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ARTICLE

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Susan Weinger

## When Dreams Wither and Resources Fail: The Social-Support Systems of Poor Single Mothers

### ABSTRACT

Recent political decisions to redesign the welfare system compels single mothers to work. With concern for the women and children so effected, this qualitative study explores the views of 42 poor single mothers regarding (1) their aspirations and dreams in relation to work and (2) the helpfulness of their social support networks in enabling them to make transitions to work or to study. Analysis was performed on both the sample as a whole and on subgroups of respondents who were divided by work category, e.g. employed full-time, employed part-time, women who were students and full-time mothers. Developing meaningful subgroupings of single mothers may help avoid the dangers inherent in lumping all single mothers into a large and potentially inaccurate category.

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Increasingly, social and political forces are working toward reducing the costs of maintaining single parents on public support. Stereotypes stigmatize welfare mothers as promiscuous women who become pregnant in order to obtain state and government support. Such images have led to the inevitable conclusions that poor single mothers must be prodded by ultimatums and threats to get them to work. Consequently, on August 22, 1996, President Clinton signed a "welfare reform" bill that requires recipients to secure jobs within two years after applying for benefits and places a five-year cap on benefits over a lifetime. Contrary to the assumptions that lie behind this legislation, most of the respondents in the present study expressed strong motivation toward independence and empowerment. One representative mother said, "I don't want to depend on AFDC: I want to be able to depend on myself." Others expressed their desire to enhance their income and make

a social contribution: I want to "be able to take better care of my family," "become financially stable and support myself and my children," "make a contribution to myself and my community," "have bills paid, save a little, have some leisure time," "feel better about myself and my decision to have the child."

This article reports findings on the perception of poor single mothers regarding the helpfulness of their support systems in enabling them to work. In the tradition of qualitative study, we sought to understand individuals' perceptions, experiences, desires, and interactions. The women were grouped into four work categories: full-time workers, part-time workers, students, and full-time mothers. We considered the perceptions of the total sample ( $N = 41$ ) as well as the subgroups. The different adaptations made by the subgroups suggest intervention strategies and policy supports to maximize the innate potential of these women and the children they nurture. Our hope is

that future legislation will be formulated on the basis of unbiased expectations about these women and grounded in an understanding of the choices they are confronted with and of how they are affected by social support systems and governmental provisions and resources.

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## Previous Research

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Social network supports have been studied in relation to areas such as general responses to stress (Cobb, 1976; Coyne & Downey, 1991; Lieberman, 1982; Pearlin, 1985; Wethington & Kessler, 1986), at-risk families (Hall, Gurlley, Sachs, & Kryscio, 1991; McLoyd, 1990; Tracy, 1990), health (Cohen & Symes, 1985; Ell, 1984; Ruffin, 1993), mental health (Brown & Fulco, 1990; Hall et al., 1991; Hall, Williams, & Greenberg, 1985; Moxley, 1988), work (Jayaratne, Yimle, & Chess, 1988; Kong, Perrucci, & Perrucci, 1993), single mothers and social supports (Lepore, Evans, & Schneider, 1991; McLanahan, 1981, 1985; McLanahan & Adams, 1987; McLoyd, 1990; Simons, Beaman, Coger, & Chao, 1993), and African Americans (DeFour & Hirsch, 1990; Linbald-Goldberg, Dukes, & Lasley, 1988; McLoyd, 1990). Overall, the research findings on the buffering effects of social supports is strong. However, some researchers have suggested caution with regard to negative social networks (Riley & Echenrode, 1986; Van Meter, Haynes, & Kropp, 1987), the limitations of social support (Schiling & Robert, 1987), the perceived and received social supports (Wethington & Kessler, 1986), and the level

of complexity of research in social support (Cohen & Symes, 1985).

With the exception of Bradshaw and Millar's (1990) study on single parents in the United Kingdom, we did not find any other work that divided the respondents

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into their work status. Our work with single parents is derivative of their work; it builds on their research by considering the differential use of social networks according to respondent groupings.

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## Research Design and Methodology

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### Sample

The snowball sample consisted of 41 single mothers selected on the basis of their availability and their work status: full-time mothers ( $n = 11$ ), students ( $n = 8$ ), part-time workers ( $n = 10$ ), and full-time workers ( $n = 12$ ). The women ranged in age from 17 to 54 years, with 75% between 21 and 39 years of age. The sample was split

roughly between those mothers who were never married (55%) and those who were separated or divorced (45%). Eighty percent had one child younger than 6 years living at home, 42% had a child between 6 and 12 at home, and 27% had a child between 13 and 18 at home. Sixty-seven and one half percent were Caucasian, 25% were African American, 2.5% were American Indian, and 2.5% identified themselves as other. Fifty percent of the research subjects paid rent, more than 25% made mortgage payments, nearly 20% received public housing, and 2% lived with a relative.

In this study, a poor person was defined as an individual who at some time during 1994 received state or federal assistance including at least one of the following: Medicaid, Food Stamps, Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC), Supplemental Security Income (SSI) housing support, or Women, Infants and Children (WIC). Sixty-two and one half percent received AFDC: 33% received AFDC for less than three years, 22% for three to five years, and 7.5% for six years or longer.

### Research Questions and Definitions

Five research questions guide the construction of the questionnaire. The questions were open ended and encouraged respondents to share their perceptions of their experience.

- In what way were early self-expectations (hopes and dreams) confirmed or disconfirmed by their life experiences?

- What type of resources do single mothers seek from others in their support network?

- What resources did the social-support networks provide?
- In what way did the support facilitate the single mother's capacity to work, study, or fulfill her maternal role?
- How were single mothers different from one another in terms of attitude toward their support network?

Social network referred to the number of persons identified by the respondent as making a difference, for better or worse, in her life. Dreams were described as "pictures of your hopes and aspirations for the future."

### **Research Process**

The interviews were carried out in a midwestern city with a population of 444,500 and an unemployment rate of 6.1%. Face-to-face interviews were conducted either in the respondent's home or in a convenient neighborhood location, for example, a restaurant or community center. Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes. Interviewers were master's-level social work students who participated in an applied social research course.

### **Data-Collection Process**

Multiple methods of data collection were used to discover how the respondents viewed their life and support system. The primary instrument was a semistructured qualitative questionnaire. The second instrument was a modified version of a social-network grid developed by Tracy & Whittaker (1990) in their study of at-risk AFDC mothers. Social network was defined as the "number and structure of relationships with others" (Tracy & Abell, 1994 p.56). Social-network resource refers to the frequen-

cy and type of supportive or non-supportive exchanges that take place between the respondent and each person in the respondent's network. The social-network grid identifies the number, frequency, and types of support provided by the individual's network. Resources include sources of concrete support, emotional support, information and advice, negative criticism, encouragement, optimism, and sources from which to borrow money.

## **Findings**

### **Early Dreams and Their Retrieval**

Conscious dreams enable people to envision themselves in the future. "The dream is a vague sense of self-in-adult-world. It has a quality of a vision that generates excitement and vitality" (Levinson, 1978, pp. 91-92). Respondents were asked the following questions.

- What were your dreams for the future at ages 17, 22, and now?
- Do you think you can make your dreams come true?
- What might prevent you from reviewing your dreams?

The women in the study related multiple dreams that encompassed both family and work identities. The mothers dreamed more about work and material achievement than they did about relationship formation or enhancement. At ages 17 and 22, they were twice as likely to dream about work; in the present they were three times more likely to dream about work. It was intriguing that they dreamed more about work than they did about relationships, in that this finding con-

flicts with the expectation that women are relationship oriented (Gilligan, 1982). However, this finding may simply reflect (a) societal messages that convey to poor women the expectation that they both work as well as care for their families (b) recent Michigan legislation requiring female heads of families to work after their children have reached nine months or two years of age, and (c) respondents' growing sense of financial anxiety and the encroaching reality of being deprived of financial support.

Most of the women who had specific dreams of achievement and advancement at 17 years of age had lost some faith in their dreams or put them on hold by 22 years of age when survival and practical needs predominated. This was especially true for full-time mothers, who initially had as many dreams about careers and financial security as did the other groupings but by age 22 were unable to sustain these dreams. As a group, full-time mothers never recovered from this loss. One full-time mother envisioned higher education and marriage at age 17; at age 22, she professed having "no dreams, just to successfully raise my family." A student at 17 years of age wanted to "travel around the world and join the Peace Corps." At age 22, she "had no dreams really and a job she did not know what I am going to do with really." A full-time worker wanted at age 17 to move to New York City and develop a professional career. At 22 years of age, her aspirations of a professional job were deferred by the more pressing need of being "able to raise my children to be good people" and "to go to trade school so I can work."

Because the dreams of the part-time workers had not become definite, they didn't experience the highs or lows of the other groups. Their dreams never crystallized and thus could be neither shattered nor recovered in early adulthood. At all ages, part-time workers were represented by a few who were "just coasting," those who wanted a "job with some type of good pay," and those who wanted a "happy marriage." Some of these women, while dreaming of marriage, had not envisioned mothering at either 17 or 22 years of age. The student respondents seemed to fulfill some part of their dream by going to school. The full-time workers adapted their dreams to their current reality.

### **Perceived Network Support**

In response to the question "What are your networks not doing for you?" the students and part-time workers asserted that their networks were doing "as much as they could." Their networks seemed to provide concrete support with their children, encouragement to respondents to finish their studies, and some financial help. Nevertheless, the students experienced conflict. Although they acknowledged receiving practical help, they stated that they were deprived of emotional support: "I wish Mom wouldn't be so tough on me. I get hassled from Mom about not being on my own, messages that I'm not doing good." They also aggressively argued with persons in their network. In general, though, students seemed to feel good about their potential to "get a job, get their own place, get off welfare, and provide for [their child]."

Full-time workers were currently dreaming their way into more prosperous and more meaningful avenues of making money. One asserted, "Better late than never, my dream is to have my own business, a retail consignment shop," another commented, "When the kids came I put aside my dreams.... Now I want to sell my house, get a master's degree, or start my own business." Although students and full-time workers had postponed their dreams and focused on survival, many were subsequently able to recreate a piece of their dreams in the present.

The least optimistic group was the full-time mothers. No one among the respondents was satisfied with her support network. Even though they had described receiving considerable practical support, they nevertheless faulted their networks for not providing adequate practical help as well as emotional support. Although they had started out with as many dreams for careers and work as had the other mothers, they were unable to sustain or recapture their original aspirations. Their perceptions of their limitations, the paucity of their network resources, and the complexity of mothering responsibilities may have created stresses they could not overcome. Lack of network support might partially explain their choice to remain at home.

### **Network Resources**

Practical support was offered more frequently and more consistently than any other resource. This finding is consistent with results from other studies (Kong et al., 1993; Moxley, 1988; Parish, Lingxin, & Hogan, 1991). Types of practical support received included con-

sistent child care, transportation, tutoring, job leads, help during a child's illness, small sums of money, house cleaning, and so forth.

Both the mother and the persons offering support may have perceived such support as leading directly to employment and thus important and worth the effort. However, the respondents did not consider practical support in itself emotionally supportive. It could also be that the provider of support received immediate and measurable satisfaction from offering practical and temporary support to another. Kong and colleagues (1993) noted that network members are wary of committing themselves to investments of self for an indefinite period.

Although practical support is essential in helping single mothers meet their work responsibilities, emotional support may enable single women to cope in the long term with the demands and pressures of their dual roles. Our respondents seemed to share a common perception that emotional support referred to interpersonal communications (verbal or nonverbal) that addressed their feelings and emotional well-being. Students and full- or part-time workers yearned to feel connected, cared about, and validated by their social network. They referred to "encouragement," recognition of my maturity," "having someone to talk to when I am feeling sorry for myself," and "someone to talk with about personal stuff" as being important. The importance of emotional support has been demonstrated in other studies of single mothers (Kong et al., 1993; Lepore et al., 1991; Linbald-Goldberg et al., 1988; McLanahan & Adams,

1987). The respondents' perceptions of the amount and quality of emotional support that they received varied.

Unlike the other groupings, full-time mothers did not express a need for emotional support. They perceived their needs as being primarily practical. In response to the question "What are you not getting from your network that you

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would like to get?” no mother among these 11 respondents was satisfied with her network. These mothers perceived their network as not providing practical help and emotional support.

Half of the full-time mothers felt isolated and unable to activate their own personal resources and effectively engage their social network. When asked specific questions such as what do you do when you feel low or someone you depend on isn't there for you, they tended to "weep," "get real depressed," "do something real

stupid like shoplifting," "cry," "eat," or explode."

The remaining full-time mothers used more active coping styles, including "talk with a friend," "send for the baby's father," and "keep going." In this way they were more similar to the single mothers in the other groups. The mothers who were employees or students tended to "reach out to talk, try to analyze feelings," "call and talk to mother," "sit in the back yard and be alone for a while," "go for a walk," "stay busy." When they did mention crying they perceived their weeping as a catharsis that relieved stress and enabled them to get on with their activities. A respondent noted that she went through phases of disappointment: "weep, withdraw for a while, then talk with friends."

### **Coping Styles**

The respondents were asked, "What do you do when someone you count on isn't there for you? The coping styles of the full-time mothers and the other mothers were similarly differentiated. Half the full-time mothers tended to "withdraw and feel anxious," "can't ask for or seek help," "wait till the next person comes along," "nothing; get frustrated." The remainder stated that they would "work it out for themselves," "try to handle it myself," "get pissed," "think of other ways to deal with it." Thus two subsets were evident in this category: one characterized by withdrawal, anxiety, and passivity and the other isolated but actively engaged in trying to resolve disappointments.

Active engagement also seemed to be most characteristic of

the other groupings. Students would either find someone else or problem solve, for example, "call a girl friend to talk about it," "make a list of what I can do on my own." Full-time workers overwhelmingly sought out the opinions of others: "restructure my time and figure how to take care of it" or "sometimes go it alone or sometimes seek solutions." Part-time workers also actively engaged other people or prayer.

### **Social Support and Coping With Illness**

In the qualitative questionnaire, two questions related to illness were asked: "What do you do when your child is sick?" and "What do you do when you are sick?" Several of respondents among the students, full-time workers, and part-time workers distinguished between "sick" and "very sick" children. Illness in the family presents stressful choice for all working mothers. These women used "very sick" as a guiding principle on which to make their decision to stay home. Of the 33 women in these groups, eight would stay home if their child was very sick. Students were most likely not to stay home. They might have special arrangements with their day-care providers or use baby-sitters if their children were ill.

Overall, though, most sick children were predominantly cared for by relatives. The highest percentage of relative support occurred among the full-time mothers and the student groups. This, again, suggests an anomaly regarding the full-time mothers, who previously indicated that they did not receive sufficient practical or emotional help from their support

systems but in response to this direct question seemed to contradict the ways in which they perceived their supportive relationships. Perhaps they felt that care for their children does not equate with help for themselves in the same way as the students and full- and part-time workers did. These mothers may perceive child care as being more supportive because it enabled them to attend school or work, whereas the consequences of child care to full-time mothers may not be as obvious.

When the mothers were ill, family continued to be a resource. Approximately 60% (22 respondents) received help from their families. Both full-time mothers and part-time mothers would “go to work anyway,” whereas most students would use their extended family to watch the children while they rested. One student said she would go to class anyway. In sum, those mothers with work commitments tended to go to work if they possibly could. Full-time mothers and students appeared to care for themselves with the assistance of their networks.

## Discussion

The single women in this study shared common factors in their family structure and in the resultant stresses of their single-parenting responsibilities. Fifty percent of the women shared a common dependency on their family when their children were ill, and 25% were dependent on their family for child care so they could work or study. However, the respondents were more likely to

confide in their friends than in their families.

The mothers in the four work-status groups differed in regard to their current dreams and their perceptions of the usefulness of their network support. Analysis of these differences suggests recommendations of policy supports and practice foci for each of these subcategories of single mothers.

### **Full-Time Workers**

These mothers tended to expect less of their networks and to be satisfied with the support they received. Eleven of the 14 women in this group appeared to have a measure of mastery over their lives and had successfully adapted their dreams to their current life. Their perspectives were less romantic and idealistic and more realistic. Thus, their goals were action oriented and sharply focused on financial reward, better job opportunities, and desirable work.

Policy and practice considerations, need to be geared toward helping this group of mothers maintain their work status. If they lose their job, they need to be buoyed in their transition to another job. Furthermore by benefiting from supports beyond what their networks currently can provide, these mothers may be in a position to move up the employment ladder. Such interventions include the creation of self-help groups to expand their friendship networks and to provide opportunities for working single mothers to sustain and encourage one another. Self-help can enable full-time workers to pool their resources, share information, and reinforce one another’s strengths. Because these mothers are vulnerable to multiple stresses

in their lives, they need practical support such as health benefits, retraining, income supports during stressful periods, and crisis intervention. Mothers who did not have career dreams but are now being forced into the labor force as a result of new laws may need additional support.

### **Part-Time Workers**

These mothers expressed uncertainty about themselves and their future in their early dreams. They appeared to be somewhat ambivalent about their responsibilities to provide child care versus the advantages of working. Their ambivalence was compounded by the perception that it was very difficult to earn enough money to support their family’s basic needs and to offset child-care costs. For these mothers, part-time work offered a compromise solution. In comparison with the students and full-time workers, these mothers viewed their networks as being considerably less helpful.

Suggested interventions for these mothers begin with helping them sort through their ambivalence by clarifying their early dreams, deal with the loss of earlier dreams, and reenergize current dreams. Employed friends, as well as social workers, help these mothers work through their ambivalence. They may benefit from an extended friendship network, which encourages intricate relationships. If they move toward full-time employment they must have access to child care and health care. Indeed, before these mothers can confront their own ambivalence, they must believe that this type of external help is available to them. In this time of

shrinking governmental supports, mothers employed part-time need information about the benefits they are still entitled to so that they do not become trapped by feelings of helplessness in the face of insurmountable difficulties.

### **Students**

These mothers typically expressed the most hope for their future. They were goal oriented, committed to their activities, and anticipating new opportunities in the future. As a group, they also appeared to be the most stressed. Perceptions of their networks were mixed. They perceived their support network as being especially supportive in practical matters, particularly those that related to their efforts to further their education, but insufficiently supportive emotionally.

Several respondents reported intense battles with persons in their support network characterized by "yelling and screaming." However, the network and the students were able ultimately to work together in pursuit of the mother's educational goal.

Respite care and supplemental child care can help those mothers, whose lives are punctuated by periods of increased stress that can overload their networks, fragment their relationships, and jeopardize their aspirations. Students and their families often have conflicting notions of what constitutes help. These misperceptions increase relationship tensions. Crisis intervention and family-centered practice facilitate communication and understanding between mothers and their support network. Students may experience emotional instability and insecurity during grading periods. Reframing their

perceptions of failure can help bolster their self-esteem and encourage them to sustain educational pursuits.

### **Full-Time Mothers**

This group of mothers was the most challenging. Three subsets of mothers with quite different characteristics were evident: (a) mothers who were child-centered and whose dreams were to remain home with their children; (b) mothers who conveyed a sense of withdrawal, frustration, and passivity and may harbor resentment toward their support networks; and (c) women for whom mothering full time was a temporary pursuit in that they had lost their job, recently separated or divorced, or had ill children. The last grouping tended to resemble either the full- or part-time workers.

Full-time mothers' anxieties were profound and diverse. Suggested interventions take into consideration the tensions these mothers feel between the roles of traditional full-time mother and full-time employee. Because some of these mothers can be characterized by an avoidant and refuge-seeking style, the pressure to work may bring feelings of frustration, helplessness, and anger. Many have internalized negative self-assessments and distrustful perceptions of the world that are particularly difficult to shift and require extensive policy and direct-practice initiatives. The interventions needed to rebuild self-esteem require a longer period than is available under managed care. Being able to venture forth and take risks in the labor force requires a sense of cohesiveness and competence that they may not possess.

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## **Conclusion**

This study investigates the ways in which four groups of single mothers perceived their work and mothering roles. By focusing our research on the women's aspirations and dreams in relation to work status, we elicited their self-reports on their resources and the quality of their interactions with their supportive network. In so doing, we attempted to understand the differences among these groupings of women and to avoid grouping all poor single mothers into a single stereotypical category. Our goal was to suggest ways that social work practice, from direct service to policy development, might assist subsets of poor single women. Although conclusions beyond this sample cannot be generated, the information presented here can be used heuristically to direct future research with this population of women and to provide practicing social workers with a framework for their interventions.

Helping single mothers reconnect with their earlier dreams helps them explore the content of the choices they have made. Understanding their choices may help single mothers escape the trap of self-blame and to plan more optimistically for the future. Exploring the fate of their dreams allows these women to examine both the adequacy of their resources in systemic terms as well as to consider the history of their coping patterns. Such understanding can lead to reeducation and cognitive restructuring, reconnection with social resources, development of new coping behaviors and styles, and reexamination of familial and psychological impasse.



For the current generation of single mothers, internal and interpersonal factors can inhibit their opportunities for employment. Even if the economic aspects of their situation were ameliorated, noneconomic factors represent obstacles to securing employment. A combination of economic and noneconomic factors determine these women's successful and ongoing employment. Whether single mothers can maintain work and student roles also depends on policy decisions made at the state and federal levels.

Economic, social, and political forces beyond their control can alter the conditions of their lives and prevent single mothers from acting on and pursuing their dreams.

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