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What Mothers Want:
Welfare Reform and Maternal Desire[*]

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In this study I use participant observations, face-to-face interviews, and focus group interviews to examine how women on welfare read and negotiate culture-of-poverty discourse and the imagery that this discourse spawns. I spoke with two groups of young single mothers receiving welfare. The first group included young mothers between the ages of 18 and 23 who were attending high school in a community-based program that served women on welfare. The second group included mothers in their early to mid 20's who were attending either a local two-year college or research university. Education was a path of resistance for the women in this study. Young single mothers were motivated to obtain an education; they wanted a better life for their child. As students, women were situated in a status that allowed them to reject the attributes associated with dominant welfare imagery. Women forged identities against the grain of dominant images that depict all women on welfare as "lazy women" and "bad mothers." The students in this study made a claim to characteristics like hard work, motivation, and good parenting. Yet, students did not fully reject culture-of-poverty discourse. Their identities as students were situated in a form of oppositional thinking that set them against other women on welfare.

Key words: *welfare, single mothers, education, women, identity*

Introduction

In the mid 1960s scholars and politicians spun Oscar Lewis' culture-of-poverty thesis into a dominant explanation of wel-

fare "dependency." As a discourse that ebbs and flows with the social and political climate, the conservative atmosphere of the1990s reignited culture-of-poverty thinking and gave shape to the welfare reform debate (Sidel, 2000). The language of reform construes welfare "dependency" as an issue of out-of-wedlock birth, which, in turn, is seen as a feature of "underclass" culture. Dominant imagery depicts single mothers on welfare as women who lack an "appropriate" orientation to the Protestant work ethic and to mainstream family values (Hill Collins, 2000; Kaplan, 1997; Sidel, 2000). Consequently, reform discourse emphasizes re-socialization; it encourages the formation of programs that aim to inculcate an "appropriate" (read White, middle class, hetero-sexual) orientation to work and family.

Progressive thinkers counter mainstream arguments by refo-cusing attention on the structural causes of single parenting and welfare "dependency" (Ambramovitz, 1996; Edin and Lein, 1997; Eitzen and Baca Zinn, 2000; Parvez, 2002; Kaplan, 1997; Seccombe, 1999; Sidel, 2000; Wilson, 1997). (Particular attention is paid to Black women since welfare discourse is a racialized discourse.) Scholars suggest that culture-of-poverty discourse is a political strategy—a discursive move—that obscures the effects of recent economic and political trends on low-income individuals and families. Economic restructuring, the shift of fiscal responsibility from the federal to the state and local level (the new federalism), and deep cuts to the social safety net has deeply impacted work-ing class and poor communities (Edin and Lein, 1997; Eitzen and Baca Zinn, 2000; Kaplan, 1997; Sidel, 2000; Wilson 1996).

Research findings show that low-income Black women value marriage as much as White women (Bulcroft and Bulcroft, 1993; McLaughlin and Lichter, 1997; Kaplan, 1997; Wilson, 1996). How-ever, a shrinking pool of economically stable men makes marriage less likely, and the strain of living in poverty contributes to divorce and marital disruption among those who are married (Blau, Kahn, and Waldfogel, 2000; Eitzen and Baca Zinn, 2000, p. 62). In sum, studies find that the outcome of economic and political changes—expressed in peoples lives as poor educational and occupational opportunities, poverty wage jobs, anti-affirmative action policies, and continuing employment discrimination—are the strongest determinants of welfare "dependency" (Eitzen and Baca Zinn, 2000; Kaplan, 1997; Wilson, 1997).

Elaine Bell Kaplan's (1997) recent study of Black teenage mothers extends class and/or race-based approaches to welfare "dependency." Kaplan demonstrates that teenage pregnancy cannot be reduced to a single system (class, race, or gender) by highlighting the complex ways that gender intersects with race and class (an intersectional approach). Like Wilson (1997), Kaplan begins with the class-based premise that industrial restructuring and an eroding social safety net has weakened family and community ties in poor inner-city neighborhoods. However, Kaplan furthers this argument by exploring the effect of economic restructuring on mother/daughter relationships and on teenagers' perceptions of their future opportunities. Economic restructuring impacts low-income women in unique ways. All women are unduly burdened with reproductive work (e.g., childrearing, housework, and care-giving), but low-income mothers care for children under conditions of tremendous strain. In the past, single mothers could rely on extended family members and on "other mothers" and "community mothers" (see Hill Collins, 2000; Kaplan, 1997). Now mothers parent teenage daughters in social isolation as economic restructuring and cuts to the social safety net leave inner-city communities and poor extended families with little to offer in the way of support.

Kaplan (1997) generates what she calls a "poverty of relationships" theory to help illuminate the link between macro economic forces, systemic forms of oppression, and micro-level interpersonal relationships that impact the psychosocial development of young single mothers. The erosion of family support works to isolate Black teenagers from social institutions, and the consequences of social isolation are expressed in uniquely gendered ways. Kaplan (1997, p. 11) notes that the teenage mothers in her study "describe being disconnected from primary family relations, abandoned by their schools and by the men in their lives, and isolated from relations with other teenagers. . . ." Under these conditions, a baby comes to symbolize love and social connection (Kaplan, 1997, p. 181). Despite feminist gains, patriarchy still teaches all girls that their value as women is in their sexual attraction to men and in their role as mothers (Kaplan, 1997; Tolman, 1994). This message has resurfaced in new and powerful ways in the conservative climate of the 1980s and 90s. For poor women, the "motherhood" mandate interacts with increasing social isolation

of poor Black neighborhoods, the absence of good educational opportunities for all poor individuals, and the absence of living wage jobs.

In contrast to the popular view that the African Americans condone out-of-wedlock birth, Kaplan (1997) asserts that Black families strongly discourage this behavior. A history of racial oppression, as that oppression is uniquely shaped by gender, had a powerful influence on women's reactions to their daughter's pregnancy. The adult mothers in Kaplan's (1997, p. 68) study were "deeply disappointed with their daughters." Mothers saw adherence to mainstream education, marriage, and childbearing norms as crucial to their daughter's success. Moreover, mobility was a family affair. Kaplan (1997, p. 69) found that low-income mothers looked to their daughters as a source of family mobility— if their daughters rose then they too would be viewed as success-ful. Middle class mothers looked to their daughters to sustain the family's hard-won place in the class system. As Kaplan (1997, p. 89) explains, "For poor mothers . . . or working class mothers, poverty is ongoing; for middle class mothers . . . memories of childhood poverty and the fear that poverty might be just over the horizon if they lose their jobs . . . drive them to censure their daughters." Pregnancy destroyed the hopes of lower, working, and middle class mothers of pregnant, teenage daughters.

The symbolic effects of teenage pregnancy are as devastating as the economic threat. The good girl/bad girl dichotomy still signifies, albeit in new ways, female respectability. As Hill Collins (2000) argues, Black women's sexuality continues to be forged through controlling images of Black womanhood. The image of the Jezebel (a sexually assertive image) and the "hoochie girl" (a contemporary take on the Jezebel) define Black women's sexual-ity as a deviation from a White, middle class, norm. The image of the matriarch and the welfare queen continue to define Black women as deviant mothers (Hill Collins, 2000; Sidel, 2000). In a culture that blames mothers for their children's failures and con-strues Black women through wholly negative imagery, pregnant teenagers are marked as "soiled goods" and adult mothers of pregnant teenagers are marked as "bad mothers" (Kaplan, 1997, p. 81).

To summarize, class and/or race-based approaches to single parenting and welfare "dependency" critique dominant culture-

of-poverty discourse by revealing the ways in which macro level changes impact low-income individuals and families. Kaplan extends this approach by accounting for the interconnected effect of gender, race, and class. Her analysis reveals the nuanced ways in which multiple systems of oppression shape the choices and actions of Black teenage mothers. Moreover, Kaplan's work points to the importance of micro-level responses to macro-level conditions. Our ability to grasp the ways in which mothers on welfare negotiate their everyday lives in the context of dominant welfare imagery is key to our ability to enact progressive social change.

Goal of This Study

I am interested in the ways in which young single mothers negotiate welfare reform discourse and the dominant imagery invoked by this discourse. I take up Kaplan's (1997) discussion of the relationship between out-of-wedlock births, social stigma, and social mobility, and I extend this discussion in one key way. Where Kaplan explores adult mothers' experiences of social stigma and fears of downward mobility, I explore the impact of welfare imagery on young single mothers who are striving to "better" themselves through education. I ask three key questions:

1. How do young single mothers interpret and explain their pregnancy?
2. How do young single mothers read and negotiate welfare reform discourse and imagery?
3. What do young single mothers think about welfare reform and its' potential impact on their ability to achieve a "better" life?

When I began this study I was focused only on women's experiences of welfare reform. Thus, my ability to analyze racial differences is limited.

Participants and Data Collection Techniques

The data for this study came primarily from a research project that I conducted on young single mothers who attended high school at an alternative educational program called the Family Center (Group One). I supplemented my primary data with an in-depth focus group interview of young single mothers who

were attending college and living in a quasi-communal setting called the Cooperative Living Center (Group Two). This focus group was conducted for a Faculty Senate report that I compiled on the affects of welfare reform on college students who were receiving aid.

I focused on single mothers in school for two reasons. My first reason was one of convenience; the director of the Family Center granted me permission to collect data in this setting. Women on welfare are a hard-to-study group. My connection to the center gave me the chance to meet a large number of young single mothers on welfare. My second reason for studying single mothers in school was to challenge dominant images of women on welfare and give voice to an understudied segment of the welfare population. As research (e.g., Edin & Lein, 1997) has shown, most women on welfare do work, or have worked at some point in their lives. Moreover, studies suggest that many women on welfare have a desire to improve their economic po- sition through education and skill training. Yet, public, political, and, at times, academic discourse treats women on welfare as a monolithic group (Hill Collins, 2000; Sidel, 2000) and construes the characteristics of "hard-to-serve" women (a small percentage of women on welfare) as characteristics that are common to the majority of women on welfare. As one of the participants in this study stated,

> They never tell about the good part, about the people who go to school. You always hear, 'teenage mothers, what are we gonna do about this?' They'll never say anything good about parents who are going to school. Only thing you ever hear is negative.

It is a relevant time to study single mothers in school given the impact that time limits (a chief feature of welfare reform policy) may have on the educational and occupational goals of women receiving welfare.

Data on both groups was collected in a city located in a border state (north/south border). While not affiliated, the Family Center and the Community Living Center were located in close physical proximity. All of the participants lived in the city where the study took place. The population of this city was a little over a quarter of a million at the time of this study. My methods consisted of

participant observations, face-to-face interviews, and focus group interviews.[1]

Group One

Group One included students who were attending the Family Center in the late 1990s. The Family Center is a community-based educational program (funded through a mix of state funds, grants, and private donations) that serves young women on welfare. The program offers education and skill training, health care for mothers and children at an on-site health clinic, and on-site childcare. The center opened in 1989 and can enroll up to 80 high school students and can serve 200 children in the day care facility. Although enrollment varies from year-to-year, the number of students tends to hover between 65 and 80. The stated goal of the Family Center was to provide students with a high school education and to prepare them for additional training and/or college, which instructors saw as necessary to students' ability to earn a living wage. Students were offered two different educational paths; they could earn a high school diploma or take classes that prepared them for the GED exam. In addition to academic instruction, students were required to attend life skills, job skills, and parenting classes. Job skill classes focus on resume writing, interviews, "appropriate" dress, and "appropriate" conduct.

I observed in this setting for a little over a year, and I observed students in two different contexts. I began by observing in various classroom settings (e.g., parenting courses, skills training courses, educational classes). I informed students of my identity and I asked their permission to sit in on the class at least once a week. Anywhere from ten to fifteen students were in attendance at each class, and classes lasted for about two hours. Students ranged in age from 15 to 23. All of the students received welfare, and most were from low-income families. About one-third of the students in this setting were White and two thirds were African American. Most students had one child, but three of the women with whom I spoke had two or more children.

In addition to classroom observations, I volunteered as a literacy tutor on a weekly basis for about four months. Each session lasted for approximately two hours. There was usually one student in attendance at each session but, on occasion, two or three students would attend the same session. I tutored ap-

proximately 10 different students over the course of my work as
a literacy volunteer. About three students attended sessions on
a regular basis, whereas other students would come and go as
their schedule permitted. As with the students in the classroom
setting, students who attended literacy training were informed of
my research agenda and my academic affiliation.

I supplemented my participant observations with in-depth
interviews of 10 students, seven instructors, and the program
Director. Six of the mothers who agreed to be interviewed were
Black, and four were White. Two instructors were Black, and five
were White. The program Director was White. For the purpose of
this paper, I focus primarily on interviews with students. I touch
on student/instructor interactions when it is necessary to high-
light how those interactions shaped students' experiences. The
number of students that I interviewed was restricted by Internal
Review Board criteria. I was granted permission to interview stu-
dents who were 18 years of age or older. Thus, all of the students
quoted in this study (quotes from interviews, observations, and
the focus group described below) were between the ages of 18
and 23.

I started each interview with open-ended questions designed
to draw out the student's experience of mothering, school, and
welfare. For instance, I asked, "Did the baby change your life?"
These types of questions often would elicit a narrative of the
student's life experiences. General questions were followed up
with more specific questions. The interviews took place in a quiet
room (e.g., the library when it was not in use, or the lounge when
it was free) located at the center. Interviews were from one to two
hours in length. I gave instructors a small gift (note cards) as a
token of appreciation. I paid students $10.00 for their time. Many
of the students in this setting worked at paid jobs while attending
school and caring for their children. I felt that it was important
to compensate them for their time. Several students refused to
grant me an interview despite the monetary compensation, and
many of those who agreed to an interview stated that they were
motivated by the chance to tell their story.

Finally, I conducted an in-depth focus group at the Family
Center. The program Director incorporated the focus group into
a life skills course. Twelve students, two instructors, and the

Director participated in the focus group. I avoided questions that focused on students' experiences at the center because the Director and several instructors were present at the focus group session. Instead, I asked questions about (a) students' experiences with single parenting; (b) their reading of, and responses to, dominant images of "welfare mothers"; and (c) their perceptions of welfare and welfare reform. The instructors' presence did not seem to deter students from speaking openly and honestly about their lives.

Group Two

I conducted an in-depth focus group with single mothers on welfare who were attending the local community college or university. Eleven women participated in the focus group. Five of the women were enrolled in the university, and seven were enrolled in the community college. Although the health care professions (e.g., nursing, physician assistant, and respiratory therapy) dominated as majors of choice, one woman was ma-joring in math, one in anthropology, and one in pre-law. Four of the participants were White, six were African American, and one was Native American. Women ranged in age from early-to-mid twenties. The participants lived at the Cooperative Living Center. The program was run as a quasi cooperative. Apartments were clustered together over a two-block radius. A child-care center and a community meeting room were located at the heart of the complex. Although students lived in their own apartment (paid for with a housing subsidy), they were required to attend commu-nity meetings, group support sessions, and many participated in cooperative childcare responsibilities. In addition to qualifying for government aid, students had to be enrolled full time at a two- or four-year college or university, and they were required to maintain of a 2.0 GPA (most of the women in the focus group maintained GPA of 3.0 or higher).

Findings

Family Reactions

Like the women in Kaplan's (1997) study, the women in this study reported that their mothers and other family members

were deeply disappointed when they "turned up pregnant." This finding held for both Black and White students. Reactions of family members (particularly mothers) reflected economic and social-psychological concerns. Low-income mothers dreaded the added financial burden of a grandchild, and they felt stigmatized by their daughter's out-of-wedlock birth. Several of the women indicated that family members pointed to them as examples of bad behavior. Samantha's mother went so far as to call her a "ho," but Chantal's experience was more typical of the young women in this study. Chantal's mother warned Chantal's sister against the dangers of single motherhood by pointing to Chantal as an example of "failed womanhood." As Chantal recounted,

> She [Chantal's mother] told my sister, 'just keep on doing good girl,' and all of that. 'Look at your sister. Don't be like her and have kids. Here she is now, she's got two kids.'

Why did the young mothers in this study choose to give birth and to keep their child given the strong family and community sanctions against out-of-wedlock birth?

The Motivation for Entering Family Life Through Birth

Some studies concentrate on the economic gains that accrue to low-income women who enter family life through marriage rather than birth (Allan Guttmacher Institute, 1999; Garis, 1998; Remez, 1998). For instance, a report by the Allan Guttmacher Institute (1999) claims that, women who have children and never marry are 10 times more likely to be on welfare. Scholars who challenge these findings argue that marriage does not always lift women out of poverty. Instead, poverty is viewed as shaping marriage choices and opportunities (Blau, Kahn and Waldfogel, 2000; Edin and Lein, 1997; Kaplan, 1997; Wilson, 1996). The women in this study echoed this understanding. They did not view marriage as a path to a better life. The complex interplay of poverty, race, and gender shaped their views of future possibilities.

Like the teenagers in Kaplan's (1997) study, the women in this study reported that they felt adrift prior to their pregnancy. They were beset by family problems and had difficulties in school. This held for both Black and White teenage mothers. Some were doing poorly in course work, and others had difficultly getting along

with their peers. Both Black and White participants in this study lacked a positive student identity. For instance, Tracy, a Black student, "lost interest in school." She "just didn't know what [she] was getting into." When I asked what their future might hold if they waited to have children, the majority of mothers in this study indicated that they would be worse off than they are now. Kathleen, a White student, revealed: "I had green hair in high school. I was doing nothing. I would have ended up on drugs or in some kind of trouble." Holly affirms Kathleen's response when she claims that she would "probably have just quit school and got [herself] a job." Young mothers simply had no vision of themselves as participating in socially valued roles in the future. Like Kaplan (1997), I found that the mother role was perceived as a viable path to a social bond (the baby as a source of love) and involvement in social life.

Many of the young mothers in Kaplan's (1997) study dropped out of school or were struggling to complete school. However, most of the women in this study stated that having a child sparked their desire to finish school, and many hoped to attain additional training or attend college. Although educational attainment may not be a widespread response to single parenting, it is one possible response as evidenced by the women in this study. As such, we need to understand how women arrive at this decision.

Both high school and college students were well aware of dominant constructions of "welfare mothers." Jeanette, a high school student, reflected a common understanding among students when she stated, " A lot of people think people on welfare are just lazy and won't work." Participants also struggled against constructions of welfare mothers as "bad" mothers. Mary, a high school student, echoed this theme: "They think a woman can't take care of her child. People think if you're single then your child is going to grow up to be a juvenile delinquent." Welfare imagery permeated students' lives; images circulated at home (they shaped family reactions to the pregnancy), at school (they shaped student/instructor interactions), and in the media.

Dominant constructions of poor single mothers as "failed mothers" may have the unintended consequence of motivating some women to seek out educational opportunities. For the women in this study, education was a way to transcend control-

ling images of welfare mothers. The child ignited their desire to strive for a "better" future. Moreover, for students who reported that they struggled in public high school, having a child helped strengthen their resolve to work through personal barriers to educational attainment. Candice highlighted this finding when she described her hopes for her children's future:

> I figure that if I go to school, my children, when they grow up, they'll look at my life and say well, 'Mom went to school, we can finish school.' I want them to . . . know right from wrong so they won't get out there and make the same mistakes that I made.

Anna's comments also captured the idea that the child represented both a source of love and signified future possibilities:

> I was out running the streets and everything, looking for love that I never got at home so then I got pregnant. All that had to change. I kind of stopped everything cause now I have a son and I got to watch what I do.

For the women in this study, education represented both economic stability and social respect.

In line with research findings on welfare and social mobility (Edin and Lein, 1997; Kaplan, 1997), both Black and White students in my study embraced a fairly mainstream vision of the "American Dream." When I asked women what they wanted for their future, both high school and college students invoked a middle class image of economic mobility. They wanted education beyond high school, a good job, home ownership, the capacity to support their family without financial worry, and, most of all, they wanted their children to attend college. Kate, a White college student, affirmed this finding when she stated,

> I'm the first grandchild in my family to finish high school. To graduate high school! Hey, I've got to go to college. I'm not trying to say that I'm better than anyone else in my family, but I want to have this under my belt. My mother finished high school and worked at the same job for 25 years. My mother likes her job, but I would rather have, it took her a long time to get the money she's making now. I can get it [a higher wage] as soon as I get out of college.

Both high school and college students in this study made explicit connections between education, living wage jobs, and social

mobility. Kate underscored this connection: "Education is more important to me [than working in a minimum wage job] because I can't function as a household off of $6.00 an hour opposed to when I graduate and I can make $15.00 an hour." Many of the high school students wanted to enter into medical professions like nursing because they saw these jobs as good paying jobs.

Education was also viewed as a way to garner social respect. Education afforded students the opportunity to forge an "appropriate" mothering identity. Several of the women in this study indicated that education was a way to protect their children from the stigma of being born to a "welfare mother." As Sandra, a White student, stated, "I want to have something to show my kids that says, 'Hey, your mother did something besides sitting on her butt. She did something!'" The desire to protect children from social stigma was underscored in a story that Mary, a Black student, told:

> There was an incident with my [Mary] boyfriend's mother. She went to school because her son was in trouble. The principal asked her if she had a four-year degree. He said the majority of people who don't have four-year degrees, have problems with their children.

Mary was stunned by the principal's remarks: "I was like, Oh! That would hit me hard!" Sandra and Mary's comments point to a fear that was expressed by several of the women in this study. Mothers feared that their children might come to view them through dominant images of women on welfare. Not only did a student status protect their children from the stigma of being a "welfare baby," this status also helped mothers secure their children's respect.

It is difficult to untangle the extent to which the desire for an education emerged independently of students' interactions with the adults in their lives (e.g., parents, caseworkers, and instructors at the Family Center). In all likelihood, it was a little of both. However, many of the students that I spoke with insisted that they came to this decision on their own; that having a child was the spark that set them on a path of social mobility. This was particularly true for college students who reported having little interaction with or encouragement from instructors in their public high schools (Most of the college students who participated in the

focus group earned their GED or high school diploma at a public high school or adult school. They did not attend high school at the Family Center, which was experienced as a supportive setting by the high school students who participated in this study.) Once high school students arrived at the Family Center and college students arrived at the Cooperative Living Center, their desire for an education was elaborated upon, reinforced, and supported through their interactions with peer, staff, and/or instructors.

In all likelihood a high school education will not pull students out of poverty. Moreover, some of the students at the Family Center had to work hard to stay interested in school. Instructors often worried about the quality of students' work, and they were concerned that some students would drop out of the program. Some college students left the Cooperative Living Center because they did not meet the GPA criteria set by the staff at the center. In short, for some students there was a gap between dreaming of a better future and achieving that dream. While students may struggle with both personal and structural barriers to achievement, the dream itself is important to understand. Dreaming expresses a vision of oneself as future self, and it is a step toward believing in one's own potential.

With the support of instructors, many of the high school students did complete their program, and a few moved on to community college or a training program. Furthermore, instructors at both the Family Center and staff at the Community Living Center acted against the grain of welfare reform policies that promote marriage when they encouraged students to complete their education and become financially independent before they married or became romantically involved. This strategy took hold of many students. When asked about future goals in interviews and focus group sessions, most students placed educational and career goals above marriage.

Welfare Reform: A Threat to Mobility

Women viewed welfare reform as a threat to their mobility. In line with recent research (see Parvez, 2002), students understood that, despite the rhetoric, welfare reform does not promote economic independence for poor women. Women viewed time limits

and work requirements as hampering their capacity to achieve an "appropriate" maternal identity and to secure an "appropriate" future for their children. (Students were required to work 20 hours per week after a period of 12 months. This was extended to 24 months after I finished collecting my data.) High school students were anxious about their ability to attain further education, and college students worried that welfare reform would push them out of college and into poverty wage work. As Tonya, a college student, stated,

> They [reformers] need to understand that going to school is like a full time job and not making the [work] requirement of 20 hours a week . . . If I'm working 20 hours a week at Dairy Mart how is that improving me?

Getting good grades and spending quality time with their children was important to students. This was particularly true for college students. High school students were being socialized to adopt "appropriate" mothering norms. Instructors construed mother/child interactions as a central feature of "appropriate" mothering, and this norm was reinforced in parenting classes offered at the center. Attending school, earning good grades, and spending time with children were behaviors that distanced students from negative images of women on welfare and solidified their identities as "good" mothers. The threat that welfare reform posed to maternal identity is conveyed in Jane's struggle to balance motherhood and student life:

> I have all night classes. I go to class from five to eight. I send my child to day care and I leave him there until four o'clock. Then I get him and I have an hour left until class. I have to go to class from five to eight so that doesn't leave me any time this semester to spend with him. My mom brings him home after I get out of class. Then it's time to get a snack, go to bed, read a story, maybe go over his homework. They [reformers] seem to think that we have all this time on our hands. I don't have time!

By impinging on the time that they spend with their children and by undermining their ability to obtain education beyond high school, welfare reform threatened to shrink the distance that the

women in this study placed between themselves and dominant images of welfare mothers.

Resistance and Culture-of-poverty Discourse

The students in this study responded to welfare imagery in complex and, at times, paradoxical ways. Students did not fully reject culture-of-poverty discourse nor did they extend their critical deconstructions of "welfare mothers" to all women on welfare. Like the participants in Kaplan's (1997) and Seccombe's (1999) study, the women in this study engaged in a form of social distancing that set them apart from other women on welfare. A student status allowed women to lay claim to the positive side of the idler/worker, good mother/bad mother dichotomy. But, this strategy kept the dichotomy in place. Jennifer exemplified this trend. Jennifer, a college student, set her emerging identity as a "good" student against "other" women on welfare:

> We are the minority. You can go to housing projects, there are girls up there that are going to school but there are some that are just sitting there and I'm thinking, 'There's nothing wrong with you that you can't work or go to school, you need to make a choice.' The ones that sit there and don't do anything make me look bad because I'm trying to make something of myself.

One student suggested that welfare reform might actually, "stop them from having baby, after baby, after baby." Of course students could point to women who fit the stereotypical image of women on welfare. However, students engaged in a form of statistical discrimination wherein knowing one "lazy welfare mother" was generalized as a statement about most women on welfare. As students, they saw themselves as an exception to this rule. Although the women in this study could analyze how structural barriers impacted their own choices and behaviors, they had difficulty extending this analysis to other women on welfare. Instructors at the Family Center fed this tendency. For instance, instructors often told students that they were exceptional because, unlike other women on welfare, they were "doing something with their lives." Yet, college students came to this belief without the reinforcement of staff at the Community Living Center. In fact, the Director of the

center challenged several college students when they expressed negative views of women on welfare at the focus group session. For the women in this study, the presence of "other" women on welfare served to remind them that in the face of dominant welfare imagery their claim to respectability was a fragile one.

Conclusion

Resistance is limited by our capacity to envision possibilities outside of dominant discourse. Responses to domination are shaped within the contours of oppositional dichotomies that work to reinscribe the very thing we seek to eradicate (Hill Collins, 2000). As with most forms of resistance to domination, this epistemological dilemma was evident in the actions of students in this study. We can understand students' resistance as both radical and limited. Students worked hard to overcome internalized oppression—to escape the cruel imagery that pervaded their everyday experiences as single, never-married mothers. They resisted gender norms that drive welfare reform and insisted on economic independence before marriage. And, they saw through the "family values" rhetoric of welfare reform. Yet, their actions drew on, and reinscribed, the very images that they hoped to escape.

Note

1. I have changed the names of people and places in order to protect the women who participated in this study.

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