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“Give Us a Chance to Get an Education”: Single Mothers’ Survival Narratives and Strategies for Pursuing Higher Education on Welfare

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Sweeping changes in 1996 to the U.S. national welfare system prioritized “work-first” policies while restricting educational opportunities for mothers on welfare. Based on qualitative longitudinal interviews and focus groups with 64 women participating in California’s welfare reform program, CalWORKs, this research focuses on the narratives of single mothers on welfare pursuing higher education after the “end of welfare as we know it” by constructing “survival narratives.” Their “survival narratives” reveal the costs of pursuing higher education while on welfare, how they construct strategies that help them persevere through school, and critically assess the failures of welfare reform.

KEYWORDS welfare, higher education, narratives, public policy, poverty, survival, resistance, TANF, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

After the 1996 reform to federal welfare policies in the United States, the current welfare policy explicitly limits higher education. Despite these restrictions, women do enroll in and complete degrees while on welfare. Pursuing higher education while participating in the welfare system is an empowering yet daunting experience for mothers on welfare. This research explores how women learn to survive and resist the welfare system to complete their education and focuses on the narratives of single mothers on welfare pursuing

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higher education after the “end of welfare as we know it.” The mothers in this research construct “survival narratives” to give meaning to their struggles to pursue higher education while on welfare and to explain how they resist the policies. To the student mothers receiving welfare who participated in this study, *survival* means engaging in whatever activity they can to provide for them and their children, within their moral framework, while using available resources to complete school and participate in the welfare system. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *survival* as “the continuing to live after some event.” In this case, the survival narratives of welfare mothers are their narratives of pursuing higher education after the 1996 welfare “reforms” restricted their opportunities. These survival narratives illustrate the contradictions between the value of education in American society and the policies of welfare reform, specifically how the institutional goals of each system are oftentimes in conflict.

Through longitudinal qualitative research with 64 women on welfare who pursued higher education in the San Francisco Bay Area, this article explores how student mothers construct “survival narratives” that give meaning to their experiences in higher education and in the welfare system and outlines how they implement “survival strategies” to finish their degrees while on welfare. Mothers do this by explaining the costs of pursuing higher education while on welfare, constructing self-narratives to help them complete their education, and implementing survival strategies that help them persevere through school while participating in the welfare system. To survive, the mothers had individual and collective strategies to get by. As they constructed their narratives, they also developed and networked with other mothers to share their survival strategies. Collins (1990) contends that there is a “private, hidden space of Black women’s consciousness, the ‘inside’ ideas that allow Black women to cope with, and in most cases, transcend the confines of race, class, and gender oppression” (pp. 92–93). These “inside” ideas are theoretical and practical. These ideas are critical to building theories that reflect women’s on-the-ground experiences challenging oppression, such as the survival narratives constructed by mothers on welfare pursuing higher education. However, concrete, practical strategies helped women endure their daily struggles, and the narratives about those strategies are explored in this article. By relating their individual survival narratives and strategies to me in the interviews, to other women, and through their participation in grassroots organizations, the mothers were helping themselves and each other survive day to day and challenging systems of oppression by engaging in resistance against it. By revealing how they construct narratives of survival, the women questioned and resisted the social policies in which they must create narratives and strategies of survival to “participate” in the welfare program. Finally, the mothers use their narratives as a lens through which to critically assess welfare reform, outlining it as a failed policy for student parents on welfare. Although other scholars have explored

aspects of these issues before, the unique contribution of this longitudinal qualitative research with women who have pursued higher education after welfare reform was implemented is twofold. First, one half of the mothers in this research participated in a grassroots advocacy organization for welfare student parents, and second, this article focuses on how the mothers navigate the conflicting expectations of higher education and the welfare system.

Welfare and Higher Education

Sweeping changes in 1996 to the U.S. national welfare system prioritized “work-first” policies and restricted educational opportunities for mothers on welfare. More than 15 years ago, in 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) replaced previous federal welfare programs with block grants to states called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). TANF directed states to use these block grants to create state-implemented welfare programs that emphasized paid work and required participants to engage in “work activities.” This policy shift, widely referred to as welfare reform, ended welfare as an entitlement program and focused on time limits for receipt of aid and moving participants into work as quickly as possible. The negative stereotypes of welfare affected how the policies were constructed and how society views those on welfare (Katz, 2012). Luna, (2009) explains, “because of the negative social constructions associated with welfare, to many, the punitive nature of the policy seems justified” (p. 442). Kelly (2010) agrees, finding that

the controlling image of the welfare mothers consists of racist stereotypes that represent women on public assistance as childlike, hyperfertile, lazy, and bad mothers. The construction of this controlling image from racist stereotypes, myths, and moral judgments served to publically justify the dismantling of public assistance programs and institute increased regulations on recipients. (p. 77)

Consequently, the policies constructed focused on “work first,” and this emphasis restricted participants’ access to higher education. Even though other aspects of American culture value higher education and recognize the necessity of education for upward mobility, for mothers on welfare this opportunity is actively discouraged. Therefore, despite a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” discourse, the TANF program is designed to devalue and severely limit higher educational opportunities for mothers on welfare.

The message mothers on welfare receive from TANF is “work first, education last” (Wolfe & Tucker, 2001, p. 7). As Butler, Deprez, and Smith (2004) explain the role of higher education as human capital development “is well established and rarely questioned in our society, until it is applied to the welfare population” (p. 4). In the first 3 years after the TANF legislation was

enacted, the number of welfare participants enrolled as students in colleges and universities nationally plummeted by half from 650,000 in 1996 to around 358,000 in 1999 (Price, 1999, p. 6). Pandey, Zhan, Neely-Barnes, and Menon (2000) observe “TANF tightens the definition of work preparation by limiting the fraction of participants who can be in school, and increases the minimum number of weekly hours of work needed to meet the requirement” (p. 117). Therefore, “because of statues that limit their access to education and training, particularly at the post-secondary level, millions of would-be students have been blocked from these programs, making welfare one of the few contexts in modern American life in which education is explicitly discouraged” (Ratner, 2004, p., 45–46). As a result, “limiting access to higher education forces [women] to accept low-wage jobs, often providing incomes below the poverty line, thus continuing the devastating effects of poverty” (Stevens, 2003, p. 7). Opportunities for higher education continue to decrease; after almost ten years of TANF, Jones-DeWeever and Gault (2006) found that

faced with the pressure of balancing work and child care responsibilities, bureaucratic hurdles, and college classes, tens of thousands of welfare participants abandoned their aspirations for higher education altogether only to face a cycle of low-wage work and perpetual poverty. (p. 8)

Because TANF was created on the assumption that “work first” ends poverty, TANF only allows states to count participants’ first 12 months of vocational education to meet the state’s work participation requirements. However, some states allowed participants to pursue postsecondary education beyond twelve months. “Maine, Illinois, Kentucky, Wyoming, and California are five states that are often cited as having made substantial provision for post-secondary education for TANF-eligible clients” (Kahn, Butler, Deprez, & Polakow, 2004, p. 7). In response to federal requirements, California implemented the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program on January 1, 1998. Under CalWORKs, an adult on welfare was allowed a maximum of 24 months for education or job training programs. Yet women’s wages are generally so low that for women with children to earn enough to be to support their families, most need at least a bachelor’s degree. Higher education is a critical way individual women can raise their earnings. For example, a widely used measure of earnings needed to support a family is the self-sufficiency standard (Insight Center, 2008; Pearce & Brooks, 2003).¹ Using this standard, the self-sufficiency wage for Alameda County (Oakland, CA), where the current research was conducted, is a mean of \$59,855 for a single mother with two children, depending upon the age of the children (range \$38,817–\$77,134) (Insight Center, 2011). According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011), annual earnings of women with some college or an associate’s degree is approximately \$43,940 and those with a bachelor’s degree, on average, earn

\$51,272 annually. Therefore, women need at least some college, or a bachelor's degree, to earn enough to support themselves and their children; however, being able to pursue a bachelor's degree is no longer possible in most states after welfare "reform." Despite the strict regulations and time limits imposed by welfare, some mothers do pursue higher education while on welfare as a route out of poverty; the research presented here focuses specifically on their narratives of survival and survival strategies as students in the CalWORKs system.

The women who participate in the welfare system often feel that they must justify their welfare receipt, to the public, and also to themselves. Hays (2003) found in her research with mothers on welfare that the women would survive with or without welfare, but they were interested in telling their stories not to "convince listeners that they were worthy of continued welfare receipt" but instead, "with the hope that they would be recognized not simply as a composite of clichés, but as whole persons" (p. 139). Through telling their stories about welfare, poverty, and higher education, the women in this study are striving to be recognized as "whole persons," who are allowed to pursue the American dream and strive for the same opportunity that many other Americans desire—a higher education.

Studying Narratives

Studying the narratives that mothers construct about pursuing higher education while participating in the welfare system is useful for examining systems of oppression and exploring how current welfare policy necessitates these survival narratives. Riessman (1993) found that for "the sociologically oriented investigator, studying narratives is additionally useful for what they reveal about social life—culture 'speaks itself' through an individual's story" and "it is possible to examine gender inequalities, racial oppression, and other practices of power that may be taken for granted by individual speakers" (p. 5). Further, as Latimer (2008) discusses, the narratives and policy suggestions of those most affected by social policies, specifically welfare reform, are seldom "systematically examined" (p. 78). As discussed in reference to Collins (1990) "inside ideas" above, the survival narratives and the on-the-ground strategies employed by the mothers are consistent with the idea of "hidden transcripts" that James Scott (1990) discusses in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. Scott contends, "like most large-scale structures of domination, the subordinate group has a fairly extensive offstage social existence which, in principle, affords it the opportunity to develop a shared critique of power" (p. 21). Constructing narratives about their survival strategies has two primary purposes. Through their "extensive offstage existence," the mothers network with other mothers through campus groups and grassroots organizing to develop and share a wide range of survival strategies. Further, through their survival narratives, the mothers, particularly the ones

involved in the grassroots advocacy organization, “develop a shared critique of power” that conveys the irony of welfare reform: the “reform” created a system that necessitates survival strategies for pursuing higher education—and the narratives that accompany those strategies—of its most motivated participants. It is also useful to explore how these narratives illustrate the student mothers’ resistance to current welfare policies. As Luna (2009) explores in her research with single welfare mothers, many of the mothers “engaged in resistance to shape an identity that transcends the stereotype” (p. 442). Luna discusses how mothers engage in overt and covert resistance against the welfare system. The women in this research are also interested in transcending the stereotypes and used their narratives to explain how they resist the current welfare reform policies.

The “survival narratives” presented here illustrate the women’s unique position of trying to change their economic status by pursuing higher education while on welfare.² Many of the women in this study tried working first but were still poor while working or quickly returned to welfare because of their vulnerable status in the labor market. Because these “work-first” strategies were not successful, they believe pursuing higher education will make them less vulnerable in the labor market, a belief robustly supported by research (Deprez & Butler, 2001; Gittell, Gross, & Holdaway, 1993; Gruber, 1998; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006; Katz, 2011; Mathur, 2008; Turner, 2011). These mothers are attempting to change their economic status and position in the social structure by enrolling in higher education for the limited time that they are eligible for welfare benefits. Although higher education is a usually respected route for getting ahead in the labor market, this is not an endorsed strategy for women participating in the welfare system. Yet the women who do pursue higher education while on welfare are applauded by politicians and advocates for their efforts and have been described by policy makers as the most “motivated” of the women on welfare.³ At the same time, mothers on welfare pursuing higher education are severely penalized by the welfare system for being so “motivated” while on welfare and must fight every step of the way to stay in school. Therefore, their survival narratives are significant because of this contradiction. They are trying to use a socially accepted path to change their economic status (i.e., higher education) in a social institution (the welfare system) that explicitly limits that pathway because of negative social stereotypes about the participants—while praising them individually for being so “motivated.” These two systems, higher education and welfare, also have policies that are at odds with one another, for example, the student privacy rights are often in direct conflict with information that the welfare system requires of its participants. To survive their attempts to change economic status, and earn a degree while participating in two contradictory systems, the mothers construct survival narratives and employ survival strategies to resist those policies, justify their welfare use and personhood, and persevere through school.

METHOD

This research was conducted in the San Francisco Bay area from June 2005 through May 2011 through in-depth qualitative interviews, focus groups, and participant observation with mothers pursuing higher education while participating in the welfare system. The San Francisco Bay area was ideal for this research because California has laws and social policies among the more generous in allowing educational programs to count as a welfare activity under the TANF program (Kahn et al., 2004), and the presence of a grassroots advocacy organization, Low-Income Families' Empowerment through Education (LIFETIME), dedicated to assisting parents on welfare pursue higher education. Founded in 1996, LIFETIME is an independent nongovernmental organization started as a support group for and by mothers on welfare who attended U.C. Berkeley, and has grown into a statewide organization and one of the few grassroots welfare-rights organizations in the United States. Its mission is "to empower low-income parents to determine, pursue and achieve their goals for education, employment and economic security" is accomplished through peer-based direct advocacy for parents to gain access to educational programs and welfare services, and grassroots organizing to change county, state, and federal welfare policies. They serve over 300 advocacy clients a year, and their organizing work includes about 200 active members and more than 2,000 supporters or less active members. LIFETIME uses peer-advocates, who are welfare mothers pursuing higher education, to help other low-income parents pursue higher education. LIFETIME involves low-income parents throughout California, but because they are located in Oakland, about 60% of LIFETIME's participants live in Bay Area counties. LIFETIME parents have participated in welfare-rights trainings, leadership activities, speaking events, protests, political hearings, policy briefings, and other activities that make them more aware of and outspoken about the issues surrounding poverty, the welfare system, public policies, and the institution of higher education.

For this research, 45 women were interviewed from November 2005 until December 2006, three focus groups were conducted in June 2007 with 19 additional women, and second interviews were conducted with 25 of the 45 original interview participants in August and September 2008. In spring 2011, another round of follow-up interviews was conducted with 35 of the original 45 participants (78% retention rate).

Research participants (45 interview and 19 focus group) were single mothers on CalWORKs with dependent children and were enrolled in higher education programs as their welfare work activity.⁴ See Table 1 for the educational degree participants were pursuing in 2006 at the first interview and the highest educational degree participants completed by 2011 at the third interview. Single mother families in California account for approximately 70% of the state's welfare caseload, and all adults on CalWORKs have

TABLE 1 Research Participants' Degree Status

Degrees	Pursuing in 2006	2011 Highest completed degree
Associate's	60% (27)	29% (10)
Bachelor's	33% (15)	54% (19)
Master's	7% (3)	11% (4)
Dropped out	—	6% (2)
Total	100% (45)	100% (35)

dependent children.⁵ Therefore, single mothers are the largest category of adults on welfare in California. In the state of California, during the period of this study, approximately 12% of the state's welfare-to-work single parent participants were engaged in vocational education, which is primarily how CalWORKs classifies participants who are pursuing higher education. The participants were enrolled programs through the California Community Colleges, the California State University, or the University of California systems, with only a few attending local private colleges. Just more than one half of the participants were involved in the advocacy organization as members, clients, or leaders (24) and the rest had no or minimal involvement with the organization (21). One of the central research questions of this project is how the experiences and narratives of mothers who are involved with LIFETIME vary from those who are not; therefore, one half of the research participants were recruited from LIFETIME and I conducted a separate focus group for the LIFETIME parents. Furthermore, participants' racial and ethnic backgrounds reflected the diversity of single mothers on welfare in San Francisco and Alameda Counties. The participants in this study ranged in age from 18 to 51, with a median age of 33. The median number of children participants had at the time of the first interview was two.

Interview participants were recruited on an ongoing basis from early fall 2005 to late fall 2006 through the community colleges and universities located within each county and through LIFETIME. Recruitment was focused through the office on each campus that serves students on the CalWORKs and Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS) and Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE) office at the community colleges and the special centers for student parents at the universities for a total of three sites in Alameda County and two sites in San Francisco County. Participants were recruited at each location by sending emails to the listserves of the offices or groups, posting flyers in the offices or centers, attending mandatory workshops to hand out flyers and introduce myself, and hanging around at the site. All mothers who volunteered and met the criteria of being currently on welfare and enrolled in school in one of the two counties were interviewed. In addition to recruiting one half of the participants through the schools, recruitment for the other half was through

the volunteers, members, or clients of the grassroots advocacy organization, LIFETIME. Recruitment through LIFETIME occurred through meeting parents at LIFETIME events and sending announcements by e-mail to the member list-serve. Several times interview participants introduced me to prospective interviewees on campus or at LIFETIME events (snowball sampling). These introductions were invaluable to my recruitment efforts and usually involved the past participant conveying how much she enjoyed participating in the interview and how I “get it” when discussing welfare issues. This was very important, especially when recruiting parents at the bachelor’s degree level, or those with more complicated paths onto welfare and into higher education, because many of them were cautious about participating in academic research about welfare.

All three phases of interviews lasted from just under a half-hour to more than 3 hours, with most of the first interviews in the 80- to 90-minute range, second interviews ranged from 45 to 120 minutes, most in the 55- to 60-minute range, and third interviews from 25 to 180 minutes, but typically approximately 45 minutes. An interview guide was used for each phase of interviews (e.g., see Katz, 2008, for the first interview guide), but overall the interviews were semistructured, the guide was simply that it guided the interview process, but often the participants took the interviews in their own directions, and answered the questions more fully than if the interviews were structured more tightly. All first interviews were conducted in person, most second interviews were in person (two by phone), and one half of the third interviews were in person (the rest by phone). The in-person interviews were conducted in a variety of locations, depending upon what was convenient for the participant, and what facilities we had access to. Locations for the first interviews were chosen to allow privacy; however, when that was not possible, public places where anonymity created privacy were used. Most often, first interviews were conducted on the campuses including in the advocacy office; in study rooms at libraries, cafeterias, and student lounges; or at local restaurants and coffee shops; and a few interviews were conducted at either my house or the participant’s home. Two interviews were conducted at the participant’s place of work. Finally, a few interviews were conducted at LIFETIME’s office, in the sound-isolated case-management room.⁶ The second interviews were conducted primarily in restaurants and cafes of the participants’ choice because of a grant that allowed purchasing of hospitality for participants. The third interviews were more likely to be in the participants’ homes, by phone, places of work, or in coffee shops. In a few cases, we meet at the same café or restaurant that we used for the second interview. In all cases, participants guided the location selection that was most convenient and comfortable to them. Often children were present during the interviews.

Recruitment for the focus groups happened in a similar way as the interviews, through contacts at the local community colleges and with LIFETIME,

with a few variations (these variations are assistance from the campus staff in help recruiting and arranging the timing the focus group after mandatory meetings) due to the need to get all participants in the same place at the same time. Participants in the focus groups were paid a small amount for their time, and this incentive was mentioned on the recruitment materials. The first two focus groups were stratified by county, with one held in San Francisco and one held in Alameda County at community colleges in meeting rooms on campus. The third focus group was with parent members of LIFETIME, in the conference room at the organization's office. I used the same focus group guide for all three groups (see Katz, 2008, for guide). The three focus groups lasted from 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ hours each. The focus group discussions centered on experiences under welfare reform, use of resources, and policy suggestions, and although not directly covering the women's life histories, brought up many of their experiences in the process.

During all but the 2011 phase of the research, I lived in the community⁷ and worked/volunteered with the grassroots organization LIFETIME. I came to know about one half of my research participants (LIFETIME participants and those not involved) outside of the formal interviews and focus groups through planning meetings, trainings and workshops, political actions and protests, conferences, and everyday interactions in the organization's office or on the various campuses (which I frequently visited).

Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded (except for two first interviews),⁸ and only twice did participants request that the recording be turned off for a few moments.⁹ The recordings were transcribed verbatim and entered into ATLAS.ti (version 4, Berlin, Germany) qualitative data software for coding and analysis. This study used a grounded theory approach to coding and analysis, moving back and forth between the field and my analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Codes were developed through "in vivo coding" by using participants' terms for phenomena as the code names, which "preserves participants' meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 55). Through focused coding, specific categories of coded data developed, guided by the interpretations and analysis of the participants.

Costs of Pursuing Higher Education While on Welfare

Pursuing a higher education while participating in the post-reform welfare system has real costs to mothers on welfare, and in their narratives, the mothers discussed those multiple personal costs. Understanding the costs through the mothers' voices are important for how they constructed survival narratives, which is covered in the next section. By outlining these costs, the mothers then work to explain how they survive them. These are "inside ideas" to use Collins' (1990) words; and in many cases, the mothers have not spoken about these costs to others before. However, at the same time,

through saying them aloud and then discussing how they survive them, it is an empowering moment for the participants. In this section, I explore the costs including sacrifices of their mental health, greater financial aid debt, and lost time with their families. The primary personal cost of going to school while on welfare impacted their mental health. Participants led very stressful, fragile lives, and attending school under a reformed welfare policy took a toll. Jasmine, age 39 and identifies her ethnicity as White/Latina, is a mother of three and domestic violence survivor and at the time of the first interview had recently completed her associate's degree. She revealed:

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

As Stewart et al. (2009) found, low-income people feel more socially isolated and have a "lower sense of belonging" than people with higher incomes (p. 173). The mothers in my research identified feeling socially isolated while on welfare and that the welfare regulations, especially the pressure of the "time clock" added to that sense of isolation. However, going to school and being part of an academic community helped decrease their sense of isolation.

Nicole C., age 35, White mother of two toddlers and pursuing an associate's degree, also described the impact on her mental health, particularly in light of TANF's time limits:

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

that I'm really determined, and I know that this is my only chance, and I know that. So I'm trying everything I can to make it.

Nicole C. and Jasmine, and most of the other women interviewed, struggled with the cost to their mental health, while working to meet the reformed welfare regulations, particularly the time limits, wondering if they should quit school. They addressed the emotional cost of being on welfare and in school as severe and detrimental, but they believed that if they can survive this limited time in school, they would have greater opportunities in the labor market to benefit them and their families. In addition, the women who finished school cited increased self-esteem as one of the primary meanings of their education. Therefore, while in school and on welfare, the mothers struggled with their mental health, but once they finished, many felt their self-esteem increased.

However, Jasmine is involved with LIFETIME. One of the primary goals of LIFETIME's work is to help mothers understand that the stress and anxiety they feel from being on welfare and trying to go to school is not an individual issue, but a structural one. Jasmine traced her trajectory with the organization: "I came to LIFETIME as a client about my case, being forced to quit school. And from that time, my development with LIFETIME has been a really positive and uplifting for me," and she felt that her involvement with the organization had

opened up a really big door for me in every way. It kind of brought me out of my shell, I didn't feel like I was the only one in the world and isolated in this situation, it showed me that there are other people out there facing similar barriers and challenges like myself, and a lot of people at that.

Jasmine's narrative about how she came to be involved with the organization illustrated a common thread in many of the LIFETIME mothers' narratives: she thought she was alone in her experience of pursuing higher education while in the welfare system. However, when she met a member of the organization, she found out that she was not alone in this process and became involved in LIFETIME and an active participant in grassroots politics. The main purpose of the organization is to develop a "shared critique of power" as Scott (1990) calls it and to empower parents to work collectively on grassroots campaigns to change welfare policies.¹⁰ LIFETIME works through grassroots organizing to raise awareness about the rights of low-income families and challenge welfare policy. The core of LIFETIME's organizing strategy is to empower parents to fight for their rights in the welfare system and to work collectively to change the oppressive policies for everyone. The organization works with CalWORKs parents on their immediate and personal problems with the welfare system and then focuses on

developing their leadership skills and empowering them to participate in the political process. Hardy-Fanta (1993) found, in her study of Latina/Latino politics, that women are particularly good at “making connections” between “private troubles and public issues” (p. 3) and that by addressing the private troubles, often women get involved politically in the public issues that contributed or caused the private troubles.

Another personal cost of going to school while in the reformed welfare system was incurring significant financial aid debt. Mothers rely on financial aid and loans to pay educational and living expenses; however, most federal and state educational financial aid does not cover additional costs for students who have dependent children (Spatz, Berger, & Hamud, 2000). Michelle, age 29, White mother of one, who was pregnant with her second child while enrolled in community college, disclosed that she and her daughter were actually going hungry until her financial aid check came: “So I’m kind of struggling on the food side right now because I’ve still got the same amount of money, I’ve only been surviving because I’ve recently got my school money, so that’s kind of balancing me out.” Student financial aid, whether from grants or loans, is often cited by the women as critical to their financial survival. However, financial aid checks, like welfare grants, are often late, smaller than anticipated, or are loans that create substantial debt that the mothers will eventually have to repay. Research finds that single student parents experience greater financial difficulties and incur much more student loan debt (20%–30% more) than students without children (Miller, 2012). Almost all the mothers in this research have student loan debt and struggled with how to make ends meet while on welfare and in school.

Furthermore, the systems of financial aid and welfare do not always integrate as required by regulations (Kates, 1991). In most cases, state or federal financial aid for education does not count as income; therefore, financial aid should not affect the amount of a welfare cash grant. In practice, how these systems interact is left to the individual caseworkers in the welfare system and the individual financial aid officers at each campus. Each of these line staff can be wholly unfamiliar with the rules and regulations of the other system and much misinformation is generated (Rees, 2006). Unfortunately, this misinformation has a real cost to the already vulnerable mothers who are in or attempting to go to school while on welfare. Almost all the participants in this study have struggled at one point or another with their caseworkers and school financial aid officers to make the two systems work together. Just one example, Jewel, age 37, White mother of a teenage son and a recovering drug addict, was in the process of enrolling in a local community college. She related her struggle between welfare and financial aid: “As soon as [the welfare system] hear you’re getting [financial aid] money they cut you off. Which don’t make no sense to me because we don’t even have enough money to survive on.” Although this was not “supposed” to happen, often the welfare system counted financial aid as “income” and decreased participants’

welfare cash grants. The participants who knew this was not “supposed” to happen often fought the mistake with caseworkers to have their welfare grants reinstated. However, like many caseworkers, some mothers in this study also did not know the exact regulation; and this misinformation could have discouraged others from pursuing education. Even when mothers have supportive caseworkers and supportive university staff, the two systems are not designed with the regulations of the other system in mind, so errors and problems occur. This is another way that LIFETIME empowered mothers, by teaching them more about the financial aid system and how it was supposed to work with welfare aid.

The struggle between time with their children and study time or time spent in “work participation activities” to comply with welfare requirements is another cost of survival for the mothers. One often comes at the expense of the other. Courtney, age 28, White community college student, examines her struggle between time with her son and time for her homework:

I'm losing time with my son. All the reading and all the homework doesn't mean anything, because how are you going to get there unless you do it? You have to do it . . . so the major disadvantage is not being with my son as much, always having to shoo him away because I'm in the middle of a paragraph. I mean that's tough . . . balancing that is tough, because my son is important, but also is school.

Courtney's struggle revealed what was felt by most of the mothers interviewed: going to school on welfare created a daily battle in which mothers must decide between their own school work, complying with the welfare “participation” requirements, and time with their children. Although this conflict was not unfamiliar to any mother in school and/or working, because of the precarious balance mothers on welfare must achieve to stay in school, their struggle between time with their children and time for studying or complying with welfare participation was perhaps more acute. Although the mothers acknowledged that there were costs to being a parent while in school on welfare, they constructed their narratives of survival to give meaning to their struggle and empower themselves to keep going in a system that is convinced they will fail.

Constructing Survival Narratives

In their narratives, mothers examined their efforts to stay in school and discussed how they responded to the multiple problems they experienced in their daily lives. Their narratives of survival are both personal “hidden transcripts” and “inside ideas” in that they were the messages that they tell themselves to convince themselves to persevere, and through this study, these hidden transcripts/inside ideas become public narratives of survival.

The mothers' narratives are individual, as is explored in this section, and collective in critique of the welfare system, which are explored later in the article. The mothers identified the varied techniques they used to survive and constructed their narratives by convincing themselves that failure is not an option, guarding against losing themselves, accessing available resources, outsmarting the system, and doing whatever is necessary to make ends meet. Often they have to survive one day at a time. These are the common themes that appeared throughout the mothers' narratives of survival, and these themes also illustrate covert forms of resistance. Many times several of these themes appeared simultaneously interwoven in the mothers' narratives, and the complexity of this will be illustrated in the discussion below. Betty's narrative exemplified her determination to finish school:

Sometimes I feel as though I've been struggling for so long and it's never going to get better and not just I should say fuck it, but I keep telling myself, Betty, you have made it this far, you've got into this program, you're not as smart as some of the other people there, but I just have to remind myself maybe I'm smarter in other ways and I have more experience, so I just have to keep saying that and I know that I've come this far and I can't give up, but it's hard.

In Betty's survival narrative she reminded herself of how far she has come, and that she must continue because failure was not an option. She acknowledged her frustrations and her daily struggle, but she used her narrative as a motivation to push herself forward toward her goal of completing her degree.

Sydney, a Black mother of three who recently finished her bachelor's degree and was now working full-time in her field and off welfare, warns against losing yourself in the welfare system:

I'd say it is worth whatever fight that you have to put up to finish school. And in whatever degree that you decide to be in. Be it however you have to work the system, don't lose yourself because of the welfare system, because it is easy to do. It's easy to lose what you want and who you are in the welfare system.

Sydney focused on her determination to stay in school, yet she warned "don't lose yourself because of the welfare system." Interactions with the welfare system and pressures to choose between welfare and their educational goals force many of the mothers to make hard decisions, often at the expense of their self-esteem, personal goals, or core beliefs. Throughout her experience on welfare, Sydney struggled with the welfare system to stay in school and major in accounting, because caseworkers tried to force her to change majors or quit school. Her technique for guarding against "losing yourself"

focused on mothers remembering their values and determination to accomplish their educational goals, while resisting the welfare system's idea of what women on welfare should aspire to do. Betty and Sydney are involved with LIFETIME, and aspects of their determination may come from the leadership trainings.

In their narratives, the mothers' determination and belief that failure was unacceptable was crucial to accessing the resources they needed to survive. For Angela, a 19-year-old Latina community college student with an infant, but not involved with LIFETIME, her survival narrative included advice to other students on welfare. She illustrated her determination to find and utilize resources as key elements to her survival:

To not give up. Just, I mean, look, people might push you away, say they can't help you, there is some people who will tell you that they can't help you, when they can help you. You just need to move and ask the next person, just don't give up with the person. Check your resources; move on to the next person. If someone won't help you, you are bound to click with somebody else. Somebody is bound to give you that helping hand. You can't give up. Because if you give up, you give up on yourself.

Through Angela's emphasis on finding available resources, she encouraged mothers to persist to locate the wherewithal they needed to survive. Angela's comments combine three elements of the survival narratives: she determined that failure is not an option, so she must persevere to discover the necessary resources, and she must stay on guard against losing herself to the welfare system.

Michelle, in her determination to finish school, highlighted these elements again and an additional element of the survival narratives, outsmarting the system. "(Going to school) has to do with your dedication and determination. If you think you can do it, you can do it. And there are resources out there, but you have to know the ins and outs." Outsmarting the system, for mothers, included not only learning the rules and regulations, but also the loopholes—as Michelle put it, "the ins and outs," in the welfare system to pursue a higher education. As Michelle pointed out, finding and gaining access to available resources was related to outsmarting the welfare system. Sometimes the resources that mothers accessed were external to the welfare system; sometimes they were internal to the system. Therefore, their narratives included ways to navigate and outsmart the welfare system to obtain needed resources. Dena, 42-year-old White mother of one completing her last semester of her associate's degree, talked about how she learned to outsmart the welfare system despite its labyrinth of ever-changing rules which created new obstacles for her:

I've gotten smarter and I've seen how it works. I'm doing what is necessary for me to get where I am, because I don't feel like I have them

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

Although Michelle nor Dena were involved with LIFETIME, this is a strategy used by the organization.

Sometimes survival was as straightforward as using available resources or learning to outsmart the system; sometimes to survive, mothers contemplated and/or engaged in illicit activities to make ends meet. These activities included taking a cash-paying job, not reporting finances correctly to the welfare office, dealing drugs, stripping, prostitution, or selling food stamps. However, most of the women in this study who mentioned these activities were just contemplating it, while discussing their feelings of being entrapped into making hard survival decisions. Misha, 29-year-old Black mother of one, pursuing her associate's degree, speculated on making ends meet in any way necessary:

But I have contemplated, can I be a stripper, I knew, I mean, I contemplated, and then I think about, I know that I couldn't be a prostitute, I know that is wrong, but, I do need this money, because of my daughter . . . what am I gonna to do, what can I do? So, all these degrading thoughts come through your head, what can I do?

Misha's struggle to make ends meet led her to consider stripping for cash or even prostitution just to be able to provide for her daughter, pay her rent, and stay in school. Many mothers discussed feeling trapped while trying to make ends meet, in ways that are not approved by the welfare system, just to be able to survive continuing their education. Their narratives demonstrate their "hidden transcripts," as Scott (1990) or "inside ideas" as Collins (1990) calls them portraying an intimate struggle with hard choices.

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

I focus on getting through each semester by dealing with all my paperwork, everything for welfare, all the financial aid paperwork, so that at least I know I can make it through *this* semester. And then I deal with next semester, *next semester*.

Her narrative illustrates the importance for these women of getting through a finite amount of time, and worrying later about what is to come. Her statements reflected feeling overwhelmed when she considered all of the obstacles that she must overcome to finish her education. Her coping strategy was to focus on a manageable amount of time to endure her daily struggles. D, 46-year-old Black mother of three who was finishing her associate's degree, gave this advice:

The biggest tip that I'd give you or anyone is that it'll pass. Everything seems so real for the moment . . . you hear all these things, it'll pass. Don't freak out. It'll pass. You're going to get what you need, just don't let that control you, you control it.

This advice by D and Betty not only focused on how to survive one day at a time, or one semester at a time, but also illustrated the theme of not losing yourself.

These aspects of women's survival narratives—convincing themselves that failure is not an option, guarding against losing themselves, accessing available resources, outsmarting the system, doing whatever is necessary to make ends meet, and taking one day at a time—illustrated how the mothers struggled within a welfare system that was intentionally designed to discourage their educational goals. By constructing their narratives, women were telling themselves and others like them how to survive to finish school. Further, aspects of their narratives illustrate Luna's (2009) concept of covert resistance, especially the cases of "outsmarting the system." This resistance, in most cases, "is intended as resistance by actors, is not recognized as resistance by targets, but is recognized as resistance by observers" (Luna, p. 444). However, occasionally, the women's narratives may be recognized by the welfare system as resistance to its policies, but usually not.

Implementing Survival Strategies

The mothers constructed their individual survival narratives to give meaning to their experience, but they must also materially survive day to day and provide for their families. Therefore, they also discuss the on-the-ground survival strategies that they employ to meet their and their families' needs. Participating in the welfare system does not provide adequate resources for mothers who are pursuing higher education. Participants often talked about the barriers they encountered and listed what they need to survive. The

women's survival through school focused on meeting the basic needs of their families, meeting their own and their families' emotional and physical health requirements, and also meeting their needs as students. The needs that the mothers faced can be divided into five basic categories. The first two categories are physical and material, which includes housing, utilities, food, cash, clothing, and transportation. The third category is educational, which includes books and supplies, tutoring, remedial assistance, study time or space, access to technology or a computer, and accommodations for learning dis/abilities. The fourth category is health, which includes access to ongoing health care for themselves and their children, dental and eye care, and accommodation for physical disabilities; emotional, which includes therapy, support groups, or networks, sense of belonging or contact with other student parents, and accommodations for mental health issues. Finally, the fifth category is family, which includes ongoing child care, drop-in or sick child care, and family-friendly study options. In addition, student needs were greatest at the beginning and end of the semesters, because these were the times when students were dealing with a tremendous amount of paperwork and negotiations with caseworkers and counselors, adjusting to new schedules and classes, meshing their child care needs to their new schedules, and had increased materials needs such as new books and supplies for the semester. The August "back-to-school" phenomenon was particularly hard because mothers and their children had all of these increased needs, on extremely limited of family resources. This time was also problematic for caseworkers, who were not often situated to handle increased amounts of paperwork and pressing needs of student families.

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

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

I have a calendar, and I live by that calendar, I write everything down on that calendar: all my appointments, the kids' appointments, my bill deadlines. I've got to do that, otherwise I get discombobulated and I'll forget something, and sometimes I just say no to some things, and I have to say no . . . so I pick out the most important and I do those things, and if by a miracle I have time left over then I'll go to the secondary things.

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

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

And when I first went into this, I thought school was going to be easy, I deceived myself because I thought, I am working 55 hours a week at my job. I can go to school for four hours a day . . . it is more strenuous to go to school, than it was for me to work. . . . Anyway, in the beginning . . . I didn't have a clue. Now, through experience, I know that I have to have my schedule, and I have to stick to it. There are a certain amount of hours that I have to allot to this, otherwise I am not going to get the grade. And then, I used to just think in those terms, to where I would just put everything to my school work. But then, my kids, were before I looked at it, it's like, gosh, they don't have clean clothes, they don't have nothing to eat. So, then I have to balance that too. And I have to take some me time too . . . so, it is just about prioritizing, and organizing the time, there are 24 hours in a day, and each minute has to be allotted for something.

Another personal coping strategy that many women mentioned dealt with the problem of how to fit in study time when their children were asleep, but they (the adults) were still fresh enough to learn. As Nicole C., 35-year-old White mother of two, explained,

by the time night time comes and I've got them fed and in bed and everything I'm so tired, I've tried to stay up and do homework, but my eyes are burning and I'm falling asleep and it's just not happening for me, so I started going to sleep with them early and getting up at 2 and 4 o'clock in the morning to try to do my homework.

This strategy, of doing their homework and studying in the middle of the night, was often not sustainable. Nicole later said, the advantage is "I have the time all to myself, it's quiet, I've have rested, but then I get burned. I can only do it for so long at a time, so I get burned out and then I just crash." Because of the strain placed on the mothers, many of the individual coping strategies have the same result: they were only a temporary fix, to be used for a short period of time, and often caused burn-out.

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

I would say first get a schedule out for yourself, second of all prioritize. Going to school has taught me to say *no*, as a woman, especially as a Latina woman, you're supposed to say *yes* to everything, you're supposed to take care of the children, you're supposed to take care of the man and your grandmother and everybody, take care of everybody, but you know what? Sometimes it's ok to say no, it's okay to say no, I don't have time for this . . . and get support, get your friends and build a network of friends and family . . . just network, that's really the important thing, and keep in mind that this is your goal . . . don't try to do everything at once or you'll go crazy.

Networking can provide emotional support and material support. The members of these networks were sometimes personal friends and family, or contacts met through organizations. As D explained, her tenure in the area, and her LIFETIME involvement, provided her with an extensive network of contacts: "well, I go through my phone book because I have a list . . . I get on the phone in a minute, and say 'can you guys do this for me?' and they are mostly rides (laughs). I still don't have a car." D's lack of a car had her reaching out to find resources to get her, literally, where she needed to go.

Campus resources were often mentioned, as very helpful and as insufficient. There are many campus resources, especially at the community colleges, that are designed to help low-income, first-generation, or returning students, and the mothers stressed the importance of those institutional

resources. For example, Monique, 25-year-old Black mother of one, said that CalWORKs students should

use all the programs in school, all the ones that you qualify for, apply, use them, cause they can be helpful, you can get extra money for books, they will help you with tutoring . . . all the programs that you qualify for, apply and use them, put them to use, that's what they are there for.

Keisha, 20-year-old Black mother of one and pregnant with her second, echoed Monique's sentiment and also used the faculty and their office hours as an additional campus resource. She added: "plus the teachers I have they are nice, they have a little time you can come to their office and they help you do everything." Staff and faculty also make a difference in meeting student's needs.

Unfortunately, not all of the campuses have equal resources; specifically, the University of California and California State University schools do not have system-wide supportive programs for low-income single parents like the community colleges do. This is very unfortunate because the CalWORKs students' needs are greater as they progress through higher degrees. As Tony, 33-year-old Black mother of two who just finished her bachelor's degree at the University of California Berkeley, pointed out:

My experience at Cal could have been a lot better if, if the mechanisms to support students like me, that are single parents or reentry students, were enclaves. They have a center for re-entry, and student parents, etc., older transfer students but it is not at the level that I think you would need for it to be effective. So, it is almost like, every agency that provides some sort of service, some sort of direct service agency, even on campus, wants you to jump through 18 hoops just to qualify or be able to receive their service, so, after a while you get tired of it. Because you have school, and you have got all this other stuff to kinda deal with, and you can't be involved in every organization . . . I find that not enough [student parents] get extra support . . . lots of other programs that you might be qualified for, but for some reason, I don't ever see it hitting those parents, I see it hitting traditional age students.

The students who transferred from community colleges to state universities were often surprised at how scarce resources were at the universities. They did not feel they had any of the support that was present in the community colleges, even when there was campus organizations dedicated to student parents.

Mothers also used community resources to fill their needs. Many used local food banks, clothing closets, advocacy and legal aid organizations, free clinics, and most participated in at least one program during the winter

holidays for food and gifts. One of the most common needs was fresh fruits, vegetables, meats, and dairy, which are expensive on food stamps, and only a few of the local food banks stock fresh items. As Michelle, 29-year-old White mother of one and currently pregnant, explained:

We go over to the church on Fruitvale . . . it just depends on what they have, sometimes it's fruits and vegetables, sometimes it's canned goods . . . it's not necessarily enough to make a meal out of, but it definitely adds to your meals . . . but it adds to what you've got and it helps. Helps spread it out a little bit ... especially the fruits and vegetables.

Some community organizations required parents to actively participate to use their resources. These resources were still important to the mothers, but as Angela puts it,

there was so much that I was trying to put on my plate, I got involved in so much, and I had just finished having a baby, so I just dropped some of the programs regardless [of the need for the resource].

Besides participation requirements, another obstacle to accessing resources was the availability and women's knowledge of resources. If a mother did not know about a resource, it did not "exist" to her. As Phoebe, 39-year-old immigrant mother of one and graduate student, said, "I tap into things, whether it's online or whether it's face to face or just through reading some literature that I pick up . . . I am using a lot of resources." The access points for resources were important for mothers who were busy and often did not have time to make additional appointments in their schedules. Mothers needed resources that were easy to access when they had time to search for them, which was usually outside regular business hours. Therefore, resource centers, online access, and distribution through existing networks helped connect parents to resources that they needed to survive.

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

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

night, and you can go out, have a night off and get to have some adult time. Which is really important just for emotional respite, so that I am not [her daughter]'s mom, I get to be me.

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

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

Although both recognized the utmost importance of supportive friends and family, especially those with resources, one mother had them and the other did not. The difference was access to familial resources and was notable in three regards as it related to Daria's and Jasmine's lives: housing, child care, and transportation. For Daria, her housing issues were easily resolved by her grandfather who frequently paid her rent, her child care issues were resolved by friends willing to take care of her daughter, and her transportation issues were remedied by her mother, who bought Daria a brand-new car because she was sick of her car breaking down. Jasmine, who called her family middle class related that they did not have the financial resources of Daria's family. She experienced long bouts of homelessness, continued domestic violence, and ongoing transportation issues with an old car. The importance of these familial resources is also found by Barnes (2008) in her study of working poor single mothers.

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

Critiquing A Welfare System that Necessitates Educational Survival Narratives

Another central component of these narratives is the mothers' assessment of welfare reform, especially those mothers who were involved in LIFETIME. In an effort to understand and overcome the barriers to pursuing higher education while on welfare, the mothers speculated about the objectives of the welfare "reform" laws that have created a system in which parents must "participate" to receive benefits. Further, through their participation, they must construct survival strategies, and the narratives that result, to use the benefits that welfare offers. They expressed their extreme frustration with policy makers who have constructed a system filled with structural barriers to their success and that contributed to a culture of shame and failure for its participants. Further, especially as seen with the mothers who are involved with LIFETIME, they have created a "shared critique of power" as Scott (1990) calls it. The mothers identified the intentionality of the policy makers in constructing a system they must "survive."

As Misha, 29-year-old Black mother of one, explained:

I think they think that you are gonna fail. I really do, I really do . . . I don't think they care. I don't think they see the importance [of going to school] . . . it's like life and death. This is the only way that I can live. I have to get this. And they don't care. I really don't think they care.

Misha deconstructed the irony of welfare reform for parents in school: the system wanted them to fail. Although Misha was not involved with LIFETIME at her first interview with me, she later became involved and her critiques of the system became even sharper.

To these mothers it appeared that the system was designed by policy makers to encourage their failure so that they would be forced to drop out of higher education and engage instead in "work-first" activities. By creating structural barriers for mothers who were pursuing higher education—such as sanctioning them for not quitting school, dictating what majors they can pursue, or withholding support services while they were in school—the welfare system created a self-fulfilling prophecy. Previous research shows that only a fraction of women who enroll in school were able to survive and complete their higher education while on welfare (Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006). These structural barriers are especially interesting given that these are implemented simultaneously with policy makers referring to the same group of welfare participants as the most "motivated." This paradox did not go unnoticed by participants; Dena adamantly illustrated:

The one thing that I wish that they would do is target the people that *don't do shit* [emphasizes last 3 words by jabbing the tabletop]. Excuse

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

Again, although Dena was not involved with LIFETIME, we can see through her comments that she identifies that the TANF program targets student parents for noncompliance of the 'work-first' regulations, even though they are working hard in school.

Marie, 30-year-old White mother of two children, who recently finished her Bachelor's degree, added:

when recipients *are* trying to better their life *by* going to college, putting strict timelines on them when they are making progress, or limiting what areas they can go into, I just think that stinks! If they're going to go and get a bachelor's degree, regardless of what it's in, that's going to help them be more employable . . . so it seems a bummer that recipients tend to get the short end of the stick or they want to make all these restrictions on them to make it harder.

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

Moreover, the 2006 reauthorization of TANF further tightened the rules for pursuing higher education while on welfare, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2006) explicitly stated: "TANF program was not intended to be a college scholarship program" (p. 36460). Betty, an active parent leader with LIFETIME, targeted these policy changes, especially the time limits on welfare, in her survival narrative:

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

Her work with LIFETIME and advocating with other parents for access to higher education for welfare families shows in her knowledge of the policies, and critique of the language and purpose of the policy. Her statement “just give us a chance to get an education” illustrates the shared critique of power that LIFETIME works to develop in parents. Betty wants her own education, but just as much wants mothers like herself to also have that opportunity under welfare policy.

Survival Narratives Illustrate the Failure of Welfare “Reform”

The mothers in this study, and others like them pursuing higher education while on welfare, are held up as “model” welfare participants by policy makers, as the “success” stories of welfare reform. The policy makers and their staff individually praise the mothers’ hard work to change their economic position and think of them as examples of the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” rhetoric of welfare reform. At the same time, they tell the mothers to avoid emphasizing their roles as students when testifying for budget hearings on welfare issues or talking with the more conservative policy makers.¹¹ However, mothers, especially the ones that participate with LIFETIME, are critical of that rhetoric. They want their “inside ideas” and “hidden transcripts” known by policy makers who craft and implement the TANF policies. Many studies show that women’s desire to enroll in and complete higher education helps them “earn” their way off welfare in jobs with wages that support their families and makes them economically stable. Most never need welfare again (Gittell et al., 1993; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2006; Katz, 2011; Mathur, 2004). Simultaneously with being called “model” welfare participants, they are also severely penalized for being so “motivated” by a welfare system that explicitly devalues higher education. Therefore, these mothers fight every step of the way to finish their education while on welfare; they must learn how to survive the system to finish school.

Instead of supporting the rhetoric of welfare reform as a “success,” the mothers in this study constructed survival narratives to expose their “hidden transcripts” and “inside ideas” as participants in the welfare system and their forms of resistance to its policies. The mothers used their narratives to motivate and energize themselves and others like them, despite the structural obstacles to their pursuit of higher education while in the welfare system. These narratives were also directed at policy makers. Scott (1990) emphasizes the need for uncovering these hidden transcripts, because “any analysis based exclusively on the public transcript is likely to conclude that subordinate groups endorse the terms of their subordination and are willing, even enthusiastic, partners in that subordination” (p. 4). A central unique contribution of this research is showing that instead of being enthusiastic partners in the proclamation that welfare reform is a success, the student welfare mothers critiqued and resisted the “reform” that created a system that necessitates

survival narratives of the most motivated of its participants. Their critique illustrates the central failure of welfare reform: If the most “motivated” must create survival narratives to use public assistance, how can welfare “reform” be deemed a “success”?

Finally, we need to pay attention to welfare policy and higher educational practices that affect low-income student parents. The mothers’ policy suggestions focus on increasing access to higher education for all low-income students, but especially student parents on welfare. First, colleges and universities can create programs and supportive services for low-income students and student parents on campus, in much the same way as the California Community Colleges have. The programs and supports need to increase as students move from community colleges to universities, not decrease, like they do in California. As the level of education gets higher, supportive services are more deeply needed by student parents. Second, according to the mothers, welfare policy needs reform again. The “work-first” approach of welfare policy has not created upward mobility for low-income parents (Katz, 2012) and should be expanded to include allowing mothers who participate in the welfare system to pursue associate’s and bachelor’s degrees while on welfare. Mothers on welfare, who are pursuing higher education and abiding by the other TANF policies, should have their TANF time clocks stopped for the time that they are in school. TANF should provide assistance to parents in school for textbooks, educational materials, transportation, and child care for study time. Further, the systems of welfare and financial aid can be changed so that they are more integrated and efficient, take into consideration the additional costs of raising children while in college, and work to help a low-income parent get a higher education instead of hindering her or saddling her with insurmountable debt. As Betty said, “just give us a chance to get an education.” The mothers will take it from there.

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NOTES

1. For more on the self-sufficiency standard see www.selfsufficiencystandard.org/.
2. There is a vast literature on the survival narratives of Holocaust survivors, and any discussion of survival narratives attributes framing to those narratives; some examples are Young (1990), Langer (1991), and Waxman (2006). However, surviving poverty is different because it is an economic survival, instead of a literal fight for life. This article engages and positions itself alongside the current literature on economic survival narratives; Edin and Lein's (1997) *Making Ends Meet* is a primary example.
3. The prevailing idea behind this is that women on welfare who are enrolled in higher education are highly motivated, will "make it" without welfare and, thus, do not need the assistance. One of the themes of the TANF reauthorization is to further restrict access to higher education and job training. In the TANF Interim Final Rule issued in June 2006, the Department of Health and Human Services explicitly stated that "TANF is not a scholarship program" (see <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/law-reg/tfinrule.html> for the full text of the Interim Final Rule). The idea is that women on welfare who are enrolled in higher education are very motivated, but should not be 'rewarded' with a college scholarship just because they have children. Instead, if they want to pursue higher education they should be removed from assistance and put on financial aid, mainly loans, to go to school.
4. Most of the women who participated in the interviews or focus groups considered themselves "single mothers" regardless of whether they were dating, involved, or living with their children's father. Usually the women were on single-parent welfare grants, but in three cases, they were on two-parent welfare grants but still identified as "single" because they were not married to their partner (who in all three cases was the children's father). From discussions of their relationships with their partners, their identity as a "single mother" comes from economic and legal reasons. Legally in all three cases, they were not married to their partners, and for the most part, by choice; in other words, the man wanted to get married, but the woman did not. Furthermore, it seemed that the women preferred to be on single-parent grants, even though it is slightly less money for the family, because it requires less paperwork and bureaucracy and frees up the other parent to work and not be subject to the welfare system's rules and regulations.
5. Percentages calculated from reports on California Department of Social Services website (www.dss.cahwnet.gov).
6. When interviews were conducted at coffee shops or in restaurants, I purchased the food as a modest "thank you" for their participation. When the interviews were in other locations, I carried a small "snack bag" with me to the interview that had a few bottles of water, cans of soda, bags of chips, candy bars, granola bars, and pieces of fresh fruit to offer to participants. In most cases, they had at least a drink and usually a snack. In one case the mother asked if she could have all of it for her children's lunch the next day, and I did give her everything I had.
7. During first and second interviews, I lived in U.C. Berkeley's family housing, U.C. Village. LIFETIME was founded in the Village in 1996, and many staff and board lived there. Four participants lived in the Village while I did.
8. In both cases, these were first interviews with mothers who were not native English speakers; they said they felt self-conscious of their English, and they did not want it recorded. I took extensive notes during both interviews. However, in one case, she went on to complete second and third interviews, and allowed me to record those.

9. On one occasion, the mother wanted to discipline her toddler and did not want it recorded. The other occasion, a participant wanted to explain her partner's cash work and did not mind if I took notes, but did not want it recorded.

10. In addition to the interviews and focus groups, over four years I have observed, participated in, and in some cases have helped plan and carry out events with LIFETIME. These events included workshops, parent leadership trainings, political empowerment trainings, legislative briefings and visits in Washington, D.C., and in Sacramento, policy meetings, protest actions and political theatre, and grassroots convenings and conferences.

11. In conversations with LIFETIME's directors, they tell me that they have been told by consultants to the California Senate's Budget Committee, the California Assembly's Health and Human Services committee, and aides to legislators on several occasions not to talk about education and training programs for mothers on welfare because it is an "unsympathetic issue." Republican lawmakers on those committees believe that welfare is not a scholarship program (which is a commonly used phrase) and that mothers on welfare who are pursuing higher education are "highly motivated" and "would go to school anyway" if welfare was not supporting them. So, instead, the consultants and aides tell LIFETIME's directors, the mothers who participate in legislative visits should downplay their role as students to gain credibility as "average" mothers on welfare. However, the directors of LIFETIME argue that these women are "average" women on welfare, and that most welfare parents, given the chance, would be successful in the community colleges. This research supports LIFETIME's directors' position, because many of the women in this study were identified as having "multiple barriers" to employment and told that they were "not exactly college material" by caseworkers who tried to get them to quit school.

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