

# Ideologies of class, motherhood, and work: The subject of the working mother viewed the lens of welfare reform

Author: Anna C. Korteweg

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**Ideologies of Class, Motherhood, and Work:  
The Subject of the Working Mother Viewed  
Through the Lens of Welfare Reform**

*Anna C. Korteweg, MA\**

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\*Anna C. Korteweg is a Pre-Doctoral Fellow at the Center for Working Families and a Ph.D. candidate in the Sociology Department at the University of California Berkeley.

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### **Abstract**

This paper addresses whether the middle-class ideology of intensive mothering extends to low-income, welfare-reliant women. I analyze how welfare caseworkers negotiate this ideology in their attempts to transform welfare-reliant women from perceived stay-at-home mothers into working mothers. I conclude that Sharon Hays's argument that the ideology of intensive mothering determines the experience of motherhood of all mothers in the United States regardless of class, ethnic/race background and regardless of whether they are stay-at-home mothers or engaged in the labor market is flawed. To explain how caseworkers approach welfare-reliant women, I turn to Gwendolyn Mink's analysis of the ideology of motherhood reflected in the 1996 welfare reform Act. She argues that the state does not allow poor single women to mother in the same way as middle-class women. Analyzing Job Club, a mandatory week-long workshop for welfare-reliant women who have not found employment on their own, I show how trainers deploy three discursive strategies in their attempts to enforce a class and gender-based ideology of work and motherhood. I conclude that these trainers, themselves part of the middle-class, construct a particular ideal of the working mother that is not based on the ideology of intensive mothering.

Does the middle-class ideology of intensive mothering extend to low-income, welfare-reliant women? How do welfare caseworkers negotiate this ideology in their attempts to transform welfare-reliant women from perceived stay-at-home mothers into working mothers? Sharon Hays (1996) argues that the ideology of intensive mothering dominates the experience of professional, middle-class mothers, regardless of whether they stay at home with their children or are engaged in the labor market. In addition, she claims that this ideology also significantly affects working-class and poor women's mothering experiences. By contrast, in her discussion of the ideology of motherhood reflected in the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, Gwendolyn Mink (1998) argues that the state does not allow poor single women to mother in the same way as middle-class women. Instead, the state seeks to minimize welfare-reliant women's mothering. In this paper, I turn to the implementation of welfare reform to assess which ideology is dominant in Job Club trainers' interactions with welfare-reliant women. Mink analyzes the letter of the law; I move out of the legislative arena to ask how motherhood is given meaning in a site of policy implementation. Looking at ethnographic data gathered in welfare-to-work workshops, I examine the ideologies of motherhood that are negotiated by representatives of the welfare state in their interactions with welfare-reliant women.

With the 1996 passage of the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), the United States abandoned its already eroded commitment to supporting stay-at-home mothering for poor single mothers by making paid work and work-related activities a mandatory condition for receiving aid. In addition, PRWORA removed the entitlement to income support for single mothers and placed a five-year lifetime cap on receiving welfare, turning Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) into Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Finally, authority over the content of welfare programs devolved to the individual states, many of which instituted short-term welfare-to-work training programs. In the Summer of 1999, I was a participant observer in these training programs, called Job Clubs, in California. Job Clubs are weeklong workshops that welfare-reliant women who have not found work on their own must attend. In these weeklong programs, I demonstrate, welfare state representatives interact with welfare-reliant women to produce a class-specific incarnation of the subject of the working mother.

There have historically been strong linkages between middle-class ideologies of motherhood and the efforts of welfare programs to use incentives and punishments to change how citizens behave. As many scholars have shown, mothers' pensions legislation, the predecessor of Aid to (Families with) Dependent Children (A(F)DC),<sup>1</sup> was rooted in the early 20th century reform movement in which white upper-middle class women directly engaged with poor immigrant women in an attempt to transform them into proper American citizens, a citizenship that rested on particular ideologies of motherhood (Gordon 1994, Skocpol 1992, Koven and Michel 1990, Mink 1990, Wilkinson 1999). More recently, the welfare state has come to emphasize work over motherhood in its interaction with aid recipients, often using the fact that a majority of middle-class mothers work as justification for requiring other mothers also to be employed. As Little (1999) shows, training programs instituted after the 1988 passage of JOBS legislation aimed to transform welfare-reliant women into paid workers. These programs were quite similar to the ones developed since the passage of PRWORA in 1996. What has changed since 1996 is the context within which these training programs take place. Prior to 1996, welfare legislation retained some ambiguity about the trade-off between enforcing work and supporting stay-at-home motherhood. Since 1996, the welfare state has been committed solely to directing women to the labor market for the satisfaction of their and their families' material needs.<sup>2</sup>

Most current research on welfare reform tends to focus on the material effects of these policies. Although this research is extremely important, welfare reform also has profound implications for women's subjective experiences of paid work and family, implications currently undertheorized and underreported.<sup>3</sup> I argue that the meanings of poor women's motherhood are not simply determined at the legislative level, as Mink (1998) implies, but also in interactions between representatives of the state and welfare-reliant women. To begin an analysis of these interactions, I turn to the ways in which the welfare state constructs women's subjectivity. Defining "subjectivity" as the socially reinforced conceptualization of self that informs action, I play off the dual meanings of being an agentic subject and being subjected to forces outside of one's control. I conclude that United States social policy is now generating a subject who will no longer have face-to-face ties to the welfare state and whose motherhood is to take second place

to her status as paid worker. In the past, welfare programs endlessly processed welfare-reliant women even as they professed a desire to strengthen women's ties to the labor market, leaving some fluidity in the balance between these women's identities as mothers and as workers (Goodwin 1995, Little 1999). With welfare reform, this fluidity is ending as the state seems to favor the adoption of the subjectivity of a mother whose parenting is secondary to her paid work. Given these legislative changes, what ideology informs the state's construction of the motherhood of welfare-reliant women? To answer this question, I focus on the discourses Job Club trainers use to transform welfare-reliant women into paid workers.

### **Class, Paid Work, and Ideologies of Motherhood**

Combining paid work and motherhood has become the norm for women in the United States. In 2000, 54% of mothers with children under 18 worked full-time, 16% worked part-time, and 27% were not in the labor force (Alstott, 2002).<sup>4</sup> Logically, one would expect working women's understandings of their motherhood to be adapted to their demanding schedules. However, based on an analysis of child-rearing advice books and in-depth interviews with 38 mothers whose background varied along class and ethnic lines, Hays (1996) argues that the ideology that informs women's experiences is the same for stay-at-home and working mothers alike. For all these mothers, "the methods of appropriate child rearing are construed as *child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive*" (Hays 1996:8, italics in original). Hays further argues that this ideology, with its emphasis on mothers' selflessness, stands in sharp contrast with another dominant ideology, which holds that people's actions are increasingly motivated by self-interest. For her, intensive mothering, despite all its problems for gender equality, is an important push-back against the individualistic tendencies of contemporary society.

Although stay-at-home motherhood might seem to be the practice that most closely matches the ideology of intensive mothering, Hays (1996, chapter 6) shows how working mothers in the paid labor force use the same ideology to justify their labor force participation. These mothers argue that their children benefit from having a mother who is able to focus her attentions elsewhere for part of the day because this improves the quality of the attention they do

give to their children. In addition, their labor force participation enables mothers to purchase the material goods and services, such as piano, judo, and ballet lessons, high-quality day care, and educational opportunities, that are all deemed crucial to a child's development. In other words, instead of focusing on their own needs to justify their desire to work, these mothers frame their engagement in the labor market in terms of their children's needs, with the centrality of the child as a hallmark of the ideology of intensive mothering.

Hays (1996:86-96) argues that although middle-class in origin, the ideology of intensive mothering shapes the experience of mothers regardless of class or ethnic/racial background. However, three articles in the anthology, *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, paint a different picture of the connection between class, ethnicity, race, and motherhood. In her introduction, Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1994:7) argues that white middle-class mothers ability to be "intensive mothers" (though she does not use this terminology) depends on the labor of working-class and poor mothers, often women of color. However, women's inability to live up to the standards set by this ideology does not mean that they are not influenced by it. Patricia Hill Collins's argument in the same volume sheds some light on this issue. She implies that the concerns of white middle-class mothers are so remote as to be irrelevant to the experiences of poor "racial and ethnic mothers." Collins (1994:45-62) contrasts the experiences of mothers who struggle for the physical survival of their children with the emphasis privileged white middle-class women place on the psychological well-being of their offspring and shows that ultimately the practices of these two groups are influenced by different ideologies. On the other hand, Denise Segura (1994) analyzes the different meanings attached to paid work by working-class Chicanas and Mexicanas. She found that Chicanas, who were raised in the United States, see their work as an obstacle to providing appropriately for their children in terms that resonate with the ideology of intensive mothering. By contrast, Mexicanas, who are new immigrants, see their paid work as a natural extension of their mothering, clearly stepping outside this supposedly dominant ideology. Taking these three essays together, I hypothesize that, although there might be a trickle-down effect, Hays (1996) downplays the impact of poor and working-class women's material circumstances on the ways they confront the ideology of intensive mothering.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to welfare-reliant women, Mink makes a strong case that, at the legislative level, the ideology of intensive mothering passes them by. In her book, *Welfare's End*, Mink (1998:120) argues that PRWORA does not grant poor single mothers, particularly if they are black, the same choice of “care-giving over wage-earning” that married, middle-class women have by virtue of having wage-earning husbands. In general, Mink argues, “welfare law codifies disdain for poor single mothers *as mothers*” (p. 121, italics in original). Citing a White House conference that focused on a study that showed that young children’s brain development benefited greatly from being around adults who spoke to them, the type of study that supports the ideology of intensive mothering, Mink argues that policy makers took this to argue “for tax incentives to make it easier for parents to stay home” (p. 121). However, this prescription did not extend to welfare-reliant women. “[O]ne Clinton official insisted that when it comes to welfare families, wage work is more important than care-giving, the moral discipline of mothers more important than the intellectual growth of their children” (p. 121). In other words, according to Mink, national level policy makers do not apply the ideology of intensive mothering to poor, single welfare-reliant women in part because these women are framed as inadequate mothers. Instead, government policies attempt to minimize direct interaction between them and their children, assuming that poor mothers are by definition bad mothers.

In sum, it is unclear how far the middle-class ideology of intensive mothering extends to poor, welfare-reliant women. Hays (1996) implies that this ideology is dispersed through cultural products such as books and radio and TV shows and thus affects everybody. However, Mink (1998) suggests that a different ideology of motherhood is at play in the social policy arena, an ideology that directly affects welfare-reliant women though it might act upon other women as well. Yet, even if Mink is right, policy makers do not deal with the day-to-day realities of welfare-reliant women. Ultimately, policies get made on the ground and the question is how these divergent ideologies of motherhood affect the actions of street-level bureaucrats (see also Lipsky 1980). To arbitrate between Hays’s argument that intensive mothering affects all mothers and Mink’s argument that social policy toward poor single mothers is shaped by a distinctly different ideology, I analyze the discursive strategies Job Club trainers develop as they attempt to transform welfare-reliant women into working mothers.



## **Background and Methods**

The California version of TANF, California Work Opportunity and Responsibility for Kids or CalWORKs, was implemented statewide on January 1, 1998. On that date, over 29,716 families in Burnett County, an urban Northern California county, relied on welfare.<sup>6</sup> By September 1999, this number had dropped to 23,284. Of these 23,284 families, 51% were African American, 14% were Asian, 14% were Hispanic, and 8.5% were white, with the remainder falling into other categories. More than half of these families were participating in some CalWORKs activity, which included part-time work, training programs, and sessions to orient them to the new law. Almost 4,000 families were in the process of being enrolled in CalWORKs, over 5,000 families were exempt from participation, and a little over 2,000 families were in noncompliance. Citing the 21.6% drop in caseload since the inception of the program on January 1, 1998, the county touts its program as very successful.

Job Club was the first step Burnett County employed in leading welfare-reliant women (back) to the workforce.<sup>7</sup> If by the summer of 1999 a welfare-reliant woman<sup>8</sup> had not managed to obtain a job for 32 hours a week or more, she would be sent to Job Club, where she was taught how to get and keep a job. This weeklong workshop was to be followed by three weeks of Job Search (also called Network Center), during which Job Club participants searched for jobs, checking in each morning (and, in one location, each afternoon as well) to give workshop trainers an update on their efforts.<sup>9</sup> Some workshops were held at the offices of the county welfare department and were staffed by county workers; others were run by nonprofit, community-based organizations (CBOs) that were under contract with the county to provide welfare-to-work services.

In 1999, I spent eight months in the field, attending training sessions at the CBOs and participating in two Job Clubs and their subsequent Network Center meetings. In addition, I conducted over 60 interviews with women on welfare and workers at the welfare department and at non-profit organizations. County-run Job Clubs epitomized the discourses of welfare reform, therefore, this paper focuses primarily on my experiences there, supplemented with information gathered in informal interactions and formal interviews with six Job Club trainers, two Job Club supervisors, and 27 Job Club participants.

The face of the welfare state represented by Job Club was African American and female; the one Mexican-American man was the exception on both counts. These workers were middle class by virtue of their employment. Although each Job Club was run by one trainer, the trainers helped each other and often walked into co-workers' workshops to chat with participants or to offer advice. In the first Job Club, the supervisor also came in on a regular basis, going around the room giving comments on people's demeanor and appearance and shaking people's hands, as she put it, to allow them "to practice the handshake" that they would need at a job interview. In the second Job Club, which took place at a different site, the supervisor was absent during the Job Club week, and he did not interact with the participants until they had entered Job Search. All trainers seemed to be selected to match the characteristics of the clients, who represented a mix of African American, Latina, and white women and a few men.<sup>10</sup> Some of the trainers and one of the supervisors had been on welfare themselves, and a number, including the one male trainer, were single parents. In the end, many of the trainers presented themselves as role models to the workshop participants, emphasizing that even if they were only a step away from welfare themselves, they had managed to stay economically self-sufficient.

### **The Workshops**

Job Club trainers deployed three discursive strategies to turn welfare-reliant women into working mothers. The first strategy posits paid work as the solution to women's problems, framing the desire to work in both moral and pragmatic terms. A second discursive strategy presents a standardized individual-psychological account of women's lives so as to obviate any structural critique of women's position in the welfare state. The third discursive strategy centers on a new ideology of motherhood in which parenting skills become marketable skills. In what follows, I discuss each of these strategies, including their implications for larger ideologies of work and motherhood.

### **Learning to Labor in late 20<sup>th</sup> Century America**

The first discursive strategy deployed by Job Club trainers focused on women's future subjectivity as paid workers. Within Job Club, the concept of work operated in two registers of

meaning. The first register was primarily pragmatic and argued for an effacement of self in order to gain access to work that pays a living wage and for active self-exploitation in order to climb the job ladder. Obtaining and keeping work was seen as a skill that needed to be taught, and women were approached as though they did not know how to get and keep jobs. By contrast, in a second register, to work was to be moral. Here motherhood, implicitly constructed as “nonwork,” and work were tied together with the threads of morality and self-esteem. The concepts of dependency and self-sufficiency dominated in this register. Both conceptualizations of work centered on the icon of an ambiguously gendered, idealized American worker who became the ideological subject to which women should match themselves. This worker icon differed significantly from the child-enriching one presented by the ideology of intensive mothering.

*The Presentation of Self and the Pragmatics of Finding and Keeping Work.* Job Club trainers developed their icon of the American worker in a series of exercises on the pragmatics of finding and keeping a job. This part of the workshop’s curriculum was constructed around the belief that women on welfare lacked the “soft skills” or the job-related social skills required to find job leads and to overcome the hurdle of a job interview. A lack of hard skills, work-related technical knowledge and expertise that would require education was not considered problematic.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, many of the workshop exercises focused on how to find jobs, fill out job applications, create resumes, write down work histories, and, most importantly, on how to conduct oneself during an interview. In a Goffmanian turn, most of these exercises centered on improving one’s presentation of self as worker.

Learning how to do interviews was a central means by which this image of the idealized American worker was fleshed out. One day, in preparation for the final series of videotaped mock interviews, Mr. Rodriguez held forth on the determinants of success in an interview, following the same Job Club-generated pie chart that other trainers used in their workshops.<sup>12</sup> Packaging, Mr. Rodriguez said, is 45% of success. When one woman asked what he meant by that, he told her it is about how you carry yourself, how you dress, talk, your posture, as well as about the look of your resume and your job application. Quantifying further, he added that 35%

of success depended on responsiveness during the interview. Here workshop participants were supposed to show that they listen well, smile, respond to questions with thorough but concise answers – in sum, they had to “show liking,” in line with one of the workshop mantras: “people hire people they like.” Only 10% of success, Mr. Rodriguez claimed, was related to work experience. Although work experience does count, “whether you are hired depends on the other things.”<sup>13</sup> (This view, of course, completely overlooked the fact that, without the right experience, one would not get an interview to begin with unless the labor market was very tight.) The last 10 percent was what he called “miscellaneous” – things over which one has no control. Sexism and racism fell under this rubric – as evidenced in his examples that an employer might already know he wants to hire a man or might reject you because he does not like your braids. When one of the women in this workshop wanted to delve more deeply into the issue of race, Mr. Rodriguez headed her off, arguing that because it represented only 10% of success, “we should not spend time on it,” thus repressing this woman’s attempt to discuss race-based subjectivity.

Job Club trainers, then, prepared women to respond to being approached as workers, in the process teaching what a worker’s subjectivity was meant to look and feel like. Learning about “red flag” words was one step in this process. Trainers told the women that during the workshop and during any type of job search activity they should avoid the words “I can’t, I won’t, I don’t, maybe, no, and try” because these words would undermine their self-esteem and thus their job search abilities. Similarly, the women were never to say that they were fired, but rather that their jobs “ended.” Nor should they talk about being late, absent, or sick. They were then handed little cloth red flags to raise whenever somebody used a red flag word.

Some of the women were genuinely concerned about how to present themselves to prospective employers. They asked how they should explain to such employers parts of their personal biographies, such as a history of drug abuse, that caused gaps in employment history. In response, trainers taught women to say “I have had a lot of barriers, but I am very strong-willed and can do the job,” in an attempt to turn “a liability into an asset,” another Job Club mantra.

At the end of each Job Club week, prospective employers, mostly representatives from temp agencies, were invited to give presentations in which they addressed the payoff of

becoming a worker. One of these speakers was Yvette Brown, a very well coifed African American woman in her 50s who ran a temp agency that offered weeklong training programs to prepare welfare recipients for low-wage clerical work. On the last day of one of the workshops, she gave a talk on job interviews during which she went over a long list of grooming tips (the American worker is neat and clean!) and the importance of proper conduct during an interview. Her presentation made work sound very glamorous. She described the best positioning of one's briefcase so one could stand up out of one's chair and shake hands without having to fumble. She talked about personnel managers who try to distract interviewees by placing them so they have to look out of panoramic windows. However, these were not the realities of job search that these women were to face; both trainers and the women themselves expected that Job Club participants would find work in the low-wage segments of the service economy where briefcases and panoramic views were equally foreign.

Although Yvette Brown made the job search sound like something out of a Hollywood movie, trainers tried to make low-wage labor palatable with the promise of increasing one's income and climbing the career ladder. In both strategies, welfare-reliant women were approached solely as workers. If one did not know already, it was impossible to tell from the trainers' discourses that these women had children or a life outside of work. This tendency, if anything, intensified when it came to discussing job retention. Job Club trainers needed to prepare women for the act of working itself and did so by attempting to teach the practices of the desired worker. They knew that although almost 70% of the women who participated in Job Club found employment within the following three weeks of Job Search, the job retention rate was much lower during the months to come. In other words, learning how to present oneself during the job search was not enough when it came to keeping a job.

In one exercise, Mr. Rodriguez illustrated how the Job Club's slogan, "get a job, a better job, then a career," which aimed at improving job retention, could be turned into reality. He held up a roll of dollar bills, laminated together lengthwise, and asked the group "how many of you would take a minimum wage job right now?" Three people raised their hands. Commending their initiative, Mr. Rodriguez picked one of them to come up into the center of the room. He said, "I have a donut shop and hired LaTisha." He then took the laminated roll of money, gave one end

to her, and unrolled the other end until it showed five and three-quarter dollar bills, the minimum wage in the state of California at that time. “How can she increase this money? She should clean up, open and close the store, if nobody’s there, take a towel and clean, keep busy.” Somebody commented “good point.” “After 30 days she’s going to be okay. I will give her a raise of \$1.25 to \$7 an hour.” Another woman said, sounding skeptical, “You give big raises.” Mr. Rodriguez continued, ignoring her skepticism, “What can she do to continue increasing her salary?” When nobody answered, he provided the answer himself:

Suppose she starts coming in an hour early and stays late. She shows that she is a good employee. Sixty days pass, and she has no missed days, has come in on Saturdays. I will up the amount by \$1 to \$8. She works 5 or 6 hours a day, close to 40 hours a week. The manager teaches her to run the cash register, and she starts coming in early to work with the manager. She learns how to make donuts. He increases her salary to \$10 an hour after six months. She is doing pretty well, the profits are increasing because she’s brought in customers, the manager gets compliments about her smile and friendliness, and he gives her a Christmas bonus and increases her salary to \$11.50 an hour. He is looking into starting another shop. In order to do that, he needs some time off, and she starts opening and closing the store. He promotes her to assistant manager. He pays himself \$15 an hour as his own boss and puts her at \$13 an hour. He has been working two years without a break, and he takes a vacation. His family is on his case for being a workaholic. He then opens a new shop, and he needs to be there full-time, so he needs to promote LaTisha to manager. She gets to look at applications to hire somebody to take her job and is making \$15 an hour, what he was paying himself.

At this point, the story ended. As he talked, Mr. Rodriguez had unrolled the laminated dollars until they got to 15, which apparently was the maximum. He then urged everybody to set goals, to plan, to think about how to move up, to allow herself to grow, to make a minimum wage job profitable.

Don’t approach a minimum wage job as a dead-end job. It opens up doors, maybe with this company or maybe with another company. I was able to hop into something better as a reward for dedication and loyalty. It does not happen always. Sometimes they work you to death and don’t give you anything.

Some women said “yeah” to this last remark, and I wondered if Mr. Rodriguez was deviating from his script here to give his own opinion. Yet, stray comments aside, nobody directly confronted Mr. Rodriguez and this fairy-tale story. One woman painted a picture of a very different, much less predictable work environment, giving a counterexample of a manager

walking off a job without notice. Mr. Rodriguez said no more than that this manager “probably had some issues” but that his behavior was not “the normal etiquette of the job.”<sup>14</sup>

Although this exercise was meant to show the gains associated with becoming the American worker, it also revealed its costs. LaTisha’s supposed success in the donut shop hinged on her doing unpaid labor, coming in early and staying late, being completely flexible about when she worked, and basically dedicating her entire life to the job. In other words, these women were to approach work as though they did not have any obligations, for example, to their families, outside of work. However, this masculine icon of the hardworking American worker was given a feminine twist, becoming “always smiling, always polite and friendly,” showing the feminine forms of emotional labor women were expected to perform if they were to be successful workers (Hochschild 1983). Where for middle-class women the value of work was tied to the positive impact of their work on their children, Job Club trainers justified expectations of self-effacement by appealing to women’s expected material self-interest with the promise that the trade-off between work and self would lead to a living wage. However, in participants’ experience the best they could do was to exchange a *minimum*, not a living, wage for voluntary self-exploitation. In their experience, most minimum wage jobs did not lead to the increase in wages LaTisha received in the donut shop exercise. During Job Search, one of the women said to me, “I have never gotten more than a \$1 raise in any job I’ve had.” Walking to the bus stop one day, another woman told me that she quit a job because she worked as hard as LaTisha did in the hypothetical example, but was offered only a 25 cent an hour raise after working for almost a year.

Not all trainers were as cavalier about the realities of low-wage work as Mr. Rodriguez. For example, Sheila argued that people should take minimum wage jobs because when they showed they were reliable workers, they would be able to “hold down two or three jobs; when you are able to hold down one, employers trust you to hold down another one.”<sup>15</sup> Yet, even as she implicitly acknowledged that it might take working multiple low-wage jobs to make ends meet, Sheila reinforced the theory that self-exploitation would ultimately lead to moving up the career and income ladder. She continued, “the first job is not necessarily an ideal job, but take it.

There is room for growth; you might be able to get other, better, jobs because you establish a working pattern.”

Sheila’s assessment that people would, at least initially, need multiple jobs also demonstrated that, like finding a job, keeping one and moving up the career ladder required active self-exploitation. In mentioning the possibility of holding down two to three jobs, Sheila, like the other trainers, downplayed the demands of family on a woman’s time. Interviews and conversations with welfare-reliant women revealed that the flexibility, or a willingness to work anytime a manager needs you to that was so highly praised by Job Club trainers, came at a price for their family life. One woman who had been working for a large retail chain since completing a community-based organization’s Job Club told me that she did not get more than 30 hours of work per week because the company did not want to give her full benefits. In addition, she was never told her schedule for any given week until two days before the week started, and her scheduled hours ranged from anywhere between 8 AM and 11 PM. The only reason she had been able to hold onto this job was because her mother watched her ten-year-old daughter when she was at work. If she had had to rely on after-school care, she would have lost this job a long time ago.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, some women I met at another CBO had worked for a call center where they were confronted with split shifts; the manager could decide that, on any given day, they would work a four-hour morning shift, then go home for a couple of hours and return to work a late afternoon or evening shift. None of these women had input in the scheduling of her work hours, experiences confirmed by the literature on low-wage service work (Herzenberg et al. 1998). The realities of this work environment brought to the fore the trade-offs between welfare receipt and wage labor described by Edin and Lein (1997), who show that for welfare-reliant women the costs of employment often outweigh the financial gains. In addition, these stories highlight how powerless women are when they try to earn their income in the lowest segments of the service economy, a powerlessness that derives from their precarious structural position in the dual labor market. Yet, despite these experiences, Job Club participants by and large did not counter the optimistic picture of work painted by their trainers. Instead, these images seemed to inspire them to give the labor market another try.



In sum, by teaching self-presentation skills and in discussing the demands and rewards of low-wage labor, albeit from a skewed perspective, Job Club trainers primarily approached women as self-interested subjects, a clear indication that they were not turning to selfless work-for-your-children discourses that mark the ideology of intensive motherhood. At the same time, the self-presentation skills called necessary for a job search were tied to strengthening women's sense of agency in pursuing self-interested goals. Job Club trainers showed that both women's self-presentation as workers and their (future) attainment of the status of worker meant they would become the subjects of their own lives and subjects recognized as such by others. However, selflessness cropped up when it came to preparing women for the demands of the low-wage economy. Here, trainers taught the women that they were to prepare themselves for subjection, and submission to the demands of managers, albeit with the hope of attaining subject status in the positive sense of the word.

The faces of the self-interested as well as of the selfless subject found their expression in the feminized icon of the idealized American worker that was the basis for the welfare state's discourses in these moments. This ideal American worker is independent because she does not rely on the welfare state and earns her own income to materially support her family. In addition, this masculine independence includes a detachment from nonmaterial family demands that involve face-to-face, time-consuming contact with children and other family members. However, in order to attain this independence and detachment, this worker also needs to exhibit decidedly feminine attributes such as a willingness to do more than is required at no extra pay as well as a perpetual smile and good cheer, even as she is being exploited by her employers. Ironically, then, welfare-reliant women were to exhibit selflessness not towards their children but toward their future employers.

*Work as a Moral Construct.* Mink (1998) argues that in the context of the welfare state, to work is to be moral, while Hays (1996) describes women who experienced the morality of work in its potential to make them better mothers in their interactions with their children. For welfare-reliant women, both aspects of work's morality come into play. Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon (1994) flesh out the implicit connections Mink makes between dependency, morality,

and work. They argue that, prior to industrialization, only property ownership conferred independence. With the rise of industrialization, “the worker” became the icon of independence while paupers, slaves, and housewives became icons of dependence. The housewife’s dependency on a husband was a positive good, but the dependency of paupers on the state and slaves on their masters indicated their lesser humanity. In the current postindustrial era, dependency has become attached to the image of the single, black, teenage mother whose putative identity contains the often contradictory attributes of the three preceding icons of dependency. During this three-stage development from pre- to postindustrial capitalism, dependency discourse increasingly became a highly individualized moral/psychological discourse. Aptly describing the context within which welfare reform takes place, Fraser and Gordon (1994:324) argue that, in this postindustrial era, “the worker tends to become the universal social subject: everyone is expected to ‘work’ and to be ‘self-supporting.’”

The link between morality and work in the practice of Job Club was not immediately evident. Initially, a psychological discourse that linked women, welfare, low self-esteem, and lack of self-sufficiency seemed dominant, but an exercise conducted on the first day showed the moral valences of this psychological discourse. Using a laminated sheet of paper that had the word LIFESTYLES written in red across the top, trainers had everybody brainstorm on the two empty columns underneath this sheet, one headed by the word Dependent and the other by Self-Sufficient. Mr. Rodriguez first asked what it felt like to be dependent on aid, and a conversation ensued that showed the humiliation people felt at having to turn to welfare. One woman said:

I don’t like to be told what I can and can’t do as an adult and as a mother. When it’s time to fill out your CA-7 [the monthly form that asks about income earned and living situation], they want to know everything, and it’s none of their business. Feeling like you might commit welfare fraud is scary.

Her comments resonated with earlier feminist analyses, which argue that, with the advent of capitalism the state took over aspects of patriarchy that no longer fell within the scope of the private family, thus becoming a public patriarch (Boris and Bardaglio 1983, Eisenstein 1983). Highlighting the extent to which she felt the welfare state controlled her life, another woman said she did not like having to wait, which made the group laugh in recognition. Waiting for

appointments, for a clerk or worker to answer the phone, and for the check to come in the mail were common experiences. One of the women further reinforced how humiliating welfare is by saying “people [working in the welfare department] talk to you very rude, nasty, like you are a kid,” showing how the abstract but pervasive state pressure exerted by what socialist feminists call the public patriarch took on the immediately felt guise of caseworkers and clerks for these women.

Positioning welfare-reliant women as atomized subjects, Mr. Rodriguez put the following words under the Dependent column: stressful, told what to do, scary, others dictate, label, low self-esteem, depressed, money (restricted), and bored, though this last term did not seem to resonate with the participants. Mr. Rodriguez’s validation of the women’s assessment of welfare enabled him to encourage women to associate subjection with the welfare state and independent subjectivity with work, where Job Club offered them the path to full subject status.

As the exercise continued, it became clear that paid work would not only put women out of reach of the humiliating welfare state; it would also allow them to enter the realm of the moral. To begin the discussion of self-sufficiency, Mr. Rodriguez asked the women how having a good job, with benefits, would make them feel, encouraging them to come up with antonyms for words in the dependency category. The women volunteered that they wouldn’t have to tell anyone anything and they would no longer have to fill out so many forms. When the energy fizzled, Mr. Rodriguez added that their self-esteem would increase, that they would impress themselves and others. Women’s motherhood made a brief appearance in these workshop discourses when Mr. Rodriguez told them that they would “become a role model” to their children:

Now if your kids go to school, you go with them to drop them off [rather than go to your own work]. Kids ask, “Mom, what are you doing all day?” Some ladies even told me that their kids knew when the check was coming. If you’re working, and self-sufficient, then you are a role model. They look at you; they want to feel proud of their parents. They want to see you looking good in the morning.

When he worked in schools, Mr. Rodriguez said, he noticed that kids were depressed in the classroom because things at home were not right. He hinted that mothers’ “nonwork,” as Lawrence Mead (1986) would call it, leads children to not respect their mothers, which in turn

leads to the children's depression. Mr. Rodriguez ended the exercise by saying, "Work is going to make your life easier," but he also communicated another message: to work is to take seriously your responsibility toward your children.

By attaching work to care in this particular way, Mr. Rodriguez linked morality in private life to work so as to convey that a good mother is a working mother. The mothers Hays (1996) interviewed saw paid work as a way to expand their ability to provide for their children materially and emotionally, but Job Club trainers used a different discourse. They knew that the material rewards of work were limited, and the notion that work would make these women more well-rounded seemed irrelevant. However, women's motherhood was used to support the ideal of paid work. Mothers invested in the intensive ideology of motherhood recounted how they had better interactions with their children if they engaged in paid work because the quality of their attention for their children improved. However, Job Club trainers stressed that the fact of work in and of itself would be beneficial to welfare-reliant women. It was as if the children of these mothers did not need to interact with their mothers. In other words, welfare-reliant women's absence from the home made them good mothers if that absence was due to their engagement in the labor force. By contrast, for intensive mothers, it was the quality of their postwork presence in the home that made paid work worth it.

Mr. Rodriguez associated morality with women's private relationships, but one of the videos shown during Job Club week, entitled "Why Are You Better Off Working?," attached the morality of work to public life. The video focused on six reasons why having a job is good, and, at first glance, it seemed to appeal to self-interest. Approaching work pragmatically, the narrator argued that "employed people enjoy a better lifestyle." Yet, in his closing remarks, the video moderator brought morality into the public sphere by saying, "Unemployment programs weren't meant as a lifestyle but as a Band-Aid." This argument fed directly into the stereotype of the lazy welfare queen who drives her Cadillac to the store to buy expensive liquor with her food stamps. In this way, relying on welfare, a public aid program, was portrayed as an immoral act.

Job Club, then, showed how the iconography of dependency outlined by Fraser and Gordon (1994) played out in real time. The videos, the trainers' speeches, and the workshop exercises all presented work as the avenue to personal salvation – salvation from poverty, low

self-esteem, unhappy families, an oppressive welfare system, and, ultimately, immorality. In the process, Job Club trainers constructed a subject whose morality would derive from the fact that she works for pay and thus is a role model for her children. This subject also knows it is in her self-interest to smile, to be docile and pleasant, because it gives her both material and moral rewards, enabling her to be socially recognized as a valuable subject. In order to attain all of this, she allows herself to be both subjected to and a subject of the conditions of working in the low-wage economy so that she will no longer be a subject of and subjected to the welfare state. However, these future achievements come at the cost of welfare-reliant women's one avenue toward intensive motherhood – their ability to stay at home with their children.

### **Defining Welfare-Reliant Women**

The preceding shows how trainers constituted welfare-reliant women as future workers. As the lifestyles exercise showed, the trainers contrasted the plusses of becoming employed with the minuses of welfare receipt. However, Job Club's portrayal of the subject of the welfare-reliant woman also had a second effect: it prevented the development of a counterdiscourse based on women's structural position in society. In addition, it prevented the development of a counterdiscourse based on their motherhood.

As Fraser and Gordon (1994) would predict, Job Club trainers approached women as individuals whose subjectivity was primarily determined by internal, psychological forces that, from the welfare state's perspective, should be within their control. Thus, Job Club trainers promoted an individualism that ascribed certain capabilities to each member of society *regardless* of the ways her personal biography intersected with her structural location in society (Mills 1959). In this process, the trainers also negatively marked character traits highly valued within the ideology of intensive mothering.

The individualistic assumption of the Job Club program ignored a number of structural problems that poor women face, problems whose solutions fall outside the reach of individuals. Looking at how welfare-reliant women and women employed in the low-wage sector make the choice between employment or benefit receipt, Edin and Lein (1997) show that the cost of engaging in low-wage labor might well exceed the material benefits gained by this type of

employment. They conclude that these women often make a rational decision when they choose to continue to stay on welfare. The cost of child care and commuting and the higher cost of clothing when working all chip away at the small financial gains women achieve when they enter low-wage employment, and at some point, these costs make employment too expensive in comparison to aid receipt.

Other researchers have shown that even in times of high employment there have been structural pockets of unemployment, resulting from spatial mismatches between job and housing sites as well as mismatches in education and job requirements (Massey and Denton 1993, Wilson 1987, 1996). Spatial mismatches particularly affect people living in inner cities or in poor enclaves in large urban areas, as was the case for most workshop participants. These spatial mismatches are exacerbated by a poor public transportation infrastructure. The Job Club curriculum to some extent addressed the cost-benefit trade-off raised by Edin and Lein (1997) but not the structural factors that underlie it.<sup>17</sup> Instead, the curriculum portrayed welfare-reliant women's problems as purely personal. However, this "personal" approach was itself standardized in its one-size-fits-all analysis of women's problems.

In the individualistic approach of the Job Club curriculum, the overarching identity ascribed to the Job Club participants was that of a nonworking, long-term welfare-receiving single woman with children and without prior job experience. Although some women fit this description, most did not. For example, in the workshops I attended, only one woman had never been employed. All the other participants had experience in the paid labor force, some of it quite recent and some quite extensive, though nobody had a continuous work history. Puzzling over why this was ignored in so much of the curriculum, I decided that the curriculum was based on a general perception that women on welfare do not work and have never worked so as to create a biographical *tabula rasa* upon which to construct the ideal worker.

On this *tabula rasa*, Job Club trainers placed two personality traits they felt explained why welfare-reliant women failed to find permanent employment. The first was that the women were unable to plan or set realistic goals. The workshop handbook given out on the first day outlined eight reasons to plan, such as to make things happen, for job advancement, to analyze the consequences of their actions, to reduce crises, to grow in confidence, and to increase self-

esteem. Implicit in all of this was a diagnosis that women were not employed because they lived chaotic, unplanned lives. This was further reinforced in a follow-up exercise where workshop participants learned to make “to-do lists.” The first part of the assignment was to write down things they had to do either that day or in the near future. The next step was to assign priorities – a “one” was a “must do right away,” a “two” meant that it “must be done but not immediately,” and things that “would be nice to get done but were not essential” got a “three.” When the women were practicing writing to-do lists, trainers would go around the room prioritizing everything directly related to work and giving secondary or even tertiary importance to everything else. Again, primacy was given to women’s (future) identity as workers over their identity as mothers.

The second reason welfare-reliant women were not employed, according to the trainers, was that they tend to do too much for others and not enough for themselves. Particularly, women get too involved in taking care of their families’ needs. In other words, trainers accuse women of the tendencies of selflessness so highly valued in the ideology of intensive mothering. Throughout his workshop, Mr. Rodriguez gave short, passionate speeches in which he told everybody “this workshop is for you” in an attempt to make women more appropriately selfish in ways that would lead straight to the labor market. One afternoon he said the following:

Staying on your goal includes your loved ones and spouses. Your spouses can discourage you; they may tell you that this workshop is not worth it. But stay positive; this workshop is for you, you know what you need. You have seen what is out there; you’re making a choice. Pull away from your emotional self – yeah, I love him, but he offers no consistency, no support. Look ahead ten years and he’s gone and you’re still where you were – to your real self.

What their real self was, was not made explicit, but in the context of the workshop, it was clear that a desire for intimacy and closeness with an adult partner should not get in the way of finding employment. Women’s “real self,” then, must be that aspect of themselves that sees that they need to get ahead through wage work, that they should not rely on a man for their income. One might expect that the care of children would fall outside this assessment, yet children were never explicitly mentioned in these contexts, leaving their needs outside Job Club discourses. Sheila, another trainer, often mentioned the negative attitudes of family, friends, and partners women

would confront in their search for a job, and she encouraged them to understand that their own needs required them to ignore these attitudes.

This framing of why welfare-reliant women fail to be employed pushed women toward a utilitarian ideology that valorizes material self-interest to which Hays (1996) claims the ideology of intensive mothering is an antidote. Furthermore, Job Club trainers' analyses of women's "real selves" and their needs in relation to their surroundings reflect a liberal feminist approach to independence – a feminism that attempts to empower women without changing the structural preconditions for that empowerment (Jaggar 1983). These attempts to redirect women's allegiance also echo Haney's (1996) analysis of interactions between probation officers and their teenage female clients. These officers, convinced that the young women in their care were not independent enough in their relationships with their boyfriends, attempted to show that these men did not take care of them, but led them into trouble. Haney shows that the young women she observed rejected this message (and its attempt to undermine private patriarchy) as part of their rejection of the welfare state's intrusion in their lives, but in Job Club, the message that men were unreliable was met with some acceptance, probably in part because it coincided with women's experiences. In addition, those who did, to some extent, rely on a man (as a few did) did so without the knowledge of the welfare department and thus were not in a position to give voice to alternative experiences.

Ultimately, the workshop curriculum was based on the idea that a lack of self-esteem is the underlying cause of both an inability to plan and a tendency to put others' needs before one's own. This is in line with current trends in social policy in which improved self-esteem is seen as the solution to a wide variety of social problems<sup>18</sup> and with current cultural practices reflected, for example, in the presence of Ayanla VanZant's popular self-help books on both the desks of employment counselors and in the hands of workshop participants during break times. However, the use of self-esteem in Job Club training sessions diverges from its presence in the ideology of intensive mothering. For intensive mothers, self-esteem is tied to their ability to give motherhood a central status in the web of their identity. For welfare-reliant women, self-esteem was to derive from their status as paid workers, a status that was to overshadow their identity as mothers.



Using the language of self-esteem to promote a central identity as paid worker, the Job Club curriculum gave a highly individualistic but standardized account of why women were on welfare and not in the workforce. This usage also revealed what Fraser (1989:155) has referred to as the therapeutic side of the welfare state, which reflects “the tendency of especially ‘feminine’ [read needs- rather than rights-based] social welfare programs to construct gender-political and political-economic problems as individual, psychological problems.”<sup>19</sup> Structural forces that make it difficult for poor women – who carry the responsibility for (young) children, who are often women of color, who have little education, who live far from well-paying jobs – to find employment that pays enough to lift them out of poverty were not addressed in Job Club. And the structural forces that render poor women politically voiceless remained largely unnamed in this expression of the welfare state.<sup>20</sup>

In the end, Job Club trainers ignored the tension between its standardized individual psychological approach and the structural realities of poverty. In other words, welfare-reliant women were discursively delinked from the structural forces that informed their poverty. In this specific incarnation, the welfare state denied the possibility that women’s failure to end their demands on the welfare state was in any way related to failings of the welfare state itself, failings very much related to the difficulties these women face as mothers. Although these women’s turn to the welfare state could be read as revealing the welfare state’s inability to eliminate poverty, Job Club trainers turned this around and argued that it was not the welfare state but the women themselves who had failed. Thus, these welfare state representatives denied both the existence of forces technically outside its scope, such as the economy, and the ones technically within its scope, such as education, that affect why women turned to welfare in the first place. This delinking from structural forces reveals a commitment to ideologies of the self as autonomous and atomized, not the commitment to self-in-relationship that informs the ideology of intensive mothering.

### **Ideologies of Motherhood in Workshop Discourses**

Motherhood was the one constant in both women’s present-day subjectivity as welfare recipients and their desired future subjectivity as workers. Yet, much as a Job Club trainer

would, I have so far analyzed exercises and speeches mostly to understand the moral and pragmatic valences of work and welfare receipt, and have failed to subject motherhood to an explicit analysis. In the ideology of intensive mothering, motherhood shapes the meanings attached to other aspects of women's identity, such as, for example, being a worker. In other words, motherhood functions as a dominant identity from which others flow. However, in Job Club, the reverse was true. Here, women's identity as workers was to determine all else, and motherhood was either obscured or commodified in order to support a worker subjectivity.

*Downplaying Women's Motherhood.* If they mentioned it all, Job Club trainers saw the mothering obligations of welfare-reliant women as a problem, an obstacle on the road to employment. However, the trainers felt that social policies had largely removed this obstacle; the general consensus among employment counselors and trainers was that providing child care reimbursements to women who were transitioning off welfare, has solved the problem of the dual burden facing employed single mothers. But motherhood did sometimes crop up as trainers discussed women's future as workers. In a zero-sum identity game, trainers actively taught women to downplay their motherhood status when it came to thinking about work. The first message of the trainers was that the responsibility to care for children should not interfere with full-time employment. As part of the Job Club curriculum, women practiced giving answers to the "16 tough interview questions" that were printed in the handbook. One of the questions was "I see you have children." In one of the taped mock interviews, a woman took this opportunity to talk about her four children, their ages, their schools, her pride in the one who was starting college, and so on. As everybody watched the video of her interview, Mr. Rodriguez told her "When they say, 'I see you have children,' what they want to know is whether you have childcare. Your response is that you have reliable child care and backup in case the kids are sick."

Similarly, in the red flag word discussion, Sheila warned her group that, "Many of us don't think about it as a red flag, but employers don't like to hear that you have children, especially under 12 months old, when they need their shots [and you regularly have to take time off from work]." One woman agreed and said, "They don't want to hear that your children are

sick.” Sheila also prepped her group to answer the interview question about children. Echoing Mr. Rodriguez, she told the participants, “They try to find out if you have children. Always say you have excellent child care and that your child is supportive of you working. You might even say that you have backup childcare.” In other words, where intensive mothers construct work as materially and emotionally beneficial to their children, Job Club trainers construct children as beneficial supporters of welfare-reliant women’s work.

At the same time, by teaching women to hide the demands their motherhood places on their time, trainers reflected common experiences of women in the workforce. Research shows that having (small) children and paid work are often very difficult to combine (Crittenden 2001, Edin and Lein 1997, Hochschild 1989, 1997, Olicker 2000, Rubin 1994, see also Michel 1999 for a discussion of the absence of a national child care policy in the United States). Where middle-class intensive mothers have more material resources, particularly if they are married to a working partner, to navigate the difficulties of full-time work and caring for children, this would not be the case for welfare-reliant women who would, at best, find employment in the low-wage service sector of the economy. However, the trainers and the Job Club curriculum did not address this dilemma, nor the limited availability of 24-hour day care or backup care for sick children (or the desirability of that type of care), but taught women to find employment by downplaying their motherhood in their presentation of self. Linda, another trainer, went so far as to have women redo a writing exercise in which they listed their past accomplishments if they had included their motherhood. Only the woman who argued that she had to go through a drug rehabilitation program in order to be able to have her children with her at home was allowed to keep motherhood on her list.

Thus, the welfare state workers with whom welfare-reliant women interacted marginalized motherhood even as it was the reason these women had turned to the welfare state to begin with. Job Club trainers approached them as workers, and when women brought up motherhood as an important aspect of their identity, they were not simply ignored, but were explicitly told to transform the value they attached to their motherhood.

*Motherhood in Service of a Worker Subjectivity.* Motherhood entered the Job Club discourse positively only when trainers used it to promote a worker subjectivity. Teaching women how to put their motherhood in service of constructing a worker identity, Job Club trainers reinforced a particular conceptualization of self to induce women to choose paid employment over welfare-receipt without delay.<sup>21</sup> This happened in two ways. The first was by portraying a good mother as a working mother. That to be a working mother provides children with a positive role model was a constant Job Club refrain, as in Mr. Rodriguez's discussion of the links he saw between children's depression and their mothers' joblessness. Sheila also connected work with good mothering. Discussing interview fears, she argued that what you have to gain from going on an interview is to become a better role model for your child. She said, "Unless they are born millionaires, they will need to get employed." Elaborating on the concept of role modeling, she told the group that to work is

...teaching children. Kids copycat their parents. If parents don't work, kids won't as they get older. Kids role-play. It's the same with substance abuse or alcohol. To be abusive with anything is bad, candy, soda, and especially alcohol and drugs. If kids see a hardworking person.... My mom raised me and my three brothers working day and night. I feel that way about my kids now. I'm the one to take care of them, to put food on the table. I'm the one responsible for them.

In this speech, Sheila, newly divorced herself, argued that it was a mother's responsibility to teach her children the importance of paid work by being a worker herself. She indicated that she learned her work ethic from her own mother and that she was trying to pass it on to her own children. By linking a lack of employment to substance abuse, Sheila also argued that nonemployment puts one in the realm of disease and personal failure, further reinforcing the immorality of staying at home and economically dependent on the welfare state. So while women were to downplay their motherhood in their presentation of self, they were to use their motherhood to motivate themselves to become workers. To effect this motivation, Sheila played on fears of the intergenerational transmission of "welfare dependency" also articulated by conservative social scientists over the decades since Oscar Lewis argued that there is a "culture of poverty" (Lewis 1959, 1965; Mead 1986, 1997).

A second way motherhood positively entered the official Job Club discourse was through a process of commodification. Here mothering and doing unpaid care work were labeled “being a household manager.” The Job Club curriculum, as well as the trainers, assumed that most women they dealt with had been out of the labor force a long time even though many of the women had (sometimes extensive) work experience. However, in a somewhat perverse feminist move, instead of portraying periods of unemployment as a gap in work history, they were told to put “household manager” on a resume or job application if there was a time gap between jobs.

The message was that as household managers they had learned a set of skills that was easily transferable to a job, and the Job Club curriculum contained a number of exercises in which women enumerated these household skills. In an apparent reversal of the link between “nonwork” and being a stay-at-home mother, Sheila told her group

No one in this room has been out of work, the way we’re going to write your resume. You’re working in the house, you’re a taxi driver, a budget planner, you volunteer at your children’s school, you’re a food preparer. You’re self-employed. You’re not receiving the income, but you’re working all the time. You have been successfully and diligently working daily.

A few days later, she had the group brainstorm on the duties and skills associated with being a household manager. The group came up with the following key words: budget, organizer, inventory (food) analysis, transportation (children), health, cook, counselor, entertainment, chef. Sheila then asked what it takes to keep the job of household manager and the following was put in a second column: patience, being responsible, healthy, dependable, a team player, trustworthy, and time conscious. It might seem that these were all reasons to reassess the low validation of caring work and mothering, and perhaps even to validate an ideology of intensive mothering, but the purpose of the exercise was to figure out a way to portray staying at home as a work activity so that prospective employers would not think them lazy. Accordingly, Sheila ended the exercise by telling the group, “This gives you an idea of what you could put down [on your resume] if you’ve been out of work for a while.”

Showing the extent to which they had adopted the link between motherhood and “nonwork,” a majority of the women responded enthusiastically to the idea of being a household manager. During a break, one of the women said that she did not want to work because she did

not know how. Her neighbor responded by saying, “You know you work at home, don’t you?,” reminding her fellow participant that household labor contained marketable skills. The first woman replied, “Yes. I cook and clean and keep busy all the time with my two children.” This dialogue showed how these two participants were reproducing Job Club’s ideology as it pertained to the intersection of work and care.

In their use of the model of household manager, the trainers transformed discourses of early second wave feminist debates about the need to revalue women’s care work. One feminist argument was that women needed wages for housework if they were to lose their status as second class citizens (Dalla Costa and James 1972). The wages-for-housework campaign saw commodification as potentially liberatory, assigning a recognizable value to women’s labor through granting a state-funded wage for housework. To move women away from the state, trainers inverted this argument and taught mothers in Job Club that they should market their mothering and care work skills while their children were to be raised by paid (though poorly paid) professionals. By interpreting the care work of welfare-reliant mothers as a set of salable skills to be marketed by the women themselves, with the remainder to be shifted to poorly paid child care workers, care work was taken out of the home. Ultimately, the work associated with motherhood, the work of care, either disappeared or was marketized. This move from “mom” to “household manager” indicated a discursive transition that turned motherhood from a questionable to a valuable subjectivity contingent upon its commodification. Where feminism aimed to liberate women from gendered and other forms of oppression, Job Club trainers used feminist rhetorical strategies to reinforce a welfare state-initiated understanding of work that delegitimized the claims women might want to make vis-à-vis the welfare state. These types of revaluations are at the core of welfare reform discourses. Reflecting that these strategies were part and parcel of the way the dominant culture perceives poor single mothers, many of the women were taken with the concept of household manager. In some way, it restored some dignity to a set of activities that was marginalized in most of the Job Club curriculum. This discourse also showed the way Job Club trainers did not apply middle-class ideologies of intensive mothering to welfare-reliant women. Instead they developed an alternative ideology in

which motherhood was directly woven into the material reasoning that underlies the cult of the self-maximizing individual.

### **Conclusion**

Hays (1996) argues that middle-class women's experiences of motherhood are defined by the ideology of intensive mothering. In addition, she argues that this ideology trickles down to poor and working-class women. By contrast, Mink's (1998) analysis of PRWORA implies that welfare-reliant women are subjected to an ideology that devalues their motherhood. Mink looks only at legislative intent. Hypothetically, it is possible that Job Club trainers, themselves part of the middle-class, might deploy aspects of the ideology of intensive mothering in their interactions with welfare-reliant women. However, I show that Job Club trainers, as representatives of the welfare state, did devalue motherhood in their attempts to spur women into the labor market and did not draw upon the language of intensive mothering. Job Club trainers constructed an ideology in which the ideal subject is a working subject who works for pay and whose worker identity trumps her motherhood.

Using three discursive strategies to construct this subject, the trainers first positioned welfare-reliant women as future workers. Through the deployment of pragmatic and moral meanings of work, they constructed a particularly gendered icon of the ideal American worker, a worker masculine in her independence from the welfare state and her detachment from immediate involvement with family, a worker who, ironically, closely matched intensive mothers' narratives of largely absent fathers. At the same time, this ideal worker was feminine in her cheerful attitude and willingness to be exploited.

In a second discursive strategy, the welfare state approached women in the present, positioning them as individual subjects with low self-esteem, who were unable to plan, who cared too much for others and too little for themselves, and who needed to learn that wage work would solve these problems. This individualistic ideology reflects Fraser's (1989) analysis of the therapeutic state apparatus, because it represents an individualism that functions discursively to prevent women from collectively making claims against the welfare state based on their structural position – which is one of responsibility for children, poverty, low education, and

limited links to political institutions. Another effect of this strategy was to obscure significant aspects of women's lives while positioning them as utilitarian self-interested maximizers.

In a third discursive strategy, those aspects of women's motherhood that could be perceived as either marketable or as motivating women to become role models for their children through paid employment were highlighted. Here, the masculine worker icon was further feminized because women's skill set did not derive from formal training, as it would for working-class men, but from their experiences as mothers. At the same time, aspects of women's motherhood that fell outside this marketable realm, such as relationships with one's children, were ignored, making these discourses of motherhood as much a strategy of absence as of presence.

Hays (1996) argues that the ideology of intensive motherhood is a counterweight to society's intense emphasis on individual self-interest. However, Job Club trainers relied far more on the latter than the former ideology. When approaching women as workers, the iconography these welfare state representatives developed focused on building a sense of agency, tied to wage work and independence, rooted in self-interest and an absence of relational care. The selflessness that marks the ideology of intensive mothering appeared only when trainers discussed women's relationship with their employers, not their children, a relationship in which women needed to exploit themselves in order to keep low-wage employment. Thus, even though the foundational assumption of welfare reform is that wage work leads to independence, Job Club trainers unwittingly showed how the kind of employment options available to welfare-reliant women operate more in the realm of subjection than in the realm of agentic subjectivity. When constructing women as welfare recipients, trainers highlighted how the welfare state apparatus they represented is oppressive in order to inspire women to leave welfare. And finally, women were denied their subjectivity as mothers, for Hays the one arena of selfless connection with another human being, unless their motherhood motivated them to find and keep wage work.

Mink's (1998) analysis, in which legislative intent denies poor single women the value of their motherhood is reflected in the practices of those who implement these policies. Hays's (1996) argument that the ideology of intensive mothering trickles down from the middle-class by and large does not hold when it comes to the implementation of welfare reform. However, I



confine my analysis to one arena in which ideology gets produced. By trying to capture the ideology of an entire culture, Hays takes a far broader sweep. By contrast, this paper focuses on representatives of the welfare state as intermediary producers of culture. Their aim is to try to alter welfare-reliant women's ability to stay home, where staying-at-home is the one resource they possess that might give them access to the practices of intensive motherhood. Analyzing how they go about achieving this aim, I show that although hypothetically, "larger culture" might have made intensive mothering dominant to such an extent that even poor single mothers who lack the material resources to support this ideology's practices might be affected by it, Job Club trainers construct an alternative ideology of motherhood in which a good mother is a worker first and a mother second.

## Notes

1. The Social Security Act of 1935 included what was then called Aid to Dependent Children. The program's name was changed to Aid to Families with Dependent Children in 1962.
2. A few states, among them California and New York, will continue to provide some form of support after recipients hit the five-year time limit.
3. There are a number of large-scale studies under way that periodically issue reports on the state of welfare reform. The Urban Institute, the Rand Institute, and the Manpower Research Corporation are among the organizations conducting this research. Many of these research projects have an ethnographic component, but they still tend to be focused on outcomes rather than process and meanings.
4. These statistics exclude the labor force participation rates of women with infants.
5. Even though she largely ignores this, Hays's own work indicates this, too, as her quotes from working-class and poor women have a more tenuous relationship to the ideology of intensive mothering than the quotes of middle-class women.
6. The names of people and places have been changed to protect their privacy.
7. Each California county has some discretion as to how it fulfills the federally mandated reduction of the welfare rolls, which required a program participation rate of 35% at the time of this research. All have to offer some limited form of assessment and training, help in finding employment, as well as help with child care and transportation. The welfare-to-work program chosen by Burnett County was developed by a for-profit organization that sells its Job Club format in 14 states and a number of other California counties.
8. In this paper, I focus on welfare-reliant women, however, there are men who rely on welfare. Most men are on welfare with their partner or spouse. In the county in which I did my research, the majority of these men were immigrants from Asia or elsewhere and they were sent to organizations that offered services in their native tongue.
9. During the three weeks of Network Center/Job Search, participants were expected to spend six hours a day searching for a job, preferably by going to places of employment in person, dropping off resumes, filling out applications, and trying to talk to managers. They had to check in each morning with the trainers and those members of their Job Club group who had not yet found employment.
10. The first Job Club I attended started with 11 women, 10 of them African American, 1 white. The second Job Club began with over 20 people but for a variety of reasons ended with 16. Three men on General Assistance participated in this latter Job Club; 2 were white, 1 was

African American. Otherwise, all the participants were single mothers, 5 Latina, 5 African-American, 2 white, and 1 of Arab descent.

11. This approach was pioneered in Riverside County in California, where an experiment in the early 1990s seemed to show that improving people's soft skills in short-term programs had as great an effect on increasing their chances to obtain work as improving their hard skills in longer, much more expensive training programs did.

12. The female trainers as well as the participants were all addressed by their first name. Mr. Rodriguez remained "Mr." throughout the workshop, an indication that participants projected patriarchal relations onto their interaction with the state, a projection Mr. Rodriguez did not try to change.

13. These quotes are paraphrases, reconstructed from notes I took during the workshops.

14. LaTisha's story, which she told on another day, of a manager who harassed her into dating him, was similarly shrugged off.

15. See endnote 13 for naming pattern among trainers.

16. In her book, *Nickel and Dimed*, Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) describes how she encountered similar management strategies when she went to work for WalMart.

17. Women who participated in Job Club and women who found employment while receiving welfare, were given transportation vouchers and child care subsidies. However, these did not address the poor transportation infrastructure of this county. In addition, the child care subsidies were time limited, and in the current wave of budget cuts, formerly welfare-reliant women in California are about to lose their long-term child care subsidies. Ultimately, their precariousness shows that these policies are necessary but not sufficient to address the complexities of women's poverty.

18. See Cruikshank (1997, chapter 4), for a discussion of the ascendancy of the language of self-esteem in social policy.

19. Echoing Althusser's division of the state into various repressive and ideological apparatuses, Fraser (1989) has usefully argued that the welfare state can be understood to have three aspects – juridical, administrative, therapeutic – which all function to constitute specifically gendered subjectivities/citizenships.

20. One of the trainers did address the issue of political power and encouraged women to register to vote, going so far as to bring in voter registration cards. However, this, too, fell under increasing one's self-esteem, in the sense that women were encouraged to take themselves seriously enough to vote and was not tied to the structural poverty women found themselves in.

21. Of course, with time limits, the choice to leave welfare was already made, but women had the opportunity to stay on until their time ran out. In addition, the state of California cuts only the adult portion of the grant after women reach their time limits. California continues to pay the child(ren)'s portion, though at the time of the research, nobody had reached their time limits yet. It was also unclear whether this benefit would be paid out to the mother or to a third party.

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