Welfare Recipients Attending College: The Interplay of Oppression and Resistance

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This qualitative study uses Patricia Hill Collins' "both/and" conceptual framework to explore experiences of both oppression and resistance among welfare recipients attending college. It examines how children, social networks, integration into campus life, and interactions with caseworkers affect welfare recipients' college attendance and college persistence. As is well established in the sociological literature, having children complicates college attendance and persistence. But this research shows that children also provide the predominant incentive for poor mothers to attain higher education. Moreover, this study reveals complexities in welfare recipients' experiences with their social networks, work-study jobs, and caseworkers that are often overlooked by current research on higher education and welfare reform.

Keywords: welfare recipients, higher education, welfare reform, matrix of domination

When asked to name the most important reasons why she attended college, Seana, a Black mother of one, replied, "because I wanted a career, not a job." Seana and the other participants in this research are among the one-fifth of welfare recipients nationwide with some four-year college or university experience (Peterson, Song, and Jones-DeWeever 2002). Seana is well aware that post-secondary education confers substantial benefits to welfare recipients. Those with higher education are more likely to find jobs, work in their field of study, earn higher wages, and report greater family well-being than welfare recipients who lack higher
education (see Kahn, Butler, Deprez, & Polakow, 2004 for a review of this research).

However, recent policy changes made it more difficult for welfare recipients to attend college. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), or welfare reform, requires that welfare recipients engage in work-related activities within two years of receiving assistance. Most states allow only one year of higher education to count as work-related activity (Pandey, Zhan, Neely-Barnes, and Menon, 2000). Thereafter, a welfare recipient who attends school must do so in addition to work requirements. Moreover, under welfare reform, states enacted "work-first" programs that emphasized job searches and job placement rather than higher education (Golonka and Matus-Grossman, 2001). After welfare reform, welfare recipients' enrollment in higher education dropped considerably (Center for Women's Policy Studies, 2002); as Jacobs and Winslow (2003) conclude, "the result of welfare reform has been to reduce overall access to postsecondary education for welfare recipients" (p. 212).

Given the unequivocal benefits of college attendance for welfare recipients, and the decreasing numbers of them who are attending college, research on welfare recipients who make it to college is especially important. This research explores college attendance and persistence among seventeen single mothers—most women of color—who receive welfare and attend an urban university in Kentucky. It uses Patricia Hill Collins' (1991) "both/and" (p. 226) conceptual stance to explore the multiple axes of domination and resistance experienced by poor, single-mother college students. As revealed below, these students' narratives question many of the theoretical assumptions and empirical findings of the existing sociological literature on higher education. Their experiences can also enhance the literature on welfare reform, which until recently rarely examined the experiences of welfare recipients attending college.

Collins is one of several multiracial feminists who emphasize that race, class, and gender form a "matrix of domination" (1991, p. 225) such that these three systems of oppression interact to affect people in distinct ways. Most students in this sample are disadvantaged in educational institutions because they are poor, single-mother students on welfare. A "both/and"
stance recognizes that people also resist the matrix of domination: "people experience and resist domination on three levels: the level of personal biography; the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender; and the systematic level of social institutions" (Collins, 1991, p. 227). This research uses a "both/and" conceptual stance to explore how single-mother students experience and resist oppression in their everyday lives. I examine the personal experience of having children, the community level of social networks, and the institutional levels of work-study jobs and interactions with welfare caseworkers.

Literature Review

In reviewing the literatures regarding college attendance and college persistence among welfare recipients, I provide a brief survey of the sociological literature on post-secondary education. I focus more attention on the literatures concerning low-income mothers of color, the group of interest here.

The sociology literature on post-secondary education cites numerous predictors of college attendance and persistence. The status attainment theoretical framework noted the impact of one's family socioeconomic background on one's achievement later in life and established that this effect in large part works through the educational system (Blau and Duncan, 1967). While the status attainment framework has been modified over the years, empirical research consistently finds a positive relationship between higher social class background and increased college attendance and college persistence (Baker and Velez, 1996; Conley, 2001). Parents' human capital also affects children's college attendance and persistence; students with parents who attended college are more likely to attend college themselves (Farkas, 1996). Social capital, the "relations between children and parents" (Coleman, 1988, p. 110), including the extent to which parents are involved in children's educational lives and bolster their educational aspirations, also increases college attendance and persistence, especially among minority students (Qian and Blair, 1999). Integration into college life—in social or academic ways—decreases attrition (Tinto, 1993).
Regarding non-traditional female students, the sociological literature clearly shows that marriage and parenthood inhibit women's college attendance and college persistence (Haggstrom, Kanouse, and Morrison, 1986; Home, 1998; Jacobs and King, 2002; Marini, 1984). Marriage and parenthood exacerbate role conflict, taking time and energy away from academics. However, one recent study noted that welfare recipients cite attaining a better life for their children as a main incentive for them to pursue higher education, suggesting that children can have some positive impact on their mothers' education (Jennings, 2004). In addition, family and friends can provide support to mitigate role conflict (Home, 1998, 1993; Lechner, 1993). And while many mothers have little time to get involved with campus activities or to form relationships with other students, integration into campus life helps them develop self-esteem and persist in school (Sharp, 2004).

Role conflict is often exacerbated among low-income single mothers who tend to work in addition to attending school and typically raise children without the help of a partner. These women often encounter additional barriers to college attendance and persistence: securing enough money to provide for their families and covering the costs of higher education and childcare (Heller and Bjorklund, 2004; Kahn and Polakow, 2004). Women's social networks have been particularly important in providing childcare and other means of support to allow low-income mothers to attend school or work (Edin and Lein, 1997; Hays, 2003; Stack, 1974). Among professional women, African American women's social networks were more likely than White women's networks to instill expectations for educational attainment; African American women were also more likely than White women to stress the importance of community ties: "Relationships with family of origin, partners, children, friends and the wider community loom large in the way they envision and accomplish mobility" (Higginbotham and Weber, 1992, p. 436). However, more recently welfare reform has eroded social networks in the African American community, because work requirements demand that increasing numbers of women work outside of the home (Brewster and Padavic, 2002).

As mentioned above, several aspects of welfare reform have
reduced college attendance among welfare recipients. State laws allow only limited amounts of higher education to count towards recipients' work requirements (Pandy et al., 2000). The "work-first" orientation of welfare reform has led caseworkers to stress employment over educational attainment (Hays, 2003; Kahn and Polakow, 2004). Because past research shows that some caseworkers are more generous to White recipients than recipients of color (Gooden, 1998), we might expect caseworkers to provide less educational support to recipients of color than to White recipients. Welfare recipients of color are less likely to be enrolled in higher education than White recipients, after controlling for age, marital, and parental status (Jacobs and King, 2002).

The above literatures document several factors likely to impact the college experiences of welfare recipients. Below, I explore which of these factors are salient in the everyday lives of welfare recipients attending an urban university in Kentucky.

Methods and Sample

This study uses Burawoy's "extended case method" in which researchers use qualitative methods to explore micro-level phenomena and advance theory. This method advances theory "by constituting the social situation as anomalous with regard to some preexisting theory (that is, an existing body of generalizations), which is then reconstructed" (Burawoy, 1991, p. 280). While this method does not produce information that is generalizable to a larger population—or statistical significance—it does allow us to focus on a specific case and what it reveals about society—or societal significance (Burawoy, 1991). With its emphasis on how everyday experience speaks to social theory, this method is useful in conjunction with a feminist epistemology that privileges women's experiences and viewpoints (Smith, 1987). This project relies on feminist epistemology in that it starts from low-income mothers' daily experiences of attending school, parenting, and receiving welfare. Because welfare recipients of color are disadvantaged according to their race, class, gender, and single motherhood status (Collins, 1991), we would expect that these students experience college quite differently than more traditional students. Thus, their viewpoints can help us re-think some
of the existing research on college attendance and persistence that tends to privilege the experiences of traditional-aged, White college students without children.

I conducted in-depth interviews with seventeen respondents, interviewing all but three of them twice. I identified most respondents through their participation in a work-study program on campus, and all but one of the women I contacted agreed to participate. The other third of the sample was found by snowball sampling; the aforementioned work-study participants gave me names of other students they knew who also received welfare. The first interview focused on pathways to college attendance, and the second on college persistence; for a few women with exceptionally hectic schedules, I asked about both in the same interview. Most interviews lasted about 90 minutes, and they ranged from 45 minutes to almost two hours. The interviews included several open-ended questions. For example, I asked respondents to describe the most important reasons they came to college, and the most important factors that helped them stay in college. The interview format was semi-structured, such that I covered several topics in all interviews, but also allowed women considerable leeway to discuss issues important in their own college experience.

After a graduate student assistant transcribed the interviews, I coded them using an open coding process. This identified recurring themes in the data, such as the importance of children and social networks in respondents’ accounts of their college attendance and persistence. In order to provide some degree of inter-coder reliability, the graduate student and I came together to compare codes and revised codes accordingly.

The sample consisted of seventeen women ages 20-45. All women except four were in their 20s, three were in their early 30s, and one was age 45. The median age was 24. All but three participants were African American; the other three were White. Well over half of the sample had one child, several women had two, and one woman had three children. One woman was married; all other women were single—though several had boyfriends and two were engaged. When incorporating participants’ quotes below, I report their number of children and race, given these factors are likely to affect respondents’ college experiences and
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their experiences with welfare caseworkers. Most women were in their junior or senior year, and a few were sophomores. Most worked on campus in work-study jobs. All respondents were given pseudonyms.

At the time of their first interview, all women in the sample received Kentucky’s Transitional Assistance Program (K-TAP), the state-level Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. K-TAP is the main social assistance program available to poor families—in most cases single-mother families. K-TAP allows full-time student recipients to attend two years of post-secondary education without any additional work requirements; after these twenty-four months, students can “count ten hours of class toward the thirty-hour work requirement” (Kentucky Cabinet for Families and Children, 2001; Miewald, 2004, p. 179). Most other states are not as generous in allowing post-secondary education to count as a “stand-alone” activity that can take the place of work requirements (Jacobs and Winslow, 2003). One local program also deserves attention. All respondents with young children (except one who did not want her child to attend daycare) had their childcare costs covered by a community-based program, 4 Cs (Community Coordinated Childcare). This program uses a sliding-scale fee structure to cover daycare costs for low-income, full-time students until their children are 13. Because all of the women in the sample were poor, they paid very little for childcare.

Recipients’ Narratives about College Attendance and College Persistence

Children and College Attendance

As described above, because kids require a great deal of time, energy, and money—and because women remain the primary caretakers of children—having children decreases women’s college attendance and persistence. With respect to children and college attendance, only five of the seventeen women went straight from high school to university and did not take any semesters off to spend time raising children or earning wages. The majority of informants had more complicated pathways to university. Six respondents attended a local community college, and a few others
were employed—some for several years—before attending university. Those who were employed before attending university often mentioned the importance of earning enough money to support them and their children; a small number of respondents postponed higher education because it would temporarily decrease their incomes. For example, speaking about the transition from employment to university, Ella, a Black mother of three, said, "it's affecting my kids . . . It's a big sacrifice because they were used to me working, so when I went back to school it was a change, 'cause there is not extra income, as you might say, coming in."

But while these women were upfront in saying how difficult it can be to combine parenthood with schoolwork, children figured prominently in their explanations for why they chose to attend and stay in school. When asked to describe the main reasons they chose to attend university, all but one of the respondents stated that they attended college in order to improve the lives of their children. When asked by the interviewer to give some of the "most important" reasons they went to college, women said the following:

Umm . . . [to] make enough money to support myself and my son. (Sanrdra, White mother of two)

I don't want to have her [my daughter] to have to be in a bad way, to have to negotiate her standards later on in life because [of] what I didn't provide for her . . . I want to be able to leave my child something other than just some parables and lessons and, you know, folk tales! (laughing) (Lavinia, Black mother of one)

Several women said that a major reason they attended university was to provide positive role models for their children. Dalia, a Black mother of one, recounted,

He [her father] always tells me I set a good example for my child . . . and she [her daughter] would see me do my homework—and I think she was in Head-start or in Kindergarten—she would do her little homework and would want to sit around and write and mock mommy. So I was like, wow, I'm actually molding somebody!

All but one of the respondents' narratives about decisions to attend and stay in college emphasized their children. While the most prevalent explanation was to attain a better life, other
reasons—such as providing a positive role model—were given by about a quarter of the informants.

Children and College Persistence: Students' Role Conflicts

At the same time, most respondents experienced marked role conflicts in their own lives; trying to be involved mothers, good students, and completing their work-study jobs on campus led to time crunches and stress. Most of the respondents had little time left in the day for schoolwork. For example, Ella said, “It’s hard because . . . once it’s time to go home and try [to] work with them and get their homework done . . . then cook them dinner and get them ready for bed—it’s like I’m studying at 10:00 at night. So by that time I’m tired . . . .” Similarly, one of the most stressed-out respondents was Jonetta, a Black mother of two who was working two jobs while attending school. She said, “once I get home and it’s time to study, I’m tired, so I’m falling asleep books wide open.”

Most respondents spoke of similar time crunches and said they needed more time to do schoolwork. Aside from a few students with higher grade point averages, most women in the sample had a C average or below. Thus, children seem to exacerbate these women’s role conflicts and make it harder to stay in college, and they probably lower parents’ grades and possibly decrease college graduation rates—though this study did not focus on college graduation or college success. Having children also probably extends the amount of time it takes for students to get a degree; while several students said that others teased them about becoming “career students,” there was little other evidence that these students would take longer than others to graduate. In sum, while children complicate women’s lives and certainly take time away from school, children also provide the predominant incentive for these women to remain in college.

Childcare: Community Program

With one exception, all of the mothers with children too young to attend school had most or all of their childcare costs covered by 4 Cs, the community program described above. Many of the mothers felt this program was essential in allowing them to attend school. The following is an excerpt from the interview with Sarah, a Black mother of one:
I: If you had to name some of the most important things that allowed you to stay in school here, what would you say those things would be?

R: Like daycare and my money; I couldn’t do without either of those . . . And if I had the grant and didn’t have the daycare, I still wouldn’t be able to do it.

The one woman with a young child who did not use 4 Cs was unwilling to put her child in any daycare. All of the other informants with young children had childcare costs covered by 4 Cs, and most said it was important in allowing them to attend college.

Social Networks and College Attendance and Persistence

Parents and other relatives encouraged the college attendance and persistence of most respondents. Most women had at least one parent—typically their mothers—who encouraged university attendance. When asked why she chose to attend college, Anita, a Black mother of one, replied, “because that’s the only thing my mom would accept.” Many others spoke of their parents’ expectations they would attend university, even though very few of the parents finished college themselves. Several of the respondents said that extended family members, such as aunts, uncles, and grandparents, were also influential in their decisions to attend college.

All respondents, except for one older respondent whose parents were deceased and one woman whose father raised her, had parents—typically their mothers—that would at least occasionally take care of their children. Ella, a Black mother of three, says:

My mother is my backbone, I mean anything I do, she’s there to support me; that’s my support system. Um, my brother helps out, he has no family and he works for my mother, so [he’s] my mom if I need a babysitter . . . Yeah, I mean I have my mother’s sister. My aunts and uncles, they help out . . .

Like Ella, many of the respondents also had sisters, aunts, grandparents, or the child’s father to help out with childcare or to provide emotional support. This seemed especially important when children were very young.

For about one-third of the respondents, the fathers of their children helped out with childcare, though some were not very
consistent in their help; one said, "he helps out when he wants to
help out." Four women (including the one married respondent)
had consistent childcare help from the fathers of their children,
from which they benefited; all of them had more free time than
other respondents, and one was able to travel abroad to study
in France while the father cared for their child. But for all other
respondents, family members and friends provided more consist-
ten childcare than the fathers of their children.

In this sample, the two students with the least help from
their parents and extended families were White, though both
had consistent help from the fathers of their children (one was
married). Almost all of the Black participants received more help
from parents and extended families than did these two White
women. But the very small sample size of White women makes
it impossible to generalize from these experiences.

Social networks' provision of emotional or "moral" support
was also important in keeping many respondents in school, as
evidenced by Ella's quote above. Many were grateful for the
emotional support of their families, particularly their mothers;
Sarah, a Black mother of one who had just graduated at the time
of the interview, stated that

They don't send me money or anything like that—my parents don't.
It's pretty much like moral support basically. It's good to have . . .
they are like, 'oh, we're so proud of you' and that just keeps me
going.

Social networks provided important emotional support for at
least half of the respondents.

Of the seventeen respondents, only one relied on parents to
help pay her college tuition (and her mother did so only for a
short time period); all others pieced together some combination
of student loans, Pell Grants or other grants, scholarships, or work-
study income to cover tuition and other costs of living. About a
quarter of the women said that parents and other relatives would
occasionally help out with some of the costs of school, such as
books.³

But by and large, parents and other relatives did not cover
the respondents' higher education costs. While this research did
not include those who have left college, it is well-established
that students who are struggling financially, like all of these respondents, are more likely to drop out of college than students who are not (Baker and Velez, 1996).

In the few cases where parents did help pay for college costs—typically books—the respondents did not feel good about having to ask for help. Describing what it's like to ask parents for help, Sandra (White, mother of two) states, “you know, when I have money problems and I have to ask them for something—I hate to do that, it’s like the worst.” None of the respondents gave any indication that they wanted or expected more help from their parents; a few suggested that since they were adults with children of their own, they felt responsible for their own educational costs. And all of the respondents had trouble making ends meet—though the degree of their financial hardship varied.

Thus, all of the respondents built webs of support, comprised of family members, extended kin, and occasionally the fathers of their children, who provided childcare and/or emotional support and were instrumental in facilitating college attendance and persistence. However, parents and other relatives almost never paid for respondents' college tuition.

Social Integration and College Persistence

Many respondents said they did not feel connected to campus in any way, save an isolated activity during a short time period, such as belonging to the choir for one semester or being active in one’s dorm for one year. Some women said that they did not have time for extracurricular activities. For example, when asked why she did not participate in groups on campus, Ella, a Black mother of three, said,

“I don’t feel like I’m on the same level... the people in my classes are a lot younger than I am so I have different activities than they do and my main [activity] is to go home and take care of my kids. So they have more free time than I do.”

About half of the students had very little social integration into campus life, which could increase their attrition rates.

Three of the respondents were active in at least one extracurricular activity for an extended period: one was on the debate team, one was in the History Honor Society and French Club,
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and one was in a sorority. All of them said that these groups were important to them; Nadia, a Black mother of one who was in the sorority, said, "It's nice to be recognized and . . . to have a certain set of people that you can go to and be like, look I'm having this problem, you know, and I need to talk to somebody about it." These three respondents enjoyed their participation in these groups, and it seems their participation kept them more connected to university life. However, most other respondents did not have time for campus groups.

Yet over half of the respondents reported substantial social integration and enjoyment in an unexpected place: their work-study jobs. Seana, a Black mother of one who graduated around the time of her second interview, said, "I think the best thing about transitioning from high school to college [was] the Postal Services on campus. My sister worked there her whole four years, so these people were like family to me, so when I got there I got the same job with them." In addition, Lavinia, a Black mother of one who had recently transferred to university from a community college, said her work-study job was "my cornerstone because it gave me a place to be when I wasn't in class . . . and it gave me really a sense of belonging on campus." Another student spoke of the baby shower her co-workers threw her, and two others spoke of their close relationships with their co-workers in their work-study jobs. Over half of the respondents spoke highly of the relationships they formed in their work-study jobs, which suggests that social integration can take different forms among low-income, non-traditional female students than among traditional students.

In terms of more academic kinds of integration—such as relationships formed with students or professors in the classroom—there was little evidence for this among these respondents. A few of the women mentioned professors who had helped them out with their classes or work-study jobs, but this was not common.

Welfare Caseworkers and College Attendance and Persistence

In this sample, there was substantial variation in the informants' experiences with caseworkers—some had very supportive caseworkers, others had "do-nothing" and "hateful" caseworkers, and a few reported more neutral experiences. Several
informants sang the praises of their caseworkers. Andrea, a Black mother of one, claimed

My previous worker was absolutely wonderful. This man . . . said 'I don't want to hear about you quitting school! You've come this far,' and . . . I think threatened me bodily harm [if I were to quit] (laughing) but he was absolutely wonderful.

Close to half of the sample said they had caseworkers who supported their college attendance—though a couple of these women said they went through bad caseworkers before ending up with a helpful one.

In contrast, the other half of the sample reported more negative experiences with caseworkers, including several African American respondents and two of the three White respondents. Perhaps due to the small sample size, I did not find evidence of a pattern of racial bias among caseworkers, though this has been confirmed by quantitative research on caseworker bias (Gooden, 1998).

A frequent complaint was that caseworkers did not know the benefits for which students qualified. (There were several special benefits available to students, such as payment of summer school tuition and book costs, and transportation vouchers.) Sandra, a White mother of two, says that a woman who worked with welfare recipients at her community college (Leslie) was much better than her caseworker at keeping her informed of the benefits for which she was eligible:

They didn't tell me a lot of the benefits that would like help me pay for school—that would help me pay for books . . . Leslie would actually tell me and I would ask my worker and she would say no. And so Leslie would have to send an e-mail to her supervisor on several occasions. So anytime I had a problem I would call Leslie and she would call them and get it straightened out.

Close to one-third of the respondents complained that their caseworkers did not know enough, or do enough, to help them in their pursuit of higher education.

Somewhat surprisingly, very few informants reported that caseworkers stressed employment over education. One exception was Dalia, a Black mother of one, who said:
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The workers were like... you're going to have to stop going to school and get a job, but then... welfare reform kicked in allowing people to work and go to school for 20 hours to better themselves and I had already been doing that. A lot of them [caseworkers] were giving me crap, and then I finally got a good one that understood what I was doing.

One or two other respondents implied that their caseworkers would prefer that they leave school for work, but this was not a common experience among these respondents.

Thus, few caseworkers emphasized finding a job rather than attending college. The more common experience was that caseworkers did not provide enough information about the several benefits for which the women were eligible, which could certainly hurt recipients' chances of completing college—especially among those having the hardest time making ends meet.

Conclusion

Collins' "both/and" conceptual stance stresses that women experience both oppression and resistance due to their positions in the matrix of domination. Most women in this sample were poor women of color; and all but one woman in the sample experienced another barrier widely believed to curtail college attendance and persistence—being a single mother receiving welfare. In many ways, this research has shown that welfare recipients indeed face substantial barriers to attending and persisting in college, but they also used several strategies to resist the multiple forms of oppression they confronted in their everyday lives.

The experiences of single-mother students in this research are not consistent with some of the theoretical assumptions of and findings from the existing sociological literature on higher education. The status attainment model and human capital frameworks emphasize the importance of both family socioeconomic background and parents' college attendance on students' educational outcomes. However, almost all students in this sample came from low-income families and very few students' parents completed college, but nonetheless these students attended and persisted in college. The social capital perspective emphasizes the importance of parental support of students' college attendance, which was
confirmed by this study. In general, however, a "both/and" conceptual framework reveals the complexities in welfare recipients' experiences of higher education that largely go unnoticed by the sociological literatures on higher education and welfare reform.

For example, the sociological literature finds a clear negative effect of having children on college attendance and persistence. But this research reveals that while the informants did experience role conflicts due to having children, which probably lowered their grades and extended their time in school, children also provided the main incentive to attend and remain in school. In addition to examining the problems children pose for mothers' college attendance and persistence, research should further explore how welfare recipients envision their role as provider and how this affects their educational and career paths. These aspects of motherhood are largely overlooked in research on motherhood and higher education and welfare reform (but see Jennings, 2004 for an exception). A "both/and" conceptual stance shows that embracing their provider role helped these respondents resist some of the disadvantages associated with being a single-mother college student.

Collins' "both/and" perspective is also useful in understanding complexities in the ways these women's social networks affected their experiences of higher education. Consistent with past research on low-income women in African American communities, social networks were crucial in allowing many of these women to attend and stay in college. Most respondents relied heavily on their parents—and in some cases, on extended family members—for childcare and "moral" support. However, while welfare recipients' social networks certainly helped defray the economic and time costs of childcare, social networks generally did not help them pay for college. A "both/and" perspective illuminates the substantial benefits conferred by social networks, but also the inability (or unwillingness) of these social networks to help cover tuition costs.

Like much earlier research, this study confirms the importance of social integration into campus life. But this study reveals that among welfare recipients who have little time for campus activities, integration can occur in an unexpected setting: work-study jobs. A "both/and" perspective also recognizes the draw-
backs of participating in work-study jobs: less time for studying, family responsibilities, and leisure time. Thus, while these women were often forced to take work-study jobs due to their financial needs, they typically found satisfaction in these jobs.

Unlike some prior research, this study did not find a “work-first” mentality among welfare caseworkers that inhibited respondents’ college attendance and persistence; this is likely due to the small sample size—and that all members of the sample made it to college so were probably more likely to gain support from their caseworkers than less educated students. Some respondents certainly had negative experiences with caseworkers, but several also had extremely supportive caseworkers. A “both/and” conceptual stance takes notice of experiences of oppression and empowerment in the respondents’ interactions with caseworkers.

While patterns in experiences of oppression and resistance associated with single motherhood, class, and welfare statuses emerge from these women’s narratives, it is much harder to ascertain racial differences in their experiences due to the very small sample of White respondents. Further research on larger samples of both women of color and White women is needed to assess how caseworkers inhibit success in college, and how women of color resist unequal treatment.

While the small sample size and qualitative nature of this research cannot provide a test any of the sociological theories of higher education, it has revealed the inadequacies of this literature in understanding the college experiences of students who are welfare recipients. It also points to several areas for further research in the areas of both higher education and welfare reform. The women in this sample resisted their oppressions due to race, class, and welfare recipient status by turning to both “private” means of support, such as family and friends, and by using more “public” kinds of support, such as the community childcare program and other resources and benefits from the welfare office. Many used an interesting combination of both forms of support, such as the woman who used a personal contact to force her caseworker to learn more about the benefits for which she qualified. More qualitative research on student welfare recipients could help identify the more successful strategies using “private” and “public” supports, and the combinations thereof.
In addition, these women have little to no time for additional on-campus activities, so attempts to increase their social integration into college life might be most useful in the context of their work-study jobs. Placing women in the same work-study jobs year after year could strengthen the relationships they form with faculty, staff, and students. Likewise, placing welfare recipients into work-study jobs in departments in which they are majors, or in places such as the advising center where they could become more versed in university policies and requirements, could also improve their ability to persist and succeed in college. Lastly, while welfare recipients attending college are pressed for time, attending meetings or support groups with other single mother students could help them feel more integrated into campus life. These interactions could help recipients learn useful strategies from others who are also working hard to be good students, mothers, and employees.

References


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Notes

1. One respondent had just become eligible for K-TAP by her second interview but was receiving Food Stamps at both interviews.
2. Graduation rates at this urban university are low when compared to those at its benchmark institutions; only about 33% of students graduate in six years. Many students work part- or full-time while attending school, so only take classes part-time. But these students were all full-time students (they must attend school full-time to qualify for the 4 Cs program).
3. Social networks often provided money for the respondents’ children: about half of the respondents said that parents would sometimes pay for some of their children’s activities, such as dance or music classes or sports activities.
4. While only a few students brought up the amount of debt they accrued by taking out loans to cover tuition and living costs, those who did realized...
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how staggering this debt could become. Sarah, who had just attained her B.A. and was about to start her M.S.W., said that after she finished all of her higher education, she would be $80,000 to $100,000 in debt. Amanda, the one married respondent said, "we'll probably be paying back money for the rest of our life."