

# Exploring women's multiple identities as they negotiate Welfare-to-Work : the intersection of race, class, and gender

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**BOSTON COLLEGE**  
**Lynch School of Education**

Department of Counseling, Developmental, and Educational Psychology

Counseling Psychology

**Exploring women's multiple identities as they negotiate**

**Welfare-to-Work:**

**The intersection of race, class, and gender**

Dissertation

by

Alexandra C. Kenna

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of the requirements for the degree of  
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Exploring women's multiple identities as they negotiate Welfare-to-Work:

The intersection of race, class, and gender

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## **Chapter 1: Problem statement and study objectives**

### **Introduction**

It has been ten years since the Clinton Administration passed the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which increased work requirements in order for welfare participants to continue receiving aid (Karger & Stoesz, 2002). The hotly debated question of whether the reform worked has recently been fueled by the Bush Administration's even more stringent work requirements and cuts in training, education, and counseling (Olsen & Pavetti & Kauff, 2006; Rowe & Giannarelli, 2006). While a great deal of research has shown the reform to be effective in reducing welfare rolls, there continue to be a great deal of people (mostly women of color with children) who have not been helped by the policies (Ashworth, Cebulla, Greenberg, & Walker, 2004; Dodson, 1998). These are the people who face multiple barriers to full-time employment in U.S. society due to complex and dynamic issues around race, class, and gender. As clinicians, researchers, and teachers it is crucial that we seek to understand how these factors psychologically play out in the lives of people living in extreme poverty and for whom welfare reform may not feel like a success.

It is easy to state that our welfare system is flawed. What is not easy, however, is to understand why and what should be done about it. In order to offer insight into some possible solutions, however, we need to have a deeper appreciation of the richness and complexity of the participants' lived experiences and how their various identities intersect with the policies that are in place.

For those of us within the field of psychology who strive to both study and promote social justice, it is necessary that we dig deep into the complicated, contradictory, and often times murky waters of policy in this country. While it surely would be easier to leave this to professionals in other fields, the psychological experience of people who face multiple barriers to success (due to their race, class, and gender) inherently falls within the purview of those of us within the fields of psychological counseling, research, and academia. Counseling psychologists and counselors have been described as “the handmaiden of the status quo” and “transmitters of society’s values”, thus pointing to the political nature of our field (Sue & Sue, 1990). We are pushed to move beyond helping people adjust and tolerate the injustices they experience, to work toward changing the unjust systems themselves (Prilleltensky, 1997). Without a deeper appreciation of how welfare-to-work (WTW) policies influence those who experience multiple forms of oppression and denigration in U.S. society, we may be serving the status quo and inadvertently enabling socially unjust practices to continue harming those whom we claim to serve.

The majority of the poor in the U.S. are women and their children (Proctor & Dalakar, 2003). Compared with 26% of white women, 54% of African American women and 56% of Latina women are poor (Miranda & Green, 1999). The majority of participants (93%) in typical Welfare-to-Work programs in the U.S. are women (Ashworth, Cebulla, Greenberg, & Walker, 2004). Ninety percent are mothers, ninety-three percent are single parents, and the average number of children per household is two. Thirty-eight percent are Black, twenty-four percent are Latino, and thirty percent are

white. Fifty-nine percent have a high school diploma and nineteen percent have some college education (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1998A, 1998B; U.S. House of Representatives, 2000).

Research has explored the impact of welfare programs on children and families (Wilson, Ellwood, & Brooks-Gunn, 1995), role strain between parenthood and employment (Morris & Levine Coley, 2004), duration in the system (Sandefure & Cook, 1998; Strother, 1995), and high rates of physical health problems and psychological distress among welfare recipients (Loprest & Acs, 1996; Olson & Pavetti, 1996). This body of work provides useful insight into the multiple barriers to employment that welfare participants experience. However, less qualitative research has been conducted regarding women's actual experiences of government assistance programs and whether they believe the programs make a difference in their lives (Nicolas & JeanBaptiste, 2001).

The "work-first" model, upon which Welfare-to-Work (WTW) programs are based (Ashworth, Cebulla, Greenberg, & Walker, 2004), stresses dominant U.S. values of meritocracy, individual success, hard work, and motivation (Sandlin, 2004). According to the U.S. theory of meritocracy, individual achievement is possible regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status (Sandlin, 2004; Sparks, 1999). Therefore, WTW and "work-first" programs are constructed around the assumption that job-search activities and employment, over human capital investment or training, will enable participants to move off of government assistance.

Supporters of the reform point to reduced welfare rolls since 1996 (Ashworth et al., 2004; Hays, 2003; Pavetti & Kauff, 2006). Meta-analysis of multiple WTW programs across the U.S. shows that the “work-first” model is indeed appropriate and successful for many participants, especially those who are white, male, over the age of 30, and with solid employment records (Ashworth et al., 2004). WTW programs that use sanctioning (i.e. limited benefits and increased time limits) and that are located in areas with lower unemployment rates tend to be more successful. Finally, programs appear to succeed in moving participants off of welfare assistance in the short term—i.e. 2 ¾ years (Ashworth, et al).

While the results of evaluative research suggest positive outcomes for some groups in some areas, it is clear that effectiveness is influenced by the demographics of the program participants and socioeconomic conditions (Ashworth, et al; England, 1992; Sapiro, 1999; Wilson, 1996). Specifically, results show that higher numbers of female, non-white, and young participants (under 30) living in more impoverished communities are associated with less program impact (Ashworth). While the 1996 legislation intended to streamline welfare by promoting individual success through independence, employment, and self-sufficiency, research suggests that contextual factors such as access to child care, transportation, and housing diminish women's abilities to obtain and sustain employment (Romero, Chavkin, Wise, Smith, & Wood 2002).

WTW programs that fail to address the complex and dynamic contextual aspects of participants' lives cannot assist those who are most in need. Similarly, by promoting the U.S. myth of success and meritocracy among WTW participants, who are primarily

women with children, and many of whom are ethnic minorities (Ambromovitz, 1996; Sandlin, 2004), the system disregards the experiences of racism, sexism, and classism, by suggesting that any failure to succeed must be due to individual deficits.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of WTW programs, more qualitative research is needed that explicitly explores the participants' psychological experiences, beliefs, and identities. Specifically, we need to gain deeper insight into how women's multiple identities interact with the process of looking for work. Finally, more exploration and understanding is needed about how women negotiate various identities and roles within their larger cultural, economic, and socio-political contexts.

### **Race oppression**

Ethnic groups have been differentially affected by welfare policies (Garcia & Harris, 2001). Women of color who utilize government assistance report structural barriers to employment including: institutional racism, violence against women, lack of affordable childcare, lack of access to transportation, and racist treatment from welfare case workers (Mink, 1999; Piven, 1999; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2002). Compared to their white counterparts, women of color are less likely to be referred for training or educational programs (Finegold & Staveteig, 2002) and are more likely to be denied services due to logistical issues (Finegold & Staveteig ; Scholar Practitioner Program, 2001).

Sandlin (2004) argues that WTW programs, which are often run by white instructors and teachers, tend to ignore contextual and societal factors such as racism and

discrimination, by focusing on the internal qualities of the participants. By choosing to ignore their own white privilege and the larger historical and economic factors that have influenced participants' lives, staff may be unknowingly reinforcing the U.S. myth of meritocracy and upholding the status quo. This dynamic could be psychologically confusing and denigrating for participants, as they are seemingly blamed for issues beyond their control. It may also be serving as a barrier to successful employment.

### **Gender oppression**

WTW programs promote the belief common in the U.S. that success can be achieved by all who work hard, have the right attitude, and follow the rules (Sandlin, 2004). However, this U.S. ideal does not fit with women who are responsible for children. Research demonstrates that women's experiences with government systems are often shaming and disempowering (Ferguson, 1984; Omi & Winant, 1986; Sandlin, 2004; Sparks, 1999). Poor women with children face the contradictory and sexist messages that all women in the U.S. deal with today. On the one hand, mothers are supposed to be available for their children and are held responsible for almost all aspects of a child's development (Kagan, 1998). But to not work is viewed as less ambitious or old-fashioned (Stone & Lovejoy, 2004). On the other hand, working moms are seen as selfish and uncaring (McCrate, 2002; Stone & Jovejoy).

WTW women are unable to win as they negotiate the responsibilities of mothering, providing financially for their children, and fulfilling WTW work requirements. Debord, Canu and Kerpelman (2000) argued that WTW programs need to address the "work-family fit" in order to address the actual lives and experiences of poor

women with children. If WTW programs do not address the very real barriers to employment, such as daycare, transportation, health insurance (Romero, et al, 2002), and trauma/battering consequences (Brush, 2000), success will be either unlikely or short-lived. These dilemmas are more related to systemic sexism in the U.S. versus the individual's inability to get off of the system.

### **Class oppression and systemic poverty**

Negotiating the world of public assistance is challenging and confusing. Research has shown how systemic policies, procedures, and expectations are inconsistent and unclear to many participants (Anderson, 2002). Similarly, research demonstrates how public assistance programs can lead to increased shame and a sense of disempowerment (Nicolas & JeanBaptise, 2001). Although the strength and resilience of low-income women is well-documented (Banarjee & Pyles, 2004; Nesto, 1994), this recognition has not been built into the Welfare-to-Work system. If women are unable to find and maintain employment, the system sends the message that this is due to laziness or poor choices (i.e. having a child). Their inability to get themselves out of poverty is seen as a personal choice.

Upward socioeconomic mobility is becoming increasingly more difficult in the U.S. (Meritocracy in America, 2004). Many of the jobs that WTW participants are qualified to do offer low wages and few benefits (Finegold & Weil, 2002). The cuts in training and education as alternatives to work make it even less likely that these women will gain the necessary skills needed to move into higher paying jobs (Norris & Spiegelman, 2003). Similarly, research has demonstrated that child care and

transportation problems make it difficult for women to remain employed after transitioning off of welfare (Norris & Speiglmán, 2003). All of these issues are related to classism and systemic poverty within the U.S., not individual deficits among WTW participants.

### **What will this study offer?**

We know that the work-first model benefits some participants and has been helpful in streamlining certain WTW programs in the U.S. (Ashworth et al., 2004). We also know that certain groups, such as poor women (Dodson, 2005; Ferguson, 1984), racial and ethnic minorities (Eubanks, 2004; Garcia & Harris, 2001), and mothers (McCrate, 2002; Nesto, 1994), do not do as well in this model and face numerous obstacles to success as they navigate their search for employment. What we do not know is how these women's multiple roles and identities interact with one another and play out within the context of WTW. Similarly, our current policies do not seem to be sufficiently helping those who are most in need—i.e. those who experience the cumulative impact of racial, gender, and class oppression.

While current WTW programs tend to focus on increasing job search skills and individual success (as measured by a participant's ability to obtain a job), it is my belief that the programs fail to address the dynamic relationship between internal and contextual factors that impact women's ability to fit the WTW mold. Similarly, participants' identities as women, mothers, and people of color are ignored in the process of pushing work first. This refusal to address the real lived experiences of the participants is disempowering, unjust, and ineffective.

This exploratory qualitative study will examine how women make sense of their experience of WTW—i.e. as poor women, as mothers, and as women of various racial and ethnic backgrounds. How do women psychologically manage the impact of multiple forms of oppression? How do sexism, classism, and racism factor into women's experiences of WTW and their ability to find employment? What does work represent to them as they navigate these experiences?

In order to explore these questions, I will interview approximately 10-20 participants going through a local WTW program. The study will employ semi-structured interviews and focus groups to gather the data and qualitative descriptive research methods (Sandelowski, 2000) to identify common categories and derive inferences for future research. The inspiration and guiding principles of the study come from critical and feminist theories (Gergen, 2001; Guerrero, 1999; Martin-Baro, 1994; Prilleltensky, 1997) and literature on multiple identities (hooks, 1984; 1989; Maguire, 2001). The psychology of working (Blustein, 2006) also offers a useful framework for exploring the roles that work and employment serve for the participants.

My hope is that this study may provide insight and understanding into the lives and experiences of women who live on the margins of U.S. society. These are the women who face multiple forms of oppression, care for children and relatives, have the least amount of employable skills, and are doing it all on their own.

As researchers, clinicians, and policy implementers, it is essential that we understand the barriers that women face as a result of racism, sexism, and economic injustice (Banerjee & Pyles, 2004). Without addressing women's lives within context

(Fels, Goodman & Glenn, 2006), these programs will continue to lead to marginal or aversive results, oppressive program conditions, and frustration for both participants and the staff who work to serve them.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the literature**

### **Theoretical framework**

The research questions stated in Chapter 1 are inspired and informed by feminist and critical theoretical frameworks (Gergen, 2001; Guerrero, 1999; Martin-Baro, 1994; Prilleltensky, 1997) that seek to understand the complex ways in which women of various ethnic and racial backgrounds experience different forms of oppression in context. Rather than focusing on the individual as the unit of change, which would be in line with current WTW strategies and theory (Ambromovitz, 1996; Sandlin, 2004), feminist and critical theory can be useful in identifying both the barriers to successful employment, and forms of resilience and strength for WTW participants. The following summarizes some of the key tenets of feminist and critical theory and research.

Feminist research explicitly acknowledges and values women's identities and lived experiences (Gergen, 2001; Guerrero, 1999). While there are certainly many feminisms (Maguire, 2001), an underlying assumption is that "women, despite differences, face some form of oppression, devaluation and exploitation as women" (Maguire, 2001, p. 60).

However, women associate with multiple identities in addition to gender. Feminist theory acknowledges that women's multiple identities are associated with various levels and forms of oppression that are intertwined with historical and cultural circumstances (hooks, 1984; 1989; Maguire, 2001). Therefore, feminist research seeks to avoid the decontextualization of the subject or experimenter from his/her social and historical surroundings and understand women's lives in context.

Feminist research includes the valuing of a sense of connectedness and interdependence between researcher and research participant (Gergen, 2001). By demystifying the role of the scientist, a more egalitarian relationship can be established between science makers and science consumers. Similarly, feminist research acknowledges the nature of the researchers' values within the research process and understands that science is not value free (Du Bois, 1983).

Finally, feminist research goes beyond knowledge generation to engage in using knowledge for change—i.e. “knowledge about women that will contribute to women's liberation and emancipation” (Guerrero, 1999, p. 16-17). Feminist research is thought of as having the potential to transform traditional psychology, epistemologies, women's lives, and participants' and researchers' lives by developing and implementing strategies to counteract traditional structural, economic, and systemic injustice (Grossman et al., 1997). Therefore, feminist research is seen as a political movement for social, structural and personal transformation (Maguire, 2001).

Critical theory and research is based on an assumption that social constructions are shaped by social, political, cultural and economic forces in the environment that are further shaped by access to power (Martin-Baro, 1994; Prilleltensky, 1999). As Prilleltensky (1997) notes, “Encouraging women, people of color, the poor, and the working class to define their problems as individuals ensures that they work to change themselves rather than society. The result is a reduced effort to alter the status quo, a state of affairs that benefits the privileged” (p.12).

Compared to more traditional theories of research, critical theory considers social action to be a necessary component of research in order to achieve distributive justice (Martin-Baro, 1994; Prilleltensky, 1999). This call for social justice action is at the political level and requires researchers to move beyond the confines of their field (Prilleltensky, 2001). More participatory critical researchers argue for the need to engage community members themselves in the process of identifying goals (LeCompte, 1995; Prilleltensky, 2001).

Feminist and critical theory and research offer a framework for exploration of the interlocking nature of oppression, in which race, gender, and class interact in complex ways. It also provides us with a way of understanding research as a forum for social justice and an antecedent to positive social movement. These theories fit well with my desire to develop a deeper understanding of how WTW functions to promote the status quo by attempting to fit participants into a mold built on white, male, middle class values and experiences. It also provides a context in which we can discuss what concrete action is needed in order to move toward the creation of a program that fits the lives of the people who are most in need.

### **Overview of Welfare reform**

Statistics gathered by the U.S. House of Representatives (2000) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1998A, 1998B) report that over 90% of welfare recipients are mothers, 93% are single parents, and the average number of children per household is two. 38% are Black, 24.5% are Latino, and 30% are white. 53% have a high school diploma and 19% have some college education.

The 1996 welfare reform, under President Clinton, increased work requirements in order for participants to continue receiving aid (Karger & Stoesz, 2002; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). Participation in work-related activities was made mandatory for recipients after receiving assistance for 24 months (Pavetti & Kauff, 2006). The expected level of effort was 30 hours a week for a parent with a child over 6, and 20 hours a week for those with a child 6 or younger. In 2006, the Bush Administration made work requirements stricter by increasing the required amount of work participation and decreasing the amount of activities that count toward work, such as education, locating child care, training, mental health counseling and addiction counseling (Pavetti & Kauff, 2006; Rowe & Giannarelli, 2006).

The 1996 reform was passed in response to years of dissatisfaction with the welfare system. While there has been disagreement over the logistics of the legislation, many concur that changes were needed in the welfare system (Hays, 2003). For instance, many felt that the system did little to help participants manage employment and did not offer sufficient benefits for basic needs. However, the root cause of problems with the system was and continues to be debated.

The more conservative argument is that problems with the welfare system are due to the poor morals and values of welfare recipients (Mead, 1986; Murray, 1984). Proponents of this view describe a "welfare culture" where recipients are seen as lazy, promiscuous, immoral, dysfunctional, and unhealthily dependent upon the system (Dodson, 1998; Hays, 2003; Schein, 1995). They argue that the government has been too lenient--without more strict deterrents, the system will continue to promote family

dysfunction and unemployment. From this perspective, the solution is believed to be a strict focus on work and preferably full-time work (Pavetti & Kauff, 2006). Tougher penalties are believed to be necessary to encourage program compliance.

Those on the more liberal side of the argument feel the problem rests in economic conditions that make it extremely difficult for people to rise up and out of poverty (Anderson, 1999; Harris, 1997; Wilson, 1987, 1996). They point to an increasingly stratified economy, a severe lack of decently paying jobs, and historical factors related to race, ethnicity, and gender that serve as obstacles to upward social mobility (Dodson, 1998; Wilson, 1996). They are concerned that the legislation does not provide sufficient resources for child care, mental and physical disabilities, and domestic violence counseling (Pavetti & Kauff, 2006). The liberal advocates have pushed for more inclusion of education and training activities that will prepare recipients for higher paying jobs and more part-time options for mothers. This group argues that stricter sanctions and penalties will only leave families at higher risk and in more precarious situations.

In many ways, the debate over welfare reform reflects the diversity of beliefs in the U.S. about how poverty occurs and what should be done about it. While the conservative and liberal groups have had the opportunity to voice their beliefs and hopes for welfare reform, less is known about what the participants themselves feel should be done.

### **Underlying values and beliefs**

The build up and impetus for the 1996 welfare reform is clearly connected to deeply ingrained values and beliefs within U.S. culture. Some of these values are related

to how we as a society, view poverty and those who live in impoverished conditions, while others are related to gender and racial stereotypes. The history of U.S. legislation related to government assistance for the poor sheds light on our current Welfare-to-Work policies and expectations.

*Who “deserves” assistance?*

The U.S. government in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century passed legislation of poor laws that distinguished between those who were viewed as “deserving” and “undeserving” of public assistance (Dodson, 1998; Hays, 2003). Those unable to work, due to issues that were not seen as their fault (i.e. European-American widows), were categorized as “deserving”. Other impoverished women, people of color, and those who simply could not work (due to mental or physical disabilities) were believed to be “immoral” and/or “idle” and were placed in poor houses where they were forced to work (Katz, 1986; 1989). Being poor was associated with individual failure, bad character, and a lack of moral worth (Dodson, 1998).

Poverty was also associated with being female and a woman of color (Thomas, 1994). Poor women and girls who were not able to carry out their appropriate domestic and reproductive roles were seen as deviant and indecent citizens (Amramovitz, 1996; Sidel, 1996). The disproportionate number of single mothers of color, due to our country's history of segregation and slavery, led to an association between skin color and the need for public assistance (Dodson, 1998). This relationship between race and gender led to views of the “Black welfare queen” as “the agent of destruction, she is the creator

of the pathological, black urban, poor family from which all ills flow...Ultimately, she is portrayed as threatening 'the American way of life'" (Lubiano, 1992).

### *U.S. work ethic*

The value of hard work is entrenched in U.S. culture and is an integral part of welfare reform. The idea that people make choices of their own free will, and therefore get what they deserve is rooted in U.S. history and culture (Kahn & Yoder, 1989). From the inception of the poor houses, employment has and continues to be seen as the solution to poverty (Dodson, 1998).

The 1996 legislation was created as a way to instill a more robust work ethic in those who were seen as lacking motivation (Hays, 2003). Current Welfare-to-Work programs are steeped in individualistic notions of humans as inherently rational, competent, independent and responsible for their own lives (Sandlin, 2004).

While the denigrating images of the "welfare queen" began to take shape years ago and under different historical and contextual circumstances, the stereotype is powerful and persistent today. U.S. values and messages about hard work suggest that when welfare participants fail to move from government assistance to employment, it is due to bad choices and a lack of will or desire to work. Furthermore, these individuals are viewed as incompetent, irresponsible, and contrary to core U.S. ideals.

### *Motherhood and employment*

Early welfare programs were based on the traditional notion of a breadwinning father, and a mother who cared for the children and home (Dodson, 1998; Hays, 2003). It

was seen as appropriate that when a husband was unavailable, due to death or military service, that the government should step in and help.

Since World War II, gender norms have changed and many more women are working outside of the home (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Frederiksen-Goldsen & Scharlach, 2001). Despite these gender changes in the workforce, there is still a great deal of ambivalence in U.S. culture regarding the question of whether mothers should or should not work (Hays, 1996; McCrate, 2002; Stone & Lovejoy, 2004). One of the biggest tensions of the 1996 reform is that it has increased paid work requirements during a time when U.S. society has simultaneously increased legislation and discussion around “family values”, which require that someone, usually the mother, stays at home to care for the children (Hays, 2003).

### *Conclusions*

Messages about who deserves to be helped in U.S. society, the value of hard work, and the tension between motherhood and employment lurk in the 1996 legislation, the execution of WTW programs, and the ongoing debates about welfare reform. We need to understand more about how participants receive and understand these messages and how it impacts their experience of the program, their search for work, and their view of themselves.

### **Results of the reform**

Supporters of the reform point to drastically reduced welfare rolls since 1996 (Hays, 2003; Pavetti & Kauff, 2006). While in 1996 there were 12.2 million welfare recipients, in 2001 there were only 5.3 million (Ashworth, Cebulla, Greenberg, &

Walker, 2004). Supporters also point out that the influx of federal and state funding has led to an increase in supportive services and employability for many welfare recipients.

Critics, however, point out that despite the lowered welfare rolls, the number of people living in dire poverty has only decreased by 15% (Hays, 2003). Of the people leaving the welfare rolls, 40% have moved from government assistance into poverty and 20% returned to welfare at a later date (Loprest, 2001). As was stated earlier, those who have been helped the most tend to be younger, white, and without children (Ashworth, et al, 2004). Others point out that while many families did see an increase in household income after finding work, the poorest families sunk deeper into poverty (Hill & Kauff, 2001). Those considered to be living in "deep poverty" (which is defined as a household income that is 50% below the poverty line) has increased since the reform (Haskins, Sawhill, & Weaver, 2001). Simultaneously, homeless shelters, food banks, and other organizations that help the poor have seen increases in numbers as a result of the legislation, suggesting that many people are simply being shuffled to other forms of assistance (Hayashi, 1999).

Hays (2003) argues that it is not finding a job that is the biggest hurdle for many welfare recipients, but finding a job that: a.) pays enough to lift a family out of poverty, b.) offers sufficient health and childcare benefits, and c.) is flexible enough to accommodate the lives of single parents. The education and skill level of many recipients is simply not high enough for them to obtain a job that can support children (Cooper, 1993; Schein, 1995). Confounding these issues, mothers of color face ongoing

sexual and racial discrimination in the job market (England, 1992; Sapiro, 1999; Wilson, 1996).

Despite the ongoing debate about whether or not the reform has “worked”, it is necessary that we gain deeper insight into the experiences of the participants themselves. Their voices may shed light on how people living below the poverty level manage to get by in the face of multiple obstacles and barriers to success.

### **Summary**

While welfare reform has been touted as a straight-forward program that pushes work first, it is clear that beneath the surface lie bigger and more complex tensions around who is seen as worthy of assistance, what makes a good citizen, and the appropriate role of women in U.S. society. Pertinent to this study are questions around the experience of women currently going through WTW, especially with the recent Bush Administration's stricter work requirements. The literature on welfare reform also brings up questions around whether the reform fits the lives of women with children and how mothers psychologically manage the roles of parent, job seeker, and employee.

The dynamic and complex associations that have developed in U.S. culture between race, gender, and poverty point out the need for a deeper understanding of how women relate to different roles and identities. It becomes clear that we cannot parcel out race, gender, or class as a separate and isolated characteristic of one's identity. Instead, we need to understand the psychological impact of how interlocking senses of self impact the individual in context.

### **Literature review of studies conducted since the 1996 reform**

The following outlines the main areas of study that have emerged in the research and literature since the 1996 reform was rolled out. Both quantitative and qualitative articles are discussed.

### **Program content**

Much of the research has focused on the delivery of information and structure of various state programs around the U.S. In general, WTW programs have focused mostly on providing job search skills, skills training, and basic education (Juntunen et al, 2006). The 1996 legislation gave states a great deal of leeway in how they chose to implement WTW programs in order to meet the new requirements (Pavetti & Kauff, 2006; Rowe & Giannarelli, 2006). However, it is important to note that the most recent proposals by the Bush Administration suggest an increased tightening of state budgets as well as increased federal monitoring of state initiatives (Goldstein, 2006). The following outlines major themes in the literature.

#### *Work-first versus training*

Evaluations looking at multiple WTW programs across the country have attempted to identify which strategy, work-first or training, is the most effective in moving people off of welfare rolls (Gueron & Hamilton, 2002; Hamilton, 2002; Juntunen et al., 2006). The results from these studies suggest that the best results come from a combination of both job search activities and pre-employment training.

The results also point to barriers that impede participants from being able to move from WTW into employment. Mental health concerns (Marrone, Foley, & Selleck, 2005; Hamilton, 2002), health problems (Romero, et al, 2002), and substance abuse (Anderson,

Shannon, Schyb, & Goldstein, 2002) have been shown to lessen the impact of WTW programs.

### *Microenterprise*

Microenterprise programs usually provide a combination of capital/aid, self-employment training, technical assistance, and peer support (Sanders, 2004). These types of programs work in conjunction with or as an alternative to WTW programs as a strategy for job creation and self-sufficiency. Microenterprise can serve to empower low income women by offering support and guidance that might otherwise be difficult to obtain, due to the multiple barriers that they face. Such programs offer poor women of color access to capital, information, networking opportunities, and management experience, while simultaneously offering employment opportunities that may be more flexible and enable women to juggle both family and work (Sanders). While micro-enterprise is certainly not the answer for all women going through the WTW system, staff should be aware of how these programs work and when and why it might be a good fit for certain participants.

Staff and program administrators should be aware of the critiques of micro-enterprise that have argued that the model has some serious flaws (Ssewamala & Sherraden, 2004). For example, some people are not natural entrepreneurs, making the risks and challenges associated with micro-enterprise less exciting and a bad match (Datta, 2004). Others point out that many micro-enterprise efforts do not spend enough time discussing and teaching participants how to save money or manage loans, which can lead to serious financial problems (Ssewamala & Sherraden, 2004).

The use of micro-enterprise as a possible strategy for lifting WTW participants out of poverty needs to be examined and explored in context. Promoting the idea that women can own, run, and manage their own business in a society in which they continue to face multiple obstacles to success, should be done sensitively and carefully. If such programs are used without taking historical, political, and cultural realities into consideration, we may be providing another circumstance in which women are being set up for failure and then blamed for their incompetence or inability to succeed.

*Gender and race identity issues*

Concepts and issues related to gender (specifically female gender) emerge as a major theme in the literature on program content. Solomon (2003) conducted ethnographic observations of a Welfare-to-Work training program and focused on the use of informal class time used to address work obstacles to employment. Specifically, she demonstrated how “sistering” was used both among the women and between the trainer and trainees, to address shared work obstacles. This “sistering” provided a space to acknowledge and understand the collective oppression and discrimination experienced by poor women.

It seemed that connectedness was a way of knowing what was going on with Judy, knowing what to do to assist her in class, and how to make sense of her experience in terms of the women's collective mistreatment and hardship. From this knowing, the women were able to call into question the administrative logic that produced taken-for-granted processes in the program and consider alternatives (p. 709).

Soloman also explored how the trainer used “mothering” to help battle male privilege. She argues that while class time geared toward job search and employment skills is needed, the female trainees benefited equally as much from having their life experiences validated and understood. The study proposes that women cannot be good employees unless their worth as persons is considered and explored.

DeBord, Fanning-Canu, and Kerpelman (2000) explored the importance of “work-family fit” in the lives of women moving from Welfare-to-Work to employment. The researchers used qualitative methods to interview 16 European Americans and 14 African Americans about the factors that they felt enabled them to make a smooth transition into work and be successful in their jobs. They found that women experienced a greater amount of success when their needs and the needs of their families were met. The researchers encourage programs to inform employers and community members about the need to support women as they transition from WTW into employment. They also argue for the need to publicize community support services more explicitly, organize support networks, and reevaluate services periodically to ensure that they are in line with the obstacles and barriers in the lives of the program participants.

Issues around race and ethnic identity emerged as another theme in the literature. Eubanks (2004) qualitatively explored the role of resilience in African American women as they transition from welfare to economic self-sufficiency. From her interviews with nine women in a New Jersey Welfare-to-Work program, she identified social supports such as immediate and extended family, the church, and women's roles as mothers to be crucial coping strategies in their survival. She suggests that future research address the

ways in which social support can be better integrated into WTW programs. She also argues that WTW staff need to explore the ways in which racism, classism, and sexism factor into the lives of participants. Eubanks stresses the need for WTW caseworkers to not only provide job search skills and training, but individual and group counseling or support as women navigate their experiences as poor women of color.

Banerjee and Pyles (2004) point out the lack of research conducted around the strengths and resilience of African American women living in poverty. Where as the WTW system tends to promote white middle class values such as independence and self-sufficiency (Sandlin, 2004), African American communities tend to emphasize communalism, interdependence, and relationships with others (Banerjee & Pyles). The authors argue that spirituality plays an integral part in African American identity and specifically serves as a form of resilience as women negotiate the experience of poverty and welfare. As one woman comments:

I really try to help everybody else. So, that's where I get my peace, by helping others. I try to help everyone even though I'm not in a good situation. I still try to help others hoping that it may come back to me. But at least I know I've done my part. Because we are all connected, if there was anything that I could do to help somebody not endure or experience what I've experienced in life, then my spirituality—that's when it shines (p. 61).

The authors suggest that WTW programs that serve African American women need to incorporate spirituality as a form of resilience into the content and delivery of services.

*American myth of success*

While WTW programs focus energy on promoting individual success (Sandlin, 2004), they simultaneously tend to ignore the larger contextual and structural factors in women's lives. Sandlin's research (2004) uncovered three major themes related to how two WTW programs regarded an individual's ability to be successful. Effort and hard work, a positive attitude, and an ability to follow the rules were considered positive qualities that would lead all participants to employment. If a participant was not able to find a job, it was clear that it was therefore due to a lack of motivation or ability to do what they were told. What was not discussed as much, Sandlin points out, were structural explanations for success. The availability of jobs, the need for more education and training, and access to economic capital (such as transportation), were not explored as often within the programs. When these discussions did come up, they were quickly diverted back toward focus on the individual.

Sandlin argues that WTW's promotion of the American myth of success erroneously places blame on the individual and ignores larger historical, contextual, and social factors that make the myth unobtainable for many. She quotes Weiss (1988) who described the American myth of success as an "illusion of opportunity, served as a social pacifier inimical to reform. Furthermore, by equating failure with sin and personal inadequacy, self-help popularizers obscured the objective causes of social injustice (Weiss, 1988, p. 7).

*Conclusions*

WTW programs that push work-first, micro-enterprise training, and the notion of the American dream of success are effective for many participants (Ashworth, Cebulla, Greenberg, & Walker, 2004). However, there are some for whom these individualistic notions are not a good fit and/or not a realistic option. More research is needed that explores what might be helpful for participants with multiple responsibilities, caretaking roles, and limited marketable skills. Furthermore, participants' gender, racial, and ethnic identities must be considered as they go through WTW programs and move into employment.

### **Program delivery**

Other research has explored issues related to the training of WTW staff and their interactions with participants. This body of research identifies the importance of understanding the dynamic processes and relationships between staff and participants that impact program effectiveness.

### *White privilege*

Sandlin (2004) argues that when white teachers/trainers of WTW programs ignore the privileges that have accompanied their whiteness, and continue to promote the American myth of success, they are serving to uphold the status quo and patriarchal values. Banerjee and Pyles (2004) suggest that WTW staff need to do their own personal social justice work by examining how their race, class, and values impact the messages that they are sending participants, both implicitly and explicitly. This work will most likely be challenging and painful, due to the fact that WTW staff experience many of the same oppressive messages as their clients. Working with the poor and disadvantaged

continues to be a thankless and invisible job in the U.S., due to low pay and low status (Blustein, 2006). However, it is crucial that more work be done around the dynamic relationships between staff and participants that may be influencing program outcomes.

#### *WTW policies and procedures*

Anyone who has worked within the welfare system understands that the numerous policies, procedures, exemptions, and loopholes are confusing and difficult to keep track of. Welfare reform has changed the number of hours participants are required to work, the activities that count toward their hours, and it has decreased the amount of training/education that participants can pursue (Hays, 2003; Karger & Stoesz, 2002). Banerjee and Pyles (2004) argue for increased training and supervision of staff's knowledge and understanding of welfare policies. It is crucial for staff to be up-to-date on WTW regulations, and competent in negotiating the system as they work as advocates for their clients.

Similarly, Anderson (2002) found that many recipients are confused about policies, regulations, and benefits. The results of his study suggest that this confusion is not due to a lack of motivation to work, but rather the overwhelming rules and incentives related to welfare reform. He encourages program staff to take a more proactive role in explaining and simplifying information to ensure that recipients are able to access services and to avoid increased frustration and apathy.

#### *Conclusions*

Those who implement and carry out WTW policies and programs play a major role in the success of the individuals using their services. It is crucial that we understand

the intra-program dynamics and relationships that impact the experiences of participants and their identities. It is also important that we appreciate the complexity of welfare legislation and the confusion that it can cause for both employees and participants.

### **Summary**

The research conducted since 1996 generates questions about how programs address the different roles that participants play in their lives—i.e. as parents, as people with various ethnic and racial backgrounds, as women, and as U.S. citizens. What values and messages are being sent to participants and how are they received? How do staff-participant dynamics impact the job search process? Do the services being offered fit the needs and lives of those who are most in need?

### **Work and women**

In order to understand more about the experiences of women going through WTW and their attempts to find sustainable employment, it is helpful to review the research that has been done in the field of women's career development. Many WTW programs have looked to the field of career counseling for guidelines and best practices as they choose how to implement work-first policies and requirements (Lent, 2001; Juntunen, et al, 2006; Weinrach, 2003)

Many critics (Carter & Cook, 1992; Betz, 1993; Fitzgerald, Fassinger & Betz, 1995) have pointed out that the field of vocational or career psychology was developed and has been primarily focused on the “vocational behavior of middle class men” (Tyler, 1978, p. 40). From the inception of the field by Parsons in 1909, the goal has been to understand men's vocational interests, career patterns, and vocational behavior

(Fitzgerald, Fassinger, & Betz, 1995). In response to this lopsided focus within vocational psychology, a significant amount of work has been done over the years to shed light on the career development of women. The following outlines some of the major areas of research.

### **Early career development research**

The study of women's career development began as an attempt to understand more about a "special" group (Fitzgerald, Fassinger, & Betz). Due to historical factors and a male-dominated workforce, much of the early research was interested in understanding what factors influenced a woman's choice to work versus her choice to stay at home (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Ireland, 1993). Later, researchers became interested in how women went about choosing "traditional" versus "non-traditional" careers (Betz, 1991; Nagely, 1971; Rossi, 1965). The work of Sobol (1963) and Psathas (1968) offered insight into how married women with children went about deciding whether or not to work outside of the home. This body of research revealed that factors such as a spouse's salary, satisfaction with one's marriage, educational level, and previous work experience all impact women's choices.

Later research began to explore how women are expected to remain responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the home and family regardless of their job or career (Fitzgerald, Fassinger, & Betz, 1995; Powell, 1999). The experience of these dual roles understandably leads to stress and role conflicts as women struggle to manage two full time jobs—i.e. one as a homemaker and mother, and the other outside the home in the world of work (Scarr, Phillips, & McCartney, 1989).

Another body of research has offered insight into some of the barriers that exist as women pursue careers (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Hackett & Betz, 1981). It is argued that women face internal barriers such as home-career conflict and math anxiety, while simultaneously bumping up against external barriers such as sexism, occupational gender stereotypes and sexual harassment (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Fitzgerald & Weitzman, 1992; Powell, 1999; Walsh & Osipow, 1994).

### **Traditional career theories and gender**

Critics have suggested that traditional career theories, such as Holland's Theory of Person-Environment Fit (1992), Super's Life Span Life Space Theory of Career Development (1955; 1980) and Social Learning Theory (1969), tend to focus on the experiences of white middle class males (Carter & Cook, 1992; Helms & Cook, 1999; Leong & Brown, 1995; Richardson, 1993). It is therefore important for us to develop theories that take into account the experiences and life circumstances that may be more typical of women in U.S. society.

Others have shown that women cannot be researched or considered as one homogeneous group (Farmer, 1985; Fassinger, 1996). Specifically, they have pointed out the need to understand how the career development of white women may differ from that of black or Latina women (Gomez & Fassinger, 1994; McWhirter & Hackett, 1993). Similarly, how might career development for lesbians and poor women be different from straight and middle class women (Fitzgerald, Fassinger, & Betz, 1995)?

While great strides have been made over the past 50-60 years in understanding how women go about making certain career-related decisions, the field of career

counseling and vocational counseling continues to focus most of its energy on the experiences of white middle class women with enough education and access to opportunity that they have the ability to “choose” a “career”. The assumption is both that women can pick between a number of possibly satisfying options, and that each can theoretically lead to a career that moves in an upward direction. What is drastically lacking is an understanding of how women go about finding work when they don't have choices, due to life circumstances, responsibilities, educational level, access to opportunity, and support systems.

### **Summary**

While the exploration of women's career development was initially focused on experiences believed to be unique to females, what has become apparent is that many of the factors related to how women make career-related decisions are more connected to issues of power and the social construction of gender in U.S. society (Blustein, 2006; Fitzgerald, Fassinger, & Betz, 1995; Hopfl & Atkinson, 2000). This realization broadens the scope and seems to suggest that an understanding of women's work-related experiences requires that we explore how women are situated within their larger social, historical, and political contexts.

Regarding women going through Welfare-to-Work, it is important for us to understand how gender norms and expectations about motherhood and caregiving impact participants' experiences both within the program and as they search for work. Research is needed to explore how current economic conditions, the labor market, and educational trends impact participants' ability to find jobs. Similarly deeper knowledge is needed of

how our country's history of race relations, immigration, and segregation impact women's experiences in the world of work.

### **Work and people of color**

Recent developments within psychology suggest that race be considered a social construction that is based on historical, social, and political factors as opposed to the presumption that race is related to physiological or biological traits (Blustein, 2006; Helms & Cook, 1999; Helms et al, 2005). This understanding of race impacts both vocational theory and practice.

The literature on vocational and career counseling with racial and ethnic minorities has demonstrated that cultural factors must be taken into consideration when implementing counseling strategies and utilizing vocational assessment tools (Carter & Cook, 1992; Fouad, 1993; Fouad & Bingham, 1995). Career counseling is not considered to be effective unless it takes place within a cultural context. Along these same lines, it is crucial that cultural differences be valued rather than seen as a deficit or inability to measure up to a white middle class standard (Fouad & Bingham, 1995). The goal of career counseling is to therefore help clients make career-related decisions that are culturally sensitive and appropriate.

### **Traditional career theories and race**

Critics have suggested that the theoretical models that are used in career counseling do not always fit with the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities (Carter & Cook, 1992; Leong & Brown, 1995). Traditional theories have tended to minimize or ignore the impact of environmental and contextual factors that influence the lives of

racial and ethnic minority clients, tending to instead focus on internal issues as barriers to success.

World views and cultural norms for racial and ethnic minorities may be different from the majority white culture and can impact how certain career-related decisions are made (Nobles, 1976; Sue & Sue, 1990). Therefore, many have argued for more multi-culturally competent career counseling theories (Bingham & Ward, 1994; Bowman, 1993; Fouad, 1993; Richardson, 1993; Helms, 1990; Helms & Cook, 1999; Vera & Speight, 2003).

Racial and ethnic identity development (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990) must also be considered as a significant influence on a client's career aspirations, decisions, and expectations (Bingham & Ward, 1994). Similarly, career counselors (both white and non-white) need to be able to explore and understand their own racial identity development and how it plays out in the career counseling process.

Finally, the experience of racism and prejudice in the world of work must continue to be explored and better understood (Blustein, 2006; Helms & Cook, 1999; Spokane & Richardson, 1992; Wilson, 1996). This applies to the ways in which racism impacts career and work theories, access to employment opportunities, and the interactions between racism and sexism.

### **Summary**

Although the field of career counseling has taken some significant steps toward the incorporation of the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities into the counseling process, less work has been done to understand how these factors interact with gender

and class (Blustein, 2006). It is clear that the focus remains on people who have the freedom to choose a certain career or vocation and is less concerned with the experiences of those whose work opportunities are limited or restricted due to historical, economic, social and political factors.

### **Work and poverty**

The relationship between work/career and issues related to poverty, social class, and classism has been neglected within the field of vocational psychology (Blustein, 2006; Liu, 2001). Although vocational psychology was initially rooted in the study of immigrants and lower-skilled workers, the field moved more toward a focus on higher socioeconomic groups with the shift toward career-related issues (Blustein).

Social class has been viewed as a challenge to research due to its inextricable relationship with race and gender (Helms & Cook, 1999; Liu, 2001). What is known is that social class impacts individuals' access to resources, skills, training, and the education needed to obtain profitable work (Sewell & Hauser, 1975; McDonough, 1997). As Dodson (1998) discusses in her study of poor women in Massachusetts, single-mother families experience the greatest amount of poverty in the U.S. Low income single mothers face a multitude of barriers as they struggle to support their families. Most have limited education and training (Cooper, 1993), deal with constant financial stress (Sidel, 1986), must constantly worry about their children's safety (Dodson, 1998), and do it all alone (Morrison et al, 1986). Researchers have noted that our field needs to do a better job of training future clinicians and researchers around issues of poverty and specifically experiences of welfare and government assistance (Juntunen et al, 2006; Lent, 2001).

**Traditional career theories and the working poor**

Recent initiatives have called on the fields of career and vocational psychology to increase awareness and knowledge around the causes of poverty, discrimination toward the poor, and the shame and stigma associated with government assistance (APA's Urban Initiatives Office, 1999; Nicolas & Jean-Baptiste, 2001). While traditional career theories are helpful in identifying various factors that influence career choice and career development, they are less helpful when applied to the many people in this country who work as a means of day-to-day survival.

As Weinrach (2003) points out, traditional career and counseling theories were not developed or intended to deal with issues related to poverty, homelessness, and unemployment. For example, Roger's person-centered approach (1957; 1980), which emphasizes empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness, has been promoted as a way to increase WTW program effectiveness (Lent, 2001). Proponents suggest that more one-on-one attention to individual needs will increase psychological health, which will in turn lead to increased employment. However, a career counselor's ability to be genuine and empathic with an individual will not have any impact on external barriers to success such as limited education, housing, and child care. See (1986) describes the person-centered approach as "relatively unconcerned with the external environment; yet the rehabilitation counselor is in constant interaction with the real world and spends considerable time coordinating community resources and delivering concrete services to the client " (p. 144). The needs of WTW participants are different and in many ways

more dire than other career counseling populations (Weinrach, 2003), making Roger's approach inefficient and a poor fit for this type of work.

### **The psychology of working**

Critics have pointed out how traditional career theories and practices are based on and for people with privilege—i.e. people who have volition in their lives and are able to make choices about the types of work they enjoy and feel fit their personalities (Blustein, 2006; Smith, 1983; Weinrach, 2003). However, many people work out of necessity and do not have the luxury of choosing their own career trajectory. Therefore, some pioneering scholars have called on the field of psychology to increase awareness and understanding of the experiences of workers in low-paying jobs (Blustein, 2006; Wilson, 1996).

The psychology of working perspective (Blustein, 2006) offers a much needed framework for addressing the needs of people who have been ignored throughout the history of career and vocational psychology. Blustein describes how working functions to fulfill three basic human needs: the need for survival and power, the need for connectedness, and the need for self-determination. He encourages counselors, researchers, and policy-makers to explore and understand the dynamic ways that work is inextricably linked to various parts of our lives.

As mothers, women of various ethnic and racial backgrounds, and women living in poverty, the participants of WTW programs are a group that has been ignored and perhaps even forgotten within traditional career and work-related literature. Most of them work to make ends meet and take care of their children, rather than as a form of

self-expression. Blustein's perspective (2006) can be used to frame some of their experiences as they search for work. Specifically, how do the jobs that these women find fit their needs for survival—i.e. does work enable them to care for themselves and their families adequately? Does work help them “survive and flourish in the economic sphere of their lives”? (Blustein, p. 69). Secondly, do the jobs that they seek offer a means for interpersonal connection to others and how do the women experience this? And finally, do their jobs offer them a sense of self determination—i.e. does it offer them a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to others?

### **Summary**

The gaps in the career literature related to people who lack choices and opportunity in the world of work combined with the fresh perspective of the psychology of working framework inspire some of the questions that this study seeks to explore. Specifically, how have the participants' experiences going through Welfare-to-Work impacted their ability to find jobs that are manageable and fit within the contexts of their everyday responsibilities and roles? What does work mean to these women? Similarly, how has the experience of not working been for them? Do they feel they have the tools and resources needed to obtain sustainable employment?

### **Multiple identities**

Social constructionist theory shares a similar spirit with feminist and critical theories (Gergen, 2001; Guerrero, 1999; Martin-Baro, 1994; Prilleltensky, 1997), and is based on the assumption that there are multiple truths that are related to contextual, historical, and cultural factors (Blustein et al, 2004; Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1999). Reality

is socially and culturally constructed and therefore complex and difficult to define using traditional scientific methods. It challenges taken-for-granted knowledge, traditional power structures, and the status quo. Because social constructionist theory views knowledge as inextricably linked to culture and context, the goal of research is to understand the complex and dynamic patterns of social relationships and structures (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1999).

A social constructionist understanding of identity would therefore be culturally embedded and based on the various social, historical, economic, and political factors that influence WTW participants as they search for employment. The views of the self that emerge are related to the experiences of race, gender, and class as they fit within a larger sociopolitical context (Cerulo, 1997). People therefore may identify with multiple views of themselves in relation to various roles and responsibilities as well as race, class, and gender.

### **Psychological experience of marginalized identities**

The following material outlines major themes in current research on multiple identities as they pertain to and are experienced by people marginalized within U.S. or North American society. The studies I examined used qualitative research methods to explore previously misunderstood and/or ignored psychological complexities about multiple identities in people who are marginalized based on issues related to race, class, gender, and sexuality.

#### *Instability and uncertainty*

A theme that appeared across a number of the studies (e.g. Banerjee, 2003; Debord, Canu, & Kerpelman, 2000; McCormack, 2005; Scott, London, & Hurst, 2005) is instability and uncertainty as participants negotiate their different identities. This was especially true for participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and those struggling with poverty. In Scott, London and Hurst's study (2005) and Debord, Canu, and Kerpelman's study (2000), the resources that mothers and single parents pulled together in order to care for their families were often unstable and unreliable. They had difficulty finding dependable transportation, child care, and consistent jobs. The researchers stated, "These unique longitudinal, qualitative data provide detail that is largely absent in the literature about multiple and often unstable care arrangements used by a group of highly disadvantaged, recent welfare leavers" (p. 382).

Banerjee (2003) pointed out that despite some participants' ability to move off of the system, those with health problems, substance abuse issues, and domestic violence in their families were unable to maintain successful employment. Similarly, McCormack (2005) illustrated how doing the things that are considered part of being a "good mother", i.e. putting children first, spending time with children, providing for children, keeping children out of trouble, and keeping children safe, are not possible when single mothers are required to work 40 hours a week. Therefore, the requirements of the system end up leading to instability and inadequate care for the children of participants.

The day-to-day battles to secure taken for granted services and care may impact marginalized groups in ways that have previously been ignored or dismissed. These

examples suggest that the psychological experience of instability and uncertainty is complex and needs to be explored further.

*Conflicting, confining, and imposed identities*

Another theme that appeared was the difficulties, contradictions, and conflicting interests that participants experienced as they negotiated different identities, which were often times confining or imposed. In a study of Hispanic gay and lesbian youth (Adams, Cahill & Ackerland, 2005), participants tended to downplay how much they believed heterosexism would play a part in their career and work aspirations. They tended to report that they didn't think it would impact their opportunities at all, while in other aspects of their lives and past experiences (i.e. school and social lives) discrimination *had* made a difference,

When asked what would have helped them reach their potential, most of the participants said they wish they had received more encouragement and open-mindedness. This wish seemed inconsistent with their claims that they had been unaffected by prejudicial thinking, and may reflect a deeper reality about the impact of heterosexism on them (p. 211).

McCormack (2005) pointed out how mothers on welfare are in a no-win situation,

On one hand, as poor women, welfare recipients are supposed to dedicate themselves to hard work to overcome their impoverishments. On the other hand, as mothers, the ideology of intensive mothering suggests that they ought to dedicate their lives to the well-being of their children, necessitating full-time mothering (p. 663).

McCormack went on to argue that those who are trying to be good mothers are simultaneously serving to uphold the status quo by adhering to traditional gender norms and expectations. Rather than fighting against patriarchal values that denigrate child care work in favor of paid labor, she argued these women are upholding the systems that continue to oppress them.

Phan (2005) pointed out a similar pattern among the Vietnamese women she interviewed,

As the women struggle to improve their quality of life and strengthen their interpersonal connections by extending their cultural bonds, they tend to undermine their own autonomy as women because their culture has assumed patriarchal relations. Conversely, if they upset the safety of the family and cultural boat to enhance their position as women, they undermine the traditional bonds of racial and cultural security which, they believed, are crucial for their children's social and emotional development, and academic socialization.

Balancing these contradictions is an integral part of the women's strategies in everyday life in Canada (p. 13).

Sparks (1996) explored how stereotypes psychologically impact African American women by imposing confining identities onto a group based on their skin color and gender. The images of the black woman as the "mammy", "Jezebel", "matriarch", and "welfare mother", have been used over the years by the dominant, white culture as a way of subordinating black women (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1981; Sparks, 1996). These stereotypes portray black women both overtly and covertly as subordinate, sexually

promiscuous, unfit mothers, controlling, and lazy. The more recent stereotype of the black female as “superwoman” (Sparks, 1996), which has been promoted within the African American community itself, suggests that she be able to provide financially for her children through enormous self-sacrifice. She is expected to contribute to the advancement of her community and be emotionally stronger than men. The resulting identities are confining and constricting, serving to label a minority group in a way that justifies their less than equal treatment and status within society. It allows the dominant culture to place blame upon the individual, rather than larger systemic processes, and suggests that any ill treatment is deserved. For not only are many of these stereotypes negative and inaccurate (as can be seen with the “mammy”, Jezebel”, “matriarch”, and “welfare mother”), but others like the “superwoman” are economically unrealistic and unobtainable in today's society. As Greene (1994) suggested, the internalization of these stereotypes can negatively impact black women's sense of self-esteem, as they either define themselves in oppressive terms used by dominant, white society or blame themselves when they are unable to meet unrealistic expectations. Sparks concluded that we need a new definition of black motherhood that “takes into account the strengths and resilience of African American women, but also incorporates the sociopolitical and economic issues that act as barriers to success” (p. 81).

These examples point out how multiple identities that coincide with multiple forms of oppression can lead to confusing and conflicting roles for mothers, women in poverty, and women of color. If women choose to adhere to a certain set of socially acceptable behaviors, they simultaneously push up against others. Many of the socially

imposed identities discussed are confining, contradictory, and/or simply unobtainable.

Finally, while women struggle with their outward social identities and expectations, they must also manage the day-to-day household realities of how to provide for their families, and the psychological toll of marginalization.

*Creativity, resiliency, and resistance*

Another theme that has emerged within the aforementioned studies was the participants' ability to be creative in their strategies for survival, resilient in the face of multiple forms of oppression, and resistant to inequitable power structures. For instance, the women trying to piece together child care (Scott, London, & Hurst, 2005) had to be creative and resourceful in their struggle to ensure care for their children,

As they juggled low-wage jobs that changed frequently, the parents in our sample patched together care for their children during the course of a given day to provide care for different-age children or to provide care during odd shifts and over the many hours that mothers were absent from home. (p. 381).

Edin and Lein (1996) explored how welfare mothers develop creative strategies for financial survival when benefits are not enough to cover basic day-to-day costs. Women sometimes end up accepting gifts, bartering, and selling informal forms of labor in order to bring in extra cash.

Dodson and Schmalzbauer (2005) explored how poor mothers utilize habits of hiding in the face of stigmatization (Goffman, 1963). Distorted images and beliefs about the lives of poor people have inspired creative responses and survival strategies when dealing with government agencies and researchers. Due to pervasive assumptions about

welfare mothers, such as using childbearing to obtain more money (Chang, 2000; Collins, 1998) and beliefs that they are lazy and undeserving of public aid, women have learned to act like a “stone” in order to protect themselves from the impact of disrespect and suspicion (Dodson, 1998). Similarly, punitive policies and regulatory abuse and scrutiny have led poor people to be wary of what they tell and to whom (Dodson, 1998; Scott, 1990). Low income families often stay quiet, appear agreeable, learn to tell people what they want to hear, and utilize “selective telling” as a way to navigate government systems without feeling overexposed or interrogated (Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005). They have learned to camouflage or hide their true emotions or experiences out of fear and discrimination (Scott, 1990), leading to a “culture of silence” (Freire, 1981).

Brubaker and Wright (2006) examined how caregiving impacted identity for African American teenage mothers. Specifically, they explored how the process and role of caregiving served as a way to empower teens and help them form a more positive sense of self through connecting their identity with the care for others. Within the African American community, informal caregiving has developed out of necessity as a coping strategy or response to racism and other forms of oppression (Carten & Dumpson, 2004; Martin, 2000; Sudarkasa, 1996). Motherhood is often associated with creativity, continuity, providing, self-esteem, and self-actualization. The role of caregiver, therefore, offers young mothers access to a validated sense of self in a larger societal context where African Americans tend to be excluded from various privileges (Jacobs, 1994; Mayfield, 1994). The researchers' findings suggest a need to develop a deeper understanding for how teenage pregnancy and motherhood impacts women's sense of

self and purpose. While it is often assumed that teenage pregnancy negatively impacts the individual, it is worthwhile to consider how the role of mothering and caregiving may serve as a buffer for larger, more systemic forms of prejudice and discrimination.

Hispanic lesbian and gay youth (Adams, Cahill & Ackerlind, 2004) utilized indifference, minimization, and the motivation to excel as a way of buffering the emotional impact from discrimination related to their race and sexuality. The families in McCreary and Dancy's study (2004) resisted traditional ideals of what a "family" means and were able to verbalize what does and does not constitute family functioning. One participant described friends as family: "I consider her as a close family member...because if I don't have something, she gonna give it to me if she have it. If I don't have food, she feed my kids, or whatever. And it goes both ways with her" (p. 694). The researchers gave these parents a chance to identify and voice what "family" means to them, rather than assuming that because they lead single-parent households that the family is broken or flawed.

Phan (2005) discussed how the Vietnamese women in her study "endured the relentless incursions of poverty, racism, and persecution by men" (p. 12). She quoted one of her participants who said, "Vietnamese women's strength lies not so much to counter the tactic of power of corporations and institutions, but in their ability to survive poverty, humiliation, and isolation from the rest of the world. There is no room for weakness in this life. We have to work hard to extricate our children from poverty and oppression". (p. 12).

In all of these examples, we see how participants experience multiple forms of oppression through their association with various races and ethnicities, class, and gender. And yet they are somehow able to persevere and push back against dominant North American, middle class values and expectations about what is “normal”. The strategies and survival techniques used are creative and demonstrate strength and resiliency, yet tend to go ignored or misunderstood by dominant white middle class society.

### **Research and policy implications**

#### *Women in poverty*

Many of the studies concluded that policymakers need to pay more attention to the realities and everyday obstacles faced by poor women. Similar in all the studies was a focus on how social policy in the U.S. tends to ignore, denigrate, or punish poor women.

Scott, London and Hurst (2005) argued that as welfare reform has increased the work requirements of participants, it has failed to adequately address the gap in child care that develops when single mothers go to work.

As we persist with social policy that values paid labor above unpaid caring labor, we must provide adequate resources to expand low-income working women's access to affordable, flexible, high-quality, stable child care, lest we face an entirely new set of problems as a consequence (p. 384).

Debord, Canu and Kerpelman (2000) stated, “understanding the initial needs and abilities of single parents who are making the welfare-to-work transition is a critical first step in the development of community supports that will aid in the transition.” (p. 322).

McCormack's description of the dilemma faced by women in the welfare system was even more ominous,

The stereotypical welfare mother is a symbol of the supposed irresponsible, sexually promiscuous, and immoral behavior of the poor. Embedded in the notion of the welfare mother are powerful ideologies of race, class, and gender that blame the poor for their own poverty; portray women, particularly Black and Hispanic women, as inadequate mothers; and view nontraditional family forms as pathological (Collins, 2001; Fraser and Gordon, 1994, Mullings, 2001). (p. 660).

McCreary and Dancy (2004) also voiced concern about discrimination against non-traditional families and encouraged researchers to assess quality of family functioning based on the family's ability to meet family needs, versus its conformity to white middle class standards. Banerjee (2003) argued for more programs that focus on human capital and increased availability of birth control to poor women.

#### *Race and people of color*

Many of the researchers in these studies concluded that policymakers and other human services workers need to be more aware of the realities of people of color, and more specifically women of color (Banerjee, 2003; Phan, 2005; Prindeville, 2003). As Banerjee stated,

Social work practitioners and students must fully listen to and learn about the realities of welfare and welfare reform from the experiences of women of color so that they can take all of the necessary steps, and at least one extra step, to help such women and their families live a dignified life of their choice. (p. 431).

McCreary and Dancy (2004) called for more research and awareness of family composition for low-income African American single-parent families. Phan (2005) argued for more research on the intersection of gender and culture for refugee women.

The research and policy implications promoted by this body of literature suggest that much more knowledge is needed in order to better serve those who associate with multiple identities. This seems even more crucial when these identities correspond with various forms of prejudice and oppression.

### *Conclusions*

The studies discussed in this section present a landscape of participants' lives that is dynamic, fluid, and complicated. They suggest a need to explore and understand the multiple roles that people play in their lives and the intricacies of how they overlap, conflict or complement one another. How do people engage or resist social messages and stereotypes related to motherhood, poverty, unemployment, and race? Finally, how do confining or imposed identities psychologically impact those who are marginalized and/or labeled?

### **Final conclusions**

The literature discussed thus far offers great insight and understanding into the experiences of participants going through WTW since the 1996 reform. However, gaps still exist related to participants' multiple identities and the intersection of race, class, and gender within the context of WTW programs. There is a need to understand how social messages, stereotypes, and prejudices about mothers, people of color, and those living in poverty impact participants' experiences of WTW. How do women remain strong and

resilient in the face of these messages? Finally, due to the very recent changes in work requirements passed by the Bush Administration (Pavetti & Kauff, 2006; Rowe & Giannarelli, 2006), little research has been conducted that explores how the increasingly stringent policies impact participants.

This study seeks to offer deeper understanding and insight into how women manage their multiple roles, responsibilities, and conflicting social messages about their gender, class, and race as they negotiate Welfare-to-Work. Specifically, this investigation seeks to provide participants with a space and time to voice their experiences and identification with various parts of themselves that usually go unnoticed or ignored—i.e. their experiences as mothers, as women of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, and as women working day to day to make ends meet. In sum, this study seeks to provide a more holistic, contextual, complex, dynamic, and therefore realistic portrait of these women's lives in their own words.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This exploratory qualitative study examined how women make sense of their experience of WTW with a focus on their identities as women, as mothers, and as women of various ethnic and racial backgrounds. This investigation responded to the following questions: How do sexism, classism, and racism factor into women's experiences of WTW and their ability to find employment? How do women manage (psychologically) the impact of multiple forms of oppression? How can WTW programs address these factors and respond to barriers, rather than upholding the status quo and continuing to oppress those who they are trying to assist?

### **Method**

Qualitative descriptive research methodology is appropriate when pragmatic description of a phenomenon is desired. Qualitative content analysis, which is one form of analysis used in qualitative description (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), was used and involves the "identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling" of patterns in the data (Patton, 2000, p. 463). Qualitative content analysis is "data-derived", meaning that the codes are generated directly from the data (Sandelowski, 2000) and are not predetermined. It is a reflexive and interactive process in that treatment of the data is modified to accommodate new data and insights that emerge throughout the study (Sandelowski). As Morgan (1993) suggests, "qualitative content analysis is an appropriate choice when the available data and the research goals call for the advantages of content analysis in describing what the patterns are in the data *as well as* the

advantages of grounded theory in interpreting why the patterns are there” (Morgan, p. 119). While there is an effort to understand and explore the latent content of the data, qualitative content analysis is the least interpretive of the qualitative methods and a “straight descriptive summary” is the end goal (Sandelowski, 2000).

### **Participants**

Nine participants in this study identified as African American or Caribbean Black and one identified as Latina. The women were between the ages of 20 and 60. All of the participants were considered proficient in English. While two of the participants reported that they were currently in stable, long-term romantic relationships, eight reported that they were caring for their children on their own and without the assistance of a partner. Three stated that in addition to caring for their children, they were in charge of caring for a parent or aging relative. For more detailed information about the participants, please see Appendix I.

### **Data collection**

#### **Gaining entrance**

Participants were recruited from a One-Stop Career Center located in Downtown Boston. Welfare-to-Work programs are housed within career centers and related employment agencies around the city of Boston. I worked in one of these sites from 2001-2003 and still remain in contact with some of the employees, which afforded relative access to this particular program and population.

Participants at this particular site are required to attend programming (i.e. job search workshops and case management) 20-30 hours each week on Mondays,

Wednesdays, and Fridays. During workshop breaks, I explained the study, answered questions, and left fliers. I made it clear that participation in the study was optional and had no influence or impact on their funding or case management.

### **Inclusion and exclusion criteria**

I was interested in understanding the experiences of WTW participants who may manage multiple forms of oppression due to their gender, status as mothers, and skin color. In order to understand the experiences of this particular group, my goal was to interview between 10 and 20 women who were going through the WTW program at this specific career center. Previous studies using qualitative description and content analysis have used similar-sized samples (Sullivan-Bolyai, Knafl, Tamborlane, & Grey, 2004; Sullivan-Bolyai, Rosenberg, & Bayard, 2006). The women had to be mothers and women of color (which happened to be the majority of participants in this particular program). While WTW programs occasionally have male participants, I only interviewed women as I was interested in participants' experiences as mothers. Participants were included no matter how many children they had or the age of their children. Similarly, all women were included regardless of whether it was their first or repeated time going through WTW and/or the welfare system in general.

### **Interviews**

Individual interviews were utilized to gain a deeper understanding of how the women felt about their experiences in WTW. Open-ended interview questions with open-ended probes were used to gather descriptive data about the women's experiences without imposing any preconceived ideas or theoretical perspective (see Appendix II:

Interview protocol). Specifically, questions attempted to glean information about how the women felt the WTW system addressed their various roles and identities—i.e. as women, single mothers, women of various ethnic and racial backgrounds, and people living in poverty. Field notes and journaling were used after every interview to bracket and record my own experiences and reactions. Some questions that came up during the interview process were: What am I hearing? Are my questions making sense? What am I missing? What am I bringing to the table (i.e. my various identities)?

A focus group/group interview was held after the first six interviews were conducted. Because two of the women had already obtained employment, only four participants were able to attend the meeting. I described the general themes that had come up in the individual interviews—i.e. themes that were common among the participants. I asked participants if these ideas rung true and encouraged feedback and corrections if they felt I had misunderstood anything. The participants reported that the ideas described felt accurate and clarified a couple of minor points. I provided them with the transcripts of their interviews and asked them to contact me if they felt uncomfortable about anything in these documents. I also answered any questions they had about the research process and next steps.

### **Human subjects protection**

As explicated in the informed consent form, research participants' responses to interviews and focus groups were kept confidential. Participants had the final say over what I included both in the group interview as well as in the transcripts of the individual interviews. During interviews, I asked each woman if she would like to choose a

pseudonym, ensuring that her identity and experiences would not be linked to data from her interview. I began focus groups with a brief discussion of the importance of maintaining confidentiality among research participants. Participants were informed that no names or personally identifying information would be recorded in the interview or focus group notes, and that the consent form and audio-tapes (from the interviews and focus groups) would be stored separately from any identifying information in a locked cabinet only accessed by me and my faculty advisor. In addition, I explained that no names or identifying details would be used in any publications or other documents resulting from this research. All data collected from individuals in the study would be presented as coming from the group. .

Limits of confidentiality were described in the informed consent form. Participants were informed, for example, that if they told me about a child who was being abused, or about their intent to hurt someone, I would be required to inform the Department of Social Services or other appropriate authorities.

Resources for mental health services within the community were distributed to the WTW participants to ensure that they had a place to discuss any difficult emotions further. I explained to each participant that if she desired to seek out services I would be willing to sit with her while she made the phone call.

### **Data analysis**

I audio-taped and transcribed all interviews verbatim. Interviews were number coded and given the pseudonyms chosen by the participants. All interview information has been kept confidential and the privacy of the participants has been protected. All

notes and research materials have been kept in a locked file cabinet accessible only by me.

The actual handling of the data was informed by Creswell's data analysis spiral (1998), in which the researcher "engages in the process of moving in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach" (p. 142). I read the transcripts several times in an attempt to "immerse" myself in the data (Agar, 1980). To check for accuracy of the transcripts, I simultaneously listened to the recordings and corresponding transcription for each interview.

Qualitative description content analysis (Sandelowski, 2000) began with an open-minded and thoughtful reading of the first four interviews. The interviews were read and listened to several times so that I could gain a sense for what it was like for these women to participate in the WTW program. These first four interviews were also shared with the research methodologist (one of the committee readers, who has expertise in qualitative methods in general and qualitative description specifically). As I read through these first four interviews, I explored questions such as "what is going on here?", "what am I learning about this?"

The next step in the process was line-by-line analysis. As I read through the first four interviews, I underlined the words and phrases that stood out as most meaningful and made notes in the margins. The notes, or in-vivo codes, that I put in the margins were usually direct quotes and phrases that the women used. Therefore, this first level of coding stuck very close to the particular words used by the research participants. Simultaneously, I kept a log (as a separate document) of the feelings, questions, and

thoughts aroused by these first four interviews. The goal at this level of coding was to record key words and phrases directly from the women and stick very close to the data. As each subsequent interview and transcript was completed, this same process of document analysis was used.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> level of data analysis consisted of comparison analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) across the transcripts to identify similarities and differences in the data. The in-vivo codes were analyzed together (across the first four transcripts) and preliminary categories/clusters (or 2<sup>nd</sup> level codes) were created. These categories were formed as I saw patterns or relationship between and among the codes (see grid below for specific examples). For each in-vivo code I asked myself, “what does this mean?” and “what is she saying here?” Then similar codes were clustered or combined to form the 2<sup>nd</sup> level codes. These 2<sup>nd</sup> level codes were descriptive in nature, yet slightly more abstract than the in-vivo codes, as they encompassed more data. They reflect common ideas and phrases used by the women as they talked about their experiences with WTW. The goal at this level of coding was to gain insight into the more general ideas and experiences that the women were discussing in the interviews. .

The 3<sup>rd</sup> level of content analysis involved creating more inclusive and comprehensive concepts that encompassed groupings or clusters of the 2<sup>nd</sup> level codes. These concepts are still descriptive and remain close to the data, but reflect slightly more general ideas and categories that emerged as the data were analyzed all together. The goal at this level of coding was to search for the women's perspectives as their grouped responses were tied back into the original research questions—i.e. about their experiences

of WTW, their identities, and their ideas about work. Throughout all three levels of data analysis, the research methodologist was consulted regularly to ensure that the emerging codes made sense and seemed to capture the women’s voices accurately.

*The grid below shows the three levels of coding. The 1<sup>st</sup> level in-vivo codes led to the 2<sup>nd</sup> level categories/clusters, which in turn led to the comprehensive concepts on the right.*

**Examples of coding process**

<p><b>1<sup>st</sup> level coding:</b></p> <p><b>In vivo codes</b></p>	<p><b>2<sup>nd</sup> level codes:</b></p> <p><b>categories/clusters</b></p>	<p><b>3<sup>rd</sup> level codes:</b></p> <p><b>Concepts</b></p>
<p>“...within the first 2 weeks you’re here...I’m doin my resume in a way I never done before...help me with my cover letter, you know...mine was too long, too personal. They help me shorten it out...”</p> <p>“...and now they supposed to help you go back into the work field, but to me, they’re not helping you go back into the work field. They’re giving you a place to come sit every day...just sit at the computer.”</p> <p>“...I applied at Shaw’s, but they’re looking for nights and I don’t have anyone to watch my baby at night, so I couldn’t do that.”</p>	<p>-The program helps you with your resume/cover letter and access to computers/technology.</p> <p>- The program is a waste of time.</p> <p>- Dilemma of the hours (making it to program/finding work while caring for children).</p>	<p><b>Women’s experience of the WTW program</b></p>
<p>“I dropped out of school</p>	<p>- It’s mostly about being a</p>	<p><b>Sense of identity</b></p>

<p>because I became a mother at 16 (break)...so it took me to be in my 30s to go back to school and get my high school diploma. We don't have...I think that's the main part of it is...that the school. Because once you don't finish school, everything else just goes down hill for you from there.”</p> <p>“I'm not really asking for too much...just a stable job and a nice home ...something I can feel comfortable, I would be able to, you know, give my children a little bit more than what I had. Um...you know, maybe my daughter can go to tap dance class on the weekends. I can't even afford that.”</p>	<p>mother.</p> <p>- I do it all for my kids.</p>	
<p>“We basically don't have anything. If you took away food stamps a day, we would be starving, homeless, and in shelters or dead cuz we're not eating. And that's embarrassing to me.”</p> <p>“I think everything is my fault because I supposed to go to school...better myself, do any kind of training to get a better job. It's my fault because I dropped the school early to start looking for a job...that's what I did. It's only because...I come</p>	<p>- Shame and embarrassment.</p> <p>- Feels like it's all my fault.</p>	<p><b>Negative psychological experiences</b></p>

<p>from a big family...so my mom and my father they are poor...so I start looking for a job early.”</p> <p>“I was in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade, workin 2 jobs to try to buy my own clothes, try to feed myself, make sure I had a way to get back and forth to school. I worked 3 jobs just to go to prom and get my hair done and everything. Like...it’s never been easy for me.”</p>	<p>- I didn’t have a childhood; had to grow up fast.</p>	
<p>“I think that they put everybody in a set category, like either you’re usin the system or you’re just lazy. Not everybody’s like that, you know? Not everybody wants to be on DTA (Department of Transitional Assistance) for the rest of their life.”</p> <p>“I don’t feel like it’s a help. I feel like it’s designed to keep us where we’re at. We’re always gonna be in that income bracket. We’re always, always, always gonna be there.”</p> <p>“I think they stay on that ‘I gotta fill my quota; I gotta make sure I don’t get fired’.”</p> <p>“when I open myself to somebody and say I need help, that’s what I expect. I</p>	<p>- The system puts everybody in one category.</p> <p>- System sets people up for failure; it enables people; encourages complacency.</p> <p>- Frustration regarding DTA workers, corruption, misuse of the system.</p>	<p><b>Feeling labeled and misunderstood</b></p>

<p>expect help...I don't expect nobody to doubt me or make me feel worse than I already feel. Cuz when you walk in that office you already feel like crap (crying). You already feel bad about bein there cuz you don't feel like you can do it for yourself".</p>		
<p>“when we had my daughter...he was in and out of jail at that time, you know? (break) And when I got pregnant with my daughter, he went to jail and...it was hard.”</p> <p>“I didn't know if I could work a full-time position. (break)...figured I'd hold onto this part time job until I was able to...become stable, feeling better and um, seek full time employment. I had a part time assignment where I just started modeling because I really wasn't able to do much of anything. My sessions were 2 to 3 hours long...and um, really that was all I could do. Sometimes I could barely get out of bed.”</p> <p>“I have major depression, so...and I took myself off (medication)... So...they want me back on, but...my doctors do... Um, I seen a therapist here too, she does too...They all</p>	<p>- Father of my children is not around.</p> <p>- Experience of mental illness.</p>	<p><b>Obstacles/barriers to success</b></p>

<p>want me back on, but...if I go back on, I can't function. cuz...(crying). It's like you're like a zombie..."</p> <p>"I think it would've been better if I'd have gone to some sort of skills training program to help me update my skills more...(break) and at least if I had that, that would show Ok, well, you know, she went back and did this and so you know, she's up to date...because I mean, 5 years is a long time of being out of that field (medical tech.) and I'm sure things have changed."</p>	<p>- I need more training/skills.</p>	
<p>"Sometimes I just get fed up. Umm...I wanna throw in the towel. I'm like, I don't want to be bothered, you know? Just leave it alone, leave me alone. (break) I'll just sit and get bored...blank...sometimes I don't want to speak to anybody."</p> <p>"Sometimes I wish I wasn't even born...but I don't want God to think that I don't love my kids."</p> <p>"I never wanted to be weak. And I feel like everything, I don't use what happened to me as an excuse...if anything, I use it to help me past anything, any obstacles</p>	<p>- I cut myself off from others.</p> <p>- God/spirituality has helped me.</p> <p>- I feel positive about myself.</p>	<p><b>Forms of resilience/resistance</b></p>

I come across.”		
<p>“what working means to me...well...it’s financial independence.”</p> <p>“I wanna go back to the work field...I have goals to meet. (break) I don’t want to depend on welfare. I don’t want, I don’t want them to enable me. I want to be able to make whatever choices that I want to make.”</p> <p>“I’m here because I’m...I have a job before, but I quit the job cuz I’m trying to find something better. They pay too little money. It’s stressful too much. And I need to help my son to go to college”</p>	<p>- Work offers me a sense of identity, self-worth, independence.</p> <p>- I want something else (vocationally).</p>	<p><b>Relationship with work</b></p>

**Rigor**

Social constructionist qualitative research is based on the concept that there are multiple truths linked to cultural, historical, and political contexts (Blustein, Schultheiss & Flum, 2004). For the purposes of this study, the qualitative methods used were couched within the social constructionist framework as I saw the experiences of WTW women of color to be inextricably linked to the larger contexts of the labor market, race relations, motherhood, and U.S. values of individualism and hard work. To ensure trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sandelowski), I ensured that many aspects of qualitative research rigor were carefully integrated into the project.

*Credibility*

This study can be deemed credible because the women who went through WTW saw themselves or their own experiences in the data. Beck (1993) describes credibility as “how vivid and faithful the description of the phenomenon is. The informants, and also the readers who have had that human experience, should recognize the researcher’s described experiences as their own” (p. 263). This was accomplished by spending a solid amount of time with the women—i.e. through observing workshops, the one-on-one interviews, and the focus group/group interview.

Credibility in this particular study was informed by elements of participatory (Dodson, 2005; Reason, 1981) and feminist (Edwards, 1990) research methodologies and practice in order to fit the needs of the participant. Focus groups have been shown to foster more participation than individualistic methods such as one-on-one interviews (Madriz, 2000). They also offer a more naturalistic and contextualized environment in which the balance of power is shifted more toward the participants (Wilkinson, 1999). I used a focus group/group interview as a forum for clarification on ideas that came up in interviews, and as an attempt to offer two contexts in which women could discuss their experiences.

Member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was utilized after transcribing the interviews to ensure that participants felt included and empowered in the research process. I believe that this population has experienced many forms of silencing in their lives. Therefore, I elected to show them the transcripts out of respect for the time and energy that they gave me to explain difficult and painful experiences of oppression. None of the participants requested changes to their transcripts.

I stopped collecting data when no new information was found and saturation was reached (Creswell, 1998). As Morse and Richards (2002) explain, "Data gathering must continue until each category is rich and thick, and until it replicates. It is saturation that provides the researcher with certainty and confidence that the analysis is strong and that conclusions will be right" (p. 174). In this study, saturation was met after collecting ten interviews.

#### *Transferability*

Transferability refers to how well the results can be transferred or applied to similar settings. I hope that other WTW participants and/or mothers and women of color are able to relate to the results of this exploration. However, the sample used in this study does not reflect all WTW programs, especially those in rural, more white, and less impoverished communities in the U.S. Therefore, this study seeks to make the results transferable only to participants living in similar urban settings and who experience multiple forms of societal oppression.

#### *Dependability*

Dependability refers to how well the data have captured the wide range of variability in the sample. This was ensured through the use of a sample that was all mothers of color. Because I did not have to screen any participants out, I was able to say that I captured the range of experience within this particular WTW population.

An audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is a paper trail noting all of the decisions made throughout the research process. I utilized an audit trail both as a way to

demonstrate rigor within the study, but also as a grounding technique for me as I waded through a very new experience.

### *Confirmability*

In order to ensure that the data were not forced into my own framework or preset agenda, I worked closely with the methodologist from my committee to receive supervision and guidance throughout the research process. She read all of the transcripts and supervised my coding process. Before moving to the third level of coding, my dissertation chair looked over the 2<sup>nd</sup> level codes and confirmed that they made sense in terms of the context of the study. I utilized field notes and memos along the way, to jot down my emotions and reactions. The member checks described above ensure that the women are able to read the transcripts along the way and let me know if I am off track. However, as Sandelowski (1993) points out, “member checking is itself socially constructed by the artifices and conventions of social interaction and research” (p. 7). It is important to note that while knowledge and understanding of how participants make meaning of their world is at the forefront of qualitative research, objective reality can never be captured (Blustein, Kenna, Murphy, DeVoy, & Dewine, 2005; Gergen, 1999).

As Maracek, Fine, and Kidder (2001) discuss, some researchers are led to qualitative methods out of a need to understand experiences that are different from our own. I am a white woman from a middle-upper class background with no children attempting to study women of color from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who care for their children. Therefore, I feel as though qualitative methodologies offer me the opportunity to hear women themselves state how they feel about their own experiences

without me trying to fit them into predetermined quantitative scales, questionnaires, and surveys developed by white privileged academics.

#### *Methodological congruence*

Qualitative research includes a variety of methods that vary in terms of theoretical orientation, procedures, and data analysis. As Morse and Richards (2002) argue, researchers should seek methodological congruence when choosing a specific qualitative method. This means there should be congruence between the research question, method, and form of data analysis. As stated earlier, the question of how mothers of color experience WTW is most appropriately answered through qualitative methods that give voice to a group that tends to be silenced. Due to the gap in the psychological literature around how multiple identities or roles intersect, qualitative descriptive content analysis offers breadth and a way to identify common categories and experiences of the women.

#### *Ethical rigor*

Ethical considerations need to be dealt more delicately and sensitively with poor women as research has the potential to unknowingly disrupt the protective survival strategies utilized (Dodson, 2005). As Cohen (2000) discusses, the researcher must be sensitive and constantly aware of the need to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. This is especially true with vulnerable populations, such as mothers of color living in poverty. Therefore the participants' identities and the identities of any 3<sup>rd</sup> parties (Hadjistavropoulos & Smythe, 2001) discussed were protected throughout the research and writing process.

Community-based participatory research (Minkler, 2004) suggests that ethical researchers need to consider and explore the potential policy implications of their work before the project begins. I have and will continue to consult with people who understand and are more familiar with welfare policy and implications. I have also worked toward a prolonged researcher engagement (Dodson, 2005) in the career center in which this program is housed. I conducted pro bono workshops and sat in on WTW workshops and activities before I collected data. My previous status as a former employee and my continued friendships with current staff made this process easier and more natural. I have met with the program director to share the study's results. At this meeting we discussed what next steps would be most beneficial to the women and program staff.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **Introduction**

This exploratory qualitative study examined how women make sense of their experience of WTW—i.e. as poor women, as mothers, and as women of various racial and ethnic backgrounds. How do these women psychologically manage the impact of multiple forms of oppression? How do sexism, classism, and racism factor into women's experiences of WTW and their ability to find employment? What does work represent to these participants as they navigate these experiences? The following sections will describe the sample, discuss what the researcher brought to the study, the data analysis process, results, rigor, and conclusions.

### **Researcher positionality**

As was stated earlier, objective reality can never be captured and is not the goal of qualitative research (Blustein, Kenna, Murphy, DeVoy & Dewine, 2005; Gergen, 1999). Similarly, feminist research identifies and values the interconnected relationship between researcher and participant (Gergen, 2001), and recognizes the role that the researcher's values have in the research process (DuBois, 1981). Therefore, it is essential that I discuss my own identity and its possible impact on the data collection process and results.

My relationship with the career center where the sample was taken must be examined as it pertains to the research results. As a former employee of the career center, I have more knowledge and familiarity with both the format and delivery of the WTW program as well as other assistance programs and systems with which the women interact (e.g. the Department of Social Services, Department of Corrections, Department of

Transitional Assistance and others). As the women were introduced to me as a former employee of the career center and specifically as someone who worked with the WTW program, they may have felt freer to discuss some of the logistics and subtle nuances of the system. Because I was familiar with these different agencies and what they do, and because this was portrayed in the interviews through nodding and general understanding, the women may have felt more comfortable talking about this aspect of their experience. While other researchers may have been more confused or shown lack of awareness of the intricacies related to various forms of assistance, the women knew that I at least had some working knowledge of the system. This in turn may have led them to more openly discuss their feelings regarding the assistance systems in general and WTW specifically.

Another aspect of my persona as the researcher that may have played a role was my pregnancy. My pregnancy began to become obvious in the early winter, when I completed most of the interviews (the last seven). As it became clear that I was expecting, all of the women asked me about my pregnancy at some point during our meeting. Their questions were usually related to whether this was my first child (which it was), whether or not I knew if it was a boy or girl (I knew it was a girl), and how I had been feeling. Upon hearing that this was my first child, the women (all of whom had at least one child) usually had a few words of wisdom regarding what to expect. Some went on a bit further to offer me suggestions about sleeping, eating habits for pregnancy, or about how to survive the first few weeks with a newborn. My impression is that my pregnancy and impending identity as a mother enabled the women to feel more connected to me because they knew we would share a similar life-altering experience. In addition, I

got the sense that their ability to offer advice and share personal wisdom evened the playing field a bit. Because they had already experienced motherhood and I was the one about to start this new phase of my life, the power dynamics shifted and perhaps gave them a sense of control or confidence. While it is hard to say how this may have impacted the results, I believe it led to a relatively more equal researcher- participant relationship.

My research questions revolved around the participants' various identities as women, mothers, women living in poverty, and women of color. In addition to my identity as a woman and mother-to-be, my race and class must be explored as we talk about the data that emerged. I cannot be sure, but my guess is that I did not appear to be a woman living in poverty (due to my clothing, identification as a doctoral student, engagement ring/wedding ring). And I am White. Therefore, of the four identities this study explored, the women may have been able to relate to me as a female and as a mother (to be) more so than as a woman struggling to provide for herself and her family, or as a woman of color. While I cannot be sure exactly how these issues played out, they must be kept in mind when exploring the results and implications.

### **Overview of concepts**

As I examined how the women in this sample made sense of their experience of WTW, seven concepts emerged. The concepts are presented in terms of their relevance to the original research questions. The first concept demonstrates how the women felt about their experience in the program. The second concept ties into their sense of identity and describes the roles, responsibilities, and aspects of self with which they most

identified. The third lays out the negative psychological impact and experiences that the women discussed. The fourth presents frustration with being labeled and misunderstood in the assistance/welfare system. The fifth presents the obstacles and barriers to success that these women encountered as they looked for work. The sixth concept demonstrates the various forms of resilience and resistance that the women utilized as they managed their various roles and experiences. And finally, the seventh concept explores their relationship with work. Direct quotes are used to give examples of the data and to maintain the spirit of content analysis in qualitative description, which sticks close to the participants' voices (Sandelowski, 2000).

### **I. Women's experience of the Welfare to Work program**

As this study sought to explore women's experiences of Welfare to Work in their own words, the first concept that emerged is made up of descriptions of the program and the women's thoughts and feelings about it. In general, the women stated that the program was helpful in providing concrete yet essential job search tools—i.e. developing and writing a resume and cover letter. Similarly, many participants described the program as useful in that it offered access to computers and the internet. As access to information technology is becoming more and more crucial in today's job market (Gilbride & Stensrud, 2003), this service was necessary for some of the women to participate in an effective employment search (i.e. many did not have a computer or internet access at home).

While the women all felt as though the program offered them these basic and concrete tools for their job search, the benefits and advantages of the program seemed to

end there. After the completion of the resume and cover letter (usually in the first two weeks), the content and format of the program felt uninspiring and unimpressive. As the following quotes demonstrate, the women experienced the program as boring, a waste of time, and tiresome. They felt as though the program could and should be offering them more in terms of job development and networking with local companies. They talked about the need for WTW to help them find good jobs or employment that fit their schedule and lifestyle (which included transportation and daycare issues).

(Andrea) that's the thing, it's not about getting up and comin here. That's not the problem for me. The problem is getting up to come here to do what we do. It's, to me, it's...purposeless. This has no point. None. None. It makes no sense to me. No sense, and like I said, they're tryin to meet a quota. They're tryin to meet a quota to have certain amount of people sign up so that, maybe so that they can stay open. You know what I mean? So they can keep functioning, everybody can keep their jobs. (break) I'm like I'm not gonna have my hours met...but you know what? At this point, it's like I don't even care. I'm to the point where I'm willin to keep my daughter home...just do whatever...just so I don't have to come here. Because it's just no help...it's just you get frustrated, you get aggravated, and it's like OK, they tell you oh nobody wants people in here with a bad attitude. Leave your bad attitude on the other side of the door. And it's like how could you leave your bad attitude on the other side of the door when *this is* the bad attitude? *This is* the bad attitude, you know what I mean?

(Michelle) I'm sittin here like, something's gotta give, you know? So I just get frustrated when like, you know what? I'm tired. I can't do it no more (laughs). Then I'll just sit and get bored...blank...sometimes I don't want to speak to anybody...I just tell them I don't wanna be bothered right now (laughs)...

(Andrea) To me it's like they're feedin you, they're feed you BS so that they can meet their quota. Can nobody tell me different. That's how I feel in my heart. They tell you...and then it's like OK, I'm gonna help you, I'm gonna help you, I'm gonna help you...but it's like you're not really helping me. All you're worrying about is that I come in, swipe my card, and that I'm here...They're hardly in the room with us. They come in and check in once every hour and a half, you know what I mean? People can come and go as they please. It's...there's no foundation, there's no...structure. It's nothing. To me, it's just pointless.

Many discussed the dilemma of the hours that are required to complete the program. They talked about the stress and frustration they felt as they tried to fulfill their weekly WTW requirements (usually 20-30 hours a week), while simultaneously caring for their children or other family members. They described feeling stuck as they had to choose between attending the program and being at home for their children. Related to this, many reported that going through the program was easier when you have older children or when childcare was secured.

(Sasha) The only thing that's stressful that's like, ok now I don't have a job but there's some days I don't have the money to get here...And I know I need to be here, but I don't have the money to get here. That can be very stressful. And it's sometimes like...my mother she'll watch my son, and my other son goes to school so I'm not worried about him, but my mother will watch the youngest one. And then there's the days where she's tired and she doesn't want to watch him and I have no one to watch him and that also stops me from coming down here and...it gets crazy.

(Ms. P) it falls on me. And, I went through DSS tryin to make me quit my job before, instead of taking the children, you know? And I don't want to have to deal with that all over again, because like I said, me being home, making sure everything is OK, is not going to get these bills paid. It's not gonna get the food in the house. Me working, is gonna make everything better for us, but they don't want to hear that cuz it's all for the children. DSS...it's like the system is workin against us because DSS is workin for the children, DTA is...

A: Gotta get your job.

P: exactly, so...them two need to come in together and figure out OK, how we gonna help this woman who's a single parent, with this child or this grandchild, however, so that she'll be able to work and not have to deal with you all in the process. That's something that needs to come together

(Marina) I have to take my son to school every morning because he don't have no transportation...so sometimes that holds me back to find a job early in the morning...so, I don't know if sending him to school in the bus is gonna be a good choice for him...because I wanna make sure that he goes to school. He takes the bus then sometimes in the morning he's gonna say maybe I'm not going to school today, I'm gonna relax. So I have to be there for him. That's one thing that stops me.

(Danielle) The thing is they want you to look for a job. They don't care what kind of job it is. You can work at McDonald's or Burger King or Dunkin Donuts for all they care, as

long as you're workin and you aint takin their money. But who teaches you how to...if you're not like me who has been to school? You know what I'm saying? Who teaches them how to go about getting training and finding a job and maintaining a job? You can get a job...but maintaining the job is the problem. Because during the process of maintaining a job, you still got your house, your kids, and then everything else.

The participants expressed apathy and frustration with the WTW program, using words like "purposeless" and "pointless". The women described an initial burst of energy and level of motivation to find work, but quickly felt defeated by their limited options. Their lack of funds to attend the program, limited childcare, and need for more training prevented them from productively utilizing the program. Similarly, their confusion around program management (i.e.the number of hours required, lack of structure, and limited job development), led to irritation and inefficient use of program time. While it is clear that the program offered some helpful concrete tools (such as a resume and cover letter), it quickly began to feel boring and tiresome. There was a general consensus that the program should do more for the participants and was falling short in terms of what it was meant to offer.

## **II. Sense of identity**

A major goal of this study was to explore the various identities of women going through WTW. The interview questions sought to allow a space for women to discuss their various roles and identities as females, mothers, women of color, and women living in poverty. A major finding of the study is reflected in the concept that emerged connected to their sense of identity. Most of the women described themselves and their place in the world foremost as mothers and caregivers. They discussed the various responsibilities and nuances of being female and a mom as they looked for work and

went through the program. As the quotes demonstrate, this identification with being a woman and mother is inextricably linked to their experience living in poverty and making it day to day financially.

(Sasha) My ideal life would be...to have a career, not a job. A very nice paying career. A house with a backyard and a front yard and a gate and...to just know that my kids would be safe. Cuz they're my number one priority. I mean it's not about me anymore. It stopped being about me when I was 19 so...it's about them and their safety and you know, how will me growing up as a parent affect their life growing up as kids and into teenagers and into adults. I just want to make sure that they don't end up like the rest of the kids out here who are carrying guns. (break) I have to keep looking cuz...I wake up in the morning and see my kids' faces every day, I have to keep looking for a job. I have to let them know that, you know, you have to grow up when you have kids. You have to provide for your kids no matter goes on in your life, you gotta put all your stuff aside to make sure that they're OK. That's...that's basically my thing is bein a mom, you have to...no matter what problems you're goin through, you can go through it later. Right now your kids need you and they don't need to see you cry and you're stressed out and angry.

(Ms. P.) If you're...blessed enough to make it out of high school with no children...chances are you would want to further your education. But once you become a mother...it, it really is like your life is over. Because the only thing you're gonna be now is a mother. And that's...it's basically it. (break) You know, as a mom, I think I'm a great mom. And...as myself, I'm still trying to find out who I am. I'm still in that process of trying to find out who *I* am (starts to cry). Just...just...I don't know who I am as a person. Like I know myself as a mother. I know myself as a homemaker. I know...all the things that a mother's supposed to do... I...you know when you don't have a childhood, you don't know what it was out there... that I like. Like I know all the things that I have to do, because of being a mother, but...as far as what does \_\_\_\_ (her real name) like...I couldn't tell you anything at all, because um...I could tell you anything about the kids...I could tell you anything about the house. I could tell you, you know, what it's like going to work, because these are all the things that as a parent, you're supposed to do. But as me as an individual...my likes, my dislikes...I don't know any of that because my whole life is always focused on being a mother since I became a mother, so that's the only thing that I do know that I do know.

(Cheryl) it's like being a mother, you know dealing with my grandmother, dealing with my kids, dealing with the slumlord, dealing with all these different people: welfare, section 8...it's like a celebrity...you don't have no privacy, (laughs) underpaid celebrity.

While some talked about their identity as women of color, most of the women did not report feeling as though this played into their experience going through the program or searching for employment. It is important to note here that my identity as a White researcher may have impacted their willingness to discuss their experiences as women of color. This will be discussed further in the Limitations section of Chapter 5.

As the women's voices portray, their experience going through WTW felt intricately connected to their identities as mothers and caretakers. Their role as caretaker seemed to offer the women a sense of purpose and mission as they navigated various systems to keep their children fed and safe. This sense of self loomed largest and sometimes overshadowed other aspects of their identity. As Sasha said, "it stopped being about me when I was 19". Ms. P. stated that once you become a mother, "it really is like your life is over". And Cheryl described her experiences as a mother and caretaker as an "underpaid celebrity". The role of caretaker offered the women a place in society. But simultaneously it felt stifling and circumscribed due to the associated losses (i.e. inability to finish high school; lack of social life) and intense scrutiny from various organizations and systems (i.e. DSS). Therefore, their identification as caretakers was inextricably linked to their access to opportunities and resources, and their experience living in poverty. These descriptions suggest a prominent, complex, and dynamic experience of motherhood and caring for others in the context of WTW. It appears as though the women's ability to utilize the WTW program effectively and find gainful employment was intricately connected with their roles as caretakers.

### **III. Negative psychological experiences**

The women discussed negative experiences of WTW and the welfare system at large that have impacted their sense of self esteem and self worth. Many of the participants described feelings of shame and embarrassment as they sought employment or interacted with various people and parts of the system. Some felt as though they were to blame for their circumstances, leading to a negative sense of self. Others talked about their lack of childhood and how they had to grow up fast in order to survive. All described their experiences with the system as difficult to manage psychologically and as taking a toll on their sense of self-worth and place within society.

(Danielle) You lose your life worth, you lose your dignity...you lose your pride. I don't even want...I would never tell my daughter I was on welfare. Never. She has no clue. I get up every morning and I leave the house and she thinks I go to work...and that's how I like to keep it.

(Lovey) People look at you like you got two heads because you're on welfare, you're askin' for food stamps to help feed your children. You know. You have to basically embarrass yourself, especially when you go into the DTA office and they, they treat you really badly. You know, they don't tell you anything that they know, special things that they can try to get you to move you on so you be able to be easier. They don't fill you in on the information so it's just lost out.

Some women expressed feelings of frustration, irritation, or shame related to their status as people of color that might be considered to be internalized racism (Carter, 2007; Speight, 2007).

(Andrea) I think it's more or less, like I said, I think it's just in our genes. Colored people especially...in our genes to just settle for whatever we have. And...with welfare bein the way it is, a lot of people just settle...and just figure out a way to stay on the system. A lot of people go from welfare to disability. Welfare to some kind of social security. You know what I mean? So...it just...there's, to me there's no self-motivation.

The voices above express the complex ways that the participants interact with assistance programs that reflect larger systemic and societal messages about poverty,

gender, and race. As Danielle stated, she would never tell her daughter that she was on welfare, and Lovey described others as looking at you as though you had “two heads” when you need assistance. While some identified the system's treatment of them as unfair, others seem to have internalized the messages and ended up blaming themselves or others similar to them. As Andrea stated, “I think it's just in our genes”.

For all of the women, the experience going through WTW and the larger welfare system in general seems to have had a significant psychological impact. Their feelings of shame and sadness made their experience looking for employment more complicated and cumbersome, as it added yet another psychological obstacle to overcome. It is difficult to know how these negative psychological experiences interact and play out in the context of some of the participants' experiences of mental illness. As will be discussed further in Chapter 5, this finding suggests that more attention be paid to the psychological impact of WTW and how this may be interacting with the symptoms and manifestations of more serious mental illness.

#### **IV. Feeling labeled and misunderstood**

All of the women discussed their frustrations with the welfare system in general and the sense that they were being misunderstood or labeled. They described a welfare system that puts everyone in the same category and sets people up for failure. More specifically, many reported negative interactions and experiences with the employees of DTA, which is the system in charge of connecting participants with various services such as WTW and food stamps (for more information see the [www.mass.gov](http://www.mass.gov) website). The interviews contained many stories about interactions with various staff and personnel at

DTA which felt unprofessional, disrespectful, and shaming. The women described feeling confused about their benefits and the many rules/regulations regarding their benefits.

(Cheryl) basically I just feel like, you know, the system is set up...the system is supposed to be set up for us, to help us. But the system is set up to fail us because it's not going in a appropriate order...like it's not...like it's ass backwards. That's the only way I can put it. It's...it doesn't make any sense, you know what I mean? They want you to walk, but you can't crawl yet...they want you to run but you...they want you to swim but you can't run yet...you know? Like you don't know how to use these muscles and utilize these things they want you to do and when you tell them that they get upset because they're lookin' at you like, "damn! What's you been doin all your life then? You aint did nothing?" You don't have to make me feel worse than I already feel, you know? So...the system? I don't think so. The system's not good.

(Andrea) I didn't expect them to give me a job or say...but they promised me internship or externship...never got it. You know what I mean? I never got to utilize the skills that they gave me...and...to me, that was like a breakdown somewhere in that function. And it's like...after awhile...it's not like they even cared. (break) Make sure these internships is what they said they were gonna be...cuz that's a, that's a government granted program and they never did their internships so...they got the money for it...but they never did it. But I bet you the welfare office probably don't know that, I bet you the state probably doesn't know that...You know what I mean? Because they put in their papers, hey, you know what? Cuz you know what it is? A lot of people was like it's easier for me to say that I'm here when I'm really home...I'm not doing the internship, I'm not goin to \_\_\_\_ (name of training program). I'm home...and they're gonna say that I was there. They're gonna say that they spoke to me and we been communicating back and forth through e-mail and she's doin job search. And deep down you know that you haven't spoken to me. You spoke to me three times out of the whole month...so it's like...in a way, everybody's just tryin to hold onto their little job that they have.

The previous quotes above (and quotes in the earlier grid) portray the intense sense of frustration the participants felt regarding various forms of assistance (e.g. DTA, WTW). Their stories tell of multiple instances of corruption, loopholes, and confusion in the system. There was a general sense that the system was not able to understand their circumstances, set unrealistic expectations, and tended to mislabel them. The women described a sense of general disrespect or being kicked when they were down, as

demonstrated by Danielle's statement, "when I open myself to somebody and say I need help, that's what I expect...I don't expect nobody to doubt me or make me feel worse". These messages felt abusive, unfair, and offensive, leading to negative impressions of specific WTW and training programs, and a lack of respect for the welfare system in general. This dynamic appears to have become an obstacle in and of itself, as the women felt they spent a good portion of their time within the program dealing with disrespectful staff and managing the painful emotions that were aroused.

#### **V. Obstacles and barriers to success**

All of the women discussed certain obstacles or barriers that prevented them from finding work or moving out of poverty. For instance, many discussed how the father of their children was not available or around, putting more pressure on the mother to provide for her children.

(Lovey) I'm a single parent. I was actually in a relationship with their father for 15 years, but the relationship kind of went sour because he basically wasn't doing anything to help, you know. I didn't want no one living with me that was not providing, and just bein there and not providing any food, any rent, you know? And I felt like I was just being used. Um...basically it's really hard raising 2 children by myself. Um, I had to turn to TAFDC.

Many of the participants described their experiences with mental illness and its impact on their job search. As the quotes below show, their experiences managing depressive symptoms prevented them from participating in the WTW program and an effective job search.

(Danielle) But if I could do it all over again...because...I have to go through too much...and you feel like you, even though you try to make things as normal as possible for your children, you feel like you're putting them through too much. Because even though you try and try and try and you make things as normal as possible...when you're aggravated, they feel it. When you're unhappy, they feel it. They was like a couple of

days last month where I didn't even want to get up out of the bed...cuz I was so depressed...cuz of the bills and clothes.

(Alexis) I physically was not able to work. I could not hold a full time job. Um there were times when I basically would not be able to get out of bed. Um...I've had times (laughs) in my apartment where you know, because I am not working and being on subsidy you know section 8, housing assistance, my rent was not paid...My utilities have been shut off. And you know it's something that you, you work through.

As the quotes above demonstrate, the women's mental health stood in the way of their success in the program. Their voices describe symptoms of depression, such as a lack of desire to get out of bed and a physical inability to work.

Many women talked about the financial stress related to living on assistance and their inability to make ends meet with the benefits they collected. They discussed the need to borrow money, stop eating breakfast, or stop paying bills so that they could make it to the WTW program. The time spent thinking about money and the tactics used to provide basic necessities for their families prevented the women from attending the program and moving into employment.

The participants reported a need for more training or skills in order to find employment. Specifically, they talked about the need to update their training in order to remain competitive in the job market and acquire the skills necessary to do certain jobs (e.g. learn PowerPoint in order to obtain an administrative assistant job). They felt as though their lack of skills, gaps in employment, and minimal education limited their ability to obtain a job that would allow them to provide for their family.

The participants in this study expressed a desire to succeed and live a better life, but felt as though significant barriers and obstacles stood in their way. Their voices above relay their battles with mental health issues, single parenthood, and a concrete need

for more training or job related skills. All of these significant issues limited their ability to attend the program or work, and provide for their families in a way that enabled them to participate fully in the program. The women's experiences with this particular WTW program suggest that they did not feel as though it addressed or discussed these very real obstacles to success. This failure on the part of the program to address the daily issues that prevented the women from succeeding appeared to diminish their sense of hope and motivation.

## **VI. Forms of resilience and resistance**

Despite the many obstacles and barriers to success in these women's lives, they demonstrated incredible perseverance and resilience. In the face of poverty and major life stressors, many were able to utilize various coping strategies to get themselves through rough times. Some used spirituality and thoughts of others who were less fortunate to maintain a healthy perspective on their own lives. Others were able to see how much they had accomplished and felt proud of their ability to overcome these barriers. The common element was an ability to remain positive and hopeful despite the negative messages and labels with which they were forced to deal as they went through the WTW program.

(Cheryl) I feel great about myself right now. Like I feel I great. I mean there are things I don't know how to do, there are things that I want to train myself to do, there's a lot of things that I am gonna do...but as far as where I'm at right now in my life, I feel real good because...I came, like I've been through a lot...and I would never be there again... and I'm happy I did that because it taught me something. You know?

(Sasha) It made me feel good as a woman to be able to multitask cuz there's...you know, it made me feel good as a woman emotionally, physically, and spiritually because you know, God made some people who aren't able to walk around and aren't able to see or

write or talk. And he gave me the ability to do all of them. You know, I'm gonna try to use it to my best ability no matter how tired I get, no matter how stressed out I get. He gave it to me. I'm gonna use it until he takes it away.

Other women talked about forms of resistance that helped them cope. For instance, many discussed how they cut themselves off from others as a way of managing their daily stress.

(Lovey) I kind of distance myself from people though...I don't really be into them because it's like you know, I'm only around them for a short period of time, you know? When I go back home it's just me and the children. And that's how I feel about everything, you know? It's just me and my children. I don't get to know people, I don't get too familiar with people comin to my home, I'm just a loner. It put me into a loner state. Just come home, take care of my kids, and then the next day and the next day and the next day.

(Cheryl) I'm doin a lot of stressful things right now, you know (laughs)? And I just, I stay to myself. And I really don't talk to too many people like...I don't want to be around people, I don't want to...because I don't feel like my demeanor's gonna show that I really want to be around and that's not, it's not like I don't but I'm going through so much, I can't play it off, I can't cover it up with a smile...

The quotes above portray a picture of women who must look both inward and outward in order to get through their daily lives and persevere in the face of multiple obstacles. They were able to appreciate their own strength and ability to survive, specifically identifying their ability to "multitask" and get through difficult times. But in order to keep moving forward, they also appeared aware that certain strategies were necessary, such as "stay to myself" or "distance myself from people". As the women in this study navigated a welfare and WTW system that felt confusing and unfair, they were impressively able to come up with techniques to keep themselves and their families protected.

## **VII. Relationship with work**

This study sought to gain a deeper understanding of how the women made sense of work and their experiences of looking for work. Because the WTW program is meant to move participants into employment as quickly as possible, it was essential that this study explore the participants' ideas and perceptions of what work represents in their lives.

Consistently, the women described work as offering them a sense of self worth and identity. It represented stability and a path toward independence, as Cheryl's quote below shows:

We always worked. It's just something that's installed in me. I don't know. I just love having a life outside of my life. I just love being a part of something different and...getting paid for it and...(break) so it's like working means a lot to me. It means a lot. You know, like I said... you know I feel young, I don't feel like I'm old at all...and I feel like I have a lot of years ahead of me and if I keep going the way I'm going then I'm gonna be where I wanna be eventually. You know what I mean? So...that's how I feel about working. It's a must...a must.

The women saw work as a positive force in their lives, many felt as though their current work skills or work trajectory was limited or stunted due to a lack of training or experience. Many talked about needing more specific skills or training, such as updated medical terminology or computer program skills, in order to be competitive in today's job market. Many felt as though the hours required by WTW would not fit with their family's needs or schedules. Temporary jobs or jobs that required early morning, evening, or weekend shifts (when children are at home) generally did not work for these women, exacerbating feelings of frustration.

(Lovey) I did find a job through a temp agency, Adecco Temp. Um, it was only 3 months so that's why I'm back here...because you know, it was for a certain amount of time. Um, and I actually have other Adecco Temp jobs that they called me for, but it's like, it's temporarily and it's really not gonna keep me, you know, in a stable

environment. So I'm basically trying to find something that I can have for longevity, you know what I mean? It's a few years or I can grow with the company and move to a higher position, paid a little bit more so I can support my children.

The women's voices demonstrate a consistent desire to have a meaningful work life. At the least, they express their need to secure a job that fits their lifestyle and family's circumstances. However, the women's experience was consistently one of mismatch and frustration when it came to actually finding such a job. They felt as though the WTW program was falling short in helping them move into a work situation that was stable and workable given their caretaker status.

### **The women's suggestions for change**

The spirit of this study stems from an interest in hearing more from the participants themselves about their experiences with WTW. Therefore, it seemed reasonable to ask them what they thought should be different in the program. The following outlines some of their suggestions for change.

In terms of the content and delivery of WTW programs, the women suggested that more job development for participants would be helpful. Networking with local companies and participating in job fairs were other ideas. Some felt the WTW system should work more like a temp agency in that it would move participants directly into a job. Many felt there needed to be more productive internship/externship programs to help participants gain on-the-job experience. Many discussed the need for more assistance with transportation in order to get to the program.

In order for participants to obtain and maintain employment, the women talked about the need for more training and educational experiences. They felt this was

necessary for them to stay up to date with changing technology in the work world and to compensate for earlier disadvantages (i.e. not graduating from high school or college). In order to keep a job, many of the women felt they needed assistance with communication skills to work more effectively with others. Similarly, they mentioned the need to help participants learn skills to balance their work and personal lives. Specifically, they talked about the difficulty many have managing employment while caring for children/family members.

The women also discussed ideas for change related to the larger welfare and assistance programs that work in conjunction with WTW (i.e. DTA). These suggestions revolved around the staff of DTA. For instance, many thought DTA staff should be better trained so that they can more effectively understand the needs of WTW participants and issues related to mental illness. They felt that DTA staff should be required to be more polite and respectful to participants and that they need to be clearer about staff roles, benefit rules, regulations and reasons for being cut off. They felt that there was too much corruption and loopholes within the system, leading to the sense that some participants get more assistance than others and that the process of obtaining assistance is arbitrary and unfair. Finally, the women suggested that DTA work more closely with DSS in order for the needs of women and their children to be considered together and more holistically.

The women also made suggestions for change regarding the entire assistance process in general. They felt there should be more opportunities for participants to obtain their GED. Similarly, it was suggested that more doors be opened for people who are

interested in further education. And they talked about the need to help teenage mothers and let them know that their life is not over once they have a child.

“There’s ways of reaching out, of letting these young girls know...life’s not over. It’s not all about hanging out with your girlfriends and doin this and that. Go better yourself. And they can do that. They can...they just need that extra little push.” (Ms. P.)

Many discussed the need for programs to be more flexible with child care options so that parents can keep their childcare vouchers longer. It also was suggested that the system address participants earlier in the assistance process—i.e. work with people before their welfare assistance is close to being cut off. Some women mentioned the idea that the system isn’t pushing people enough.

“They’ll let you sit at home the whole two years and not do anything...give you \$246 dollars every two weeks, you know what I mean? Give you all that foodstamps that you get and it’s like, people become dependent on that. People become comfortable with that situation.” (Andrea)

The women’s suggestions above relate to the content and delivery of WTW services as well as the treatment of participants by staff and various personnel. Their ideas relate to program specifics as well as more global messages and treatment by the system. Their ideas were therefore both practical and insightful and will be integrated into implications for practice, theory, policy, and research (in Chapter 5).

### **Conclusions**

This study explored how women’s multiple roles and identities interacted with one another and played out within the context of a WTW program. As women struggling to make ends meet and dealing with poverty, the women’s voices expressed a constant and powerful pressure to provide and care for their children. Their experience of the

program appeared to be intimately linked to the various issues related to childcare, child education, and provision of a safe and stable home life for their children. All of the women described and made sense of the program in terms of how it factored into their caretaker roles, suggesting that their identity as mothers/caretakers are inextricably linked to their experience with WTW. Similarly, the daily struggles to provide financially for their children served as both a motivator and constant form of stress as they navigated their participation in the program and search for employment. Their identities as women of color or from various ethnic and racial backgrounds (non-white) were not discussed as being important in how they experienced the program and job search.

This study also explored how the women psychologically managed the impact of multiple forms of oppression and how these experiences factored into their search for employment. As the results demonstrate, these women have developed a variety of coping strategies and forms of resilience and resistance in order to manage the difficult emotions that were aroused as they interacted with various forms of government assistance. Their words illustrated a frustrating and confusing world negotiating various assistance programs and the messages that these programs send to their participants. The women clearly described a system that feels corrupt and encourages complacency. They viewed programs as setting up participants for failure and simultaneously labeling them as such. And yet these women were able to state that these labels did not fit them and were not fair. Their voices portray a group of women who are impressively strong and resilient in the face of tremendous obstacles such as single parenthood, mental illness, and limited education.

Finally, this study sought to understand what work represented to these participants as they navigated these experiences. Clearly, work was associated with positive feelings such as independence, self-worth, and a sense of purpose. Many women became animated when they discussed their past employment and/or long-term career dreams. However, all of them felt as though they were bumping up against substantial barriers to success in their vocational lives. Their need for more training, education, work experience, and workable schedules stood squarely in the way of them moving into any form of satisfying or sustainable employment. This experience was especially frustrating for the women given the intended mission or perceived objective of WTW programs.

## **Chapter 5: Inferences, implications, and conclusions**

### **Objectives of the study**

This exploratory qualitative study sought to offer needed insight into how women make sense of their experience of WTW; more precisely, this investigation has examined the lived experiences of women in WTW programs who also grapple with their identities as women, as mothers, and as women of various racial and ethnic backgrounds. In order to do this, I explored women's multiple roles and identities and how they interact with one another dynamically within the context of WTW. I examined how these women psychologically manage the impact of multiple forms of oppression. Finally, I explored what work represents to them as they navigate these experiences.

These questions were inspired by the considerable gaps in the literature on WTW, in conjunction with my hands-on experience working with this population. My view is that this study and these specific research questions are important in informing clinicians, academics, and policy-makers to be able to gain a deeper appreciation for the complexity of the WTW experience and those going through it. Furthermore, a dynamic understanding is necessary for us to provide much needed help, support, and resources for this underprivileged and often times misunderstood population. In order to gain this deeper understanding, qualitative methods were used to allow the women's voices to speak for themselves. Specifically, qualitative descriptive research methods (Sandelowski, 2000) were used because of their ability to provide data about a previously unexplored topic and gap in the literature, and their focus on remaining close to the data and actual words of the participants (Morgan, 1993). The results of the study therefore

reflect ideas that are closely linked to the voices of the women going through this particular WTW program. The following section outlines the link back to psychological research literature; highlights implications for future research, practice, and policy; and finally summarizes the limitations of the study.

### **Link to the literature**

#### **Consistencies with previous research and theory**

##### *Content and delivery*

The content and delivery of this WTW program was in accordance with earlier research (e.g., Juntunen et al, 2006) in that it focused mostly on providing job search skills, skills training, and basic education. The program seemed to push similar messages as previous research findings (Sandlin, 2004): effort and hard work, a positive attitude, and an ability to follow the rules. It was assumed that adherence to these messages would lead to employment and success. There seemed to be little discussion of structural or contextual factors that could potentially impact one's ability to move upward in the U.S. economy.

The interactions that the women described with various staff and personnel were essentially consistent with previous research. The participants were often confused about policies, regulations, and benefits (Anderson, 2002), leading to frustration and apathy. "Mothering" has been described as a way for women in authority, and specifically WTW staff, to protect and direct other women (Soloman, 2003). While the participants talked about "mothering" techniques being used occasionally by the program director, the overall sense was that time with staff felt limited and impersonal. Discussions of

personal experiences were scarce and encouraged at unexpected times. This appeared to increase participants' feelings of ambivalence and confusion about the purpose and objective of the program. These findings suggest that this particular WTW program was not atypical in terms of the content and delivery of services.

### *Barriers and obstacles*

The barriers and obstacles to success experienced by the women in this study appear similar to previous research findings. As Hays (2003) suggested, finding a job was not the hardest task for these participants; instead, it was finding work that fit the needs of their families and could lift them out of poverty. Like the participants in DeBord, Fanning-Canu, and Kerpelman's study (2000), the women felt they would be more successful if and when the needs of their families were met. These women, like the single mothers in previous research (e.g., Cooper, 1993; Dodson, 1998; Sidel, 1986; Morrison et al., 1986) had limited education and training, dealt with ongoing financial anxiety, spent a great deal of time worrying about their children's safety, and were doing it all alone. They described feeling stressed and frustrated with their circumstances. Many talked about unstable housing, confusion about benefits, and an uncertainty about how their next bills would be paid, fitting with previous findings (Banerjee, 2003; DeBord, Canu, & Kerpelman, 2000; McCormack, 2005; Scott, London, & Hurst, 2005). The women's mental health concerns (Marrone, Foley, & Selleck, 2005; Hamilton, 2002), health problems (Romero, et al, 2002), and substance abuse (Anderson, Shannon, Schyb, & Goldstein, 2002) all stood in the way of their ability to obtain employment and succeed in the program. Therefore, it would appear as though the participants in this

study were similar to participants in previous research and experienced similar obstacles in their search for work.

### *Conceptions of work*

Aspects of the participants' experience of work and employment were consistent with previous research and theory (Blustein, 2006; Hays, 1996; McCormack, 2005; McCrate, 2002; Stone & Lovejoy, 2004). Specifically, the women's ideas about work support many of the premises of the psychology-of-working framework (Blustein, 2006). Employment for most of the women reflected a movement toward independence, identity, and hope. However, in accordance with earlier research (Hays, 1996; McCrate, 2002; Stone & Lovejoy, 2004), they struggled with the innate tension between employment and motherhood (McCormack, 2005). Their education and skill level was simply not high enough to obtain a job that would enable them to support their children (Cooper, 1993; Schein, 1995). They experienced stress and frustration as they attempted to balance their program/work required hours and time with their children to keep them safe and out of trouble. The potential for work to be meaningful and rewarding was stunted and limited, which led to feelings of ambivalence about employment. This tension between what work represented in theory versus reality supports the idea that work is a crucial aspect of psychological well-being and mental health (Blustein, 2006).

### *Resilience and resistance*

The participants' forms of resilience and resistance fit with the findings of previous research. Despite the inherent conflict between employment and caregiving, the women's role as mothers and caretakers generally served as a form of resilience and

positive identity. This experience fits with earlier findings (Brubaker & Wright, 2006; Jacobs, 1994; Mayfield, 1994) that suggest the role of caregiver offers young mothers of color a validated sense of self when they are denied so many other privileges in U.S. society. As has been shown before (e.g., Banerjee & Pyles; Eubanks, 2004), spirituality helped the African American women in this sample (9 out of 10 participants identified as Black or African American) manage various life stressors. The women described going through things alone and cutting themselves off from others, which fits with Dodson's (1998) findings that poor women act like a "stone" in order to protect themselves. As these examples demonstrate, the forms of resistance and resilience utilized by the women in this study are in line with previous findings.

In sum, the content and delivery of this specific program; obstacles to success; conceptions of work; and forms of resilience and resistance appear consistent with the findings of previous research. Despite the many ways in which the findings of this study support earlier research, there are a few inconsistencies that deserve mention and further exploration.

### **Inconsistencies with previous research**

#### *Limited interpersonal connections*

Black feminist literature has described "sistering" among women as "connectedness as a primary way of knowing" (Collins, 1991, p. 212). In terms of WTW programs, sistering has been used to describe a style of communication used by staff and personnel to build connection with and between participants by sharing personal experiences and struggles related to societal, systemic, and contextual barriers (Soloman,

2003). "Sistering" was not used in this particular WTW program as a way to help participants join together and explore the larger systemic barriers that they faced. While this tactic has been utilized successfully in other WTW programs (Soloman), the women's support and assistance to one another was not reinforced in this program. If anything, the women in this sample appeared to have actively cut themselves off from one another, suggesting that "sistering" or sharing felt too overwhelming. This dynamic implies that the women in this study may have been more isolated than the participants in other WTW studies.

#### *Race and ethnicity*

An interesting and unexpected finding of this study revolved around how the women viewed their race and ethnicity in the context of WTW and their search for employment. While previous research has demonstrated that mothers of color face ongoing sexual and racial discrimination in the job market (England, 1992; Sapiro, 1999; Wilson, 1996), the women in this sample did not feel as though their skin color impacted their opportunities. As Sparks (1996) suggests, stereotypes psychologically impact African American women by imposing confining identities onto a group based on their skin color and gender. The women in this sample described feeling misunderstood and negatively labeled by the system, but seemed to believe it was based more on their identities as mothers living in poverty than women of color.

There are a few possible explanations for this unexpected result. My identity as a white female researcher may have played out in the participants' willingness to discuss such a hotly debated, complex, and emotional topic such as race. It is also possible that

these women used indifference and minimization when discussing race and issues of discrimination (Adams, Cahill & Ackerlind, 2004). However, it may be that racial and ethnic identity simply did not resonate as much as other forms of identity for these particular women. More research is suggested in order to understand this dynamic in more depth.

### **Integrative inferences**

The research questions and spirit of this study were informed by feminist and critical theory (Gergen, 2001; Guerrero, 1999; Martin-Baro, 1994; Prilleltensky, 1997), as I sought to understand this particular group of women's experiences and sense of identity in context. This theoretical lens led to an exploration of power and taken for granted knowledge in these participants' lives. It required a more intense examination of the role of research and researcher in participants' lives and an increased sensitivity to my own identity in the process.

The results of this study led to four major inferences regarding the experience of mothers of color going through Welfare-to-Work. I will briefly state them here, link them to the literature and research, and explore the implications for practice, policy, and research. The first inference relates to the importance that these women's roles as mothers played in their experience of the program and welfare in general. The second inference underscores the need for more attention to mental health concerns (both diagnosed and undiagnosed) in the context of WTW. The third inference refers to the participants' experience confusion, mixed messages, and conflicting agendas going on in the system itself. And the fourth inference relates to tension between the meaning of

work and its role in the lives of these women. The following outlines why these inferences are considered significant and, assuming that further research supports the findings, what is suggested for practice, policy or research in order to work toward a higher quality WTW program.

### **Link to theory**

As was stated earlier, feminist theory provides a lens for understanding women's identities within various social, cultural, and economic contexts (Gergen, 2001; Guerrero, 1999; hooks, 1984; 1989; Maguire, 2001). Feminist research is seen as a political movement for social, structural and personal transformation (Maguire). Critical theory and research views social constructions as shaped by social, political, cultural and economic forces that are further impacted by access to power (Martín-Baró, 1994; Prilleltensky, 1999). Critical theorists argue that an emphasis on the individual as the unit of change shifts attention away from systemic power structures and promotes the status quo (Prilleltensky). Critical theory encourages researchers to promote social action and move beyond the confines of their field (Martín-Baró, 1994; Prilleltensky, 1999; 2001). Both feminist and critical theory offer the framework needed to explore the interlocking nature of oppression, in which race, gender, and class interact in complex ways. In this sense, the four inferences below reveal the dynamic ways in which mothers of color navigated various responsibilities with limited economic resources.

### *Motherhood*

Motherhood and the role of caretaking for these women was both an obstacle to success *and* a form of resilience. In a Northeastern urban setting where poverty, lack of

education, and limited opportunities are a daily reality, these women experienced their identities as mothers as complex. The responsibility of caring for their children prevented them from pursuing their own education, vocational interests, and upward mobility. Their role as single parents struggling to make ends meet impacted their experience of the program, mental health, and employment possibilities. However, it also served as a source of strength, confidence, and purpose in the world. To describe the participants' role as mothers/caregivers simply as an obstacle to success is both patronizing and decontextualizes their experience. This limited view blames the women for their circumstances and treats motherhood as an exception or annoyance, rather than a common thread and potential source for self-worth and meaning.

Feminist and critical theory allow us to understand the significance of motherhood and caretaking in the context of WTW and see it as fluid and multifaceted, rather than unidimensional. WTW's view of the individual participant as capable of success despite their circumstances dismisses the importance of the larger family unit and role of caregiving in women's lives. The system's focus on the individual as the unit of change promotes the status quo and fails to address how socio-economic class and limited access to power makes success unobtainable for the women themselves and their children. In order to promote true success, programs like the one in this study need to understand and validate the experience of caregiving while living in poverty.

### *Mental health*

The mental health of the WTW participants in this study needs to be viewed in the context of poverty, oppression, and limited opportunities. Traditional deficit models of

mental health view the individual as the unit of change and seek diagnostic labels based on internal disorder and illness (Prilleltensky, 1999; Vera & Speight, 2003). Critics of traditional models encourage the inclusion of contextual factors when conceptualizing mental health concerns (Fels, Goodman, & Glenn, 2006; Prilleltensky) and point to the negative consequences of oppression (Friere, 1985; Prilleltensky). My experience is that WTW tends to treat mental illness as a discrete and neatly categorized phenomenon—i.e. participants are either diagnosed with a mental illness and referred to mental health services, or deemed fit to be part of the program. However, as the results of this study suggest, the participants' experience of mental health issues was fluid and not openly discussed. While only one participant revealed that she had been officially diagnosed with “depression”, a number of the women described symptoms of psychological distress such as not being able to get out of bed, crying constantly, and feeling as though life is pointless. Systemic barriers to success, such as poor education and limited social and economic resources led to anxiety and feelings of hopelessness. Their identification as single mothers living in poverty led to isolation and frustration associated with being labeled as lazy, unfit, and uncaring. These feelings seemed to ebb and flow as the participants interacted with various social service agencies and felt more or less helped and understood. Fitting with previous research (Dodson, 1998), negative experiences with various government assistance programs led to an understandable tendency to hide certain information from staff. And the participants utilized various forms of resistance to help them cope with what felt like oppressive and inaccurate labels (Robinson & Ward, 1991). Therefore, the participants' experience of mental health was tenuous,

related to their context, and must be viewed as intricately connected to their economic, social, and political environments, as well as their identities as mothers, women, and people of color.

*Confusion and mixed messages*

Critical theory challenges taken-for-granted knowledge and examines how power structures can serve to maintain the status quo (Prilleltensky, 1999). In the context of WTW, critical theory offers a lens to explore how the content and delivery of the program may be contributing to the participants' distress and barriers to employment. While there is a growing body of research demonstrating that the program needs to provide more assistance with services like child care, transportation, and counseling (Hays, 2003; Pavetti, 2006), there is a smaller amount of research that explicitly explores interactions between participants and government assistance programs (Dodson, 1998). The results of this study suggest that communication within the system needs to be examined in more depth. The participants expressed feeling unsure and confused about the purpose and regulations of the program. Their experience suggests that those who hold power within the welfare system in general and WTW in particular may be contributing to some of the mixed messages, confusion, and contradictions that lead to frustration and apathy for the participants. A critical theory lens can open up discourse about aspects of the system that traditionally go ignored or disregarded. This lens inspires more explicit examination of how staff communication patterns, the giving/receiving of program information, and access/denial to benefits and training may impact the experience of WTW program participants.

Feminist research is political (Maguire, 2001) and goes beyond knowledge generation to engage in using knowledge for change (Guererro, 1999). As was stated earlier, it is my hope that the results of this study may be used productively and practically to inspire dialogue about previously ignored topics. The spirit of this study has been and continues to be based on the idea that the women's voices should be heard by those who research WTW as well as those who hold power to implement change. Therefore, this project is meant to be the beginning of a process, not the end result.

*Work: tension between hope and reality*

A dynamic experience of work emerged as the women discussed their experiences with WTW, employment, and unemployment. As was discussed in more depth earlier, participation in the paid labor force and having a good work ethic has been viewed in U.S. culture as the solution to poverty (Dodson, 1998), and within WTW as the way to decrease the welfare rolls (Hays, 2003). As Sandlin (2004) discusses, the values of WTW assume that humans are inherently rational, competent, independent and responsible for their own lives. Blustein (2006) describes how work functions to fulfill three basic human needs: the need for survival and power, the need for connectedness, and the need for self-determination.

The results of this study suggest that work represented both hope and punishment for these participants. The women appeared initially to be hopeful that work would fulfill at least some of the needs outlined by Blustein. Unfortunately, the jobs that were available to them did not fit their needs for survival and did not enable them to care for themselves and their families adequately. Their employment options did not appear to

offer them a sense of connectedness to others, because jobs were often short-term, unstable, and unsatisfying. And finally, work and the WTW program did not lead to a sense of autonomy and competence for these women. Instead, work and WTW ended up feeling like punishment and something that pulled mothers/caregivers away from their children and relatives. As women living in poverty and with limited resources, their unavailability to their family posed much more serious consequences than it might for women from higher socio-economic status. The result appears to have created a dynamic where the women felt pulled between conflicting demands and opposing ideals about what work represents.

Feminist and critical theory allows the women's economic, political, and historical contexts to be considered as we explore this tension (Gergen, 2001; Guerrero, 1999; Martin-Baro, 1994; Prilleltensky, 1997). Their status as women living in poverty with very few resources limited their ability to experience work as potentially meaningful and inspiring. The demands of motherhood and caregiving further limited their opportunities to obtain the education and employment skills needed to secure work that could lift them out of poverty. Finally, the program's failure to incorporate and embrace their identity and reality as women, mothers, and parents struggling to make ends meet, led to feelings of frustration, disconnection, and apathy about the program itself and work in general. This experience and conception of work is therefore inextricably linked to the participants' identities as women caring for others while living in poverty.

### *Conclusions*

Fitting with the spirit of feminist and critical theory and research, the findings reported in this study encourage social action by clinicians, policy makers, and researchers on behalf of WTW participants. The ideas below are meant to serve as a starting ground for increased dialogue, interest, and engagement around what can be done to better serve WTW participants.

## **Implications**

### **Implications for practice**

#### *Explicit integration of motherhood into WTW*

A major inference from this study revolves around the role that motherhood plays in the lives of these women and in their experience of WTW. I would argue that WTW programs need to do more to validate women's roles as mothers and integrate this identity into program content and delivery. The more understood these women feel, the more likely they are to participate and remain motivated. Participants who do not feel heard or accepted will be more likely to disengage from the process, which defeats the point of the program. Until the actual lived experiences of these women and their children's/family's needs are accepted and incorporated into mainstream content and delivery of services, programs will continue to marginalize the people for whom they are meant to help.

Programs need to spend more time in workshops and case management addressing the issues related to motherhood and caregiving and explore how it impacts the participants' search for work. Staff should encourage the women to offer and receive support from one another as they navigate the balance between caregiving and

employment. Staff might utilize more self-disclosure and personal accounts of how they have managed conflicting roles in their own lives. My experience is that program facilitators (who are mostly women) have experienced similar struggles managing work and caregiving. While it appears currently to be a rarity, there is no reason why staff and participants cannot connect over this shared sense of identity, thereby offering increased emotional support.

*Increased attention to mental health issues*

The second inference relates to the role that mental health issues play in the experience of the participants. While only half of the women interviewed in this sample struggled with a diagnosed mental health problem, such as major depression or substance abuse, it was my impression that almost all of them experienced some symptoms of depression or anxiety. Given the level of stress in their lives and the immense obstacles these women faced, their symptoms seem totally reasonable and expected. Unfortunately, some of their symptoms were interpreted as laziness, attention-seeking, or lack of motivation, rather than warning signs of psychiatric problems. Until mental health concerns, treatment options, and referrals are better incorporated into WTW content and delivery, the impact that these issues have on the participants' performance in the program will go ignored and misunderstood. Similarly, if mental health concerns are misinterpreted, programs will not only fail to work for a significant number of individuals who are not healthy enough to work 40 hours a week, but will serve to further denigrate this vulnerable population. By ignoring, dismissing, or just missing the very painful symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues, WTW programs will

reinforce historical and societal messages about the illegitimacy and unacceptability of mental health problems.

The results of this study suggest that programs need to incorporate better screening and referral mechanisms, so that participants in need can receive help sooner and without wasting the time of both participants and staff. I believe that programs need to provide better training for staff to understand the continuum of mental health concerns, identify early warning signs, and seek appropriate consultation for participants. Earlier detection and management of mental health problems would prevent participants from wasting weeks to months in a WTW program when their likelihood of employment is minimal.

It is crucial for staff and personnel to explore how the experience of oppression, frustration, stress, and unemployment can contribute to mental health problems (Prilleltensky, 1999). I also recommend the infusion of multicultural and cultural competence training (Sue & Sue, 2004) for staff. This study suggests that negative experiences of the program itself can lead to lowered self-esteem and a damaged sense of self. It is suggested that program facilitators open up discussion about the psychological experience of going through WTW, navigating various forms for government assistance, and searching for employment. My impression from conducting the interviews is that the process of opening up conversation about parts of these women's lives that usually go ignored was empowering and meaningful in and of itself. Staff may need to be reminded that creating a forum for discussion does not mean they have to have answers for these

very complex topics. But to ignore the very real obstacles to success that participants are managing appears to cause more harm and lead to uninspiring program results.

The participants' identification with motherhood and caregiving was powerful and significant as they experienced the WTW program and search for employment. Their mental health ranged from highly symptomatic and alarming to precarious at best. Their psychological state of mind was therefore a significant factor in their experience of the program, whether explicitly stated or not. WTW practice must more overtly incorporate motherhood/caregiving and mental health awareness into the delivery and content of services in order to accomplish their goal of moving participants into work.

### **Implications for policy**

#### *Communication within the system*

Reported confusion and mixed messages in the welfare system clearly needs to be addressed in future policy efforts on welfare, work, and anti-poverty initiatives. The women's voices, as explicitly presented in Chapter 4, paint a picture of a WTW system and the related services that is inconsistent and inefficient. Specifically, they discussed feeling as though staff don't care, are not around, and treat participants disrespectfully. Referrals for training and education were experienced by the participants as arbitrary and based more on luck than need. Information about opportunities and services felt manipulated, withheld, or given only to those with connections. Finally, training programs were viewed as inconsistent as they failed to follow through with intended goals, such as moving participants into internships/externships.

The results of this study suggest that frustration and confusion with assistance programs and the availability of various social services may be leading to less successful results for WTW. As these women had negative interactions and experiences with social services agencies and departments in general, they seemed to become less motivated and inspired to participate in WTW. The reported favoritism and loopholes that they encountered suggested that you do not have to play by the rules if you know the right people. This idea undermines the message that WTW is trying to send—i.e. you need to work and play by the rules in order to succeed in society. Therefore, the system itself may be sending contradictory messages to its participants, leading to more confusion and frustration.

Solving the communication problems and contradictory messages sent by the welfare system is beyond the scope of this study and most likely rooted in complex historical and political dynamics. However, the findings from these participants suggest that WTW as a specific program cannot fulfill its intended objective until it works in conjunction with other social service agencies in meeting the full gamut of needs that poor women face in their lives. Increased communication and consultation between agencies and services seems like a bare necessity. Caseworkers and other welfare and WTW personnel may need increased training and support so that they can offer more humane and respectful services to their clients. Finally, a more holistic and contextual perspective (Fels, Goodman & Glenn, 2006) of how participants live and experience their world needs to be incorporated. Specifically, it is suggested that participants' racial,

gender, and class identities be validated and addressed in the context of their search for employment.

*Need for more training and basic skills*

The women's consistent and pervasive desires for more training and education must also be addressed at the policy level. While it is the goal of WTW programs to move participants into employment as quickly as possible (Ashworth, Cebulla, Greenberg, & Walker, 2004), the women in this study needed basic skills and experience *before* they could be competitive or even eligible for employment. Because of their lack of necessary skills, their experience in the WTW program felt pointless and/or a waste of time. The emphasis within the program was on developing a cover letter, resume, and filling out job applications. However, the content of the participants' resumes made them unemployable or competitive only for work that would keep them dependent on the system. This dynamic contributed to the women's sense of frustration and feeling as though they were being set up to fail.

The current structure and "work first" objectives of the WTW system (Ashworth, Cebulla, Greenberg, & Walker) do not allow time or space for staff to address these needs for training and employable skills. The funding of this particular WTW program was based on how many participants they were able to place into employment in a calendar year. Therefore, referrals to training and education did not work in conjunction with the program's goals. In fact, any attention to issues above and beyond moving participants into work as soon as possible appeared to be seen by staff as inefficient and hurting the bottom line. This inherent conflict between the program's goals and the

needs of the participants illustrates how critical it is that training and employable skills be explored at a policy level. WTW programs will continue to have marginal results and simultaneously send their participants negative and psychologically damaging messages if these basic yet essential skills and training needs are not met.

### **Implications for research**

#### *Experience of work within WTW*

If WTW programs are focused on moving participants into employment as soon as possible, we need to explore what work represents to the individuals. Previous research suggests that work is associated with both tangible means of survival (wages and benefits), and more abstract forms of meaning (social interaction and self-expression), depending upon social class and access to opportunities (Blustein, et al, 2002; Chaves, et al, 2004; Drenth, 1991). This study revealed a complex experience of work, unemployment, and future employment. While the women described work as representing a sense of hope, identity, and independence, their experience of employment in the context of WTW felt unobtainable, out of their reach, and punitive. This implies that although WTW is meant to instill a spirit of hard work and perseverance, the actual lived experience of the program feels pointless, hopeless, and a waste of time. It would appear then that the intended goal is undermined. From the participants' perspective, why *not* continue to receive benefits from the state and live off the system if the alternative doesn't work? Why shouldn't these women continue receiving subsidized daycare, transportation, and housing if the jobs they are suitable for do not offer the

schedule, hours, or salary needed to sustain the wellbeing of their families? This relationship between work and assistance is troubling and deserves more exploration.

*Internalization of negative messages*

Related to this dialectic between what work represents theoretically and realistically, the women seemed to internalize some of the negative messages that they experienced going through WTW. Specifically, they appeared to internalize some of the very powerful and oppressive labels about what it means to need assistance and what it means to be a person of color living on the "system." While the women in this study had significant obstacles to successful employment and survival off of assistance, they spent a good deal of time describing the unfair and demoralizing treatment that they received *within* the system and its impact on their psychological well-being. Based on the findings presented in this study coupled with existing scholarship (Friere, 1990; Thomas, Speight & Witherspoon, 2005), it is a possibility that participants feel worse psychologically after interacting with various parts of the system. We need to explore more explicitly the impact that these negative messages and labels have on the mental health of WTW participants.

More research is needed that explores the dynamic experience of work that emerged in this study. Quantitative studies that examine participants' perceptions of work (i.e. sense of work opportunities/possibilities/meaning of work) and beliefs about employment before and after going through a WTW program would offer more depth. Similarly, future research could delve more deeply into how participants psychologically process contradictory and negative messages about employment and WTW. Mixed

methods studies that utilize the participants' voices in conjunction with quantitative tools to measure the psychological impact of the program would shed light on whether or not programs and the system are doing more harm than good.

#### *Inter-professional collaboration*

Due to the complexity of the obstacles faced by this population and the contradictory messages they receive from society, I would argue that inter-professional collaboration and consultation is essential (Brabeck, Walsh & Latta, 2003; Kenny, Sparks & Jackson, 2007; Walsh, Brabeck, & Howard, 1999). It is my hope that readers from a variety of settings and backgrounds, including career counselors, mental health practitioners, academics, policy-makers, and WTW administrators/staff will find this information useful and insightful. Therefore, the results of this study could and should be explored across different disciplines and fields.

#### **Limitations**

##### *Researcher identity*

As was mentioned earlier, my identity as a white researcher most likely impacted the content of the interviews in various ways. Feminist research sees the researcher's identity as a dynamic part of the research process (Gergen, 2001). It is possible that my attempt as a white person trying to explore the role of race in the lives of these women felt threatening, confusing, or inappropriate. This may have led to some of the women suggesting that race and their status as women of color was not a significant factor in their experiences going through the program. As previous research demonstrates, minimization and indifference can help oppressed groups manage the emotional impact

of discrimination (Adams, Cahill & Ackerlind, 2004). It is also possible that the women in this study tended to minimize oppressive racial experiences as a coping strategy. In any case, my racial identity must be considered as an active part of the research process.

*Impact of political, economic, and historical context*

The scope of this study limited the amount of time that I was able to devote to exploring how the local political, economic, and historical conditions influenced the program and experience of these particular participants. As discussed in Chapter 2, the results of this study were understood using a feminist and critical lens (Gergen, 2001; Guerrero, 1999; hooks, 1984; 1989; Maguire, 2001; Martín-Baró, 1994; Prilleltensky, 1997). Feminist and critical theorists encourage researchers to explore the lived experiences of participants (Gergen; Guerrero); the dynamic interaction of historical, political, and cultural factors (hooks; Maguire); issues related to access to power (Martín-Baró; Prilleltensky); and the relationship between researcher and participant in context (Gergen).

Using this lens, the women's identification with motherhood, experience of the program, relationship to work, and interactions with me must be considered within the larger cultural, historical, and political context. This study took place in an urban Northeastern setting with particular racial and socioeconomic tensions and realities. Some of the participants touched on factors such as neighborhood dynamics, housing prices, race relations, and local job market issues. Future research might consider exploring more explicitly how the specific setting of a program influences the experiences of the participants and staff.

*Sample size*

The sample size of this study must also be considered as a potential limitation. This study utilized purposeful sampling (Sandelowski, 2000) which seeks out cases that are information rich. As was stated in Chapter 3, data were collected until saturation was met and no new information emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After interviewing eight or nine participants, it became apparent to the primary researcher and consulting methodologist that participants were providing redundant information and that the experience of this particular group of women had been fully explored. Other studies that have utilized qualitative description have reached saturation somewhere between 10 and 20 cases (Sullivan-Bolyai, Knafl, Tamborlane, & Grey, 2004; Sullivan-Bolyai, Rosenberg, & Bayard, 2006). Therefore, this study's sample size falls within the expected range for qualitative description research and would not be considered unusual. However, 10 cases can be considered relatively small, especially for researchers and academics from more quantitative backgrounds and training.

**Conclusions**

The implications described earlier provide concrete suggestions for potential change based on the experiences of those who have experienced WTW and assistance first hand. The ideas spring from the results of the study and are informed by the women's voices, psychological theory, and previous research findings.

The voices of the WTW participants in this study reveal a dynamic relationship between the program and search for employment, and their identities as women, mothers/caregivers, and women living in poverty. Their desire to be good mothers

served as a source of strength, but simultaneously conflicted with the requirements of WTW. Work and employment served as a source of hope, but also felt frustrating and unobtainable. These experiences felt deeply connected to the participants' gender and class and led to psychological challenges and negative feelings about themselves, WTW, and government assistance in general.

The four inferences gleaned from this study highlight the need for programs to embrace the issues and dilemmas faced by mothers and caregivers. More opportunities for education and training are desperately needed in order for these participants to successfully secure work. Attention to the mental health and the psychological functioning of participants must be improved. Confusion and contradictory information need to be managed more effectively. Finally, the women's words express the need for better treatment and respect for participants in general.

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### **Appendix I: Participant information**

Michelle was 47 years old and identified as African American/Black. She reported having nine children, but said one lived with her in her home. She attended school through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade and was looking for work in customer service.

Ms. P. was 41 years old and identified as African American/Black. She reported having five children and said four lived with her in her home. She attended school through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade and was looking for work as a medical receptionist. She reported being diagnosed with depression.

Renee was 23 years old and identified as African American/Black. She reported having one children, but said three children (a younger brother and sister) lived with her in her home. She attended school through the 11<sup>th</sup> grade and was looking for "office work or customer services".

Cheryl was 27 years old and identified as African American/Black. She reported having two children who both lived with her. She reported that she was also responsible for her grandmother, who lived in her home. She attended school through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade and was looking for work as alb technician.

Sasha was 24 years old and identified as African American/Black and Carribean/Black. She reported having two children who both lived with her, in addition to her mother, younger sister, and fiancé. She attended "some college" and was looking for work as a "medical assistant/office job".

Marina was 46 years old and identified as Latina. Spanish was her primary language. She reported having one child who lived with her. She also cared for her mother in her home. She attended school through the 11<sup>th</sup> grade and was looking for work in "retail customer service".

Lovey was 32 years old and identified as African American/Black. She reported having two children who lived with her in her home. She attended school through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade and was looking for work as a medical assistant or in "customer service work". She reported feeling "depressed" and "sad".

Andrea was 27 years old and identified as Caribbean/Black. She reported having two children and was pregnant with a third. Her first two children lived with their father. She attended high school and "trade school" and was looking for work as a receptionist or administrative assistant. She reported receiving treatment for substance abuse.

Danielle was 28 years old and identified as African American/Black, Caribbean/Black, and Caucasian/white. She reported having two children who both lived with her in her home. She attended high school, "trade school" and a "two-year associates degree". She

was looking for work in “cosmetology, retail, medical assisting”. She reported feeling “depressed” and “not able to get out of bed” frequently.

Alexis was 38 and identified as African American/Black. She reported having three children who did not live with her. She attended high school and “some college” and was looking for administrative work.

**Appendix II: Interview protocol**

1. Sometimes people feel more comfortable using things other than words to describe or show how they feel or experience something. Is there a way that you can show me (without words) how you see yourself in terms of this WTW program and your life right now? You could show me through a drawing (I have pens and paper), or tell me about a book, movie, picture, song, proverb, image, quote or anything else that you feel captures your experiences.
2. Maybe you can start out by telling me a little bit about yourself? (Prompts: your past experiences, how long you have been in the WTW program, your interests, dreams, etc,?)
3. Please describe for me your ideal life. How does this vision of your ideal life fit with the WTW program?
4. Tell me about your experiences with the Welfare to Work program—i.e. what has been helpful and not helpful?
5. What are some of the challenges or stressful situations you have encountered as you go through the program and search for a job? Are there any other services that you think you need in order for you to find a job?
6. Please tell me about the type of work you would like to be doing and how your job search has been so far?
7. What does finding a job and working mean to you in your life right now?
8. How has it been going through the WTW program and making ends meet (financially)?
9. Please tell me a little about the different roles and responsibilities you have in your life right now?
10. How has it been managing these different responsibilities as you go through the program and look for a job?
11. How has your experience been (both in the program and as you look for a job) as a mom?
12. How has your experience been as a woman?

13. How has your experience been as a woman from a \_\_\_\_\_ racial or ethnic background (based on info from contact sheet—for example “as a Caribbean black woman, a Latina, etc)?
14. How have these experiences as a mom, as a woman, and as a woman of \_\_\_\_\_ background impacted you emotionally or made you feel about yourself?
15. Do you have ideas for how the WTW system could be improved?
16. How has it been talking about these things today?
17. What else about your experience would be helpful for me or others to understand?

