Marie was a 30 year old white mother of two and UC Berkeley graduate. She met her now husband while she was in school, and they both had clear educational goals that they were working towards separately. When they got together, they provided support to each other to meet their goals:

He was really happy because when we were dating I had told him my goals, you know, I wanted to transfer, and he’s always been very, very supportive, and that’s his family too. His mother geared him to academics are very important, so he was always very supportive of me. And that was a big thing for me too. If he wasn’t going to college and pursuing his Bachelor’s degree, I don’t know if I would have hit it off with him, because I really wanted someone who was on the same page as me, so that was a big factor. We both had that mutual understanding that we have a goal that we’re both individually trying to accomplish, and having the support for that was important. We needed that from one another. So he’s been very supportive.

It was rare for a mother to attend school at the same time as her partner. More often, one person pursued higher education, while the other partner provided emotional and financial support. RBS, a 27 year old Filipino mother of one and community college student, explained how her boyfriend felt about her pursuing her degree: “he loves it, he is actually willing to sacrifice, working until I have finished, he is actually waiting [to go to college himself] for me to get my degree.” This tag-team approach to higher education was experienced by a few other mothers with boyfriends, in addition to RBS. In some

cases, like Sydney, a mother's pursuit of higher education encouraged her partner to go to school as well. Sydney, a black mother of three in her early thirties, recently completed her Bachelor's degree and was now engaged to her boyfriend. She commented: "oh, he loved it. He absolutely loved it. He is one of those, really bad childhood types of things where he got his GED, and after he saw me in college, he actually went and got his bio-science degree. It was really cool. He loved it, he was really, really proud of me. He would tell people, oh yeah, my girl is in school. So, yeah, it was cool."

Even when partners were supportive of the mothers' educational goals, there was a common struggle because going to school is difficult. Lucy, a 30 year old Latina mother of three who was in her last semester of her Bachelor's degree, explained that even though her partner was supportive, they all struggled because she was in school:

He supports me. Sometimes [when] I'm a little stressed out I'm hard on him if anything, because I expect if he's at home to be able to help me more, but he's so tired, it's almost impossible too, so um, he really supports me though. Most of the years that I was in school prior, I haven't always had a steady job, he's been the one who always had a steady job. I've always had financial aid but it's never been enough...and he never gets jealous and like who are you studying with, he might ask, but he supports me. (laughs) We hope in the end that this is all going to help us...we're all suffering now, we're all suffering. Everyone's helping me and everyone's suffering with me basically (laughs).

However, the experiences of Lucy and the other mothers discussed in this section were only one piece of this story. In many more cases, the mothers' boyfriends and partners were somewhat supportive but had fears and anxiety over the women achieving more than they had educationally. They were intimidated by the mothers' educational and career aspirations. The women felt their partners' anxiety and intimidation, and this threatened the women's educational goals and the relationships. Jasmine, a 39 year old

white/Latina mother of three and recent community college graduate, reflected about her partner, whom she lives with:

He's supportive about it, but he's kind of negative about it, at the same time because he's an alcoholic. A lot of times he puts me down about it, he gets kind of jealous and angry about it. A lot of times, a lot of the things that he does in his life really does get in the way of my ability to move on with school, so I'm kind of having a struggle with that right now. Even though he has been there to watch the kids a lot still there's a price to pay for me there, because when I get home he starts drinking and I can't do homework and stuff. And there's times that I couldn't go to school because of his drinking, so there's a win and a lose in a big way on that situation.

Jasmine's experience with her partner was a familiar one. In her case, she blamed many of his actions on his alcoholism, but other mothers had similar experiences. Their partners were not thrilled about them going to school. While they may have provided some child care while the mothers were in school or a little extra income that allowed the women to keep going to school, once the mothers got home from campus, their partners expected them to do women's traditional household duties. The partners were not willing to pitch in. This discouraged mothers while pursuing their educational goals because they did not have the time, energy, or place to study.

The partners' anxiety and intimidation also took other forms. Sally, a 37 year old Asian Pacific Islander, mother of two and community college student, was also a recovering drug addict, yet her partner was still using drugs and this caused major disruptions for her education. She explained how he was intimidated by her educational goals, and that his drug use while she was in school caused strain on their relationship:

You know, he's really supportive. I think it scares him, and hopefully, I hope it'll scare him into trying sobriety again, even if it means another relapse. You know, it definitely, just one person doing drugs, and the other not, does create a strain, in whatever you may even, you can even in the relationship. When you start adding things like school to it, it really, it puts a really large, large, big, big strain on it.

But he's really supportive and he he's glad I'm doing it. You know, he's glad that I'm doing it.

Sally's sentiment, like Jasmine's, was that their partners say that they were supportive, but their actions did not always mirror their words. Jane, a 23 year old black mother of one and community college student, worried about how her education intimidated her partner. She wondered if her ability to bring in higher wages than he made would affect their relationship:

He thinks it's good, he really likes it. Sometimes he gets upset and I think he said before that sometimes he gets intimidated, because he feels like sometimes, for a while he talked about cars a lot, he likes cars a lot, and I would bring something up and I don't think he'd understand what I was talking about and I'd get frustrated (laughs). But it's not something I should do, and I think he's said before that he feels intimidated. But he's excited about it, he is happy about it, he's excited about it, be happy about it. But I think it could definitely put a damper on the relationship if I am bringing home a lot more money, if I got a BA. I mean he's making a little bit more than minimum wage, he seems ok with it, but I'm not him, so I don't really know about exactly, he says its ok with it, he seems ok with it, but I know how that can make a person feel, I mean I felt have felt intimidated by educated people before, so I understand that feeling.

Jane's worry was not uncommon. Some of the participants worried that their education would threaten their current relationships and in some cases affect their ability to find partners in the future. Although some of the mothers in this study were certain that their education would have positive effects on their romantic relationships and wanted partners who have similar educational aspirations or achievements, others were concerned about the current relationships and their prospects for the future. Overall, the women's romantic relationships seem to complicate their educational aspirations, although on the surface, the women claim that the men in their lives were or tried to be supportive.

'My family is supportive, but I don't think they understand'

Somewhere between the supportive cheerleader children and mothers navigating complicated romantic relationships with their partners, the women's families also had strong views on the mothers pursuing higher education while on welfare. Similar to the complex emotions expressed by the mothers' partners, the women's families seemed often to have conflicting sentiments. To begin with, there were families who were very supportive of the mothers' educational aspirations and provided unconditional love and critical emotional and financial support. Rebecca, a 34 year old white mother of two who was pursuing her Bachelor's degree, lived at home with her family after leaving her husband, who was abusing drugs. She expressed how her parents' support was vital to her well-being:

They were very supportive of [my education], they've always been supportive of me, no matter what I do, good or bad. Unconditional love is an easy thing to say, but it's a harder thing to do and they've done it. And, so they're proud of me, of course, but more than that, um, they really supported me through it. And so, not just, you know, 'we'll be here if you need us to baby sit' but I mean, really, they let me live at their home, didn't make me pay any rent, you know, helping me save money to get a car, all these things, they really support me in doing and showing me that education is important.

Additionally, Daria, a 29 year old white mother of one who was in her last semester of her Bachelor's degree, says that her family was: "so proud. So proud. Umm, my mom gets teary these days whenever the issue, somebody talks about it or when we are talking about it. My dad is just beaming ear to ear that both of his kids are graduating within a year of each another. And we are both teachers, or work in education. So, they are very proud of us." Her parents, who were divorced, have provided both her and her brother with significant financial and emotional support through their undergraduate careers.

When Daria became pregnant her junior year of college, she did not have to drop out of school, but was able, through her family's support, to finish her degree.

For Taz, her mother's support was very important to her going to school. Her mother helped her realize that for a young black mother in a very poor section of Oakland, education was one of the few paths out of poverty. Taz, a 27 year old black mother of two and community college student, explained: "oh, she's excited. She just told me keep going. 'You just keep going, she said 'that's the best thing for you, you've got two kids, you're on the right road, you're young mother, 17, there's a lot of young mothers out there who are not doing anything, they're on the streets, having all these babies, you know, dependent on welfare to pay for stuff,' you know, she just told me by being a young mother that you did great and just keep going, don't stop." For some of the mothers, like Taz and Daria, their pregnancies were unexpected, but they did not let that dampen their educational aspirations. Sydney, like Taz and Daria, experienced an unexpected pregnancy after she started college and her mother's support was essential to her as she continued to pursue her education at a school closer to home. Sydney, who recently completed her Bachelor's degree, said about her mother: "I think she wasn't sure what was going to happen after I got pregnant. She had sent me off to this really prestigious black college and I kinda ruined it, more or less, and I think she was really worried that I was just going to be some girl with a baby. So, she was really happy when I kept going and kept going. It took me a little longer than expected. But she was so proud of me when I graduated." This unconditional support was uncommon, but as seen through Rebecca, Daria, and Taz's stories, this support played an important role in sustaining and carrying several mothers through their educational goals.

More common was the response that their families were supportive but did not fully understand the mothers' educational aspirations or what it took to complete a higher education degree as a single parent in the welfare system. Lele, a 37 year old black mother of five who recently completed her Associate's degree and was in the process of transferring to UC Berkeley, explained that her family supported her, but did not fully understand her life:

Everybody, they are very encouraging. It is difficult because, umm, my sister, because, like I said, she is transient, my brother, he was going to go on to school since he got out of high school, the one that is the computer engineer, he, umm, he is like, yeah, keep going. Because he got a degree in one thing and now he is going back for something else. And then my younger brother, he is in Virginia at the University, he is trying to get me to go out there. Come out here and go to Howard, you know, so it's like, they are very supportive. And my parents, they are just like in awe, like, wow, I can't believe that you are doing this, that is great. Like, we didn't think that you would ever, you know, go to school. You know, I want to tell them, it's not like you really encouraged me, but you know. I really give my parents a lot of leverage, they didn't know, they were ignorant to a lot of things. They thought that you were supposed to go to high school and get a job. And when you don't, when you mess up and get pregnant and have to get married, you ruined that. So, you know their scope of the world is kinda...

Lele's parents, like other participants' families, tried to be supportive, although they did not fully grasp how or why the mothers pursued higher education while on welfare. As Monique, a 25 year old black mother of one and community college student, explained about her parents:

They are proud of me. My dad he wants me to work. And he may not understand, I know, because a lot of times I struggle because I don't get a lot of money from aid monthly, it is not high, it is not enough. But I make it, and he's like 'go get a job,' and I am like, I know, but I just want to finish school, so that when I do finish school, I can get a good paying one. I don't want to keep jumping from job to job to job, I want to get somewhere I want to stay.

Monique's struggle to stay in school, despite the financial difficulties, was not understood by her parents, but was echoed by other mothers. Betty, whose mother was on welfare

when she was younger, related how complicated support can be when your family does not really understand the struggle. She explained how her mother and sister respond:

They think it's good, I know they're proud of me and my mom's really happy; she cries all the time when, you know, if I get an award or you know, when I'm graduating. My sister's very supportive, she helps me with watching [my daughter] on the weekends so I can do papers and things like that, but with my mom too, I feel like she doesn't really understand how important it is to me sometimes because when I'm at my breaking point and I'm crying and I just feel like I can't take it, I'm not smart enough to do the work, whatever it might be, my mom always says well, maybe you should just drop out, she just doesn't understand and I'm like, you can't just drop out, it would be like all this time and effort for nothing. You know? But they're proud, they're happy, I try to tell my mom and my sister both, my mom never graduated high school, neither did my sister, but they hate school, they don't want to go to school, I even tell my sister all the time, she works in a drug program, and I'm like you could take these drug and alcohol education classes, get a certificate, and I'm like I'll do it with you, that's not going to hurt me, that would just be better, but they hate school, they don't want to go to school, so...

Lele, Monique, and Betty illustrated just some of the complicated ways that their families tried to support their educational goals, but for the most part did not fully understand the choices that they were making. Their families wanted them to be successful, but did not fully realize the steps that it would take for them to complete school. This lack of understanding can undermine the support that their families tried to provide.

In a few cases, the mothers' families were overtly negative about their pursuit of higher education. For example, Marie explained:

My dad was ok with me getting my AA degree, but he really wasn't very supportive of me getting my Bachelor's degree.

SK: Why?

He looks at cost, he thinks of something like the place of Berkeley as the ivory tower, where elite rich people go, and then questioning whether having your Bachelor's degree will really help you make any more money. I don't know, I find that surprising, because my dad was going to try to get his Bachelor's, but then he opted to stay with his AA degree and at United. So he's always been skeptical. And my step mom, it was always like ok, 'when are you going to be

done, how much longer are you going to be at school, when are you going to get a job?' That was the big thing with my family, and you know, now that I have my degree, they're proud of me, and they're proud of my accomplishments, but there's always like a sense of weariness, you know you've been going to school for a long time now. So that's what I got a lot of the time.

Marie's family was pleased when she finished with her Associate's degree, but their negative view while she was pursuing her Bachelor's degree made attaining that goal even more difficult. Although she is now working for a decent wage in her field, her family still questions whether she needed to graduate from UC Berkeley in order to get that job. Similarly, Vanessa's family did not understand the value of higher education for Vanessa or her daughter. Vanessa, a 30 year old white mother of one and community college student, explained what various members of her family felt about her education:

Oh, they're not too happy about it...my father, my biological father, I have no idea what he thinks about me being in school. I guess he thinks that as long as I'm not out having more babies, you know, I'm ok. My stepfather is a little happier about me going to school, he's come here before and he knows that education can kind of get me somewhere, but he doesn't want me to stay in school too long, and it's mainly because of what my mother and grandmother think, that school is a waste of time. Because when you go to school you're not making money, and if anything you're paying money, you're paying them to get an education, and that's how they look at it, as a waste of money, a way to get into debt. I believe that because I am the black sheep of the family that they, I guess that they feel that only once it needs to be said and no more, because I've let them know that it's their opinion and basically to keep it to themselves. Because if they're not going to pay my bills then they are not going to have a say in what I do.

Vanessa tried to say that her family's negative feelings about her education did not affect her; however, it was evident that, in general, families' positive support of the mothers' education was important to the mothers and they felt assisted them in meeting their educational goals. So, it is likely that the negative feelings that Vanessa and some of the other mothers' families had about education may undermine their ability to achieve their goals.

In this chapter I have explored how the mothers ‘made their case,’ as Hays would put it, about why they pursued higher education while on welfare. They made their case by constructing narratives around the meaning that they give to pursuing higher education and by examining the ways that they responded to their families and partners about their pursuit of higher education. This examination of their rationales demonstrates that mothers on welfare pursue higher education for the same reasons that most Americans pursue higher education, mainly to get ahead in the labor market. Some of the other rationales described here—such as being a role model for their children and increasing their self-esteem—also are found in other discussions of why women, particularly older women, pursue higher education (AAUW 1999). Their pursuit of higher education is also in line with many cultural beliefs about what is needed to pursue and achieve the American Dream. By believing in and attempting to pursue the American Dream, mothers on welfare in higher education prove a central point to conservative critics: they are not culturally different than other Americans. Their belief around what it takes to support their families is rooted in the same sense of what it takes to pursue the American dream that many other Americans believe it. However, as will be explored in the next two chapters, some participants in this study recognize that higher education may not be enough to get out of poverty, at least not for everybody, and that other policies should be considered. The mothers view the current labor market as not fully meritocratic because they have more of a structural view of the economic policies that create poverty. As will be further discussed in Chapter 6, some are working collectively at the grassroots level to challenge economic injustice and current welfare policy.

CHAPTER VI

‘POVERTY DOESN’T HAVE A TIME LIMIT:’ CALWORKS MOTHERS’ INVOLVEMENT WITH LIFETIME

Jasmine was a 39 year old white/Latina mother of three, domestic violence survivor, who recently graduated with her Associate’s Degree from a local community college. She was an active LIFETIME parent leader; she first heard about the organization while participating in a town hall meeting to which she was invited by the food bank that she used while she and her family were homeless. At the meeting, she was approached by one of the organization’s parent leaders about what she had said during the meeting: “when I was having a town hall meeting with the food bank and I was speaking about my situation being stopped from school and being homeless, because that was the main thing, we were living in a filthy store front illegally which didn’t have a bathroom or a kitchen for 3 and a half years. One of the LIFETIME people was there and heard my testimony and they came up to me and introduced themselves and I got in touch with them and basically that’s how it all started. That was like in April 2001.” She continued by explaining, “LIFETIME came up to me because they heard me talk about quitting school as I was speaking, about being forced [by my caseworker to quit school], and from that time on I filed an appeal and I won my appeal in early 2002. I went back to school in August 2001 even though the county told me not to, I did anyways...with LIFETIME’s advice. I would have never done this had I not met LIFETIME because I had no idea that they [caseworkers] were breaking the law because I was already going to school and they made me quit. And that’s against the law in California.”

Jasmine traced her trajectory with the organization: “I came to LIFETIME as a client about my case, being forced to quit school. And from that time, my development with LIFETIME has been a really positive and uplifting for me, in the sense that I got on the parent leadership committee which is comprised of groups of CalWORKs parents who help LIFETIME form decision making about laws or policies that affect our life because we are the ones living our life. And part of that meant going to Sacramento on [legislative] visits, and in some cases to Washington, D.C. to do the same and be involved in briefings.” Jasmine felt that her involvement with the organization had “opened up a really big door for me in every way. It kind of brought me out of my shell, I didn’t feel like I was the only one in the world and isolated in this situation, it showed me that there are other people out there facing similar barriers and challenges like myself, and a lot of people at that.”

Through her experiences in poverty and by being involved with LIFETIME, Jasmine related how she had developed an understanding of the structural deficiencies within the welfare system: “it also showed me how the resources in the system were not being given to me and how the social system had been dropping the ball basically and failing parents like myself who are really truly trying and who have good intentions in every way to get out of poverty. Nobody wants to be in poverty, and poverty doesn’t have a time limit on it, and LIFETIME seemed to understand all these things.” In addition to learning about the dynamics of poverty and the welfare policy through the organization’s trainings, Jasmine worked with the organization to change them: “LIFETIME has also been integral in helping to form and change law and policy in California that affects

families, like mine, and I've been a part of that change by being involved with LIFETIME.”

Jasmine's narrative about how she came to be involved with the organization illustrated a common thread in many of the LIFETIME mothers' narratives: she thought she was alone in her experience of pursuing higher education while in the welfare system. However, when she met a member of the organization, she found out that she was not alone in this process, and became involved in LIFETIME and an active participant in grassroots politics. One of the central research questions for this project is how the narratives of mothers involved with the organization differ from those who were not. This chapter will first explore how LIFETIME engages in grassroots advocacy and politics. Second, this chapter will outline the varying levels of participants' engagement with the organization: parent leaders, clients, and potential participants. Finally, this chapter will examine the ways that the LIFETIME mothers' narratives about their pathways onto welfare and into higher education, their survival narratives and strategies, and the meaning of their education differ from the narratives of mothers who are not involved with the organization.

LIFETIME and Grassroots Politics

Low-Income Families' Empowerment through Education, which is called LIFETIME by the staff and parent leaders, is a grassroots, nonprofit organization founded in 1996 by Diana Spatz, a mother on welfare who was finishing her Bachelor's degree at UC Berkeley. Through her time in the community colleges and at UC Berkeley, Spatz networked with other student parents, formed support groups, designed and conducted

student-led classes, and created student parent resource centers on various local campuses. She finished her degree at the same time as welfare reform was passed nationally and implemented in California. The 1996 welfare reform, as discussed in Chapter 1, greatly restricted the opportunity to pursue higher education while participating in the welfare system. In response, through a fellowship designed for social entrepreneurs, Spatz founded LIFETIME.

LIFETIME's purpose is two-fold; one aim is to provide peer-advocacy services by and for mothers on welfare to help them pursue higher education. These services are mainly provided by interns who are student mothers on welfare and who work for the organization part-time, usually as part of a work-study program through local colleges or universities. The organization conducts outreach workshops at community colleges and universities across the Bay Area, and more recently across the state, in which the organization teaches parents how to advocate for themselves and how (or when) to reach out to LIFETIME or other advocacy organizations for support. When parents contact the organization for advocacy support, the peer advocates work with them to resolve their issues with the welfare office or file a state appeal. The focus of this part of the organization's mission is to help parents resolve their individual problems with the welfare system so that they can stay in school while on welfare.

The second main purpose of the organization is to empower parents to work collectively on grassroots campaigns to change welfare policies.⁴⁸ LIFETIME works through grassroots organizing to raise awareness about the rights of low-income families and challenge welfare policy. The core of LIFETIME's organizing strategy is to empower parents to fight for their rights in the welfare system and to work collectively to

change the policies for everyone. The organization works with CalWORKs parents on their immediate and personal problems with the welfare system and then focuses on developing their leadership skills and empowering them to participate in the political process. The organization holds one and three day Parent Leadership Trainings where they inform parents about current welfare policy, upcoming changes to the policy, and how to become involved in the political process. Parents who participate in LIFETIME's leadership trainings are called "Parent Leaders" by the organization. Staff and parent leaders engage in grassroots political activities and actions to change welfare and poverty policy at the local, state, and federal level.

LIFETIME's approach to grassroots political engagement is a process that is a known, though little used, strategy in political organizing. The strategy is to help people through their immediate personal crisis with advocacy and social services, then to engage them in political work to help change the policies that put them in crisis in the first place. This strategy, as Abramovitz (1999) points out, is an organizing strategy more often used by women than men, especially poor and working class women. Hardy-Fanta (1993:3) found, in her study of Latina/Latino politics, that women are particularly good at "making connections" between "private troubles and public issues" and that by addressing the private troubles, often women get involved politically in the public issues that contributed or caused the private troubles. The organization helps parents make the connections between their 'private troubles and the public issues,' a process by which could also be referred to as 'radical social services,' a description that comes from a history of radical social work.⁴⁹ Although there are many ways to define radical social work, one of the ways is the following: "(1) a belief that the institutional structure of society is the source

of the personal problems of the clients; (2) a focus on economic inequality as a central concern and cause of other social and individual problems; (3) a critical view of social service agencies as instruments of social control, co-optation, and stigmatization; (4) a focus on both structural and internalized oppression; and (5) a linkage of cause and function of private troubles and public issues” (Reisch and Andrews 2002:6). These elements are in line with how LIFETIME connects parents to the advocacy they need to solve their personal troubles and engages them politically to challenge the structures that cause the oppression.

Some in the social movement literature might also call what the organization does creating an “oppositional consciousness” among the parents on welfare, although LIFETIME does not call it this.⁵⁰ Mansbridge (2001:5) argues that oppositional consciousness “is usually fueled by righteous anger over injustices done to the group and prompted by personal indignities and harms suffered through one’s group membership.” LIFETIME argues that the very act of using welfare creates personal indignities and harm, and they work to funnel women’s ‘righteous anger’ into political action. The organization’s development of parent leaders is in line with the process of developing an oppositional consciousness that Mansbridge (2001:5) outlines: “at a minimum, oppositional consciousness includes the four elements of identifying with members of a subordinate group, identifying injustices done to that group, opposing those injustices, and seeing the group as having a shared interest in ending or diminishing those injustices.” In this organization’s case, this includes raising the consciousness of mothers on welfare to identify with each other, then working to raise their awareness about issues surrounding economic injustice including how welfare policy is designed and

implemented, the structural causes of poverty, and finally, learning about the political process to oppose or challenge those injustices in the policies. As will be evident in the discussions below, not all mothers who have contact with LIFETIME become involved in their political activities; only a few develop an oppositional consciousness.

Levels of Engagement

As we see in Jasmine's narrative, her trajectory to being involved with LIFETIME followed the organization's strategy for engaging parents in grassroots politics. First, she met a parent leader from the organization who helped her work on her personal case issues, and then she attended a parent leadership training, which led her to becoming involved with the organization's parent leadership committee. LIFETIME's parent leaders come to get involved in several ways, but as Jasmine's narrative illustrates, the personal connection with a staff member or parent leader is a critical first step. However, not all mothers who met the organization's parent leaders get involved to the degree that Jasmine did. Therefore, this section will explore the participants' levels of engagement with the organization: parent leader, client, or potential participant. At each level, I will also explore the meaning that the women's involvement with the organization had to them, which will illustrate the difference in identity between parent leaders and those who were clients only.

Parent Leaders

This section will examine the narratives of the participants who were most active in LIFETIME, which the organization calls their 'parent leaders.' Parent leaders have

usually participated in at least one of the organization's parent leadership trainings and stay engaged in the grassroots political work that LIFETIME does. Seventeen participants in this study identified themselves as engaged with the organization as a parent leader. Twelve of those participants I would describe as very engaged, while the remaining five are only occasional participants in LIFETIME's activities. This section explores the ways that mothers come to find out about the organization, how that initial contact evolves into being a parent leader, and the meaning that their involvement with LIFETIME has to them. At times, their narratives about becoming parent leaders explore all three of these elements at once.

The women's most common route to finding out about the organization and getting involved was through contact on their community college or university campus. This is particularly true for those who identify as parent leaders. Nine of the twelve most active parent leaders that I interviewed came to know about LIFETIME through their schools. The organization puts on workshops and presentations, and advertises through flyers at the community colleges and public universities in the area. Also, leaders who are active with LIFETIME are usually also active on their own campuses, and make announcements at meetings and in their classes to let other students know about the organization. Of the nine leaders who first found out about the organization through their campuses, five of them got involved because of the personal connection that they made with a parent leader or staff member during the workshop or at the personal suggestion or introduction by a college staff member.

An example of this was Nicole, a 33 year old black mother of one and community college student. She related how she first found out about the organization: "I found out

about LIFETIME through CalWORKs because they came and did a presentation at our school and told us about what our rights were...here on campus. What we need to do: advocate for yourself. And not only that, I had issues with my worker regarding transportation, and they had a transportation meeting that I was really interested in, and I got more involved.” As Nicole mentioned, participants often heard about LIFETIME through the workshops that the community colleges require for parents on welfare or for those involved in the EOPS or CARE programs. In her case, her involvement escalated because the organization was engaging politically in an issue that was important to her personally. While getting her personal problem with transportation resolved with her caseworker, she also became politically involved in helping make the situation better for other parents. Her involvement with LIFETIME started with this one concern; however, she stayed involved because she became aware of how her transportation problem was tied to systemic issues with the welfare system. Her engagement with the organization opened opportunities for a career in advocacy or grassroots politics, and ultimately meant a career for her:

And the purpose why I want to do [grassroots advocacy] is because me being a single parent on welfare, I felt that the organization that LIFETIME did, helped me become that person. And I want to do that for other people. And I feel like that if I was still in that same position, I don't think I would get much of the support that I did back then. I think that I would still be in that situation where, like most people are with their welfare-to-work, they don't know what to do, how to advocate for themselves. So, I would be in that same situation. So, I have become more of a leader and a role model to other parents, than I would have been four or five years ago. That's the way I see it. That's why I am passionate about the work that I do.

Nicole's involvement in the organization gave her the opportunity to learn to advocate for herself and for other parents in similar situations. Through that work, she has found a career that she is passionate about.

Another mother, Twitch, a 30 year old black mother of one and recent university graduate, explained how her attendance at one of those mandatory meetings escalated to her being an active parent leader:

So I started going back to school, I was kind of going through the motions and I was involved with this program at school, we had to go to these stupid workshops...I had to go to one of those meetings, the EOPS whatever, and I had to go because that's how you qualify for their program... Well, I go to this workshop and LIFETIME is there, and it was good because there was this girl there and she was going to Berkeley, she'd just graduated from Berkeley. And at that time I was like, ok, you go to school because that's what you're supposed to do, but I really didn't see anything happening out of it, I think it's because I was already looking for jobs and there was nothing there, and I was like, ok, this is just what you do. And then I saw the girl from Berkeley and she was on welfare, and she had like 3 kids I think, and she had just gotten offered this awesome job in Washington hecka money, and I was like, oh, ok, ok, good.... and like I said I heard her talking, and then the head of LIFETIME came up and said you should really come, so I started coming, and I was like, hmm, and it was really neat to get involved in something like that because I'm already a person who stands up for themselves, but I kind of just forgot about it, like how to do it, so it was a good place for me to go to remember... And that's how it went, and I got involved with LIFETIME, and I saw other people in my same situation, frustrated, stressed out, happy, graduating, you know, people like me, and I was like ok, good, I can live a little better, still stressed, but this is how you breathe. Ok, this is good. So I got involved in the organization... well, first I was a parent leader, then I volunteered, then I worked there, I've given a couple of workshops, I've gone with the head of LIFETIME around to different places to tell about LIFETIME more.

Twitch's and Nicole's experiences were similar: an aspect of LIFETIME's presentation at these workshops resonated with them and inspired them to become involved in the organization. As both mothers explained, the resonance can be a particular issue that they were interested in or a reminder of a forgotten aspect to their personality, which was triggered by the organization's way of engaging parents to advocate for themselves and others. Their involvement escalated because they connected with the work that LIFETIME was doing. As Twitch said "I can live a little better, still stressed, but this is how you breathe;" her political engagement, although a time commitment, gave her

strength and support to persevere in school while on welfare and motivated her to fight for that right for others.

Another mother, Tony, a 33 year old black mother of two who was a domestic violence survivor and recent graduate of UC Berkeley, tells her story of becoming involved, which is similar to Nicole's and Twitch's narratives. Tony related how she got involved with LIFETIME, which made a difference in her life and on her campus. She also met the organization through workshops at her community college, which LIFETIME sponsored during spring break to help mothers meet their weekly work requirements while they were on the break from classes. She explained that LIFETIME helped her connect with other resources that made her education possible, but at the same time, the knowledge that she learned from her involvement with the organization encouraged her to help her campus implement better policies that allowed others to stay in school as well:

The benefits of being a CalWORKs student was not made clear to anyone until LIFETIME came down there. And once LIFETIME came down, and they did a series of workshops, one of them was a Spring Break workshop, 'cause what CalWORKs demanded was that we had 32 per week, work hours per week. So, we had to provide that too on Spring Break even. So, what they decided to do was put on this workshop during Spring Break to give us information and also to give us the number of hours that we needed to complete or whatever. So, it was really informative, and they came and gave us lots and lots of information. And that was around the time that CalWORKs had funding that was available to the community college to have a CalWORKs representative there. So, they hired someone from the CARE department to figure out how to deal with CalWORKs. And I think that might have been the break for a lot of people. Some people knew about CalWORKs programs just because they knew other people that were on CalWORKs or whatever and knew about what to ask. But those were very few and far between. So, once people found out about their rights through LIFETIME, then it was a matter of trying to get those policies implemented. So, what that person ended up being good for, because they didn't have very much training and didn't understand, was pretty much fielding our requests, and to the social service office, they would say, look, this student feels like this was their right and they feel like this should be given to them, and we need to figure out what happened or

whatever. And I think that that person became the reason for the agencies to be a little worried, but also that person also became the reason why a lot of people didn't get services and why a lot of people didn't bother to pursue it any longer because they didn't have the training that they needed. So, the student like me, that had contact with LIFETIME that had a chance to know more about what our rights are and to really push that. But for people who had other barriers to deal were not able to get the kinds of services that they wanted. Some people quit, some people left school. Some people were in really abusive relationships at the time and couldn't see the light. They just weren't understanding what it meant for them.

Tony indicated how her involvement with LIFETIME empowered her to “really push that” and fight for her rights on her campus. Although it is possible that Tony would have fought for her rights without being politically engaged with the organization, she cited her involvement with them as the reason she was able to stay in school. Tony remained engaged with LIFETIME after she completed her Associate's degree and transferred to UC Berkeley. As her engagement in the organization's political work evolved, she found out that she was eligible for additional benefits because of her experience with domestic violence. She explains: “because when I left my marriage, I was in an abusive situation, and they never informed me at all about any domestic violence services. So, when I got more involved with the organization, I found out that I should have been offered services and/or an exemption at least. So, LIFETIME and I decided to fight it. And we ended up winning it, so I was exempt [from welfare-to-work activity requirements].” Being exempt from the work activities allowed her to stay in school and she eventually graduated from UC Berkeley. She remained involved in the organization's political work until her recent graduation.

Although many of the parent leaders became involved with LIFETIME through the workshops and presentations that the organization conducts at the community colleges and universities, mothers also got involved through referrals for LIFETIME's

advocacy services from other social service organizations. D, a 46 year old black mother of three and community college student, related how she found out about the organization in a time of crisis; because the organization helped her through that crisis, she became part of the parent leadership committee:

I found out about LIFETIME, my youngest daughter was a hell raiser, she really was, and because I stayed in [domestic violence shelter] transitional housing, I didn't have the power to deal with it the way I wanted to deal with it, ok. And foster care came into play, and they assigned me a neighborhood intervention program person. They didn't put her straight into foster care, they put an intervention, which was really cool. And the social worker for the intervention handed me the LIFETIME card because I just lost my job and I applied for welfare because I didn't have any income, and [my caseworker] told me, 'forget you needing some type of therapy, medical attention, you're butt's going back to work; you're highly intelligent, get you butt off to work, I don't care if you have a mental breakdown; get your tail back to work.' So I said, uh-oh, something's wrong, I'm a spasm, I'm homeless, I've got a daughter, a teen, an adolescent who's highly at risk and you know, it says on this paper that you're supposed to offer me counseling, and she said, 'your butt is going back to work.' So I told the [intervention] social worker and she handed me LIFETIME's card... I picked up the phone, I called and they gave me an earful, I went back to the caseworker, and I said, they said that I have the right to get aid for my emotional, mental problems. I had the right to seek remedy for my health and that is the law and therefore I am demanding to get relief. And she got all nervous (laughs) and she said let me check on it, let me talk to my supervisor, I said I'm not going anywhere. When she came back she said you have a six month waiver, and I said, thank you. I'm going to school, as I should...that was 2003...They didn't have to sell me, I went to their parent leadership summit, and I sat through that, and I called them and I said I'd like to volunteer.

D's narrative outlines LIFETIME's central strategy of engaging women in grassroots politics. The organization helps mothers meet their immediate needs by empowering parents to advocate for themselves at the welfare department, through a system of peer-mentoring and support. Usually this is done over the phone, as D illustrated with 'and they gave me an earful,' in which D got the information she needed to challenge what her caseworker was requiring of her. As illustrated throughout this study, the 'work-first' approach has caseworkers forcing mothers on welfare to engage in work activities despite

other crises in their lives that might exempt them from work requirements. For D, who was homeless, recovering from severe domestic violence which left her permanently disabled from her severe Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (though she did not know it at the time) and dealing with a special needs adolescent who was being investigated for possible removal by the foster care system, the ‘work first’ approach was not what she needed or could even handle at that time. LIFETIME’s strategy meets mothers where they are, helps them through their immediate crisis, and then invites them to be part of the effort to change the system that contributed to the crisis in the first place. D’s engagement escalated, as it did for the mothers previously discussed in this section, from the parent leadership meeting and she had been involved since.

Phoebe was another example of a mother in crisis who found out about LIFETIME and became an active parent leader, challenging the welfare policies that she initially feared. A 39 year old black immigrant mother of one, Phoebe was escaping domestic violence and fighting through a nasty divorce, yet because of her immigration status, she was not certain that she would be allowed to remain in the country after the divorce. She applied for welfare and enrolled in a local community college where she met a parent leader at the CalWORKs orientation for her community college:

During the orientation at [the community college] was when I met [LIFETIME parent leader]. So you know, and she was at the orientation, and she stood up and said I’m a member of LIFETIME and I help students. And it was like oh, and I wrote to them, so this was January right, and I hadn’t sent in my CW7 it was called, so I hadn’t sent it in and I don’t know why, I don’t know, for whatever reason, and I had gotten a letter saying ‘we’re going to cut your welfare benefits off.’ and I was like, oh god, and I was scared of the people at welfare and I had this sensation of people just fussing around me and asking me all kinds of things and at the same time the bureaucracy was such, you know, so heavy. And I was scared that anything I didn’t do correctly or I overlooked something, that was it, I’d be dropped because they were very intense with that sort of stuff, you know. Six months if you don’t report this correctly, and you’ll forever be sanctioned off

welfare if you don't do that correctly, and that coupled with dealing with divorce and this and that and the other, you know, fearing that I'd be kicked out of the country because I was getting divorced before my 2 years of conditional residency was up, you know, there was just tons of legal stuff. And I felt like just constant [threat] to my existence which was so fragile, so it was constantly scary. So when [LIFETIME parent leader] stood up and said by the way I've got this thing, I was like, ah, so I wrote her this note...and she sent me it back and she said see me afterwards. So it was like ok, and that was that, she kind of took me under her wing...just somebody standing up and talking about LIFETIME and then going there and going to Sacramento and giving testimony.

Phoebe's journey from a mother in crisis escaping domestic violence to testifying about welfare policy in front of lawmakers in Sacramento, although unusual for most welfare mothers, is almost typical for parent leaders. LIFETIME works to engage parents politically and train them to be part of the policymaking process, such as testifying at committee hearings, being part of community boards, and meeting with legislators and other policymakers. The organization's strategy of grassroots political engagement also builds on creating relationships between parent leaders so that the ones who are further along their educational journeys mentor the parents who are just starting.

LIFETIME engages both in institutional politics—such as participating in legislative briefings, hearings, and visits with policymakers, as illustrated in Phoebe's narrative—and also in extra-institutional grassroots politics such as sit-ins, political theatre, and protest marches. One of the strengths of LIFETIME's approach to grassroots political engagement is putting a face and a story to the policies that are being deliberated or implemented by empowering and training mothers on welfare to present their own testimony to legislative committees on issues—such as welfare policy—that affect their lives. As Phoebe mentioned, she and most of the other parent leaders have given testimony about welfare policies in Sacramento or on Capitol Hill. In some cases, the mothers also bring their children with them. LIFETIME's reasoning is that many times

policymakers do not know or have never even met a woman on public assistance who will be directly affected by the policy that they are implementing. LIFETIME's strategy is to make it personal, by having mothers on welfare testify about their own experiences, which, at the same time, dispels many of the myths about welfare mothers. The organization hopes that this strategy encourages policymakers to enact policies that are more in line with what LIFETIME is advocating. On more than one occasion, however, LIFETIME's directors (who are themselves former welfare mothers) have been told not to bring welfare mothers (and especially their children) to state budget hearings because they make the issues too personal to the policymakers. The LIFETIME directors interpret this request as evidence that their strategy is working.

In addition to the active parent leaders discussed above, two participants mentioned being familiar with the organization and using their services or going to parent leadership training, but not being involved on an ongoing basis. Both mentioned finishing school as the pivotal moment when one mother became less involved and the other became more involved. Nancy, a 45 year old Latina mother of one who recently completed her Associate's degree, found out about LIFETIME through her community college and joined as a member. She now participates in the Individual Development Account program, EARN, that the organization facilitates:

But I'm a member and I've been going to the membership planning committees, and I like that because when I go there, just the fact that there are other women in my situation, it's almost like a support group for me. Knowing that ok, I'm not the only one in this situation. Also they educate me as to what's going on, and I still want to know what's going on with CalWORKs recipients...Because I know that there's going to be Latinas going on the welfare system, and how are we going to support them? So I want to know what's going on.

SK: So have you been to the parent leadership committee meetings?

Yeah, I've been to the committee, I went to the summit, which was amazing...they had a lot of good speakers there... And there was a lot of empowerment at that summit. It is so cool, I am a member. Every woman should go to that. Every woman that's on support services should go to that, just so they know and have a sense of empowerment.

However, after she completed her degree, she started working in her field and stopped participating actively with the organization. Tony was another parent who stopped being an active participant after she graduated; it is not unusual for LIFETIME parents to become less involved after graduating. Nancy also discussed that she felt LIFETIME's motto is a little misleading, which led to her being frustrated with the support that the organization is able to provide, and contributed to her becoming less involved after her graduation:

I was a client, but to be honest with you they couldn't really do much for me because of my situation. I was a little disappointed in the sense like their whole motto is from GEDs to PhDs, but past the BA there's really no support systems for you, so I'm really disappointed at that. But I know that that's not totally their fault, but at least they should change the model (laughs). Because after BAs, because after that it gives you a sense that they're going to be there to support you all the way to your PhD, but that's not true.

LIFETIME's motto of "GEDs to PhDs" stresses the importance of education at every level, but as Nancy acknowledged, she was unable to pursue education while on welfare after completing her BA, because of welfare regulations. LIFETIME did help her challenge the appeals ruling in her case, but they were unable to get it overturned, and she was sanctioned off welfare. She started working part-time while she applied for Master's programs; however, she stopped being actively involved with the organization after she graduated.

Yet, for Marie, the converse was true: her involvement with the organization has increased since she graduated. When she was on welfare, she did not feel that she needed

the support, although she was aware of the organization and participated in some of their campus workshops. Now that she was working with low-income parents at a community college, she was interested in getting more involved. Marie, a 30 year old white mother of two and UC Berkeley graduate, discussed her involvement with LIFETIME then and now:

I didn't, because I was living with my parents it was a little bit easier for me, [than] it is for a lot of people. But I did use LIFETIME, they came and spoke, it was a, I was part of the CARE program at [her community] college, and um, because you can't have spring break or Christmas break, whatever, when you're in the CalWORKs program because you still have to complete your work participation hours during that time, she would always have like a retreat for us. And she'd have workshops and different fun stuff for us to do and one of the workshops was [name of LIFETIME board member] from LIFETIME came and spoke to us, so I was a little bit involved with LIFETIME at that time...[I] did the IDA program. Yeah, we attended the meetings, and I did one day of volunteer work with [LIFETIME], and I wish I could have done more. I have so much admiration for [LIFETIME's director] and the organization, you know, her being a welfare mom, to me she's a pioneer fighting for her rights, I have a lot of admiration and respect for her.

SK: And have you ever been to one of their parent leadership committee meetings?

No, I actually, I'd like to, I've been inquiring a little bit more. I'd like to be more involved in something, doing a little bit of volunteer work.

Marie knew of the organization's programs and services and the parent leadership trainings, but because she got along pretty well with her caseworker and lived at home with her parents, she did not feel that she needed LIFETIME's support, and thus did not become involved in any of their activities. Now that she was finished with school, and working in a local community college at the office that helps low-income students, she wanted to get involved with the organization's leadership trainings. Her interest in LIFETIME's political work focused on both her lived experiences and the work that she does through her job every day.

As both of these mothers' narratives illustrate, graduating may be a moment when involvement in LIFETIME's political activities shift. For mothers like Nancy and Marie, and for some of the active parent leaders who have recently graduated, how their engagement in grassroots politics, especially through LIFETIME, may change after their graduation is uncertain. In this study, many of the women pursued degrees and careers in fields in which they could apply the knowledge that they learned through the organization and stay engaged in advocacy or political work. In that sense, many of the mothers stay engaged in grassroots politics and welfare advocacy work after graduating, even though that work is not necessarily done through LIFETIME. (Examples include Twitch, Lele J., and Phoebe.) However, some mothers' direct involvement with the organization does seem to decrease after graduation. This could be, in part, an unintended consequence of LIFETIME's organizing strategy: bringing parents in to solve their individual problems with the welfare system, and then engaging them in the political work to change the system. After graduating, the mothers may feel that they no longer need this support and become less engaged. However, future research is needed to fully explore this hypothesis. Longitudinal research with CalWORKs mothers who have graduated can address this question. This is an area that I will follow up on in the second round of interviews and in future research: retention of parent leaders in grassroots politics after graduation. In these subsequent interviews I would like to explore whether LIFETIME'S strategy has the unfortunate result of making some parents believe that once they graduate, they no longer need to be engaged in the work that the organization is doing.

However, some of the most active parent leaders believe that graduation will not change their engagement. Jasmine was aware that graduating may bring changes in her

life, but believed that her engagement with LIFETIME and grassroots political work will continue. She explained the impact that the organization has had on her life and envisions her future with them:

It's had a tremendous impact on me in a very positive way and it's one of the key components and pillars in my life that really holds me together when I really feel despair and I feel those weak moments when I almost just want to give up, um, I see all these other people still working on changing their lives and that gives me the momentum to keep going otherwise it is so easy to give up in this kind of situation because it's extremely challenging on a person and organizations like LIFETIME, they really know how to hold people together to keep moving forward and that's just been a really important part of my life more than anything else, because LIFETIME is my life, what LIFETIME does, is my life...One of my slogans in the big t-shirt campaign I did at LIFETIME, which was very, very emotional and extremely intriguing experience for me, and that was back in January of 2003, was I wrote on the back of one of the t-shirts a slogan that said 'education is emancipation out of poverty' and it is. And our law makers, like I say when I go to Sacramento, sometimes I go up there and I say I'd like to address you today with 3 key points before you vote on this particular issues, first of all, you had a mother, you all had a mother at one time in your life, secondly, you all were children and most importantly, you all wouldn't be sitting where you are today without an education, so think about these three components. So think about these three key components when you vote on this particular policy today, and a lot of times the policies are around low income families and children and education, and that's the kind of work I do at LIFETIME and I'm proud of it, and even when I graduate I intend to continue with the work because I am LIFETIME.

Her proclamation that "I am LIFETIME" exemplified the identity that parent leaders develop as activists with the organization. It illustrates that some parent do develop an oppositional consciousness, and this identity is central to their lives and political engagement. This identity as activists is the main difference between parent leaders and clients.

Clients

This section will explore the narratives of participants who remained clients of the organization's advocacy services, but were not involved in the political activities. Some

mothers used LIFETIME's services, but had not gotten involved in the leadership trainings or grassroots politics. The clients were aware that the organization sponsored parent leadership trainings and engaged in grassroots politics, but for a variety of reasons, they were not involved in them. These mothers had not developed an oppositional consciousness that characterized those who became parent leaders.

Some clients, like Gloria, were still in the middle of their crisis, and had not moved past dealing with their personal issues to ongoing participation in parent leadership activities. Gloria, a 32 year old Latina mother of three and domestic violence survivor, was pursuing her Associate's degree at a local community college. She was having extreme problems with her caseworker and feared being cut off from welfare at any moment. She was actively working with LIFETIME on her case, and explained her situation:

In June, I was in an AC Transit bus accident [the bus system in Alameda County]. Despite my injury my worker is still pushing me to work--the 20 core hours and the 12 non core hours. My worker pushed me into job search--she wants me to find a job. I am trying to negotiate with her about an internship. I show proof that my son has PTSD and is in therapy for anxiety. I also put my other son into therapy to make sure he doesn't have any problems because his grades were going down. Each child's problems manifest themselves in different ways. My youngest son and I were in the AC Transit bus accident...I think that mental health activities should count towards the core activities. But my worker says that they are not enough--she needs more specific or worse mental health. She hasn't honored my pain, she acts like this is even more now that LIFETIME is involved. I am going to fight their actions to my worker's boss. She contradicts her supervisor and tells him the county policy....the supervisor said the only way we can honor your exemption is if I drop my classes...he told me this because I was there by myself. LIFETIME was not there—they have a lot of authority. I did not cry then, I would not let them see me cry. The supervisor says the way that we can tell if you are under a lot of stress is if you stop going to school because of it. He says that is the way the system works. They wanted me to sign something that said this, but I would not sign it.

Gloria was told about the organization by the CalWORKs advisor at her college because the county caseworker was pressuring her to quit school. She was working with LIFETIME to stay in school and get access to the mental health services that she and her children needed. However, at the time of the interview, Gloria's personal case was in such a precarious situation that she turned down offers to participate in ongoing parent leadership activities that had happened since she came to the organization for help with her case. Although some of the parent leaders, as discussed above, get involved despite their ongoing personal crises, some mothers, like Gloria, may not get further involved, or may wait until their crisis passes.

Another mother, Daria, was also aware of LIFETIME's leadership trainings and grassroots politics, but was not involved in them. Instead, she used just one of the services that the organization offers, the IDA program EARN. Daria, a 29 year old white mother of one who was in her last semester of her Bachelor's degree, explained when asked if she used any of LIFETIME's services:

No. EARN is the only one that I am involved in. And that is fantastic.

SK: Are you in EARN? [EARN is an Individual Development Account (IDA) program that is administered by LIFETIME but is funded by another organization.]

I am in EARN, that program rocks! Save a thousand and we will give you two more! Okay. Twist my arm. I think it is save two thousand and they give you four. So, you end up with six thousand dollars.

SK: So, you are almost done with the EARN?

No, not almost done. I am in the process. In the process, I think that I designated that I wanted to use it on a down payment on a house. That is my goal, is to keep working and be able to get into a house so that I can stop paying rent.

SK: You have heard of LIFETIME?

Yeah.

SK: Have you done anything with them?

I know that they do the EARN, that's all I know.

SK: So, you are in EARN with them? [There is at least one other organization that administers EARN in San Francisco.]

Yeah.

Although Daria was involved with the EARN program through the organization, she did not engage in any of their other services or activities. This may not be unusual for the EARN clients, as this pattern was also seen above with Marie's narrative, and will be further discussed below with Nicole C.'s narrative. Marie participated in EARN as well, and wanted to become more involved with LIFETIME's grassroots political events only after she was off welfare. Nicole C. explained why she has been unable to move from being a client to participating in the leadership trainings and grassroots political activities:

SK: When did you first learn about LIFETIME?

It was actually here on campus, they were doing um an IDA thing here and then that's how I met the person for the first time at this center.

SK: And then um what type of involvement have you had with them since meeting them that first time?

The IDA account they've done several...

SK: So do you have an IDA account?

I do have an IDA account and just from working here we have had contact with them because they come here and work through our center and through the state center and things like the resource fair, and they've advocated for me with CalWORKs.

SK: So you've been a client as well?

Right, and it's been someone that I know that I can call, and it's just good to know that there's somebody because I guess they have attorneys and they are

people who have been there too, they know things and they know that you're not lying about what's happening and they know that this crazy stuff actually really does happen. And so that feels good.

SK: And have you been to one of their parent leadership meetings?

No. I mean I get the notices telling me all the great things that they do, and I would like to, but my schedule is so crazy that, and even the things that I need to go to for the IDA, and they have child care there, I'm like, ok, do I go there or can I try to pass my math class, so I'm always making these choices of this or you know, and it's always something, and it's a stress always.

As Nicole C. explained, she felt that the stress and demands of her daily life prevented her from participating in the grassroots political activities that the organization sponsors. Her perspective was one that was articulated by many of the mothers, even the most involved parent leaders: their daily lives and time constraints prevented them from being as involved as they want to be.

However, another mother, Dena, was actively trying to get advocacy help from LIFETIME for her case, but did not feel like she was connecting with them. Although she wanted to be more involved with the organization, she needed to get her issues resolved first. A 42 year old white mother of one and community college student, Dena explained:

You know what? I'm kind of bummed out about LIFETIME as a matter of fact. Because I went out there, met with [a staff member], I've told them all that stuff. Nobody wants to follow up. They just told me ok, well, follow up with a hearing. I'll talk to them a little bit, sometimes I'll leave messages and I don't get phone calls back, finally I just got one back in the day by a lady that I met at some calculator training some months ago, but I was working with [a different staff member] on this a little while ago... and I did that and I never heard from anybody out there again, so...isn't that interesting?

As with any organization, there are occasions when clients or participants feel that their needs are not being fully met. I interviewed a few mothers who wished that LIFETIME would follow-up with them more quickly. Through my work with the organization and conversations with staff member, I have observed that the staff works hard to ensure that

clients and parent leaders get the support they need. As in many organizations, however, things do occasionally fall through the cracks. This mother was interested in getting more involved and moving from a client to participating in one of the parent leadership trainings, but until her case issues were addressed, did not want to invest the time. Although Dena was the only participant who directly articulated this perspective—that her involvement would be limited until her case was handled more directly—there may be other clients of LIFETIME (not participants in this study) who would get more involved once they get their welfare case issues resolved.

As explored in this section, clients of LIFETIME had many reasons why they were not engaged in the organization's political work, and for the most part, they had not developed the oppositional consciousness that parent leaders did. A prospect in the next round of interviews is to explore why mothers participate or use some of LIFETIME's services but are not interested in getting further involved, or lack this oppositional consciousness that others develop under similar circumstances. This part of my research focused heavily on parent leaders (n=17) and slightly less on the organization's clients (n=7); this next step in research could also include following parents who are new to the organization as they either develop or fail to develop this consciousness.

Potential Participants

The last category of LIFETIME's participants is the mothers who had recently heard about the organization and were interested in getting involved. Since one of the ways that I recruited for this study was at the mandatory workshops for CalWORKs students at the community colleges, the organization was presenting at some of these

workshops. Two of the participants that I interviewed were newly familiar with the organization but were not currently involved with the organization. In addition, some of the other participants in this study were aware that LIFETIME existed but were not and did not plan to be involved with the organization. Their responses centered on the idea that they were glad that the organization existed, were aware of their services and programs, but did not feel that they currently needed them. Therefore, even when mothers do not use the organization, they were typically aware that the organization exists. They knew of its services and leadership meetings, and knew that they could call LIFETIME if they wanted to participate or needed assistance. As Alexis, a 25 year old Latina mother of one and UC Berkeley student, illustrated when she answered my question ‘have you ever used LIFETIME:’ “No, I know that they exist, umm, they also work on the welfare policies, that they are proactively working to change some of the welfare the policies like the caps, that exist right now. That’s pretty much what I know about them.”

However, there were two mothers who were hoping to get involved with LIFETIME or were in the process of getting involved. Courtney, a 28 year old white mother of four and community college student, when asked if she knew of the organization, explained that she “heard of it just recently. I am hoping to become a member, I want to be a member, I want to go with them to Fresno on Thursday, I want to become involved strongly as much as possible, so LIFETIME, yeah!” Another mother, RBS, heard about the organization through a brochure that was in the campus CalWORKs office and wanted to get involved. RBS was a 27 year old Filipino mother of one and community college student; in response to my question about LIFETIME, she said:

Yes, I was trying to, umm, go to one of their meetings or summits that they have, but I missed the deadline.

SK: So, how did you find out about LIFETIME?

Through a brochure here at the CalWORKs office.

SK: And when was that?

Spring of this year.

SK: And, have you ever contacted them for help, like with their services?

No, not for help. The only time I contacted them was to get information about their next meeting.

Although RBS found out about LIFETIME through a passive means instead of an active one such as a workshop, she was still interested in participating in a leadership training and finding out more about grassroots politics. Active recruitment methods such as organizing through workshops or presentations was most common among the women I interviewed, yet passive invitations through brochures and flyers may work for other groups of the organization's clients. It will be interesting in the next round of interviews to see if either of these mothers became involved with the organization.

In conclusion, mothers' initial involvement with LIFETIME was most commonly through in-person invitations, referral, and presentations. Second, some parents who used the organization's advocacy or other services consequently got involved in their grassroots political campaigns. However, not all parents who used LIFETIME's advocacy services got involved in their grassroots politics. As there were commonalities in the pathways to increased engagement with LIFETIME, there were also common issues that were cited by mothers as reasons why they were not involved past client status. Even mothers who were parent leaders cited not being as involved as they would

like to be due to constraints on their time and resources. Mothers who did not advance past client status also identified time constraints as a primary reason. Another issue for parents in crises, who came to the organization for advocacy services, was that they were not interested in becoming politically involved, and thus they did not transition into political involvement. Some parents in crisis did transition from clients to LIFETIME's political activities; therefore, this transition was not fully closed off when parents were in crises, just less likely. As outlined by the active parent leaders, the organization does a remarkable job connecting parents' personal crises with a critique of welfare policy and the broader social issues of poverty and economic justice. This connection resonated with many mothers and engaged them in becoming more involved. As the next section will illustrate, their involvement with LIFETIME does affect their personal narratives about poverty and higher education. Getting involved with the organization links their individual perspectives and narratives to those of other parents and the greater social issues.

Differences in Narratives

In earlier chapters, I addressed two of my three central research questions,⁵¹ by exploring the pathways of mothers onto welfare and into higher education, their survival narratives and strategies for completing higher education, and the meaning of their education to them. The third research question of this study is how involvement with LIFETIME appears to affect participants' narratives about pursuing higher education while in the welfare system. I found three primary differences between the narratives of women who participated in the organization and the narratives of those who did not: the

way mothers frame their participation in the welfare system, their sense of support while pursuing higher education, and their policy suggestions.⁵² This section will explore the first two, framing participation and sense of support, both of which are internally reflective and explained through the mothers' previous experiences. In the next chapter, I will explore the policy suggestions offered by the mothers in interviews and focus groups, and how the nature of these suggestions varied by women's involvement with LIFETIME.

In Chapter 3, I explored the pathways that mothers identified to their pursuit of higher education while participating in the welfare system. Mothers who were engaged with LIFETIME range across all five of those pathways. However, the way that they framed their participation in the welfare system was slightly different from the framing used by mothers who were not engaged with the organization. The LIFETIME participants discussed their use of welfare assistance more as a right that they have as citizens, rather than as something shameful. They cited their rights under the welfare system; in many cases, through grassroots political engagement, they have fought for those rights. Although this difference sounds very explicit, it comes through in their narratives in very subtle ways. The best way to illustrate this point is by examining the way that the mothers discussed their shame about the welfare system. For example, many mothers, despite their involvement with the organization, discussed hitting rock bottom and then going onto welfare as a last resort. (I explored this in Chapter 3.) Most mothers experienced, to varying degrees, a sense of shame associated with going on welfare. The mothers who were not involved with LIFETIME, however, discussed this shame in internalized ways.

Misha was a 29 year old black mother of one and community college student. She explained that she does not talk about welfare because it is embarrassing and she worried what others around her would think if they knew she was on aid:

I don't talk about that. That's embarrassing. I don't talk about that. And I don't know, I just no, I don't...I would feel very ashamed if somebody asked me, you know, ohhhh, you're on welfare, I would feel ashamed because they are going to keep that in their head. And you can't say that they don't go home and talk about that, because I know that I have gone home and talked about certain things that have happened at work And you know, and then if you come in there and you are dressed nice, and you are telling them that you are on aid they are going to look at you up and down, like how did you get all of that, if you know you are on aid. I think that they have a picture what a person on welfare supposed to look like.

Angela, an 18 year old Latina mother of one and community college student, explained how she felt that the welfare system shamed her. Her perspective was that the welfare system wanted her, as an individual, to fail. She explained: “the government is helping me, you know, [but] sometimes I feel like, that they don't want us to succeed...that the government would have a personal grudge against me.” Both Misha's and Angela's perspectives about shame suggest the many ways that the welfare system, and society as a whole, tries to make women feel ashamed at using welfare assistance. The shaming of welfare mothers is well chronicled by other researchers (e.g., Hays 2004; Mitchell 2003). Along these lines, Newman (2000), in *No Shame in My Game*, explores how low-wage workers try to create identities in their work that are not based on this culture of shaming the poor. Creating a culture of shame for welfare mothers and low-wage workers highlights how society attempts to blame individuals for their economic circumstances.

However, the mothers who were involved with LIFETIME were more likely to resist internalizing the shame. In some cases they explicitly externalized the shame, and explained how American society tries to create a culture that overtly shames mothers on

welfare. They were critical of this culture of shame, and outlined how the welfare system—and caseworkers specifically—shame women who use social service programs. Their stance attempted to shift the responsibility off individuals who are poor, and to uncover the structural dynamics of poverty. They pointed out that there are political advantages to blaming individuals, specifically single mothers who are often minorities, for their need to use welfare. Part of the resistance of shame is accomplished through explaining how they believe they have earned the right to use a necessary resource. For example, Jasmine, a 39 year old white/Latina mother of three and recent community college graduate, discussed her response when people tried to make her feel ashamed that she was on welfare:

A lot of people say that I shouldn't be using their tax dollars to go to school on, that I should go and get a job, a lot of people think that I'm wasting my time, a lot of people think that I'm taking on school just as an excuse not to go to work. (Laughs)

SK: How did that make you feel? What did you say to them?

Well, my response was, um, I felt offended and hurt, but at the same token, I explained to them in full context, I said listen, I've worked for 15 years in the service industry paying taxes, and now my taxes are paying for me to get back into the work industry to pay more taxes, and even more than I did before. So this is a springboard and a fair exchange in every way. So I look at it this way, I'm really paying for my school at the end of the day because I did my part out there. I worked and I worked very hard, and unfortunately the kind of work that I had was low wage and had no kind of future potential in it, and now it's time for me to really consider that due to the fact that I have a family to take care of. That's been usually my defense is. That I'm giving back what I'm getting, and I will give back what I'm getting.

In Jasmine's response, she outlined the ways that she was an active—and tax-paying—participant in society, and why she should not feel ashamed to use social service programs, since she had participated in the institutions that supported them. By stating that she was an active participant in working society and paying taxes, she was refusing

to accept the conservative welfare rhetoric that produces shame. Jasmine was one of LIFETIME's most active parent leaders, and her perspective was akin to the perspectives that LIFETIME uses in its trainings.⁵³ Through the parent leadership trainings, LIFETIME attempts to help mothers reclaim the identity of 'welfare mother' and externalize or at least recognize that the shame that they feel is not their fault and is a product of the conservative framing of the welfare debate. Another mother, Tony, also linked the shaming with assumptions by policymakers about what families on welfare need, instead of focusing on what citizens want in their country. Tony, a 33 year old black mother of two and recent UC Berkeley graduate, explained:

More than anything, the women that are on CalWORKs, the women and men that are on CalWORKs that are raising children and are trying to get a better education are already dealing with a life situations that are very challenging. [They] are already dealing with [situations] that are very complex. And so to kinda, I guess pigeonhole is the word that I am looking for, to pigeonhole people into your own preconceived notions of what a social policy should look like, based on what you want your city to look like or whatever, just doesn't make any sense. Because people are individuals and their lives are complex, and their issues are complex. And I don't think that it is a matter of people needing Life Skills training, it is all about policy, it is all about the top. If the top had a different conceptual view of what their country should look like, who its citizens are, what they want their state, or county, or cities to look like, and kinda have a humanistic or holistic view of it, things would be much better. People are very arrogantly creating policies that have absolutely nothing to do with any research or anything but their own life experience, basically only along with their own biases about others out there. There is a huge disconnect between policy and practice.

Tony's assessment of how policymakers "pigeonhole" participants into what they expect welfare parents to be like is challenged by the work that she and other LIFETIME parent leaders engage in. Tony express that her perspective came from her participation in LIFETIME and the organization's framing of the welfare debate. In addition, Tony also expressed that her analysis is also drawn from her educational experiences at UC Berkley in an interdisciplinary major that focuses on issues of social justice. Mothers who were

involved with LIFETIME, whether actively or through just a few parent leadership trainings or political activities, adopted some of the perspectives that LIFETIME uses; these are sharply critical of the way that conservatives frame welfare issues, oppose the Bush administration's proposals for welfare policy, and support progressive social justice movements. The framing of shaming is the best overt example of how LIFETIME training helps mothers move from an internal analysis of their use of welfare to an external one.

The second primary difference between the narratives of LIFETIME participants and of non-participants was their sense of support from others who were in a similar situation, i.e. other mothers pursuing higher education while on welfare. When mothers who were not involved with LIFETIME were asked whom they turn to for support, they were less likely to cite other mothers on welfare as part of their support group. Instead, they named their family, sometimes caseworkers or campus advocates, or they said that they had no one to help them. Vanessa, a 30 year old white mother of one and community college student, replied when I asked her who she turned to for support:

Inward, I think that's where the overwhelmingness comes in. I basically rely solely on myself, which isn't really a good thing because sometimes you do need outside support, especially we do need it, not sometimes, but we do need it, and I don't really search for that from anyone and I guess that's kind of hard because when I'm in a situation, I look at what's going on, what's right here in front of me, I don't look outside of the box and think how can I look at this differently or how can I deal with that differently, and if I were to ask somebody else on the outside they might see more clearly if they're not in that situation.

Misha, echoed Vanessa's point by reply that "Really, um, I don't have anybody, to turn to. I pretty much, I think that I have kinda adapted into being my own rock and being able to stand tall." While she tried to show how strong she was by being her own rock, later in the interview she acknowledged that it was tough not having a sense of support

from friends or other students. However, some mothers were aware of LIFETIME, but did not see what they needed in LIFETIME, and thus, did not get involved. They may still have believed that they needed more support, but they did not feel that LIFETIME would be a good source of that support for them.

LIFETIME participants, in contrast, often discussed how the organization provided them with a great deal of peer support, understanding, and networking. As described earlier in this chapter at great length by Jasmine and Twitch and other mothers, that was key to why and how mothers became involved with the organization and one of the main advantages that they saw in staying involved. Through LIFETIME, mothers found a sense of belonging that many do not get in any other way. The mothers who got involved with the organization recognized that they needed social support and saw what they needed in LIFETIME's activities and other parents.

LIFETIME provides support to mothers on welfare pursuing higher education by empowering them to advocate for themselves and by engaging them in grassroots politics to change welfare policy. Most mothers who got involved with the organization started as clients seeking help with a personal problem with the welfare system. Some continued and became involved with LIFETIME's grassroots activism. Through this work, parent leaders challenged welfare policies at the local, state, and federal level. Although not all mothers on welfare pursuing higher education who knew about the organization participated in all their activities, most were at least aware that this organization exists and were familiar with its general purpose. I found three primary differences between the narratives of mothers involved with LIFETIME and those who were not: the two individual level differences discussed above, shaming and support, and a third, difference

in policy suggestions, which will be discussed in Chapter 7. Also in Chapter 7, I explore the social policy and sociological implications of this study.

CHAPTER VII

ENVISIONING ANOTHER WORLD: CHANGING POVERTY POLICY TOGETHER

In March 2005, a small group of mothers on welfare from New York, Ohio, and California, along with LIFETIME's Executive Director and I, entered a conference room at the Office of Family Assistance, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in Washington, D.C. The Office of Family Assistance administers the TANF program nationally and we had a meeting scheduled with Andrew Bush, the Director of the Office of Family Assistance. Mr. Bush is the top TANF administrator in the country, and a Bush Administration appointee.⁵⁴ TANF and the Violence Against Women Act⁵⁵ were being considered for reauthorization in 2005, and the Bush administration was focusing its efforts on marriage promotion policies for low-income families. LIFETIME and advocates from around the country were in Washington for the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence's lobby week. LIFETIME, leading a small sub-group of welfare advocates, requested and was granted a meeting with Mr. Bush.

Shortly after we were seated in the conference room, Mr. Bush entered and the meeting started. Each woman introduced herself and explained what had brought her Washington that day: to advocate for expanding access to education and training and domestic violence services during TANF reauthorization. Each woman present, with the exception of me, was a mother who had participated in the welfare system as a result of domestic violence. None of them received domestic violence counseling, services, or waivers from work requirements and each had been sanctioned off welfare as a result of

repercussions from domestic violence. With the help of advocates, each mother was able to get back on welfare, into safe housing, and enroll in higher education programs. They told Mr. Bush their personal stories and how they were meeting with him to symbolize the hundreds of thousands of other women who are in similar situations across the country. They explained that three of them were escaping severely abusive marriages, one was escaping an abusive partner who was a veteran, and one recently moved several states away to escape an abusive boyfriend. The central message that the women conveyed was that “family violence is NOT an option” and they advocated that the Office of Family Assistance make the Family Violence Option⁵⁶ mandatory for states and require states to give accommodations to mothers on welfare who are victims of domestic violence. Throughout the meeting, Mr. Bush repeated one phrase: “we are going to have to agree to disagree.” He then went on to explain the priorities of the Office of Family Assistance under the Bush Administration, the primary of which was marriage promotion policies.

The mothers present, wanting to find some common ground with Mr. Bush, took a step back from their position. They expressed their concern over policies that promote marriage to women who are domestic violence victims, since many of them were married when the violence occurred. Instead, they suggested that the marriage promotion policies include safeguards or exemptions for women who are survivors of domestic violence. Again, Mr. Bush repeated “we are going to have to agree to disagree.” “Okay,” one of the mothers said, trying to take yet another step back and find some common ground from which to lay a foundation for the discussion; asked “well, can we agree that domestic violence is a major issue for mothers on welfare?” Again, Mr. Bush repeated “we are

going to have to agree to disagree.” At this point, everyone in the room was restless and frustrated. The meeting had been going on for over an hour, and the mothers looked disheartened. Their strategy of finding common ground from which to start their discussion of welfare, domestic violence, and higher education was not working with this administrator. They just wanted the opportunity to be heard during this policy process. They realized that a Bush administration appointee might not agree with them, but they wanted to participate in the reauthorization process. This policy directly affected their daily lives. They had been meeting on Capitol Hill all week with legislative staffers and, in a few cases, with members of Congress. They have not had this much trouble being heard. Even in the meeting the previous day, Representative Rick Santorum’s Health and Human Services legislative staffer warmly received them and was open to listening to their ideas, even if, although he never directly said it, he disagreed with what they advocated.

However, this meeting ended a short while later when one of the mothers, exasperated, asked “well, I know that you want us to agree to disagree, but can we at least agree that domestic violence is bad?” In response, Mr. Bush stood up, politely thanked us for coming, and excused himself. During the debrief from that meeting, the mothers emphasized over and over again that they did not fully understand why he had been so cold and unwilling to discuss the various ways that TANF policy was implemented and possible policy changes. Although they knew going into the meeting that this would be the toughest of the week, they could not understand why he was so unwilling to work to find common ground with their ideas. Through other conversations with progressive and conservative policymakers that week and in their previous advocacy

work, no one had experienced such a cold shoulder. It left the mothers wondering, why did he even take the meeting if he was going to treat them that way?

As this experience illustrates, the on-the-ground experiences of mothers on welfare tell a very different story from the rhetoric that is used by administrators and politicians in the welfare debate. I believe that listening to the voices of those affected by these policies is a critical step in making policies that improve their daily lives. I conducted this research in the midst of the ongoing policy uncertainty of TANF reauthorization and its numerous temporary extensions. During the interviews and focus groups for this study, I asked participants their views on the current welfare policy, the local labor market, and what changes they would like to see. When asked about the policies that affect their daily lives, the mothers on CalWORKs had quite a lot to say, and, as demonstrated above, they want their voices heard in the policy process.

In this chapter, I explore the views of mothers on welfare about the policies that affect their daily lives and how we can create policy change together that more closely reflects the lived reality of poverty. Also in this chapter, I explore the sociological implications of this research by revisiting the research questions that guided this study: (a) what can the narratives of mothers pursuing higher education while on welfare tell us?; (b) what are the rationales that mothers on welfare cite for pursuing higher education, particularly after TANF implementation made this route very difficult?; and (c) how does involvement with LIFETIME, a grassroots welfare-rights and advocacy organization, affect women's narratives? By addressing these research questions, this dissertation makes substantial empirical, theoretical and policy-oriented contributions to the sociology of poverty and the sociology of education.

To accomplish these goals, in this chapter I first address how mothers' policy suggestions inform theories of poverty that reflect their daily lives; second, highlight how LIFETIME mothers' policy suggestions differ from mothers who are not involved with LIFETIME; third, examine how the focus group discussions further illuminate mothers' policy suggestions; and finally, explore the sociological implications of this research.

Poverty Theory and Poverty Policy

This research took a grounded theory approach to two academic theories of poverty, structural and human capital theory, as reflected in the narratives of mothers on welfare who were pursuing higher education. Not surprisingly, the mothers who participated in this study used both approaches to explain their experiences and make suggestions for policy changes. The mothers pursued higher education for reasons consistent with an individual human capital approach: they believed that more education, particularly degrees, would pay off in higher earnings. They were also involved in and aware of the structural arguments for the causes of poverty—such as a dearth of well-paid jobs—but understanding those arguments does not help them put food on their tables or pay their rents. And so, many mothers were involved in economic justice organizations, while at the same time working to increase their own human capital. They recognized that change happens very slowly, but still believed that it is possible. The mothers' narratives about welfare policy and possible changes focused on two main components of policy change: the importance of education and training for individuals to get off welfare and out of poverty, and the need for structural improvements in our labor market and social safety net.

This vernacular approach is very similar to Rank's (2004:179) "new paradigm" for understanding poverty, which highlights the human capital components of a structural theory of poverty:

A shift of thinking about the causes of poverty from an individually based explanation to a structurally based explanation allows us to distinguish and make sense of two specific questions. First, why does poverty exist? Second, who is more likely to experience poverty? The structural vulnerability explanation, with its musical chairs analogy, answers both questions. Poverty exists primarily because there is a shortage of viable economic opportunities and social supports for the entire population. Given this shortage, a certain percentage of the population is ensured of experiencing poverty. Individuals with a heightened risk of being on the short end of the economic stick will be those who are least able to effectively compete for the limited number of economic opportunities...A new paradigm recognizes the fundamental distinctions between understanding who loses out at the game and understanding how and why the game produces losers in the first place.

This section explores the suggestions the women in my study offered for poverty and welfare policy changes using Rank's structural vulnerability theory and economic musical chairs analogy in order to imagine policies that reflect the lived reality of welfare participants. Rank's analogy of a game of economic musical chairs illustrates the two central questions about poverty (2004). The analogy goes: in a game of musical chairs, there are always players who are not able to get a chair when the music stops, and these "losers" are analogous with Rank's second question from above, "who is more likely to experience poverty?" But the logically prior question is "why does poverty exist?" in the first place—or for the game of musical chairs—why are there too few chairs to begin with?

Using this analogy of musical chairs, there are winners and losers in our economy, and the mothers in my study were aware that they and others like them were the ones "losing" in this game of economic musical chairs. They were doing everything

in their power to not to lose in the economy, primarily through acquiring additional education. Yet, they also realized that while they might do everything in their power to increase their skills, there still would not be enough jobs at wages that support a family for everyone in the labor market. As these mothers discussed their policy recommendations, they distinguished between increasing their individual chances and the individual chances for other women like them, and fundamentally changing economy opportunities. Many were involved in LIFETIME, with its focus on grassroots political change. They wanted to be part of a fundamental change in our society—changing the nature of the game, that in Rank’s (2004:179) words, “produces losers in the first place.”

Getting My Own Chair

The overall theme of the mothers’ policy suggestions, whether federal or state-level, was an increased focus on education, especially community college and university-level education. They viewed education as the most critical individual-level strategy to getting themselves and others like them out of poverty. Alexis, a 25 year old Latina mother of a toddler-aged daughter, is a student at UC Berkeley and explains:

A lot of [mothers on welfare] are not encouraged to go to school, to community college or to four-year universities, so they stay in that hole, that low minimum wage hole that they can’t get out of. I think that umm, I think just that mothers on welfare, anybody who’s on welfare should really just try to go to school. You know, because it relieves a lot of the worries, of, well, am I going to get fired from this job, you know, at least if you are, if you stay in school, you know that it is something that is temporary, that eventually in the long-term, will give you a better chance of succeeding and you know, in the workforce or whatever you wanna do. You have a greater chance, ‘cause you have more knowledge, more information.

I then asked Alexis: “how could welfare policies, be changed or improved, so that policies encouraged people to go to school, or helps them stay in school?” She responded:

Having like orientations about education, about 4 year colleges, 4 year universities, having that as part of the orientation, like a full presentation on how you have the option, versus, instead of going into a vocation, how you have that option, and making that like a mandatory orientation before getting your cash or before getting your food stamps. Making that something mandatory from the beginning, you know, right up front. Like you can either work, vocation, or community college, or 4 year university, you know, giving people the option, like making that like an orientation. They should also set up CalWORKs programs on 4-year university, at you know, the 4 year university campuses, I think, because they only offer that at the community colleges. If a bill could be passed or something like that. It could be the thing of the land where like in every state they had like a CalWORKs program at a four-year university, or something. A federal focus.

Lele, a black mother of five, recently finished her Associate’s degree at a local community college and transferred to the University of California Berkeley last fall. She explained: “You know, basically [education] is a passport into society. It is your ticket into people saying that you had enough, you had enough discipline, enough focus to go through X amount of years, to focus on one goal, and we applaud you for that. So, it is definitely a ticket for people to look at you.” Lele’s explanation meshes with Rank’s musical chairs analogy: she feels that her education at the community college, and especially when she graduates from the University of California Berkeley, will get her a chair in the economic game, and recent research supports her position (Mathur 2004; Shaw et al. 2006). Despite TANF’s message of “work first, education last,” women still pursue education and job training programs to try to increase their wages and leave the welfare system, and metaphorically gain a chair in the game of economic musical chairs.

Creating More Chairs in the Game

In addition to increasing access to higher education, which the mothers themselves acknowledged as an individual strategy that will work only if there are enough jobs, they discussed the structural need to expand the number of available jobs at wages that support a family and the immediate need for a real social safety net. These two policy suggestions, as discussed below, together with increasing access to higher education, coincide with three of the five key strategies Rank (2004) outlines for reducing poverty.

By increasing the number of jobs or creating an environment in which there are more living wage jobs (by significantly increasing the federal minimum wage, as an example), there will be more chairs in the game, and thus fewer losers in the economic game. Angela, an 18-year old Latina community college student with a 6-month old baby, criticized the current situation:

There's really no good jobs. Oh, I've worked at the mall. Recently, the holidays just passed, and I was working at the mall. And them shitty jobs are like \$7.75, ickkk, you and just dealing with, being able, from the difference from how I used to live, and you know, and assimilate, and they pay \$7.75 an hour, and some places even \$8, and I was getting paid \$10 in San Francisco...But, it's bad, you don't get paid no more than \$10, sometimes you get paid \$7.50, \$7.75, and I mean, so people that's why they feel like they don't have any hope, or they don't have any other choice to do things, because they don't have enough for their house or their food, or whatever it may be. But, I mean, the work, the jobs that they have available for us minorities, or women on CalWORKs, I mean... we don't have good jobs out there.

Nicole, a 33 year old black mother of one and community college student with severe dyslexia, explained the importance of access to education for increasing an individual's chances in the labor market. She also explained how there were not enough resources focused on ending poverty, in the first place, with the result that there will always be

people who are poor (i.e. losers in the economic game): “I think just higher paying jobs would be one thing, education, would be too. If people were encouraging parents to, hey, go to school and get an education, that would benefit, that would probably be the best thing right there. But a lot of the times, people don’t have the resources, you know what I mean, and a lot of times, there are not enough focus, or attention on poor people to actually get out of poverty. There are not enough resources in schools, there are not enough, pretty much, there is just not enough.”

Another woman, Sally, a 37 year old Asian Pacific Islander mother of two and former methamphetamine addict, finished her Associate’s degree in drug counseling in the spring of 2006. She was very critical of the current system and its “work first rhetoric” as well as the role of corporate greed, and the lack of motivation from politicians and the general public for the system to change. The end of her quote came the closest to explaining outright the economic musical chairs game:

You know, interestingly enough, I think for a woman in general who is trying to get [a job], bad. I saw somewhere in the paper that there was some, like California's got booming jobs, but they're probably all at Wal-Mart. You know, that's how come, because, it's not like, it's not meaningful, I don't think there's a lot of meaningful work that's accessible to people who phase out of CalWORKs. Because, I mean, in large, I think a lot of women who are on CalWORKs are being forced to work, they are not encouraged to pursue their education. You know, and work takes on many different levels but umm. I don’t think [there are jobs for women leaving CalWORKs]... I think that, you know, go back to what I said about share the wealth. Subsidize employment, if you're working, that would get you from at least below the poverty level, that's a start. Don't call it welfare, call it whatever these corporations call it, tax somethings, benefits somethings, you know, give it a whole new name. Get the stigma away from it. Umm, education really should be accessible, you know, after high school level. You know, like my sister she can barely qualify for financial aid, she should go back to school. Her husband's got two jobs, they're living in a two-bedroom apartment that is subsidized, they have two car notes, they just want the American dream, but it's all on the credit card. And the bill collectors are calling the neighbors looking for them. You know it's just, yeah, it's not a, it's not, umm, and you know people should have the option to go to school. But, I think that the whole system

is not built around having that happen. The whole values of our culture, it's not there, it's just not there. So I don't really see it happening, you know, I don't.

I then inquired how she would change the welfare system, and Sally responded specifically:

Put some money into it. Put some money into it. Make real meaningful programs. What would I want them to do? Stop giving the corporate fucks a write-off on everything. That's where a source of the money could be. Tax the fuckers. Get real with it. Share the fucking wealth. Hello, fifth-largest economy,⁵⁷ hello! You know, I mean it's, it's not that complicated. Well, it is for them because it will mean something to do with their profit, you know, margins. Well, fuck. You know, I don't know, that's what I would tell the politicians (laughs).

Sally emphasized how the values of our country conflict with the policies that were in place. As discussed in Chapter 5, and mentioned by Sally in her quote, she believed in the American dream; yet Sally was skeptical of the chances for low-income women to achieve that dream given the current system.

Another mother, Tony, a 33 year old black mother of two and recent UC Berkeley graduate, also emphasized the irony present in the current policy. She highlighted the disparity between how the current policy was structured and what was needed for mothers to be economically self-sufficient:

When you compare the standard of living from people who have been able to get an education and those who have not, it is absolutely a no brainer. And so I think that the social service agency perhaps, or even legislator, policymakers, whatever, need to look at what the goals are. If their goals are to have functioning self-sufficient productive members of society, that are giving back to their society, then maybe they need to better look at how they can outfit social policy to fit that goal. But if that is not their goal then (laughs) then they are doing exactly what they should be which is wasting time, wasting public funding, not getting done what should be done.

The mothers in this study pointed out the immediate need for a real social safety net and how that is not happening given the many problems with the current system. After the recent reauthorization of TANF, the work policies were further emphasized, and the

mothers believed that we were moving even further from creating a social safety net that actually works for the families who needed it the most.

Interestingly, many of the participants mentioned that they supported time-limits on cash aid—if those limits come simultaneously with reasonable exceptions to the time limit, higher cash aid grants levels during their time on aid, and real help getting off welfare before reaching a lifetime limit. One of the best ideas was offered by a mother who discussed raising the grants levels for a set amount of time (five to seven years) and providing real supportive services; if after that time the person cannot get off welfare move him/her into another type of program that would provide longer-term safety net benefits at a lower level and maybe fewer supportive services. The mothers were upfront that real help is needed for them to leave poverty, and they wanted to get off welfare as much as the conservatives want them off welfare. As Monique, a 25 year old black community college student, explained: “So, it’s just like, you get these types of assistance, and [so why] not take advantage of them, and use them while you have them, and when you get your job and get working, and make the money, and you can get off of them and let somebody else use them.” The mothers in this study wanted nothing more than the opportunity to move out of poverty and into the middle class; many of them also expressed the desire to help others do the same—through their careers and through political activism. They wanted to change the game for themselves and for everyone so that fewer people are “economic losers.”

The Diversity of Policy Suggestions

All of the mothers who participated in this study emphasized the importance of their education for leaving poverty and they acknowledged that structural factors, such as job market dynamics, also played a role in who is poor. However, there were variations in the specific policy suggestions that the mothers gave. One of the main differences between the narratives of mothers who were involved with LIFETIME and those who were not was the nature of their policy suggestions. The LIFETIME mothers' suggestions were more structural and focused on larger changes in the welfare system than did those of non-LIFETIME mothers. For example, LIFETIME mothers focused on shifting from a 'work first' focus to expanding access to education and training programs, streamlining the welfare bureaucracy, and providing universal access to health care and child care. In contrast, the suggestions of the non-LIFETIME participants focused on more local issues such as interactions between clients and caseworkers and various practices at the local welfare offices. Although these issues are indicative of broader systemic concerns, the ways that non-LIFETIME mothers framed their policy suggestions were pointedly local in nature.

Tables 7.1 and 7.2 summarize the specific policy suggestions that mothers mentioned in their interviews, organized by the mothers' participation status in LIFETIME (24 LIFETIME mothers and 21 non-LIFETIME mothers). In only a few cases, mothers gave a policy suggestion that was more commonly given by mothers with a different participation status; eight non-LIFETIME mothers made suggestions that were most commonly made by LIFETIME mothers, and four LIFETIME mothers made

suggestions that were most commonly made by non-LIFETIME mothers. Those names are in italics.

Table 7.1: Policy Suggestions from LIFETIME Mothers

Policy Suggestions:	Mothers suggesting: (italics are non-LIFETIME)
Expand access to university and graduate level education.	Jasmine, D, Nicole, Mercedes, MMM, Jewell, Nancy, Betty, Sally, <i>Angela, Princess, Michelle</i>
Expand access to affordable health care.	Jasmine, Mercedes
Provide domestic violence and/or mental health assistance and accommodations in welfare-to-work contracts.	Jasmine, Mercedes, Betty, <i>Misha</i>
Provide transportation assistance.	Jasmine, Mercedes
Expand access to child care, especially in the evenings and on-campus.	Jasmine, Mercedes, Rebecca, Tony, <i>Nicole C</i>
Fix the bureaucracy in the welfare system.	D, Nancy, Tony, Sally, <i>Lucy</i>
No time limits for participants pursuing higher education.	Marie, Betty, <i>Kelly</i>
Listen to the people who are on welfare when crafting policies.	Lele J., Courtney, Betty, Faith, Sydney, Sally
Supportive structures for parents at CSU or at the university level like CARE program and/or special financial aid for student parents.	Betty, Faith, Sydney, Tony, <i>Alexis</i>

Table 7.2 Policy Suggestions from Non-LIFETIME Mothers

Policy Suggestions:	Non-LIFETIME Mothers suggesting: (italics are LIFETIME)
Treat each person as an individual and/or have more individual flexibility in program rules.	RBS, Dena, Jewel, Mindy, Vanessa, Daria, <i>Twitch, Mercedes</i>
More caseworkers or fewer cases per caseworker.	Jane, Monique, Jewel, Kelly, Mindy, Daria, Angela, <i>Twitch</i>
Better trained caseworkers.	Jane, Monique, Jewel, Vanessa, Angela, <i>Tony, Sally</i>
Different rules for CalWORKs students, to allow them to go to school.	Dena, MMM, Mindy, Dena, <i>Sally</i>
Ask less personal information of participants.	Keisha, Jewel
Access to information about welfare; give participants all the options for work activities.	Jewel, Nicole C., Angela, Alexis

As seen in tables 7.1 and 7.2, the policy suggestions that were given were strikingly different for mothers who participated in LIFETIME and for those who did not. The policy suggestions from the LIFETIME mothers focused on systemic changes to the welfare system that emphasized a shift in priorities from a ‘work first’ approach to more holistic conception of the supportive services that women need to be economically secure. These suggestions included expanding access to Bachelor’s and Master’s degree programs and eliminating time limits for those in school; expanding access to universal health care, including mental health and domestic violence services; providing universal child care; investing in public transportation or providing transportation assistance; and creating supportive structures at the university level for welfare students. In addition, in these policy suggestions participants called attention to the reality that they were not considered when policymakers created these policies and emphasized that they should be. Finally, these suggestions highlighted the substantial inefficiencies in the system and explored ways that they could be streamlined.

On the other hand, the policy suggestions made by mothers who were not LIFETIME participants were more locally focused on interactions within the county welfare systems and at the county welfare office. Suggestions such as hiring more caseworkers and providing better training for them brings to light the struggles that many mothers have with their caseworkers. Yet, they did not link these individual problems with larger issues in the welfare system. The overall priorities of welfare reform created a policy that was more intrusive, less efficient, and more punitive (DeParle 2004). The mothers who were not LIFETIME participants noticed those qualities that DeParle cites, but they did not recognize that these issues were systemic instead of local concerns.

Therefore, when they suggested policy changes, these mothers did not acknowledge how their suggestions might be indicative of broader concerns with the reformed welfare policy.⁵⁸

Creating Policy Together

Although individual mothers' suggestions provide many ideas for policy changes, one of the strengths of adding the focus groups to this research was to give mothers a setting in which they could explore their policy suggestions in a group conversation. I hoped that this collective opportunity would allow women to further develop their individual policy suggestions. The focus group guide (see Appendix D) was the same for all three groups, and it focused on accessing campus and community resources, caseworker relationships, developing a social safety net from scratch, and changing the current CalWORKs policy. An interesting shift happened during the focus groups. At the focus groups held at the community colleges (one in Alameda County, and one in San Francisco County), the mothers' conversation focused on two levels: first, how society can ensure that people's basic needs are met; and second, how to address local concerns at the county welfare office, like those with caseworkers that were discussed in the previous section. Those conversations lacked a mid-level emphasis on the structure of the U.S. welfare system and economy. In direct contrast, however, that was the central element that the LIFETIME focus group wanted to discuss and the level at which to direct their policy suggestions. The LIFETIME participants talked about basic rights in U.S. society and how the U.S. social policies and economy were not designed to provide equal access to those rights.

At the community college focus groups, the mothers emphasized that housing, food, and universal health care need to be fundamental societal priorities (for any society, not just the U.S.). After those were met, participants felt that society should then focus on access to quality education, at all levels, for any member of the society. They talked in very general terms about these goals, and emphasized that unless basic needs are met, any other effort is useless. For example at the Berkeley City College Focus Group, the conversation about creating a new social safety net started with Cece:

Cece: I would go the first thing I'd do would be to make sure that everybody has adequate housing, because if you don't have a place to lay down you really can't focus, you can't focus if you're standing up or there's nowhere to lay, you can't concentrate and your whole chemistry is off. There's no foundation. So the first thing I'd make sure that everyone had adequate housing and make sure everybody would have enough food to eat [agreement from the group] and then I would go from there and try and listen to individuals, and see what were their needs and attend to that, but I would make sure everybody had a comfortable place to stay and enough food to eat and I would build my foundation on that.

Renee: Housing, food, clothes, you know...

Shimare: No violence, no killing.

The conversation at the City College of San Francisco went along similar lines, with housing, food, and safety being the focus of conversation. Then, in each group, the conversation shifted from basic needs to what it takes to create a community in which people feel safe enough to explore what they need. For example, the City College of San Francisco Focus Group concluded that, when creating a social safety net from scratch, everyone must have access to housing, food, and water (in that order), then their conversation immediately shifted to:

Moesha: How do we create a community? Have a big heart, that's how you start it off, you've got to have a big heart to start a community, if you don't have a big heart and an open mind for people to say what they need, then there is no community.

Tuli: Take away all the corruption in the world [verbal agreement from others]. That's what it comes down to, so the rich won't get richer and the poor won't get poorer.

Nicole C.: I think that instead of all of this "out for me and myself, and I'm going to get it before you get it"....

Several people: Is selfish.

Nicole C.: And all that 'me, me, me' before the 'us or we' [does not create community].

The mothers focused on both immediate personal needs and what it takes to build a community. However, when I asked them immediately after this exchange what changes they would make to welfare policy or the CalWORKs system, they shifted dramatically from these utopian ideals to specific changes they would make with caseworkers at the local offices. The Berkeley City College student mothers suggested smaller caseloads, increased direct access to caseworkers (i.e. being given caseworkers' direct phone numbers instead of having to go through a central switchboard or leave voicemails), and a system of accountability to ensure that the caseworkers provide a certain level of service. Along the same lines, the City College of San Francisco student mothers suggested client evaluations of their caseworkers, increased access to the transportation assistance the county was supposed to provide, cultural competency training for caseworkers, and having one caseworker for all the systems (i.e. CalWORKs, food stamps, housing, MediCal, etc.). The disconnect between their policy suggestions and what each group believed is needed when discussing how to create a safety net from scratch was striking to me. I thought that a conversation that started with creating new systems would lead to a more systemic analysis of current policy and generate suggestions that focused on structural changes. However, that was not what transpired at

the two community college focus groups. Instead, the two conversations within each of these focus groups were very disconnected from each other, with one having few implications for the other.

However, the LIFETIME group was much more aware and critical of the interplay between social structure and systems of inequality in creating poverty. They were even critical of how I framed the questions, and suggested when asked how they would create a social safety net from the ground up, that as a society we need to be focused on those systems of inequalities:

Tracy: The idea of access vs. equality, and one of the things that came up for me is that like equality is not actually the thing that we're looking for because people's needs are not equal. Everybody doesn't need the same thing, a single person doesn't need the same thing as a person with a child and so when looking at issues of access, it's like who are you and what do you need, you know, who, what does your family look like and what does the family need. We don't actually have anything that resembles a free market, that's just what people are talking about and it gets manipulated. It's the myth of capitalism, and it's completely fucked, and so people are led to believe this thing that's not really happening and they're trying to buy into a thing that doesn't really exist. Which is the same sort of thing as the American dream, it doesn't exist, not a thing, mostly it's not even possible, but they want you to believe it so that you keep working in the place that you're working in, in order to do. Poverty and malnutrition are a matter of policy, not a matter of resources, and that's one of the things that we really need to think about and look at.

Jade: And genocide, right?

Tracy: Yeah, violence, genocide, I mean it's, poverty is a matter of policy, it's intentional and it's just a matter of world wide.

Jade: Because when I was homeless and 8 years old in this country it didn't matter that oh, she's 8, it didn't matter that I was a child, it was like oh, you're poor, so fuck you, you're homeless and that lasted for years, with my mom and my brother sleeping outside, so for me it's like there has to be um, there has to be a level where things are automatic, you shouldn't have to be like fill out 35 forms and then we're going to put you on a housing list and then we're going to get you housing. You know, it's like no, that's your automatic right...It's going to be like everybody has housing here, everybody has access to healthcare, everybody has access to education, everybody has access. Everybody has access. And everybody

is a participant. Because there's a difference to being a player and being a participant. And being a participant, or a player is different. So it's like in other words if you are a youth and you get arrested and you go through the juvenile system you are participating in that, right? But you aren't making shit, you're getting pimped, everyone else is making money off of it. The arresting officer's making money, the parole officer, the judge, the lawyer, everybody's getting paid but you, so they're the players and you're the participant. And what everybody in order to make this work everybody's got to be a player because everybody's got a stake in this... There's conditioning that happens, ghettoization, lifestyle where you become criminalized, but when you're in an environment when you're not under criminalization then it's less likely in terms of, in other words if you promote and support healthy behavior you're going to get healthy behavior. What you invest will manifest. California's number one in prison system, so of course, everybody's getting incarcerated. It's 43rd in education, so what does that say? They're investing in people to be put in prison, that's why they look at 3rd graders testing scores and determine how many beds to put in the prison system. So knowing that criminalization is happening, we would need to create an environment where people are not being criminalized and penalized for a lifestyle that they can't help but live because the environment created that lifestyle..... I want to rewrite the whole welfare system, I want to write a law that is going to actually eliminate poverty, not criminalize people living in poverty but that's actually going to eliminate poverty. But see, if poverty's eliminated, that takes down capitalism... We live in a society that was built on racism and classism and all the fucking shit you want to name you know what I'm saying? We live in a society that is very classist, we also live in a society that where white supremacy created skin privilege, so all of these things in this society can cause a lot of barriers, an it's going to cause a lot of obstacles, so even though there's this fucking American dream that you get sold, if you do everything right, go to school, go to high school, do everything properly, go to college, and you're just going to live a great life. It don't happen like that.

As the selection from the LIFETIME focus group illustrated, through the mothers' work with LIFETIME and other social justice movements, their critique of the social structure was very pronounced. Jade acknowledged that she was "sold" the American dream, which she bought into until she became conscious that her life experiences were not congruent with the ideology behind the American dream. From this oppositional consciousness, as discussed in the previous section, different perspectives on policy emerge. The mothers in the LIFETIME focus group did not want the welfare system

‘reformed’ again; they suggested instead that the whole economic system be reevaluated and the institutional “isms” be addressed.

As the first three sections of this chapter illustrated, mothers on welfare pursuing higher education have concrete local policy suggestions all the way through a structural critique of the welfare system and the society that it is embedded in. Not surprisingly, access to higher education for low-income women, both to those on welfare and those not on welfare, was central to their proposals. By accounting for all of the mothers’ discussions of policy changes and inadequacies of the various systems in which they participated (welfare, higher education, U.S. economy) and by thoughtfully examining the frequency and attention that each concept received throughout the interviews and focus groups, I suggest seven essential social policies. The key is that these policy recommendations emerged from the conversations with the women and through their narratives. Although no single one of these policy recommendation is entirely new, most have been called for previously by other social science scholars and researchers (I have documented examples of these in the endnotes for each social policy); what is new is the *totality* of this list. The seven policies are:

1. Expand access to higher education for all Americans and provide the financial and supportive assistance that students of various backgrounds need to complete their degrees.⁵⁹
2. Ensure universal access to health care, including services for domestic violence, mental health, and substance abuse.⁶⁰
3. Expand access to affordable housing for families making less than the self-sufficiency standard.⁶¹

4. Increase public transportation networks and affordable access for riders.⁶²
5. Provide access to safe, affordable, enriching child care for all families.⁶³
6. Increase the federal minimum wage to living wage levels.⁶⁴
7. Focus on social work, not case work, in social support programs.⁶⁵

Through these seven essential social policies, I think that many families will no longer need welfare *and* the poverty rate will fall. Recent welfare reform focused on reducing caseloads and moving families into work, without addressing the condition of low-wage workers in America. As a result, the welfare caseloads dropped dramatically, *but the poverty rate did not fall*.⁶⁶ These seven essential social policies address the spectrum of issues that women on welfare, low-wage workers, and many in the working and middle classes deal with on a daily basis. Any one or two of these policies could create significant changes for poor families in our country. Yet, the primary policy contribution of my study is that we need to implement *all seven* of these policy recommendations. Often policymakers and academics focus on one policy ‘solution;’ however, this fragmentation of social policy does not address the scale of problems that low-income families face. One or two policy ‘solutions’ are not going to address the structural failings that leave many families vulnerable to long-term poverty. With all seven, I believe that we could *drastically reduce poverty* in this country. This may be a wish list, but in a year filled with discussion of hope and change in U.S. politics, we need to start somewhere.

Pursuing a ‘Reformed’ Dream: Implications for Sociology

The research questions that guided this study were: are (a) what can the narratives of mothers pursuing higher education while on welfare tell us?; (b) what are the

rationales that mothers on welfare cite for pursuing higher education, particularly after TANF implementation made this route very difficult?; and (c) how does involvement with LIFETIME, a grassroots welfare-rights and advocacy organization, affect women's narratives? By addressing these research questions, this dissertation makes substantial empirical, theoretical and policy-oriented contributions to the sociology of poverty and the sociology of education.

First, empirically, this study fills a gap in the literature on gendered poverty by exploring the narratives of single mothers on TANF pursuing higher education. To answer the first two research questions, I explored the pathways that mothers on welfare take to enroll in higher education and participate in the welfare system in Chapter 3 and I examined the rationales that mothers give for pursuing higher education in Chapter 5. Through the mothers' narratives, this research provides a critique of the barriers research that is common in the welfare literature. Instead of viewing their past experiences and current situations as 'barriers to work,' the mothers view those elements as 'pathways to higher education,' which they believe will lead them to self-sufficiency. As discussed in Chapter 5, I find that mothers on welfare pursuing higher education are not culturally different from other Americans, and that their rationales for pursuing higher education are in fact an aspect of pursuing the American dream. Furthermore, I contribute to the sociology of education by studying the narratives of an under-explored group of students. As some of the most disadvantaged students in higher education programs, the women in this study provided a unique perspective on educational choices and the social narratives around the role of education. This is accomplished in Chapter 4, where I examined how mothers on welfare pursuing higher education construct survival narratives and survival

strategies. Through these narratives and strategies, they relate how they are able to pursue higher education in a system that provides structural impediments to that pursuit.

Second, the theoretical implication of this study is that by using grounded theory to bring individual women's experiences to the center of theoretical development, I discovered that women's own explanations of their experiences are consistent with existing sociological theories—specifically the structural vulnerability theory, which combines aspects of human capital theory with the structural theories of poverty. Human capital theory assumes a rational labor market, but even if we reject that assumption, research concludes that for welfare participants, higher education does yield higher earnings. Similarly, structural theory focuses on the barriers facing low-income women who seek economic independence. While we know those barriers and constraints exist, some women do manage to improve their wages enough to support themselves and their children, albeit on very tight budgets. In this study, I went beyond the research that has primarily used human capital and structural theories of poverty as competing explanations to suggest instead that they may be complementary. Women's narratives point to both kinds of theoretical explanation—suggesting that these theories are not necessarily at cross-purposes. Instead, women's lived experiences of poverty and higher education more closely resemble Rank's structural vulnerability theory, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Therefore, this study shows that women's narratives can guide sociologists to fruitful ideas for future research and theorizing, in ways that more closely fit lived human experiences.

Third, an important contribution of this study came from comparing the narratives of mothers who were/were not involved with LIFETIME, a grassroots political advocacy

organization. Participants' experiences can help improve the existing organization and provide a model for future grassroots political advocacy organizations, specifically those that raise oppositional consciousness and/or engage in radical social services as a way to bridge the gap between advocacy work and grassroots political organizing. As discussed in Chapter 6, participation in LIFETIME provided an increased sense of support for mothers and helped them externalize the shame associated with being on welfare. Additionally, this chapter documented that the narratives of mothers who are involved with a grassroots advocacy and welfare rights organization are more structurally oriented than the narratives of those who are not. Also, as discussed in this chapter, my findings have direct policy implications for the implementation of TANF reauthorization at the state level and can inform the next round of TANF reauthorization in 2011. It contributes to the national TANF debate by suggesting how welfare mothers might fare if education and job training programs were expanded, and by suggesting what supportive services would be most useful in this expansion. It also informs the debate at the state level, in California or in other states that need to meet the reset work participation rates. By expanding education and job training programs to the 30% allowed by federal TANF regulations, states can meet the work participation rates by encouraging mothers to pursue higher education. Also, this study suggests state level policies and resources that help or impede welfare mothers' progress in education and job training programs and in the local labor markets.

Closing Thoughts

As I was writing this last chapter of my dissertation, I received a call from Betty inviting me to her Master's of Social Work graduation. As related in earlier chapters, Betty dropped out of school by fifteen and spent years using drugs. After her daughter was born to an addict mother, Betty enrolled into county-ordered treatment. The treatment program required her to enroll in school as part of the program, which she did and started at the local community college in a special program for students who had not completed high school. After ten years in school completing two Associate's degrees and a Bachelor's degree, finally, in May 2008, Betty graduated with her MSW. Her graduation was attended by her daughter, her mother and sister, extended family, friends, and LIFETIME friends, including me. We all sat in the second row and cheered very loudly as the Dean hooded her. Her ten-year old daughter stood on her seat jumping up and down yelling the loudest. The look on Betty's face said it all—joy and sheer relief—she had made it. The next morning (which is the same morning I write this) Betty started her new job as a social worker, making over \$50,000 a year with full benefits. Betty is earning above the self-sufficiency standard for her family on her first day off welfare.

This research gives insight into 63 women's intimate stories about trying to beat the odds, as Betty did. Despite all odds, despite all of their 'barriers to work,' the mothers in this study are in school while on welfare and surviving. They talked about their struggle and fighting the hardest fight every day to get their education despite policy makers and caseworkers telling them that they cannot do it. They participated in this research to tell their stories in hopes that the policies would change as well. Through their narratives they want policy makers to know that they do not want their lives to be tons

easier, they do not want a free ride. They just want each day to be a little easier, they want the same opportunities as middle class students or those who do not have kids, they want time with their children, and, most importantly, they want to help others accomplish the same. They want all mothers on welfare to be told about the opportunity to go to school, and to be able to attend. In the end, that was the most common answer to my last question in every interview: ‘what is the most important thing you want people to know about your experiences?’ They asked me to tell others on welfare that they can do it too!

ENDNOTES

¹ There are many acronyms throughout my dissertation, and in each case I spell them out the first time I use them. From that point on, I only use the acronym. For a full listing of all of them, please refer to the table on page viii.

² “Man in the House” rules focused on regulating women’s relationships with men and other criteria in order to grant aid only to poor women who had “suitable homes.” Aid was often denied based on these ‘suitable home’ regulations, which also furthered racism and sexism in welfare policy, disrupted women’s relationships with men or the fathers of their children, and added to the deserving vs. undeserving poor arguments. For more see Abramovitz 1996.

³ Caseload trends 1994 to 2004 can be found at: <http://www.ncsl.org/statefed/welfare/caseloadwatch.htm>.

⁴ Although H.R. 3734 does not stipulate heterosexual or married when describing families, it implies both in the way TANF is implemented and the language that is now on the Health and Human Services website about the program.

⁵ These goals are outlined in H.R. 3734 and the bill text can be accessed at <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c104:H.R.3734.ENR:htm>.

⁶ See the Administration for Children and Families’ Healthy Marriage Initiative website for full details: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/about/mission.html>.

⁷ Again, see Healthy Marriage Initiative website for more on this policy: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/index>.

⁸ According to data from the California Department of Social Services as collected by each county, submitted to the state, and reported on a monthly basis in the Welfare-to-Work 25/25A (WtW25) forms. Accessed online at <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/research>.

⁹ In this discussion of the literature, I define higher educational programs as post-secondary education and job training through short or long job training certificate programs that last more than 12 weeks and less than 24 months, Associate’s degrees which last approximately 2 years, and Bachelor’s degree programs which last approximately 4 years.

¹⁰ The current federal poverty guideline can be found at: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/POVERTY/index.shtml>.

¹¹ Although technically mothers were not allowed to pursue Master’s degrees while participating in the CalWORKS program, this study does include three who were able to do so.

¹² Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) was a program created in the Family Support Act of 1988 to encourage higher education, job training, and work for welfare participants. It drastically expanded opportunities for mothers on welfare to pursue higher education, which many did. Most of the previous research on welfare mothers in higher education was conducted with participants of the JOBS programs.

¹³ Literally, I live in U.C. Berkeley’s family student housing, called the U.C. Village. I am active in Village resident associations in addition to being active with LIFETIME. LIFETIME was founded in the Village in 1996, and many members of the staff and board have lived here. In addition, two of the study’s participants also live in the Village.

¹⁴ Unfortunately, in many instances, county caseworkers misunderstood what the elimination of the 24-month time clock meant for participants pursuing higher education, and continued to tell them that they could not go to school after 24 months. In addition, because participants were initially told when they signed their welfare-to-work contracts that they could only pursue higher education for up to 24 months, many were stuck with welfare-to-work contracts with education plans for shorter term programs instead of Bachelor’s degrees (Rees 2006).

¹⁵ For more information, see their website: www.geds-to-phds.org.

¹⁶ LIFETIME has been influential in changing many policies on the county and state level in the last 10 years, and over the last seven years in affecting federal TANF reauthorization. At the county level in Alameda and San Francisco, they fought for and won the right of welfare parents to count homework and study time in their weekly welfare-to-work hours. At the state level they have had several state bills passed to increase access to education and job training programs for welfare families and they have fought to protect welfare cash grants cost-of-living adjustments in the yearly state budget negotiations for the last seven years. They strive to hold the state accountable to provide the education and job training programs and support resources required by law as part of the CalWORKS program.

¹⁷ All of the data (and percentages) discussed in this section came from the California Department of Social Services as collected by each county, submitted to the state, and reported on a monthly basis in the Welfare-to-Work 25/25A (WtW25) forms. Accessed online at <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/research>.

¹⁸ LIFETIME’s internal research, focused on data from clients in 15 counties throughout California.

¹⁹ The CDSS primarily classifies CalWORKs participants who are pursuing higher education as engaged in “vocational education.” In the state of California, during the period of this study, approximately 12% of the state’s welfare-to-work single parent participants were engaged in vocational education. Over the course of the research, San Francisco and Alameda counties, averaged together, also had approximately 12% of participants engaged in vocational education. Unfortunately, because of how the state collects its data, it is impossible from state data to determine how many welfare participants are pursuing Associate’s versus Bachelor’s degrees. ‘Vocational education’ is the primary category for those in higher education programs, but participants could also be classified as Self-Initiated Programs or “SIP,” if they enrolled in school before applying for welfare. The SIP status is a highly coveted status because oftentimes SIP participants are not required to engage in any welfare-to-work activities other than the one that earned them the SIP designation, such as going to school. However, there are a few activities that are granted SIP status, other than education, so from the data I am unable to determine which participants are in school, and which ones are engaged in other activities. However, it is important to point out that not all participants who are pursuing higher education are counted as a SIP or in the vocational education category. The welfare participants pursuing higher education could be classified in another category by the counties and these categories include “job skills,” “vocational education training,” and “education directly related to employment.” For example, one of the state categories is “job skills training directly related to employment” which could mean a job training certificate or Associate’s degree that is being earned through a community college or it could be an on-the-job training program that is unpaid. Based on previous research (Mathur 2004), it is probable that the highest percentages of participants are enrolled in G.E.D. and job training certificate programs and a very low percentage in Associate’s or Bachelor’s degree programs. Each educational category is not descriptive of the degree sought, but what the degree might do to support welfare-to-work rhetoric. These categories are not uniformly applied across counties because each county classifies specific degree programs according to its own system. For example, the way a caseworker in Orange County classifies a program that leads to an Associate’s degree may not be the same way that a caseworker in Alameda County classifies the same program. Based on several (10-15) personal conversations with caseworkers in Alameda and San Francisco Counties and California Department of Social Service statisticians, intra-county classification is more consistent than inter-county classification. While this is not a systematic observation, it is suggestive that at least some of the observed difference is due to coding differences and not program differences. During TANF reauthorization in 2006, one of the most important changes is that the welfare-to-work activity categories were federally defined instead of state or locally defined. This will ensure that the states are enforcing the time limits set by the federal TANF program, such as one year in vocational training, so that participants in different counties and states are being held to the same standards. These changes were not implemented during this study, but are important to keep in mind when discussing state data.

²⁰ Each CalWORKs student who is enrolled in an education or training program is required to have educational program outlined and approved in her welfare-to-work contract, which is done through the CalWORKs office on campus. These CalWORKs offices are designed to help students coordinate their educational plans within welfare requirements. These offices also help students utilize supportive services like child care and book reimbursements, obtain work-study jobs, and provide informative workshops and advocacy services. Some offices or programs also require students to participate in meetings once or twice a term through the CalWORKs office. Some students also participate in the EOPS or CARE programs, but they are not required to participate in them. In Alameda County, there are CalWORKs offices at all but one of the community colleges. However, in San Francisco County, since there is only one community college, the City College of San Francisco, with nine campuses, there is only one EOPS/CARE and CalWORKs office, on the Phelan/Ocean campus.

²¹ This school changed its name during this study to Cal State East Bay.

²² The drawing occurred after the last interview was conducted, in the last weekend in November 2006 at a LIFETIME parent leadership meeting, which several of my participants were attending. I provided dessert for everyone and had two mothers volunteer to pick the names out of a hat. One winner was present, and the other I contacted the next day and mailed the gift card to her.

²³ I suspect that this was most effective at Chabot because of the office staff being very interested in the project and the strong relationship that the CalWORKs counselor has with CalWORKs participants. The CalWORKs counselor worked had to connect mothers in her program with opportunities in the community; therefore, the kiosk where my flyers resided was an often-used resource in that office.

²⁴ Participating in the resource fair as a way to recruit participants was a very interesting technique that is not often discussed in the literature. Resource fair participants are gathering information and spend time talking about issues with those who are tabling. Participants of the resource fair seemed to be more relaxed and in less of a rush than those who I meet in office visits and in mandatory workshops, they wanted to talk about my perspectives and the

research project, they asked several questions about the research, and a few wanted to conduct the interview right there. In the future, I would like to try to use this recruitment method more, and if possible, have the space to conduct the research that day.

²⁵ Also, Berkeley City College is a “new” school, in that it was previously called Vista Community College and located several blocks away from the new building in a variety of aging buildings. In 2006, the campus moved to a brand new building, changed its name to Berkeley City College, and additional resources were put into the CalWORKs and EOPS/CARE programs. Due to the additional resources and an energized CalWORKs coordinator who planned many workshops and social events for the CalWORKs mothers, a cohort effect occurred. I contacted the CalWORKs coordinator and she invited me to recruit for my focus group at the end of the year party (to celebrate their first year at the new campus). The mothers were very energized about participating in the focus group when I meet them at the party. I planned the focus group for the next Friday, got contact information from the interested mothers, and called them to confirm early the next week. I had nine people RSVP for the focus group. On Friday, eleven people showed up for the focus group. Having more people come to the focus group than planned (or than who RSVP-ed) is unusual when conducting focus groups, and eleven is a large number for a focus group. However, this group of women was used to doing things together; therefore, I felt that I could not turn anyone away.

²⁶ Since they had another meeting the day after I contacted her to plan the group, she said that she would announce the opportunity to the parents and have them contact me. I received several phone calls over the next few days, and planned the focus group for after the next parents’ meeting in two weeks. However, on the day of the focus group, several of the parents who had planned to come backed out, but a few others stayed after the parents’ meeting and wanted to participate. However, two of the participants from my interviews also wanted to participate. Without them, the group would be rather small at four participants, and again, because they all knew each other and did many events as a group, I decided not to exclude the women who had already done interviews with me.

²⁷ Many of the women who participated in the interviews or focus groups considered themselves “single mothers” regardless of whether they were dating, involved, or living with their children’s father. Usually the women were on single parent welfare grants, but in three cases, they were on two-parent welfare grants but still primarily identified as ‘single’ because they were not married to their partner (who in all three cases was the children’s father). From their discussions of their relationships with their partners, their identity as a ‘single mother’ comes from economic and legal reasons. Legally in all three cases, they were not married to their partners, and for the most part, by choice; in other words, the man wanted to get married, but the woman did not. Furthermore, it seemed that the women preferred to be on single-parent grants, even though it is slightly less money for the family, because it requires significantly less paperwork and bureaucracy and frees up the other parent to work and not be subject to the welfare system’s rules and regulations.

²⁸ When interviews were conducted at coffee shops or in restaurants, I purchased the food as a modest ‘thank you’ for their participation. When the interviews were in other locations, I carried a small ‘snack bag’ with me to the interview that had a few bottles of water, cans of soda, bags of chips, candy bars, granola bars, and usually a piece of fresh fruit to offer to participants. In most cases, they had a least a drink and usually a snack. In one case the mother asked if she could have all of it for her children’s lunch the next day, and I did give her everything I had.

²⁹ In both cases, the mothers were not native English speakers and said that they felt self-conscious of their English and cited that as the reason they did not want it recorded.

³⁰ On one occasion, the mother wanted to discipline her toddler and did not want it recorded. The other occasion, a participant wanted to explain her partner’s cash work that they were not reporting to welfare, and did not mind if I took notes, but did not want it recorded.

³¹ I did this coding at Research Talk’s Summer Qualitative Research Intensive training in June 2006, where I took workshops on grounded theory, coding, Atlas.ti, memo-writing, and writing up findings.

³² MDRC was formerly known as the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, but formally changed its name to its initials in 2003.

³³ As seen on MDRC’s website at www.mdrc.org.

³⁴ At the suggestion of one of my committee members, I thought further about the role of shelter advocates in getting women onto welfare. Barnett, Miller-Perrin, and Perrin (2005) find that one of the top priorities of shelter staff was to help women get onto welfare in order to be economically independent from their abusers. In my research about one third of the women who experienced the domestic violence pathway did seek help from a domestic violence shelter, one third did not, and it was not clear in one third of the narratives whether or not the women used a domestic violence shelter at some point. Seeking help from a domestic violence shelter is an important element for women fleeing domestic violence and going onto welfare. However, the domestic violence pathway in my research illustrates the mechanisms through which women got onto welfare *and* into higher education. The role of the

domestic violence shelter staff, no doubt remains important, but is not apparently a key mechanism by which women in my study got onto welfare *and* into higher education.

³⁵ The cycle of violence is discussed by many; including Walker 1979 as an early advocate for the use of this term.

³⁶ Lele graduated from community college in the spring of 2007 and transferred to the University of California Berkeley in Fall 2007, where she is currently pursuing her Bachelor's degree.

³⁷ This policy was explained to me by LIFETIME's Directors and PEER Program manager.

³⁸ From the "Immigrant Women Toolbox" on the Family Violence Prevention Fund's website at: <http://www.endabuse.org/programs/display.php3?DocID=318>.

³⁹ Although the names of most the specific schools are removed, I am choosing to leave in references to the University of California Berkeley because of the perceived prestige of the school and the role that plays in the women's narratives and identities as UC Berkeley students and graduates.

⁴⁰ She finished her MSW in May 2008.

⁴¹ There is a vast literature on the survival narratives of Holocaust survivors, and any discussion of survival narratives attributes its framing to those narratives; some examples of those are Young 1990; Langer 1991; Waxman 2006. However, surviving poverty is different because it is an economic survival, instead of a literal fight for life. This chapter engages and positions itself alongside the current literature on economic survival narratives; Edin and Lein's *Making Ends Meet* is an often cited example.

⁴² The prevailing idea behind this is that women on welfare who are enrolled in higher education are highly motivated, will 'make it' without welfare and thus, do not need the assistance. One of the themes of the TANF reauthorization is to further restrict access to higher education and job training. In the TANF Interim Final Rule issued in June 2006, the Department of Health and Human Services explicitly stated that "TANF is not a scholarship program" (see <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/law-reg/tfinrule.html> for the full text of the Interim Final Rule). The idea is that women on welfare who are enrolled in higher education are very motivated, but should not be 'rewarded' with a college scholarship just because they have children. Instead, if they want to pursue higher education they should be removed from assistance and put on financial aid, mainly loans, to go to school.

⁴³ The issues of the truthfulness of participants could be raised here. It is possible that they told me they were just contemplating illicit activities, at the same time as they really participated in those activities. However, from my participant observation of mothers on welfare over the four years of this research, I conclude that most mothers on welfare engage in some activity at some point that is not strictly according to welfare policies; which I would further suggest is mainly due to the welfare policies being complicated and inconsistently applied across cases. Yet, I would also conclude that the percentage of mothers who engage in activities that were illegal and at least moderately lucrative were very small.

⁴⁴ In conversations with LIFETIME's directors, they tell me that they have been told by consultants to the California Senate's Budget Committee, the California Assembly's Health and Human Services committee, and aides to legislators on several occasions not to talk about education and training programs for mothers on welfare because it is an "unsympathetic issue." Republican lawmakers on those committees believe that welfare is not a scholarship program (which is a commonly used phrase) and that mothers on welfare who are pursuing higher education are "highly motivated" and "would go to school anyway" if welfare was not supporting them. So, instead, the consultants and aides tell LIFETIME's directors, the mothers who participate in legislative visits should downplay their role as students in order to gain credibility as 'average' mothers on welfare. However, the directors of LIFETIME argue that these women are 'average' women on welfare, and that most welfare parents, given the chance, would be successful in the community colleges. This research supports LIFETIME's directors' position, since many of the women in this study were identified as having 'multiple barriers' to employment and told that they were "not exactly college material" by caseworkers who tried to get them to quit school.

⁴⁵ Seven of the participants had completed their degrees and were working and off of welfare at the time of the interviews. See Appendix A for more information.

⁴⁶ Jewel is answering the question "what does your son say about you going to school?" and her answer does combine her son's responses to her pursuing higher education and her process to sobriety. She completed her drug and alcohol treatment program then enrolled in a job training program, which she graduated from, and then directly afterwards she enrolled in her Associate's degree program. Because of the fluidity of her process getting clean and enrolling in educational programs, it may be difficult to separate her son's feelings about each individual step in this path.

⁴⁷ Jewel is explaining the tokens that Alcoholics Anonymous gives out to participants who have been sober or clean for set amounts of time.

⁴⁸ In addition to the interviews and focus groups that this research is based on, over four years I have observed, participated in, and in some cases have helped plan and carry out events with LIFETIME. These events have included workshops on campuses, one day and three day parent leadership trainings, political empowerment and engagement trainings, legislative briefings and visits with policymakers both in Washington, D.C. and in Sacramento, policy working group meetings, protest actions and political theatre, and grassroots convenings and conferences.

⁴⁹ LIFETIME's directors are starting to use this term for their work, and suggested that I look into the concept when I was writing this chapter.

⁵⁰ When one of LIFETIME's directors read an earlier version of this chapter, she appreciated the idea of oppositional consciousness and requested that I give her more information on this concept. She wants LIFETIME to start using this idea more directly in their work. She said that she felt like this was what they were already doing, but they did not know it had a specific name.

⁵¹ The first two research questions were: (a) what can the narratives of mothers pursuing higher education while on welfare tell us? and (b) what are the rationales that mothers on welfare cite for pursuing higher education, particularly after TANF implementation made this route very difficult?

⁵² In addition to those primary differences, there is a difference in the level of education between those who are actively engaged in LIFETIME and those who are not. In this study there are eighteen mothers who are pursuing or have completed Bachelor's or Master's degrees. Only four of those mothers were not involved with LIFETIME, and all four were early in their pursuit of their Bachelor's degree (first year at university). All of the mothers who were in their last year of their Bachelor's degree, have completed Bachelor's degrees, or were pursuing or finished with Master's degrees are clients or leaders of LIFETIME. Six of the fourteen mothers who are involved with LIFETIME are clients; eight mothers are leaders. Although much of the recruitment for this study was done through LIFETIME, it is also unusual for women to complete Bachelor's and Master's degrees while on welfare without advocacy assistance.

⁵³ Based on a personal conversation with one of LIFETIME's directors, there may also be some self-selection to this perspective as well. She felt that some of the mothers who get most actively involved with LIFETIME were those who resisted the shaming before they got involved with LIFEITME. LIFETIME's frame of the shaming resonated with them and they became more involved as a consequence.

⁵⁴ Andrew Bush is not related to George W. Bush, and for more: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/orgs/bios/abush.htm>.

⁵⁵ The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was originally passed in 1994 and provides federal funding to combat violence against women.

⁵⁶ PRWORA give states several options, and for TANF to address the high incidence of domestic violence among mothers in the welfare system, Title I of PRWORA created the Family Violence Option (FVO). Under the FVO, states are given the flexibility to offer protections to domestic violence victims with children in the welfare system. These protections include domestic violence and family counseling and temporary waivers of welfare-to-work program requirements that may put domestic violence victims and their children at risk. Program requirements that can be waived include but are not limited to weekly work requirements, time-limits, family cap provisions, and child support cooperation requirements. The waiver on time-limits is particularly important, since domestic violence can create long-term physical and emotional problems that seriously limit a mother's ability to secure or maintain employment. The FVO also prevents states from being penalized for giving good cause waivers of work requirements to victims of domestic violence. Under TANF, states are required to have a certain percentage of their welfare caseload engaged in a welfare to work activity, or lose federal block grant funding. However, under the FVO, battered women in the welfare system can be exempt from work participation rates, with no fiscal consequence to the state. Furthermore, TANF regulations did allow states to use TANF block-grant funds for domestic violence programs and services in the welfare system, even though Congress has never provided specific funding for state implementation of the FVO. Since 1996, 41 states plus the District of Columbia have adopted the Family Violence Option, and another 6 states, although they did not adopt the FVO, developed similar policies, mostly implemented on a county by county basis. Three states—Idaho, Oklahoma, and Virginia—have no policies that are equivalent to the FVO.

⁵⁷ During the height of the technology boom of the 1990s, if the state of California were its own country, it would have had the fifth largest economy in the world.

⁵⁸ However, there was one policy suggestion that was made by one LIFETIME mother and one non-LIFETIME participants; D (LIFETIME mother) and Barbara both suggested that university staff should complete sensitivity or diversity training about working with low-income and minority students. This policy suggestion was not related to

welfare policy, but instead directed at colleges' and universities' ability to serve low-income and minority students. In both cases, the mothers mentioned in their narratives an incident that happened in class between themselves and a faculty member. They felt some faculty were not fully sensitive to issues of race, class, and gender, specifically as they related to low-income students in higher education. They were at the same community college, and, in both cases, the students had conversations with the Dean because of the incident. However, this policy suggestion illustrates that when considering policy suggestions for welfare mothers in higher education, welfare policy is not the only arena that needs to be addressed. Higher education policies also need to be included in discussion of policy changes that affect mothers on welfare.

⁵⁹ Higher Education: Edin and Lein 1997; Jones-DeWeever and Gault 2006; Mathur 2004; Mink 1999; Polakow, Butler, Deprez, and Kahn 2004; Rank 2004; Shaw et. al 2006

⁶⁰ Universal Health Care: Edin and Lein 1997; Katz 2001; Mink 1999; Newman 1999; Rank 2004; Shipler 2004;

⁶¹ Housing: Rank 2004; Wilson 1996

⁶² Transportation: Wilson 1996

⁶³ Child Care: Edin and Lein 1997; Jones-DeWeever, Peterson, and Song 2003; Mink 1999; Newman 1999; Quadagno 1994; Rank 2004; White 2002; Wilson 1996

⁶⁴ Minimum Wage: Edin and Lein 1997; Mink 1999; Newman 1999; Rank 2004;

⁶⁵ Suggestion 7 is a little more controversial, in that one of the goals of the welfare rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s was to remove caseworkers' discretion in providing aid for families, and to instill the idea that welfare was a right (Kornbluh 2007; Mink and Solinger 2003). As the system currently exists caseworkers are not social workers, and often do not have any more education than the clients that they are serving. In California, caseworkers are only required to have a GED. However, as Blank (1997) also suggests for her Tier 1 case evaluator, some of the caseworkers could have more extensive training, and thus more discretion working with clients to meet their needs.

⁶⁶ As discussed in Chapter 1, the drastic decrease in the welfare caseloads did not coincide with a drastic reduction in poverty. The welfare caseloads in 1996 were approximately 5 million families; and in 2006, the caseloads had just more than 2 million families, and the poverty rates in the same years were 14% in 1996; and 12.3% in 2006.

APPENDIX A: PROFILES OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	# Kids	Pathway	Degree	County of Residence	Advocacy
1. Jasmine	39	White/Latina	3	Domestic Violence	AA completed	Alameda	Leader
2. Misha	29	Black	1	Unexpected Pregnancy	AA current	Alameda	No
3. Alexis	25	Latina	1	Unexpected Pregnancy	BA current	Alameda	No
4. Lele	37	Black	5	Domestic Violence	AA current	Alameda	Leader
5. D	46	Black	3	Domestic Violence	AA current	Alameda	Leader
6. RBS	27	Filipino	1	Unemployment	AA current	Alameda	Potential
7. Nicole	33	Black	1	Unexpected Pregnancy	AA current	Alameda	Leader
8. Jane	23	Black	1	Unexpected Pregnancy	AA current	Alameda	No
9. Marie	30	White	2	Unexpected Pregnancy	BA completed	Alameda	Leader
10. Monique	25	Black	1	Unemployment	AA current	Alameda	No
11. Sally	37	Asian Pacific Islander	2	Substance Abuse	AA current	Alameda	Leader
12. Barbara	41	Black	1	Unemployment	AA current	Alameda	No
13. Angela	18	Latina	1	Teen Pregnancy	AA current	Alameda	No
14. Twitch	30	Black	1	Domestic Violence	BA completed	Alameda	Leader
15. Dena	42	White	1	Later-life Pregnancy	AA current	Alameda	Client
16. Taz	27	Black	2	Teen Pregnancy	AA current	Alameda	No
17. Mercedes	38	Latina	4	Domestic Violence	BA completed	Alameda	Leader
18. Gloria	32	Latina	3	Domestic Violence	AA current	Alameda	Client
19. LaToya	21	Black	1	Teen Pregnancy	AA current	Alameda	No
20. Princess	35	Italian	2	Domestic Violence	AA current	Alameda	No
21. Keisha	20	Black	1*	Teen Pregnancy	AA current	Alameda	No
22. Lele J	40	Black	2	Unemployment	AA current	Alameda	Leader
23. Courtney	28	White	4	Substance Abuse	AA current	Alameda	Potential
24. Michelle	29	White	1*	Substance Abuse	BA current	Alameda	No
25. MMM	31	Latina	4	Teen Pregnancy	BA current	Alameda	No
26. Jewel	37	White	1	Substance Abuse	enrolling in AA	Contra Costa	No
27. Rebecca	34	White	2	Substance Abuse	BA current	Alameda	Client

28. Trisha	Mid 40s	Black	4	Substance Abuse	AA current	Alameda	Leader
29. Phoebe	39	Black	1	Domestic Violence	MBA current	Alameda	Leader
30. Kelly	42	Russian Israeli Jew	1	Domestic Violence	AA current	Alameda	No
31. Mindy	41	White	1	Substance Abuse	BA enrolling	Alameda	Client
32. Nancy	45	Latina	1	Later life Pregnancy	BA completed	San Francisco	Leader
33. Mariposa	34	Latina	1	Unemployment	AA current	San Francisco	No
34. Vanessa	30	White	1	Unexpected Pregnancy	AA current	San Francisco	No
35. T	Late 30s	Black	2	Domestic Violence	BA current	San Francisco	No
36. Jade	31	Asian Pacific Islander	1	Unexpected Pregnancy	AA current	San Francisco	Leader
37. Lucy	30	Latina	3	Unmarried Partners	AA current	San Francisco	No
38. Daria	29	White	1	Unexpected Pregnancy	BA current	San Francisco	Client
39. Betty	39	White	1	Substance Abuse	MSW current	Alameda	Leader
40. Nicole C.	35	White	2*	Unmarried Partners	AA current	San Francisco	No
41. Faith	31	Black	3	Teen Pregnancy	BS current	Santa Clara	Leader
42. Grace	Mid 30s	Latina	3	Domestic Violence	BA current	Alameda	Client
43. Robin	Early 40s	Black	1	Later-life Pregnancy	MSW completed	San Francisco	Client
44. Sydney	Early 30s	Black	3	Domestic Violence	BS completed	Contra Costa	Leader
45. Tony	33	Black	2	Domestic Violence	BA completed	Alameda	Leader

Focus Group Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	# Kids	Degree	County of Residence	Advocacy
46. Monica	--	Latina	3	AA current	Alameda	No
47. Rosa	44	Black	3	AA current	Alameda	No
48. Renee	38	Black	2	AA current	Alameda	No
49. Ashley	24	Black	1	AA current	Alameda	No
50. Shamarray	--	Black	1	AA current	Alameda	No
51. Paige	24	White	1	AA current	Alameda	No
52. Candy	51	Black	3	AA current	Alameda	No
53. Gloria	37	Black	6	AA current	Alameda	No
54. Brenda	25	Latina	1*	AA current	Alameda	No
55. CeCe	49	Black	4	AA current	Alameda	No
56. Hope	26	Black	1	AA current	Alameda	No
57. Jane S.	33	Black	1	BA current	Alameda	Yes
58. Tracy	32	White	1	BA current	Alameda	Yes
59. Shonda	46	Black	5	BA current	Santa Clara	Yes
60. Alyanna	29	Asian Pacific Islander	1	AA current	San Francisco	No
61. Brianna	26	Latina	1	BA current	San Francisco	No
62. Moesha	28	Black	1	AA current	San Francisco	No
63. Rachel	26	Latina	3	AA current	San Francisco	No

*Keisha, Michelle, and Brenda were pregnant at the interview or focus group, so the number of children for each was expected to increase by one. Michelle, Mindy, and Nicole C gave children up for adoption, so the number reflects those for whom they are the legal parents.

APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHICS OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Interview Participants' Demographics

School	Percent (n)
Laney	13% (6)
Chabot	24% (11)
Other Alameda Community College	9% (4)
University California Berkeley	9% (4)
California State University East Bay	9% (4)
Other Alameda University	7% (3)
City College of San Francisco	12% (5)
San Francisco State University	13% (6)
School in another county	4% (2)
Total	100% (45)

Degrees	Percent (n)
Associate's current	58% (26)
Associate's completed	2% (1)
Bachelor's current	20% (9)
Bachelor's completed	14% (6)
Master's current	4% (2)
Master's completed	2% (1)
Total	100% (45)

Race/Ethnicity	Percent (n)
White	24% (11)
Black	42% (19)
Latina	20% (9)
Asian-Pacific Islander	7% (3)
Other/Mixed	7% (3)
Total	100% (45)

Number of Children	Percent (n)
1	54% (24)
2	20% (9)
3	15% (7)
4	9% (4)
5	2% (1)
Total	100% (45)

Advocacy	Percent (n)
LIFETIME member/client/leader	53% (24)
Not Involved	47% (21)
Total	100% (45)

Focus Group Participants' Demographics

School	Percent (n)
Berkeley City College	61% (11)
Other Alameda University	5.5% (1)
City College of San Francisco	22% (4)
San Francisco State University	5.5% (1)
School in another county	5.5% (1)
Total	100% (18)

Degrees	Percent (n)
Associate's current	83% (15)
Bachelor's current	17% (3)
Total	100% (18)

Race/Ethnicity	Percent (n)
White	11% (2)
Black	61% (11)
Latina	22% (4)
Asian-Pacific Islander	5.5% (1)
Total	100% (18)

Number of Children	Percent (n)
1	56% (10)
2	5.5% (1)
3	22% (4)
4	5.5% (1)
5	5.5% (1)
6	5.5% (1)
Total	100% (18)

Advocacy	Percent (n)
LIFETIME member/client/leader	17% (3)
Not Involved	83% (15)
Total	100% (18)

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE

I. Beginning Procedure:

- A. Personal introduction: who I am, where I am from, why I am doing the research.
- B. Study introduction: Research project to ask women on CalWORKs about their experiences in education and training programs and in the job market. The goal of the project is to understand women's reasons for pursuing further education while on welfare.
- C. Explain the consent form, ask them to sign it.
- D. Ask them to think of a pseudonym for me to use for them.
- E. Ask permission to audio record the interview, sign consent to record on consent form, and give them a copy.
- F. Start audio recording.

II. Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about how you came to enroll at (school)?

- 1.1. What type of educational program are you enrolled in? At what school?
- 1.2. What is your major?
- 1.3. When did you enroll? (Or how long have you been taking classes there?)
- 1.4. What classes (or types of classes) have you taken?
- 1.5. How did you find out about your educational program?
- 1.6. How did you come to choose this school?
- 1.7. How did you choose your major?
- 1.8. Are you a SIP (Self-Initiated Participant)? (If no, why did you decide to pursue education as your welfare to work activity?)
- 1.9. Were those choices affected by time limits? Would you choose differently if there were no time limits for education while on CalWORKs?
- 1.10. Do you have a work-study job?
- 1.11. Do you receive financial aid? What type? How much?
- 1.12. When do you plan to finish your degree?

2. Tell me about high school or other education you had before coming to (school)?

- 2.1. Did you graduate from high school?
- 2.2. If yes, what year?
- 2.3. If no, why not?
- 2.4. If no, did you complete a GED? When?
- 2.5. Have you had any other education or taken any other courses after high school, but before you started at (fill in name of school)?
- 2.6. Have you had any vocational training? What type and when?

3. Tell me about your children?

- 3.1. How many children do you have?
- 3.2. When was your first child born? Boy or girl? Other children?

4. Tell me about becoming pregnant with your (first) child?

- 4.1. Tell me about your relationship with your child's father/s before you became

pregnant.

- 4.2. What happened when you became pregnant? How did he react?
- 4.3. Tell me about your current relationship with your child's father? Do you have contact with him? Do you get along?
- 4.4. How often do your children see him? Does he have other children?
- 4.5. Does the county collect child support from your child's father?
- 4.6. Does he pay you child support?
- 4.7. Does he give you financial or other support in any way?
- 4.8. If no to all three above, has he ever given you child support or assistance?
- 4.9. Have you ever been married? If yes, when?
- 4.10. When, how, and why did it end?
- 4.11. Tell me about the long-term romantic relationships that you have had?
- 4.12. Have you ever lived with a boyfriend (girlfriend or partner)?
- 4.13. Are you currently seeing anyone?

5. Tell me about how you came to apply for CalWORKs (or welfare if earlier)?

- 5.1. When did you first apply for welfare/CalWORKs?
- 5.2. What led up to you applying for welfare/CalWORKs?
- 5.3. Have you been on welfare/CalWORKs continuously since then or have you been off it for a period of time and then re-applied? (If they have not been on CalWORKs continuously, ask:) When did you go off CalWORKs? Why? When did you reapply for CalWORKs? Why?
- 5.4. Do you do other welfare to work activities to complete the weekly work hour requirements? If so, which ones, how many hours a week, for how long?
- 5.5. How do you get along with your employment specialist? (also called CalWORKs worker, or employment worker)
- 5.6. What does your employment counselor say about you being in school?
- 5.7. How do you get along with your eligibility worker? (also called intake specialist, TANF caseworker) What does your eligibility counselor caseworker say about you being in school?
- 5.8. How did they react to your decision to go to school? What do they say now?
- 5.9. Have you had any problems with the welfare office? (Prompt with lost paperwork, not being able to reach your worker, rude workers, etc.)
- 5.10. What benefits/aid do you receive? (CalWORKs, food stamps, section 8, MediCal, childcare assistance, transportation vouchers, book/supply vouchers, utility assistance, social security or SSI, disability, others?)

6. What child care arrangements do you have?

- 6.1. Who watches your children while you are in school?
- 6.2. Does the county pay for your childcare?
- 6.3. Are you satisfied with your childcare arrangement? Why/why not?

7. Tell me about your parents and other family?

- 7.1. Who lived with you while you were growing up? If necessary, prompt with, did you grow up living with your mother, father, or both, or other relatives?
- 7.2. What did your (insert head of household adult/s here) do for a living while you

- were growing up?
- 7.3. What was the highest level of education completed by your mother?
 - 7.4. Father?
 - 7.5. How would you describe your parents' financial situation while you were growing up? Possible categories if they need prompting: on welfare, desperate or very poor while working not able to make ends meet, living paycheck to paycheck, or making it but a paycheck away from financial trouble, or comfortable.
 - 7.6. Do you have siblings?
 - 7.7. If yes: how many?
 - 7.8. Where do they live?
 - 7.9. What do they do for a living?
 - 7.10. What type of relationship do you have with them?

8. Tell me about the jobs that you have had?

- 8.1. What was your first paid job? How/why did you leave each job?
- 8.2. What other jobs have you had since then? How/why did you leave each job?
- 8.3. (Prompt them to list each one).
- 8.4. (Might be redundant, but if not made clear from above two questions, specify:) What was your most recent job?
- 8.5. How much is the most that you have ever earned an hour? (or week/month/year)
- 8.6. Have you ever received unemployment insurance?
- 8.7. Describe what a "good job" is to you.

9. What is the job market like for a woman who is trying to get off CalWORKs?

- 9.1. Do you believe there are enough jobs available for people who need them?
- 9.2. Is there a shortage of "good" jobs?
- 9.3. If so, how or in what ways does this shortage affect you?
- 9.4. Would you tell prospective employers that you are on welfare? Why or why not?
- 9.5. That you are a single parent? Why or why not?
- 9.6. Do you believe that women are discriminated against in the job market because of their welfare status?

10. Tell me about your goals?

- 10.1. What does your education program mean to you?
- 10.2. Have your expectations about education or job training held true?
- 10.3. What are your educational goals?
- 10.4. What are your job/career goals?
- 10.5. What kind of jobs do you feel like you qualified for before you enrolled in your educational program?
- 10.6. Do you think your educational program will affect your ability to get a job? How or in what ways?
- 10.7. What kind of job do you hope to get after completing your educational program?
- 10.8. Do you think your educational program will increase your chances of getting a "good job"?
- 10.9. Some people say that education is a strategy to get out of poverty. Do you agree

- or disagree with them? Why/why not?
- 10.10. What might make it easier for you to get off welfare? [If necessary, prompt with the following one at a time: higher wages, child care, transportation options (or a car), health care, more education?]
 - 10.11. What might make it more difficult for you to get off welfare? [If necessary, prompt with the following one at a time: domestic violence, disability, lack of child care, transportation problems?]
 - 10.12. What might make it easier for you to find a living wage job? [If necessary, prompt with the following one at a time: more education, child care, transportation options (or a car), health care?]

11. What do you see as the advantages of going to school?

- 11.1. What do your children say about you being in school?
- 11.2. What does your family (your parents or siblings) say about you being in school? (If dating someone: what does your significant other say about you being in school?)
- 11.3. What are the disadvantages of going to school?
- 11.4. Has anyone made comments about you going to school while on welfare? If so, what did they say?
- 11.5. How did that make you feel or how did you respond?

12. What are your biggest struggles right now?

13. What resources do you use to help you get by?

- 13.1. How do you juggle the demands of school, children, and welfare? If necessary, prompt with what strategies or resources do you use?
- 13.2. What advice or tips would you give to someone trying to juggle these demands?
- 13.3. Do you know any other students on CalWORKs?
- 13.4. Do you hang-out with other CalWORKs students? If yes, do you discuss the demands of school, children, and welfare?
- 13.5. Do other students on welfare do anything to help you get along or stay in school? Do you get advice from them? Material or emotional support?
- 13.6. Do you exchange resources, tips, or strategies with them?
- 13.7. Do you know of any institutional resources or advocacy groups are available to women on welfare returning to school? Please list them. (Prompt with advocacy groups, legal aid, CCC CalWORKs office, EOPS/CARE program)
- 13.8. Have you ever used any of these advocacy resources? When, how, result for each one. If nothing/little is mentioned, prompt: Have you heard of LIFETIME, EOPS, CARE, East Bay Legal Aid, Bay Area Legal Aid, etc. Then answer: Have you ever used any of these advocacy resources? When, how, result for each one.
- 13.9. Is there anyone you turn to when you need support?
- 13.10. If you need last minute child care, who do you call?
- 13.11. If you need emergency cash, who do you call?

14. What are your biggest joys right now?

15. What is the most important thing that you want people to know about your experiences on welfare and in college?

16. What would you tell politicians who are reauthorizing welfare policy?

16.1. Some politicians say that some welfare mothers might never become economically independent in the job market; do you agree or disagree with them? Why?

17. What would you tell the Director of the California Department of Social Services about CalWORKs?

17.1. What would you tell them about your experiences on CalWORKs while being in school?

18. What would you tell the county supervisor about caseworkers in your county?

19. What would you tell your university president about being on welfare while enrolled in school at (insert name of school)?

19.1. Are there issues that need attention between the welfare department and the campus administration? What are they and why?

20. There have been several recent changes in the CalWORKs system and policies, have these changes affected you?

20.1. Did you know about the recent policy change that now allows parents to go to school for the whole 60 months you are on CalWORKs?

20.2. How did you find out about it?

20.3. Did it change your plans?

20.4. Have you had any problems with the transition to the CalWIN system?

20.5. Have there been any other recent changes to your benefits?

Thank you for your patience and I have just a few more demographic questions for you.

21. Where do you live? (County, city, neighborhood)

22. How old are you/what year were you born?

23. How do you identify your race/ethnicity?

24. Where were you born?

25. How long have you lived in California?

26. Where else have you lived? When and for how long?

27. How do you get to school? (Do you own a car, do you rely on public transit, or both)

III. Questions for sub-sample who participate in advocacy organization:

1. How did you find out about LIFETIME? When was this?

2. Tell me about your involvement with LIFETIME? (If necessary prompt, are you a client, a member, a volunteer, etc?)

3. Have you ever used their PEER advocacy services? How? Do you currently use them?

4. Have you ever been involved with their Parent Leadership Committee? Are you currently involved with the PLC? Have you been to a PLC event? If NO, have you ever been invited to one?

IV. Questions for sub-sample with completed degrees:

1. What degree or certificate did you earn?
2. How did you feel when you completed or graduated?
3. What did your family say about you finishing your program?
4. Did you have/attend a graduation ceremony? Tell me about that day. Prompt with did your family attend, did you have a party, how did you feel?
5. What did your caseworker say about you finishing your program?
6. What are your plans now?
7. What are your job/career goals?
8. Are you still on CalWORKs? If yes, what is your welfare-to-work activity now?
9. Are you looking for a job? (If found a job, then skip the next question.)
10. Have you applied to jobs? If yes, have you been invited to interview for any positions? If yes, tell me about the interview? [Prompts if necessary: how do you feel it went, were you comfortable, what impression did you have about the company, what questions did they ask you, did you have to complete any testing, such as skill based, psychological, background checks, etc., have they called you back for a second interview?]
11. Have you found a job? If yes, does it pay enough for you to support your family? Would you call it a “good” job?
12. If previous answer is no: are you still looking for a “good” job while you work in the other job? Why or why not?
13. Would you recommend more education for other women in situations similar to yours? Why or why not?
14. Do you think education/job training was an effective strategy for you? Why/why not?
15. Would you consider or are you interested in getting another degree or continuing school? Why/why not?

V. Conclusion Procedures

Thank you so much for your time today and I am looking forward to the next time we meet. I just have one more question.

- A. Is there anything that you feel was not covered in the interview that you want to discuss with me?
- B. If you think of anything you want to discuss, please feel free to contact me at [phone number] or by email at [email address].
- C. I will be contacting you in about 6 months for a second interview. The second interview will be slightly shorter than this one and will be the same format with similar topics.
- D. Do you expect to have the same phone and email address in six months? Can you give me a secondary phone number, such as a relative or friend, I can contact to find you if you have moved?
- E. Do you know anyone else who is a student on CalWORKs who might be interested in being interviewed? Can you give them the flyer or my contact information?

APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

I. Beginning Procedure:

- G. Personal introduction: who I am, where I am from, why I am doing the research.
- H. Study introduction: Research project about women's experiences on CalWORKs and in higher education. The goal of the project is to understand women's reasons for pursuing further education while on welfare and their ideas for public policies about welfare and higher education.
- I. Introduce the research assistant and explain that she will take notes during the discussion.
- J. Explain the consent form, ask them to sign it.
- K. Ask them to think of a pseudonym for me to use for them, participants make nametags with her pseudonym on it to wear during the focus group.
- L. Explain focus group confidentiality: "To prevent violations of your own or the other member's of this group's privacy, please be aware of the private experiences that you might consider too personal or revealing. Please also respect each group member's privacy by not disclosing any personal information that they share during the group once you leave here today."
- M. Remind them that the focus group will be audio recorded, ask them to sign that section on the consent form, and give them each a copy of the consent form.
- N. Start audio recording.

II. Focus Group Discussion Questions:

- 1. Can we all go around and introduce yourselves with a pseudonym and tell me how you came to enroll in college and/or enroll on CalWORKs?

Climate and Resources

- 2. What's the climate like on this campus for student parents? How do you feel being a student and being at your college?
- 3. What resources do you use?
- 4. What other resources do you need, would you like to know about, or need to be offered in this area?

Caseworkers:

- 1. What makes a good caseworker?
- 2. What makes a bad caseworker?
- 3. How can the county improve relationships between clients and caseworkers?

Welfare Stereotypes:

- 4. What are the stereotypes of mothers on welfare?
- 5. Do those stereotypes affect your life? How?

Welfare Policy:

- 6. So, imagine with me that we are starting over on Mars, how do you ensure that everyone in your community has the resources that they need to live?
- 7. What are the biggest changes that you would like to see happen in the CalWORKs system?
- 8. How are you involved in social issues or social change?

APPENDIX E: RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Interview Recruitment Email Text:

Hi, Students on CalWORKs!

I am looking for moms on CalWORKs to take part in a research study about your experiences in the welfare system while enrolled in school.

The research will involve two in-person interviews, about six months apart, to discuss your educational experiences in the CalWORKs system. Each interview will take about 90 minutes and will involve questions about your educational and career goals and your experiences with the CalWORKs system.

Participants who complete the first interview will be entered into a drawing for one of two \$50 gift cards to Target. There is a 1 in 30 chance of winning!

For more information or if you are interested in participating, please contact me at [phone number] or [email address].

Other Details: All information collected in this study will be kept strictly confidential. Your participation may benefit society, for example by leading to better social policies for welfare and education. There will be no monetary compensation for participating in this study. Research is being done for an academic research project and is not part of the CalWORKs system or this university.

Thanks! I look forward to hearing from you!

Sheila Katz
Ph.D. Candidate
Vanderbilt University
Department of Sociology

Focus Group Recruitment Email Text:

Hi, Students on CalWORKs!

I am looking for moms on CalWORKs to take part in a focus group as part of a research study about your experiences in the welfare system while enrolled in school. The focus group will be on (date and time) at (place).

The research will involve a two hour focus group to discuss educational experiences in the CalWORKs system. The focus group will involve questions about your educational and career goals, your experiences with the CalWORKs system, and your ideas for public policy changes.

Participants will be paid \$40 for participating in the focus group.

For more information or if you are interested in participating, please contact me at [phone number] or [email address].

Other Details: All information collected in this study will be kept strictly confidential. Your participation may benefit society, for example by leading to better social policies for welfare and education. Research is being done for an academic research project and is not part of the CalWORKs system or this organization.

Thanks! I look forward to hearing from you!

Sheila Katz
Ph.D. Candidate
Vanderbilt University
Department of Sociology

Interview Recruitment Flyer:

Are you a student on CalWORKs?

**I am looking for moms on CalWORKs
to take part in a research study
about your experiences in the welfare system while enrolled in
school.**

**The research will involve two in-person 90 minute interviews, about six months apart,
to discuss your educational experiences and the CalWORKs system.**

**Participants who complete the first interview
will be entered into a drawing for one of two \$50 gift cards to Target.
There is a 1 in 30 chance of winning!**

**For more information or if you are interested in participating,
please contact Sheila Katz at [phone number] or [email address].**

Focus Group Recruitment Flyer:

Are you a student on CalWORKs?

I am looking for moms to take part in a focus group about your experiences with CalWORKs while enrolled in school.

When: (example) Friday, April 13 from noon—2pm

Participants will be paid \$40.

For more information or if you are interested in participating, please contact Sheila Katz at [phone number] or [email address].

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

Consent to Participate in Research

Principal Investigator: Sheila Katz

Version Date: 10/3/2006

Study Title: Pursuing Higher Education after “Ending Welfare As We Know It:” Women’s Narratives about Poverty and Education

Institution: Vanderbilt University Department of Sociology

PURPOSE: You are being asked to participate in a research study about women who are enrolled in educational programs while participating in the CalWORKS program. My name is Sheila Katz and I am a graduate student at Vanderbilt University. I am conducting this study for part of the requirements for my doctoral degree.

PROCEDURES: Your participation will involve two face-to-face interviews, about 6 months apart, each of which will last for approximately 90 minutes. The interviews will include questions about your educational experiences, job history, experiences in the welfare system, employment goals, and personal background. With your consent, the interview will be recorded on mini-disc. Audio recording is optional. Handwritten notes will be taken by the researcher during the interview.

BENEFITS: Personal benefits of participating in this study may include increased self-awareness or improved understanding of your personal history. Your participation may also benefit society, for example by leading to better social policies for welfare and education.

RISKS: Because of the personal nature of this interview, you may experience unexpected or unpleasant emotions related to memories. Information about counseling services is available from the researcher on request. No risks to physical health are known to result from participating. The time required to participate in the interview may be an inconvenience, but I will work with you to schedule a time that fits your schedule.

COMPENSATION: There will be no monetary compensation for participating in this study. You may ask to receive a copy of the completed research report. All participants who complete the first interview will be entered into a drawing for one of two gift cards to Target retail stores worth \$50 each. Winners will be selected and notified shortly after the first round of interviews is completed.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All information collected in this study will be kept strictly confidential except to the extent required by law. Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym, or fake name, at every stage in the research process. If this research is published you and anyone else you discuss will not be identified by name. Interview tapes and transcripts will be stored separately from your name and contact information, in a locked location accessible only to the researcher. Name and contact information will be kept until the completion of the second set of interviews; then all contact information will be shredded and discarded.

WITHDRAWAL: Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you will not be penalized or lose benefits if you refuse to participate. You may choose to withdraw from this study at any time. You may decline to answer any question during the interviews.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS: If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Sheila Katz at [phone number] or my Faculty Advisor, Karen Campbell, Ph.D., Vanderbilt University at [phone number]. For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this study, contact the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board Office at (615) 322-2918 or toll free at (866) 224-8273.

If you agree to participate, you must be given a signed copy of this document and a written summary of the research. By signing this consent form, you are indicating that:

- You had the research study, including the above information, described to you orally.
- You have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to your satisfaction.
- You have read and understood the consent form.
- You voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Name of participant

Signature of participant

Date

I consent to audio recording this interview.

Signature of participant

Date

Name of investigator

Signature of investigator

Date

APPENDIX G: FOCUS GROUP CONSENT FORM

Consent to Participate in Focus Group Research

Principal Investigator: Sheila Katz

Version Date: 4/25/2007

Study Title: Pursuing Higher Education after “Ending Welfare As We Know It:” Women’s Narratives about Poverty and Education

Institution: Vanderbilt University Department of Sociology

PURPOSE: You are being asked to participate in a research study about women who are enrolled in educational programs while participating in the CalWORKs program. My name is Sheila Katz and I am a graduate student at Vanderbilt University. I am conducting this study for part of the requirements for my doctoral degree.

PROCEDURES: Your participation will involve participating in a focus group of approximately 5-10 people that will last for approximately 120 minutes. The focus group will include questions about your educational experiences, job history, experiences in the welfare system, educational and employment goals, and ideas for social policies. The focus groups will be recorded on mini-disc. Handwritten notes will be taken by the researcher and her assistant during the focus group.

BENEFITS: Personal benefits of participating in this study may include increased self-awareness or improved understanding of your personal history. Your participation may also benefit society, for example by leading to better social policies for welfare and education.

RISKS: Because of the personal nature of the topic of this focus group, you may experience unexpected or unpleasant emotions related to memories. Information about counseling services is available from the researcher on request. No risks to physical health are known to result from participating.

COMPENSATION: The monetary compensation for participating in this study is \$40. You may ask to receive a copy of the completed research report.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All information collected in this study will be kept strictly confidential except to the extent required by law. Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym, or fake name, at every stage in the research process. If this research is published you and anyone else you discuss will not be identified by name. Focus group recordings and transcripts will be stored separately from your name and contact information, in a locked location accessible only to the researcher. Name and contact information will be kept until the completion of the research; then all contact information will be shredded and discarded. During the course of the focus group, participants may discuss personal information, please respect the privacy of the other participants by not disclosing any personal information that they share during the focus group after the group ends. To prevent violations of your own or the other member’s of this group’s privacy, please be aware of the private experiences that you might consider too personal or revealing. Please also respect each group member’s privacy by not disclosing any personal information that they share during the group once you leave here today.

WITHDRAWAL: Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you will not be penalized or lose benefits if you refuse to participate. You may choose to withdraw from this study at any time and still be compensated as outlined above. You may decline to answer any question during the focus groups.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS: If you have any questions about this research study, please contact Sheila Katz at [phone number] or my Faculty Advisor, Karen Campbell, Ph.D., Vanderbilt University at [phone number]. For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this study, contact the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board Office at (615) 322-2918 or toll free at (866) 224-8273.

If you agree to participate, you must be given a signed copy of this document and a written summary of the research. By signing this consent form, you are indicating that:

- You had the research study, including the above information, described to you orally.
- You have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to your satisfaction.
- You have read and understood the consent form.
- You voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Name of participant

Signature of participant

Date

Name of investigator

Signature of investigator

Date

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