Beyond “Work First”: An Empowering Approach to Welfare Programs

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Abstract

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The current system of classifying welfare programs divides them into “work first” and “mixed strategy” categories, where the former approach pushes women into the first job they can find, and the latter allows for some education or training along with work. I argue that this classificatory system tells us little about what actually goes on in welfare offices. I spent over a year conducting participant observation and interviews in two welfare-to-work offices in Contra Costa County, California. I propose a new way of examining and comparing welfare programs that looks at the combination of policies, practices, and discourses that shape participants’ access to resources, relationships, and information. I contend that welfare to work programs should be viewed through the lens of economic, social, and cultural capital. I illustrate how one welfare program transmits each of these types of capital. In addition, I add to our theoretical understanding of capital by proposing that economic and social capital, like cultural capital, have both dominant and subjugated subtypes. I argue that only by acknowledging and respecting the subjugated forms of capital held by many welfare-reliant women can welfare workers successfully transmit the dominant forms of capital that would help women move permanently toward self-sufficiency. Finally, I elaborate a new classificatory system based on the successful transmission of the three types
of capital in welfare programs. I envision a continuum with Empowering programs—those that are the most successful at deploying subjugated capital in order to impart dominant capital—at one end. At the other end of the continuum are Repressive programs—those that fail to make available the three forms of capital or those that impart it in such a way that it is rejected by participants. I intend for my work to shift our focus away from an understanding of TANF implementation that is focused only on state categories of allowable participation, to one that is focused on the overall experiences of participants in the program. I hope it will illuminate some of the ways welfare-to-work programs can improve their programs within the confines of federal and state regulations.
I dedicate this book to the women of Clinton Family Inn, Spring 1997, especially Wendy and Jamette.

You inspired this research, and it is my memories of your strength and perseverance that have propelled me all these years.
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Acknowledgements

I am incredibly grateful for the many welfare-reliant women, and men, who allowed me to sit through their classes, interviews, and meetings, taking notes on what were often very personal and difficult moments in their lives. I am especially grateful for the eleven women who allowed me to interview them, and who shared deeply personal information with me. As I wrote, I continued to be struck by the strength and resourcefulness of so many of the women I was lucky enough to get to know. I am also immensely appreciative of all the CalWORKs employees who extended themselves to me in large and small ways—from the administrators who granted me initial access, to the instructors who tolerated my presence for weeks on end. A special thank you to Craig, Dennis, and Eric, who spent countless hours with me and extended friendship and support along with their knowledge and opinions about CalWORKs.

To Michael Burawoy, my chair, I extend my deepest gratitude. Thank you for not giving up on me, and for all your crucial insight and advice. I also thank my other committee members, Raka Ray and Wendy Brown, for their support and feedback over the years. Thank you to Sandra Smith, who also read and offered important suggestions on part of this project.

I doubt that I would have completed this dissertation were it not for Michael Burawoy’s dissertation groups, and all my wonderful colleagues who read numerous memos and drafts and offered extensive and brilliant advice—not to mention support. I thank everyone who at one time or another participated in these groups with me, but especially Linus Huang, Ofer Sharone, and Cinzia Solari. In addition, I thank my friend and colleague, Jenn Sherman, for her intellectual help, but more importantly her friendship and support, not
to mention her willingness to answer a million silly (and not so silly) questions over the
years.

I am also grateful for the Labor and Employment Research Fund Doctoral
Dissertation Fellowship that supported me and enabled me to concentrate on writing during

Finally, I want to thank my family. My parents, Ron and Carolyn Woodward, and my
brother, Matt Woodward have supported me through this long process without ever
expressing doubt that I would finish—even when I doubted it myself—and without ever
pressuring me about the length of time it was taking. Andrea Ganz has provided the day to
day emotional, logistical, practical, and financial support that has made this whole project
possible; I could not have done it without her. And my girls, Sage and Alex, have kept me
grounded, reminded me what’s really important, and inspired me to finish what I started.
Thank you.
Introduction

In an almost window-less brick building in Lewiston, CA, the California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program—otherwise known as welfare—is administered. The building is located in the heart of Lewiston, surrounded by fast food restaurants, a small supermarket, and a drugstore. There is a bus stop out front, and a train stop is a few blocks away. Through two sets of doors lies a waiting area devoid of natural light. Dirty upholstered chairs are set upon the bare floor. A wall with Spanish and English language posters informs clients of their rights. Straight ahead is a glassed-in area where two security guards sit waiting for trouble. To the right are reception windows, also glassed-in. To the left are several phones from which welfare recipients call their welfare workers. A small table with a couple of toys is the most welcoming part of the room.

Numerous doors open off the waiting area and lead to classrooms and to the welfare workers’ cubicles. One door leads to the Resource Room, a surprisingly inviting and lively space with a handful of computers, a board with job leads, telephones, a printer, a fax machine, and various books, pamphlets, and other resources to help recipients find employment. Behind locked doors, the grung darkness of the office continues in the workers’ area, despite holiday decorations and other attempts to brighten the atmosphere. The building was under construction at the time I was there, and workers had been moved around and crammed into tight spaces. While the renovation was promising in theory, it was years from being finished and few workers held out much hope that it would significantly improve conditions.

1 The names of the cities, Lewiston and Strafford, are pseudonyms. All welfare-reliant women and welfare workers’ names have also been changed. In my creation of pseudonyms for welfare workers at both offices, I tried to use the format most often used by welfare participants. Most welfare workers used their surnames with participants, however a few, including Dan and all the instructors at Strafford, went by their first names.
In contrast, the Strafford Employment and Human Services Office, located only two towns over, sits atop a grassy hill overlooking the Bay. Set in a small industrial park, the Strafford building is nicely landscaped and appears inviting. Inside is a carpeted waiting room with upholstered chairs that while spotted still seem much cleaner than those at Lewiston. The room is bright with natural light. Receptionists sit behind glassed-in windows, but the one security guard who works here is rarely visible. To the right is an information desk where one or two workers sit out in the open, suggesting neither danger nor fear. A door all the way to the right leads to a small room with phones where welfare recipients call their workers. Through a second door is the interview room. To the left are classrooms and the resource room, which is smaller than the one at Lewiston. These doors are often left unlocked and open, contributing to the open, airy feel of the office, and to the sense of security there. Two locked doors open into the back of the building where welfare recipients almost never go. While workers complain about dirty rugs and cubicles, the wide open space is cleaner, brighter, and far more inviting than the Lewiston office. From the second story many workers have a scenic view of the bay.

The dramatic contrast in settings is the first noticeable difference between Lewiston and Strafford. The second difference is therefore not very surprising. Lewiston serves a predominantly African American community, with a racially similar staff. Strafford, on the other hand, is exceptionally diverse. There are significant numbers of African American, Latina, and white welfare recipients, and again, the welfare workers mimic the diversity of the clients. In addition, one unit is devoted entirely to non-English speaking Southeast Asians, mostly Laotians.
Beyond these two immediately obvious differences, the two offices are more similar than they are different. Both located in Contra Costa County (CCC),\(^2\) California, they must conform to the same written policies, and workers answer to the same upper level administrators. Applicants undergo the same administrative process, described below. And to a large extent, welfare to work participants at both offices follow similar paths through the system as they face work requirements and time limits.

From late 2002 through early 2004 I conducted participant observation at these two Employment and Human Services offices in Contra Costa County, California where the California Work and Responsibility to Kids Program (CalWORKs) was administered. I observed two Job Club classes and two Job Search classes at each site, for a total of 16 weeks. I sat with welfare workers while they answered phones and did the paperwork that took up the vast majority of their days. I accompanied workers in their meetings with new applicants and current clients. The majority of these meetings were intake interviews, the meetings that determined potential recipients’ eligibility. But I also observed orientations, assessment meetings where welfare-reliant women developed their self-sufficiency plans, regular follow-up meetings, and re-certifications, where clients had to again prove their eligibility for aid. I accompanied caseworkers to the CalWORKs office at the local community college and to meetings with clients that took place in their homes if they were too ill or disabled to make it to the welfare office. In addition, I traveled with the outreach unit, a group of social workers and community members that go to the homes of CalWORKs participants who have not shown up for required classes or meetings, or are otherwise about

\(^2\) Strafford and Lewiston are not the only welfare offices in Contra Costa County, however when I refer to CCC throughout this dissertation, I refer only to these two offices.
to be sanctioned. Most of my conversations with welfare workers were informal as I asked about their daily routines and questioned them about interactions I observed. However I also conducted brief interviews with 10-15 welfare workers from each office, including supervisors and division managers. During my time at the offices, especially the time I spent in Job Club and Job Search classes, I got to know many welfare-reliant women—and a few men as well. I was always honest about who I was and what I was doing there. Along with innumerable informal conversations, I conducted 10 in-depth interviews with welfare-reliant women, five from each office.

The Journey through Welfare to Work

When a CalWORKs applicant arrived at the office to apply for welfare, she was screened, if she chose to be, for “immediate need.” If she passed the initial screening, she was granted an intake interview before the end of the next business day. Among other stipulations, anyone with an income of $100 or more in the past month was ineligible for the meager $200 (at most) and food stamps given to the few families that did qualify. \(^3\) This aid was delivered within a day and was all she would get for her family until their case was opened, a process that could take up to 45 days.

After this screening the applicant was given an enormous packet that contained the fourteen page welfare application, numerous pamphlets and booklets about MediCal and various aspects of the CalWORKs program, and a series of forms covering a broad range of topics, including welfare fraud, child care, and direct deposit. She was then scheduled for a half day orientation and an intake interview, both of which typically took place within a week—unless she qualified for “immediate need”—although it could be longer. At the intake

\(^3\) An applicant with an income of over $100 for the month, but whose rent is greater than the income, may be eligible for food stamps, but not cash.
interview the applicant had to bring her “completed” application packet. Some of the forms were supposed to be filled out in advance; others required a signature in the presence of a welfare worker. The forms were complicated and redundant. Questions often seemed irrelevant and unnecessary. I observed more than 20 intake interviews, and I never saw an application packet that was completely and properly filled out without the help of a welfare worker. During the interview, the worker asked the applicant to reveal all the details of her living situation, her employment history, and her financial situation. Some workers moved slowly and carefully. Most rushed through this at top speed, slowing only if they felt the applicant was confused.

After the intake interview, the intake worker had 45 days to open the case (if the applicant was eligible, which she usually was) but inevitably the initial burden fell on the applicant, who had to return to the welfare office with all the paperwork that she did not bring to the interview: social security cards and birth certificates for everyone in the family, proof of residence and rent, proof of school attendance, and proof of vaccinations, among other things. If she failed to return with the required paperwork, the case was closed. Otherwise, cases were typically opened in less than the 45 day limit.

Next the case was transferred from the intake worker to a benefits specialist and an employment specialist. The former would be in charge of the family’s food stamps and cash assistance. The latter was supposed to help the applicant find work or another approved activity, but more often was less of a support figure and more of an enforcer of work requirements. After an appraisal interview with the employment specialist, at which time the participant could agree to be screened for learning disabilities, she was most likely sent to two weeks of Job Club followed by two weeks of Job Search. Although this was supposed to
happen just weeks after her case was opened, this process often took months. A few recipients—those already employed or attending a school program that fulfilled their work requirements—were moved straight to the next step, assessment, without taking the classes. Others who had extensive work histories were allowed to bypass Job Club, the job readiness course, but were still required to take Job Search.

Once the new recipient was in Job Search, her path would begin to diverge from other CalWORKs participants. Now she had choices to make. It is here that the implementation of welfare reform in CCC differed most from the majority of programs across the country that follow a “work first” philosophy. Sometimes called “quick labor force attachment,” a work first approach assumes that most welfare-reliant women have little job experience and few work skills. Premised on the idea that gaining work experience of any kind will be the fastest, cheapest way to move women from the welfare rolls to self-sufficiency, work first programs push participants into the first job they can find, regardless of the pay, benefits, promotional possibilities, or the desires and goals of the participants. Despite its congruence with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, not every welfare to work program follows work first’s premises. Although California’s welfare programs are supposed to follow a work first approach, the two welfare offices that I studied implemented a more lenient, more empowering approach.4

Participants in CCC were not required to take the first job they could get. In fact, they were discouraged from doing so. Instead, they were asked to think about their futures, their goals and dreams, and to create a plan that would set them on a path to achieving those goals.

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4 Since the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 was passed, dramatically increasing the required participation rates states must meet to 50%, based on federally approved work activities that do not include therapeutic services or certain educational pursuits that had previously been allowed by the state of California, CCC has undoubtedly been forced to become more “work first” than when my research was conducted.
Despite the dreamy discourse, the reality was not nearly as hopeful, as a variety of regulations, as well as other constraints and barriers, got in the way of the pursuit of dreams for most participants. Nevertheless, new welfare recipients did have some significant choices to make. They could pursue a fairly long list of education and training programs, ranging from 21 day certified nurses’ assistant (CNA) trainings to 18 month long certificate programs in education or business (among other things) at the local community college. Or participants could choose to look for employment, in which case they were encouraged to find a job they would like and one that would help them get a better job in a field they wanted to pursue. In addition to these options, participants could seek counseling or participate in substance abuse, domestic violence, or other mental health services, all of which counted toward their work requirement. In rare cases participants had their work requirements waived while they engaged in these services.

After the completion of the Job Club and Job Search classes, each participant met with a social worker for her assessment meeting. At this time she had to finalize her plan to achieve self-sufficiency before her five-year time limit was up. This welfare to work plan was binding. For example, if a recipient signed a plan saying that she would pursue training as a CNA and then look for work, she was obligated to follow the plan unless a worker agreed to allow her to change it. If employment was required and not found, she had to participate in some sort of unpaid community service, or face a sanction. While participants followed their plan, they had to keep in regular contact with their employment and benefits specialists, including a monthly income report to the latter. Failure to follow the plan, to meet the required number of hours for work activities, or to attend scheduled meetings with welfare workers would likely lead to a sanction. Currently in the state of California, both the
weight of time limits and sanctions is somewhat reduced because children continue to receive
aid while only adults are cut off. But in an area where the monthly cash grant is $548 for a
parent and child, but monthly housing costs for a one-bedroom apartment are even greater,
any loss of income can have devastating effects. Further, Governor Schwarzenegger has
repeatedly proposed that children should not be exempt from the time limits and sanctions of
their parents. An estimated 230,000 children will lose their CalWORKs aid under his plan,
including 4000 children in Contra Costa County (CBP 2009). If his plan is approved, it will
demolish what is left of the safety net for the most vulnerable children.

The trajectory of individual participants was influenced by the welfare workers they
encountered. And by the time a Lewiston or Strafford participant settled into school, work, or
another work activity, she had dealt with a minimum of four welfare workers, not including
the workers who helped arrange child care or the instructors who taught the mandatory
classes. It is no wonder that participants were often confused about who their workers were,
or which worker to call for a particular problem. Instructors played an especially important
role in motivating participants and guiding them toward work activities. While both the
Lewiston and Strafford offices allowed participants to choose among employment,
education/training, and therapeutic services to meet their work requirement, the emphasis
placed on these different activities by instructors differed at the two sites, as did the
receptivity of participants toward the different activities. At Lewiston, education was seen as
the best way to achieve self-sufficiency and ultimately escape poverty. This path was
encouraged, and participants who had not planned to go back to school sometimes ended up
doing so after being persuaded by an instructor. Therapeutic services, however, while
vaguely recommended by instructors of Job Club, were largely avoided by participants. At
Strafford, on the other hand, therapeutic services were actively encouraged and frequently used by many participants. And while education was both encouraged and pursued, instructors were also enthusiastic about work as a primary path toward self-sufficiency. Despite the differences between Strafford and Lewiston, both offices provided opportunities for participants to gain the skills, support, and direction needed for successful entry into the labor market.

**Chapter Outline**

This dissertation seeks to shed light on the journey taken by welfare participants in CCC. It also aims to understand what it is that welfare-reliant women really want, and how we might assess welfare programs—even given the current policy situation—from their perspective. In the process I hope it will change the way we think about welfare to work programs and welfare-reliant women. In Chapter 1 I explain that welfare-reliant women—not only in CCC but throughout the nation—have been supportive of welfare reform, despite its eradication of a safety net, because it offers the hope of a better life through work. Welfare-reliant women want to work, not only for basic economic survival, but because they see work as a means to family security, a path to fulfilling their personal aspirations, and a civic duty.

Chapter 2 then asks the question, how might we look at welfare programs in order to assess their ability to help women meet these goals? I consider the current system of classifying welfare to work programs, typically as some variation of work first or “mixed strategy,” and I argue that these terms are inadequate. Focusing our understanding of welfare programs only on the allowable work activities and number of welfare recipients on the rolls, these terms tell only a small part of what goes on in a welfare program. Rather than looking at welfare programs from the perspective of the government and policy organizations that
hope to be politically relevant, I seek to understand and categorize them based on what is important and relevant to welfare-reliant women. I therefore propose a new way of examining and comparing welfare to work programs that looks at resources, relationships, and discourses, as well as the options participants have for meeting work requirements. I argue that within the confines of PRWORA, the best programs—those with the greatest benefits for recipients—strive to bolster welfare-reliant women’s economic, social, and cultural capital. I add to our theoretical understanding of capital by proposing that economic and social capital, like cultural capital, have both dominant and subjugated subtypes. I argue that only by acknowledging and respecting the subjugated forms of economic, social, and cultural capital held by many welfare-reliant women can welfare workers successfully transmit the dominant forms of capital that are important in moving welfare-reliant women permanently toward self-sufficiency. I call CCC’s program and others that are successful in imparting all three types of dominant capital empowering, in contrast with repressive programs that fail to provide the three types of capital, or fail to provide it in a way that is palatable and therefore useful for welfare-reliant women.

Chapter 3 is an examination of the economic capital imparted by CCC’s welfare to work program in the form of full child care subsidies, transportation monies, and other economic resources. Here I consider how acknowledging women’s subjugated economic capital—or unreported income—and refusing to penalize women for it—actually encourages women’s participation in the formal labor market. Social capital is the subject of Chapter 4, where I look at the ways CCC’s program encouraged long-term, positive relationships with certain welfare workers and fostered community-building among participants. By acknowledging that participants may have useful social connections outside of the welfare
office, as well as potentially negative relationships that impede their paths, instructors are best able to help women form positive dominant social capital and activate the connections they already have. In Chapter 5 I consider three forms of cultural capital that were available at CCC. Formal education and training were available through local institutions. Within the welfare office, job search skills and norms of appearance and behavior for the workplace were imparted through the Job Club and Job Search classes. I discuss the importance of a critical pedagogy in transmitting dominant cultural capital.

In Chapter 6 I address differences between the Lewiston and Strafford offices. While I maintain that both offices delivered empowering programs, I describe the educational focus of Lewiston compared with the therapeutic focus of Strafford. I argue that Lewiston instructors, responding to the resistance of participants toward therapeutic discourses and practices combined with the historical significance of education in African American communities, encouraged an expansive empowerment through education. The instructors at Strafford, on the other hand, faced a diverse population that included a small but significant population of previously middle class women who had left abusive relationships. Not meeting resistance to a therapeutic approach, they encouraged a restorative empowerment through therapeutic services. Instructors at both offices responded to the needs and preferences of participants and chose a path that was empowering to the women with whom they worked.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I argue that while an empowering welfare to work program is a positive response to PRWORA, it is far from a just response to poverty in the U.S. Working within the confines of a block grant program that has eradicated welfare as an entitlement, even empowering welfare to work programs can only be aimed at individuals, thus ignoring
the socioeconomic system that ensures poverty for many Americans. While providing education and training—even unlimited education—may succeed in helping individuals escape welfare and poverty, this tactic will never eradicate poverty, nor will it change who is poor in the U.S.—disproportionately women and children of color.
Chapter 1: Nowhere to Go but Up: Why Welfare-Reliant Women Welcomed Any Reform after AFDC

As the nation cheered the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA)—the “end of welfare as we know it”—academic feminists and sociologists, along with progressive activists, were among the only voices of opposition. These groups insisted that forcing welfare-reliant women to forgo the work of mothering in order to take minimum wage jobs that would not lift them out of poverty was bad for women, children, and the nation. And they warned that time limits would leave the women who faced the greatest barriers to success in the labor market without a safety net for themselves or their children. But despite the efforts of these scholars and activists, the vast majority of Americans, including the majority of Democrats, was demanding welfare reform and was willing to accept the plan passed by the Republican Congress. Anxious to decrease the welfare rolls, stop welfare fraud, and end “welfare dependency,” nearly everyone agreed that time limits and work requirements were necessary.

Proponents of PRWORA have argued that welfare-reliant women need reforming. They need to acquire a work ethic and learn the value of hard work. They need restrictive policies and work requirements to help them break free from the cycle of dependency created by the old welfare system. This prevailing perspective, codified into work first policies around the country, hails work not only as essential to economic self-sufficiency, but as spiritually important—work is believed to “save the soul[s]” of poor women (DeParle 2004, p. 162). Yet scholars have provided much evidence to show that poor women not only want to work, but they did work, even before reform (Edin & Lein 1997; Handler & Hollingsworth 1971; Pavetti 1993; Spalter-Roth, Burr, Hartmann, & Shaw 1995). Most of this literature has
assumed—accurately—that poor women value work because it is economically essential. However, just as is true for most other Americans, the importance of work has multiple meanings for welfare-reliant women. While scholars have written about the mainstream values held by welfare recipients, and have discussed some of the benefits these women receive from employment, there is little scholarship that focuses on the multiple layers of meaning that work has for welfare-reliant women. Given the persistence of stereotypes of welfare recipients as lazy and fraudulent, or at least lacking a strong work ethic, and the resulting policy context, continued research into the actual views of welfare recipients is necessary.

In the following chapters I argue that Contra Costa County’s welfare program was empowering. But a program can only empower women if it speaks to them—if it meets them where they are at, and pushes them where they want to go. This chapter takes seriously what welfare-reliant women said they wanted in a welfare program, and what they wanted for themselves and their families.

I begin this chapter by discussing discourses deployed by conservatives and progressives regarding welfare and welfare reform. Next I show that despite the very real concerns raised by scholars and activists, the women whose lives were most affected by reform were optimistic about the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program (TANF). In order to understand why so many poor women welcomed restrictive reforms, I consider what “being on welfare” looked like before reform. I explore the history of AFDC,

See Iversen and Farber 1996; Sandfort, Kalil, and Gottschalk 1999; Scott, et al. 2001; Scott, London, and Edin 2000; Seccombe, Walters, and James 1999. For a more general discussion about welfare-reliant women’s mainstream values, see Hays (2003). In addition, Hochschild (1995) argues that most poor Blacks continue to believe in the ideology of the American Dream: that hard work and perseverance will lead to “success.” Similarly, Wilson (1996: 181) found that people living in inner city ghettos share the American work ethic, and the belief “that people can get ahead in life if they try.” And Newman (1999) shows that low-wage workers in some of New York City’s poorest, most ghettoized communities hold onto mainstream values about work.
particularly the reforms that led up to PRWORA, and show how this program was experienced by welfare-reliant women. I then argue that welfare-reliant women supported the reforms of 1996 because TANF offered them hope for a better future. Key to this better future was work: welfare-reliant women supported reform because they believe in work. I articulate three registers of meaning welfare-reliant women give to work. I argue that welfare-reliant women view paid work as a means to family security, a path to personal aspirations, and a civic responsibility.

Ignoring the structural barriers that cause and perpetuate poverty, most recent conservative discourse⁶ has located the source of the problem with poor people’s values and behavior. Aid to Families with Dependent Children was viewed as promoting and perpetuating welfare dependency, and “contributing . . . to the rise of a new set of ‘behavioral poverty’ problems including eroded work ethic and dependency, lack of educational aspiration and achievement, increased single parenthood and illegitimacy, criminal activity, and drug and alcohol abuse” (Rector 1993: 283). In defense of the bill that would later become the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, then Chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, Congressman Bill Archer, said

Virtually every section of the bill requires more personal responsibility. Recipients are required to work for their benefits. Drug addicts and alcoholics are no longer rewarded with cash payments that are often spent on their habit. Aliens who were allowed into the country because they promised to be self-supporting are held to their promise; fathers who do not live with their children are expected to pay child support or suffer severe

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⁶ Of course, neither conservative nor progressive discourses are monolithic. There are significant variations among conservatives as well as among progressives. There are also numerous “Moderate” discourses (arguably including those of the Clinton administration), none of which I address here. For the purposes of this paper, I refer to a singular conservative discourse and a singular progressive one; I have tried to capture the dominant strands of these discourses to best represent both ideological camps.
consequences; and welfare can no longer be a way of life. After 5 years no more cash benefits will be provided.

This bill will reverse the decades-long Federal policy of rewarding self-destructive behavior. We will no longer reward for doing the wrong thing (1995: 619).

While conservative discourse prior to the passage of PRWORA blamed poor people, particularly those in the inner city—in other words, Blacks and Latinos—for their poverty, single mothers were especially scapegoated. The supposed failure of (Black) single mothers to provide their children with discipline and responsible role models was blamed for the perpetuation of poverty in the inner cities. In a famous article published in the New York Times in 1992, Charles Murray wrote, “Children learn to be responsible adults by watching what responsible adults do. . . The violence and social chaos in the inner cities show us what happens when about half a generation of males is born to single women” (1992: 557). Murray went on to advocate the end of welfare and the use of orphanages to care for children born to single mothers, an extreme position even within the conservative movement. However the discourse around single mothers and absent fathers was pervasive among conservatives as well as moderates. Single mothers in inner cities were described not only as lacking a work ethic, but as lacking morality and mainstream values.

Conservative discourse portrayed these women as radically different from other Americans. Vivyan Adair writes,

For Republican Senator John Ashcroft writing in the *St. Louis Dispatch*, the inner city is the site of ‘rampant illegitimacy’ and a ‘space devoid of discipline’ where all values are askew. For Ashcroft, what is insidious is not material poverty but an entitlement system that has allowed ‘out-of-control’ poor women to rupture traditional patriarchal authority, valuation, and boundaries (2002: 462).

Adair goes on to quote from William Raspberry’s 1995 *Washington Post* article,
'Unfortunately AFDC . . . is paid to an unaccountable, accidental and unprepared parent who has chosen her head of household status as a personal form of satisfaction, while lacking the simple life skills and maturity to achieve love and job fulfillment from any other source. I submit that all of our other social ills—crime, drugs, violence, failing schools are a direct result of the degradation of parenthood by emotionally immature recipients’ (2002: 463).

In this way, single mothers, especially African American single mothers who rely on welfare, became the locus of blame for just about every social problem. And the assumptions underlying these assertions were that single, welfare-reliant mothers lacked a work ethic, lacked responsibility, and lacked the values of independence, self-discipline, and hard work that are revered by most Americans. But conservatives could not have been more wrong. Single, welfare-reliant women are not lacking in these values, as my data will show below.

Instead, as progressive discourse insisted, welfare-reliant women are lacking in opportunities and resources. This discourse, though barely audible beneath the din of conservatives (and moderates), did not blame welfare-reliant women for their poverty, but instead placed the blame on structural sources of inequalities, including labor market conditions, such as deindustrialization and globalization; the lack of national health care and day care; racial discrimination; and an unequal educational system. Progressive discourse focused on the likely increase in financial hardships that would be the result of both Republican and Democratic proposals for welfare reform (e.g. Spalter-Roth et al. 1995; Danziger and Danziger 1995). In addition, progressive discourse warned that these proposals would further endanger women living with domestic violence (see Davis and Kraham 1995), and would interfere with (poor) women’s basic right to mother their children (e.g. Women’s Committee of One Hundred 1995. See also Goodman 1995; Roberts 1999; and Mink 1998).
In a 1993 New York Times article, Mimi Abramovitz and Frances Fox Piven criticized conservatives for blaming poor women for poverty and other social problems. And they criticized the emerging trend requiring welfare-reliant women to work—and ‘behave’—in order to get welfare benefits. They asked (564), “But even if there were jobs for unskilled women that paid enough to support a family and cover child and health care besides, does it really make sense to force mothers into a labor market flooded with other desperate job seekers? Is it sane policy to force women to leave their children for jobs flipping burgers or mopping floors?”

Many feminists criticize work requirements because they force poor mothers into the work force, often without acceptable child care arrangements. They demand that poor mothers’ caregiving labor, or their motherwork,” be recognized and compensated (Goodman 1995; Mink 1998). Dorothy Roberts (1999) points to the double standard from conservatives, whereby poor mothers—who are racially coded as Black—are expected to work, while middle class mothers—racially coded as white—are told that it is better for their children if they provide full-time care. She goes a step further, insisting that PRWORA is aimed at controlling all aspects of poor women’s mothering—but not just any poor women. Poor Black women, typically believed to make up the vast majority of welfare recipients thanks to decades of biased media portrayals (Gilens 2003), are the chief targets.7

7 African Americans do make up a disproportionate part of the welfare population (38% in 2002) but certainly not a majority of it (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2004).

According to Roberts, not only does PRWORA force poor women to leave their children in often substandard care while they work, but it seeks to reduce the number of children born to welfare-reliant women in the first place. Roberts (1999) says that attempts to make birth control mandatory for female welfare recipients and family cap policies7 not only “reflect a national consensus that the government has no obligation to support poor women’s decision to have children or to sustain the children that poor women have,” but “they enforce the view that childbearing to poor women is pathological and should be deterred through social policy” (153).

Roberts argues that lower cash payments, work requirements, time limits and sanctions make it increasingly difficult for poor women to care for their children. She speculates that these polices will lead to
While Roberts focuses on race and motherhood, several scholars designed a study to examine how the race of welfare participants shapes state welfare policies such as time limits and sanctions. Soss et. al. (2003) look at the effects of high concentrations of African American and Latino welfare recipients on states’ policy choices regarding sanctions, work requirements, time limits, and a family cap. Holding other factors constant, they find that states with more African Americans and Latinos on their welfare roles were more likely to adopt the most punitive family cap and time limit policies. States with more African Americans were also more likely to enact stricter sanction policies. They write, “Such policy disparities not only can produce inequalities in the distribution of resources, they also subject citizens from different social groups to systematically different treatment at the hands of government” (245). As Blacks and Latinos comprise a growing proportion of welfare recipients (Schram 2003), these findings are particularly disturbing. Rather than simply arguing against strict policies for welfare recipients, these scholars show that differences from state to state are not random, but instead have racial—and racist—underpinnings.

More than a decade since the passage of the Personal Responsibility Act was passed, conservative discourse continues to laud welfare reform and argue for more stringent requirements, while progressive discourse continues to describe the ill effects of PRWORA on women and children. Progressives have defended the basic rights of poor women and have argued for policies that would help them economically. And they have criticized the way racial and gender ideologies shape welfare policies. When I entered the welfare office I was armed with these criticisms, and anxious to add another progressive voice to the

more children being removed from their mother’s care and placed in foster care. Further, she says that it will be increasingly difficult for mothers to “correct the neglect that led to the removal” because “TANF cuts off aid to parents for children who are away from home for more than forty-five days” (164-165).
literature on welfare implementation. I have not abandoned this objective. However I was
struck by the disjuncture between the criticisms of welfare reform lodged by middle class
progressives, and the positive assessments of welfare reform I heard from welfare
recipients—more than half of whom were Black. I could not help but think that progressives
must be missing something: an understanding and incorporation of the views and values held
by welfare-reliant women. I argue that many progressives do not have a clear understanding
of the multiple meanings work has for poor women, and the many reasons they want to work.
By failing to acknowledge that welfare-reliant women’s reasons for wanting to work extend
beyond pure economics, progressives miss an opportunity to call into question the
assumption—held by many across the political spectrum—that welfare-reliant women would
rather live off government aid (if there were no time limits and if aid amounts were higher)
than work. This chapter is an attempt to call this assumption into question, and to show that
welfare-reliant women believe work, in addition to helping them provide for their families
financially, will help them fulfill their career and personal goals, and what they view as their
civic responsibility to provide for their own families and teach their children the values of
responsibility and hard work.

What Welfare-Reliant Women Really Think of PRWORA

The majority of studies that look at the views of welfare-reliant women toward the
policies of PRWORA clearly indicate support for work requirements and time-limited
welfare receipt. These studies also show that welfare-reliant women long for more
educational opportunities and individuation in the application of welfare to work rules. There
are two studies, however, that indicate that welfare recipients may be more critical of reform.
Bullock’s (2004) study, conducted in an unnamed Midwestern city, compared the views of
mostly white welfare recipients with those of their mostly white welfare workers. She finds that the welfare recipients support more progressive welfare policies than welfare workers. Bullock (2004) shows that welfare-reliant women support ‘progressive’ policies, namely those that increase income, health insurance, and work supports such as child care. She further shows that while they do not support ‘restrictive’ policies—such as family caps and time limits—to the same extent, they do not outright reject them either.⁸

A second study clearly shows a group of welfare recipients resisting the tenets of reform—but only under unusual circumstances. Little (2001) carried out ethnographic research at Community Education Circle (CEC), a community based agency in New York City. This agency had a contract with the state to provide education and employment services to welfare-reliant women. When the staff, who did not view themselves as part of the welfare system, became discouraged about the new welfare rules that limited the time women could spend on educational pursuits, they raised money and hired an advocate. With the assistance of the advocate, the participants became activists, going so far as to speak in front of the state legislature to argue for more time for education and training. They insisted that all women

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⁸ She also finds that neither social workers nor welfare recipients showed significant support for restrictive policies associated with TANF. While this appears to indicate that welfare recipients in this city are critical of reform, the methodology of the survey is important here. Instead of being asked about current policies, or about their overall opinions of reform, respondents were asked to rate their support for particular policies—some of which were enacted and others that were not. Of the 20 policies that were on the list to be rated by respondents, Bullock only tells us about half, three that she calls “restrictive” (family caps, time limits, and workfare) and several that she calls “progressive” (universal health care, extending day care services, and cost of living increases for welfare benefits, free education, and job training). We have no idea what the other policies were, how they were coded, or what the respondents rated them. We do not know, for example, if they were asked about work requirements—a policy that is technically restrictive, but does not have to involve the more punitive variant, workfare. Further, the respondents had to rate the policies on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1= “strongly disagree” and 7= “strongly agree.” While welfare recipients clearly favored “progressive policies,” giving them a composite score of 5.66, their disapproval for “restrictive policies” was less overwhelming, with a score of 3.78—close to the neutral score of 4.00. It is therefore hard to ascertain from this study just how these welfare-reliant women felt about their experiences with welfare reform—except that they were certainly in favor of more services and greater benefits. This study does not provide evidence that welfare-reliant women reject the basic premises of reform.
deserved time to pursue education or training and find work that they enjoyed. While inside the political arena the women took a reformist position, Little claims that outside of the political arena an even more radical discourse developed among some of the women—they began to claim an entitlement for their motherwork alone, much as Roberts (1999) and other feminists have done. The emergence of this discourse attests to the possibilities of political activism among groups of welfare recipients when they have regular exposure to radical critiques of the welfare state, which is usually not the case.

Despite these two studies, most research looking at welfare-reliant women’s views of welfare reform shows that these women longed for reform and favored work requirements—and quite often more restrictive policies. One study, conducted in 1996 and 1997, after PRWORA was signed into law but before it was fully implemented, looks at the opinions of a diverse group of welfare recipients from three different U.S. cities. This study found that most participants favored work requirements, time limits, and even family cap provisions. However the respondents qualified their support for these policies, citing the need for exceptions when families needed additional time, had children with special needs, or were unable to find adequate child care. While some women expressed fear and concern over the reforms, a majority supported nearly all of the major changes (Burton, et al. 1998).

Two other studies, also conducted prior to the passage of PRWORA in Northern Florida and Michigan, respectively, found that all the women longed for extensive reforms to the welfare system. Work requirements were overwhelmingly supported, although some women supported them only under certain circumstances, for example if one had older children, if adequate daycare was available and subsidized, or if the job paid more than

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9 This study included former and current welfare recipients, as well as men who were familiar with the welfare system.
minimum wage (Seccombe, Walters, James 1999; Seccombe 1999; and Sandfort, Kalil, and Gottschalk 1999. See also Scott, London, and Edin 2000). On the other hand, when asked about other reforms, welfare-reliant women in Florida were largely opposed to time limits, or supported them only with hesitation, worrying that individual circumstances would not be taken into consideration. However it is important to note that these women did not believe that welfare should be a permanent entitlement. The opinions of welfare-reliant women concerning family caps were more split, with only about one third supporting them (Seccombe, Walters, James 1999; Seccombe 1999). In general, AFDC recipients were happy that the system was being reformed, and were willing to accept work requirements and potentially other restrictions as well.

Even after PRWORA was implemented most welfare-reliant women have continued to support the changes it brought. Two ethnographic studies prove that even in places where a strict work first philosophy reigned, and services such as child care were lacking, welfare-reliant women continue to support the mainstays of PRWORA. Despite the restrictive work first approach taken by Burnett County, California, Korteweg (2003, 2004) reports that women “liked the idea of welfare reform,” often saying that the reforms should have been implemented long ago (p. 295). But Korteweg, like others, finds that the participants were far from content with the welfare system. They had numerous complaints about the welfare bureaucracy and many of their welfare workers (See also Sandfort, Kalil, & Gottschalk 1999).

Hays (2003), in the most comprehensive ethnographic study of welfare policies and implementation, finds similar views among the welfare-reliant women she meets in Arbordale and Sunbelt City. Both states in which Hays’ offices are located had a two year
limit on welfare, and both sites allowed for only minimal training, usually limited to short term training for low level jobs. Arbordale and Sunbelt City had programs that one would expect welfare-reliant women to abhor. Yet Hays claims that women were not outraged, in fact even women who had been sanctioned were often positive about reform, particularly the work requirements. Of course welfare-reliant women had many serious complaints as well. In particular, Hays reports that they expressed a need for policies that would protect those having the hardest time—that exceptions need to be made so that those who are trying, but failing, will have more time and assistance.

**Why Welfare-Reliant Women Believe TANF is Better than AFDC**

One of the key promises of welfare reform was to “make work pay” for welfare recipients. This was done in two primary ways, although implementation varied at the state and local level. Many states chose to increase their income disregards (amount of earnings that recipients can keep that is not counted against their welfare grant), thereby ensuring that working recipients had greater income than those who were not working. The other way to make work pay was to increase non-cash benefits, often referred to as “work supports,” namely child care and Medicaid. Between 1994 and 1999, federal and state funding for child care rose by 60%. Twenty-seven states developed transitional child care programs that guarantee child care assistance for certain families leaving TANF. Fifteen additional states prioritized welfare leavers for transitional child care assistance (SPDP 2000). PRWORA also delinked welfare receipt and Medicaid receipt for adults, and allowed states to extend coverage more broadly. Transitional Medical Assistance, a subset of Medicaid, was altered, extending its coverage for up to 12 months after a family’s income exceeds that allowed by regular Medicaid (Greenstein and Guyer 2001). Women that I spoke with at CCC did not
always know about these changes prior to learning about the welfare to work program during Orientation or job readiness classes, but they were often excited and relieved when they found out. When I asked Cassie, a white single mother in her 30’s, what she liked about welfare reform in CCC, she said

All the things they do for you! I mean … people used to tell me they were on welfare, and I would be like, God, why would you be on welfare? ‘Cause I thought welfare was just food stamps. I didn’t know that they give you medical coverage; I can go to the dentist. I’ve gotten, I’ve gotten eye glasses since I’ve been in school, I didn’t even know I had a vision thing. Um, they pay for my son’s childcare, I mean what am I going to do when I have to pay for that childcare myself, I mean, that’s in another year, I’m gonna have to start covering some child care.

Burton et al. (1998) also find that these non-cash welfare benefits are highly valued by welfare-reliant women, sometimes more so than cash benefits.

Despite the enthusiasm of welfare-reliant women toward reform’s child care and medical assistance improvements, this alone cannot explain their support for work requirements, or their qualified support for time limits. Furthermore, these benefits have not proven to be as successful as they appear. Funding for child care decreased after 2001, and in turn, many states provided less child care assistance to poor families. Nearly half of all states have had waiting lists for TANF families requesting child care, so many welfare-reliant women are not able to get this crucial benefit when they need it (Schulman and Blank 2005). And despite the expansion of Medicaid eligibility, there has been a decrease in the number of eligible families actually covered. In particular, as welfare caseloads declined following reform, families leaving welfare often did not get Medicaid, despite their eligibility (Garrett and Holahan 2000; Greenstein and Guyer 2001). This situation has improved, but many eligible families are still uncovered (Loprest 2003b).

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10 Recent cuts to California’s Medicaid program have eliminated dental services for adults.
We must, then, look for other reasons that welfare-reliant women support the key
tenets of PRWORA. I argue that understanding women’s experiences as AFDC recipients is
essential in understanding why they welcomed even restrictive reforms. Although most of
the women I met in 2003 and 2004 had not been AFDC recipients as adults, some had been
recipients as children, and others had lived in communities where welfare receipt was
common. The studies cited above were all conducted either prior to reform or in the first
couple of years after 1996, and we can therefore assume that more of these welfare-reliant
women had direct experience with AFDC. I believe looking backward will shed some light
on the current situation.

*History of AFDC*

The story of AFDC is a story about the distinction between deserving and
undeserving women, and therefore about deserving and undeserving children. This
distinction was certainly not new, but had been codified in the “suitable home” rules in many
Mothers’ Pension programs prior to AFDC. Started in 1935 as part of the New Deal Social
Security Act, Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), as it was first called, sought to provide
children who lacked parental support (i.e. fathers), due to death or absence from the home,
with regular aid.11 State ADC programs routinely distinguished between “deserving” and
“undeserving” mothers in making eligibility decisions. ‘Deserving’ single mothers were
those that met the standards of their social worker—typically mothers who had been married
and whose marriages ended through no fault of their own. The presence of male friends,
boarders, alcohol, illegitimate children, or any other sign of “immorality” as judged by white,
middle class standards, would disqualify the family (Gordon 1994). For Black families, it

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11 ADC was limited to single parent families until 1961, when Congress allowed states to choose whether to include provisions for certain two parent families.
was nearly impossible to be deemed ‘deserving,’ especially in states that implemented “employable mother rules,” allowing them to deny aid to mothers with school age children if it was determined that they could work. While white mothers were less likely to be viewed as employable, it was thought that Black women could and should work outside the home (Abramovitz 1996).

For those women approved for aid, benefits were low—well below the poverty line—despite the expectation that they stay at home with their children. Low benefits ensured that marriage and family life would remain more attractive to women than welfare receipt (Abramovitz 1996). ADC’s low benefits, means test, and morally-grounded eligibility decisions stood in sharp contrast to other New Deal programs. By the end of the 1930s, a two-tier welfare state had been federally implemented, with Unemployment Insurance and Social Security in the upper tier, and ADC in the lower tier. Social Security and other contributory, social insurance programs are given as entitlements, and were originally aimed at white, male, citizen-workers. The lower, feminine tier of the welfare state, on the other hand, where means-tested programs like AFDC and now TANF are located, is deeply stigmatized. These benefits are given to households, typically to single mothers and their children, all of whom are considered ‘welfare dependents.’ These recipients are positioned not as rights-bearers, or citizens, but as clients, “the negatives of possessive individuals” (Fraser 1987: 152; see also Fraser and Gordon 1994).

Despite some positive changes that eliminated many of the racial barriers to AFDC, welfare receipt only became more stigmatized during the latter part of the 20th century. But

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12 In fact, welfare-reliant women, even those who received aid prior to the federal ADC program, have always been employed in large numbers. A 1942 federal survey of 18 states showed that 23% of welfare-reliant women were working or looking for work, and this figure was twice as high in the South (Reese 2005).

13 Note that this is also a primary goal of TANF, with its marriage incentives.
first the 1960s saw a tremendous increase in AFDC rolls and a renewed concern for the poor. The civil rights movement, demographic changes—especially among Black families—as well as court rulings and law changes that relaxed some of the restrictions on recipients—led to an increase in AFDC participation (Weaver 2000), particularly among African Americans, as well as Latinas. (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Abramovitz 1996). But as caseloads rose and expectations for all women shifted, so did expectations for welfare-reliant women. By the 1960s, women who received AFDC were no longer expected to stay at home with their children and remain on aid. Instead, they began to be expected to find paid work and leave welfare.\textsuperscript{14}

In 1962—the same year Michael Harrington’s \textit{The Other America} alerted the nation about the extent of poverty in the U.S.—Social Security Amendments were passed in Congress that increased social services for AFDC recipients. The intention of the 1962 Act was to provide “rehabilitative services” to “help families become self-supporting and independent.”\textsuperscript{15} This marked a shift in the way AFDC was understood; it was no longer meant to be a permanent solution for poor single mothers. The Act led to an increase in the number of caseworkers, and perhaps, a less-punitive tone of welfare delivery, but not to a significant increase in services, and thus not to increased self-sufficiency for poor women (Kane and Bane 1994; Katz 1986).

By 1967 rising caseloads led to the passage of another Amendment, which created the Welfare Incentive (WIN) Program. WIN encouraged welfare-reliant women to work outside

\textsuperscript{14} As early as 1943, Louisiana passed the first formal work requirement for ADC, requiring Black welfare-reliant women and children to work when their labor was needed in the cotton fields (Reese 2005). However nationally, the expectation for welfare-reliant women—especially white women—to work began two decades later.

the home, and enacted earnings disregards, allowing AFDC recipients to keep the first $30 of their earnings without penalty, and to then disregard one third of the rest of their earnings in calculating their benefits. States were even required to register “appropriate” AFDC recipients for education and training programs. But without much funding or enforcement, most recipients were unaffected by the program (Weaver 2000). And it certainly did not succeed in lowering the rolls. In fact, AFDC applications rose dramatically until 1972, largely as a result of the Welfare Rights Movement and the court cases it pushed forward.

By the 1980s the notion that welfare-reliant women should work had become mainstream. Community work experience programs, better known as “workfare,” were instituted in many states. These programs put some welfare recipients to work—typically at menial labor—for their welfare checks, but initially offered none of the protections available to actual employees, such as minimum wage laws or the right to unionize.16 In 1988 this trend was encouraged by the passage of the Family Support Act (FSA), which replaced WIN with the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program (JOBS). This change required states to provide single welfare recipients with basic education, job skills training, and the child care and transportation assistance to make utilizing these programs possible. It also required states to provide at least two of the following: job search, on-the-job training, work supplementation, and community work experience. States had to enroll at least 20% of their non-exempt welfare recipients in JOBS by 1995. Further, states were required to penalize—by decreasing their AFDC payments—those clients who refused to participate in the program

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16 As mentioned in footnote 4, workplace protections have since been extended to workfare workers.
without a satisfactory reason, as well as anyone who turned down a paying job that would not have decreased their total cash income\textsuperscript{17} (Weaver 2000).

In practice, states’ welfare to work programs were more focused on basic education and training, and less on job placement. Although education and training became more available, most recipients still did not benefit from the JOBS program. Relatively few recipients were required to work against their will; neither were they threatened with time limits. Overall there was very little money for services, such as child care and transportation. But it was reasonably common for welfare-reliant women to pursue college degrees—an opportunity largely eradicated by work requirements under reform.\textsuperscript{18}

Again, given this information it seems that welfare recipients would loathe PRWORA and the changes it brought. But if we look at their daily lives, we begin to see why welfare reform brought them new hope. Welfare-reliant women face three particular challenges that are related to their status as welfare clients. These three challenges were particularly poignant in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as welfare benefits decreased, and politicians and the media launched attacks both on welfare fraud and welfare recipients in general. First, welfare-reliant women have to navigate the rules and regulations of the welfare system, and comply with these and the decisions of their welfare worker, or face often dire consequences. Second, women who rely on welfare must manage the social stigma of being on welfare. Third, and most significantly, welfare recipients must find a way to survive economically—to pay for the most basic services to meet their most basic needs—despite extremely low

\textsuperscript{17} Total cash income includes both AFDC cash and wages.
\textsuperscript{18} See Center for Women Policy Studies (2003) for a brief compilation of studies that show the drastic decline in post-secondary education among welfare-reliant women, as well as information about individual states’ policies.
benefits. While TANF recipients must negotiate these three challenges also, I argue that TANF offered change, and therefore hope for a better future.

*The Welfare Bureaucracy*

During the 1960s and early 1970s there is evidence that many welfare-reliant women had positive relationships with their welfare caseworkers (Kane and Bane 1994; Handler and Hollingsworth 1971). But the casework focus of this era gave way to a more bureaucratized welfare administration in the 1970s, and the rise of what Kane and Bane (1994) call the “eligibility-compliance culture.” The eligibility-compliance culture came about, in part, because of legal challenges during the early 1970s that sought to limit the discretion of caseworkers in favor of more equitable standards. But high error rates in favor of clients came to the public’s attention, and welfare officials sought to correct this problem in order to prevent inevitable cuts to their budgets. Federal regulations also changed in 1970, and states were required to audit some of their cases and compute error rates. This quality control process eliminated much of the discretion welfare workers had previously had, and the interaction between workers and clients became further bureaucratized. In particular, eligibility determination became a complicated process requiring extensive documentation, whereas before caseworkers typically took a client at her word, unless there were reasons to suspect dishonesty. The national error rates fell significantly during the 1970s, from 16.5 % in 1973 to 7.8% in 1980 (Kane and Bane 1994). And while these changes standardized procedures—in principle increasing equity—throughout the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s, welfare-
reliant women had grave complaints about the welfare bureaucracy, including unfair, unequal, and arbitrary treatment by welfare workers.¹⁹

Welfare-reliant women, from large and small communities across the country, have consistently complained about difficulties reaching their caseworkers, endless waits in their welfare offices to speak with a worker, and rude treatment by those inside the bureaucracy. Complaints of rigid rules with arbitrary enforcement and inconsistent practices by caseworkers have been well documented (Funiciello 1993; McCormack 2002; Jarret 1996; Sandfort, Kalil, and Gottschalk 1999). Surveillance is another common source of welfare-reliant women’s anger. Extensive documentation became required to open and recertify cases, and cases were regularly closed when women were unable to produce the proper papers. Investigators showed up at homes to verify how many people lived there. More recently, computer systems were connected to state databases, allowing workers to verify information about earnings and other welfare benefits, again, trying to catch welfare cheaters (Gilliom 2001).

Increased efforts, including the JOBS program, to encourage welfare-reliant women to seek employment and leave the welfare rolls during the 1980s failed to transform welfare’s eligibility-compliance culture to one of self-sufficiency (Kane and Bane 1994; Meyers, Glaser, and Mac Donald 1998). Welfare-reliant mothers often told about rules so rigid that they actually got in the way of their efforts to get off welfare (Jarrett 1996; McCormack 2002; Sandfort, Kalil, and Gottschalk 1999). The vast majority of recipients were not given

¹⁹ There is not space in this chapter to address the welfare bureaucracy after reform, however I found that CCC had an “eligibility-compliance culture” as much as one of self-sufficiency. Others have found the same (Lurie and Riccucci 2003; Riccucci, Meyers, Lurie, and Han 2004; Nathan and Gais 1999). Also similar to other studies (Korteweg 2004; Sandfort, Kalil, Gottschalk 1999), I found that following reform welfare-reliant women still had numerous complaints about the welfare bureaucracy and the way they were treated by caseworkers.
subsidized child care or assistance in finding a job. Upon leaving welfare, transitional Medicaid and child care were rarely available. And when they did work, welfare-reliant women got to keep little of their earnings until they earned enough to no longer qualify for welfare.

In 1995 Seccombe (1999: 162) asked welfare-reliant women in Florida what they liked about the welfare system. “When asked,” Seccombe writes, “respondents tended to laugh, grimace, shake their head in disbelief, stare back blankly, comment that they need more time to think about an answer, or curtly retort, ‘There are none!’” For the women who relied on AFDC for years, so many of whom wanted to work and leave welfare behind, being stuck in a system that neither offered the support necessary to find and keep employment nor provided enough money to live comfortably, was a nightmare. Any change, even one that held the possibility of being stranded in poverty without assistance, was welcomed, if it also offered the possibility of freedom from the welfare bureaucracy.

*Stigma*

Along with being treated poorly inside the welfare bureaucracy, welfare-reliant women faced intense social stigma in the 1980s and 1990s. The public’s perceptions of “welfare dependents” living lavish lives on welfare checks was a far cry from the economic and social realities of these women’s lives. But dependency had come to be seen as pathological, and welfare receipt had become the ultimate form of dependency. Fraser and Gordon (1994) have shown that with the rise of industrialization, dependency became seen as a characteristic of those who did not work for a wage. Of course wage-earning men, reliant on women’s reproductive and caregiving labor, were not considered “dependent” at all. But at first being dependent was not considered inherently pathological. Some dependents were
coded as good, namely women and children. “Bad” dependency, on the other hand, became associated with relief.

In the postindustrial age, dependency has lost its positive meaning. The dependence of children, housewives, and those who receive Social Security and other contributory welfare programs is rarely referred to as dependency at all, yet the dependence of poor single-mother families on welfare has become loathsome to mainstream America. The legal and political dependency of the past has been largely abolished, and women are no longer expected to rely on a man’s wage for financial support. Independence and self-sufficiency are always good; dependence is always bad. Dependence has become a psychological term denoting weakness and pathology—think substance abuse and co-dependency. The psychological turn has further feminized the notion of dependency (Fraser and Gordon 1994). Racialization of the term occurred as more African American women entered the welfare rolls once racist restrictions were lifted, and media coverage portrayed the nation’s “undeserving” poor as Black (Fraser and Gordon 1994; Gilens 1999, 2003; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001).

Despite dramatic caseload increases of Blacks, the percentage of the poor comprised of African Americans rose only slightly during the 1960s, while their portrayal in the media more than doubled (Gilens 2003). Not only were images of the poor increasingly racialized, but negative stories on poverty, those about welfare abuse, for example, were far more likely to show images of Blacks than stories that were more neutral or sympathetic to the poor. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, this trend was only exacerbated (Gilens 2003). Racialized depictions of lazy, or even worse—cheating—welfare mothers shifted the nation’s attention from a War on Poverty to a war on the poor.
While there is no question that the public has attached great stigma to welfare receipt, and that welfare recipients are stereotyped as lazy and fraudulent, the way this has played out in the lives of welfare-reliant women is more complex. We know that welfare-reliant women are well-aware of the negative public depictions and stereotypes of welfare recipients (Jarrett 1996; Seccombe 1999; Rogers-Dillon 1995; McCormack 2002). Further, it appears that the experience of stigma is related to several factors, in particular the community in which the recipient lives, and the extent to which the recipient has internalized the stigma (See McCormack 2002 and Goodban 1985). One study found that welfare-reliant women experience greater stigma when living in mixed-class communities compared with more uniformly disadvantaged ones (McCormack 2002). Another study found that the experience of being on welfare had the greatest negative impact on those who both identified with a lower social class and believed in the ideology of equal opportunity. In comparison, those who identified with a higher social class were more likely to believe that they were responsible for being on welfare, but were less likely to feel stigmatized (Goodban 1985).

Finally there are various responses to the experience of stigmatization. While some welfare-reliant women actively counter public perceptions, challenging the existing social order and giving structural reasons for their poverty, most are more likely to develop other ways of managing social stigma and stereotypes.

One of the most common ways of negotiating social stigma—disassociating oneself from other welfare recipients (McCormack 2002; Kingfisher 1996; Seccombe 1999)—is particularly important in understanding why welfare-reliant women often support even more restrictive welfare reforms. Despite complaints about arbitrary rules, the welfare-reliant women McCormack (2002) interviews are also concerned that “deserving” welfare recipients
are not granted exceptions from certain rules. Many welfare-reliant women, generally viewing themselves among the “deserving” recipients of aid, want caseworkers to make decisions that distinguish between clients who are “deserving” and those who are “undeserving.”\textsuperscript{20} McCormack finds that this distinction is based on three criteria: recipients’ relationship to work, how they spend their money, and how they spend their time. According to Kingfisher (1996: 58-61), even among women involved in welfare advocacy groups, the most common strategy for dealing with negative stereotypes is the “bad-people-exist-but-I’m-not-one-of-them” tactic. Distinguishing between “good” and “bad” welfare recipients allows welfare-reliant women to position themselves as deserving without directly confronting the inaccuracies of the stereotypes or the structural reasons for a largely feminized and racialized poor population. It is also a way for welfare-reliant women to convey the extent to which their views about hard work and independence are like those held by Americans who have never relied on AFDC or TANF.

While there is little evidence that serious welfare fraud has ever been very common, there is evidence that most welfare recipients have some income that goes unreported, and that they need this in order to survive (Edin and Lein 1997). There is also no evidence that AFDC recipients did not work because they were lazy; on the contrary, most either worked, went to school, or looked for work during any given year (see below). But just like most Americans, welfare recipients are concerned about welfare fraud, and are anxious to sanction those women who abuse the system, or who are simply “lazy.”\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} Seccombe (1999) finds similar results. See also Broughton (2003), who shows a dissociation between self and other clients in mandatory job readiness and job search classes. These women assume that “cultural retraining,” or teaching welfare recipients culturally acceptable dress and behavior, is needed by other welfare-reliant women, but not by themselves.

\textsuperscript{21} While women had few positive things to say about receiving AFDC in the two decades preceding reform, or about their fellow recipients, it appears that their caseworkers were hardly more enthusiastic about their clients
Welfare-reliant women saw welfare reform as an opportunity to undo the stigma attached to welfare receipt. They believed that work requirements, as well as time limits and tougher sanctions, would help distinguish between “deserving” recipients—who would engage in a work activity—and “undeserving” recipients—who would be sanctioned for failing to work. (See Burton, et al. 1998).

Economic Survival

Economic survival—arguably the most time and energy consuming aspect of most welfare-reliant women’s lives—must be considered along with the alternative: poor mothers’ economic survival without welfare. Public perception assumes that most welfare-reliant women have not worked, do not work, and do not want to work. But this is untrue. The vast majority of welfare-reliant women want to work and have job histories, often quite extensive histories (Edin and Lein 1997; Spalter-Roth, Burr, Hartmann, and Shaw 1995; Pavetti 1993; and Handler and Hollingsworth 1971). Further, many AFDC-reliant women worked while receiving welfare. In the early 1990s Edin and Lein (1997) conducted interviews with two groups of low-income single mothers—those who relied on welfare and those who relied on a low-wage job without welfare—in three U.S. cities. They found that over half of their welfare-reliant interviewees had some income, though usually unreported, from paid labor.  

Another study, conducted during the late 1980s, showed that the majority of AFDC

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or the program. In one of the only studies conducted in the two decades before 1996 that looks at the views of welfare workers, Kingfisher (1996) reveals workers’ feelings of entrapment and powerlessness in their jobs. Overwhelmed by high caseloads, paperwork, and constantly changing policies, many workers experienced enough work related stress to be concerned about their health. Workers also complained about poor relations with their managers as well as their clients. They described many of their clients as lazy, manipulative, and deceitful. But they also complained about a lack of discretion—an inability to help clients in need and an inability to penalize clients whom they suspected of cheating the system. Workers, like recipients, categorized clients as deserving and undeserving, and treated them accordingly (Sandfort, Kalil, and Gottschalk 1999).

22 Edin and Lein (1997) found that only 8% of their respondents engaged in “underground” work, such as selling drugs, while 44% had earnings from jobs that are considered legitimate, although most of this went unreported.
recipients participated in the labor force during a two year period. Further, 40% of recipients engaged in significant hours of paid work each year, while another 30% actively looked for employment. Even among those welfare-reliant women who were not working or actively looking for work, most said they wanted to work if it would benefit their families. Only one fifth of welfare-reliant mothers were neither working, nor looking for work, nor exempt due to disability, and among these women, some were in school and many were caring for infants and toddlers (Spalter-Roth, Burr, Hartmann, and Shaw 1995. See also Goodwin 1972; and Edin and Lein 1997).

Unfortunately, wanting to work is not the same as getting and keeping a job. And even working full time does not necessarily improve one’s financial situation. Edin and Lein (1997) found that women who worked at low-wage positions, the only positions available for the vast majority of welfare-reliant women, had as much—and often more—hardship than welfare recipients. This was due to the increased expenses posed by working, such as child care, transportation, and work clothes. Add to that the potential loss of health insurance for those whose incomes made them ineligible for Medicaid, and the rise in housing costs for women in public housing—where rent is calculated as a percentage of your income—and working became extremely expensive. In fact, just like welfare-reliant mothers, low wage-reliant mothers could not survive solely on these incomes. Even the JOBS program’s training and education did not help welfare-reliant women increase their earning potential, according to these women, because it only offered “nurse’s or teacher’s aide courses, housekeeping courses, or low-level secretarial and word processing courses,” or training for other similarly low wage jobs (74). Instead welfare-reliant women wanted “two-year degrees in pharmaceutical, dental, and medical technology and in accounting, business, and
Welfare-reliant women, therefore, had to rely on a combination of other sources of income and benefits—namely other forms of government support (food stamps, Medicaid, SSI, etc.), additional jobs, support from friends and family, and aid from community agencies—in order to survive.

AFDC was the ultimate trap. To survive on its cash assistance frequently required the addition of unreported income. And to get off it required either a nearly impossible to come by good job, or an undesirable trade off: equal or greater financial hardship and less time with your children, in exchange for “self-sufficiency,” which brought with it the benefits of increased privacy and public respect. For many women in CCC and elsewhere, the combination of free child care, transportation monies, work requirements, and a looming time limit has provided the impetus to change one’s life. PRWORA, with all its requirements and restrictions, promises to be temporary, and in doing so, it offers the hope of a better life.

The Importance of Work

Although numerous studies have found that welfare-reliant women support work requirements and believe that welfare receipt should be temporary, most of these studies do not seriously explore why it is that women feel this way. Burton et. al (1998) do not seek to explain what they describe as “cautious optimism,” toward reform, however they do say that it is evidence that welfare-reliant women “understand and acknowledge the dependency that time-unlimited welfare can produce” (18). Here the authors buy into the conservative notion that AFDC created dependency, but they also affirm the fact that welfare-reliant women share these mainstream views, and in this way, they critique the popular notion that poor people—especially poor people of color—are lacking the values of hard work and independence that most Americans share.
While Hays (2003) takes seriously the minority of welfare-reliant women whose values and behaviors deviate from mainstream American culture, she argues that most welfare-reliant women share the mainstream values of work and family, and that it is these values that have led welfare-reliant women to support changes to the welfare system. Hays approaches welfare-reliant women’s support of welfare reform with caution, showing us the ambivalence and fears that poor women have about a system that leaves some poor women without a safety net. My data suggest that Hays is right, but instead of focusing on the ambivalence of welfare-reliant women toward reform—or even their ambivalence at having to leave their children to go to work—I focus on their unambiguous belief in the importance of work for their futures.

Underpinning welfare-reliant women’s support for reform is their belief in the importance of work, and their desire to have a good job (i.e. one that pays well, offers benefits, and has room for growth). The vast majority of welfare-reliant women believe that a job offers the best solution to most of their problems. They want to work—and not just to make ends meet. Most people think of work for poor women primarily in economic terms as a means of survival, at the least, and a means out of poverty and toward economic stability, at most. Now that welfare is time-limited, the economic significance of work has increased. However the importance of work beyond economic survival has often been ignored or sidelined. Several scholars have suggested that welfare-reliant women believe work will increase their personal self-esteem (Edin & Lein 1997; Sandfort, Kalil, & Gottschalk 1999; Seccombe, Walters, & James 1999) or help them set a good example for their children (Sandfort, Kalil, & Gottschalk 1999; Seccombe, Walters, & James 1999. See also Iversen & Farber 1996). Yet rarely have these factors been fully explored or given central importance.
Scott et. al (2001) provide an exception as they look at the costs and benefits of work for welfare-reliant women. However they focus on the ways women believe the transition to work will affect their children. While my findings confirm that welfare-reliant mothers put their children first, I find that the value and meaning they attach to work go beyond the effects of work on their children and beyond economic survival.

Like welfare-reliant women elsewhere, the participants of CCC’s welfare to work program had many complaints about the welfare system, but mostly positive things to say about welfare reform. That is, every woman I met there believed that work should be required, although some thought individual circumstances should be taken into consideration. Time limits were more contentious, yet even those who believed the time limits were unreasonable agreed that welfare should be temporary. Some women felt that the current welfare rules and support were sufficient—these women, more often white, tended to be those with more education or job skills and experience. Most of my interviewees and the other women I talked with believed time limits were important, but that exceptions should be made, or jobs provided. This belief was shared by women across racial and educational lines. But as in most other studies, none of the women I met had a critique of welfare that included believing that poor mothers and their children were entitled to long-term government assistance, or that performing the work of mothering—beyond the first year or two of a child’s life—was worthy of compensation.

What women did express was an intense desire to find meaningful, stable employment. By observing classroom discussions of future goals and the necessary steps to reach them, I began to see the depth with which welfare-reliant women valued work. I divide the meanings and importance women placed on work into three registers and explore each in
turn. First is family security. While the financial costs and benefits of working have been
explored by others, I focus here on the beliefs and hopes women have about the potential of
employment to secure their own and their children’s futures. Second is the potential work has
to help women achieve their personal aspirations. We often forget that welfare-reliant women
are more than just mothers, or that they have dreams of their own. But the women I met in
CCC had a broad range of future goals and desires for their own lives. The third register of
meaning work holds for welfare-reliant women is about civic responsibility. While one of the
assumptions behind PRWORA was that welfare-reliant women do not share the
quintessential American value of individual responsibility, I show that many welfare-reliant
women do believe that work and trying to be self-sufficient are civic duties.

*Family security*

The vast majority of welfare-reliant women I met believed that a job offered the best
path to the universal goal of family security. They *wanted* to work—and not just to make
ends meet. First, paid work is just about the only way to get off welfare without drastic
financial losses. Despite PRWORA’s emphasis on marriage as a route off welfare, most
welfare-reliant women do not view marriage as a solution to their poverty (Edin and Reed
2005). States have done very little to push forward this goal, and there is no evidence that
welfare workers are encouraging clients to marry either (Horn 2001; Hays 2003). Not once
did I hear a worker—either in their interactions with clients or their conversations with me—
mention marriage as a viable solution to poverty and welfare time limits. Even among
married welfare recipients—and in nearly every class I attended there were several—nearly
all will need two incomes in order to earn enough to support their families, so work remains
the most realistic path off of welfare and all of its indignities. While work will move families
off welfare, for many families extreme hardships will continue (Boushey & Gundersen 2001; Boushey 2002). Welfare-reliant women would no doubt be deeply discouraged if they knew the statistics. What they do know is that work—especially in combination with more education or training—is their only real hope of attaining a better life.

The meanings that work had for women, even in economic terms, differed based on their cultural capital and the current desperation of their situation. For some family security was a narrow concept. In one Job Club class I observed, one woman wanted a job so she could “survive.” Grace, an African American single mother who was living in a shelter with her five children, wanted work so she could make sure her children “have a roof over their heads.” LaWanda, an African American mother of three was also concerned with survival. She was opposed to time limits in their current form, but suggested that they would be acceptable if employment was guaranteed. She was willing to work at any job that guaranteed her enough income to live. She said about the welfare administration:

You know, I can see them placing you at a job placement when your time frame run out. Place me somewhere to work that I’m gonna be able to survive off of. Then I could see [them] saying, ‘OK, yeah, we can’t give you no more because now [we] placed you somewhere [we] know you’re gonna survive.’ They should have a program like that where they place you [at a] job…

Other women responded to questions about wanting to work or future goals with more long-term and optimistic visions. While surviving after time limits are reached was one goal of working, actually moving out of poverty was clearly another goal. For these women, family security meant achieving a middle class comfortability. In the same Job Club class

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23 According to the Urban Institute’s National Survey of America’s Families, the median wage for employed former TANF recipients was $8.06 an hour in 2002. Based on this figure, a woman that worked 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year would make $16,764.80, putting a family of three just above the poverty line ($14,348), or a family of four just below the poverty line ($18,392). However a full third of these workers were employed only part time (Loprest 2003a; U.S. Census Bureau 2003).

24 Quotations have been minimally cleaned up to make them more readable. Eclipses are only included when substantive words have been omitted.
where two women gave basic economic survival as their reasons for wanting work, two other women said they wanted a job for “stability” or so they could “live comfortably.” When asked their future goals, most participants in this class hoped to own a home in the near future. In the long term, their dreams included owning a yacht, being a landlord, being able to retire comfortably, and paying for their children’s education. In another class, participants listed owning their own home, sending their children to private school, putting their kids through college, owning a car, and having savings and retirement accounts as future goals. During our interview, Karen, a white single mother of two who had just landed a job as a chef at a country club, told me that she dreamed of owning her own pastry shop because “I want to be able to put my kids through college.” Ginnie, a 45 year old Black, single mother of four described how she hated being on welfare, much preferring to work, as she had done most of her adult life. Even though work had never allowed her many of the things she longed for, it still held the hope of leading to a middle class lifestyle, while welfare offered no such hope:

See, a lot of people that never been on aid before, they don’t know how a person feels that’s on that. And, you know, I hate being on aid! I really do. . . . I can’t go nowhere. I can’t—I want to buy a home, you know, I want to buy a brand new car. I want to have things. I want to be able to go on nice trips with my kids, and, you know, you can’t have that on aid cause you not getting enough. You just barely getting enough to survive.

Despite the barriers involved in reaching the American Dream, poor women continue to be motivated by it, and continue to hold onto the hope that they—or at least their children—may someday achieve it.

*Personal aspirations*

Some of the women at CCC longed only for a job that brought in enough money to live on and that provided a stable, respectful workplace. Others, like Karen above, had career
aspirations, desiring two year degrees or certificates, with goals of becoming licensed vocational nurses, day care teachers, lab technicians, or business owners. Still other welfare-reliant women dreamed of careers as registered nurses, pediatricians, or fashion designers. For some women—those with two year degrees already, or those with particularly high social and cultural capital—these goals may have been realistic. However, in most cases they were not likely outcomes, despite CCC’s unusually “generous” practices that allowed most women the opportunity to pursue up to 18 months of education or training instead of first looking for work. Although there were some restrictions on the types of education allowed, and although most women had to combine training with some paid employment in order to meet their hourly work requirements, it was typically the educational pursuit, not paid employment, which was the central work activity during this period for those who chose to pursue training. In addition, CCC instructors encouraged participants to hold onto their dreams while pursuing small steps in the direction of their goals, such as getting an entry level job in the same field as one’s career goal and enrolling in community college courses. Cassie, a white single mother who had recently escaped her husband’s domestic violence, exemplified this trajectory. She described the transformation she underwent as she realized that she could follow her dreams and have more than just a job:

And Susan, who was one of the teachers there, she’s the one that made me think that I could go to school and go out there and get a—I felt like I couldn’t get a job, I couldn’t go to school. What am I going to do? I don’t have Bob anymore. I was really feeling depressed. Now, especially interning at a dentist’s office, I’m like, I can go out there and get a job and have a career, and go out there and have a purpose!

There were other women whose futures seemed relatively bright, although not necessarily as bright as they had hoped. Wendy, an African American mother of one, dreamed of being a crime scene investigator or forensic scientist, and fueled her dream by
watching the various CSI shows on TV. Although several years later she was working as a receptionist, she had come close enough to completing her A.A. degree in the Administration of Justice program at the local community college that they allowed her to participate in graduation activities. Vanessa, also African American and a single mother with one child, longed to become a pediatrician. And while this goal may not have been particularly realistic, she was on the right path. She had completed two years of college and intended to finish her BA once her three-year-old daughter started school. She was majoring in technical engineering due to an opportunity she encountered in high school, but she was also pre-med. Most women had more modest career dreams, or did not have a singular dream to which they held on tightly. Kendra, for example, hoped to work for the government, perhaps as a social worker working with kids. But she also dreamed of opening a beauty salon, and was open to working in landscaping, as she had done in the past.

Although end goals differed greatly, women in all places on the aspirational spectrum saw work as a way to improve their personal lives. For some, work was about getting out of the house and having a life separate from their children. Gabrielle, a Latina mother of five with a long work history, reported that the class felt like a “vacation” because she was away from her kids all day. Although she had been working from her home taking care of other children for the last few years, she said she wanted to go back to retail or cashiering work, where she enjoyed—and excelled at—interacting with customers. Talisa, a Black mother with two children at home, had recently completed a medical assistant certificate when I met her at Job Club. She was working as an intern at a local health care facility and hoped to get

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25 Wendy refused to drop out of school once her 18 months of education had been used up; she chose instead to face a sanction and finish her degree. I met several other women during the course of my research who made a similar choice. Wendy lived in low-income housing, which only required her to pay one-third of her income each month, and worked a government subsidized job (work study) that also did not count toward her required work hours, in order to survive.
paid work soon. Even when jobs fell through, she chose to stay there performing unpaid work, in part because it fulfilled her work requirement, but also because she loved having a place to go each day where she enjoyed the work and the people, and she was hopeful that by keeping the internship she would soon land a paid job within the same organization.

Like welfare-reliant women in other studies, many of the welfare to work participants I spoke with in CCC saw work as a way to improve their self esteem and self-confidence, or to “better themselves” as one participant told me (Edin and Lein 1997; Sandfort, Kalil, and Gottschalk, 1999; Seccombe, Walters, and James 1999). While women and instructors often talked rhetorically about work as a means to build one’s self-esteem, the reactions many women had to Job Club and Job Search classes best illustrate the potential work has for increasing self-worth, and women’s belief that work would do this. Rosa, a shy Mexican immigrant in a marriage marred by domestic violence, admitted not wanting to come to Job Club when she got the letter from the County mandating that she attend. But already on the first day of class she said it was easier to get up that morning because she had some place to go. On the fourth day, during an exercise where participants were asked what they want to work on during Job Club, Rosa shared her desire for “self-improvement,” for being “more than just a mother.” She said she needed to believe that it is never too late to do something.

The next day when asked to share one of her goals, she said she wanted to be confident when

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26 Cruikshank (1993) has argued that self-esteem is a technology used by the state to make people more governable. This is an interesting and important line of thought. The issue of self-esteem is regularly manipulated in welfare offices and a lack of self-esteem is often blamed as an underlying reason for women’s poverty (Broughton 2003; Korteweg 2003). Instead of acknowledging the structural realities and inequities of race and class in the U.S., self-esteem is a convenient and timely scapegoat used by the state and individual welfare instructors. However, I do not believe that the idea that work will bring greater self-esteem has been planted in welfare-reliant women’s heads by welfare workers. This is not to say that they have not been influenced by worker discourses. But one need not enter a social service office to encounter the notion that hard work and independence (i.e. working towards self-sufficiency) bring with them self-esteem, or self-confidence, or a general feeling of self-worth. And most of these women have worked before; they know that they feel better about themselves when they are employed.
applying for a job. Over the four weeks that I spent with Rosa, she spoke repeatedly of her need for more self-esteem, and her belief that work held the potential for transforming her inner self. During most of the class her career goals were focused on becoming a day care provider, although she also mentioned wanting to be a medical assistant. She planned to start classes in the fall to gain early education credits. But on the last day of Job Club she talked about becoming a fire fighter. She said she had always wanted to be one, and she did not want to regret not pursuing it. As the weeks in class passed, Rosa had gained enough self-confidence to begin dreaming about more paths her life could take. She wanted to work not just because she had to, or because she needed the money, but because there were jobs that she was interested in pursuing. She wanted to work for herself, to fulfill her own aspirations.

Civic responsibility

In addition to wanting to work for financial reasons, or to improve one’s sense of self-worth, most welfare-reliant women I met also wanted to work because they believed it was the responsible thing to do. The personal responsibility demanded by PRWORA is really about civic responsibility. Despite the fact that cash aid has never comprised more than about 1% of the federal budget—meaning that a miniscule amount of tax dollars from working families actually goes to other families’ welfare checks—the widely hailed American belief that one should support one’s own family so as not to burden those who work and pay taxes prevails. Like most Americans, the welfare-reliant mothers I met did not believe the government should be permanently supporting able-bodied adults. And they believed it was bad for their children to grow up seeing their mother “sitting at home” rather than working. They felt a personal and civic responsibility to work, both to support their own families and to teach their children the values of hard work and responsibility.
Women believed they had a duty to support their children economically but also to provide them with safe care, education, and guidance. They saw work—so long as they had acceptable childcare arrangements—as important not only for the economic needs of their families, but also for their children’s socialization. This is not to say that working comes without sacrifices and hardships. Numerous studies have shown the difficulties low-income women face as they leave their children for work, as well as the ambivalence many single mothers feel, especially when they are unable to locate quality child care or when they feel their work hours take them away from their children for too long (Scott, et al. 2001; Weigt 2006; Press, Fagan, and Bernd 2006). The women in my study were well aware of the costs involved in working, but most maintained that being a working mother was providing their children with a positive role model and teaching responsibility to their kids.27

Alicia, a young single mother of mixed race/ethnicity, spoke about wanting to improve her education as well as working toward a career because she wanted to be “successful” and “educated” for her daughter. Grace, an African American woman, also spoke about improving her education and finances through work in terms of wanting to be a “good example” for her children. Karen, a white single mother with two young children, told me that people “should want to [work]. I know a lot of people don’t, but… if you have kids… you need to set a good example.” This was not about teaching her children to support themselves because the government could not be relied upon, this was about teaching her children that the responsible thing to do is to work and support one’s own family. Here a rare exception stands out in particular contrast to the majority of poor mothers. LaWanda, the

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27 See Weigt (2006) for an important discussion of the competing normative discourses poor single mothers face and utilize—about family, mothering, and work enforcement. Weigt critiques these discourses, linking them to the prevailing neoliberal ideology, and arguing that they blame individuals rather than social structures for inequality and poverty.
young Black mother who wanted to work but wanted the government to guarantee her a job, expressed concern during our interview that welfare would not be there to support her daughter when she got pregnant. In sharp contrast to nearly all the other mothers I met, LaWanda did not foresee her children better off than herself, nor did she assume that her children would always work and be self-sufficient themselves. However even LaWanda—who was employed part-time—believed it was fair for the government to expect her to work, so long as there was an adequately paying job available for her.

Along with seeing working as key to teaching their children the right values, women also saw working as fulfilling their part of the social contract. Sometimes this sense of duty was linked directly to the issue of taxes. Wendy, an African American welfare recipient who was sanctioned despite attending college full time and having a work study job—because she was beyond the 18-24 months that educational pursuits and subsidized work count as a work activity—believed that working or going to school while on aid was one’s duty. She told me that before going to school, when she was working a regular job,

I was a tax payer. And I feel … if I can get my butt up and go to work, so can you. And yes, I do feel, if you on aid, you should be made to do something….if you’re not doing just anything, you should either be made to say ok, you got two months or something to find you something or you’re completely cut off…

As was often the case with the welfare-reliant women of CCC, who had significant but not unlimited opportunities to pursue education while receiving aid, Wendy equated going to school with working, since the purpose of school was to obtain a better job later. Even though when Wendy was employed and not receiving aid she probably received an Earned Income Tax Credit each year and therefore got back as much or more than she paid in taxes, Wendy identifies with tax payers and believes that neither she nor anyone else should be
allowed to receive government aid if they are not doing some type of work beyond caring for their children.

Robert, a Nicaraguan immigrant and one of the few married men whom I encountered in the classes, expressed his agreement with budget cuts and increasingly stringent policies for welfare recipients. Despite the ambivalence—and sometimes outright disagreement—of the instructors regarding these changes, Robert insisted that people will try to take advantage of the government if strict rules are not in place. He cited the example of his sister who resisted getting a job, instead living with Robert and his family, until he gave her a time limit to find work. Although Robert was unusually conservative in his views about welfare, his concerns were echoed by many welfare-reliant women, and his belief that people should support themselves, only rarely and briefly relying on the government for assistance, was nearly universal.

More often the belief that one has a responsibility to one’s fellow citizens to work was embedded in women’s opinions of welfare reform or their fellow welfare recipients. The overwhelming support for work requirements, for example, stems from the very mainstream belief that people have a responsibility to take care of themselves and their families. While strict time limits were not universally supported by CCC’s welfare to work participants, many welfare-reliant parents did agree with Cassie, who said about California’s 5 year time limit: “I think that’s long enough for somebody to get on their feet.” Those who thought the time limits were too strict typically believed, like Alexia, a young Latina recipient, that individual circumstances should be taken into consideration:

You know, they give you five years to get everything together. If you can’t make it in those five years, you had to have done something wrong. Or something must have happened, maybe you lost somebody that, you know,
Ginnie, an African American woman with an adult daughter who was also a TANF recipient—and who had spent about 8 of her 27 years as an adult on either AFDC or TANF—characterized the views of most women when she said of reform:

I think it’s better because, um, they are making people realize you can’t be on welfare for the rest of your life. Cause I’ve known a lot of people that they mother was on it, then they had kids and they got on it, then they kids… It was like a cycle, and this way is stopping the cycle. You know, like I’m on it, eh, my daughter’s on it, but, the things I went through, I don’t want her to go through the same things. . . I think once they did the overhaul of everything and gave people like five years is the maximum, I think that was a good thing, cause it made you really think, “OK, after the five years are up, what happens?” You know? “What am I going to do with myself.” Because I feel like in five years, people should either done went to school or went and tried to get some kind of work. Don’t just sit at home and say, ‘Oh, you know, I can just wait until next month when my check comes.’

. . . My father always taught us, as long as you got two strong legs, you can go to work. You know? Whether it’s starting at—you gotta start at the bottom to reach the top. I done work for $3.35, so it’s, it’s not the money, it’s how you carry yourself and how you budget yourself. . . Yeah, the program that they got now for welfare to work, I think it’s a good program. But, they also gotta realize that . . . people that on aid have to make a change too, and they gotta give them, you know, not a lot of time, but at least, give ‘em some effort to make that change, and if they don’t make that change, than, you know, kick ‘em off! You know, if you just sitting at home ignoring that you only got a certain amount of time, and you not trying to do anything, than kick ‘em off. And then, you know, they going to get out there and do something, they’ll finally get out and look for a job. . . I think it’s a good thing that they changed it, because too many people were just, ‘It’s Ok, I lost my job, I’ll go get on aid and, you know, I’ll just stay there the rest of my life.’ No.

The belief that welfare receipt should be temporary, and that welfare-reliant women should always be working toward self-sufficiency—either through work or education—should be seen as support for the view that work is a civic responsibility of the able-bodied.

As discussed above, the condemnation of other welfare recipients who are believed to be “lazy” or somehow cheating or abusing the welfare system is widespread among welfare—
reliant women (McCormack 2002; Kingfisher 1996; Seccombe 1999; Broughton 2003).

Many of the welfare-reliant women I met viewed themselves in opposition to other welfare recipients who do not work or do not want to work. Some women were even more explicit in their disapproval of these “undeserving” recipients. Shauntay, a young Black woman, favored time limits despite her own concerns that she would not be self-sufficient in time, “because, I mean, some people will try to stay on forever, you know, use welfare without trying to get a job.” Another African American woman, Talisa, was at first opposed to time limits when she spoke with me. But when I asked her how she would change welfare policies if she could, she recanted, insisting that she would leave everything the way it is, “because of the way that people are. Cheating and sneaking and not really needing.” Talisa’s choice of words here shows the contempt many women felt for those recipients they viewed as undeserving. She maintained this position despite my probing questions and deep skepticism that there were really that many cheats. The above quotes underscore the depth of welfare-reliant women’s belief that work is more than just a means to economic ends, or even self-fulfillment. Welfare-reliant women share the mainstream view that work is a duty that extends beyond responsibility to one’s family, and becomes about being responsible to one’s community or to all those who work hard and play by the rules.

Conclusion

Like most Americans, welfare-reliant women share a faith in the virtues of hard work and paid employment. Though facing dire poverty if they fail to find and keep a job, and despite a low wage labor market that promises little hope of future prosperity, welfare-reliant women see work as the path to security and the American Dream. Work is viewed as a way to improve one’s sense of self-worth, and personal career goals are held onto despite
significant barriers. The goal of self-sufficiency through work is embraced as civic duty, and mothers seek to demonstrate the values of hard work and independence so that they may pass these on to their children.

The case of Contra Costa County is an interesting one because in many ways it is an exception to the norm of work first programs following welfare reform. At the time of my research, prior to the passage of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 and the ensuing changes that undoubtedly led to a more work first approach in CCC, participants were encouraged to pursue education or training and to find a good job. What constituted a good job depended on the individual, but it commonly meant some combination of paying above California’s minimum wage, offering benefits, opportunities for promotion, or at least being enjoyable and in the participant’s chosen field.

However the labor market conditions faced by welfare-reliant women in CCC were as dire as those faced by welfare-reliant women across the country. Although in 2003 and early 2004, when I was conducting research, the California economy was in an upswing after the recession that supposedly ended in 2001, the market was still grim. And for African Americans, who made up more than half of the participants I encountered, the economic recovery was especially slow (Mitchell 2003). While I know that participants were at least initially discouraged from taking a job that they would not enjoy, I do not have data on how frequently good jobs were actually obtained. I also know that participants were eventually forced to meet work requirements, either with a job or through community service, known as “unpaid work” or “working for free.” So despite a leniency that allowed participants some education and extra time, work requirements, as well as sanctions and time limits, were still present and enforced.
Contra Costa County’s exceptionalism might mean that its welfare-reliant women were more supportive of welfare reform, given their more lenient and encouraging welfare to work program, than are recipients in strict work first programs. However other research suggests that work requirements and some sort of time-limited receipt have been largely supported even by welfare-reliant women in strict work first programs, albeit with qualifications (Hays 2003; Korteweg 2003, 2004). CCC’s welfare to work participants may also be more hopeful about their futures, and more prone to aspire to middle class status or ambitious careers than participants of work first programs, given the availability of education and encouragement in pursuing one’s desired field.

However, client support for the tenets of welfare reform should not be viewed as support for strict work first policies, including the near elimination of education and training opportunities, and certainly not for the changes that appear certain the 2006 passage of legislation that will dramatically increase work participation requirements, while decreasing the availability of child care. While most welfare-reliant women prefer TANF to AFDC, they still have plenty of complaints. TANF did not bring greater educational opportunities for most participants, and in most cases it did not bring better jobs either—only the requirement that one take the lousy jobs available. Welfare-reliant women are consistently supportive of greater educational and training opportunities and case by case assessment so that families with the greatest barriers are given exceptions. Neither should poor women’s support of welfare reform be seen as support for the welfare bureaucracy. Instead we should see welfare-reliant women’s support of reform as evidence that they want to be full participants in American society, and that they hold quintessential American views: they value paid work,
“responsible” spending, and productive use of time, whereas they also label “lazy,” “irresponsible” behavior as “undeserving.”

Once I accepted that the way I viewed welfare reform—through a feminist, progressive lens—differed from the way welfare-reliant women viewed welfare reform—as a crucial and hopeful change that highlighted the importance of work—I was able to begin seeing CCC’s welfare program from the perspective of welfare-reliant women. As a middle class white woman—childless at the time of my research although not during the writing—I have no doubt erred at times in my representation of these mothers—all of whom were poor and most of whom were women of color. Despite inevitable imperfections, I believe that I have captured something important—the significance of the non-economic aspects of welfare programs, and the possibilities for community, relationships, pedagogy, and discourses within the welfare office.

The next chapter offers a critique of the way welfare programs have been classified and understood since the 1960s. Using what I learned from welfare-reliant women, I then propose a new way of thinking about welfare programs. I try to balance the undeniable importance of financial support and work in the formal labor market—and women’s need for assistance in preparing for, finding, and keeping such work—with the also important and often neglected importance of women’s experiences, feelings, and relationships.
Chapter 2: From Repressive to Empowering: Welfare Reform Implementation across the Nation

The 1980s and early 1990s gave rise to intense public hatred of “welfare,” as welfare-reliant women, particularly African Americans, were charged with laziness, fraud, and general abuse of the welfare system. The mainstream media led the way in promoting these stereotypes as the norm among welfare recipients. Moderate and conservative politicians—for decades advocating employment rather than education-focused welfare to work programs—seized the opportunity and passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities and Reconciliation Act of 1996. PRWORA transformed cash assistance from a federal entitlement program—Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—that encouraged education and training through the (albeit poorly funded) Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program (JOBS) into locally run work programs under the banner of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Most, but not all, state and county governments enthusiastically complied by developing “work first” welfare programs, where welfare-reliant women must accept the first job they can get, regardless of pay or other factors, and where education and training programs are rarely allowed to count as work.

The debate over the best approach to welfare programs—education or employment—has gone on since the 1960s. And although those advocating for employment-focused programs gained ground in the 1980s and early 1990s, it was PRWORA that codified the trend toward work first programs. Prior to PRWORA several important studies of welfare programs suggested the greater success of those that pushed poor women immediately into work, over those that provided basic education and training opportunities. The State, and in turn both the research commissioned by the State and that which hoped to be politically
relevant, has focused on these two approaches to welfare to work programs, and the classification of programs as either work first or human capital development, or in some cases, “mixed strategy.” I argue that these classifications and this research focus have neglected much of what goes on in welfare offices, concentrating only on a program’s allowable work activities, participation rates, welfare roll reductions, and to some extent, the short-term earnings gains (if any) of former welfare recipients. Ignored are interactions between people and relationships that develop, discourses that are employed, and the overall experiences of welfare to work participants in these programs. Also frequently ignored are the quality of educational and training opportunities and the quality of jobs available to participants, and how both of these factors (and the amount of time allowed to pursue education and find a job) affect families in the long term.

During my participant observation in two of Contra Costa County (CCC), California’s welfare offices, I found that unlike most programs under PRWORA, many participants were allowed, and even encouraged, to pursue education and training for up to 18 months. Those not fulfilling their required hours this way had to work. Yet it is inadequate to simply call this program’s approach “mixed strategy,” or even human capital development—because this captures only one dimension of the program. I therefore propose a new way of examining and comparing welfare to work programs that looks at the combination of policies, practices, and discourses that shape participants’ access to resources, relationships, and information. I argue that welfare to work programs should be viewed through the lens of capital. I show that all welfare to work programs impart economic, social, and cultural capital, albeit in different ways and to differing degrees. I argue that within the confines of PRWORA, the best programs—those with the greatest long-term benefits for
recipients and those that leave welfare-reliant women feeling empowered and able to improve their lives—provide welfare-reliant women with significant cash and other economic capital. In addition, they provide social capital through positive, long term relationships with workers and a community among participants. Finally, they impart cultural capital by promoting education and training opportunities, teaching job search skills, and discussing workplace norms in a way that respects participants’ cultural capital and choices. I argue that the discourses and practices deployed in the transmission of capital are crucial in determining the extent to which welfare participants acquire and use this capital.

I begin this chapter by showing that the work first/human capital development classification system—and the research that has led to it and followed it—have neglected much of what goes on in welfare offices. I then develop a framework for understanding and categorizing welfare to work programs. I lay out two ideal types, empowering and repressive programs, located on either end of a continuum of welfare programs. I use ethnographic data provided by other researchers to illustrate the existence of, and differences between, empowering and repressive welfare programs. Empowering programs push the limits of PRWORA and successfully transmit a wide range of economic, social, and cultural capital to welfare-reliant women, hoping to increase their chances of success in the long run, and to improve their quality of life in the short run. Repressive programs, on the other hand, fail at transmitting the three types of capital to welfare-reliant women, and do little to improve poor families’ lives beyond providing small amounts of economic capital.

**State Classifications of Welfare to Work Programs**

Over the past several decades the debate over the nature of welfare programs has frequently involved liberals arguing that welfare-reliant women need education and training
before employment, and conservatives arguing that poor women most need work experience (and a work ethic). The various government programs from the 1960s until PRWORA’s passage in 1996 attempted—largely unsuccessfully due to a lack of funds—to both provide welfare recipients with the training and education needed to be successful in the work force, and to move them permanently into employment. But with the passage of PRWORA, work first advocates succeeded in eliminating the possibility of true human capital development programs, although some programs, often classified as “mixed-strategy” have tried to merge a focus on employment and self-sufficiency with some training and educational opportunities.

Bourdieu has written that “systems of classification ‘are not so much instruments of knowledge as instruments of power, subjugated to social functions and more or less openly geared to the satisfaction of the interests of a group.” ²⁸ In this case it is the State and those involved in policy debates about the best way to move welfare-reliant women off welfare whose interests are met by the classificatory scheme. Social scientists employed by the research institutes that conduct these studies are invested as well. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 236-7 n.27) have argued that the “uncritical adoption by social scientists of bureaucratic categories and government measurements … and concerns (…What are the most economical means to make [public aid recipients] ‘self-sufficient’—i.e., socially and politically invisible?)… has reified the moralistic and individualistic perception of poverty by the dominant into ‘scientific facts.’” I suggest that the current system of classifying welfare to work programs by the extent to which they are “work first” succeeds in reinforcing the States’ goal of emptying the welfare rolls, rather than the larger goal of ending poverty.

²⁸ Wacquant and Bourdieu (1992:14 n.26). This is a modified translation of Bourdieu (1984: 477).
Many of the most important studies of welfare programs in the last few decades have been commissioned by the State. Several studies conducted prior to welfare reform sought to definitively answer the question of which approach is more successful, education or work. These studies and the political debates that led to them and followed them show the State’s investment in classifying welfare to work programs as either work first or human capital development. In particular, two studies of welfare to work programs under the 1988 Federal Support Act’s Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program, both conducted by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC), were influential. One study, contracted by the California Department of Social Services and funded by this department and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, looked at several California counties’ Greater Avenues to Independence (GAIN) programs. Riverside, the most “work first” of the programs in the study, yielded the best results in terms of earnings gains for participants as well as welfare savings (Riccio, Friedlander, and Freedman, 1994; see also Gueron and Hamilton 2002; Strawn 1998). A second study, the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies, which was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services with additional support from the U.S. Department of Education, looked at 11 programs in seven locations across the country. Three of the locales developed two programs side by side and randomly assigned participants to either the work first or the human capital development program. In addition, one site, Portland, implemented a mixed-strategy program which not only allowed some education and training, but also encouraged participants to find “good” jobs, rather than the first job that came along (Hamilton, 2002). The most successful program in the study, based on the increased earnings of participants, was Portland’s program. However, work first programs produced more positive earnings
effects and cost less money than human capital development programs (Freedman, et al. 2000; Bos, et al. 2002). Despite the relatively small gains in earnings of those in work first programs, and the fact that the NEWWS study’s most successful program was Portland’s mixed-strategy program and not a pure work first one, the purported success of the work first programs in both of these studies was important in the mid 1990’s Congressional debates over welfare reform.

Studies since 1996 have continued to look at welfare programs through the lens of the work first vs. human capital development debate, despite the inability of states to receive federal funding for true human capital development programs. Now programs are frequently categorized by the degree to which they are work first. For example, an Urban Institute study prepared for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services looked at welfare to work programs in five states, and determined that states were taking two different approaches to creating work first programs. Some states implemented Work First, Work Mandate models, where participants have a short period of time to find work, after which those who are still unemployed must participate in work experience/workfare programs. The other approach to work first programs, the Work First, Participation Mandate model, also requires participants to look for work first, but provides those who are unsuccessful with more options, such as education or training, in order to fulfill their work requirement (Holcomb, et al. 1998).

Another Urban Institute study evaluated welfare programs in 17 cities in 1996-7 and found that 11 of these sites had a strict work first approach—meaning no education and training was available. Another five had a mixed strategies approach, allowing some participants to pursue education and training, typically after they had been unsuccessful at finding employment. Only one site had an enhanced mixed services approach, where other
services, such as mental health services, were available in addition to education and training (Holcomb and Martinson 2002a; 2002b).\(^{29}\) Similarly, a Rockefeller Institute of Government study that categorized welfare to work programs in 19 states found that three quarters of the programs had implemented some type of work first approach. The remaining programs, they claimed, had not made the transition to a work-centered culture, but continued to focus on eligibility and anti-fraud issues. Although this study was open to the possibility of other approaches, it found only programs that had successfully made the transition to work first, and those that had not ‘progressed’ in this way (Nathan and Gais 1999).

Classificatory systems are important. They help us to understand what is going on, but they also shape the institutions they are intended to describe. Work first is not just a description of the dominant program type; achieving a work first (and in some cases mixed-strategy) classification is a goal of nearly all welfare programs across the country. In fact, the role of the MDRC has extended beyond just researching the success rates of different welfare program types, or the extent to which programs have complied with the work first mandate. In March of 1997, just as states were scrambling to set up welfare programs that complied with PRWORA, MDRC published a 131 page “how-to guide,” entitled “Work First: How to Implement an Employment-Focused Approach to Welfare Reform” (Brown 1997). The State’s interest lies in implementing work first programs and pushing women off the welfare rolls and into employment. Studies that survey PRWORA’s implementation across the country reflect this. But these studies, and this classificatory system, serve the State’s interest while ignoring many important dimensions of welfare programs, especially welfare-reliant women’s experiences within the program and their long-term prospects in the labor market.

\(^{29}\) By 2000, only five of these programs were strictly work first, two were mixed, and nine had become enhanced mixed programs (Holcomb and Martinson 2002a; 2002b).
Capital Transmission in Welfare Programs

Certainly since 1996 most welfare programs have become “work first,” with some allowing education and training under certain circumstances, and some almost never allowing these activities to count as work. And there is no doubt that the extent to which a given program allows or restricts education and training is important, but I argue that classifying—or designing—programs only along this dimension has limited our ability to understand the range of welfare to work programs that have been implemented since PRWORA and thus to assess what practices are best for welfare-reliant women given the current policy context. Studies that look at the variation among welfare programs on such issues as time limits, sanctions, benefit levels, and child care availability suggest that welfare programs differ in important ways that have little to do with the predominant classifications. Ethnographic studies of welfare programs, discussed in depth below, illuminate not only the variation among programs that describe themselves as work first (See Hays 2003; Broughton 2001a, 2001b, 2003; and Korteweg 2003, 2004), but also show the existence of programs that deviate in many ways from the work first hegemony (See Broughton 2001a, 2001b; and Little 2001). These studies show differences in office ethos, in the types of interactions clients have with workers and with each other, and in pedagogical practices and discourses. Programs differ in how coercive they are and how responsive they are to the particular needs and desires of welfare-reliant women. I argue that in light of these ethnographic studies that

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30 Prior to the recent federal policy changes there was evidence that alternatives to strict work first programs were increasing (Nathan and Gais 1999; Nightingale 2001; Holcomb and Martinson 2002a, 2002b). However, in early 2006, Congress passed a deficit-reduction bill that included a reauthorization of TANF that will dramatically increase the required participation rates states must meet to 50%, without regard for caseload reductions prior to 2005. Previously most states had negligible participation requirements because they were offset by caseload reductions in the first years of TANF. This change will undoubtedly lead to a renewed enthusiasm for work first policies and a turn away from states allowing work activities that differ from those approved by the federal government, such as mental health services and additional education and training. (See U.S. Congress, PRWORA 1996: Sec. 407d for federally allowable work activities.)
show the importance of practices and discourses, as well as policies, a new framework is needed to understand the variation between welfare to work programs, and hopefully, to make clear what program characteristics are most beneficial for welfare-reliant women.

Welfare to work programs are places where resources are distributed, social interactions take place, discourses are deployed, information and knowledge are disseminated, life-changing decisions are made, and new subjectivities are constructed. To take all of these factors into account, I propose that welfare to work programs be viewed on a continuum with repressive programs at one end and empowering programs at the other. The terms repressive and empowering, and the three dimensions which are the backbone for these classifications, are intended to illuminate the economic redistribution, social relations, and cultural dissemination that occur in welfare to work programs. Specifically, I show that welfare programs are engaged in the (re)distribution and transmission of economic, social, and cultural capital. The amount and types of capital available, and the contexts within which this capital is transmitted, differ dramatically between those programs that I call repressive and those I call empowering. Repressive programs limit the options available to participants and provide little assistance, seeking primarily to get them off the rolls by making them into compliant workers. Empowering programs offer more options and assist clients in more long term ways. Instead of trying to push all women rapidly into the labor market, they focus

\[31\] Here I refer only to the approach used by the program, not to its rate of success, since there is no body of data that would allow one to consider the success rates of repressive vs. empowering welfare programs. One could argue that since all programs that receive federal money must comply with certain restrictive federal rules, “empowering” programs are an oxymoron. I am sympathetic to this view. However the extensive variation between programs deserves attention. Further, ethnographic accounts (Broughton 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Little 2001) make clear the many benefits of empowering programs in contrast with repressive ones, and my experience at CCC indicated to me that there was something qualitatively very different about this program compared to other programs about which I had read ethnographic accounts, for example Broughton’s Readywork (2001b, 2003) and Hays’ Arbordale and Sunbelt City (2003).
on ways to improve women’s chances of staying off welfare once they do leave the rolls. They do this by providing clients with capital and capital-building opportunities.\(^{32}\)

Capital, for Bourdieu (1986: 241), is “accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its ‘incorporated,’ embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor.” It is the distribution of the three forms of capital—economic, social, and cultural—according to Bourdieu, which structures our society. Each form of capital can be converted to the other forms, albeit with an expenditure of time and labor (1986). For Bourdieu, the more capital—of any kind—one has, the better their chances of success in the labor market.

This typical understanding of capital assumes a singular, unified and interlocking system of the three types of capital. Drawing on the work of many scholars, particularly cultural capital theorists who have argued that there exists more than one system of prestige regarding skill, tastes, and dispositions (Lareau and Lamont 1998; Hall 1992; Carter 2003; Lareau and Weininger 2003; Yosso 2005), I argue that there are two broad varieties of capital, dominant capital and subjugated\(^{33}\) capital. In other words, there is a hegemonic system of economic, social, and cultural capital, much like Bourdieu describes. However there are also subjugated systems of capital, where the economic resources, social

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\(^{32}\) While not all work first programs are severely repressive, this approach tends toward the repressive end of the spectrum. Similarly, not all programs that deviate from the work first norm are empowering, however they tend to fall on that end of the spectrum.

\(^{33}\) Carter uses the terms dominant and non-dominant to talk about the two types of cultural capital she finds. But I think the term non-dominant misses something. It misses the way this non-dominant capital is perceived as subordinate. At first I used the word subordinate to describe this type of capital. But after someone strongly objected to this term at a talk I was giving, I realized that “subordinate” might imply that I viewed this system of capital as subordinate, or as negative in some way. In addition, I wanted the term that I used to capture the idea of this form of capital being suppressed. So I use the term subjugated. I hope it captures the idea of a type of capital that is devalued and often stigmatized by the dominant society.
connections, and information and dispositions are illicit or are devalued or stigmatized in the formal labor market and mainstream society. I consider economic, social, and cultural capital now, and illustrate how the dominant and subjugated types operate in the context of welfare programs.

Economic capital, that which can easily and immediately be converted into money, is obviously the form of capital that is most lacking in welfare-reliant families. Dominant economic capital is that which is acquired through the formal labor (or real estate, stock, etc.) market, or through government aid. In the context of welfare-reliant women, it is money that is reported to the welfare office.³⁴ It is this form of economic capital that is also provided by welfare offices. Subjugated economic capital, on the other hand, is money not reported to the welfare office—illicit income. This may include gifts from family and friends, money earned through the formal labor market using someone else’s social security number, as well as money earned in the informal labor market, through both legal and illegal activities, including everything from babysitting other’s children to selling drugs. (See Table 2-1.)

Table 2-1: Dominant and Subjugated Capital

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Dominant Capital</th>
<th>Subjugated Capital</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic Capital</td>
<td>Legal &amp; Condoned</td>
<td>Illicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Capital</td>
<td>Acknowledged</td>
<td>Devalued</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural Capital</td>
<td>Affirmed</td>
<td>Stigmatized</td>
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</tbody>
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Most welfare-reliant women have, or have had, both dominant and subjugated economic capital. In addition to government aid, the majority of welfare participants have

³⁴ Generally all earnings from the formal labor market in which ones social security number is used are traceable by welfare departments’ computer systems. While this raises important questions about surveillance, which are not dealt with in this dissertation, it does largely eliminate the failure to report money earned legally in the formal labor market.
work histories and have earned dominant economic capital through work in the formal labor market. Many have cars, and a few even own homes or have very small savings. Most welfare-reliant women also have some subjugated economic capital—money or resources given to them or earned by them that is not reported to the welfare office (Edin and Lein 1997). Welfare programs are charged with providing economic capital, surveilling welfare recipients to discover subjugated capital, and encouraging the transition from government aid to the formal labor market.

Dominant economic capital is provided by welfare programs in the form of both cash aid, including the cash grant as well as transportation monies and reimbursements for such things as school books and work uniforms, and in-kind benefits that have a clear cash value, such as food stamps and child care subsidies. Since food stamps are federally regulated and thus uniform across states, I focus my discussion of economic capital on cash aid—which varies dramatically from state to state—and child care subsidies. Although child care is an in-kind benefit, it has a clear cash value—one which many recipients would have to pay were it not provided. From the point of view of both the welfare agency that is paying for the child care, and the participant who does not have to, child care is an economic benefit. Child care also enables many participants to work, and in this way it can be “invested” in order to create more economic capital. Similarly it is convertible insomuch as it can be traded for the social capital that workplace connections yield, or the cultural capital that schooling and training provide. The availability, accessibility, and quality of child care vary tremendously, and because of its importance in allowing parents’ to pursue work activities, it is a focal point of my assessment of programs’ transmission of economic capital. Other forms of economic capital provided by many welfare programs include transportation monies and
reimbursements for interview and work clothing, and other materials needed for work or school.

The most empowering programs provide relatively high levels of economic capital, such as child care, thus allowing welfare-reliant women to work in the formal labor market and move toward self-sufficiency. They acknowledge the need for subjugated economic capital to complement welfare payments, but their focus on supporting women’s short and long-term educational and career goals encourages a move, in the long-term, away from subjugated economic capital. The most repressive programs on the other hand, provide less economic capital, while focusing more on condemning women for “fraud,” or unreported subjugated capital. In turn they end up reinforcing poor women’s reliance on subjugated economic capital because they fail to provide the work supports needed for women to work while also fulfilling their roles as mothers.

Social capital, or the resources one has through one’s social network, also has dominant and subjugated varieties. Dominant social capital includes the social connections one has that are acknowledged and valued by mainstream society and the formal labor market, such as relationships with people who are employed in the formal labor market. Subjugated social capital, on the other hand, includes those relationships that are devalued by mainstream society, for example other welfare-reliant women, or those engaged in the informal economy. (See Table 2-1.) Most welfare-reliant women have both dominant social and subjugated social capital. While both types of social capital can be acquired in welfare offices, I focus on the availability of the former, since it is this type of capital that has the potential for helping welfare-reliant women in the labor market.

These two general categories of social capital, dominant and subjugated, are
complicated by divisions of positive and negative social capital (Wacquant 1998), social leverage and social support (Briggs 1998), and bonding and bridging social capital (Putnam 2000). Wacquant argues that social relationships can have positive or negative effects. In particular he points to a variety of social institutions, including welfare programs, which he argues provide negative social relationships that do more harm than good. While I agree that this is possible in the case of repressive welfare to work programs, I show below and in Chapter 4 that empowering welfare to work programs promote positive relationships both between welfare recipients and welfare workers, and among recipients.

Believing that useful and important relationships are not limited to those that can be converted into economic or cultural capital, Briggs (1998) distinguishes between social leverage—social relationships that help one “get ahead” and social support, those relationships that help one “get by.” Furthering this notion, Putnam (2000), distinguishes between bridging and bonding social capital. The former describes a network that cuts across class or other stratifying lines, and is typically more useful as social leverage. Bonding social capital, on the other hand, describes relationships formed horizontally among people, which are less likely to prove useful in converting social capital into other forms, and more likely to yield social support. Empowering welfare offices are sites where both social leverage and social support, and bridging and bonding social capital, are fostered. Welfare-reliant women develop relationships with welfare workers (bridging) and with each other (bonding), particularly during mandatory job readiness and job search classes. In Chapter 4 I argue that both of these types of relationships have the potential for providing social leverage and social support, and that positive social capital acquired in the welfare office can significantly benefit women both in their everyday lives and in their future goals.
I argue that instructors can promote the development of social capital both by being supportive, available mentors and by encouraging a supportive, non-competitive classroom ethos. By showing that they understand and respect participants’ lives, instructors can forge lasting bonds with participants that yield both social leverage and support. And by fostering and modeling personal sharing and empathy, instructors can go a long way toward promoting the development of bonding social capital between welfare-reliant women. These latter relationships provide needed support and encouragement, but may also leading to shared housing, child care, transportation, or other useful assistance.

Cultural capital, which Bourdieu has called “ informational capital” (with Wacquant 1992) includes the cultural knowledge and dispositions one has, as well as the education and skills one has attained (1986). While cultural capital has frequently been conceptualized as the body of knowledge and tastes held by the upper (white) classes, I draw on the work of scholars who have argued that multiple forms of cultural capital exist (Lareau and Lamont 1998; Hall 1992; Carter 2003; Lareau and Weininger 2003; Yosso 2005). Within the context of welfare programs, dominant cultural capital includes the skills, attitudes, and behavior that are affirmed by mainstream society, and thus by the formal labor market, while subjugated cultural capital includes those skills, dispositions, and behaviors that might be needed and valued within certain groups, but that are stigmatized by the dominant culture. It is therefore dominant cultural capital that welfare to work programs have an interested in imparting. (See Table 2-1.)

Welfare to work programs have an opportunity to transmit three types of dominant cultural capital, but in order to do so they must first recognize and acknowledge the existence of multiple forms within their programs. In the case of welfare to work programs, the cultural capital of interest is that which is dominant in the upper (white) classes and valued within the formal labor market. Within this framework, cultural capital can be thought of as consisting of two broad categories: the cultural disposition and the behavioral dispositions. The cultural disposition category includes knowledge and dispositions that are valued within the upper (white) classes, while the behavioral category includes knowledge and dispositions that are valued within the formal labor market. The cultural capital of interest to welfare to work programs is that which is dominant in the upper (white) classes and valued within the formal labor market. Within this framework, cultural capital can be thought of as consisting of two broad categories: the cultural disposition and the behavioral dispositions. The cultural disposition category includes knowledge and dispositions that are valued within the upper (white) classes, while the behavioral category includes knowledge and dispositions that are valued within the formal labor market. The cultural capital of interest to welfare to work programs is that which is dominant in the upper (white) classes and valued within the formal labor market. Within this framework, cultural capital can be thought of as consisting of two broad categories: the cultural disposition and the behavioral dispositions. The cultural disposition category includes knowledge and dispositions that are valued within the upper (white) classes, while the behavioral category includes knowledge and dispositions that are valued within the formal labor market.

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35 Carter’s (2003) assertion that dominant and non-dominant forms of cultural capital exist forms the basis for my argument that all three types of capital have dominant and subjugated forms. Her particular study is discussed in Chapter 5.
cultural capital. First and most importantly, they can provide broad opportunities for participants to pursue education or training, and to count these as work activities. Repressive programs generally lack or restrict opportunities to pursue formal training and education, while the most empowering programs encourage their pursuit. Secondly, most welfare to work programs spend considerable time teaching job search skills, including how to craft a resume and answer interview questions. While these skills are examples of dominant cultural capital, they do not conflict with subjugated cultural capital and are therefore usually taught in a straightforward manner, without judgment. Based on several ethnographic studies of welfare programs, all discussed below, it appears that this type of cultural capital is frequently and successfully imparted by programs across the repressive/empowering spectrum (Broughton 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Hays 2003; Korteweg 2003, 2004). Finally, dominant cultural capital in the form of workplace appearance and behavioral standards\(^\text{36}\) is often taught to welfare-reliant women. Since this subtype is at the heart of the difference between dominant and subjugated cultural capital, it is the most problematic to impart, and it is therefore here where pedagogical discourses and practices play the greatest role.

Repressive programs focus on “cultural retraining” (Broughton 2001a, 200b, 2003), which undermines the particular type of cultural capital already obtained by participants and teaches adherence to white, middle class cultural standards and worldview. In addition, a repressive approach teaches these norms—such as how to appear for a job interview—as “appropriate behavior.” Participants are seen as lacking. These programs fail to acknowledge and respect the subjugated cultural capital welfare-reliant women possess.

\(^{36}\) Elsewhere I discuss another type of dominant cultural capital taught in most welfare classes, often referred to as “lifeskills.” This includes money management, and coping with stress, etc. I argue that in repressive programs this material is aimed at instructing participants how to behave “appropriately” (meaning in white middle class ways). An ideal empowering approach would either not teach this material at all, or would teach it in the context of sharing survival strategies.
The most empowering welfare to work programs, on the other hand, utilize a critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Lynn, 1999; Ball 2000) to convey dominant cultural capital in a respectful and strategic way, and to help participants transform their lives. I assert that in the context of a welfare to work class, a critical pedagogy has four components. First, a critical pedagogy encourages dialogue and participation in the learning process. Second it expands participants’ view of their lives and situations, helping them to see all their options. Third, it encourages reflection, and a questioning of social practices, arrangements, institutions, and existing power relationships. Finally, a critical pedagogy respects individual participants, their life experiences and choices, and the dominant and subjugated cultural capital they already possess. A critical pedagogy involves discourses that acknowledge structural inequalities, critique the welfare system, or question dominant economic, racial, or gender ideologies and thus it provides support for participants’ lived experiences. These empowering discourses and practices contradict mainstream views that blame the impoverished for their poverty. Removing the blame and affirming the experiences and knowledges of participants have positive effects for recipients’ self-confidence. (See Broughton 2001a, 2001b.) In addition, dominant standards of appearance and behavior take on a different meaning when racism and structural inequalities are acknowledged by the teacher. Instructors who employ these empowering discourses do not ask participants to internalize dominant cultural capital, but instead encourage them to utilize it in order to further their own socioeconomic positions. In doing so, they gain participants’ trust. Participants, in turn, are more likely to view dominant cultural capital as the rules of an unfair game, but rules, nonetheless, that they may need to follow in order to succeed in the labor market.

While all welfare programs transmit economic, social, and cultural capital to their
participants, the extent to which a given program transmits the three types of capital determines its position on the repressive/empowering spectrum. Programs that are generous in transmitting all three types of capital attempt to empower women by giving them the tools to succeed after they leave welfare, including improving their chances in the labor market, as well as increasing their self esteem and sense of efficacy and providing opportunities to develop positive social relationships. These programs understand that empowering women may—in the long run—help them in the formal labor market, but also that empowerment improves one’s quality of life in the short run.

Repressive Programs

Repressive welfare to work programs limit the options and opportunities of welfare-reliant women and add further constraints to their lives. In this section I rely on the ethnographic data collected by other scholars to illuminate the way repressive welfare programs fail to provide participants with dominant economic, social, and cultural capital.\(^{37}\) (See Table 2-2.) I will consider four welfare programs that fall on the repressive end of the continuum I am proposing: Sharon Hays’ Arbordale and Sunbelt City (2003), Chad Broughton’s Readywork, and Anna Korteweg’s Burnett County.\(^ {38}\) (See Figure 2-1 later in the chapter.) Part of examining the extent to which these programs provide capital and capital building opportunities to their participants is considering the amount of time programs allow recipients to receive aid and transition off welfare. Capital takes time to accumulate (Bourdieu 1986), and thus the more a state or locality restricts the time participants may

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\(^{37}\) To be clear, I am not arguing that these programs offer nothing positive, nor am I arguing that all participants have a negative reaction to these programs. Even the most repressive programs typically aim to motivate participants and to provide them with some job search skills, such as helping with resumes and interviewing skills.

\(^{38}\) In describing all the welfare programs in this chapter I use the present tense, however policies and practices are always changing, and this should not be taken to mean that these programs continue to operate in the ways described by their ethnographers.
receive welfare, the less likely they are to be able to transmit much in the way of capital. Short time limits may also represent a program’s lack of interest in transmitting capital, and thus a lack of interest in helping participants achieve long-term success.

Table 2-2: The Relationship between Capital and the Repressive to Empowering Continuum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repressive Programs</th>
<th>Empowering Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minimal cash aid, no childcare, transportation, or other reimbursements</td>
<td>Substantial cash aid, childcare, transportation, and other reimbursements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distrust and dissociation among women and between women and welfare workers</td>
<td>Trusting relations among women and between women and welfare workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No education/training; no job search skills taught; workplace norms taught without respect for women’s subjugated cultural capital</td>
<td>Education/training; job search skills taught; workplace norms presented with respect for women’s subjugated cultural capital</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both Arbordale and Sunbelt City are in states that limit the receipt of cash assistance to two years at a time, after which families must spend 24 months without welfare before they can receive cash aid again. Korteweg’s Burnett County is in California—a state with a lenient time limit policy, allowing families the full federal limit of 60 months on aid, and then continuing to provide cash assistance for eligible children after their parents have timed-out (as described in Chapter 1). This lenient time limit should allow participants time to gain capital and find decent employment. However in practice, Korteweg finds that an 18-24 month time limit is typically enforced in Burnett County. Further, she claims clients almost never hit this shorter limit because they are generally sanctioned for noncompliance first (Korteweg 2004, and personal communication 2/13/2006). Broughton’s Readywork is in Illinois, a state with a five-year lifetime limit for TANF receipt, but one which is limited to
two years for recipients with children over 13. So Readywork faces only moderate time restrictions compared to the other repressive programs discussed here and programs nationally.

Aside from food stamps, cash grants and child care subsidies are the two most significant forms of economic capital provided by welfare programs, although they are not the only ones. Maximum cash grants in both Arbordale and Sunbelt City are approximately $350 a month for a family of three. While it is hard to imagine any one person—never mind three—surviving on so little, these benefits are neither particularly high nor low compared to other states. While Hays’ sites may not provide the most miserly assistance, they are far from the high end of the range. Economic capital in Burnett County, on the other hand, appears to be relatively generous compared with other states and programs. California’s maximum cash grant is over $700 for a family of three (NCCP 2006), and although it was less than this at the time Korteweg conducted her research (SPDP 2000, 2001), it was still one of the highest in the country. While Broughton says little about economic resources, we know that Illinois provides families of three a maximum of just under $400 a month (NCCP 2006), higher than Hays’ sites but much lower than the state of California.

Economic capital in the form of child care subsidies is frequently unavailable—or inaccessible—as well. Hays reports that only about 40 percent of eligible Arbordale participants receive a child care subsidy; in Sunbelt City the number is even lower—approximately 25 percent (72). Although Sunbelt City has money available for child care, Hays describes a complicated system in which a nonprofit organization runs the child care program. Many families are unaware that they are eligible, and even for those that are aware,

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39 Illinois does, however, allow for individual exemptions to be decided by the welfare administration (National Conference of State Legislators, 2005).
the location of the child care office and bureaucratic hurdles are often insurmountable. At Arbordale, the quality of child care is more of a problem than access to it, according to Hays, who describes incidents of abuse and neglect at informal child care settings. Hurdles to obtain an economic resource, or issues that invalidate its worth—such as abuse at a child care facility—are failures of the welfare program to provide economic capital in a usable, accumulable, or convertible form. While child care is lacking in Sunbelt City and Arbordale, other material resources were more available. Hays tells us that transportation vouchers, clothing and supplies for work, and even additional money for such things as eye glasses and car repairs are available if they are related to work. However women presumably had to know to ask for such assistance, and even then it was at the caseworker’s discretion. Neither Korteweg nor Broughton say much about child care or other economic benefits, although they appear to be available to some extent in Burnett County. When Broughton compares Readywork with an empowering program (discussed below), he suggests that the economic capital provided by Readywork is lacking in comparison. Overall, Hays’ and Broughton’s sites provide moderate to low economic capital, while Korteweg’s Burnett County appears to provide more. However the lack of social and cultural capital available in Burnett County place its program firmly on the repressive end of the spectrum.

When it comes to social capital, all four of these sites seem to provide very little positive social capital. While the authors rarely discuss relationships between workers and participants, or among participants, the little they do say suggests few, if any, supportive relationships. For example, Hays does not describes punitive practices, whereby participants who have attendance problems, fail to make 40 job contacts during the 30 day search, or turn down a job offer, face sanctions. This environment is not conducive to developing positive
social relationships with workers or other participants. Korteweg (2003, 2004) reports that employment counselors in Burnett County did very little counseling, instead spending their time managing cases and completing paperwork. She says that although a small subset of employment counselors was “client-focused”—thus offering the possibility of creating warm, supportive relationships with clients—most were not. She also reports that participants have many complaints about their workers and the welfare bureaucracy. Broughton also describes fairly negative relationships between participants and their instructors, who engage in punitive practices and repressive discourses (see below). Similarly, none of these authors provides evidence that these welfare to work programs aid in the creation of a supportive community of welfare-reliant women. Instead, Korteweg and Broughton describe a dissociation between participants as they identify themselves as among the deserving recipients of aid, but label other participants as undeserving. Instead of a culture of solidarity, one of distrust and assumed difference emergences in this environment.

This repressive ethos persists in the transmission of cultural capital at all four sites as well. None of the sites appear to allow for much education or training. Hays describes both her sites as work first and contrasts them with states and programs where welfare recipients are allowed to count one year of education or training toward work requirements and places that “are relatively flexible in the speed with which they require their clients to get jobs” (27). Later Hays describes the short term training programs that are available to participants who are unsuccessful at finding employment during the 30 day job search. Available training
programs, typically for low-wage jobs in the service sector, are chosen by the caseworker or with the client, indicating the minimal level of control clients have over their futures.\(^{40}\)

Burnett County also limited education and training programs, only allowing women to count education as work if they were already enrolled before applying for welfare. This is an extremely repressive implementation of a state policy that states that “Individuals who do not find employment during their job search will...[be] assigned to an education, training, or work experience program, as appropriate and as resources permit” (California Department of Social Services, Health and Human Services Agency 2002, A ii). Although some therapeutic services are available, few clients tell their employment counselors enough about their lives to indicate that they need these services. (Korteweg 2004).\(^{41}\) While not among the most progressive or most repressive work requirement policies, Illinois—like California—affords local welfare to work programs the leeway to set their own policies and practices (Center for Law and Social Policy 2002). Thus despite the fact that the state of Illinois allows postsecondary education to satisfy one’s work requirement for more than 12 months,\(^{42}\) Broughton describes the work first philosophy of Readywork as “a tough-love program that attempts to engender minority self-determination by enforcing conformity to mainstream cultural standards and adapting its clients to slots available in Chicago’s low-wage labor

\(^{40}\) There are a few differences in work requirements between Hays’ two sites. In Arbordale mothers are allowed to stay home with children under 18 months old; however there is a family cap. In Sunbelt City, new mothers have a lifetime maximum of 12 months work exemption (but no family cap). Sunbelt City also grants 20 percent of their cases—as many as allowed by federal law—“hardship exemptions,” while Arbordale exempts almost no one. Despite these differences, in neither welfare program are welfare-reliant women empowered to make choices about their present or future lives, or to takes steps—such as education, or turning down minimum wage jobs—that will help them find employment that will lift out of poverty.

\(^{41}\) This problem is not unique to Burnett County, but is a national problem. Disclosure rates are low, despite a large body of evidence that shows that approximately 20% of welfare-reliant women are currently in abusive relationships (Tolman and Raphael 2000).

\(^{42}\) After 36 months participants must work 20 hours a week in order for additional education to meet their work requirement (SPDP 2000c).
market” (2001b: 101). His use of “self-determination” is ironic, given the lack of choices available to participants. Work is the only option.

All four sites require welfare-reliant women to attend classes that seek to teach them dominant cultural capital. However with few, if any, elements of a critical pedagogy, these classes do little more than seek to culturally retrain participants. Hays says little about these classes at Arbordale and Sunbelt City, but does write that they “included sessions on how to dress for an interview, defer to your employer, get along with your co-workers, manage childcare, budget your time, balance your checkbook, speak proper English rather than street slang,” among other things (39). Teaching deference and the use of proper English, without a critical approach, suggests that these welfare programs did not seek to open new worlds and options for these women, but instead attempted to force them into compliance with both welfare regulations and white, middle class norms.

Korteweg gives us a detailed look at the Job Club classes required of welfare-reliant women in Burnett County, and from this we can tell that repressive discourses are abundant, while empowering ones are largely absent. Korteweg (2003, 2004) provides ample evidence of both blaming and cultural retraining, but no evidence of a critical pedagogy. Instructors blame participants’ poverty largely on a lack of self-esteem, rather than a lack of good jobs, discrimination, poor education, or market fundamentalism. Cultural retraining in Burnett County goes beyond just teaching women acceptable norms for dress and behavior.

Korteweg writes that “trainers taught the women that they were to prepare themselves for subjection, submission to the demands of managers,” and that with such behavior they would

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43 Burnett County’s classes used a curriculum created by a for-profit agency that was used by welfare to work programs in 14 states (Korteweg 2004: 448).
44 Korteweg (2004) does mention that one trainer encouraged participants to vote, even bringing in voter registration cards. However she argues that he was not trying to get them to change their structural realities by voting, but instead thought it would improve their self-esteem.
succeed on the job (2004: 459). By blaming clients’ low-self esteem, lack of motivation, inability to set goals, or lack of awareness of or adherence to (white, middle class) cultural norms for their “dependence” on welfare, instructors tell clients that they are to blame for their poverty, and that by changing their thinking and behaviors they would change the course of their lives.

Broughton’s description of classes at Readywork is strikingly similar. Self-determination is absent, and participants and the subjugated cultural capital they bring with them are degraded. The punitive practices are shocking: one participant is dismissed (which Broughton says probably meant sanctioned) for failure to remove an African hat he wore for religious reasons. Tardy participants have their names written on the board, and people are called into the hall for talking out of turn. A blaming discourse is more explicit than it is in Burnett County, where the instructor only implicitly blames clients for their situations by pointing to their lack of self-esteem. At Readywork the blaming is explicit:

Linda [the instructor] says the program adopts a confrontational style to introduce clients to the rigorous world of work, to promote responsibility, to break down bad habits, and to build self-esteem—aspects of cultural retraining. In her self-esteem lectures, Linda entreats workshop participants to ‘stop throwing pity parties for [themselves]’ and ‘to stop making excuses about why [they] aren’t working.’ Instead of being ‘volunteer victims,’ she says, you can start working and become ‘independent,’ self-sufficient,’ and ‘responsible’ and ‘make your children proud’ (2003: 40).

Although Broughton (2001b: 165) acknowledges that participants find this discourse motivating in some ways, he describes the self-esteem and motivation that are gained in Readywork’s classes as “fleeting.”

45 Here he describes two types of self-esteem. The first, which was “ultimately fleeting,” was an optimistic and eager disposition toward the job search process. The second type of self esteem “related to a participant’s self-worth or her ability to possess a valid identity while belonging to a publicly stigmatized group...” This type of self esteem was also developed in contrast with other welfare recipients who they viewed as less worthy (2001b: 165).
Cultural retraining at Readywork seems especially insidious. As in the situation where a participant wore an African hat, much of the cultural retraining—which takes up most of the first week, according to Broughton—is “aimed at erasing the blackness of a potential worker” (2000: 40). While it may be true that “erasing blackness” and sticking to white language and appearance norms could increase one’s chances on the job market, the cultural retraining that Broughton and others describe is not about providing participants with information about employment norms and allowing them to choose whether or not to use it. Participants are not allowed to discuss the social or personal meanings of a job market that rejects Black culture and any signifiers of this culture. Only normative (i.e. white) standards of language, appearance, and behavior are allowed, while the structural realities facing poor African Americans as well as the importance—both personal and collective—of maintaining Black culture are denied.

There is no reason to think that these four repressive programs are anything but representative of the majority of welfare programs across the country. In fact Hays insists that Arbordale and Sunbelt City, “taken together… provide something close to a vision of the ‘typical’ operations of welfare offices under reform” (2003: 26). And yet these programs do not provide poor women with any significant outlays of capital—not even social support—as they move toward self-sufficiency. Despite the motivational rhetoric used at times in nearly all the classes, women are not built up and empowered to change their lives—and they are certainly not encouraged to work for social change. One might expect these classes to bring similarly stigmatized and stressed-out women together, but instead such classes breed resentment and distrust. Korteweg (2003) argues that repressive discourses in the classroom prevent the emergence of counterdiscourses challenging the welfare system and other
inequalities. Broughton says that the women of Readywork turn on each other, insisting that the blaming discourse and cultural retraining is misdirected at them, but that these discourses are appropriate for other welfare-reliant women. In this way women “rationalize the contradiction between their self-identification as deserving and the derogatory discourse[s] of the workshop that labeled them as undeserving and ill-equipped culturally to join the rest of society” (2003: 47).

**Empowering Programs**

Despite the limitations of federal law, and the hegemonic belief that “independence,” “personal responsibility,” and hard work are a foolproof means of achieving economic success, some welfare to work programs have tried to make the best of the federal and state regulations by implementing programs that provide participants with economic, social, and cultural capital as they move along the federally required path to self-sufficiency. These programs employ an empowering approach (see Table 2-2.), where they seek to help each welfare to work participant achieve her goals.

Jobproject, Broughton’s (2001a, 2001b) second site, also in Illinois, and Little’s (2001) Community Education Circle (CEC) in New York City, are both excellent examples of empowering welfare programs. (See Figure 2-1.) Both community-based agencies contracted with by the state to provide educational and employment services to welfare-reliant women, Jobproject and CEC are focused on human capital development rather than quick labor force attachment. They are about as far from the ideology underlying welfare reform as is possible, while still meeting the minimum requirements. In the case of Jobproject, staff members are social activists who lobby for more education for welfare recipients. Despite this, welfare reform has limited Jobproject to a 6 month program from one
that had been two years. Educational opportunities have been limited as well. Instead of the liberal education curriculum it taught before reform, Jobproject now offers vocational and GED courses. Although subject to the same moderate time limits as Readywork, Jobproject offers greater resources to its participants, including a toy lending library and parenting counseling, job search and placement assistance, some general counseling, and referrals to additional resources within its network of nonprofits. In addition to the cash assistance received through the welfare office, Jobproject provides economic capital in the form of on-site day care for its participants. The fact that the day care is on-site benefits participants both by cutting down on the transportation and time involved in carting one’s children to and from day care, and by alleviating some of the concerns parents often feel about leaving their children at a strange place with strange people. It is unclear whether Jobproject—or the local welfare offices—provide other forms of economic capital; however the extensive resources and referral system suggest the availability of other economic benefits.

Figure 2-1: The Repressive to Empowering Continuum
CEC is technically not a welfare to work program, and therefore does not provide all the job search and other services that Jobproject and other welfare programs typically do. Thus the classes do not include curriculum aimed at teaching participants norms of workplace appearance and behavior. However, this program is still relevant in that it is a program in which instructors are leading participants toward self-sufficiency within the confines of welfare reform. CEC’s staff thinks of themselves as educators and not welfare workers, and this clearly informs their relationships with participants. We do not know much about the economic resources available to the participants of CEC, however we know a few things about New York’s policies. The state of New York continues to provide assistance to families that have reached their 60 month time limit, thus promising more economic capital than most states. New York also provides a maximum benefit of approximately $575 a month for families of three, which is greater than most states (NCCP 2006; SPDP 2001). Child care protections are also ample, with all parents and other caretakers protected against work requirements if child care is deemed unavailable for any child 12 years of age or less (SPDP 2000). Thus while we do not know how accessible the child care is, there is a sense both from the regulations and the lack of attention Little gives to it that the women of CEC were able to obtain this economic benefit without much trouble. Little does not discuss other economic benefits, most of which would have come from the welfare office rather than CEC.

The availability of bridging and bonding social capital, and social leverage and social support, is particularly extensive at Jobproject. Broughton’s (2001a, 2001b) descriptions of the classes include intimate sharing by both instructors and participants, and even one-on-one meetings where participants discuss the “diary entries” they write each day in class. One Jobproject participant goes so far as to refer to the staff as “family” (2001:161). Staff
members regularly advocate for participants, using their “social leverage” to help women get ahead. The classes themselves differ dramatically from those at Readywork and the other repressive programs discussed above. There are no punitive practices at Jobproject. Although attendance and punctuality are discussed as important, the rules are not taken very seriously. Broughton writes that “leniency at Jobproject is philosophically grounded, according to the staff, in encouraging voice and assertiveness among women. Officials at Jobproject rationalize the need for this practice by pointing to their statistics that show that 60 percent of their clients are in or have been in abusive relationships” (2001a: 30). Class time is spent sharing personal stories. Broughton describes the consciousness-raising that goes on in the classroom, and the high value participants placed on it:

[The women] engaged in unorganized, participant-led, boisterous and emotional consciousness-raising sessions that served to mediate against the isolation they said they felt as single mothers living in depopulated, spread out, and dangerous ghetto neighborhoods. Through collective story-telling, problems—which had seemed distinctive, shameful, and personal—were perceived as shared and surmountable (2001a: 32).

This process of sharing intimate stories in a supportive setting leads to the building of community—especially social support—at Jobproject, well as transmitting cultural capital. When asked about their Jobproject experience, participants talked about developing “social ties” and sharing stories (2001b: 148-149).

Just as at JobProject, CEC staff members were deeply distressed by the new regulations and limitations their students faced after welfare reform was implemented. CEC staff eventually raised money to hire an advocate who would help their clients. Through informal consciousness-raising with the help of the advocate, some of the participants became activists, even traveling to the state capital to speak with legislators. CEC has done more than empower welfare-reliant women to be agents in their own lives; it has empowered
the women to be agents of social change. That participants have an advocate as well as empathetic instructors on whom they can rely is evidence that bridging social capital, in the forms of social leverage and social support, is available. Participants’ activism and the support of instructors is further evidence that a network of social relations (bonding and bridging) has developed and is being put to use.

As skill-building programs, both Jobproject and CEC provide abundant cultural capital in the form of formal education. The GED preparation that follows the introductory course at Job Project imparts cultural capital in the form of basic skills. At the end of the Jobproject program, staff encourages women to pursue education and their dreams rather than just finding a job. Not only do workers discuss women’s long-term career goals and the educational paths they would need to follow, but they encourage continued education and often advocate for the participants, pushing their welfare caseworkers to allow them to continue education and training before having to work (Broughton 2001b). Further, women at Jobproject are likely to be referred to services for domestic violence, substance abuse, and vocational training. These options not only hold the potential for self-knowledge and understanding, but they are evidence of the way Jobproject encourages self-determination.

Empowering discourses abound, and repressive ones—even cultural retraining, the most pervasive repressive discourse at other sites—are not present (2001a, 2001b). After a month-long introductory workshop clearly meant to parallel job readiness and life skills courses offered by Readywork and other welfare to work programs, Jobproject participants take four months of GED preparation classes and participate in a final month-long program intended to place the women in jobs or job training. At JobProject a critical pedagogy is employed by instructors, who spend a week of the class discussing domestic violence. They
also encourage discussions about racial discrimination and poverty. By acknowledging the structural reasons for poverty, Jobproject encourages critical thinking and a deeper understanding of the world. And by relying on participants’ own experiences to shape class discussions, the classes validate the unique subjugated cultural capital that the women bring to the program.

New York City requires welfare-reliant women to participate in the City’s work experience program (WEP), better known as workfare, and then job club, before attending CEC’s classes. All the while participants’ 24 month educational time clock is ticking.\textsuperscript{46} While there is little the CEC staff can do about this, staff members have not hidden their opposition to welfare reform from participants. When workers were required to track participation in their program, staff ultimately met and agreed that they would not report any of their clients for sanctioning. Education is the primary goal of CEC, and staff encourages participants to spend as much time on education as possible before looking for work. But formal classes are not the only way that cultural capital is transmitted in this program. Empowering discourses that encourage participants to think for themselves and act on their beliefs is another way. And certainly social activism builds cultural capital as well by helping to develop speaking skills, knowledge of the political process, and a sense of self-efficacy, among other things.

**Explaining the Variation**

Jobproject and CEC represent the most empowering end of the spectrum of welfare to work programs. Their existence alerts us to the possibilities of creating programs that benefit participants even within the confines of PRWORA. However both of these programs serve

\textsuperscript{46} PRWORA only allows education and training (and any other non-work work activities) during the first two years of assistance (U.S. Congress 1996).
only a select group of welfare to work participants, those who have managed to arrive at their doors from their welfare offices where far less empowering programs were plentiful. The following chapters examine the welfare to work program in Contra Costa County, California. While this program is less exclusively empowering than Jobproject or CEC, it takes place within the County’s welfare offices. Thus unlike the two programs described above, which only involve a fraction of welfare to work participants in the area, CCC’s empowering program is the same for all welfare recipients who receive aid from these offices. For this reason, CCC is particularly useful in illustrating how other welfare to work programs could implement empowering welfare programs within the confines of the federal law.

While the existence of JobProject and CEC can be explained by their pre-PRWORA role as educational facilities, differences among the repressive welfare programs discussed here, and especially between these programs and CCC, require more explanation. Welfare rules and regulations exist at multiple layers of federal, state, and local government. While the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 forms the backdrop for today’s welfare programs, each state has great leeway in developing a state plan for its welfare, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, program. Thus there is tremendous variation between states, particularly on such issues as time limits, allowable work activities, and sanctions. In addition, while some state plans lay out specific regulations for the whole state, at least 20 states pass on some or most of the control to the county level. California, while quite liberal in its overall welfare rules, passes on most of the decision-making power to individual counties. This devolution to the county level means that welfare

47 I spent time at two of Contra Costa County’s four welfare to work offices. Although the policies at the other two offices are the same, their practices may be different and I therefore cannot say that every welfare to work participant within the County participates in an empowering program.
policies and practices can be dramatically shaped by local political values, (Fording, Soss, and Schram 2007), not to mention individual administrators. Supervisors and welfare workers also have significant discretion as Michael Lipsky (1980) famously argued.

The stark differences between Korteweg’s Burnett County and CCC are particularly interesting, given that they are both located in California’s liberal Bay Area. They share quite lenient state policies and are situated in progressive communities. But ultimately it is local administrators and to a lesser extent welfare workers that enact and implement the policies that make Burnett County repressive—especially in terms of social and cultural capital transmission—and CCC empowering in these same areas. Unlike many welfare programs across the country that advertise their “work first” philosophy, Contra Costa County’s welfare plan never uses this term despite its popularity. Contra Costa County’s choice to veer away from the predominant work first philosophy and discourse, in both its written documentation and in practice, is significant, and no doubt has guided its welfare supervisors and workers to be more flexible and more empowering in their approach.

Conclusion

While the implementation of PRWORA was ideologically aligned with the work first philosophy, strict work first programs are not required by federal law. Studies show the existence of other types of programs, particularly those that allow greater education and training. However by limiting our understanding of these programs to the allowable work activities and available services, we fail to understand the complex ways in which these programs differ. A focus on the provision of economic, social, and cultural capital in welfare to work programs allows for a much broader view, in which the options and resources available to participants, as well as the context in which they are provided, is considered.
Mapping programs’ location on the repressive to empowering continuum makes it clear what individual welfare programs can do to improve their programs, and even what individual instructors can do to more successfully impart social and cultural capital. Instead of focusing on what is cheaper and more beneficial to the state (strict work first programs), this classification system focuses on the experiences of welfare-reliant women and the way welfare programs can improve their lives in the short and long term. And it takes into account the fact that the way participants are treated, and the way they experience the program, will affect what they are able to gain from it.

By looking at ethnographic studies of welfare to work programs, we see great differences in the provision of capital. As different as the opportunities to accumulate capital are between the programs I have called empowering and those I have called repressive, the variety of contexts in which this capital is transmitted is even greater. Welfare to work classes that teach workplace readiness and norms differ in how this material is taught. A respectful, supportive, and empowering approach helps to build social capital by creating alliances between workers and participants and fostering a supportive community. It also promotes the accumulation of cultural capital by creating an atmosphere in which participants can learn skills and tools that are likely to improve their chances of success in the labor market. Further, the deployment of a critical pedagogy allows participants to question rules, procedures, and cultural norms, thereby allowing for critical thinking and opinion formation and expression. These are all essential elements of dominant cultural capital that are also important skills for building additional capital.

While it certainly seems as though programs that increase participants’ social and cultural capital would improve their chances in the labor market, I can only speculate about
these likely benefits. I can, however, speak to the short-term benefits that I saw emerge in CCC—which are in-line with those discussed by Broughton in regards to JobProject. First, greater economic resources make life—and work—much easier and less stressful. Beyond the obvious advantages for poor families of child care and larger cash grants, women in CCC’s program—as well as Broughton’s JobProject—described feeling motivated, inspired, and emotionally supported by instructors and fellow participants. Some spoke of being happy to be out of their house and with other adults, and many spoke of believing that they could go back to school and pursue a career that they had come to believe was an impossible dream. Some seemed to appreciate the “required” aspect of the classes because it helped them get motivated to get out of their house and pursue education/work. Others focused on the significance of meeting and becoming friends with other welfare-reliant women, and many leaned heavily on instructors for guidance, support, and motivation. The importance of community and social support, and of having one’s own life experiences valued and validated are easy to ignore when faced with the economic needs of poor families. But poor families’ great economic needs do not preclude other human needs. We all have a need for connection with others, a need to pursue things that would bring us personal fulfillment, a need to be acknowledged and respected as people. The existence of CCC and the other empowering programs discussed in this chapter show that welfare offices do not have to be sites of distrust and negative social capital. Instead, they can become positive places where community and relationships are nurtured.

The following three chapters consider the transmission of economic, social, and cultural capital at CCC. In each one I further develop the concept of subjugated capital. As I lay out the ways in which dominant capital is disseminated at two welfare offices in CCC, I
focus on the way each form of capital is meaningful and beneficial to welfare-reliant women. I argue that the context in which capital is transmitted is as crucial as the type or amount of capital provided. And hopefully I provide a lens through which we can see welfare programs more from the perspective of the men and women who rely upon them.
Chapter 3: Economic Capital

Economic capital is the most desperately needed form of capital for welfare-reliant families, and it is ultimately the lack of this capital that drives them to the welfare office in the first place. Economic capital is generally thought of as the resources one has that can easily be converted into cash, but I include here in-kind resources—such as child care—that if not provided would have to be purchased using cash. While there is an extensive literature in which Bourdieu’s concepts of social and cultural capital are theoretically and empirically developed and debated, economic capital has largely been left alone by those engaging Bourdieu’s work. It is assumed that economic capital is “straightforward”—that cash and things that can easily be turned into cash are all the same. Social capital has been shown to have strong and weak variants (Granovetter 1973), social leverage and social support divisions (Briggs 1998), bridging and bonding varieties (Putnam 2000), and positive and negative types (Wacquant 1998). And cultural capital is often parceled out into subtypes, including human capital and intellectual capital. More importantly, numerous scholars have taken seriously the idea that cultural capital is not a homogenous, unified field, but that different communities have their own systems of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are highly valued (see Lamont and Lareau 1988; Hall 1992; Carter 2003; Lareau and Weininger 2003; Yosso 2005). But economic capital has largely been left out of the discussion.

As introduced in the previous chapter, I argue that all three types of capital—economic, social, and cultural—have dominant and subjugated subtypes. By this I mean that there is a hegemonic form of each type of capital, and a system that links this dominant economic, social and cultural capital together. Dominant economic capital is legal and condoned. It is earned in the formal labor market or through investments. It may be passed
down through inheritance. Dominant social and cultural capital are key to the accumulation of this economic capital. Subjugated economic capital, on the other hand, is money that is acquired through the informal labor market, or through illegal means. This is money that is not reported to the government for tax purposes. In the case of welfare recipients, I suggest that subjugated economic capital includes not only money that is not reported for taxes, but also all economic resources (including any earned through the formal labor market) that are not reported to the welfare administration. Subjugated economic capital, therefore, is illicit income. Social and cultural capital—particularly but not exclusively subjugated social and cultural capital—may help one acquire subjugated economic capital. For example, certain relationships may yield an opportunity to earn money “under the table,” while subjugated cultural capital in the form of “street smarts” may include the skills needed to “hustle” money and other economic resources for one’s family.

While no welfare programs provide recipients with enough economic resources to live comfortably, some provide significantly more than others. There are also differences in the assistance provided to poor families making the transition to formal employment, or the transition to earning more dominant capital. The most empowering welfare to work programs provide welfare-reliant families with substantial dominant economic capital, in the forms of cash aid, food stamps, and other resources. In particular, work supports, such as child care subsidies and transportation monies are widely available in the most empowering programs. Ideal empowering programs also have workers who help participants get the greatest benefits possible, often using their discretion to aid participants financially. These workers understand that it is nearly impossible to survive on welfare benefits alone. They help participants in two ways. First, empowering workers who are involved in benefit calculation and eligibility may
bend rules or encourage participants to answer questions in certain ways in order to maximize the cash aid or food stamps participants receive. Secondly, empowering workers—especially instructors—may acknowledge and respect that most participants have subjugated economic capital—unreported income—upon which they rely for survival. Instead of an atmosphere of fraud prevention, where workers turn participants in for failing to report their sources of subjugated economic capital, workers may tell participants that they are aware of these sources and that they understand their necessity. By doing so workers build trust and understanding between themselves and participants, facilitating the transmission of dominant social and cultural capital discussed in the following chapters. Further, by acknowledging and respecting participants’ “hustle,” workers can more effectively encourage (re)entry of participants into the formal market.

In contrast with the most empowering programs, the most repressive programs provide less economic capital and do so in an environment of stinginess, fear, and suspicion. By failing to provide adequate work supports, such as child care, or by erring on the side of providing fewer rather than greater benefits, these programs end up reinforcing the necessity of subjugated economic capital in order for families to survive. In addition, discourses that either ignore or denigrate “hustling” fail to acknowledge the realities of many participants’ lives. Less respect and trust between workers and participants may affect the acquisition of other types of capital and eventually the success of participants in the formal labor market.

This chapter focuses on the interplay of dominant and subjugated economic capital for welfare-reliant women at the Lewiston and Strafford welfare offices. First I highlight the dominant economic capital available to welfare-reliant families through the welfare program. I consider how difficult it is to access this capital, and how the available economic resources
compare to other welfare to work programs across the country. I show that CCC provides more economic capital than most welfare to work programs, and that this benefits women and their children in immediate and long-term ways. Next I consider the subjugated economic capital that welfare-reliant women in CCC have. Here I look at what women had to say about their economic resources, as well what welfare instructors had to say about subjugated economic capital. I argue that most welfare workers, especially the instructors, at CCC have a realistic and non-punitive approach to participants’ subjugated economic capital. These workers tend to acknowledge the immense constraints and hardships welfare-reliant women face, and they largely refrain from judging their survival skills. Perhaps counter-intuitively, welfare workers who acknowledge, permit, and even encourage the use of subjugated economic capital actually end up promoting greater use of dominant economic capital. I argue that were welfare workers to take a hard line and punish welfare-reliant women for their “fraudulent” ways, this would end up reinforcing the necessity of subjugated economic capital to keep their families afloat.

**Economic Capital Transmission at the Lewiston and Strafford Welfare Offices**

I begin this chapter by discussing the economic capital available to welfare-reliant families in CCC. Although it is far from adequate, it is more than most welfare programs provide. Because the Lewiston and Strafford offices are within the same county, and thus

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48 There are several types of economic capital that I will not be discussing in this chapter. Diversion payments, a one-time grant provided to potential TANF applicants hypothetically so that they do not need to receive welfare, are very popular in some locales. These were almost never used in CCC, and on the rare occasions where they were used, applicants were carefully screened to ensure that a diversion payment was really all that was needed. A worker once explained to me that these grants would be considered in a situation where someone had recently been hired but would not receive their first paycheck for some time. The grant would then hold them over until their regular income began. I do not discuss diversion payments here. There are also several types of economic capital available to families who leave welfare as a result of attaining employment with income that disqualifies them, or do to timing out. These include child care for 12-24 months, MediCAL, an auto loan program, and incentive rewards for employment. I do not discuss retention assistance here. MediCAL, the health insurance available to CalWORKs recipients and other low-income Californians, is another crucial economic benefit, however since it is not administered by CalWORKs workers, I do not discuss it here.
subject to the same regulations, there are very few differences in the availability of economic capital at the two offices. Economic capital takes several forms in welfare offices. Cash aid is the most obvious, followed by food stamps. Child care payments are also vital. Transportation monies, reimbursements for work and school supports, and other assistance also play an important role in the lives of welfare-reliant families. While many of these are in-kind benefits, they all have a clear cash value. In addition, all of these forms of economic capital are important in order for welfare-reliant women to be successful in the formal job market, and thus for them to build more dominant economic capital.

As discussed in the Introduction, many families who apply for welfare also apply for emergency assistance. Since the process of opening a welfare case can take up to 45 days, many families apply for the meager $200 (this is the upper limit) plus food stamps that qualifying for emergency assistance will get them while they wait for their case to be opened. Shockingly, any family that has had $100 or more in income during the last month is immediately disqualified from this form of cash aid, although if they also had to pay rent during this month, they may still qualify for emergency food stamps. At least some of the workers guarded these emergency benefits as if they were “coming out of their own pockets,” as participants often complained whenever they had a dispute with a worker over their benefits.

Criteria to receive regular cash aid is almost as stringent, and the benefits almost as meager. To be eligible for cash aid, families have to have $2000 or less in cash, property—excluding a home that they live in—and other resources. A car with an equity of $4650 or less is exempted for each adult. California provides a maximum cash grant for a family of three of $704 a month. Nationally, 2005 TANF cash benefits range from $164 (Alabama) to
$923 (Alaska) a month for three-person families, with Alaska’s monthly benefit far exceeding all other states.\textsuperscript{49} California’s grant is one of the highest in the country, however so is the cost of living, especially in the Bay Area. One rule negatively affecting the cash grants of some welfare-reliant women in CCC and throughout the state is the maximum family grant rule, enacted by the State of California. This rule excludes children conceived after applying for welfare from being added to the cash grant, unless the family leaves aid for two consecutive months during the ten months prior to the child’s birth. Twenty-two other states have some type of child exclusion or partial-exclusion rule as well (U.S. GAO 2001).

With CalWORKs providing so little—despite a high level of benefits in comparison to other states—many applicants were already living with family or friends, often without having to pay rent. However one of the questions they were asked during their intake interview was whether they were responsible for some portion of the rent. If they said no, than they received a severe reduction in their grant. If they said yes, and the rent or mortgage was in someone else’s name, they had to obtain the lessee’s signature certifying that they were responsible for a portion of the rent. This particular scenario marks one of the most common situations I observed in over a year at CCC where caseworkers had the ability to assert their discretion to greatly benefit a poor family. Most of the caseworkers I observed encountering this situation tried to suggest to the applicant that they should answer this question about paying rent affirmatively. But there was significant variation in how forcefully and clearly a caseworker explained the regulations. Since any amount of rent was sufficient to warrant receipt of the full grant amount, most caseworkers began by saying something like, “Don’t you help out with the bills in some way?” If the applicant said no, the

caseworker often rephrased their question and tried again. I observed Ms. Guzman, a Strafford worker, explaining what the “government wants to see.” Often this kind of prodding was enough to get the applicant to change their answer, but sometimes they continued to insist that they were lucky to have family covering all their expenses at this time. Perhaps they were worried that the workers were trying to get them caught making fraudulent claims. Some caseworkers then completed the eligibility process, giving the applicant the much lower grant amount. But a few caseworkers got really honest and upfront with the applicant. Dan, an experienced intake worker, would eventually tell some applicants that they needed to pay some rent, or at least say they were going to, in order to get the full grant. He would help them fill out the sheet, suggesting that they pay some money each month, and then telling them to get the signature of the lessee. Technically, he broke the rules by advising applicants to lie in order to ensure that these poor families got as much economic capital as he could possibly give them. In the words of Mr. James, an instructor at Lewiston, Dan was helping women “pimp the system.”

Food stamps are the other primary benefit applicants receive when they apply for CalWORKs. Since food stamps are federally regulated, benefit amounts are the same throughout the contiguous states. The maximum benefit for a family of 3 during the 2004-2005 year was $393 (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2006). It is important to remember that food stamps can be used only to purchase food (and not alcohol or heated foods), and may not be used to purchase essentials like toilet paper and soap; money for these expenses must come out of one’s cash grant. Similar to rent and the cash grant, eligibility for food stamps is dependent on purchasing and preparing your food separately from anyone else with whom

50 See footnote 1 for an explanation of my choice of pseudonyms.
you might live. Intake interviewers had to ask families who were living with others whether or not they did this. Many said they purchased and prepared food with others. Again intake workers differed in how they handled this. Some wrote down just what the applicant said; other suggested, sometimes in vague ways, that they answer differently. A couple, like Dan, were willing—although not necessarily with every client—to come right out and explain that unless they claimed to purchase and prepare food separately, they would not be eligible for food stamps. Dan wielded his discretion more consciously and comfortably than most other workers I encountered. He seemed at ease determining who he would help and who he would not help. Dan would step far out on a limb for applicants he sympathized with, but could also be cold and “by the book” with those he did not trust or for whom he did not feel “sorry.” He had a soft spot for single women—majority of applicants—whose stories he believed. Men, on the other hand, he admitted to giving a hard time during the intake process.51 While the most empowering approach to casework would be to push the rules in all situations to benefit the client, caseworkers at Lewiston and Strafford bent at least some rules to help some poor families. And I saw no evidence of workers deliberately bending a rule in a way that would hurt an applicant or client.

Child care payments are the next most crucial benefit for which CalWORKs participants are eligible. Although sorely lacking in many locations throughout the U.S. (Schulman and Blank 2005), fully subsidized child care was widely available in CCC. Like other California Counties, CCC paid child care providers “up to a maximum rate or ceiling of the 85\textsuperscript{th} percentile of the rates charged by private market providers in the area offering the

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51 One day he told me that he did not think men should be on welfare at all. Even single fathers, he said, should be working, although when I pressed him he dropped this and spoke about two-parent families. He said he often saw the woman in a two-parent family trying to fulfill her obligations, while the man did nothing.
same type of child care” (LAO 2005; see also California Budget Project 2005). All single parents engaged in an approved work activity in Lewiston were eligible for child care assistance, as were two parent families in which the parents worked 55 hours per week or more. Numerous local day care centers and licensed family providers accepted this as full payment. After completing the paperwork in the Child Care Unit at each welfare office in CCC, parents then had to make arrangements with the available provider of their choice. They also had the option of leaving their child(ren) with a close relative who was not licensed, and the County would pay them as well.

There appeared to be plenty of child care providers available and sufficient options in terms of the type of child care covered. Although it was common to hear mothers say they were having trouble completing the paperwork or initially making the arrangements, women eventually made their way through the bureaucratic hurdles and received child care. The child care unit was a separate unit at each welfare office, and the welfare workers there only administered this benefit of CalWORKs. Most were well-liked by participants. I spent some time with the child care unit at Strafford, and the workers seemed particularly satisfied with their jobs. They enjoyed working closely with clients and being able to provide them with a much needed benefit. Unlike other welfare workers, those in the child care department played less of a punitive role, and had concrete and ample benefits to provide.53

Nationally, there is not only a dearth of subsidized child care for welfare-reliant women, but in many locales women have few choices about the type of child care they can

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52 In 2002 and 2003, when I was conducting participant observation at Lewiston, the law provided that child care providers could be paid up to the 93rd percentile of the Regional Market Rate (LAO 2004).
53 One of the workers in this department deviated from most other welfare workers that I encountered at either office by questioning whether single parents should be made to work. She based her concern on two things. First, she thought children should not be forced to be away from their only parent. Secondly, she said that child care for a family often costs as much, and sometimes more, than the parent makes in the time they are away. So the program is not cost effective either.
choose, and even fewer providers to choose from. Often the quality of the child care available for poor women is greatly lacking. Because of the many providers available for welfare-reliant women in CCC, quality appeared to be less of an issue. While I did encounter women who were having problems with their provider, I did not encounter anyone who complained about a lack of other options. One white woman, Bethany, said she looked at 30 child care providers before she found one with whom she felt comfortable. But she was satisfied, and anxious to have her child begin there rather than being with her soon to be ex-husband all day. With the important exceptions of evening and special needs care—which were also hard to find—no co-payments were required. This also distinguishes California from many other states where welfare-reliant women must contribute to the expense of child care. Several women did complain that the County would not pay for child care while they were looking for work (except when they were in the Job Search class). For single parents with young children who finished Job Search without a job, and without plans to pursue training, this sometimes posed a significant problem.

Transportation payments are another important type of economic capital for welfare-reliant families, and were regularly given to CCC participants who commuted to a work activity. At the beginning of each Job Club or Job Search Class, the instructor found out who needed a bus pass, who needed mileage reimbursed (if they had a car), and who preferred an allotted amount of cash to cover other transportation expenses. Participants who also traveled to work, school, or interviews told their instructor who then submitted the paperwork for additional transportation monies. Clients not enrolled in one of these classes communicated their transportation needs to their welfare worker and he or she was responsible for getting them the appropriate pass or funds. Of course workers differed in their
efficiency, speed, and willingness to give out transportation money. For those clients with a regular schedule at either school, work, or the mandatory welfare classes, the money always came, though often not as soon as the participants would have liked. But recipients with irregular schedules, and those looking for employment, applying to training programs, or meeting with child care providers, were less likely to get their transportation needs met. In addition to these transportation payments, a program called Rides to Success was in operation during the time I spent in CCC. This program provided free transportation to welfare-reliant men and women for employment related activities (including rides to work, interviews, etc.) for a short period of time. It was intended as a service to be used while making more permanent transportation arrangements, or for situations when one’s regular transportation fell through. Participants were rarely told about this service; however there were posters in the Strafford office at least. It appeared that few participants utilized this program.

While child care and transportation are two of the greatest barriers to work that can be met with economic capital, they are not the only ones. Appropriate clothing or materials are sometimes needed to get or keep a job—or to complete a training program. CCC was committed to providing these materials to participants. During Job Club and Job Search classes, CCC participants were given several opportunities to obtain at least one interview outfit. They were also told that books or other materials or fees needed for an approved training program would be paid by the County. Similarly, they were informed that if they needed a uniform, safety gear, or some similar item for a job, the County would pay for that as well. At Lewiston, Mr. James, in particular, encouraged participants to “pimp the system,” by taking advantage of everything they could possible get CalWORKs to provide. Both
offices had a Clothes Closet for Women, where donated (usually new) interview outfits and accessories could be obtained. Construction at the Lewiston site had temporarily closed this room, but a worker did bring some clothing into the classes. In addition, Job Club instructors often drove a van of women to one of the Wardrobe for Opportunity locations, where CalWORKs participants could choose one professional outfit. A Just for Men Clothes Closet was mentioned as well, although men, and a few women, were more likely to purchase an outfit at a nearby store and have the County reimburse them.

The above benefits and resources are the primary ways that CCC provided welfare-reliant families with economic capital. However there were a few additional sources of aid. Both offices had some monies set aside for “incentives.” These included gift certificates and cash provided to recipients upon graduation from Job Club, “awards” to those with perfect attendance during Job Club, and awards given to participants when they completed one month, three months, six months, etc. of employment. Different instructors used these awards different, but they all seemed to value them and enjoyed handing them out. Mr. James gave everyone the maximum he was allowed, regardless of attendance or participation, while most other instructors were more discerning. The Strafford office claimed to be running out of these monies, and said they had been cut from the budget. It seemed that this would eventually happen at Lewiston as well, although they appeared to have more “incentives” in stock while I was there, even though it was at a later date. A source of emergency assistance also existed at the Strafford office, where the child care unit had organized a small food pantry including baby supplies such as diapers. They held small fundraisers among the workers to keep their shelves stocked. When applicants or participants showed up hungry or in desperate need of supplies, workers provided them emergency goods from the food pantry.
I conclude this section on the economic capital available to CCC participants with arguably the most important, and without a doubt the least adequate in-kind benefit—housing assistance. Low-income housing developments and the Section 8 program—a federal program whereby eligible families become Section 8 certified through their local housing authority, and then look for an apartment or house where the landlord is willing to accept a subsidy from the Public Housing Authority as well as partial rent from the tenants—are the two primary housing assistance programs for low-income families and are entirely separate from CalWORKs. However CalWORKs does administer several small housing assistance programs, each of which may be used only once in a life-time, save particular circumstances such as domestic violence, and they may not be used in combination with one another. First, a relocation grant of up to $1500 was available to participants with a job who needed to move closer to work, child care, or transportation. A transitional grant, also of up to $1500, was available to families leaving temporary or transitional housing to move to permanent housing. An emergency grant of up to two months’ rent or $1500, whichever is less, was available to families who were behind in rent in order to prevent eviction. Finally, Homeless Assistance Temporary Shelter payments were available for homeless families. These payments included funds for up to 16 days, usually at one of several rundown motels that both participants and welfare workers thought were scary. Although there are several homeless shelters in or near CCC where homeless families can stay much longer than 16 days, they were typically full. Thus families took these 16 days of assistance, and hoped to find temporary shelter somewhere when their time was up. Of all the housing assistance resources, the temporary shelter assistance was the least adequate. The story of Juanita, a Latina mother with a baby, illustrates the depth of the problem.
I met Juanita in a Job Search class at Lewiston in September 2003. Although she had several children, she only had custody of the youngest. She had been married, and was fleeing her ex-husband’s violence—but there was no room for her and her baby at any of the local shelters. She was staying at a local rundown motel with her baby and her boyfriend, using a Homeless Assistance voucher that covered only 16 days of motel payments. Juanita did apply for jobs and inquire about GED classes during Job Search, but she spent most of the time looking for housing—temporary or permanent. She was ineligible for Section 8 because her husband was caught with drugs while they lived in housing paid for with Section 8 funds. But in any case, both Section 8 and low income housing developments had lengthy waiting lists; eligible families often waited years for assistance. This meant that there were many women living in cramped and miserable conditions who wanted to move but were unable to because of the lack of affordable housing.

I met up with Juanita during the following spring. She could no longer take care of her baby, and she chose to give her to the father—the man who had abused her—instead of involving Children and Family Services, and having her baby placed in foster care. Juanita was living on the streets with her boyfriend after being kicked out of a homeless shelter for breaking curfew. She had worked at McDonald’s for a month and half; she told me the “job ended” because she could not speak Spanish. Without a child in her custody Juanita had lost all welfare benefits, including medical care. To make matters worse, she owed CalWORKs money because they overpaid her and she spent it rather than returning the money to them. She asked me, “What did they think someone in my situation was going to do, be responsible and give it back?” Juanita’s story, while more extreme than many, represents what can
happen to poor families in areas with far too little low income housing, extremely limited homeless shelters, and soaring housing costs.

Despite the abysmal temporary shelter assistance, the economic capital provided by CCC is quite good when compared to other welfare to work programs across the country. The cash grant is one of the highest in the country, child care options and funding are abundant, most recipients receive transportation monies either in the form of gas reimbursements or bus passes, and “extras” like clothing, books, and work materials are generally available if you request them. The availability of child care, and the choices given to parents about the type of care, is particularly important when considering the long-term effects of the economic capital provided. While the cash grant and food stamps do not provide enough to live on, never mind enough to save so as to accumulate economic capital, the child care assistance allows parents to pursue both jobs and training that may lead to better jobs. In this way, the substantial investment California and CCC make in child care has the potential to help participants build more capital—economic, social, and cultural—and this provides CCC’s participants with an advantage over the majority of welfare recipients who participant in programs that have either less money for child care, fewer options about the type of care (often leaving mothers reluctant to leave their children), and most significantly, too few slots available, so that most eligible parents do not receive child care assistance at all.

All of the economic capital provided by CCC is intended to help participants as they move from welfare to work. The work supports that comprise part of CCC’s economic assistance—child care, transportation, and work/education materials—all provide the necessary economic capital to help make work in the formal economy a rational choice for
the majority of welfare-reliant women. That is, with these economic supports and the
continuation of them for sometime after work is found, work, rather than welfare receipt,
yields greater income and less hardship that welfare receipt. In this way, the economic capital
provided by CCC is consistent with PRWORA’s goal of moving welfare-reliant women off
aid and into the workforce.

Surviving on Welfare: The Reality of Subjugated Economic Capital

Getting the most economic capital out of the CCC welfare system often required
some work and some patience. Therefore only those participants who were adept at working
the system, and willing and able to be patient, received the maximum available benefits. Yet
even if you “pimped the system” in this way, it was impossible to survive on welfare alone,
although sometimes the use of other welfare programs, such as low-income housing, made it
possible to survive without help from family and friends or income from “hustling.” For
women who were sanctioned—often pending the successful completion of the mandatory
classes—surviving only on dominant economic capital—or reported forms of income and
assistance—was nearly impossible. Sometimes these women had only been sanctioned for a
few weeks, but often it had been months. Their survival without welfare, and usually without
a formal job, is evidence of the unreported economic resources many, though not all,
challenged welfare-reliant women had.

Women made ends meet in a variety of ways. A quick survey of the ten women I
interviewed shows many of the most common ways women pieced together the income
needed to survive. Most important were strategies to minimize housing costs. Five of the
women lived in low-income housing developments, where their rent was very low and
dependent upon their income. These included Shauntay, a young Black woman with one
baby, who was living with family when we first met. But when I interviewed her a few months later she had found housing with one of her welfare classmates in a low income housing development. By sharing a low rent, these two women made their small cash grants go further. Another woman lived with her adult daughter and granddaughter—who also received CalWORKs aid—in subsidized housing. A sixth interviewee had Section 8 housing, and paid only $42 a month in rent. Three additional women lived with family (parents or grandparents) or in one case, the parents of a friend. One of these women paid $350 a month in rent, one paid only utilities and other small expenses, and one paid nothing. Alexis, the only one of my interviewees whose housing costs were covered illegitimately, paid no rent or utilities. Since she did receive the full monthly grant for two people, she must have claimed—probably at the direction of her worker—to be paying something for rent. But although her worker had suggested answering the question about food preparation differently, Alexis told me that she answered honestly that she prepared food with her parents and siblings. She therefore did not receive food stamps. These three women who lived with family or friends also sometimes received other benefits from their living arrangements, such as child care and use of a car. Only one woman, Karen, lived in an apartment for which she paid market value rent. And Karen, a white woman, had significant help each month from her father, who paid the difference between the money she received from welfare, $670, and her $925 a month rent.54

In addition to these arrangements that made paying for housing possible, two women had part-time work study jobs with regular hours while they attended community college. Another had a part-time job in retail that had very irregular hours. Karen had also just begun

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54 I am not sure whether this assistance was reported, although I suspect that it was. This might explain why Karen’s grant for three people, typically $704, was reduced to $670.
a job as a chef at a country club. One woman received SSI money for one of her children, and this supplemented her CalWORKs money. Michelle, a 20 year old African American woman who was attending college classes, was not eligible for child care because she was not fulfilling her required number of hours. She was looking for part time work, but in the meantime her mother was begrudgingly providing child care for her seven-year old son, although she was demanding some payment.

Several women mentioned that in addition to their reported incomes they sometimes received money from friends, family, and children’s fathers. Several women also had income from unreported work. During our interview, Shauntay was “babysitting” her cousin’s children, and she said she relied on some money from babysitting to get by. LaWanda, a mother of three children, only one of whom was on aid due to the maximum family grant rule, said she did hair to make additional money.

Credit card scams and other illegal or fraudulent means of making money were sometimes discussed among participants at CCC, and it appeared that these methods of making a little money were neither uncommon nor necessarily viewed as unethical by some of the women. Women were typically hesitant to discuss these matters with me, however, a couple women, in addition to Alexis, did inform me of their manipulations to acquire more welfare monies. Shauntay admitted accepting homeless assistance funds when she was not actually homeless. Cassie, whose intake worker had not helped her by telling her to say she paid rent, at first received a very limited grant. When she discovered that she could be getting much more, she tried to get her grandmother to sign the form saying that she was paying rent. Yet although she was paying utilities—something I saw some caseworkers count as rent—her grandmother refused to sign the form. Eventually Cassie forged her signature and began
receiving the maximum grant for two people, $568 a month. I also met several men and women with criminal records for forgery or signing bad checks. Although these were past incidents, it is evidence of the reliance of some poor men and women on illegal means of acquiring (subjugated) economic capital.

I argue that all of this unreported income, whether via legal means of making money or not, should be thought of as subjugated economic capital, distinct from the dominant economic capital provided through the welfare program, earned through formal employment, or otherwise reported to one’s welfare worker. The availability of subjugated economic capital—for those with the necessary (often subjugated) social and cultural capital to successfully obtain it—was best expressed by Shauntay when I asked her what she thought about the time limits on TANF receipt. Despite a marked lack of all three types of dominant capital, she seemed fairly unconcerned about her future. While she may well have been in denial about a time limit that was still years away, her words are nonetheless telling about how some poor women survive without welfare:

I mean it’s easy to go out there and hustle, I mean not like, you know, just, it’s easy to go out there and get money. I mean, it’s not, but it is. You can do different things by trying to get money. Not, I mean not necessarily drugs, just… [I asked her what kinds of things.] Like, be on the corner selling shirts, and stuff. You know, all different kinds of things.

While for some welfare-reliant women, perhaps especially those who were white and/or had greater access to dominant capital, survival by hustling would be both impossible and unthinkable, for other women, it was a regular and necessary part of life.

Encouraging Work, Discouraging the Hustle: Welfare Worker Discourses

Welfare workers across the nation are responsible for imparting dominant economic capital and encouraging its acquisition through work. They are also responsible for warning
participants of the consequences of welfare fraud—including everything from failing to report the birthday money your Mom gave you, to lying in order to get more aid. Instructors at CCC spent the most time with participants and typically got to know them better than any other workers. Because the duties of instructors were far removed from those of other welfare workers who are responsible for administering benefits and keeping track of participants’ eligibility and compliance with regulations, instructors were in a unique position. Certainly they could take a hard line and report fraud when they uncovered it, as they were required to do, and as one can imagine happening in more repressive programs. Or they could pretend that subjugated capital did not exist, or that most welfare participants were fully honest and in compliance with the reporting rules. But instructors could also choose to acknowledge the realities: most welfare to work participants had unreported income—subjugated economic capital—and without it they could not provide their families with food and shelter. Most of the instructors I encountered in CCC understood that subjugated economic capital was necessary for the survival of most families on welfare, and none of them were disposed to turning people in for a failure to report gifts or hustling income. Instructors at Lewiston, where participants generally had less dominant capital and more subjugated capital of all kinds, were particularly upfront and realistic about the necessity of unreported income.

Both Mr. James and Ms. Johnson, the two instructors I observed at Lewiston, acknowledged the need for unreported income. Despite harsh anti-fraud regulations, they did not berate the women for this, nor threaten to turn them in if they found out the details, but instead they simply acknowledged the necessity of unreported income. On the third day of a

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55 This is not to say that some of these instructors would not turn people in for other, more egregious types of welfare fraud.
Job Club class Ms. Johnson wrote the grant amounts families of different sizes receive under CalWORKs on the board. Next to each figure she wrote a smaller number, her calculations of the hourly wage each grant amount equaled assuming a 40 hour work week. Thus a family of two with a grant amount of $548 a month was equivalent to working 40 hours a week and earning $3.43 an hour. For a family of four, receiving $809 a month, the equivalent pay rate increased to $5.06 cents an hour. Directing attention to these figures on the board, she said $548 is not enough money—“so we hustle the rest.” She told them that it is OK to hustle some, but you don’t want to be stuck at $548 a month ten years later. On day 6 of the class, she returned to talking about the wage chart. Rewriting part of it on the board, Ms. Johnson told the class that getting $3.43 an hour for two people is “chump change.” She said if you can survive on this amount without hustling you could be an accountant. In these mini-lessons Ms. Johnson tried to show participants that work—even minimum wage work—in the formal labor market pays more than welfare. But she was also acknowledging the near impossibility of surviving on one’s welfare check alone, and she was sanctioning participants’ unreported income, or subjugated economic capital. In doing so, Ms. Johnson showed participants that she was aware of the depth of their economic needs, that she knew something about their lives, and that she could be trusted. She separated herself from welfare workers whose job it was to ensure that clients report their finances honestly. But she also used her knowledge and acceptance of participants’ subjugated economic capital to encourage a move to the formal labor market and more legitimate dominant economic capital.

Mr. James went even further than Ms. Johnson, telling participants on the first day of class that he would not turn them in if he found out they were breaking the rules—he said it
was important for the men and women in his classes to be able to trust him. Mr. James acknowledged the way welfare “keeps you on the constant hustle.” He continued, telling participants that they are going to do hair, sell drugs, “sell ass,” do credit card scams, checks scams, or sell their food stamps. When he said, “do hair,” the class laughed. He asked if they were laughing because this is what they do. They answered affirmatively. I think they were refreshingly surprised by a welfare worker who understood many of the details of their lives and refused to judge them. Another day Mr. James encouraged them to “get out of hustle mode,” stop making excuses, and live up to their potential. On another occasion, following a discussion of racism and American history that touched on subjects as varied as the war in Iraq and environmental racism, Mr. James specifically told participants that if they have to get their money illegally, do it, use the money well, and then stop. He also warned participants that other welfare workers were looking for fraud. He even told them that the welfare department is getting “trickier,” doing things like sending out fake hair clients. When they catch you, he told them, you face a decreased grant and possible jail time. He concluded his warning by saying, not for the last time during this Job Club/Job Search sequence, “That’s why this is economic slavery.”

One might think Mr. James was discouraging the pursuit of dominant economic capital in favor of whatever type of economic capital was easiest to acquire. This would be a misunderstanding. Instead, Mr. James was fully acknowledging the barriers—particularly structured racism—that participants at Lewiston faced as they tried to care for their families while receiving temporary aid. As will be seen in the following chapters, Mr. James promoted education and training above all other work activities. Education, he insisted, was the way to leave the “hustle” behind, by ensuring that you could support your family through
work in the formal labor market alone. Mr. James also persuaded participants to conform to workplace norms in order to get and keep jobs. His vision for participants involved a complicated balance between conforming to and subverting the rules of the game, all so that participants could get ahead and leave poverty behind—both individually and collectively as African Americans.

Bill, the Job Search coach at Strafford, also established trust between his participants and himself, although he was less overt about his contempt for many welfare policies and his willingness to subvert them. Bill’s views about subjugated economic capital were implicit in the classroom but more explicit in his discussions with me. During the months that I was at Strafford, Bill spent a lot of time working one-on-one with Amir, a married father who had lost his high-paying job in the technology industry and who had spent two years unsuccessfully looking for a job with a similar salary. Amir was excused from the Job Club and Job Search classes because of his work history and education (or the dominant cultural capital he held), but Bill worked with him individually to help him with his job search. Bill told me that Amir must have had a lot of financial assistance from his family and the Pakistani community to have survived this long without a job. Bill added that this was good, but that he did not want to know the details. Here Bill implied he would be put in a bad situation if he were to have clear evidence of Amir’s unreported income. But without details, or proof, he was not responsible for reporting fraud. On at least one occasion I did see Bill, along with Anna, a school district employee who assisted in teaching Job Club and Job Search classes at Strafford, acknowledge a participants’ unreported income. In an effort to motivate her they told her that eventually all her sources of unreported economic assistance would dry up and she would need to support herself. They said, “We know you aren’t
subsisting on the county money alone—no one can.”

Although the team of Job Club instructors as Strafford rarely acknowledged or sanctioned subjugated economic capital, they did occasionally let on that they knew participants had, as they said, “underground income.” On one occasion Addy and Susan were half-heartedly leading the class through a series of worksheets that listed reasons that work was better than welfare. Addy joked that “if your underground income is too high for you to care about getting off welfare…. .” Her voice trailed off and Susan chuckled. While these acknowledgements were less frequent than at Lewiston, Strafford instructors did little to warn participants about welfare fraud nor did they threaten to turn them in if they caught them cheating. Instead, most of these instructors chose to ignore the issue, probably for the same reasons that Bill did not want to know the details of Amir’s unreported income. On one occasion I witnessed a rare discussion of fraud when Addy, a social worker and part time instructor, was concerned that Justine, an African American participant, was being left to care for her niece for long periods of time. After encouraging her to set boundaries with her sister so as not to be used this way, Addy pointed out that if Justine did not receive aid for this child, than she was committing fraud by using her welfare grant to support someone who is not supposed to be in the household. When Justine said that fraud investigators had been to her house, Addy explained that this meant that her worker must have suspected some type of fraud. Addy encouraged Justine to tell her worker about her niece and get her added to her grant if the child was in fact going to live with her most of the time. Addy did not threaten to turn her in and did not seem to be concerned about the “misuse” of welfare money. She did, however, have several concerns. She wanted to 1) secure additional money for Justine if she was going to raise her niece, 2) eliminate what she thought was the irresponsible and abusive
behavior of Justine’s sibling, and 3) ensure that Justine did not get caught for fraud.

While instructors seemed aware of—and usually accepting of—the realities of participants’ finances, other welfare workers were sometimes less aware and often less understanding. Ms. Banks, a white benefits specialist at Strafford, told me that a lot of families have unreported income. But unlike many instructors, who saw this as necessary for participants’ survival, Ms. Banks supported investigating families suspected of having significant sources of unreported income. Disillusioned about participants’ efforts, Ms. Banks complained that too many safety nets existed for welfare-reliant women in California. She said she had even begun to change her mind about California’s policy that prevented the children’s portion of a welfare grant from being sanctioned or timed-out, believing that these “safety nets” allowed parents to be unmotivated. Another Strafford worker, Ms. Wallis, a white employment specialist, told me that she believed very few welfare-reliant women had unreported income. Despite her estimate that only about 10% of her clients reported income that was not from the formal economy, she maintained that this was because most participants did not have income to report, save what they earned and reported from their jobs in the formal economy. Ms. Wallis’s assertion seems highly unlikely given previous research (Edin and Lein 1997 in particular) and the unreported income and eligibility manipulations my interviewees admitted. I believe Ms. Wallis wanted to see her clients in the best possible light—as needy and honest as they claimed to be. The difference between Ms. Wallis and instructors who accepted the necessity of unreported income without it seeming to affect their judgments of participants, is unclear. However with the exception of Bill, all the other welfare instructors at both Lewiston and Strafford were African American, and most of these lived in either Lewiston or nearby Oakland, both cities with large Black populations.
and inner city poverty. Some of them had experienced poverty and been welfare recipients themselves, and many had family members who were or had been aid recipients. Ms. Wallis on the other hand, was white and lived in Strafford, a suburb. She may have been less familiar with subjugated capital, “hustling,” and survival strategies.

Certainly there were many welfare workers, like Dan, who helped participants get as many benefits as possible, even breaking rules to do so. I witnessed Ms. Winslow, an intake worker at Lewiston, simply change an applicants’ answer to the question about separate households and food preparation, ensuring that the applicant would receive food stamps. She did not ask questions or explain the change; she simply did what would provide the most aid to the applicant. She told me that welfare-reliant women “have to do what they have to do,” and she tried to use her discretion freely to help them. But even workers who bent rules to increase participants’ economic capital often saw them as manipulative, or “trying to get one over on them,” as Ms. Winslow put it. While the instructors would not necessarily disagree with this assessment, their role as teachers and coaches rather than eligibility workers or rule enforcers seemed to put them in a unique position to appreciate the complexities and constraints of women’s lives, and to distance themselves from seeing the secrets and manipulations of participants as somehow directed toward them. In turn, they were best able to acknowledge and respect the subjugated economic capital welfare-reliant women had, while also encouraging participants to pursue education and work in the formal economy so that they might leave welfare and the hustle behind.

**Conclusion**

The goal of welfare reform is to move poor families off aid and into the formal labor market. Welfare programs, including CCC, typically spend a substantial amount of time
telling participants why work is better than welfare (see, for example, Korteweg 2003; Hays 2003). Yet, the vast majority of welfare recipients need no convincing; they already want to leave welfare behind for work. It is often assumed that providing welfare-reliant families with minimal economic assistance will spur them into the paid labor force. I have argued that this approach only prevents many women from working legitimate jobs, pushing them further into the informal economy and increasing their reliance on subjugated economic capital. On the other hand, providing families with greater assistance, understanding the necessity of subjugated economic capital and overlooking this type of routine “fraud” is one of the important ways welfare programs can encourage a move to the formal labor market.

Although participants in CCC still receive far too little in economic capital, their cash benefit amounts and the availability and relative accessibility of work supports, namely child care and transportation monies, far exceeds those of the majority of welfare to work programs nationally. In addition, there are many intake workers and benefits specialists who use their discretion to secure greater economic capital for participants. These methods also appeared to be sanctioned by some of their supervisors, who had intimate knowledge of each case dealt with by workers in their unit. Although CCC administrators and some workers were committed to catching fraudulent clients, there seemed to be at least as many workers—including some in positions to investigative and sanction participants for fraud—who considered certain types of fraud acceptable—such as the failure to report irregular cash gifts from family, or lying about the separate preparation of food in order to be eligible for food stamps. In addition, some instructors took an even more subversive position, acknowledging the existence and necessity of subjugated economic capital and “hustling,” and refusing to turn clients in for these activities.
Among welfare workers and instructors there was a great deal of inconsistency about how to think about and deal with fraud and subjugated economic capital. A more perfectly empowering welfare to work program would be comprised of a staff that consistently used their discretion to get participants more economic capital, and that consistently acknowledged and respected subjugated economic capital. However the absence of deeply repressive instructors—for example those looking to uncover fraud and report it—and the presence of intensely empowering instructors—especially Mr. James who encouraged hustling if it was done with the aim of bettering oneself and eventually leaving welfare and “the hustle” for legitimate employment—indicate CCC’s generally empowering approach.
Chapter 4: Social Capital

While providing economic capital to poor families is—at least on the surface—the primary purpose of welfare programs, it is certainly not the only function of these programs, especially since the passage of the Personal Responsibility Act. Aside from economic capital, it is arguably the transmission of cultural capital—often in the form of “cultural retraining” or behavior modification—that is the secondary function of welfare to work programs. While this will be taken up in the next chapter, here I look at what is for many welfare programs only a latent function—the transmission of social capital, or the widening of participants’ social networks. I argue that while not an aim of the Personal Responsibility Act, the ability of welfare programs to promote the development of certain types of social connections is important both for women’s success in the formal labor market and for their overall well-being.

In the previous chapter I argued that economic capital has dominant and subjugated types. In this chapter I argue that social capital also has dominant and subjugated variations. But social capital, or the resources one has through one’s social network, is more complex than economic capital and has thus been the topic of much scholarship in the past several decades. Numerous scholars have expanded our understanding of social capital by labeling different varieties and showing their empirical validity and theoretical usefulness. Rather than seeing these theories as at odds with one another, I show that several of the most important contributions to the concept of social capital may be synthesized to form a more complete understanding of the term and how social capital operates, particularly in the context of welfare offices.
Welfare programs, with a goal of moving welfare-reliant women permanently into the formal labor market, can significantly assist participants by providing them with dominant social capital, or connections that hold the potential of leading to good jobs—those with decent pay, benefits, and possibilities for promotion. They can also help women by providing connections to people who will act as a support team, encouraging and assisting them as they make this transition. But only the most empowering welfare programs foster the development of these types of social capital. Many welfare programs—those I call repressive—care little about creating trust and lasting relationships between workers and recipients, and care even less about promoting social ties between participants (see Broughton’s 2003 Readywork, for example).

This chapter begins with a theoretical discussion and synthesis of some of the most important and relevant contributions to the concept of social capital. I discuss how different types of social capital may develop within the welfare office. I then turn to my ethnographic data from Contra Costa County to show how dominant social capital can be successfully transmitted in a welfare program. Given the range of instructors at CCC, the variation among their pedagogical techniques and classroom personas makes clear the significance of individual welfare workers in facilitating the development of social capital. In particular, I show the ways the most empowering instructors promote the creation of lasting social ties between themselves and participants, and among participants. Finally, I look at the relationships welfare-reliant women have outside the welfare office, and how empowering instructors acknowledge the positive and negative social capital many welfare participants have. In a respectful and realistic manner, these instructors encourage participants to shed
negative social capital and to mobilize positive social capital—whether dominant or subjugated.

**Theorizing Social Capital in the Welfare Office**

Generally when people discuss capital, they mean what I refer to as dominant capital—or the primary system of economic, social, and cultural resources that works in combination to stratify people by class, power, and prestige. But this notion assumes that there is one economic system, and a generally agreed upon set of characteristics and people with whom power and prestige rest. The existence of an illicit and informal economy, relied on greatly by welfare-reliant women, many inner city residents, immigrants, and others, and the existence of various systems of knowledge, tastes, and dispositions—or cultural capital—as acknowledged by many scholars (Lareau and Lamont 1998; Hall 1992; Carter 2003; Lareau and Weininger 2003; Yosso 2005), suggests the existence of multiple systems of social capital as well. I therefore argue that like other types of capital, social capital falls into two broad types: 1) dominant social capital, or social connections that are acknowledged by mainstream society and thus potentially influential in the acquisition of dominant economic (and dominant cultural) capital, and 2) subjugated social capital, or social connections that are devalued. These relationships may be useful in the acquisition of subjugated economic (and subjugated cultural) capital, or they may provide social support. Some relationships may blur the distinction, or be both dominant and subjugated social capital, as discussed below.

While all welfare-reliant women encounter welfare workers (and usually other welfare recipients) at the welfare office, and thus widen their social network, the extent to which these connections are useful—or harmful—differs. Wacquant (1998) has argued that the social capital inherently created through interactions between recipients and welfare
workers in Black ghettos—of which Lewiston is arguably an example—is so accompanied by surveillance, punitive practices, and general contempt for recipients that the result is a negative, rather than positive, social capital. There are certainly studies of welfare programs, including some that preceded the 1996 welfare reforms, that suggest that relationships between welfare workers and recipients may be predominantly negative (for example, see Funicello 1993, Korteweg 2003, 2004; Broughton 2003, 2001). However I argue that in empowering welfare to work programs there is a focus on building supportive relationships between instructors and participants. Thus even amidst a policy context that enforces surveillance, seeks to lower the welfare rolls, sanctions participants who fail to tow the line, and seeks to individualize and blame participants for their own poverty, enclaves can and do exist in which participants and a handful of welfare workers build trust and develop beneficial relationships—or positive social capital. It is this potential for the development of positive social capital in welfare offices that is the subject of this chapter.

While for Bourdieu, social capital must be convertible into other forms of capital, meaning that not all types of social relationships would be “valuable” enough to qualify, Briggs (1998) expanded this notion of social capital by differentiating between social leverage—or social capital that helps one “get ahead”—and social support—or social capital that helps one “get by.” A related and equally useful set of categories was developed by Putnam (2000), who differentiated between bridging and bonding social capital. Bridging social capital—such as relationships between welfare participants and welfare workers—are those that “bridge” class or another axis of power. Bonding social capital—for example relationships among welfare recipients—are horizontal relationship and are therefore more likely to yield social support than leverage. Interactions at CCC show that social leverage and
social support, as well as bridging and bonding social capital, are available. They also indicate that bridging social capital cannot be reduced to social leverage, nor can bonding social capital be reduced to social support. In fact both horizontal and vertical relationships potentially yield both social leverage and social support.

First, relationships between instructors—or other welfare workers—and participants are a type of bridging social capital. These relationships are cultivated in empowering welfare offices where instructors, in particular, work closely with welfare-reliant women, often for many weeks, and get to know them well. These workers have the potential of becoming long-term mentors and advocates for participants. For welfare-reliant women, these relationships may lead to job referrals, references, or advocacy on their behalf—all examples of social leverage. This form of capital can be converted in the labor market into economic capital, or through education into cultural capital. But these relationships may also involve emotional support and encouragement, motivation, and help solving short term problems—examples of social support.

Social networks among participants—arguably examples of subjugated social capital rather than dominant—can be viewed as bonding social capital, although certainly welfare-reliant women do come from different racial and class backgrounds. In empowering programs community building among participants is fostered through the supportive, respectful atmosphere of the required classes and workshops. Discourses and practices that encourage consciousness raising—the sharing among participants of life experiences, resulting in a better understanding of the social forces that have shaped their lives—promote
the creation of lasting ties among welfare recipients.56

Like the bridging social capital between welfare recipients and welfare workers, bonding social capital can also come in the form of social leverage or social support. My findings confirm recent literature that suggests that even in poor black communities people have dense and useful social networks (Smith 2005; Newman 1999).57 All the welfare-reliant women I encountered had connections to those who were employed, and some had connections to people with long-term, stable employment or to others who might be influential in the formal economy. Thus while bonding social capital at a welfare office is unlikely to yield ties to an employer, it might well lead to a social connection with an influential employee. However both Sandra Smith (2005) and Katherine Newman (1999) found that despite the existence of these social relations, those with work connections often refuse to help others they know obtain a job. Smith (2005) argues that social networks have to be activated in order for these networks to be useful. Activation of social networks in poor urban black communities is largely based on how job contacts view the work histories and personal behavior (namely, to what extent their behavior is perceived as “ghetto”) of their job-seeking ties. Smith also argues that the strength of the ties matters, with primary importance given to how well the referee knows the person they are referring. Empowering welfare to work programs provide an opportunity for welfare-reliant women to expand their social networks, and to build strong ties by getting to know each other’s work histories and behavior over a period of several weeks. Those who have earned the trust of their fellow participants may have gained the type of social capital that could potentially lead to a job in

56 My use of the term “consciousness raising” follows Broughton’s (2001a, 2001b) use of it to describe the importance of the “story-telling” that took place at Jobproject.
57 This is in contrast to earlier scholarship in which it was argued, most notably by William Julius Wilson, that poor, non-working women, in particular, were socially isolated (Wilson 1996; Wacquant and Wilson 1989).
More commonly, the bonding social capital developed in empowering welfare programs leads to social support. For example, I saw participants assist each other when it came to housing, child care, transportation, and of course, emotional support. Although not necessarily convertible into other forms of capital, these less tangible benefits improve participants’ quality of life. For welfare-reliant women whose primary goal—at least through the eyes of the dominant society—is to get off welfare, I consider these social ties a form of dominant social capital in so far as they provide support for women’s movement off welfare and into the paid labor market. However these ties may also be subjugated social capital—or ties that are typically unacknowledged and devalued—even if positive, for example assisting with obtaining subjugated economic (or cultural) capital.⁵⁸ Repressive programs do not pay attention to social capital, and may create negative social capital between workers and participants. In addition, instead of creating positive dominant social capital between participants, they tend to create negative social capital as participants dissociate from one another, in a sense competing for “deserving” status. Empowering programs, on the other hand, provide opportunities for building dominant social capital in the hopes that it will help women—either with leverage or support—as they seek to enter the formal labor market.

Social Capital Transmission at the Lewiston and Strafford Welfare Offices

Although the Lewiston and Strafford welfare offices share identical written policies, County oversight, and many similar practices, they also differed in important ways. As discussed in previous chapters, the Lewiston office primarily serves African Americans. The

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⁵⁸ The Urban Poverty and Family Life Study, conducted in the late 1980’s found that in an inner city African American neighborhood, social contacts were a particularly “useful means of gaining informal work to help make ends meet…” (Wilson 1996).
office is crowded, dark, and dirty. In contrast, the Strafford office serves a diverse clientele and is spacious, light, and airy. At the Lewiston office each of the three African American instructors taught two weeks of Job Club followed by two weeks of Job Search to the same group of participants. Strafford organized their classes differently. Bill, only white welfare instructor at either office, taught all the Job Search classes, along with Anna, one of two school district employees who taught part-time at Strafford. The other welfare instructors, all African American women, team-taught the Job Club class. They were assisted part-time by Anna, also Black, as well as by a white school district employee. Thus Strafford participants had fairly uniform experiences when compared to one another. They also developed relationships with several instructors, and commonly formed a bond with one over the others. Lewiston participants, on the other hand, usually only encountered one instructor, thus their experiences varied from one another, and their options for bridging social capital were more limited. All instructors, however, promoted the development of bonding social capital, and both offices provided opportunities for gaining social capital of the bridging, bonding, social support, and social leverage varieties. I begin by discussing bridging social capital, or relationships between participants and welfare workers, and I consider both the support and leverage these relationships may provide. I then move on to bonding social capital, or relationships among participants, and again consider the possibilities for leverage and support.

*Bridging Social Capital*

While as an ideal type, empowering welfare to work programs offer positive social capital in all of their worker-client relationships, in reality this is impossible. Even in CCC, an empowering program that offers substantial positive social capital, there are instances of...
negative social capital operating between workers and participants. I begin this section by discussing participants’ sometimes negative relationships with welfare caseworkers and social workers, because to ignore this is to ignore a significant part of many welfare-reliant women’s experiences, even in CCC. I then discuss the usually positive relationships participant have with welfare to work instructors, and how these relationships benefited women.

Despite the fact that each CCC participant encountered at least four welfare workers during their initial months on aid, (and this does not include instructors or workers in charge of the child care subsidies), none of these relationships commonly yielded meaningful social capital of any type. While the intense division of labor—a topic of much debate among welfare workers and administrators—potentially allowed for greater efficiency, it was deeply confusing for participants who perennially struggled with which worker they were supposed to contact for what type of problem. It could be argued that spreading out the casework in this way gave participants an opportunity to meet various workers, thus increasing their chances of finding an ally; but at least as true was the reality that participants spent very little time with any one worker, and workers’ caseloads were extensive enough to prevent the formation of close relationships with the vast majority of participants.

Unfortunately there were examples—particularly at the Lewiston office—of welfare workers acting as negative social capital. Ms. Green, an intake worker at Lewiston was perhaps the most notorious worker at either office. I asked Shauntay, who complained about Ms. Green on numerous occasions, about her experiences with her.

Shauntay: “Um, she was just mean. Like, if I asked her a question, it was like, ‘Well, what do you mean?’ It’s, you know, she got an attitude…. She was like, ‘Oh, you know, excuse me, I’m just having a bad day today.’ But, that wasn’t … her only day.”

Kerry: She was always having a bad day.
Shauntay: She was always having a bad day. I would talk to her nice…She was mean…. That was the only one that was being mean.

Wendy, an African American mother of one, spoke at length about her problems with Ms. Green. Perhaps most egregious was the fact that Ms. Green, an intake worker whose job it was to open a case and then pass it along to a benefit specialist, held onto Wendy’s case for at least nine months, instead of the 2-3 months it should have taken her to open the case and prepare it for transfer. If Ms. Green held onto all of her intake cases for only half that long, she would be so buried in paperwork and responsibilities that it is no wonder she never returned calls. Here is some of what Wendy had to say about her:

Wendy: Let me tell you, she met me at the end of June [2003], and every time something came through my house, as far as a Notice of Action, it had her name on it. So that was the only person I knew who to call. I don’t call there much, because everything, you know, I’m like, ok, it’s going fine, it’s going fine, it’s going fine, but every time I do call, it’s like, “Well, I don’t know where your case is,” or “Give me a minute, let me let the computer warm up,” or “Can I get back to you.” I don’t hear from her for dang near two weeks. Then I call the supervisor, I can’t remember what the lady name is, but I call her … and she didn’t get back to me either, so I was getting tired of playing tit for tat so I just got tired and I didn’t call no more. But I keep telling her, you know, the only reason I keep calling you is because your name is on every piece of paper that walks through my door. If it wasn’t, and it was somebody else’s name, I wouldn’t call you no more.

Kerry: Does she think that there’s someone else that you should be talking to?

Wendy: Well hell, if it is, she should have directed me to that person! . . . No, she don’t tell me nothing. She barely do nothing. . . . And then when they have the nerve to tell you, “Only leave one message. I will return your call within 24 hours.” That’s bullshit.

Kerry: Does she ever return your calls?

Wendy: No. ‘Cause I got to call her.

After telling me that she had just gotten a notice notifying her that her case had finally been transferred to a benefits specialist—meaning that she no longer had to deal with Ms. Green—Wendy went on to tell me about her recent “altercation”: 
Wendy: …We just got into an altercation, me and Ms Green, the other week about $31 in food stamps. Come on now. $31 in food stamps is not gonna make me or break me none. . .

She sent me a notice of action stating that I was getting $134 for that month. I already knew, that’s what I usually get. She told me that they didn’t—she didn’t figure my money out right—so she owed me an extra $31. I got that! She sent me another notice of action stating, “Your housing budget was not figured out correctly and we owe you another $31.” I never got that [money]. And it was never, honest to God, on my soul, it was never put on my card. So I had kept checking my card and checking my card, ‘cause see before I even got the notice, the ones, … when there was $134 and the $31 that brought it up to $165. I had already spent that. So my card was down to zero and 28 cents. So my $31 never got put on it, that she “claimed.”

Kerry: Cause you would have noticed that.

Wendy: You feel me? So then, when I’m on the phone with her, she’s like, “Well, I have all my cases scattered all over the place, everybody else is working on my cases, and…

Kerry: [sarcastically] Clearly, that’s your problem . . .

Wendy: You feel me? I’m like, ok, well, I said, I just have one personal question to ask you. “It is 8:30 in the morning, Ms. Green. Do you possibly think that I got, that I don’t have nothing else important to do, but to sit on this phone with you and argue about $31.” And that’s what I told her. She’s like, “Well, Ms. Foster, it says here that the $134 … was on the card on the 9th of March. Then the $31 got put on on the 10th or something of March. Then the next $31 got put on on the 16th of March.” I said, “Ok, you know what?” I said, “I guess you think that I just really don’t have …” And I said, “You know what? Can you please possibly just tell me what I’m getting for the month of April?” She said “$165.” I said, “Thank you very much, and you have a good day now.” And I hung my phone up. Because I mean, I have, like I said, I barely call the woman ‘cause I don’t get nothing out of her. So I’m just like, hell with it. But now, do you possibly think that, I’m on my way to work, it was a Thursday morning, I’m on my way to work, and do you think I’m about to lie over a, I mean, $31 dollars…Come on now. $31 ain’t gonna get me nothing but a pack of spaghetti and maybe a bag of chicken.

So, and like I said, she just blew out of proportion and made a big ‘ole, damn commotion about it at 8:30 in the morning and I wasn’t trying to hear it so I hung up on it. Case closed. And, hell, where the $31 at?

This situation illustrates the types of problems welfare-reliant women regularly have with workers and the problems they encounter as they struggle to get the benefits they are due. It also illustrates the suspicion that surrounds them whenever they make a complaint. Failing to return phone calls, treating participants with suspicion, and under-calculating families’
benefits—sometimes by hundreds of dollars a month—were common problems described to me by many women. Sometimes well-meaning workers were implicated, and sometimes a worker despised by one participant was considered “okay” by another. But a few workers were overtly “mean,” as Shauntay describes Ms. Green, or completely incompetent, as Wendy describes her. Ms. Green, one of the few consistently described as both mean and incompetent, was a clear example of negative social capital in that her involvement in their lives was almost always a negative experience involving trouble getting their benefits, additional phone calls and work, and a variety of negative emotions. Despite a few consistently despised workers like Ms. Green and a few particularly egregious mistakes on the part of workers, I would describe much of the social capital developed between participants and welfare workers as neutral—neither particularly beneficial nor particularly harmful beyond the mostly “fair” provision of benefits and enforcement of regulations.

Fortunately the social capital that routinely developed between welfare-reliant women and welfare instructors was distinctively positive. Although I only occasionally saw participants who had long-term, meaningful relationships with their regular welfare workers, this type of relationship was common with instructors. All the instructors I observed at both Lewiston and Strafford had a good rapport with the majority of their participants and all offered—to some extent at least—the possibility of a long-term relationship.

Instructors had a great deal of autonomy. Broadly, they were expected to hold Job Club and Job Search classes as scheduled. Each class was two weeks long. Job Club classes were scheduled from 9:00am to 4:00pm, but usually ended by mid-afternoon. Job Search was more flexible and varied by instructor, with some of the required hours always spent out of the classroom. A formal curriculum for the classes existed, but instructors had great leeway,
as seen in Chapter 5. At the end of Job Search, instructors were also required to write a brief report on each participant to pass along to the assessment workers—the social workers who met one-on-one with participants to create a binding welfare to work plan once the mandatory classes were over. These plans could include education or training but always ended with employment. In order to write this report, most instructors met with each participant individually so that they could pass along the particular goals and desires of each welfare-reliant adult, but the amount of time spent in these meetings and the focus of the discussion varied by instructor.

Bill, the Job Search instructor at Strafford, and Mr. James, one of the Lewiston instructors, were the most giving of their time, regularly setting up individual meetings with participants that often lasted an hour or more, and sometimes meeting with a given participant on several occasions. They were also the instructors most able/willing to use their leverage to benefit participants. As a local business owner, Bill had many community contacts, and he regularly gave participants his personal contacts, and sometimes made phone calls for them. He also promised to track down job leads for them in the evenings, although he did not always follow through. In a one-on-one meeting with Louise, a white mother with experience as an auto mechanic, Bill began by taking a look at her resume. After a discussion about her career goals, he gave her the names of two women-owned mechanics or auto body shops. Although they were not quite what she was looking for, Bill assured her that stopping in and talking to these women would help her figure out the best path to pursue, even if they did not lead to employment. But he was also hopeful that these contacts might be helpful with employment as well.
Like Bill, Mr. James was willing to put himself and his name on the line for many of his participants. On one occasion he sent a participant to a store and directed her straight to his mother, who was a manager there. This level of social capital activation was not automatic, but depended on how responsible Mr. James viewed each individual participant to be (See Smith 2005). More commonly he agreed to be listed as a reference for participants who were filling out applications.

Many of the instructors were willing to quietly advocate for their participants—for example to request that they be allowed to pursue an education program that was not on the approved list, or to talk with a worker about a problem a participant was having. But Mr. James was particularly vocal about his role as an advocate within the welfare office. He often wrote long reports for participants advocating that their educational plans be approved—and he was clear with participants about his role as advocate for them. When another participant reported that her worker would not approve a fashion design program, Mr. James promised to “fight” for her. In a one-on-one meeting with Georgia, a Black woman in her 40s, Mr. James began by checking her time clock and confirming that she had time to complete a training program. She explained that she wanted to become a cardiovascular technician, and she showed him some information about a training program in another county. He asked her what types of jobs she would get with that, and satisfied with her answer, said that they first needed to confirm that she could not complete the training somewhere within Contra Costa County. They checked online, and it appeared that she would need to travel into San Francisco for the training. After trying to determine how serious Georgia was about completing this program, Mr. James said he would talk with her assessment worker. He warned her that the fact that she had been sanctioned for failing to complete Job Club and
Job Search in the past would be used against her. I asked if her age would also be a problem. He said yes, and then said that assessment workers want people to work and they do not like to pay for programs in other counties. He then talked about how the assessment workers “hate him,” and said, “They’ll be really mad about this.” He seemed gleeful about the ensuing conflict, and determined to make this happen for Georgia. Although he did not always win these fights, he did put his heart into them, and the participants were always grateful. And when he lost, he helped participants come up with an alternative plan that would eventually allow them to achieve their goal.

Wendy, who complained about Ms. Green above, first encountered Mr. James in 1994 when he was a caseworker and she first moved to the county and applied for welfare. She talked to me at length about his advocacy. She said he called her a “success story,” since for many years Wendy worked and supported herself and her daughter while also going to school.

**Wendy:** So, anytime, even when I have a problem with Ms Green, I go straight to him. I go straight to him. And, now, he like, “Well, why is this goin’ on?” or “Why are you…?” ‘Cause like when I first started . . . [Ms. Green] was only giving me money for my daughter. And I wasn’t gettin’ no money for myself. And I’m like, you mean to tell me I’m only getting $300 and something dollars from welfare. Come on now, I know better than that. So, I was like, could Martin, you know, Mr. James, could you please tell what’s going on, and why am I only getting this . . . and he was like she had cased my whole . . . She put me as a one person household instead of a two, or whatever you want to call it. And, I mean, I go, I always go behind her, yes I do. Every time I feel that something is wrong, I go right to him.

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59 I spent time with several of the assessment workers at both Strafford and Lewiston, and I spoke with many participants about their experiences with these social workers. While I did not encounter any workers willing or able to approve any training or education program a participant desired, all in all I found them quite approving of education and training as opposed to immediate employment. They did not have the enthusiastic, empowering, anti-establishment persona of Mr. James, but they were very far from the kind of repressive workers described by Hays (2003), Broughton (2003, 2001), and Korteweg (2003, 2004). I heard quite satisfactory things about these workers from most welfare-reliant women as well, although complaints about the actual regulations concerning training and education were abundant. For example, the 18-24 month time limit was thought to be unreasonably short by most participants—as well as many workers.
Kerry: How many times do you think you’ve done that?
Wendy: Oh, my god, numerous. I mean, numerous.

Wendy told me that she had gone to see Mr. James within the last couple weeks to inquire about the missing $31 in food stamps. Although he could not fix the problem, he told her that he believed that she had not gotten the money, and this trust was meaningful for Wendy. I asked her if she felt he had ever gone out of his way to help her, to which she replied,

I know he has... he has went over and beyond the call of duty as far as I’m concerned. . . He has done many a things out of his way for me. . . He has told me numerous times when they have job um, job fairs, and lettin’ me know that he was one of the drivers and if I wanted to go he would save a seat on the bus for me. Or you know, if I call him from my own home, with a personal question as far as like, the money or the food stamps, whatever, he’s always calling me back on my own phone number or my cell phone number, and givin’ me whatever answers I need. I wish I had him for a worker.

Wendy also told me that until she sat through one day of Mr. James’ Job Club class, she had not known that the welfare program would pay for her books and some other school expenses. Until hearing Mr. James’s “pimp the system” message, she had no idea that she was entitled to this type of support.

Mr. James exuded sincerity and genuine caring for the participants in his classes. Sixteen students completed his Job Club class when I was there, a number considered large by all. Mr. James told me that this was a large class because many participants would only take the class with him—some had tried it with others, like Shauntay, and others had heard about him and refused to attend the classes until it was his turn to teach. Georgia and Latrice told me one day that if they had been assigned a different instructor they never would have stuck with the class. They said this despite knowing that dropping the class would lead to being sanctioned—something Georgia experienced when she failed to attend in the past.
Both Bill and Mr. James were also particularly vocal about their continued support after the classes were over. Not surprisingly, these two instructors were regularly visited by past participants who came to ask for advice, references, inspiration and support, and also to share good and bad news. In this way they provided social support, as well as social leverage. For Bill this continued contact was institutionalized, since instructors at Strafford were also charged with retention work, or providing services to participants who have found work and left the welfare rolls. One day a woman recently fired from Trader Joe’s came to see Bill to seek help finding a certified nurses’ assistant training program. On the same day another woman visited Bill and the other instructors at Strafford. Although she had also lost her job, she was already enrolled in registered nursing classes. Bill greeted these women warmly, hugging one of them, and continually promising his help. One of my interviewees told me that Bill had given her three job leads one week, even though her class was over. She said he really went out of his way to help her. Two women I interviewed had the following positive things to say about Bill:

. . . it’s like he was right on the button with me; he must tune into everybody like that individually. But he is the perfect guy. If he lost his job, I would be so sorry for the welfare up there. Because he just tunes into each individual and just knows: he is a motivator! He should just be like at a conference motivating speaker, make millions, ‘cause he’s really good. . . . He’s just, he’s really good at his job and, I, I haven’t called him in a long time and I feel like I should call him and tell him that I still think of him, you know? … (Cassie, white)

I really enjoyed him too. . . he really tries to help you out. Um, if you know what you want to do, you know, he’ll try to find a way to help you. You know, I can get in contact with this person or that person, or I know this person. And he’s willing to stay with you until you—even if you don’t know what you want to do—stay there, sit there with you and try to figure out whatever you want to do with you. And he just doesn’t leave you high and dry, “Well, ok my day ends at 12, see ya!” And that’s the other kind of support that you actually need, I mean, he calls himself a coach—that’s fine! I mean, if you want to call yourself a coach, that’s fine. I mean, to me, it’s more
like he’s a life-changer. Um, and I actually forgot to tell him that today to, cause I was down there. Because he actually made me see things in a different light. He made me see that the dreams that we have aren’t that—are reachable, cause like, I thought, you know, I want to become a cop, how am I going to do that? I’m crazy, or you know, the other dream that I actually told him that I had, because he asked me what are your dreams, and I said, “Well I want to be, you know I wanted to become police officer.” He goes, “Ok, what else, and, I, I know you have something else in there.” I was like, “Well I, a long time ago I wanted to become a singer, but, you know, I’m 24, I’m too old.” He was like, “What? You’re not too old!” He’s like, “You want to sing in front of the class?” I’m like, “No, I don’t want to sing in front of the class.” Um, but you know, just the police officer dream, he made it real. He broke it down to me, he spent time with me, you know, out of his own free time, that he doesn’t even have to do. You know, free time that he’s not even getting paid for. And, just basically broke it down to me, on the board, you know, step by step, you can do this, this, this, and that, and reroute yourself to go here and there and there, and you can do it. It’ll take a little bit longer but you can do it. And I was just, I think I was just sitting there with my mouth open, like, I would have never thought of that. . . . (Alexis, Latina)

While Bill was well-liked by most participants, a few found him too intense or felt he did not follow through with his promises. Mr. James, on the other hand, seemed to have no detractors, save for some of the other welfare workers and supervisors. His were the only classes I attended where no one complained about the instructor or about being bored.

Shauntay, a young Black mother, claimed that Mr. James was the only welfare worker that had helped her. And she was not alone. During the month that I observed Mr. James teaching, there was a near constant stream of past students knocking on the classroom door hoping to talk with him. He made time for them whenever possible. One day he introduced a

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60 Like most of the Strafford workers, Bill worked a 4-10 schedule, working ten hours a day four days a week. However it was not uncommon for him to come in on his day off. Bill taught his classes in the morning, and met with participants in the afternoon. He also had paperwork and other tasks to complete for his retention cases. It’s unlikely that he met with Alexis on his day off, and more likely that he was meeting with her during time that he could have been completing paperwork or other tasks at his desk.

61 I should note that Mr. James frequently spoke of women in an extremely objectifying manner, and on several occasions I saw women in his class look uncomfortable, and even comment on his inappropriateness. His other qualities were so positive that they seemed to overshadow his sexism. Despite my general lack of tolerance for sexism, even I found myself able to appreciate Mr. James’ many positive qualities despite his jokes at women’s expense.
past student who stopped by to use the resource room and say hello. Mr. James talked
happily about all the ways she had pimped the system: getting the county to buy her a rolling
backpack, a gun for her police training, and then using her financial aid money to buy new
furniture. He also told how her attitude had changed for the better once she began school. She
agreed. The class applauded her. Another day a participant stopped by who was now enrolled
in a culinary program at the local community college. He needed photocopies for a school
project, and Mr. James was happy to help him utilize the programs’ resources in this way. He
considered such requests resourceful.

Mr. James and Bill provided social leverage in two ways. By providing job contacts
or information about education and training possibilities Mr. James and Bill helped connect
participants to the dominant labor market. But as advocates for participants within the
welfare office, they also acted as a bridge between participants and their other welfare
workers who were typically less lenient and empowering in their decision-making. These two
instructors also provided crucial social support to the participants that went through their
classes. They were viewed as encouraging, motivational—even inspirational—by many of
the men and women they coached.

Other instructors also provided participants with positive bridging social capital. At
Strafford a team of instructors taught Job Club. Since these instructors had less to do with
finding employment or pursuing education, they were less influential as social leverage,
however they did offer social support. They routinely providing advice and encouragement,
and they, too, often maintained relationships with participants after the class ended. 62 Addy,
who co-taught one week of Job Club, was also an assessment worker. She sometimes

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62 Again, several of the Job Club instructors at Strafford were retention workers, responsible for following up
with past participants who still qualified for transportation funds, etc.
advocated for participants with other assessment workers, however she was less likely to advocate for particularly unusual or unlikely requests—perhaps in part because she worked under an assessment supervisor—than were Bill or Mr. James. She also encouraged more “realistic” goals, such as certified nurses’ assistant training for people, and she often thought of education and training programs as more appropriate for the younger women. For example, she told Shannon, a motivated 18 year old African American woman, that “because you are young you can go to school and work weekends,” or make some similar arrangement (emphasis added). Addy was a good listener, though, and willing to be persuaded by persistent participants whose training goals were within the usual allowable range.

Susan, the instructor who spent the most time in front of the Strafford Job Club classes, was particularly well-liked. Though about 20 years older than many of the women she instructed, Susan was single, childless, and youthful, and perhaps better able to connect with the many 20ish women who passed through the class than the other Job Club leaders who were older with grown children. Susan was also funny, and most of the women appreciated her humor. Cassie credited her with giving her the idea to go back to school (see Chapter 5). And although she concluded the following statement by talking about Bill and how he was really the most amazing instructor, Cassie said “Susan was really a great instructor and lecturer and, and joking and good . . .” Alexis, the young Latina woman who also raved about Bill, said of Susan:

Susan, um, she basically, she just made the class. I mean, just her presence, it was just like, she’s Fab. . . It’s just her whole presence, it, you know, she makes you wanna be there. She’s just like, so, I don’t know what other word to use, just bright! You know, just like, whoo. . .That’s really motivating. When you don’t have support any other place, that’s important, that’s just like, “You can do it!” and you know, “Don’t give up…”

For many Job Club participants, this type of encouragement was rare. Many had not been
told that they were capable of going to school and having a career. Sometimes a little encouragement and praise went a long way.

At Lewiston, Ms. Johnson paled in comparison to Mr. James, however taken on her own she also provided participants with valuable bridging social capital. Although she did so in less typical and arguably influential ways than Mr. James, Ms. Johnson gave long-term assistance and support to many of the women she taught. One of the unusual ways in which she did this was by offering to drive participants home or to interviews and schools. While providing transportation was neither part of her job description, nor a clear example of social leverage, it was a way that Ms. Johnson provided obvious assistance to some of her participants. Women were usually shocked by her offer to drive, but also grateful. Sometimes this seemed to provide the needed motivation and support to get a participant to sign up for classes, and in this way could be viewed as social leverage. While this was an unconventional example of social capital, knowing someone with access to a reliable car who is also knowledgeable about the area and willing to drive you to unfamiliar locations without asking anything in return was a significant help for many welfare-reliant women.

Ms. Johnson also cultivated long-term relationships with some of her participants. Two women I interviewed told me how their relationship with Ms. Johnson continued after their classes were over. More than six months after completing the required classes, Clara, a young Filipina woman, and one of only a handful of women I encountered at Lewiston who was not African American, had recently called Ms. Johnson to thank her for all her help. She said of her instructor, “She keeps telling me if I need her help, you know, just call; and she’s really nice.” Clara told me that Ms. Johnson had given her the idea to go to school, and had helped her enroll by driving her there. LaWanda, an African American woman with three
children, also formed a close and long-term relationship with Ms. Johnson. After the classes ended she contacted Ms. Johnson for help before going on a job interview: “Right before I went on my interview I called Ms. Johnson and said, ‘OK, I’m all freaked up, so, what should I say?’ And she told me, and I ended up getting the job…”

Not everyone found Ms. Johnson to be so helpful. Shauntay, a young African American woman, had been dropped from Ms. Johnson’s Job Club class because of poor attendance. I met her when she successfully completed the Job Club/Job Search sequence with Mr. James. She told me that Ms. Johnson’s class was boring, especially compared to Mr. James’s class. She said:

I don’t know, [Ms. Johnson] just feel like she was so good. I don’t know. It was like she just treated it, she treated welfare people different. I don’t know, like people on welfare different. Like ‘I’m better than ya’ll,’ or ‘I can talk to you any kind a way because you’re on welfare…’

Ms. Johnson seemed unaware of how she was often perceived. Since I shared Shauntay’s assessment of Ms. Johnson, I found it particularly striking when Ms. Johnson told the class that she treats people, particularly people on welfare, well, and better than a lot of workers. While probably true that Ms. Johnson treated participants better than some of the other welfare workers, there seemed to be disjuncture between how she believed she acted and how a significant minority of participants and others perceived her.

Certainly these workers were not perfectly empowering; they were not loved by all nor did they avoid all the pitfalls of the repressive instructors that Korteweg (2003, 2004) and Broughton (2001a, 2001b, 2003) describe. But overall participants had remarkably good things to say about all of their instructors, which contrasted with the wide range of opinions about the other welfare workers. Given the difference in feelings toward different types of welfare to work employees, it is perhaps not surprising that many of the instructors also
complained—usually in private conversations with me—about the rigidity, irresponsibility, and uncaring attitudes of other welfare workers. Mr. James told his participants that he had essentially been instructed not to tell them to what they were entitled. Such direction only made Mr. James angrier and more likely to help participants “pimp the system.” Ms. Johnson was less publicly critical about other workers, but almost as bitter. She told me privately that many of the complaints I heard from participants about their caseworkers were accurate. Both Mr. James and Ms. Johnson shared a primary complaint: caseworkers just did not care. Both instructors were frustrated and angry that despite repeated invitations, almost no assessment workers or other caseworkers ever came to Job Club class to meet or check in with those participants’ who were part of their caseload. They saw this not as a result of being overworked, but as a clear measure of the lack of caring and lack of dedication these workers had for participants. Bill also had complaints about CCC’s program and other workers. He complained to me about the lack of retention services at Strafford. He wanted more extensive services, with retention workers visiting participants’ jobs and potentially intervening before small problems became big ones. He told me that he had spoken to administrators about his ideas, but neither they nor his co-workers were interested. He described his co-workers as “bureaucrats” seeking “as little face-to-face contact with clients as possible.” In this way Ms. Johnson, Mr. James, and Bill shared a perspective on CCC’s welfare program: they each cared deeply for their participants, and they each believed that no one else cared nearly enough. No doubt it was this level of caring that was crucial to the formation of lasting ties—positive bridging social capital—that they provided to so many of the welfare-reliant men and women with whom they worked.63

63 I should note that my experiences with other welfare workers, including the brief interviews I conducted with
Bonding Social Capital

Because welfare to work classes were the primary place where welfare-reliant women came in sustained contact with one another at the welfare office, instructors at CCC also played important roles in the creation of bonding social capital. Of course, these bonds likely included both dominant and subjugated social capital. That is, women provided each other with emotional and practical support that helped them in their search for employment and efforts to get off welfare. But women may also have provided each other with “hustling” assistance, or simply been friends to one another in ways not clearly tied to the goals of the welfare program—or in other words—in unacknowledged ways that are typically ignored by the welfare system. I contend that in empowering programs, where social bonds between participant are fostered and participants are encouraged to help one another make a permanent transition to “legitimate” work, dominant social capital between participants is more likely. In other words, by encouraging a certain quality of relationship between participants, welfare instructors can promote bonds that provide some type of support for women’s move into the formal labor market and off welfare.

Within their classes, all the instructors I observed fostered a sense of camaraderie and encouraged a noncompetitive, supportive atmosphere. In turn, participants sincerely wanted each other to succeed. Women regularly shared job leads and information about welfare and resources with one another. During Ms. Johnson’s Job Search class, which unlike Mr. James’s and Bill’s classes did not include instruction, participants helped each other learn to use the computers, sign-up for email accounts, post their resumes online, and use fax machines. There was a true spirit of cooperation. Although I never observed a clear example many of them, confirmed the wide range of caring and competence expressed by participants and instructors.
of social leverage occurring between participants in relation to the labor market—for example an instance where a participant used someone they knew to get another person a job—there were many instances that could be considered examples of leverage. For example, participants who had already signed up for classes sometimes helped other women with the same process. One time I witnessed a woman poking her head into a class of participants who were using the computers; she asked if anyone had a job lead for a position as a cook. A woman immediately said, yes, that at her mother’s workplace they were looking for a cook. She gave the woman the information. Of course these two women did not know one another, and thus the woman with the lead did not offer her mother as social capital. But there was every indication that most participants would have assisted many (though not all) of their fellow classmates with a job referral and personal connection if they had had one to offer. Since most jobs were found after Job Club and Job Search were over, this may well have happened without my knowledge.

Although it is common for welfare-reliant women to dissociate themselves from other welfare-reliant women, often viewing them as lazy or undeserving, (Kingfisher 1996; Seccombe 1999; McCormack 2002; Broughton 2001a, 2001b, 2003), I rarely saw this take place between participants within the same class. Two exceptions stand out. The first took place at Strafford, when Bethany, a white mother in her thirties, said privately to me on the fourth day of Job Club that she did not belong here. She said her mother had told her that she was not supposed to be here, while other people chose to be here. Bethany was not only white, but had been middle class and married, though now she was getting divorced. She saw her situation—and seemingly her humanity—as different from that of the other women. A second exception occurred toward the end of Ms Johnson’s Job Search class. For several
days participants and Ms. Johnson had believed that an absent classmate had been hired and was working, and was therefore exempt from the attendance requirement. When participants discovered that she was, in fact, only waiting to hear if she’d been hired, they told Ms. Johnson. Yet even Ms. Johnson, certainly more infatuated with rules and procedures than Mr. James or Bill, told them to mind their own business. In this way she discouraged “tattling” and in turn promoted unity rather than divisions between participants.

In order for a real and lasting community to develop, however, it is not enough to encourage participants to help one another and to discourage divisiveness. Participants must be brought together in a supportive, non-judgmental space where sharing and consciousness raising are encouraged and dreams are not squelched. All instructors encouraged the sharing of past work experiences and future goals. But instructors differed in the extent to which they encouraged sharing on a deep, emotional level. Yet it is through this deep sharing and the process of consciousness-raising that the participants in many classes formed bonds with one another that lasted beyond the scope of the class.

Most of this deep sharing took place in Job Club classes, where formal curriculum topics included domestic violence, stress management, and self-esteem—topics ripe with possibilities for consciousness raising. Job Club classes at Strafford and Ms. Johnson’s Job Club class at Lewiston followed the formal curriculum topics, but in different ways and with varying results for the development of bonding social capital. Mr. James’ Job Club class at Lewiston, on the other hand, abandoned the formal curriculum and only minimally covered these topics, however the curriculum he developed in its place, along with his pedagogical style, promoted the formation of deep bonds between women.

Broughton (2001a) has written about the sharing and consciousness raising that took
place at Jobproject, a welfare to work program in the Chicago area that I classify as empowering. He writes, “The story-telling (about domestic violence in particular) seemed to change many participant’s [sic] understanding of themselves, their predicament, and each other. In their reflections on [the class], they referred to the collective identities they forged as poor women subject to gender, class, and racial inequities” (31). He describes how participants perceived the consciousness raising as improving their self-esteem and in turn their ability to find and retain employment. While these are important effects—and certainly in line with the empowerment about which I am writing—in this chapter I am interested in the way such sharing of deeply personal experiences—and in the case of Mr. James’s class, beliefs—fosters the development of long-standing relationships between women, and how these relationships support women’s move from welfare to work.

Job Club instructors at Strafford relied heavily on prepared curriculum, however they used several sources of material and mixed them up as they saw fit. In addition to a team of women instructors, both the counselor—whose primary job was to link welfare-reliant women interested in counseling services to outside resources—and the part-time domestic violence counselor—gave presentations and stopped by several times during the two week period. The first week of class centered on job readiness, or getting yourself and your life in order. Strafford instructors had a broad view of what it meant to be ready for work. They encouraged participants to take care of legal, health, and emotional problems before seriously looking for work, since any of these issues would sabotage a new job. They therefore spent a lot of time talking about women’s lives, and the problems women in the class were facing. Just as Broughton found domestic violence to be the center, in some ways, of women’s sharing, I too found that domestic violence, coupled with relationship problems (usually
involving some controlling, violent, or irresponsible behavior) were the primary topics of women’s intense sharing at Strafford. Considering that two of the five women I interviewed from Strafford were on welfare as a direct result of leaving violent partners, a third indicated that her marriage ended due to changed behavior—including aggression—when her husband returned from Iraq, and another discussed constantly moving as a child because her mother was running from her abusive boyfriend (and this woman was still a child, 13, when she got pregnant), there was no shortage of domestic violence experiences to be shared.

The instructors of Strafford’s Job Club class encouraged this sharing by giving the class plenty of time and space to talk. This included a lot of unstructured class time, as well as breaks and lunch when smaller groups would gather, in and out of the classroom. The instructors, especially Susan, but also Addy, would also share things from their own lives. Susan talked about her failed marriage to a man who became a drug addict while they were together. Addy talked about her own struggles and those of her grown children. Instructors reacted calmly to even the most horrific stories women shared. They maintained a sense of hopefulness about the future—that women could really change their lives regardless of their current or past experiences. They kept their preaching to a minimum, often advising but rarely judging. They asked a lot of questions. I sensed that many of these women were not used to being asked about themselves, their desires, their goals. It seemed that many were not used to people caring what they had to say.

The following paragraphs chronicle the third day of a Strafford Job Club class, illustrating the constant stream of sharing that occurred, and how quickly participants were willing to tell their stories. The instructors began the day with a discussion of a stress assessment sheet the class had filled out the day before. Susan asked people how they scored,
and offered a few tips. She talked about the importance of a support system. While some participants had quite low stress levels, according to the assessment, others scored higher.

When Bethany, a 34 year old white woman, attributed her high stress level to her soon to be ex-husband, a discussion about relationships ensued. Instructors issued warnings and advice, and Susan shared her own experience with her crack addicted ex-husband. Another participant explained her high stress score as related to her strained relationship with the baby’s father. A brief discussion about parenting and fathers followed, with participants and instructors suggesting that mothers refrain from telling their kids bad things about their fathers.

When break was announced, much of the class remained and continued talking and sharing with each other and the instructors. Two young women passed around pictures of their babies. Jackie, a 51 year old white woman, told Susan and Anna that her mother had lied to her about her father’s death. When she was 17 her mother had her committed for self-destructive behavior. Her father, who she had believed was dead, came to get her. She then learned that her father had been sending her gifts for every holiday her entire life. Her mother had either hid them or sent them back, but never let Jackie have any of them. Jackie eventually got the gifts from her father, but of course she had outgrown them. Later, Rosa, a Latina participant, shared that she had a hearing problem that wasn’t diagnosed until she was 15. Until then her family had thought she was just a troublemaker.

Job Club continued with a presentation by the domestic violence counselor. Several women shared their experiences of being abused by husbands or boyfriends—including

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64 On Day 2 Jackie had told several of us that her step father raped her and got her pregnant when she was 12. Her mother did not believe her until the baby was born. It was this sequence of events, and her mother in general, that Jackie said led to her drug abuse which began when she was a teenager and continued for about three decades.
relationships that were ongoing. (See Chapter 6 for details of this workshop.) The day
continued with a workshop on “Controlling Your Anger.” Rosa and another Latina woman,
Shauna, shared stories of their own anger and violence. Rosa had gotten into a fight with a
woman. Shauna—who said she had not gotten into a fight in years—admitted that she was
recently cooking in a kitchen alongside a 15 year old boy who was teasing her. When he
refused to stop she hit him over the head with a pan. She did not think she had hit him that
hard, but he had to get staples in his head. Without judging, Susan asked the women what
they could have done differently. Then she told the class about her own past. She had been
prone to fight until one day when she had been planning to get into a fight with another high
school girl. As she was sitting thinking about the fight she had planned, she was pulled out of
the class and told that her father had died unexpectedly. She said she never thought about
fighting that girl again.

Steve, a male participant who had previously shared with instructors and perhaps a
few others that he suffered a great deal of physical violence as a child, shared a story about
how he tried to “go after” his obnoxious boss. This time Susan was more judgmental; she
strongly advised against such behavior in the workplace. This led to a story from Kalia, an
African American woman, who told the class how she had been sexually harassed when she
worked at the post office. After getting fired she went to her boss’s supervisor and got
rehired. She then got in trouble for having long nails, which was supposedly a safety hazard.
But she wasn’t fired again until she threatened to file sexual harassment charges. Another
participant with a long history of work at the post office said she knew these supervisors, and
they were really bad. Susan validated Kalia’s experiences by saying that she too had heard
that the post office (presumably locally) was a difficult place to work. Susan ended the day
by talking about breaking bad habits and creating healthy ones. She said you have to speak positively to yourself, and love yourself.

This day in Strafford’s Job Club class shows how willing participants were, in the right setting, to share intimate details of their lives—and how many of these details had to do with anger and violence. It also shows the extent to which instructors and other participants withheld judgment, often just listening, while sometimes offering advice for how to change one’s life and/or behavior. Most importantly, it shows how participants, already on day three of what for most would be 20 days of classes, were willing to trust each other with personal information. It was this sharing, and the connections made between people’s experiences, that eventually led participants to form bonds with one another. Although I did not follow this group of participants through their Job Search class, I observed another group of participants for the full four week cycle of classes. This gave me an opportunity to see how an already bonded group became even closer under Bill’s tutelage.

Along with Anna, Bill focused his class on how to find and keep a job. Although there wasn’t much formal class time spent on sharing personal details of one’s life, except for job histories and career goals, Bill was not oblivious to women’s personal lives. He liked to gain as much information as possible about participants’ situations, so he could best understand them and guide them. Bill kept participants engaged with each other during class time in different ways than in the Job Club class. Participants practiced interviewing each other and sharing the information they gathered. Women reported on their efforts to find employment, and talked about any difficulties they were having in this regard. Bill also shared a great deal about himself, including his personal life. He talked about the different jobs he had had, including one from which he had been fired. And he talked about difficult
times in his life, and how counseling once played an important role in helping him be a better husband and father.

All of this sharing made Bill very accessible, and it kept those participants who had just completed Job Club together in a comfortable space for sharing about their own lives. Most importantly, it promoted a supportive atmosphere where participants were expected to empathize with one another and support one another, rather than competing with or judging their fellow classmates. The kind of intensely personal sharing that took place during Job Club now took place during breaks, in small groups, with or without the instructors. In a conversation early one morning with Anna—Bill’s co-teacher—and several participants, Louise, a somewhat older white participant, admitted that Anna probably did not remember her because she looked very different the last time she took this class. She explained that she had been on drugs then, and that she had now been clean for a year. Another participant responded, “You look radiant!” Then Cassie, another white participant, shared that she had been clean for nearly 5 years. A discussion about family members with past or present substance abuse problems ensued, followed by a discussion about teaching one’s children about drugs. Although Cassie and the other women had only known Louise for a few days—since she had not attended Job Club with them—they worked hard that morning to show their support.

On the last day of Job Search, Cassie tearfully told the class that she had cried that morning as she thought about how much she would miss the instructors and fellow participants. She said that just as she was feeling more relaxed and ready to go back to work and school she had to leave her support. Anna agreed that people formed “good bonds” in these classes. Later Natalie, a Hawaiian mother of 5 who had only joined the class for Job
Search, said she would miss the class and group too; she joked that she was thinking about not getting a job so she could come back. In the weeks that followed this class, I spoke with a few of the participants, who were always able to give me an update about several of the others. I heard that they had helped each other with babysitting, looking for housing, moving, and of course, providing emotional support.

Job Clubs at Lewiston also provided bonding opportunities for participants, although here the importance of the instructor for setting the stage for this type of gelling becomes clearer. Ms. Johnson, as she put it, was “straight forward.” She contrasted her style to that of Mr. James, whom she viewed as acting more like a friend to participants. Mr. James, in turn, described his style as completely the opposite of Ms. Johnson’s. He said he focused on “sharing and building bonds.” Both claimed that they put more time and energy into their classes than the other instructors. Ms. Johnson shared little about herself in the classroom, or rather, what she did share was rarely about her personal struggles and never made her “look bad.” Unlike Bill and Susan at Strafford, and Mr. James at Lewiston (as shown below), Ms. Johnson rarely talked about her mistakes and regrets, but instead talked more about the good choices she had made. Her unwillingness to make herself vulnerable in front of the classroom made her seem removed from most of her participants, and it did not encourage the kind of deep sharing that is necessary for consciousness-raising to take place and deep bonds to form. In addition, she seemed wary of close bonds forming between participants, once telling me that she kept the classroom door locked during lunch so that participants could not spend time with each other without her being present. She said this prevented conflicts that she did not know about. Ms. Johnson did not trust the women, and the result was less trust and bonding among participants.
The first group of participants I observed in Ms. Johnson’s Job Club class did not appear to form any sort of bond with each other, at least not prior to Job Search. The second group, which I observed in Job Search, did seem to gel better, and some friendships existed, although not in the way I observed in Mr. James’s class or in at least some groups at Strafford. In neither of Ms. Johnson’s classes did I witness much sharing of deeply personal information nor were any links made between personal problems and a broader social reality. The few moments in which I saw glimpses of consciousness raising had nothing to do with Ms. Johnson, who was often not present (which was ironic given her concern about conflicts forming when she left them alone). For example, two women discussed the difference between caring for one’s grandchild without the involvement of the foster care system, as Meredith, a 59 year old Black woman was doing, and caring for a family member with foster care assistance (i.e. monies). According to Anaya, who was approved to be a foster parent pending finding suitable housing, Meredith was losing out on hundreds of dollars a month. After I asked more questions about this, and said I found it interesting that the government was willing to provide adequate funds for you to care for someone else’s child but not your own, several women stopped to think about this. They saw the injustice.

Mr. James missed few opportunities to raise the consciousness of his participants, at least when it came to race and poverty. (Gender awareness, on the other hand, was not his strong suit.) Unlike the Strafford Job Club teachers, for whom domestic violence was a major topic of conversation, Mr. James focused more on race. In a discussion that began about diversity in the workplace, Mr. James and the class engaged in a dialogue about race and ethnicity that began with identifying the common stereotypes of different groups. The sharing that ensued was honest and intense. Participants talked about their experiences with
racism. Some shared their deep anger. They discussed their stereotypes and prejudices, as well as their positive experience with people different from themselves. There was disagreement and yelling, especially about “foreigners,” namely Middle Eastern immigrants. Mr. James tried to get participants to see that their stereotypes of Middle Easterners, gays and lesbians, etc. were akin to stereotypes of African Americans and welfare recipients. The participants that saw this connection immediately tried to make it clear to those who did not. Mr. James facilitated this process by sharing his own stories as well as providing information and insight that helped move the group through their stereotypes. Through sharing their thoughts and feelings, welfare-reliant men and women learned more about their own oppression and that of others.

During the next three weeks, Mr. James’s class continued to share with one another, and continued to have moments of consciousness-raising. Evidence of the deep bonds, trust, and sense of community that formed were most apparent on the last day of the Job Search class, after we had been together for four weeks. Fourteen of the original 18 people completed both classes. This was an extremely large graduating group, and an extremely low attrition rate. After the last class and pizza party many people lingered in the classrooms, watching a movie, taking pictures together, and copying down each other’s contact information. Women described the four weeks as a powerful and inspiring experience. After the class, I kept in touch with a few of the women for several months. During this time I know that many of the women were in contact with one another. Several of them also met each other regularly in the resource room at the Lewiston office. They planned to have study groups together when many of them started college in January. Months later, when I conducted interviews with a few of the women, I found that Shauntay and another classmate
had moved in together. Both had been living with family members and had wanted desperately to move out, but rental costs were prohibitive. They were able to get a new apartment in a low income housing development together.

I do not know how many of the relationships that began during the classes lasted beyond six months. But I believe that the bonding social capital that developed had lasting benefits for participants. While a few of these benefits may have been tangible—computer skills learned, rents shared, children babysat—more of them were intangible. Women found community, other mothers in similar circumstances, trying to do the best for their families. They found support and encouragement—things easily glossed over by researchers but of undeniably importance in the lives of these women.

Creating a “Dream Team”: Mobilizing Social Capital Outside the Welfare Office

Of course welfare-reliant women enter the welfare office with their own networks of social relations. Some of these relationships are positive—somehow contributing to women’s well-being—and others are negative—draining women of their emotional and/or material resources without a significant positive contribution. Some of these relationships may be key to women’s hustle (subjugated social capital); others may encourage participation in the formal labor market (dominant social capital). Other relationships may have nothing to do with economic capital, but may be subjugated social capital because it is a devalued relationship (e.g. an unemployed boyfriend). Still other relationships may be dominant social capital, or acknowledged (e.g. a clergy person). However a particular relationship is not confined to either subjugated or dominant social capital—but instead the distinction is blurry, and people may move within these categories.
Historically the welfare system, including welfare workers, has denied the significance of poor women’s social networks, and has sought to limit the help women are allowed to receive from these networks. Even today, reporting requirements force women to report the fathers of their children for child support collection, as well as requiring women to report money received as gifts. These requirements have a negative effect on women’s relationships as well as limiting their economic capital. Such policies drive a wedge in what may have been supportive, healthy relationships. Empowering welfare programs acknowledge the range of social capital participants may have, and encourage participants to mobilize their social capital toward their (required) goal of leaving welfare for work. All the instructors at CCC promoted participants’ success by fostering supportive relationships within the welfare office and by encouraging women to identify and nurture supportive relationships outside the office and to end negative ones.

Mr. James began his Job Club class by talking about assembling a Dream Team. Reminding participants about the U.S. men’s Olympic basketball team from 1992, he told them to figure out who is on their Dream Team—who will help them and what particular qualities or resources these people have. He described how he had lost friends and a wife along the way, because they had different goals than him and because they got in the way of his dreams. “If you’re not for me you’re against me,” he told the class. Throughout the class Mr. James referred back to his metaphor of the Dream Team, encouraging people to figure out who is in their social network and how those people can help them. And he remained adamant about getting rid of the people in your life who hold you back or discourage you from accomplishing your goals.
Mr. James was not the only instructor who encouraged participants to think about the people in their life and how they are positive or negative forces. Ms. Johnson discussed friends as being a potential source of support, as well as being “time robbers”—things that eat up your time and keep you from getting important things done. On another occasion she talked about the difficulty of getting motivated to go to school or work when others in your house—namely husbands or boyfriends—are doing nothing. She also discussed one’s social networks as a way to find jobs—especially jobs that are not listed in the paper—thus acknowledging that participants may have dominant social capital of the leveraging variety.

At Strafford there was a lot of discussion about networking, and an assumption that participants had connections to people who could potentially act as social leverage. In both Job Club and Job Search, participants were encouraged to tell everyone they knew that they were looking for a job. Bill even had participants do informational interviews with employed people they knew; he told the class that in the past these interview assignments had led to jobs—sometimes until the participant started asking questions, family members or friends did not even know they were looking for work. Instructors also encouraged the development of new social capital outside the welfare office. Addy had participants complete a worksheet called, “My Support Circles.” Anna told a woman who wanted to be a nurse to surround herself with nurses and nursing. She said, “Just like if you hang around with drug dealers you are likely to end up dealing, if you hang around with nurses…”

Negative social relations were an equally important topic at Strafford. In a discussion about stress in which the instructors encouraged participants to avoid certain group situations where there is peer pressure, Anna said, “If they’re your friend, they’ll respect your choices.” On another occasion an instructor talked about the advice her cousin received in “rehab,”
“the same old people are in the same old places doing the same old things,” so in other words, you need to make new friends once you leave your old bad habits behind. Addy talked about the potential for family and friends to be “sabotages,” especially if they like it when you are home (as opposed to working). She described the way her husband, who was out on disability and lonely at home, tried to get his friends to take time off to hang out with him. In a conversation about job and interview readiness, Anna told a story about an employee with an abusive husband who would show up on the job. She said if you are in a situation like this you should talk to one of the counselors; you are not ready to work. Susan then talked about how hard it is to have friends, and especially a spouse, pressuring you not to go to work. Sometimes participants did talk to their welfare workers about domestic violence. Cassie, a white mother who left her abusive husband soon after having a child, had a temporary waiver on her work requirements so that she could go to therapy and take some time to get her life together before having to go to school and work.

CCC’s instructors acknowledged the importance of women’s social networks. They realized that many have sources of support and even potential social leverage, while also understanding that many have negative social capital—people who weigh them down, destroy their self-confidence, and sometimes endanger not only their chances of self-sufficiency but their lives. Discussions about abusive partners and friends who resented women’s efforts to change their lives abounded, as did conversations about utilizing your social connections and creating a positive circle of support, or Dream Team. Instructors offered advice but few judgments and they talked about negative influences in their own lives—past partners or friends who had led them, or tried to lead them, astray. By acknowledging the positive and negative social capital participants had, and by
simultaneously refusing to judge women for their abusive relationships and providing support and encouragement for them to think about leaving, instructors built trust with welfare-reliant women, and encouraged the development of positive social capital—in and out of the welfare office—without reinforcing negative social capital.

**Conclusion**

Instructors at CCC created classroom environments where women supported one another as they looked for employment, signed up for classes, searched for housing, and conducted other business with the aim of self-sufficiency. Many of the instructors went a step further, sharing their own vulnerabilities and failures, encouraging sharing and consciousness raising, and refraining from suspicion and judgments in an attempt to create a space where welfare-reliant women could share their own experiences. Through this sharing, consciousness was sometimes raised as women realized that domestic violence, or racism, played major roles in landing many of the them at this point in their lives. Perhaps even more importantly, this deep sharing also led to the formation of lasting bonds with other welfare-reliant women. These relationships provided women with emotional support, but also a variety of practical assistance that was much needed as women—often simultaneously—had to find suitable housing, look for work, and enroll in classes, all while raising children.

Instructors also offered themselves as mentors and acted as bridging social capital, providing both social leverage and support. They acted as references, provided job leads, advocated on behalf of participants within the welfare office, offered advice, provided encouragement and inspiration, and sometimes just listened. Although instructors rarely played a direct role in landing a welfare-reliant woman a job, they were regularly a key link between participants and the formal labor market. And they offered what was often much
needed encouragement and support, not only during the classes, but often long into the future.

The combination of bridging and bonding social capital, and social leverage and social support that developed in Job Club and Job Search classes provided women with an important network of people to assist them in (re)entering the formal labor market and in surviving day to day. Women became each other’s cheerleaders, pushing each other to move forward despite inevitable setbacks. The class became a sort of “we.” The instructor’s “You can do it!” became about a plural “you.” Participants had an opportunity to see themselves as part of a collective, and to hope for each others’ success as well as their own.

The dissociation of welfare-reliant women from each other that many scholars have described was very much alive in CCC—but very rarely between women who attended Job Club and Job Search classes together. In class after class, I witnessed women coming together to help and support one another. Led by instructors who modeled and fostered cooperation, respect, and understanding, women carved out a positive space for themselves and each other, the benefits of which no doubt included social capital in the form of social leverage—but just as importantly—social support and an improved quality of life.
Chapter 5: Cultural Capital

Along with economic and social capital, welfare to work programs have an opportunity to transmit and encourage the acquisition of cultural capital. Cultural capital, a concept most famously developed by Bourdieu, is commonly understood as the knowledge, dispositions, and tastes of the (white) middle and upper classes. Cultural capital is hereditary in that it is passed down from generation to generation through early socialization. Formal education also transmits cultural capital, but the educational system privileges those who have already acquired cultural capital from their home environments, thus increasing the disparity. Since, like all forms of capital in Bourdieu’s (1986) formulation, cultural capital is convertible into other forms of capital, those with early opportunities to accumulate cultural capital are at a distinct advantage not only culturally, but socially and economically. In this way cultural capital is key to the reproduction of inequality.

While this commonly accepted description of cultural capital and its transmission is important for understanding how the upper classes maintain dominance, it in fact perpetuates inequality by constructing those in the lower classes, and those whose racial, ethnic, religious, or other characteristics differ from dominant society, as lacking. Since the concept of cultural capital came into frequent use several decades ago, many scholars have called the notion of a singular, homogenous cultural capital into question (Lareau and Lamont 1998; Hall 1992; Carter 2003; Lareau and Weininger 2003; Yosso 2005). Carter (2003), for example, posits that there are dominant and non-dominant forms of cultural capital. She looks in particular at low-income African American youth, and shows that there is a set of knowledge, language styles, and tastes that are valued within this community. Status and power among poor urban Blacks are not obtained by demonstrating dominant cultural capital,
or “acting white,” but by performing “blackness.” Carter explains, “‘non-dominant cultural capital’ embodies a set of tastes, or schemes of appreciation and understandings, accorded to a lower status group, that include preferences for particular linguistic, musical, or interactional styles. Non-dominant cultural capital describes those resources used by lower status individuals to gain ‘authentic’ cultural status positions within their respective communities” (138). Viewed in this way, we can expect welfare-reliant women to have and to value non-dominant, or subjugated, cultural capitals.\footnote{I would also argue that dominant cultural capital has various permutations, for example differing between middle and upper class groups, and across national and regional lines.}

However subjugated cultural capitals are just that: subjugated to dominant ones. They are therefore far less convertible into dominant social and economic capital. Carter (2003) shows that poor Black youth do not only hold non-dominant cultural capital; they also hold some dominant cultural capital, and they understand in which situations to display which set of cultural markers. In the context of welfare to work programs, the question arises: Do welfare-reliant women have enough dominant cultural capital to succeed in the labor market, and if not, what do they need? This chapter begins by attempting to answer these questions. I then argue that pedagogy, the way in which instructors teach the various forms of cultural capital disseminated in welfare programs, greatly influences how much dominant cultural capital is acquired and utilized by welfare-reliant women. Here I will show that the most empowering welfare to work programs not only provide the greatest opportunities to acquire cultural capital, but they do so through a critical pedagogy that encourages the accumulation of more cultural capital and empowers participants to use dominant cultural capital strategically. One key element of this critical pedagogy is the acknowledgment and respect given to participants’ subjugated cultural capital.
The remainder of the chapter explores the empirical data from the Lewiston and Strafford welfare offices. Here I describe the transmission of three types of cultural capital imparted by welfare programs: formal education or training, job search skills, and dominant norms of appearance and behavior. I pay particular attention to the pedagogical approaches of instructors. I argue that overall, Contra Costa County provided more opportunities to acquire cultural capital than most welfare programs—such as those repressive programs described in Chapter 2—and that the teaching styles of the instructors, though varied, included elements of a critical pedagogy that empowered participants.

**Dominant Cultural Capital: Who Has It and How Much?**

Despite popular images that homogenize welfare-reliant women as a group, welfare recipients actually differ from one another in many ways, including the amounts and types of dominant (and subjugated) cultural capital that they hold prior to entering the welfare office. While many welfare-reliant women have not completed their high school diploma or GED—or have but still test poorly on basic reading and math literacy—many others have completed training programs, and a few even have two-, and rarely four-, year degrees. And although some welfare participants have a clean draft of their resume and extensive experience interviewing for and obtaining employment, others have no resume and have never been on an interview. A few, almost always the youngest women, have never had a job. Among the majority who have worked, some have worked a series of short jobs, quitting or getting fired after a couple months each time. Others have held skilled positions for many years. Some welfare-reliant women come from families where welfare use was common and jobs in the formal economy rare. Others come from middle class backgrounds where dominant cultural capital was taught all along.
So while some welfare-reliant women would benefit from all three types of dominant cultural capital offered by welfare programs, a few need none. Most would benefit from some, especially formal education or job training—typically the least available form of cultural capital—and job search skills. Job search skills and assistance with resumes are generally appreciated by welfare-reliant women across the board, even those in the most repressive programs (Broughton 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Korteweg 2003). Job search skills are often lacking, even for people with substantial dominant social capital. That is why college and university career offices, as well as programs for unemployed professionals, offer this type of assistance to job seekers, and self-help books on these topics abound. Job search skills are not taught in schools, and they are unlikely to be passed down by family members, thus many people, including welfare-reliant women, welcome help in this area. Another reason welfare-reliant women consistently value job search instruction is because it teaches a largely uncontroversial set of skills. This form of dominant cultural capital is unlike other types, such as language, appearance, and dispositions, for which subjugated cultural capitals also exist and arguably compete for welfare-reliant women’s adherence. Job search skills have no subjugated counterpart, and are therefore taught and learned in a fairly straightforward fashion.

The third, and most contentious, type of dominant cultural capital available to welfare-reliant women is dominant norms of appearance and behavior. This is also the focus of most required classes in repressive welfare programs and is present even in most empowering programs. The most relevant portion of this dominant cultural capital is related to the labor market. From hygiene lessons to how to handle conflicts on the job, norms of workplace appearance and behavior are taught to welfare to work participants across the
county. While often perceived by welfare-reliant women as “material we already know,” the link between these habits and skills and the workplace is clear. Instructors and employers are quick to relay stories of welfare-reliant women who are lacking this knowledge that is often thought of, even by many welfare recipients, as common sense. But while hygiene and standards of appearance may be known and followed by most welfare-reliant women, other workplace behaviors, such as when it is considered acceptable to miss work, may not be. In addition, poor women may be knowledgeable about workplace norms, but may resist them.

Welfare classes play the role of convincing welfare recipients that they should follow the rules. But how they do this and how successful they are varies greatly.

In addition to teaching dominant norms of appearance and behavior for the workplace, most welfare programs also teach norms for society in general. This is less relevant to success in the labor market, and is often taught as “lifeskills.” Typical topics include nutrition and food safety, money management, stress management, self-esteem, goal setting, and parenting. One program in the Midwest even taught “proper etiquette,” or “how to present oneself as a lady” (Adams and Adams 2006). There is an assumption that welfare-reliant women are lacking not only money and the skills and habits needed to hold a job, but also the basic skills, dispositions, and values necessary to lead ‘responsible,’ ‘respectable’ lives. Formal lifeskills curriculum is almost always written from a white, middle class perspective so that, for example, parenting lessons impart white, middle class standards of discipline rather than those stemming from within the communities from which most welfare-reliant women come. Built into the curriculum is the judgment that dominant cultural norms may also be unable to follow these norms, such as attendance and tardiness rules, due to their role as (often single) mothers. This reality cannot be changed by welfare offices, however they can acknowledge the constraints that women face in meeting job requirements that are impossible for most mothers, and they can refrain from sanctioning women who are fired due to these circumstances. They can also encourage women to take certain steps to avoid these situations, such as arranging for back-up childcare.

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66 Women may also be unable to follow these norms, such as attendance and tardiness rules, due to their role as (often single) mothers. This reality cannot be changed by welfare offices, however they can acknowledge the constraints that women face in meeting job requirements that are impossible for most mothers, and they can refrain from sanctioning women who are fired due to these circumstances. They can also encourage women to take certain steps to avoid these situations, such as arranging for back-up childcare.
behaviors and values are not just different, but inherently better, than subjugated ones. When such formal curriculum exists, as it did in CCC and seems to in most programs, if and how the material is presented commonly falls to the instructors, those welfare workers who typically spend 2-4 weeks with nearly every adult welfare recipient in the program. They determine what to present and how to present it, decisions that largely affect how the material will be perceived by welfare-reliant women, and thus the extent to which the material will be utilized once the classes are over. The content and pedagogy used in these classes also affects women’s self-confidence, motivation, and future plans.

**The Importance of Pedagogy**

Studies show that aspects of dominant cultural capital, often called “soft skills,” including motivation, attitude, personality, and ability to interact with customers, are highly valued by employers, and that this trend is increasing.\(^{67}\) There is also evidence that employers perceive African Americans, especially Black men, to be lacking in these attributes (Moss and Tilly 1996). If we begin with the assumption that workers who follow white, middle class standards of appearance and behavior in the workplace will do better in the labor market than those who either do not know these standards or resist them, than it makes sense for welfare to work programs to try to impart this type of dominant cultural capital. My experience in CCC leads me to believe that a significant part of the task, from the perspective of welfare to work programs whose job it is to help welfare-reliant women get—and hopefully keep—jobs, is convincing welfare-reliant women that resisting dominant

\(^{67}\) One study of Minnesota employers who have partnerships with local welfare to work programs showed that employers see a lack of soft skills, including general social skills and staying on the job despite work frustrations, as the primary barrier to employment and job retention for welfare recipients (Owen et. al. 2000). Another study of employers in regards to hiring welfare recipients showed that most employers would want assurances that potential applicants would have no problems with absenteeism, tardiness, work attitudes, or substance abuse (Holzer 1999).
norms of workplace appearance and behavior is self-defeating. I argue that participants receive the information differently from instructors who teach these norms as the ‘proper way to behave in the world,’ vs. instructors who acknowledge resistance to these norms as understandable but ultimately personally ineffective.

I show that the use of a critical pedagogy, or at least some elements of one, is beneficial for welfare-reliant women. Building on Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, scholars in the field of education have considered how to best teach students of color and those whose cultural backgrounds differ from the hegemonic white middle class. As Arnetha F. Ball (2000) explains, a critical pedagogy “encourages reflective consciousness and the questioning of social practices and arrangements that promote ruling interests. In classrooms that practice critical pedagogy, serious attention—whether implicitly or explicitly expressed—is given to enlightening learners concerning life possibilities and focus on issues of power and the struggles that have historically shaped the voices, meanings, and experiences of marginalized others” (1012). A critical pedagogy is aimed at getting students to transform their lives and current situations; it is aimed at liberation (Freire 1970; Lynn 1999; Ball 2000). Ball argues that even encouraging students to consider life’s vast possibilities, and “introduc[ing] the notion of choice” constitute elements of a critical pedagogy (Ball 2000: 1012). In the context of welfare to work classes, this means deviating from the work first philosophy to give participants greater opportunities and more choices. It means questioning the formal curriculum, welfare regulations, and why the participants are poor and on welfare in the first place. Certainly welfare to work instructors are not trained in any sort of pedagogical approach, never mind critical pedagogy. However to varying extents,
some instructors do engage in critical, dialogic, and emancipatory discourses and practices in the classroom (Broughton 2001a, 2001b; Little 1999, 2001; Ball 2000).

Building on Ball’s study of three African American teachers in community-based literacy classes, I argue that in the context of mandatory welfare to work classes, four elements of a critical pedagogy emerge. First, dialogue and participation in the learning process is crucial. Participants need to be actively engaged, not passive learners. Secondly, a critical pedagogy includes a focus on expanding participants’ views of their life possibilities and helping them to see all the myriad options—this presupposes that there are choices available to participants, which there must be for a program to be truly empowering. This second element is complicated. Many welfare to work classes offer a truly false hope and a false sense of choice. They push welfare-reliant women into work within a few weeks, and that work typically consists of low-wage, dead end jobs. These repressive welfare programs focus on the importance of work regardless of wages and other benefits, and they tell participants that all jobs are inherently good (or good enough) and that hard work will lead to better jobs (Korteweg 2003; Broughton 2001b; Adams and Okojie 2005; see also Hays 2003). Empowering programs, on the other hand, still motivate participants with the hope of a better future, but they are more honest, and offer real choices. These programs allow and encourage education and training, and they encourage participants to find good jobs, also giving them additional time to do so. By helping participants to map out a career plan involving many small steps, they allow participants to dream big while being honest about the length of time and many steps necessary to reach their goal. A discourse of choice is key to motivating welfare-reliant women in most programs. Choice can be part of an empowering pedagogy, as described by Ball (2000), or it can be a cover for the reality of welfare-reliant
women’s deeply constrained lives, as articulated by Morgen (2001). In programs where participants have significant choices about whether to pursue work or education and what type of job to look for and accept, choice is real, although still constrained. In repressive programs, where only work is allowed and participants must take the first job they can get, choice is so limited that the discourse is meaningless, or rather, meaningful in its condescension and inaccuracy.

Thirdly, a critical pedagogy includes opportunities for reflection, questioning social practices, arrangements, and institutions, or thinking about existing power relationships. In the context of welfare recipients, there must be space for them to think about and criticize the welfare system and ideally there is also space to think broadly about inequality. Finally, respect for the individual participants, their life experiences and choices, and the dominant and subjugated cultural capital they hold is important. If instructors do not have a basic respect for participants, and an understanding of what their lives are like, empowerment is not possible.

While a critical pedagogy is liberating and thus important in its own right, I argue here that it is significant in welfare to work programs because it aids in the transmission of cultural capital. It does this in two primary ways. First, dominant norms of appearance and behavior taught through a critical pedagogy are received very differently by welfare-reliant women than when these same norms are taught uncritically. When taught critically, welfare-reliant women are allowed to question the norms, and even be angry about them. In addition, the subjugated and dominant cultural capitals that women bring to the classes are acknowledged and respected, and trust is built between participants and teachers. Welfare-reliant women are then left to decide to what extent they want to conform to these norms. By
presenting this dominant cultural capital as a choice, albeit a restricted one, women are empowered. Participants may choose to utilize dominant cultural capital to further their own personal goals without internalizing the norms and leaving behind their own cultures. This process also builds self-respect, and thus self-confidence.

The second way that a critical pedagogy helps in the transmission of cultural capital is more direct. Critical pedagogies encourage education—both self-education through reading, thinking, and talking with others, and formal education. In addition, a critical pedagogy that critiques the welfare system and race, class, and gender inequalities actually builds participants’ cultural capital by expanding participants’ critical thinking skills and self-confidence. While not important (and arguably deleterious) for many low-wage jobs, critical thinking skills are essential in many careers and educational settings. They are also crucial to envisioning and participating in social change, and thus contain liberatory potential.

Critical pedagogies, by valuing women’s experiences and the knowledge they bring to the class, and by encouraging dialogue and questioning assumptions, build self-esteem and self-confidence. In both repressive and empowering welfare to work classes women are told that they need more self-esteem, and that this will help them move toward self-sufficiency. While self-esteem and self-confidence will hardly help one overcome a lack of skills and experience, and will certainly not improve harsh labor market realities, they are no doubt helpful. Women with solid self-esteem are less likely to be depressed by the often tedious and disheartening experience of job searching. They are therefore more likely to be able to stick with the search despite repeated rejections. In addition, they are more likely to believe they can learn new skills on the job. While there is evidence that self-confidence is less important to employers than many other “soft skills,” I argue that a certain amount of self-
confidence is needed for a job-seeker to present herself as enthusiastic and highly motivated, and these are qualities that are highly valued by employers. 68

The remainder of this chapter is spent examining the transmission of cultural capital at the Lewiston and Strafford welfare to work offices. I consider the availability of the three types of cultural capital outlined above, and the various pedagogical styles utilized by instructors. I show that CCC’s instructors utilized key elements of a critical pedagogy and that welfare to work participants responded with enthusiasm. Although long term outcomes are unknown, the availability and accessibility of cultural capital in CCC may well have improved women’s chances of finding and retaining decent jobs. But arguably just as important, I contend that the experience of attending classes where elements of a critical pedagogy were present, had benefits for the women in terms of their sense of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and hopefulness about their futures.

Cultural Capital Transmission at the Lewiston and Strafford Welfare Offices

Despite the demographic and aesthetic differences between the Lewiston and Strafford offices, and the different types of empowerment that I discuss in the following chapter, there were many similarities between Strafford and Lewiston. Despite a formal work first policy, both offices allowed participants to pursue education and training, often before looking for employment. I look at the regulations, practices, and discourses surrounding the option to choose education over work at each of these welfare offices. I then turn to the two types of cultural capital taught in Job Club and Job Search classes at both offices: job search skills and the dominant standards of appearance and behavior in and out of the workplace.

Formal Education and Training

68 See Moss and Tilly (1996) for a discussion of the soft skills that employers want.
One of the most significant differences between repressive and empowering welfare programs has to do with the availability and accessibility of educational and training opportunities. Of particular importance are the circumstances under which participants are able to choose them over work, how long they can pursue them, and what types of programs are available. Federal TANF participation rules state that adult basic education, including GED preparation, is not a primary welfare to work activity, and thus that this type of education may only count toward one’s participation requirement if they are engaged in 20 or more hours of a primary activity.\(^{69}\) CCC adhered to this rule, which limits the number of participants who pursue basic education, as well as to California state rules allowing no more than 18-24 months of education, training, or subsidized employment (California Department of Social Services and Health and Services Agency 2002). However, CCC approved a broad range of vocational and postsecondary programs as meeting participants’ work requirements, including many programs that led to a two-year degree. Contra Costa Community College offered programs that were approved for CalWORKs participants as a primary work activity. These included automotive, business, and culinary arts programs. Some of the programs that appeared to be the most popular among welfare to work participants were the early childhood education and family daycare programs, and the medical assistant and various nursing programs.\(^{70}\) Other educational programs that were always or sometimes approved included regional occupation programs that provided computer and clerical courses, as well as other training programs that were very likely to lead to employment, such as truck driving school.

State and county rules required that participants look for employment before pursuing

\(^{69}\) 45 C.F.R. \(\text{\textsection}261.31;\) See also Contra Costa County 2003. The Deficit Reduction Act of 2006 has imposed greater restrictions on education and training, among other activities.

\(^{70}\) See the Contra Costa College CalWORKs Website (2006) for a complete list.
education or training, but in practice participants at both Lewiston and Strafford could spend their time in the required Job Search class researching and applying for educational programs and looking for work to supplement their hours in class. Social workers made the final decisions regarding which educational programs to approve for particular applicants, and there was therefore some slight variation between the two offices, and from participant to participant. Despite a belief by all instructors that education was a valid and often worthwhile work activity for welfare to work participants, Lewiston’s Mr. James was unique in his focus on education not only as a means to a better job, but as a means to personal growth and political engagement.

At Lewiston I observed two of the three regular instructors, each for 4 weeks. Both Ms. Johnson and Mr. James were strong advocates for education, encouraging clients to use the available time to begin pursuing their dreams. One participant told me how Ms. Johnson encouraged her to go to school and how this changed her life. Clara, a very young, very shy single mother, credited Ms. Johnson with giving her the idea of going to school. She told me she had not even considered it until Ms. Johnson suggested it to her. When I talked to Clara about 6 months after this occurred, she was enrolled in college and had gotten a work study job through the CalWORKs office on campus. She attributed her successes both to the encouragement of Ms. Johnson and her actual help in driving her to the campus the first time. Many other participants in Clara’s Job Search class were also pursuing education.

While Ms. Johnson only pushed education for those she thought would most benefit, Mr. James advocated the skill-building path indiscriminately. One of the first things he told

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71 Exceptions are made for participants who are in self-initiated programs prior to applying for aid. See California Department of Social Services and Health and Services Agency 2002; Contra Costa County 2000.
72 The third instructor did not grant me access to her classes.
his class was that he wanted to help them think about a career and long term success, and that he advocated college or vocational training to make this happen. Later he told them that “college changes you and your thinking process; it makes you more mature, more confident.” When a participant was forced to attend Job Club rather than continue with classes leading to a high school diploma—because the latter is not a primary work activity—Mr. James promised to help her get around these rules. He told her that she could attend Contra Costa College—where many programs are considered a primary activity—and work on her diploma at the same time. By the end of the month, nearly everyone in Mr. James’ class was seriously considering college or a training program, and many were already in the process of registering.73

Instructors at Strafford, where I also observed two Job Club and two Job Search classes, were less enthusiastic about education and training than Mr. James, but like Ms. Johnson they were receptive to most of the women who showed an interest in training programs, and strongly encouraged those young women without high school diplomas to complete them or get a GED. Bill’s one-on-one meetings with participants were tailored to their particular goals, and so sometimes, but not always included discussions of education. Meeting with Louise, a white mother with experience as an auto mechanic, Bill began by taking a look at her resume. She explained that she wanted to go back to school to take classes in this field. After asking her if she really enjoyed this line of work—to which she answered affirmatively—Bill asked if she really needed more training. Louise explained that she wanted to get her certification to conduct smog checks, and that she also needed to learn how to work with cars with computerized diagnostics. Bill immediately agreed that she

73 Unfortunately, starting college or vocational classes is not the same as completing them, and I know that there were a couple people, at least, who did not make it through the first semester.
would need more training and promised to talk with her worker about this. In addition to encouraging and advocating for individual participants’ educational plans, Bill regularly brought in Ken, a representative from the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services Office (EOPS) at Contra Costa County Community College, to speak to his Job Search classes. EOPS provided funds for low income students to attend community college. Ken provided details about the program and told his own story of attending college while receiving welfare.

I met many women at Strafford who chose to pursue some type of education or training. While I was there, at least four women that were currently or had recently been in the job readiness classes began a four week certified nursing assistant (CNA) training. Several of these women were excused from Job Club class to attend the training—in other words the training came before they ever looked for work. Some of them hoped to continue on with more advanced nursing later.

Some Strafford participants also pursued more ambitious programs. Cassie was a particularly motivated participant, and one of the only women I encountered at either office that received a domestic violence waiver that delayed the start of her work requirements and reduced the number of hours she had to work. She was able to wait until fall, when she began classes at the local community college to pursue a dental hygiene program. I ran into Cassie a couple of years later. She had switched to an RN program, but was still in school, working, and receiving welfare.

Instructors at both offices strongly encouraged participants to think about their ultimate career goal—what they really wanted to do with their lives—and then plan small steps to get them from welfare to that goal. In addition to encouraging women to pursue the
education needed to reach their career goals, instructors at both offices insisted that participants find work in a related field, or at least work that they would enjoy. All the instructors agreed that if you hated your job, you would probably quit or get fired, and therefore taking any job—the work first philosophy—was not beneficial to achieving self-sufficiency. When women strayed from their spoken goal in their search for work, they were redirected. For example, Ms. Johnson told one woman that she did not really want to be a janitor, and she had better not write that down as one of her job objectives. Of course time was a factor; most participants were only allowed a few weeks after the end of Job Search to look for work before community service (unpaid work) was required.

Instructors also tried to ensure that participants understood the details of the jobs and career paths they claimed to want. Mr. James had one woman look up the salaries attached to pharmacy assistants—to show how low they were—and the amount of education necessary to be a pharmacist—so that she would have a realistic view of what was required. At times instructors discouraged participants from pursuing certain careers if they thought the plan was a bad match with the participants’ personality or strengths. On several occasions the women instructors at Strafford reminded participants that being a CNA, and even an RN, entailed changing bedpans and dealing with other bodily fluids. Sometimes they specifically said they could not see a particular participant doing those things. But when participants with time on their educational clocks pushed to pursue these CNA trainings, the instructors did not stand in their way.

The availability of educational programs—particularly those that can lead to a college degree—and the encouragement of welfare workers to pursue education and/or work related to one’s long-term goals separated CCC’s welfare to work program from the majority of
welfare programs, which are work first. At least three of the four element of a critical pedagogy were present as educational options were discussed and encouraged by instructors. First, dialogue and participation was essential—participants were repeatedly asked about their career goals and involved in creating career plans. Secondly, the act of encouraging education inevitably opened doors for participants, clearly expanding their own visions for their futures and presenting them with choices. This component of a critical pedagogy is most evident here, and is less apparent in the transmission of job search skills and workplace norms. By making education an allowable and accessible possibility for almost all participants, CCC went a long way toward helping welfare-reliant women acquire the kind of cultural capital that tends to yield long-term benefits in the labor market. Thirdly, all the instructors respected the participants (at least most of the time). They understood that participants came with a wide range of skills and knowledge, and that they would make very different choices about their futures. Finally, Mr. James focused on the role of education in expanding one’s thinking about poverty, welfare, and inequality, the fourth element of a critical pedagogy for welfare classes.

*Job Search Skills*

Within both welfare offices, mandatory Job Club and Job Search classes were the primary location of cultural capital transmission. The first, and arguably most useful form of capital imparted was job search skills, including the use of job databases, help with resumes, and advice and practice regarding interviewing. Other topics varied between instructors, or from one class to the next. All of the instructors at both offices taught job search skills to some extent. While there was some discussion of the best ways to set up a resume, both offices typed participants’ resumes for them, sometimes providing them two different ones.
for different types of jobs. Participants were able either to leave the format of the resume up to the person typing it, or to craft and edit it to their liking. Welfare-reliant women also had access to computers, fax machines, telephones, and job leads.

At Lewiston, Ms. Johnson used the formal curriculum, which included approximately one week’s worth of job search skills, to be taught following a week of lifeskills. During this time, Ms. Johnson instructed participants in how to fill out applications, write cover letters and thank you letters, and respond to commonly asked application and interview questions. Ms. Johnson also encouraged participants to practice interviewing in front of the class, although only a few participants actually did this. During Job Search, however, Ms. Johnson mostly left participants on their own to look for work, requiring an average of 5 job contacts each day from each participant. Contacting schools or training programs counted as a “job contact,” as did following up on an application, or making “cold calls” to inquire about possible job openings. A few participants, including Meredith, an older woman who had not worked in many years and was unfamiliar with even the most basic computer skills, found the requirement impossible. But most participants found it fairly easy to meet this requirement, although this often involved stretching the truth or applying for jobs that were not really desired. Ms. Johnson’s participants spent the required time in Job Search doing a variety of activities. Some signed up for college classes, or found out what they needed to do and where they needed to go to complete their high school diplomas. Some looked for apartments, either because they were homeless or because they were living with family and wanted a place of their own. Most did look for employment, either as a primary work activity or to be combined with some education. The search for employment was aided by job leads available in the resource room at Lewiston, however most job leads were found on online.
For those participants lacking basic computer skills, this was an opportunity to learn how to navigate the web. Ms. Johnson was mostly unavailable to help; she wandered in and out of the room, worked on paperwork, and occasionally met individually with participants. But participants worked remarkably well together and taught each other whatever they knew. I helped as well. I also purchased newspapers on several occasions, mostly to help Meredith who could not access online job listings because she could not maneuver the mouse despite the efforts of several of us to teach her.

Mr. James, who developed his own curriculum, spent less time on job search skills, partly because he was so focused on convincing participants to pursue education. His Job Search class did, however, include workshops on ways to find jobs, as well as information about writing resumes and cover letters. He left ample time for participants to find and pursue job leads, and spent much of his time meeting one-on-one with participants mapping out their future goals. Mr. James did not require a particular number of job contacts, although he said that job contact sheets would go directly to their assessment (social) workers, who were in charge of approving their welfare to work plans. He told them to do them every day, but emphasized that he wanted quality contacts rather than quantity.

At Strafford, job search skills were taught in both Job Club and Job Search classes as well. In Strafford’s Job Club classes, a great deal of time was spent on “getting to know yourself” activities. Participants did several “interest inventory” or “personality mosaic” exercises, always discussing the results with the class. The purpose of these was to help participants choose a career path. This was seen as the first step to looking for employment. Time was also spent going around the room and listing personal strengths and accomplishments. This was both an effort at raising self-esteem and at preparing participants
for interviews where they would be asked about their personal strengths. Addy, a social worker and one of the Job Club teachers, as well as the school district employees also spent time reading through the formal curriculum on how to fill out applications, and how to answer particular interview questions. A couple of participants performed mock interviews for practice.

Strafford’s Job Search class was far more formal than any at Lewiston. Bill took his “coaching,” as he called it, very seriously, and approached the class as one might any group of job seekers, regardless of welfare status. Bill moved slowly and enthusiastically through the curriculum he had developed. He presented “research” on the best ways of finding work. He encouraged networking, or “mining the gold in your own backyard,” by sending participants out to talk with everyone they know—as well as approaching strangers—to find out about the jobs people have. He assigned these “informational interviews” to help participants think more broadly about the labor market and what types of jobs are available. Next he sent participants to businesses of interest, again to conduct “informational interviews.” He recommended—and sometimes demonstrated—cold calling, as well as dropping in on companies to find out if they were hiring. Bill met one-on-one with participants to help them plan their career paths; they always left with several “job leads,” but these were generally places to cold call, rather than actual job openings. Spending time on interview techniques and the art of writing thank you notes, Bill gave concrete advice about what to say and do in a variety of situations. In particular, he emphasized working with ‘no’s;’ he helped prepare participants for rejection and suggested ways to turn ‘no’s’ into ‘maybe’s’ and sometimes ‘yeses.’ He was pushy, for sure, but with a few exceptions, participants really valued his advice and support. He forced participants to talk about
themselves and to name positive attributes and accomplishments. Most participants did not think they would apply his aggressive and risky suggestions to their own job search, but I think he successfully taught participants to take more risks and be more confident and assertive in their job search. While in his class, and probably afterward, participants did things like writing cover letters and thank you notes for jobs where most applicants likely did not. His advice and techniques were taken from books and studies aimed not at low-skill, entry level jobs, necessarily, but professional jobs as well, and in this way he was imparting a dominant cultural capital that might well have set his participants apart from the majority of applicants.

Although welfare-reliant men and women at Lewiston and Strafford had different opportunities to acquire job search skills depending on which instructor(s) they had and what exercises were done during their classes, they all learned some basics of looking for work. They developed resumes and master applications that could easily be adapted for most jobs, they learned about interview questions and how to respond to them, and they heard about some key websites and other ways of finding job openings. Most participants came up with a list of their best attributes and how to talk about these in the context of a job interview. Many identified one or several fields of interest, or solidified long-term career goals, and most learned more about the steps necessary to reach their goals.

Teaching job search skills lends itself less to a critical pedagogy than encouraging education and training, or teaching “soft skills.” But CCC instructors certainly maintained dialogue and participation throughout the process. And by encouraging participants to think about their future goals and apply for jobs in their desired field, they helped participants see new options. Further, by talking about illegal and difficult interview questions—such as, Do
you have children? (illegal), and Have you ever been arrested? (difficult)—instructors implicitly allowed a critique of the labor market and allowed for the possibility of discriminatory hiring practices. They also advised participants on how to answer such questions and about the expectations employers would likely have. Finally, instructors also maintained their usual respectfulness as they taught or provided opportunities for participants to learn job search skills. Some participants were easily able to write a cover letter on their own, for example, while others needed extensive help. Instructors understood this and usually met participants where they were at, or encouraged participants to help each other. One participant, LaWanda, a seemingly gregarious mother of three, told me that before taking the Job Club and Search classes with Ms. Johnson she would not have been able to go on a job interview or do the interview with me because she was too shy in those situations. But in the classes she claimed to have learned how to talk with someone one-on-one, and she was able to succeed in a job interview as well as being willing to be interviewed by me. LaWanda experienced a significant boost of confidence—likely teamed with some interview skills—that clearly improved her labor market prospects as well as her overall self-esteem.

_Dominant Cultural Capital: How to appear and behave on and off the job_

At least one week of most Job Club classes was devoted to teaching participants dominant standards of appearance for interviews and jobs, and dominant standards of behavior for both employment and life. But unlike job search skills—the tricks that most job seekers must learn and apply in order to be hired—this form of cultural capital is aimed specifically at poor, usually non-white job seekers perceived to lack not just skills, but ‘appropriateness.’ As shown in Chapter 2, repressive welfare to work programs tend to treat welfare-reliant women as lacking: lacking the skills, ‘appropriate’ attire, and ‘appropriate’
behavior to get and keep a job; lacking the values—responsibility, hard work, discipline, chastity, and motivation—to be good parents and citizens. Mandatory welfare to work classes are seen by many as an opportunity to teach welfare-reliant women all the things they are lacking. But in more empowering programs, the content, and especially approach to this curriculum is different. The most empowering programs and instructors abandon much of this cultural retraining altogether. But other instructors and programs that are more empowering than repressive teach this material, but do so in a way that does not construct participants as lacking appropriateness or values. Instead they approach participants as though they may be either lacking or resisting some of the knowledge (capital) that is necessary to succeed in the labor market, and they use elements of a critical pedagogy to impart it.

Instructors’ approaches to class attendance rules were both a reflection of how they viewed welfare-reliant women and their role as instructors and also a factor in shaping the tenor of the class. Ms. Johnson told participants that they were allowed two full-day absences during the two week long Job Club class. Interviews were the only excused absences. She encouraged participation, but did not require it; she allowed one participant to sleep through a considerable portion of the class, and people who came late were rarely reprimanded. Mr. James had an even more lax attendance policy than Ms. Johnson. He told participants that he would not tell them how many days they were allowed to miss, because they would then miss that many days. He asked participants to see him during breaks to discuss any conflicts or other issues. Over the course of the class, he generally excused anyone who was making an effort, present most of the time, and had reasonable explanations for their absences. People

JobProject and CEC—as educational sites detached from the welfare office—have the luxury of being able to omit this type of cultural retraining.
who skipped the first few days were dropped, and one woman who was perpetually late and absent was warned repeatedly that she would be dropped if her absences continued.

Like Mr. James, Bill had no attendance policy, but expected participants to let him know if they needed to miss class. He said if he felt like he was being “jerked around,” he would call people on it. In general he was very lenient and did not do anything that resembled “babysitting” participants. Regarding classroom rules and practices, Job Club instructors at Strafford were the strictest, although they insisted they were following County rules that mandated that participants attend all but 7 hours of the two week long Job Club in order to “graduate.” When I privately mentioned to them that Lewiston had more lenient rules, they insisted that they were “counting wrong.” Strafford participants were given excused absences for interviews, but nothing else. However they were told at the beginning of the first day of Job Club about these rules, and if they knew they could not meet the requirement, they were allowed to contact their worker and reschedule for another Job Club class, without penalty. Instructors compared attendance at Job Club to that of a real job. When one participant suggested that if this were a real job, people would be there on time, instructors said they doubted it. Participants’ clothing and appearance were also discussed at Strafford in a way they were not at Lewiston. Instructors told one man that his clothing was unacceptable, and he embarrassedly explained that he had no acceptable clothing because of a rapid weight gain following a back injury. While the Job Club instructors accepted his response, it is unlikely that his clothing would have been criticized—and certainly not in front of anyone, even me—at Lewiston.

While these class rules formed the backdrop for the classes, the curriculum and approach of the instructors were more important in determining dominant cultural capital
acquisition. At Lewiston, Ms. Johnson read through the formal curriculum material and held discussions about appropriate hygiene and dress on several days throughout the two week Job Club class. But she mostly ignored the issue of on-the-job behavior. Instead her class focused on lifeskills. One day a woman came to talk about nutrition and food safety. Most of another day—and this was true in all four Job Club classes I observed in CCC—was spent with a guest speaker from the Consumer Credit Counseling Service of the East Bay, who spoke about budgeting, financial planning and goal setting, and fixing your credit record. Additional time was spent on goal setting, making good choices, coping with stress, managing time, organizing your life, and differentiating between needs and wants. One morning was spent with a counselor discussing self-esteem; another hour was spent with the domestic violence counselor, as was also true in other classes at CCC.

Some of these topics, such as the distinction between needs and wants, seemed inherently judgmental: to assume that poor mothers cannot differentiate between their and their children’s needs vs. their wants is insulting and suggests that part of their financial troubles have to do with bad spending habits. I question the relevancy of nutrition classes as well, especially since there was no discussion of the fact that healthy food costs more than unhealthy food, or that stores near where most participants lived lacked fresh produce but were well-stocked with highly processed junk foods. But when I asked participants what they thought of these workshops, they were far less negative than I was, and most of the women seemed to value the information and find it useful. Or maybe they just enjoyed the experience of sitting in a classroom with other welfare-reliant women, where the overall

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75 In fact, across the street from the Lewiston office was a grocery store. Hungry with little time to spare, I went in one day at lunch time, hoping for a salad bar or deli—or at least a piece of fruit. No luck. No fresh produce at all.
atmosphere was supportive and upbeat. Maybe the topic of the workshop mattered less than the pedagogy and classroom ethos.

Unlike Ms. Johnson, Mr. James ignored the formal curriculum and taught—or rather performed—some combination of material that he found, created, or came up with on the fly. He spent a short period of time on hygiene and appearance, and also such lifeskills as setting and reaching goals and the power of positive thinking. He even discussed the differences between wants and needs, but he did so with a sense of humor, and in a far less preachy way than Ms. Johnson. Mr. James focused more heavily than any other Job Club instructor on the workplace and, indirectly, job retention. He led a workshop on diversity in the workplace and another on sexual harassment. He talked about workplace cultures and the importance of understanding them in order to fit in. Mr. James specifically acknowledged that “workplace cultures” differed from participants’ “home cultures” or “subcultures.” He discussed his own initial discomfort in certain workplaces, and spoke about the mistakes he had made adjusting to workplace norms.

Job Club instructors at Strafford utilized a combination of the official curriculum and other curricula they had found. They mixed it up from week to week, pulling different exercises and worksheets out of several books and binders. Hygiene and appearance were covered, but workplace behavior was considered less. Instead, Strafford instructors focused on self-knowledge and self-improvement. They did exercises and self assessments about risk taking, personality attributes, and personal strengths. They had participants go around the room sharing what they were proud of, and what their last good choice had been. Like Ms.

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76 To be fair, I should explain that because of the different organization of instructors and classes at the two sites, I had the opportunity to see the same teachers teach the same class twice at Strafford and only once at Lewiston. Mr. James told the class that many of his workshops were new, and Mr. Johnson told me months after I observed her Job Club class that she had made many changed to the class.
Johnson’s class, they covered time management, organization, and scheduling. They talked extensively about stress, not just going over ways of coping, but also taking stress assessment tests and sharing the results with the class. Anger management and the power of positive thinking and having a good attitude were also discussed. Both the domestic violence counselor and the general counselor gave presentations, and both stopped by at other times to speak with workers or participants.

Finally, Bill, who taught only Job Search classes, had the least opportunity to impart this type of cultural capital, since his job was primarily to teach job search skills. However, he also discussed job retention. Bill recommended particular behaviors and practices to improve one’s chances of promotion and to address performance reviews. Bill instructed participants to keep careful notes of their work performance, jotting down questions, areas of excellence, and things to improve upon each day or at least each week. After compiling these into a brief summary, Bill recommended presenting these to an employer either in response to a poor evaluation or to indicate your worthiness for a promotion or raise. He claimed to have used this technique himself. While most participants, myself included, thought this was a lot of work and was unlikely to pay off, a few participants said they would try it. Perhaps more importantly, it got participants thinking about performance reviews, and spurred conversations about talking to an employer and responding to their feedback. And it did so in a way that did not single welfare-reliant men and women out as deficient, since Bill, a college graduate and former salesman, used these techniques himself.

In addition to the curriculum used by the instructors, their pedagogical approaches and the discourses they deployed affected the transmission and reception of dominant cultural capital. All the instructors used key elements of a critical pedagogy. First, they all
encouraged—and most required—participation, often asking a question and going around the room requesting everyone’s responses. A more free-flowing discussion was also allowed and encouraged by all the instructors on a regular basis. Still there were differences between them. Ms. Johnson stayed close to her written curriculum, and often spent time reading through it. Strafford Job Club Instructors alternated between the curriculum and time for more open discussions. They also read through formal curricular topics, although they often engaged the participants in the reading process. Mr. James’s approach was the most student-led and thus participatory. He paid little attention to keeping to a schedule and was willing to stay on a topic as long as it held people’s interest. Never reading through written curricula, there was a great deal of time and space in his class for discussion, and he knew just how to elicit responses from even the most introverted participants.

Above—in the sections on education and job skills—I show the ways instructors deployed the second element of a critical pedagogy, by helping participants expand their goals and imagine new possibilities for their lives. The third element was less universal, although there were at least hints of it in each instructors’ class. In Chapter 2 I showed that instructors in repressive welfare to work programs employed practices that punished participants and discourses that blamed them for their poverty. The most empowering programs and instructors, on the other hand, explicitly blamed structural inequalities—things like institutionalized racism and the structure of the labor market—for participants’ poverty. By acknowledging structure, or the unfair rules of the game, instructors helped participants to understand how best to play the game, while allowing them to choose to what extent they wanted to play it. Failure to play the game is therefore not necessarily a personal failure, but a choice. And playing the game is not forsaking one’s community or “home culture,” as Mr.
James put it. It is simply strategic. This pedagogical approach facilitates the building of trust between instructors and participants, and among participants. This trust further facilitates the transmission of cultural capital, allowing welfare-reliant men and women to acquire and practice using dominant cultural capital without being perceived negatively for “acting white” or otherwise leaving one’s subjugated cultural capital behind, if only in certain situations.

The instructors of CCC differed in the extent to which they critiqued the welfare system and structural inequalities. Ms. Johnson vacillated between critiquing the welfare system and holding individuals responsible for getting off welfare and out of poverty. She acknowledged her disagreement with some of the welfare regulations, in particular the 18 month deadline to get a job, which she felt put too much pressure on people. However she also said about the system, “it is what it is.” She left it at that. Although not as critical of structured racism and the welfare system as Mr. James, Ms. Johnson did leave space for participants to attribute their own circumstances to structural inequalities. By occasionally mentioning the existence of racism and encouraging participants to vote she acknowledged that external factors contributed to people’s situations.

Mr. James, on the other hand, employed a radical discourse that critiqued the welfare system and race and class inequalities. One day after writing the welfare cash aid amounts for different family sizes on the board, he became angry. Telling the class that these numbers should “piss them off,” he said that this class was comprised of Black and Hispanic people, and referring to the numbers, he said, “This is what the government thinks of you… This is economic slavery.” At this point Mr. James had become so agitated that he apologized to the class, but he went on, pointing out that most of these grants were less than minimum wage.
He ended the class for the day by saying, “This should encourage you and inspire you to use this program to get everything you deserve” so that you never have to be “bound by these economic chains” again. “This is bondage.” On other occasions he called on participants to “pimp the system,” and told them that education was their individual way out of “bondage.” He critiqued what he called the “white power structure,” blaming it for the impoverishment of people of color. Mr. James’ life experiences—which he shared—were similar to the socioeconomic positions of welfare-reliant men and women, and they felt his words of critique and encouragement deeply. His acknowledgement of their plight and refusal to blame them for their situations, combined with his insistence that their lives could be improved through education and hard work, were motivating and inspiring to nearly all participants.

None of the instructors at Strafford were as subversive or exciting as Mr. James, although Bill fulfilled the role of charismatic motivator well. At Lewiston, where almost every recipient was African American, it was easier to unite participants on the basis of race and the experience of racial discrimination. But at Strafford, where a large population of white recipients existed, along with a mix of Latinas, Asians, and African Americans, race did not explicitly appear in classroom discourse, despite the predominance of Black instructors. Only a critique of capitalism—something considered far more radical and less mainstream than African Americans’ assertion of racism—could have played this role of uniting participants and explaining their position as impoverished Americans.

There were ways, however, in which Strafford Job Club instructors engaged participants critically, and allowed for politicization. The Iraq war had recently begun when I was attending Job Club at Strafford, and some participants and instructors regularly engaged
in an anti-war, anti-Bush banter. There were also threats of budget cuts to the TANF program while I was at Strafford. In fact, the contract with the school district ended while I was there, and the two instructors who were employed through that contract were laid off, or perhaps offered another job with the school district. The incentive program that had provided participants who finished Job Club, found work, or stayed employed for a given number of days with a small chunk of cash or a gift certificate also ended. One instructor with less seniority spoke regularly about her concerns about being laid off, and instructors talked often with participants about the insecurity of nearly all welfare benefits, warning them that things might be changing for the worse, including Bush’s plan to increase the number of hours of required work. These conversations reminded participants of the precariousness of their benefits and the political nature of welfare. It also put workers and participants on the same side of the issue, with similar rather than adversarial interests.

During one Job Club class at Strafford, instructors presented an interesting exercise. Participants were told to imagine an association, “Citizens for a Stable Society,” that sought to end poverty, crime, and unemployment. But to do so they would have to make all the decisions for those in the community regarding what work, education, and hobbies people would pursue. The class was then asked to come up with three reasons why this was a bad plan. Participants were horrified at this idea, and a lot of talking ensued. After some conversation, one of the instructors, Susan, held up the monthly report form that participants must fill out while on welfare. She told them, ‘Your incomes are so low that we basically tell you how to live.’77 She explained that the purpose of this exercise was to get them to think about how many rules they were subjected to, and how much control the government had

77 This is an inexact quote.
over them. One participant insisted that their hobbies were not dictated to them. Susan and Janet, another instructor, responded that with so little income there are many hobbies that they cannot pursue, so in a sense the government does make decisions about their choice of hobbies. Of course this exercise completely ignored the reality that if not welfare, than the low-wage job market would control participants lives almost as much as welfare receipt. But it was an interesting admission by instructors that clients lives are deeply constrained, and that the welfare system is invasive. There was an implicit, although definitely not explicit, critique of the welfare system embedded in the exercise, although its purpose was to motivate participants to get a job and get off welfare.

Finally, to varying extents, instructors respected the cultural capital participants already had. Sometimes this meant acknowledging that many participants held significant amounts of dominant cultural capital. Other times it meant sharing and respecting participants’ subjugated cultural capital. Ms. Johnson’s style of presenting the material was a bit aloof and formally non-judgmental. That is, she presented materially ‘objectively,’ without making assumptions about the participants or their lives. For example, one exercise asked participants to rank a list of 16 values, including everything from love to equal rights to a sense of accomplishment, in order of personal importance. Although participants shared their ranked lists—which differed dramatically from one person to the next—with the class, Ms. Johnson had little to say about them, leaving the exercise to be one of self-awareness. However, she largely adhered to dominant norms of professional behavior, and her teaching of the formal curriculum encouraged participants to internalize these norms in a way that Mr. James’s did not. Ms. Johnson did not punish participants or blame them for their poverty the way workers in programs I call repressive have been described as doing (Broughton 2100a,
Nevertheless her whole-hearted embrace of dominant cultural capital and her failure to acknowledge and respect the subjugated cultural capitals held by participants, combined with her tepid critique of the welfare system left participants less inspired and motivated than Mr. James’ students to pursue education or to acquire and utilize dominant cultural norms that they did not already possess.

Mr. James’s pedagogical approach involved self-awareness and personal sharing. He clearly identified himself as “like” participants. He announced on the first day, “I don’t teach; I share. I will never talk down to you; I’m not any better. I’d be at the GA office if I lost my job.” Because he located himself as “like” participants, and because this was believable, he could also criticize aspects of subjugated cultural capital and endorse aspects of dominant cultural capital without sounding preachy. He even portrayed himself as in the process still learning things—including controlling his spending—that could be considered dominant cultural capital. For example he had the class list their “wants.” He embraced the range of answers, and shared his own desire for a motorcycle, which he talked about often during the class. Instead of critiquing the answers that were less practical and encouraging participants to “want” more reasonable things (say owning their own home rather than wanting a diamond ring), he insisted that all these things would make their lives more comfortable. But he also warned against a culture of instant gratification, and joked about all the people he knew who were driving an Escalade but could not afford it. He talked about a time when he bought things to fill a void, and got himself in trouble. So Mr. James encouraged a level of fiscal responsibility, but he also embraced the tastes and desires—some of which could be considered subjugated cultural capital—of his participants. And he didn’t talk about the arguably middle class norm of saving for the retirement or even emergencies—but instead
focused on saving to be able to buy luxuries, if that was what one desired. The key for Mr. James was that he was “one of them.” He appeared, acted, and talked like one of them. He referenced Black authors and entertainers and made jokes that participants clearly understood, but that I often missed. He situated himself firmly in their reality because he had been there—and still wasn’t far off. And he embraced these similarities, while also making jokes and criticizing, at times, subjugated cultural capital that he believed was detrimental for poor Black people and communities.

Ultimately, Mr. James taught the dominant cultural norms as strategy: something to be learned and used in order to achieve one’s goals. Though not intended as a pedagogical strategy, Mr. James’ approach appeared to succeed in presenting both the realities of “workplace cultures,” as he called them, and convincing participants that playing by these rules would benefit them in the long run. Rather than asking participants to internalize dominant norms, his approach allowed participants to pick and choose among the dominant practices, or to use their knowledge of dominant culture in order to subvert it. One of the more critical participants that I encountered, Shauntay—who was dropped from Ms. Johnson’s class for poor attendance—summed up the general sentiment about Mr. James’s class when she told me, “I didn’t find nothing that I didn’t like about Mr. James’s class.”

At Strafford, the focus on participatory learning helped to assuage the notion that participants were inherently lacking. For example, classroom interactions involved instructors asking participants who scored well on time management to give tips to those who did not score as well. This acknowledged and utilized the knowledge and skills (arguably dominant cultural capital) already held by participants. Instructors also shared their strengths and weaknesses. Two of the instructors were older, with grown children, and the third was
younger, but still older than most of the participants. They shared the things they had learned over time, thus approaching participants more as older, wiser friends, rather than as parents or authorities. But Strafford instructors were more overtly judgmental than Lewiston instructors, and occasionally there were interactions that really underscore the importance of a critical pedagogy.

One day Anna, the Black school district employee who assisted in the classroom at Strafford, got into an argument with Patricia, a 24 year old white (or maybe light-skinned Latina) mother with numerous tattoos. The instructors noticed that she had a new tattoo on her leg. Condescendingly, Anna said that Patricia was “one of those who get a tattoo after going through Job Club,” meaning that she has failed to take their advice about not getting visible tattoos. Patricia said she had 4 on her hands as well, and that she was always glad she has them. Anna told about her nieces who had to wear long-sleeves to work in order to cover their tattoos. Bill who was present added that it will be hard to get a job that pays $35-40K with those tattoos. Patricia responded that she will never make that much. The instructors told her that she will need that much money to support herself when all her other help dries up. Patricia said that it would be prejudiced to fire her because of the tattoos. Bill agreed, but said it will happen. “Lots of things are prejudiced, but it’s the real world.” Bill then left, but Anna kept going. Patricia asked what her tattoos have to do with the job she can do. ‘Nothing,” replied Anna, explaining that it was about her image. Patricia went on to say that this is other people’s problem. Anna persisted for a while before leaving. After Anna left Patricia said, “I hate this fucking place,” and complained that Anna was “talking shit to her.”

This conversation is notable because it was so rare. This was the type of interaction that I expected when I began my research, and the type described by Broughton and
Korteweg. But there were shockingly few examples of instructors who got into arguments with participants in this way, and shockingly few examples of participants who became angry with the instructors. While Bill presented the reality of the need for dominant capital, without judgment or a “need” to convince her—and therefore did not anger Patricia—Anna was clearly trying to convince Patricia to choose her (dominant) way of doing things because it was “right.” Instead of leaving the decision up to her, and empathizing with the unfairness of certain job market expectations, Anna tried to persuade Patricia to do things “her” way. The argument between Patricia and Anna is also significant because it shows that when a worker adopts a repressive approach—assuming the role of parent or disciplinarian—it usually backfires. Instead of encouraging Patricia to cover her tattoos and refrain from getting more, the debate seemed to solidify her belief that she should not have to change for a job. Instead of convincing her to adopt dominant norms of appearance, Anna ensured that Patricia would resist choosing dominant cultural capital.

Although different from the therapeutic discourse of Job Club instructors, Bill also engaged in a critical pedagogy of sorts. Despite the fact that Bill did not discuss racism or sexism or other inequalities, he went out of his way to treat participants with respect, and no differently than if they were adult job seekers who were not on welfare. He sincerely wanted the best for participants, and this showed through his coaching, as he called it. Bill disliked the welfare system in general, and he often implied this with participants. But he didn’t go into details; mostly he did his best to ignore the reality of the welfare system. He hated dealing with things like participants’ transportation monies, not only because it was a hassle, but because he thought they should all be given adequate funds for this without all the paperwork and rules. By ignoring the welfare system as much as possible, Bill gave
participants the gift of being just job seekers, not welfare participants. And by talking about
his good and bad experiences in the work world, including all the bad supervisors he’d
encountered, he put himself on the same level as the participants, as well as validating many
of their miserable and unfair experiences in the labor market. Like all the instructors I
encountered at both offices in CCC, Bill deviated from the work first philosophy, and he did
so emphatically. He pushed clients to find a good job, including one they would enjoy and/or
one that would lead them toward their larger goals. Bill fulfilled a similar role at Strafford as
Mr. James at Lewiston: he was charismatic and caring, full of energy and enthusiasm and a
“You can do this!” attitude.

The topics covered by Ms. Johnson, Mr. James, Bill, and the instructors of Strafford’s
Job Club class differed some, as did their approach to conveying the material. Ms. Johnson
wanted to give participants the tools to play the game better. Mr. James wanted to give the
participants the tools to play the game so they could change the game. The Job Club
instructors at Strafford wanted participants to evaluate and change the way they thought
about and approached the game. Bill wanted participants to beat other workers at the game,
and beat employers at their own game. But to some extent, all the instructors acknowledged
that the labor market and workplace norms constituted a game to be played, rather than an
‘appropriate’ or ‘correct’ way of being in the world. And I argue that it was this
acknowledgement that helped participants learn that to incorporate the soft skills taught in
CCC.

Conclusion

CCC provided many opportunities for participants to pursue education and training,
and thus gain cultural capital through a formal educational program. Although GED
programs and adult basic education, which often do not lead to a GED, have not been shown to improve welfare-reliant women’s incomes, college courses and degrees, and certain other credential programs have been shown to raise poor women’s incomes (Martinson and Strawn 2003; U.S. Census Bureau 2005). CCC also provided participants with job search skills and access to computers, copiers, and fax machines, all of which are important in today’s labor market. Finally, CCC taught welfare-reliant women dominant cultural capital—workplace standards of behavior and appearance, and lifeskills—in an effort to help them get and keep jobs, and become and stay self-sufficient. Particularly because of the availability and accessibility of education and training programs, CCC provided greater opportunities to acquire cultural capital than most welfare to work programs. This is part of what makes CCC an empowering welfare to work program. But I have shown that teaching, or simply making cultural capital available, is not enough. Pedagogy matters; instructors’ discourses and practices matter.

All the instructors at Lewiston and Strafford implemented elements of a critical pedagogy. Without exception, the instructors encouraged dialogue and active participation in the classroom, and generally treated participants with respect. They sought to motivate participants, encouraging their dreams and goals and helping them to think broadly about their life possibilities. They encouraged self-determination and choice. In addition, they encouraged education and training programs to fulfill work requirements when allowed. They encouraged participants to look for good jobs, not the first job that came along. And they encouraged participants to have long term plans, and to find jobs that would help them reach their long term goals. This non-work-first strategy to moving welfare-reliant women off welfare has been shown to lead to higher incomes or better outcomes than the usual work
first approach of taking any job available (Strawn 1998; Gueron and Hamilton 2002; Hamilton 2002). For the most part instructors avoided blaming participants for their poverty and current situations, and some of the instructors discussed the structural bases for poverty, and offered their own critiques of welfare reform. And overall, instructors respected the lived experiences of participants and the knowledges and opinions they held. By employing part or all of the elements of a critical pedagogy, instructors opened doors for participants—who were encouraged to see beyond their current situations—as well as offering on-going support.

Mr. James took things a step further. By combining the teaching of dominant cultural capital with a critique of the “white power structure,” Mr. James suggested to participants that pursuing education was more than an individual matter, but was connected to the Black community and social change. He encouraged them to educate themselves not just for a job, but for their own edification about their history and current situation as African Americans.

Individual instructors are important, and can significantly shape the experiences of individual welfare participants. But the pedagogical approaches of CCC’s instructors were dependent upon certain regulations and practices in CCC. If these same instructors worked in a work-first welfare program, where they were required to help participants get and take the first job possible, these classes would have been radically different. While a critique of the system would still be possible, and while instructors might be able to position themselves as opposed to the rules they have to enforce, ultimately the options available to participants would have been dramatically reduced, and the motivation and enthusiasm of instructors like Mr. James would have been curbed. On the other hand, repressive instructors could exist in a program that allowed for education. In this case participants would not be encouraged to
“pimp the system,” but instead encouraged to look for employment—any employment. A repressive instructor could have blamed participants for their poverty, or told them that they were lucky to get any welfare benefits at all.

Thus the empowerment that existed at Strafford and Lewiston was a combination of policies and practices, as well as instructor discourses. But these two offices did not empower participants in identical ways. The types of empowerment they promoted differed significantly, as will be seen in the following chapter.
Chapter 6: Educational vs. Therapeutic Empowerment

Throughout the first five chapters of this dissertation, I focused on the similarities between Strafford and Lewiston, largely ignoring the differences between these two offices. In this chapter, I focus on the differences. In earlier chapters I have discussed Lewiston’s and Strafford’s physical office space, and the racial and ethnic make-ups of the welfare participants and welfare workers at each office. In this chapter I expand on the demographic differences between the two offices, and then consider how they differ in the types of empowerment they offer participants.

Along with the windowless, dirty appearance of the Lewiston office—and the overwhelming Black clientele—came a reputation clearly steeped in racial subtext. Many Strafford workers worried about being transferred to Lewiston, where they believed the workers had higher caseloads—which they did—and a much needier and more volatile clientele. Strafford workers regularly warned me about my upcoming fieldwork at Lewiston. I was told that the workers were cold and might not have time for me, and I was warned about the welfare participants, who were perceived as multigenerational welfare users prone to anger and drama. I found little of this to be true, although it may be true that overall the women who utilized the Lewiston office were in more dire situations, with less familial help and more multigenerational welfare use. Lewiston workers were busier, and perhaps less accommodating to me, however the root causes of this seemed to be both their higher caseloads and the differences in physical space at the two offices. All Strafford workers sat out in the open, and there were always desks available where I could sit for long periods of time observing. Space at Lewiston was tighter, and many of the workers had small offices with doors. I often had one of these offices to use myself, but rarely was given a desk that
was open to other workers. One of the reasons for this was that the Lewiston office was undergoing remodeling, and workers were crammed into only part of their usual space.

As should be evident throughout the earlier chapters, I encountered dedicated, lively instructors at both offices. The same was true of other workers, although welfare-reliant women did have more complaints about the workers at Lewiston than those at Strafford. Many of these complaints, however, were aimed at a small number of Lewiston workers who did not return phone calls or complete paperwork to open cases in a timely fashion. Similarly, I did witness a couple of situations at Lewiston where welfare-reliant women became extremely agitated, and in one case violent. Again, this represented a very small number of clients. On the flip side, at Strafford I witnessed a couple of agitated or intoxicated male clients.

I begin this final chapter by looking at the demographic data provided to me by the county, and in this way moving beyond my impressions of the demographic differences between the two sites. I look at racial and ethnic differences, but also differences in citizenship, language, gender, and employment. But the bulk of this chapter is spent considering how the empowering approaches of instructors and other welfare workers at these two offices differed. Here I use both the statistical data kept by the county and reported to the State, as well as my observations of welfare to work classes. I will show that while the participants and instructors at Lewiston viewed education and training as the best route off of welfare and out of poverty, the Strafford workers and participants viewed education as one route, but also placed value and hope on therapeutic services. These two paths were not exclusive of one another, but the encouragement of therapeutic services and especially the willingness to embrace these services by many of the participants stands in sharp contrast to
the way therapeutic services were perceived in Lewiston. I argue that cultural differences between participants of different racial and class backgrounds, as well as some differences in the events leading up to welfare receipt, shaped how willing participants were to view therapeutic services favorably. And I argue that instructors took cues from the participants in their classes, and adopted an approach that was well received—and thus empowering—to the women at their site.

**Demographic Differences (and Similarities)**

My demographic data stems from statistics kept by the County for a 7 month period, from January 2003 through July 2003. This time period coincides with the early part of my participant observation. I use the data for descriptive purposes, and to bolster my perceptions of the similarities and differences between the two offices. During these months, Strafford averaged 559 adults with a work requirement (some adults, due to disability, a newborn baby, or other circumstances, were not required to work) compared with Lewiston’s 814.\(^{78}\) While at the Strafford office nearly 22 percent of these adults were men, only about 11 percent of those at Lewiston were men. Although there is no way of knowing how many of these men were single fathers vs. how many were married to women also on aid, it was more common to encounter married couples at Strafford, and this probably accounts for the difference.\(^{79}\)

While I only spoke with and observed classes of English speakers—in some ways skewing my perceptions of race and ethnicity at the two offices—both Lewiston and Strafford had significant numbers of non-English speaking clients. At Lewiston these were

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\(^{78}\) All numbers that represent people (rather than percentages) have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

\(^{79}\) My data includes 7 months worth of data on the sex of adult welfare to work participants, but this excludes those adults not required to work. I also have one month’s worth of statistics on all adult recipients, and this confirms that there were proportionally more men on aid at Strafford.
almost exclusively Spanish speaking participants. But at Strafford a variety of different languages were spoken. Overall, approximately 77 percent (844) of Strafford’s cases were English speaking and reading, compared with 89 percent (1218) of Lewiston’s. Seven percent of Strafford’s cases were Spanish speaking and/or reading, compared with 11 percent of Lewiston’s. In addition, 15 percent of Strafford’s caseload was Mien, Laotian, or Vietnamese speaking.

Differences in the numbers of welfare participants who were not citizens mirror the differences in language. Strafford, averaging 96 immigrants on the roles, had almost three times as many immigrants as Lewiston (averaging 35), despite having fewer clients overall. The bulk of these were categorized as “legal aliens,” but there was a significant refugee population at Strafford as well.

As discussed throughout this dissertation, the two offices also differed significantly in the racial and ethnic make-up of the clients. Some of this can be attributed to the larger immigrant population at Strafford. But unlike Lewiston, Strafford also served more whites and more citizens who were Asian or Pacific Islanders. Over the first seven months of 2003, 38 percent of Strafford’s welfare participants were Black. Many of these participants lived nearer to the Lewiston office than the Strafford one, to which they were assigned. Nineteen percent of Strafford’s participants were white. In addition, 15 percent of participants at Strafford were Hispanic, and another 15 percent were Laotian. The latter group was mostly contained in a separate unit where Vietnamese (6 percent), Hmong, Cambodian, and a few other Southeast Asian ethnic groups were serviced by workers who could meet both the

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80 In this instance, all participants, meaning everyone—including children—who receives a grant, are counted.
linguistic and cultural needs of these welfare recipients. In contrast, 77 percent of Lewiston’s participants were Black, 16 percent Hispanic, and three percent white.

It was my perception while conducting participant observation at the two offices that Lewiston participants had less education, were more likely to have grown up in poverty, and were generally in more dire circumstances. Unfortunately I do not have data that can confirm (or counter) these observations. However data on earnings do suggest that more welfare participants at the Strafford office were working in the formal labor market or reporting informal earnings. Just over 30 percent of CalWORKs cases in Strafford had reported earnings during this seven month period, compared to 24 percent of Lewiston cases. This is not an enormous difference, but it does hold true for each month. I also have statistics for families that have timed out of CalWORKs, but whose children continue to receive aid, and there is a similar difference in reported earnings between the two offices here as well, although the percent with earnings is over 50 percent for both offices in these cases. There are several possible reasons why Strafford families seem more likely to have reported earnings that the families in Lewiston. First, it is likely that Lewiston clients are at a structural disadvantage—we know there are more Blacks at this office, and thus that these clients face and have faced greater discrimination in education, the job market, and potentially in the criminal justice and welfare systems. Plus, it was my perception, and the general perception of the workers, that Lewiston clients were harder to serve. They had more barriers—less education, poorer basic skills, more multi-generational poverty, fewer outside

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81 Tables of welfare to work participants’ educational levels are available; however the numbers of total adults at the two offices do not make sense given the other data I have. When I inquired about this particular table, I was told that “Educational level is cumulative since the beginning, and can’t be compared to monthly data.” Unfortunately this did not explain why in some months Strafford had more total welfare to work participants on their educational tables than Lewiston, despite the fact that all other tables indicated that Lewiston had more participants.
resources, etc.—than Strafford families. They may also have had more health problems and disabilities. In addition, I would argue that overall participants at the Lewiston office had less dominant capital and more subjugated capital, of all three types, compared with Strafford participants. Thus it may be that Lewiston families relied more heavily on subjugated economic capital, or unreported earnings, particularly those acquired by hustling (as opposed to assistance from family, for example).

Neither earnings from hustling, nor earnings from the formal labor market—when talking about largely uneducated, low wage workers—are secure. However I would argue that hustling is even less secure than formal employment, and that a lower percentage of workers in the labor market signals greater poverty among Lewiston’s participants. The average wages earned by those participants who were employed at the two offices do not differ significantly. Both are in the $9-$10 dollar an hour range. However during this seventh month period, Strafford did have 13 more families than Lewiston leave the welfare rolls due to employment. This includes cases where the family asked to be discontinued and the caseworker assumes that it is due to employment, as well as cases where child support, or a second parent’s income, are added to the family. 82

Finally, there is a difference between the two offices regarding the percentage of CalWORKs participants who were exempt from the welfare to work requirement. While 26% of adult Strafford participants were exempt, just over 21% of adult Lewiston participants were. When we look at the reasons for these exemptions, we see additional differences. More of Strafford’s exemptions were due to caring for an incapacitated family member, domestic

82 This includes cases where the family asked to be discontinued and the caseworker assumes that it is due to employment, as well as cases where child support, or a second parent’s income, are added to the family.
violence, being over 60, and being disabled. More of Lewiston’s exemptions, on the other hand, were due to pregnancy, and mothers under 18 who were required to be in school but not work. These numbers suggest that Lewiston’s clientele is younger, with more teen pregnancies, which is consistent with a generally more disadvantaged population, with greater multigenerational poverty.

**Two Types of Empowerment**

The statistics I received from CCC illustrate the ways the two offices differ in terms of the participants they serve. Now I will look at the way the offices differed in their approach toward helping welfare-reliant women leave welfare for the labor market. As I have discussed in previous chapters, both offices provided substantial economic, social, and cultural capital or capital-building opportunities, and thus both offices were empowering. But they were not identical in terms of the discourses deployed by instructors, or in terms of the way participants reacted to and interacted with these discourses. After sitting through several Job Club and Job Search classes at both offices, I came to think of allowable work activities as fitting into three categories: employment, education/training, and therapeutic services. While the latter is not federally allowable, the state of California allowed counseling, support groups, etc. to count as work. While many participants fulfilled all of their work requirements with employment, and many others were able to find an educational or training program that would fulfill their weekly work requirements, therapeutic services were typically combined with work and/or education to meet participants’ work requirements. In

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83 Lewiston also had a slightly higher percentage (2.78) than Strafford (0.66%) of those exempted because they were deemed “incapable of working.” I’m not sure how this category was used, but I’m guessing that it was the discretion of a social worker who determined that someone realistically could not work at a given time for some other set of reasons—quite likely some sort of mental illness.
addition some participants were exempted from work requirements while pursuing counseling or psychiatric services.

The most glaring difference between the two offices was how therapeutic services were integrated (or not) into the curriculum of the classes, how much they were emphasized (or not) by the instructors, and how this information was received by participants. There was also a difference in how education was presented at the two offices. This part of the chapter will detail how Lewiston and Strafford instructors differed in their presentation and encouragement of their preferred paths off welfare, and how participants responded. The following section will consider possible reasons for the differences.

I begin here by briefly looking at the statistics regarding participants' employment, which is very similar at the two offices. I then turn to education/training and therapeutic services—the two broad types of work activities in which differences exist between the offices. I consider both the statistical and ethnographic data, and highlight how instructors diverged in their presentation of certain work activities and how participants differed in how receptive they were to them.

Instructors at the two offices differed little in their relationship to work. Those from both offices encouraged participants to find good jobs—typically meaning those that were in one’s preferred field, had decent wages or opportunity for raises, promotion, etc. Strafford instructors were generally content to hear participants’ plans to find employment, as was Ms. Johnson at Lewiston. Mr. James, with his focus on education, really pushed people to wait to find a job until after they had used their 18 months to pursue education. Paid work was extremely common at both sites, and if those who were newly on welfare were removed from the equation, certainly a majority of participants at both sites were working for pay. More
participants at Lewiston, however, were engaged in job retention services (average of 17.57) in contrast with Strafford (average of 9.86). This difference is interesting in that it is, perhaps, unexpected. Job retention services were provided to those who were employed and making enough that they no longer qualified for aid. These services included 12 months of child care and transportation payments. The low number of participants receiving these services at both sites is surprising, as is the greater number at Lewiston. Perhaps more Strafford families chose to forego these services after finding work, or perhaps Strafford families were less likely to be made aware of these services. Finally, unlike the images of workfare that dominated the media after TANF was implemented nationwide, very few participants in CCC were engaged in unpaid work—also called community service or workfare—to complete their work requirement.

**Education and Training**

Both Strafford and Lewiston encouraged education and training—as discussed in Chapter 5. However Lewiston—especially Mr. James—took a particularly strong stance on this, insisting that everyone would benefit from more education, and that the 18 months allowed for education should be “pimped” rather than wasted. Many participants at both offices pursued education or training; sometimes they were responding to their own inner drive for education, but often they responded to the opportunity presented to them. It was common for women from both offices to say that they had not considered going to school until they were encouraged to do so by an instructor.

Unfortunately, the statistics kept by the County do not keep track of how many participants pursued some type of education or training while receiving welfare, but we can get a sense of how many participants were engaged in these pursuits at a given point in time.
Over the seven month period for which I have statistics, 26 percent of Strafford participants (on average) were engaged in an education or training program. A nearly equal percentage of Lewiston participants, 27 percent, were similarly engaged. These numbers are impressive given that a substantial portion of participants at any given time are just beginning their time on welfare, and another substantial number have used up the 18-24 months allotted for education and training pursuits. Once the type of education or training program is considered, we see some differences between the two sites. Vocational training, which included approved community college certificate programs, was a work activity for 12 percent of Strafford participants and 16 percent of Lewiston participants. While the difference is modest, my ethnographic data back this difference, which may be more significant than it appears here. These statistics do not consider the type of vocational program pursued, and as I will show below, this mattered.

The percentage of participants pursuing English as a Second Language classes, and those engaged in programs to assist people with learning disabilities were also areas of difference between Lewiston and Strafford. Not surprisingly given the greater number of immigrants there, Strafford had more participants (an average of 18) engaged in ESL classes than Lewiston, who had none during these seven months. Lewiston, on the other hand had an average of nearly 50 people (8.5 percent of those with a work requirement) receiving services for learning disabilities compared with only about 15 (3 percent of those with a work requirement) at Strafford. This difference could be due to a higher proportion of participants

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84 For example, almost a third of those with a welfare to work requirement at Strafford during this 7 month period were engaged in orientation, mandatory classes, and assessment activities, all of which may be completed before education or training programs are started. Fewer, about 23 percent were similarly engaged at Lewiston. The difference between the two sites appears to be the very large number of participants in assessment in Strafford. This suggests that the process of moving from assessment to a signed welfare to work plan and a work activity took much longer at Strafford, however I cannot account for this difference.
with learning disabilities at Lewiston, but it could also be indicative of the way welfare
workers conducted the screenings, or the way the services were presented to participants. It
may also be that due to the generally more dire circumstances of Lewiston participants, they
were more likely to accept these services, which count toward their work hours but may also
be used retroactively to add time back to participants’ 18 month welfare to work clock if it
was determined that their original plan was impeded by the learning disability.

I have asserted that despite similar statistics regarding participants’ use of education
and training as a work activity, Strafford and Lewiston were not identical in this regard. In
Chapter 5 I discussed at length the way instructors at both sites encouraged education. Here it
also became clear that individual instructors differed; in particular Mr. James encouraged
education as the way out of poverty, a means of self-fulfillment, and an act of personal and
even community transformation. No other instructor took this approach in such an explicit
way. But despite the rather large differences between Mr. James and Ms. Johnson at
Lewiston, there was also a way that they were alike—...
welfare-reliant women, but because there were several approved private programs that offered certificates in these fields as well. Lewiston workers were adamant that participants wanting these certificates go to the community college, even though the programs there were lengthier and more strenuous than the other programs that on the surface seemed comparable. The instructors explained to participants that the credits they would earn at the community college were transferable—so in the future they could use these credits to earn a degree in the same or a different subject. Instructors seemed to understand that even a couple of semesters of college would yield substantial benefits for participants. Thus the approach to education and training—despite regulations limiting the length of time participants could count it as a work activity—was not limiting, but expansive, allowing room for growth and change in the future. (See Figure 6-1.)

Table 6-1: Two Modes of Empowerment

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Lewiston</th>
<th>Strafford</th>
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<tr>
<td>Education and Training</td>
<td>Expansive</td>
<td>Routinization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapeutic Services</td>
<td>Resistance</td>
<td>Restorative</td>
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Participants embraced this advice and the support provided to help them arrange for enrollment. Ms. Johnson would sometimes drive participants to the college so that they could sign up for classes. Mr. James often sat down with participants in front of the computer to go over the details of the program the participant wanted to pursue. When the Job Club and Job Search classes were over, many of the participants had a clear plan for pursuing an
educational program that would help them achieve, or get closer to achieving, their ultimate career goal.

Strafford’s treatment of education was quite different, although instructors also allowed and encouraged a variety of educational programs. But despite its equal proximity to the college, Job Club instructors were oriented toward other education and training programs as much, if not more than toward the college. Strafford instructors advised participants about a variety of certificate programs not associated with the local community college, typically training participants in low-wage, highly gendered fields, such as certified nurses’ assistants and day care providers. These programs, typically short and devoid of prerequisites, were often appealing to welfare-reliant women and were probably less intimidating than the longer certificate programs—even those in identical fields—at the community college. GED programs and other adult education programs that taught computer/office skills were also frequently recommended. But unlike Lewiston, where the discourse surrounding training was geared toward a broad education and widening one’s possibilities—and where education was encouraged with passion—the discourse at Strafford was routine, limited, and focused on training for commonly pursued, typically low-wage, occupations. Training programs were announced and implicitly recommended by instructors without careful consideration. Participants typically followed the recommendations of the instructors without much independent thought. I therefore call the approach to education at Strafford, routinized. (See Figure 6-1.)

In one notable instance, Strafford Job Club instructors helped several women enroll in a CNA training course. One of the instructors, Susan, first mentioned it on the first day of Job Club, right after she learned about it herself. The CNA course was again brought up by an
instructor on day 6 of the class, when another instructor, Addy, asked Bethany, a 34 year old newly-single white mother, if she would be interested in becoming a CNA. Bethany had expressed an interest in working in the medical field or with kids or the elderly. Bethany responded with moderate interest, saying she could probably do that. On the eighth day of class, Shannon, a young black woman, announced her intent to pursue this CNA training program, and she had already gathered some information about it. Later that day two women who had previously been trained as CNAs or licensed vocational nurses asked more about this program and the jobs available to CNAs. One of the women was sure she did not want to work in this field again, but the other, Maria, was interested in becoming trained again, once the instructors explained to her that she would not have to do in-home or convalescent home care. Hospitals also need CNAs, they told her. The instructors directed Maria, and then Bethany, to Shannon’s information. The training started the following Monday. Addy called the CNA training program and told them that Shannon and Bethany would be coming on Monday and that the County would be paying for them. Addy and Susan attempted to dissuade Maria from pursuing this program, both because they could not see her doing the tasks of a nurse’s assistant, and because she had worked in and left this field in the past. But Maria was persistent and eventually Susan and Addy allowed her to sign up for this program as well. The following day, the 9th day of Job Club, these three participants began the paperwork, fingerprinting, etc. that were required of them to enroll in the CNA program, for which there was an orientation the following day. But then the instructors found out that the program was only 20 days long; they immediately announced that this was not enough time. When Maria explained that it included two weeks of book learning and two weeks of an internship, the third instructor, Janey, remarked that this was the “fast track,” and then began
complaining about the “sloppy” CNAs at her mother’s nursing home. Susan said now she understood why so many people have their CNA license. The Job Club instructors quickly realized that the shortness of the training did not bode well for the preparedness or employability of program graduates. But while they did voice these concerns, they did not take responsibility for their role in directing women to this program and helping them enroll, and they did not advise the women against using some of their 18-24 month education clock for this program, which these three women did.

While education was allowed and even encouraged at both offices, instructors approached the topic with different intents and intensity. Interestingly it was the Lewiston instructors, typically working with welfare-reliant women who seemed to have less dominant cultural capital than the Strafford participants, who advocated approved programs at the community college. Unlike private certificate programs, the community college required students to take remedial courses where needed, and thus could help fill in gaps in students’ literacy and numeracy. Lewiston instructors took an empowering, expansive approach to education, encouraging women to pursue college and to dream big. Education was seen as holding the potential to expand ones economic chances, but also ones’ mind and self. At Strafford the approach to education was routinized. It was generally thought of only as a means to economic advancement, but even here there was something careless and superficial about the way Strafford instructors advised welfare-reliant women toward training.

Therapeutic Services

The third category of approved work activities in CCC was therapeutic services. The formal structure of therapeutic services was the same at the two offices. Both Strafford and Lewiston had counselors on staff to meet with participants and make referrals to such
services as psychiatric appointments, ongoing counseling, and substance abuse treatment. During part of my time in Lewiston the counselor was out on leave and her absence may have lessened the therapeutic nature of the Lewiston program. Both offices also had a part-time domestic violence counselor on the premises. They were there to educate participants as well as to meet with participants individually. As employees of the local domestic violence non-profit, these counselors were able to refer participants to a variety of services, including temporary housing for families and counseling services for abused women, as well as abusers.

Despite parallel staff and services, there were modest differences between the two sites regarding the use of therapeutic services by participants. While only a very small number of participants at Lewiston counted therapeutic services as a work activity (2.9%), Strafford participants were more likely to do so (9.47%). More than five times as many Strafford participants (11.86 on average compared with 2.29) were engaged in substance abuse services. Nearly twice as many participants at Strafford (9.29 on average) utilized domestic violence services in any given month compared with Lewiston participants (4.71). This matched what Jennifer, Strafford’s domestic violence counselor, told me about the two offices. She said that both offices had few referrals from welfare workers, but that Strafford— unlike Lewiston—had many referrals from the Job Club class. While all of these numbers are small, they only represent therapeutic services that counted as work, and thus do not necessarily count those participants who visited the welfare office counselors for a couple of sessions, or those who chose not to report their use of mental health services. These numbers also likely neglect the families who sought mental health services for their children.

My ethnographic data, discussed below, suggest that even more participants—especially at
Strafford—have used some type of therapeutic service through the welfare office, either for themselves or their children.

Therapeutic discourses were less prevalent at Lewiston than Strafford. However they did appear at Lewiston from time to time, for example when Ms. Johnson covered topics like stress management or Mr. James discussed how to handle problems on the job. But generally pragmatic strategies for dealing with these issues took precedence over a therapeutic approach focused on feelings, deep-seated issues, or past traumas. Therapeutic discourses were most obvious when the counselors came into the classroom to introduce themselves or run a workshop. However unlike at Strafford, these counselors did not stop by regularly or spend time “hanging out” in the room. Mr. James, for one, certainly did not prioritize the domestic violence counselor’s presentation; when she arrived at the scheduled time he asked her to reschedule since he was busy with his new curriculum.

During the first week I spent at Lewiston, Ms. Johnson’s Job Club class participated in a self-esteem workshop led by the office’s general counselor. The counselor did not allow my presence, and Ms. Johnson chose to be absent as well. After the workshop the participants told Ms. Johnson about it, and I was present for this. They complained at length about the counselor and her facilitation of the self esteem workshop. Alicia said that she did not like “psychology because it makes things tense.” “There are certain things you can’t say in a group,” she added. And then, “Therapy makes you bring up stuff you don’t want to bring up.” Apparently the counselor, Carrie, talked at length about her relationship problems and her own divorce. The participants were in agreement that she needed counseling more than anyone, and that her level of sharing was inappropriate. Most were also in agreement that the topic of the workshop and some of it were helpful, but they said they would have preferred it
if Ms. Johnson had led it. I never met Carrie but I suspect that she was white (as were all the other counselors I encountered as CCC) and addressing self-esteem with an all Black group. She also had never introduced herself to the class before that day. Her inability to gain participants’ trust was likely due to both of these factors, perhaps in combination with her behavior during the workshop.

Later during the same Job Club a domestic violence counselor came to the class to run a workshop. This time I was present. It was the first time Darlene had conducted such a workshop at Lewiston, and although she was informative and supportive, she was unable to connect with the participants. The women in the class were hesitant to participate, and some were quite rude to her. While some participants took the pamphlets she passed around, others refused. Grace said she was taking one for a friend, but since she was living in a homeless shelter with her five children, I wondered whether it was really for herself. When Darlene said that women can be abusers as well as the abused, several participants asked her if she was abusive, seemingly in an effort to rattle her. When one particularly engaged woman, Rose, responded that sex without consent is one form of abuse, laughter and noise followed. As Darlene tried to regain control of the class, Grace voiced her irritation that they were being quieted and not allowed to fully express themselves. Darlene finished presenting the information with little discussion and no questions. After she left the room, two participants—a man and a woman—say she “sucked.” When Alicia complained that Darlene did not have much information, another participant defended her—and the importance of the issue—by saying, “unless you’ve been abused.” Rose also defended Darlene by saying she was “cool enough.” Rose then added, “No one really wants to talk about abuse.”
Rose’s final statement largely sums up the response to domestic abuse awareness and counseling services at the Lewiston office. Few women in Lewiston wanted to admit that domestic violence had or was affecting them. I think the same went for substance abuse issues, depression, and other mental health issues. There seemed to be a stigma attached to wanting or needing therapeutic services. Mr. James tried to combat participants’ resistance (see figure 6-1) by talking about a time in his life, during his divorce, when he was depressed and was helped by going to counseling. He was so well-liked that this admission certainly did not cause others to think poorly of him, but on the other hand, his personal recommendation to seek counseling for problems did not visibly change participants’ resistance to therapy. And neither Ms. Johnson nor Mr. James made much effort to get participants to talk about domestic violence or substance abuse. They seemed happy to relegate these issues to the short periods of time when the counselors were present.

Occasionally women at Lewiston did admit to having been abused in the past. This seemed to happen more often in Mr. James’s classes, where closer bonds formed between participants. Immediately following the domestic violence counselors’ workshop, Judith, a Black woman with a grown son and a younger daughter, told several of us about her negative past experience with the local non-profit providing services for survivors of domestic violence. She told us that they had accompanied her to the hospital, but were also working with the DA who was pressing for more jail time than she wanted her abuser to get. She did not like that. Fitting the pattern of resistance in Lewiston, even when Judith admitted to abuse—including abuse severe enough to land her in the hospital—she remained resistant to services and, in some ways, loyal to her abuser. This is not uncommon, of course, but her
negative experiences with the domestic violence services clearly differed from the stories I heard at Strafford.

There was much greater integration of therapeutic services and discourses throughout the classes at Strafford. Instructors focused more intensely on these psychological issues, and required more interaction from the class. Participants discussed managing stress, anger management, having a positive attitude and breaking “bad habits of the mind.” These discussions were led by the regular Job Club instructors (all African American women, with the exception of one white school district employee who was there part-time). On the first day of class, Susan told the Strafford participants that they needed to take care of any problems—including health, legal, and emotional—they had before they started looking for work. She asked them, “If you are not emotionally stable, how are you going to work?” This idea of restoring or repairing oneself before looking for work was a recurring theme at Strafford and is significant not only because it shows the emphasis on a therapeutic approach there, but also because it flies in the face of the work first discourse that predominates in welfare to work programs nationally. But there also seemed to be a willingness from day one on the part of many participants to consider their own and others’ need for counseling or to think about their problems in therapeutic terms. Strafford participants did not balk at the notion of talking about one’s personal problems in a therapeutic setting. Instead there seemed to be an acceptance of the idea that sharing one’s personal struggles would have an empowering and restorative effect. (See Figure 6-1).

On the second day of a Strafford Job Club class, Margie, the office’s counselor, came into the classroom and introduced herself. She explained her role and how one could go about seeing her. She also explained how her confidentiality worked. And she told the class
that they would get work credit for hours spent in counseling. Anna recommended seeing a
counselor even for rather mundane things like parenting issues. After a participant shared a
story about her three year old stealing candy from a store, Margie told the class that children
could receive counseling as well. She then talked about the Clean Slate program,\(^{85}\) which
helped to erase people’s criminal records under certain circumstances. A man and a woman,
both with criminal records, asked several questions about this program. Margie answered
these questions and left the classroom, but she appeared several more times during the
course, often stopping in to “pick up” a participant who had requested an appointment with
her.

The following day the class was joined by the domestic violence counselor, Jennifer.
She was met with a much warmer reception than Darlene at Lewiston. Strafford participants
jumped right into the conversation. Jackie, a middle aged white woman who had already told
some of the instructors that she had been raped as child by her stepfather, admitted that her
current boyfriend was verbally abusive. She said she would rather be physically abused.
When Jennifer responded that the goal was no abuse, Jackie said she could not even envision
a relationship without abuse. As Jennifer talked about the pattern of controlling behavior in
abusive relationships, James, a Black man, gave an example of a woman who was
controlling. Responding to the discussion about the cyclical nature of abuse, Tadisha, a Black
woman, talked about a friend who would call her for help when she was being abused. By the
time Tadisha would arrive the friend would be “all lovey-dovey” with her partner. Later in
the workshop, a Latina woman, Rosa, talked about being abused by her husband and walking
barefoot to a police station where she received little help. She talked with Jennifer privately

\(^{85}\) This program was discussed at Lewiston by the instructors, not the counselors. At Strafford it was discussed
by both.
after the workshop. Jennifer also talked with George, an Asian (perhaps biracial, white and Asian) participant who told Jennifer about being abused by his stepfather as a child. He admitted that this abuse had held him back as an adult, and he shared that there was an “incident” that led to his having to take an anger management course. Jennifer promised to help him get some counseling, and he seemed open to this. Unlike the Lewiston workshop where participants did not share their experiences with abuse, and implicitly questioned the legitimacy and importance of the domestic violence counselor, Strafford participants eagerly shared their stories. Further, during the course of the two-week Job Club, at least five participants out of approximately 15\textsuperscript{86} met with or signed up to meet with one or both of the counselors.

*Explaining the Differences*

So why was it that the Lewiston office empowered women through an expansive approach focused on education, while the Strafford office empowered women through a restorative approach centered around therapy? Certainly there has been a trend in recent decades away from an educational focus in human services, and toward a more therapeutic approach. James Nolan (1998) writes, “a therapeutic cultural orientation has become a dominant feature of the American state.” Looking specifically at U.S. welfare programs—especially means-tested ones—Nancy Fraser argues that the state interprets poor women’s needs as being at least partially psychological in nature. The fact that both welfare offices promoted education, and allowed participants to pursue training before first looking for work, was highly unusual. But Strafford’s focus on short training programs that prepared women for low-wage jobs certainly matches the national trend. (See Hays 2003; Nightingale, Pindus, \textsuperscript{86}This number is approximate because over the course of the two weeks the number of enrolled participants changes as people drop out or are kicked out after missing more than the allowed number of hours (7 hours).

\textsuperscript{86}This number is approximate because over the course of the two weeks the number of enrolled participants changes as people drop out or are kicked out after missing more than the allowed number of hours (7 hours).
and Trutko 2002; Holcomb, Pavetti, Ratcliffe, Riedinger 1998.) So it seems that it is Lewiston—with its simultaneous avoidance of and resistance to therapeutic discourses, as well as its emphasis on a broad education—that most needs to be explained.

First we must consider the possibility that the difference had to do with instructor preferences and discourses. Perhaps the Lewiston instructors were inclined more toward education, or were personally wary of therapy. Mr. James was currently enrolled in college, and was experiencing his own expansive educational experience. This no doubt made him particularly enthusiastic about sending participants to college. But the Strafford instructors had been to college also, and at least one had an advanced degree. Further, Mr. James was not at all adverse to therapy, as seen above when he admitted to participants that he had been to counseling in the past and that he had benefited from it. Ms. Johnson seemed open to therapy too, and was less forceful in her push for education than Mr. James. But she clearly directed participants interested in education to finish their GEDs and/or attend community college. So while there may have been some instructor preferences at play, this certainly cannot explain the resistance to therapy seen at Lewiston.

A second possibility is that the participants’ needs differed at the two sites. Perhaps the Lewiston women were more in need of education than the Strafford women, or maybe the Strafford women experienced more domestic violence or other trauma and mental health issues than the Lewiston women. On the surface, there appears to be some truth here. Given the generally more entrenched poverty of Lewiston participants, it would not be surprising if educational services were more needed in Lewiston. However based on the County’s statistics, this does not appear to be true, although certainly ESL classes were in higher demand at Strafford. But even if Lewiston participants needed more education, this does not
explain why they were sent to a community college while Strafford participants were
directed toward short certificate programs.

Since I met more women at the Strafford office who spoke about domestic violence, it is worth considering whether Lewiston women may have needed such services less than Strafford women. Over 60 percent of welfare-reliant women have experienced domestic violence at some point in their lives, and though there is some slight variation based on race, it is African American women, not white, Asian, or Latina women, who report more and more severe, abuse. There is therefore no reason to think that Lewiston women suffered less abuse than Strafford women. However, I met several women at Strafford—all of whom were white—who had once been financially secure but had left abusive relationships and then found themselves in poverty. So perhaps domestic violence was more commonly the primary cause of women’s poverty at Strafford, and this, in turn, made therapeutic services a more salient issue to both welfare-reliant women and their instructors/welfare workers.

Even if these assumptions are accurate, they cannot fully explain why Strafford empowered women through a restorative approach and Lewiston empowered women through an expansive approach. The third explanation I want to consider is whether demographic differences between the two offices fueled differences in participants’ cultural dispositions, or the cultural meanings participants attached to education and therapy. There is a historical tradition of African Americans relying on education to uplift their communities. Historian Linda Gordon (1994) writes about the Progressive Era, “Although most Americans do not consider education a part of ‘welfare,’ that distinction was particular to the white experience. . . for blacks, who lacked educational opportunity, schools were an antipoverty program” (123-124). The historical significance of education for African Americans, and the continued
struggle against radically unequal schools, played out in the Lewiston welfare office as Mr. James told his class that education would be the key to their long term success. He also viewed college as empowering in ways that extended beyond economic empowerment. He told them, college changes you and your thinking process; it makes you more mature, more confident. He therefore embraced education as a means of expansive empowerment—expanding participants minds, self esteem, potential, and economic chances.

There is also evidence that different racial and ethnic groups use available domestic violence and other therapeutic services differently. Nancy Fraser (1989), considering a 1971 study by Prudence Rains of two facilities providing services to pregnant teens, addresses Black women’s resistance to therapeutic techniques. While one facility serviced middle class white women, the other worked with poor Black women. Both sets of women received counseling that encouraged them to discuss their feelings and the “deep emotional causes of their pregnancies” (179). But while the young white women internalized this perspective, the young Black women resisted it. Fraser writes that these Black women “devised a varied repertoire of strategies for resisting the expert, therapeutic constructions of their life stories and capacities for agency….In effect, these young black women blocked efforts to inculcate in them white, middle class norms of individuality and affectivity” (180).

One could argue that differences in cultural capital may have been at play both in Rains’ study and in CCC. While therapeutic discourses have become common among the middle classes—and thus could be said to be a part of dominant cultural capital—the subjugated cultural capital held more consistently by the Black women in Lewiston involved a resistance to therapeutic technologies. In addition, recent studies suggest that Black women use traditional mental health services less than white women, and that they tend to be less
satisfied with their experiences when they do use these services. African Americans may be suspicious of intervention by the state and other largely white institutions, given the abuse and surveillance they have experienced historically and still today. Black women may be expected by other African Americans to protect Black males, and may choose to do so rather than turning them over to a racist criminal justice system. In addition, domestic violence services tend to be color-blind, ignoring issues particular to Black women, as well as other women of color. A lack of cultural competence, as well as a lack of Black counselors and other service providers, all have been mentioned by Black women survivors of abuse as weaknesses of available services (El-Khoury, et al. 2004; Gillum 2008). Judith’s story, above, seems to fit this pattern.

These problems are not limited to African American women, but may also be true for other women of color—particularly if they do not speak English. There is also evidence that Hispanic women underutilize domestic violence services, in one study (West, Kantor, and Jasinski 1998) this has been shown to be primarily due to a language barrier. I did not observe a clear difference between white and Latina women’s willingness to talk about and seek services for domestic violence, but this may have been because my sample of Latina women was limited to those who were proficient with the English language.87

So there is evidence to support the notion that the different modes of empowerment may be due to the different racial and ethnic groups represented at the two offices, and certain cultural dispositions that followed. The Black women I encountered in the Lewiston classes were skeptical of and resistant to domestic violence and other mental health services as well, no doubt for the same reasons I have just described. But what did not happen in

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87 Spanish speaking CalWORKs participants attended separate Job Club classes.
Rains’ study, and what Fraser does not consider, is that workers could change their tactics to better suit the women with whom they are working. In a purely therapeutic setting this is unlikely, but in a welfare office, where there are already other discourses oriented toward personal fulfillment and empowerment, particularly education and employment, workers can shape their discourse to one that is salient and readily accepted by participants.

I therefore argue that the primary reason for the different models of empowerment at the two offices was not due to instructor preferences, or in differences in the rate of domestic violence or mental health issues, or the need for education, but instead stemmed from the meanings participants at the two offices attached to therapy and education, and thus what participants viewed as empowering. In the case of Lewiston, this was another example of the instructors acknowledging and responding to participants’ subjugated cultural capital—in this case a suspicion of and resistance to therapeutic discourses and practices. This dynamic interplay between the way participants understood their own needs and the way instructors came to understand their clients’ needs was the key to creating an empowering program.

Conclusion

I have argued that the Lewiston and Strafford welfare offices deployed different approaches to empowering their welfare participants. While instructors at both offices viewed employment—if you liked your job—as fundamental to one’s personal growth and success, they differed on the significance of education and therapeutic services. Lewiston workers, and participants, sought an expansive empowerment through education and training. Strafford workers and participants, on the other hand, valued education, but fully embraced a restorative empowerment (see Figure 6-1) focused on healing the self in order to be “work ready,” as they called it, as well as happier with one’s life. And I have argued that the key
explanation for understanding the reasons for the different models of empowerment stemmed from the participants themselves and their cultural dispositions toward education, therapy, and empowerment.

Thus while it is tempting to ask which program was more empowering, it is important to realize that what is empowering to one person is not necessarily empowering to another. While it is possible that an expansive approach might have resonated well with many Strafford participants, it is clear that a restorative approach would have been rejected by Lewiston participants. And I think that an expansive approach would have left some Strafford participants still yearning for something else—at least for those women who were in the process of escaping and healing from abuse.

It may also be tempting to disregard the empowering approaches of these offices, and instead focus on the broader economic context of welfare reform and poverty. I agree with the criticisms of feminist scholars who have argued that federal and state regulations do not allow enough time for education, but I argue that despite this small window of time, there is great variation from one welfare program to the next, and that this matters. Programs like Lewiston’s, which encourage women to “pimp the system” and get as much education as they are allowed, not only increase women’s cultural capital, but also foster the development of social capital between workers and participants. I also agree on some level with criticisms about the individualizing tendency of a therapeutic approach, but what I witnessed in Strafford’s welfare office made me rethink my assumptions. When women came together in these classes and shared their experiences of abuse, there was a consciousness raising that took place. As women developed a new view of their own lives and experiences, and how they were similar to those of other welfare-reliant women, participants acquired more
cultural and social capital. Whether through an expansive or a restorative approach to empowerment, most women left the required classes in Lewiston and Strafford more hopeful, motivated, directed, and socially connected than they had been. These benefits—even if they failed to lead to good jobs and economic success—are worthy of our attention. Programs that yield these benefits despite national and state regulations should be models for other welfare programs.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

It is easy to underestimate the importance of hopefulness, respect, and understanding in the life of someone struggling to feed her children. But the gratitude and enthusiasm of so many welfare participants at Strafford and Lewiston forced me to pay attention to these intangible aspects of the program. Empowering welfare programs do not solve poverty. I have argued that they are likely to improve women’s chances of escaping poverty by providing more economic, social, and cultural capital. But in reality even the most empowering programs can only economically help women in marginal ways, given the limitations of TANF.

Many times in the course of my research and especially my writing, I have questioned whether I was falsely enthusiastic about CCC’s welfare program. I have wondered if it was all smoke and mirrors—if I was somehow co-opted by the instructors to believe that there was something positive about a program whose policies I had always opposed. I have asked myself over and over if I have spent too little time talking about the moments when instructors infantilized participants, or assumed that because they were poor they were bad with money or unaware of proper nutrition for their children. Similarly, I have worried that I have not reiterated often enough my belief that all people have a right to food, shelter, and medical care, and that real democracy requires these guarantees. I have worried that I have, at times, ignored the structural for the interpersonal, and have somehow strayed from sociology into a discourse of pop-psychology—talking about hopefulness and empowerment. I have sometimes been uneasy about my arguments, fearing the ways they could be (mis)interpreted or manipulated.
But I have come back, time and time again, to the women I met in Strafford and Lewiston, and what they told me. They want to work. They do not want—nor do they think they have a right—to be paid to stay home with any but the smallest, and sickest, children. They prefer TANF to AFDC because it pushed them to work. Of course they saw huge flaws in many of TANF’s regulations as well, but they still accepted the work requirements that I was so quick to rally against. Most of the welfare-reliant women I met enjoyed the classes and appreciated the information and experience, even when the topics made me uneasy. I spent a long time sitting with these insights, the disjuncture between what I believed was best for these poor families—what I believed was fairest and most generous—and what they said they wanted. I toyed with notions of false consciousness, cooptation, and a failure to tell me the truth. But ultimately it felt like a greater injustice to come into these women’s lives and reinterpret their words to fit my meanings than it did to honor what I believe they were telling me and err and on the side of being, perhaps, too kind to CCC and its welfare program.

Over and over I heard women say that they liked TANF because it motivated them—albeit by force—to work. While I still do not support the work requirements stipulated by TANF, I have come to see how a program that requires women to leave their homes, come together in a group, and then engage in a work activity can provide many women with a needed push, not to mention social support. Given that women overwhelmingly told me that they wanted to work, this is crucial. Only when I paid close attention to women’s desire to work, and the myriad meanings work held for them, did the dissertation begin to take shape. If women had told me that they wanted, more than anything, to stay home with their children, to be full-time stay at home mothers, than this dissertation would look very different. But
even when I shared my belief that the work of mothering deserved payment, they maintained their desire to work outside of the home, at least part-time, if adequate day care was provided and their children were healthy and over a certain age, (the age varied from woman to woman, usually no more than two years).

So I have argued that CCC’s welfare program, compared with vast number of work first programs implemented in the 1990’s, was empowering to participants. Through the transmission of dominant economic, social, and cultural capital—or the opportunities to acquire these forms of capital—CCC empowered women and gave them many tools to help them take charge of their lives. It offered poor families substantial economic capital by providing cash benefits that neared the highest in the county, and by ensuring that every family fulfilling their work requirements had access to (almost always) free child care. In addition there were several discourses about economic capital which benefited women and their families. Some instructors, most notably Mr. James, encouraged women to “pimp the system,” or try to get as many benefits as possible from the welfare program. Although Mr. James was the only instructor who explicitly encouraged this, other instructors did tell their classes that they were eligible to have the county pay for things like school books and work uniforms. All the instructors also acknowledged, in various ways, that most participants had unreported income—or subjugated economic capital. And all the instructors communicated—in either explicit or implicit ways—that they did not want to get anyone in trouble for this type of routine, small-scale welfare fraud. By taking this stance, instructors built trusting relationships with participants, as well as helping them keep as much income as possible.
CCC offered many opportunities for gaining social capital as well. Through the required classes participants got to know instructors, some of whom had and used their community connections. For the many participants who formed solid relationships with these instructors, they had an advocate within the welfare office as well. While such relationships with instructors only occasionally led to job leads, they regularly led to emotional support, advice, and encouragement. Participants also acquired bonding social capital as they developed relationships with one another. I have argued that these were crucial in terms of building women’s support systems, but they also had practical effects for many women—help with transportation or babysitting, for example. Instructors played a role in the development of social capital by being a nurturing and often inspiring presence in the classroom, and by facilitating a cooperative and supportive atmosphere among participants—something quite uncommon in the literature. They also acknowledged the range of relationships women might have out of the welfare office, and encouraged women to develop or maintain relationships that were positive and supportive and to end or limit negative or detrimental relationships.

Finally CCC provided many opportunities for the acquisition of cultural capital. Most notably this came in the form of education and training opportunities that were promoted at both offices, albeit more so at Lewiston. But through the Job Club and Job Search classes CCC also taught job search skills, such as resume writing and interviewing. And CCC taught norms of appearance and behavior for the workplace and beyond. Key to the transmission of these types of dominant capital—or to the pursuit of opportunities to gain these types of capital—were the discourses deployed by instructors in the classroom. By encouraging education before work—despite policies which dictated participants must look for work
before pursuing training— instructors helped many participants gain cultural capital in the form of knowledge, skills, and credentials. Instructors at CCC also tended to be respectful of participants subjugated cultural capital. By acknowledging and respecting the skills, tastes, and dispositions participants brought to the classes, instructors valued participants’ lives and experiences and even helped them to see how these could be useful in the labor market. Treating participants with this kind of respect also increased the likelihood that participants would be able and willing to acquire the habits and dispositions that would be expected of them in the labor market.

We know that providing child care and transportation monies, and completing certain educational and training programs typically improves welfare-reliant men and women’s chances in the labor market. It also seems likely that increasing their bonding and bridging social capital could result in job leads, as well as the social support needed to retain employment. Further, teaching job search skills and workplace norms in such a way that participants feel respected rather than threatened or blamed for past failures also seems likely to improve women’s chances of getting and keeping a job. Without outcome data, however, this is impossible to prove.

But what I have argued throughout this dissertation, is that even if the dominant capital transmitted in CCC’s welfare offices did not lead to improved chances in the labor market (and I believe it did), this capital and the way it was transmitted to welfare-reliant women still empowered them. I have argued that to be empowered means to believe that one can be an agent in one’s own life—to be hopeful and confident in one’s ability to improve one’s life circumstances. That CCC’s welfare program left so many of its participants empowered is important. Empowerment is arguably a prerequisite for improving one’s life,
finding and keeping employment, or overcoming poverty. I would even argue that a sense of empowerment is crucial as a parent as well—that it is essential to passing on a sense of hopefulnness and possibility to one’s children.

Empowerment is not enough, but it is essential. A program that provided women with even greater opportunities for gaining dominant capital, but that blamed participants for their situations, and offered little hope of overcoming the challenges they faced would be sure to fail. Of course this begs the question, could this be a false-empowerment? Were women in CCC still empowered in the weeks and months following their Job Club and Job Search classes? Did they still believe they could change their life, and were they actually doing so? I interviewed several women who had completed the mandatory classes approximately six months prior to the interview. Some of these women were still working on the educational and career plans they had made during Job Club and Search. Some were not. Many were still in touch with their instructors and friends they made in the classes. For some, the burst of empowerment may have rescinded, but none appeared to be left feeling bitter about failed possibilities. Without long term outcome data it is impossible to answer whether there were long-term benefits to the empowering Approach of CCC’s program. However the long-term view did not appear to be negative in any way; there was no indication that participants once hopeful and motivated, later felt that the discourses deployed in Job Club and Job Search were full of false-promises. Future research directions might include longitudinal research to track women’s experience of empowerment over time, and to compare the lives and attitudes of welfare recipients who participated in empowering welfare programs with those who attended a repressive ones.
Ideally, an empowering approach would not have to operate against the grain of many repressive and restrictive regulations. But even given current restrictions, there are many things that counties and individual welfare programs can do to improve their welfare programs. First, Individual welfare programs should maximize the economic capital they provide to participants, by being as generous as possible with transportation monies and other work supports. Workers should acknowledge that most participants need subjugated economic capital—hidden income—to survive. And they should overlook all but the most egregious cases of welfare fraud.

Secondly, individual welfare programs and workers should foster positive, long-term relationships (social capital) with participants, as well as between participants. Supportive, responsive welfare workers who understand the constraints welfare-reliant women face, and who do not blame families for their poverty, are crucial to this goal. This is something that individual workers can do, even in quite repressive programs. Supervisors can play a key role in encouraging workers to relate to participants in this way as well. Most importantly, instructors of mandatory welfare classes should create a supportive atmosphere where participants build trusting relationships with one another, and with the instructor(s). To the extent possible, instructors should assist participants by acting as references, and networking with employers and training programs. Also helpful, is an acknowledgment of the varied relationships participants may have outside of the welfare office. Respecting these relationships and encouraging participants to utilize them—as well as encouraging them to end negative relationships—may also be helpful.

Finally, individual welfare programs can do their best, within the confines of local laws, to promote education and training programs, and to allow participants to use the
maximum amount of time allowed to increase their education. In addition, they should teach job search skills—ensuring that all participants have clean resumes, know how to fill out applications, and have practice interviewing. Individual welfare workers can talk with participants about what employers expect in terms of appearance and behavior on the job. This form of dominant cultural capital is often—but not always—already held by welfare participants. Those with successful work experience can help instruct those with less about employer expectations, and how to retain employment once it is found. Instructors should have some understanding of participants’ subjugated capital—even better if they share that capital—and should deploy this in the classroom. By acknowledging and valuing participants’ subjugated cultural capital, instructors can create a learning environment where participants are more open to hearing what will be expected of them in the labor market. By teaching workplace expectations and ways of dealing with issues that may arise on the jobsite as tools to be used in order to keep one’s job, instructors can present these soft skills as a choice, and thus put participants in control of their own behavior and decisions.

Opportunities to complain about the norms, and to discuss the options jobseekers and workers face, could be particularly beneficial. Instruction should also include worker’s rights, and what legal recourse they have if their rights are denied. Thus instead of teaching participants to be compliant workers—a perspective that may be (and should be) resisted— instructors can teach participants to be smart workers—to know what to do to keep one’s job if they decide that is the most important goal, and also to know how to protect themselves from illegal exploitation. This is a key way to help empower welfare-reliant women.

To do these things, instructors and all welfare workers will need more training. Educating welfare workers in the structural causes of poverty, and in issues such as domestic
violence—faced by a majority of welfare-reliant women at one time or another—as well as ensuring that they participate in diversity and sensitivity training is crucial. If workers are expected not only to be competent at the paperwork most jobs at the welfare office require, but also at interacting in caring ways with poor women and their families, they will do a better job at providing the human connection that can be so meaningful and even motivating for welfare-reliant women.

While my study is uniquely positioned to suggest the above recommendations, and while I stand behind the difference individual welfare programs—and even individual welfare workers—can make in participants’ lives, I readily acknowledge that massive changes are needed to federal welfare and economic policies. So I end my dissertation with my recommendations for short, medium, and long-term changes that will end poverty and benefit all families.

The importance of work—and of education, counseling, and other services to being able to find and keep work—were driven home to me by the women themselves, and I believe we, as progressive and feminist scholars and policy-makers, need to pay close attention to what poor women want from social policy. Feminist and progressive scholars agree on key aspects of social policy reform, such as the need for universal health care, universal and high quality child care, an improved education system and expanded education and training options, and a higher minimum wage. In addition, many feminist scholars of the welfare state, such as Gwendolyn Mink and Dorothy Roberts, argue for a minimum guaranteed income so that all single parents receive payment for their carework. Similarly, Sharon Hays (2003) suggests “substantial tax credits to caregivers” (236). Along with this policy recommendation, these scholars call for us to acknowledge the value—both the
economic value and the social importance—of motherwork or carework. They argue that mothers who choose to stay home with their children, even poor, single mothers, should be allowed to do so on the basis of the social and economic value of their work in the home. As one Strafford child care worker told me, it was common for the price of child care paid by CCC to be nearly the same as the income earned by the parent. This raises an important question—what is the point of forcing poor mothers to work outside the home, if there is often no financial benefit for tax payers? I began my research agreeing with these policy and social recommendations, and I still do. But now I am more aware of what gets little attention from these scholars—the importance of employment not for economic reasons, but because poor women want to work.

It is a delicate balance, as a feminist, to choose what to emphasize, especially in regards to policy recommendations. I want to stand by my belief that mothering is work, as well as my belief that poor women should have the right to stay home with their children as well-off women do. I also want to hear what poor women are saying, and respect their demands rather than trying to change them to fit my own, or to fit a more feminist, progressive agenda. Finally I also want to take into consideration the current social and political context, and think about what is politically and economically doable at this particular moment—but without losing sight of long-term goals.

Below I sketch my recommendations for short, medium, and long-term policies for poor—and eventually all—families in the U.S.
Short Term Goals:

1) A government work program that promises employment to all. This program must pay at least minimum wage. Like Roosevelt’s WPA, this program would repair and improve our infrastructure and schools, and revitalize neighborhoods. Many of these jobs should be green jobs, and should focus on helping all communities move toward green energy.

2) Guaranteed quality child care for all who are employed through this government work program, as well as for other low-income families.

3) Guaranteed health care for all who are employed through this government work program, other low-income families, and all uninsured children.

4) An improved educational system at every level, including greater funding for Head Start through public universities. In addition, we should provide education and training to all those employed through the government work program. I suggest allowing these workers to spend one fourth of their paid work week pursuing training and education programs. This is an investment in our futures.

Medium-Term Goals:

1) A full employment policy including a continuous government work program that could absorb any unemployed persons who chose to work in it. This program must pay minimum wage, and could include everything from revitalizing public spaces to working one-on-one with students in neighborhood schools.

2) A minimum wage that is a living wage. If you work, you should not be poor.

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For a description and analysis of this type of program, see Papadimitriou (1998).
3) A caretaker’s wage for parents who stay home with their children, and other caregivers.

4) Guaranteed, quality child care for all families. Even middle class families struggle to afford quality child care. This should be a given so that all who want and need to work can.

5) National, single-payer health care for all.

6) A greatly improved educational system, including quality public preschools and affordable public universities. Our educational system is in shambles, and does more to perpetuate inequality than to combat it. A complete revamping is needed.

Long-Term Goals

I tell my students that we cannot achieve something that we do not first envision—so we must dream big! Along with the above, I hope for the following:

1) A guaranteed minimum income for all, regardless of employment status. Food, housing, health care, and education are all human rights.

2) A free public university system. No one should forgo an education or career path because they cannot afford it. Money spent on education—including higher education—is an investment. An increasingly high-tech, information economy will require more highly educated workers.

3) A true re-valuing of carework, such that men and women share in caretaking responsibilities and staying home with young children is viewed as work worthy of a decent income. Women—and men—should be able to choose to be a stay-at home parent, or to work outside the home (part or full time). And this decision should neither be determined by one’s gender nor one’s class.
Until we have a caretaker’s wage or minimum guaranteed income that can support a family, we will continue to need a safety net for poor families where the parent(s) cannot or will not work outside the home. There will always be people with barriers too great to overcome, and people who can work part-time, but not full time. If we accept that food, housing, healthcare, and education are fundamental human rights, we can accept that we will need to provide for those few who cannot participate as workers of one kind or another. As Chapter 1 indicates, the numbers of those who feel no obligation to work and who would free-ride if given the opportunity, appears to be very small. For most, work is fundamental to their sense of self and purpose—if only decent jobs and work supports—like child care—existed.

If welfare policy and practices started with this understanding—a belief in the desire of the vast majority of welfare-reliant families to work and be self-supporting rather than a suspicion that most welfare-participants are trying to pull-one-over on their worker and get a free ride—both our federal policies and the practices of individual welfare offices and workers would be far gentler. Welfare-reliant women would be approached with care and understanding—as was usually the case with instructors at CCC-- rather than suspicion and animosity (as was often the case with the few workers who conducted initial interviews with welfare applicants at CCC, and with welfare workers written about by others). Respect and genuine understanding, when also combined with opportunities for welfare participants to acquire economic, social, and cultural capital, go a long way toward benefiting women. I believe social policies should ameliorate all poverty in a country as wealthy as the U.S., but while the material needs of poor families are of utmost importance they are not the only needs poor families have, and they are not the only needs that can be met through welfare
programs. People have a need to be recognized, respected, and understood. We all have a need for meaningful, supportive relationships with others, and for hope in our family’s futures. Individual welfare programs and workers can help provide these even when substantial capital is not available.

It is easy to dismiss the intangible aspects of interactions in the welfare office, and to argue that all welfare-reliant women need is a good job—and child care to go with it (or compensation for their motherwork). During this time of rapidly rising unemployment, as many states continue to cut their welfare rolls rather than responding to growing need, it would be easy to dismiss the significance of empowerment. I do not want to underestimate the gravity of the economic situation, or the number of families struggling—and often failing—to keep their children sheltered and fed. But I also want to argue that even during these difficult times, perhaps especially now, offering welfare-reliant families hope, compassion, and as one welfare-reliant mother put it—a You Can Do It! attitude—is crucial.

I conclude by again emphasizing the importance of the non-economic aspects of welfare programs. Welfare offices are governed by an array of federal and state rules and regulations, heralded as sites of negative social capital, and notorious for their repression and surveillance of welfare-reliant women—and yet these two offices found a way to create something positive for the women—and men—who came through their doors in need of help. Welfare programs can leave women feeling hopeless, guilty, and angry, if they provide few services and deploy punitive, blaming discourses and practices. Or they can leave women empowered—hopeful, engaged, and connected to one another. To do the latter workers must be responsive to the cultural orientations and proclivities of the participants, as well as being respectful of women’s experiences and perspectives. That CCC’s welfare
program—and particularly its instructors—was able to create a space and atmosphere where women began to trust one another is significant, and shows the potential for welfare offices to be multi-faceted institutions where both individual and community empowerment are possible.
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Methodological Appendix

When I first began to think about writing a dissertation I knew it would be about welfare reform. Having spent four memorable months working at a New York City homeless shelter for women and children, I was both academically and politically—not to mention emotionally—committed to this topic. At first I envisioned a comparison between Unemployment Insurance—and the process of applying and receiving this form of welfare—and TANF. I was interested in “testing” the theory of the two-tiered welfare state written about by Nancy Fraser, Linda Gordon, and other feminist scholars. Given the recent change from AFDC to TANF (CalWORKs in California), and the work requirements that came with this, I wanted to see if this form of welfare was still subject to the maltreatment and stigmatization about which these authors and countless others had written about, and if unemployment insurance was really all that “unstigmatized.” When I discovered that Unemployment Insurance in California was newly administered largely by phone, I visited a couple of One Stop Career Center to see if fieldwork done there might shed light on my question. In the meantime, I was waiting to see if the letter I had sent to an administrator of Alameda County’s CalWORKs program was successful in achieving access to a welfare office.

The One Stop Career Centers that I visited were interesting, but it quickly became clear that they would not help me address my question. Welfare-reliant women, people receiving unemployment insurance, and others who were seeking employment were undistinguishable from one another, and most of the workshops and services did not differentiate between these groups either. I failed to gain access to Alameda County as well—they were undergoing a variety of staffing chances and restructuring, and many
months later apologized for not responding to my inquiries. Contra Costa County, on the other hand, responded to my repeated phone calls, and I was soon able to meet with an administrator who had the authority to grant me access to the welfare offices. I was starting to doubt the feasibility of my initial question, and therefore just wanted to spend some time in a couple of welfare offices. I knew I was interested in the interactions between workers and welfare-reliant women, but otherwise I was open to go where my research led me.

There are no doubt pluses and minuses to this sort of approach. I certainly would have been more comfortable and efficient had I had a clear research question. I would have had a better sense of what questions to ask, and on what, in particular, I should focus my attention. My data probably would have been tighter, with fewer gaps. But I also might have missed what I saw as the most interesting and surprising thing about my research—the empowering approach of Contra Costa County’s CalWORKs Program, and the instructors at Lewiston and Strafford in particular. Entering the welfare office with only an interest, and without a clear question, allowed me to be open to whatever struck me as most significant and worthy of exploration. In this way, I allowed the women of CCC’s CalWORKs Program, and the instructors and welfare workers that shape the program, to tell me the story they wanted to tell.

As I believe is inevitable, I did begin my research with some preconceived notions. Most relevant was my belief that welfare reform was all bad. I assumed that most participants would dislike welfare reform, even though there was already evidence in the literature that suggested (without fully exploring) that this was not the case. I also thought of welfare workers as the enemies of welfare participants, and I assumed that they would be overworked, unresponsive to clients’ needs, and frequently incompetent. These assumptions
were largely based on my experiences at the homeless shelter in New York City. I had often had to intervene when women there needed help straightening out problems with their welfare workers. But the majority of welfare workers I encountered in CCC were basically competent, well-intentioned, and relatively caring. There were exceptions. A few workers were very incompetent, and some were unsympathetic and resentful of most participants. On the other hand, some were amazing—especially but not exclusively instructors—putting in extra time and effort, caring deeply for their clients, using their discretion to secure the most for the men and women they helped. My openness to discover whatever story lay behind the workers and clients at CCC allowed me to see the ways that some of my biases and preconceived notions were inaccurate.

My project was a comparative study of two welfare offices within one county. But it was also a comparison between what I have called repressive and empowering welfare programs. Since both of my sites were empowering the programs I compared them with came from the literature. Before, during, and after conducting field work I read accounts of other ethnographers. The majority of these accounts showed the type of welfare program I had anticipated finding, and that I have called repressive throughout the dissertation. Sharon Hays’ important book is the most significant of these, and describes welfare programs so horrific that I found myself shocked at times, such as when she describes a woman who was raped being denied welfare because she could not identify the father of her child. It was against the accounts of Sharon Hays, Chad Broughton, and Anna Korteweg, in particular that I developed my typology and came to see CCC’s welfare program as different from the norm. Broughton’s account of JobProject and Deborah Little’s account of CEC, two programs that I have referred to as empowering, helped me to solidify my views, and
provided the evidence that CCC was not just an aberration, but was, in fact, one approach to welfare implementation.

*The Ethnography*

After my initial meeting with an administrator at CCC, it was arranged that I would attend a two-week long Job Club class at Lewiston. During this time I realized what a wonderfully rich opportunity these classes were for an ethnographer. For approximately 6 hours a day, there was formal and informal interaction between participants and an instructor. There were numerous breaks when I could talk casually with participants, and the instructor was often available to chat privately at the end of the day. There were times when participants talked with one another without a welfare worker present. I was able to take notes throughout the day, and thus record things as they happened.

I was initially struck by the relative “niceness” of the instructor, Ms. Johnson, and the lack of irritation or anger on the part of participants, who did not seem particularly resentful about spending a day learning about nutrition, or having numerous conversations and exercises about interview attire. At the end of this first Job Search Class, I requested more time in these classes, and also said I would want to spend time at a different office. I intentionally held back my desire to “move in” to a couple of offices for over a year, instead asking for relatively small things at first in the hopes that people would become comfortable with my presence.

After about a month my administrative contact arranged for a few days of access at the Strafford Office, where I observed intake interviews and an orientation for welfare applicants, and talked with many different types of welfare workers. I also met Bill, the Job Search instructor, and briefly observed his class. Bill was very open to me sitting through a
class, and all the supervisors agreed, so within a few weeks I had secured a two week period of participant observation in the Job Search Class. From there I arranged to sit in on two Job Club Classes and an additional Job Search class, for a total of 8 weeks of daily observations. These proved incredibly fruitful and interesting. Here I was again impressed and surprised by the caring nature of the instructors, and the relationships that formed between them and so many of the welfare participants. I came to realize that for many women, these classes were a break from full-time mothering and provided a needed emotional outlet, not to mention being motivating and inspiring for many of the women.

After these 8 weeks I wanted to spend more time with the other welfare workers and see more of their interviews and one-on-one meetings with clients, as well as gain a better understanding of the rules and regulations, paperwork, and path through the welfare office. My contact in the County administration told me to arrange for this with one of the supervisors at the Strafford office. At this point I begin being clearer with about my needs—since it was often assumed that I would want to observe for a few days. Over the next few weeks I was given a desk in one intake unit and was able to come and go on my own schedule. I became a fixture in the office and no longer worried about access.

It was my intent to spend a considerable amount of time observing welfare recipients’ meetings with their various welfare workers. I was particularly interested in observing the assessment workers’ meetings with participants. All participants met with an assessment worker after completing Job Club and Job Search, and it was here that their welfare to work plan was designed and signed. These social workers made the final call about whether education, therapeutic services, and/or employment would be expected of the participant. They also determined whether the client faced particularly difficult barriers, in which case
they “kept” the case. Most cases, however, were passed on to the employment specialists, caseworkers who monitored participants’ work activities. Those assessment workers who worked most closely with participants with significant were uncomfortable with my presence given the particularly personal nature of their meetings. But the workers who met with all participants to create welfare to work plans allowed me to sit in on their meetings. I soon discovered that participants rarely showed up when they were scheduled. Often they called to reschedule, sometimes they showed up late hoping to catch the worker at a good time. Sometimes they did not call at all. It often took me five or six scheduled appointments to observe one meeting between a worker and a participant.

This was not true, however, of intake interviews—those with families who were just applying for welfare. Numerous intake interviews took place at both offices every day. So I ended up observing many of these. I also spent much of this time at Strafford learning about the program, and the paperwork and computer work intake workers, benefits specialist, and employment specialists had to complete. Dan, an experienced intake worker, taught me the ins and outs of the program, spending countless hours with me explaining things, answering my questions, and allowing me to observe him. After a couple months sitting with one intake unit, and near the other intake unit and the assessment unit, I was given a desk upstairs where the benefits specialists and employment specialists were located. Like assessment meetings, participants rarely showed up for the meetings they were supposed to have monthly with their employment specialists. Participants who were working or in school full time were often excused from these meetings. benefits specialists, who managed the cash grants and food stamps participants received, typically met annually with participants to “recertify” them. Although I had hoped to sit in on meetings day in and day out, once I left the intake
units I was lucky to be in a few meetings a week. But I did hear many phone calls between workers and participants, and I observed workers interacting with each other, and doing their paperwork.

During this time I also conducted short semi-formal interviews with 10-15 workers. Here I asked them about their career trajectories and future goals, what they liked and didn’t like about their jobs, and what they liked and didn’t like about the TANF/CalWORKs program. Their answers to these questions, combined with the chance to watch most of these workers interact with a few participants, gave me a good sense of their views about welfare and welfare-reliant women. Here I saw the range of workers—those who believed that regulations and requirements should be more stringent and that welfare-reliant women tended to be irresponsible, lazy, or sneaky; and those workers who believed that rules should be more lenient and services/benefits greater. This latter group of workers tended to see welfare-reliant women as well-intentioned but burdened with regulations and myriad barriers.

Having spent a full six months observing at the Strafford office, reentry into Lewiston was relatively easy. My administrative contact gave me the contact information for the one of the supervisors at Lewiston, supervisor and I began trying to reach her directly in early September 2003. I initially received permission to observe Ms. Johnson’s next Job Search class. From there I spoke directly to Mr. James, who allowed me to sit through both his Job Club and Job Search class (4 weeks total). There was one other regular instructor at Lewiston, and I obtained permission from the supervisor to observe her classes, however she declined participation, saying she thought I had seen enough. I did have numerous opportunities to observe her interactions with participants during my time at Lewiston, as she often stopped by the classes, and sometimes substituted for the Ms. Johnson or Mr. James.
She appeared to be well-liked by participants, and what I could tell of her approach reminded me of Ms. Johnsons’ but perhaps with more authority and less condescension. Although it would certainly have been preferable to have been able to observe her classes, I have no reason to think that her approach and interactions with participants varied so greatly as to alter my argument about the empowerment offered at the Lewiston office.

The supervisor who acted as my contact at Lewiston then granted me access to the intake workers. She spoke with another supervisor for me, and got me a schedule, and then I began talking with workers directly to arrange for times when I could observe them and talk with them. Because the intake workers at Lewiston sat in individual offices, there was much less of an opportunity for me to observe paperwork, phone conversations, and interactions among workers. I was given an office to use as well, but other than a place to store my belongings and wait until a client showed-up, this space did little to assist my observations. After observing most of the intake workers conduct one at least one interview, there did not appear to be any systematic differences between intake interviews at Lewiston and those at Strafford, except that at Lewiston the interviews usually took place at the worker’s desk, since most were private, whereas at Strafford there was a separate room with individual interview offices to be shared by all the workers. I then headed upstairs where the other welfare workers were located. Only among the employment specialists was I able to have a desk that was near and open to several workers. This afforded me time to build a rapport with these workers, and to be available for the meetings they had scheduled with participants—on the occasions when the participants attended the meetings.

I also approached the supervisors of the various units that sat upstairs at Lewiston, and requested permission to approach their workers. I met with several of each type of
welfare worker at Lewiston, although in general I spent less time observing them than I did at Strafford. In part this was because it was more difficult, logistically at Lewiston, largely due to the construction taking place there and lack of open seating arrangements. But it was also because I was coming to the end of my study, and realized that I was not seeing anything very different during the Lewiston interviews and meetings with clients, than what I observed at Strafford. The differences between the two offices were evident in the Job Club and Job Search classes, as I discussed in Chapter 6. However in terms of one-on-one meetings between welfare workers and clients, there were variations from worker to worker, but not from one office to the next.

At the very end of my time at Lewiston I spent a couple days with a unit at Lewiston that serviced welfare participants at both the Strafford and Lewiston offices. This small outreach unit was staffed by social workers as well as community workers—people who lived in the community and who helped the social workers identify resources, among other things. These workers went to participants’ homes when they were in noncompliance, not showing up to Job Club, about to time out, and other critical situations. The brief time I spent with this unit was among the only time I spent with participants who were actively failing to complete their work and other requirements. This raises an important weakness in my study. I have written at length about the work ethic of welfare-reliant women and about their support for work requirements and often time limits and other welfare regulations. However my research was among welfare participants who were complying, or striving to comply with the welfare rules. Neglected in my study were the many participants who had “opted out” of cash aid for themselves, but who continued to receive it for their children because of the California safety net. From numerous conversations with welfare workers, and from the
many occasions where I witnessed a participant being threatened with a sanction or returning to compliance after a period of being sanctioned, it was clear that many participants moved in and out of noncompliant/sanctioned status, and that the most common reasons for this included missed meetings, failure to complete Job Club and Search classes when required, and failure to complete the work requirements. I certainly encountered many women who had been sanctioned at one time or another, and there did not seem to be anything qualitatively “different” about them. In other words, I do not have any reason to believe that these families had less of a work ethic, or even that they were less likely to believe in work requirements in theory. I would, however, guess that they were more likely to yearn for individual consideration, and altered rules—such as more time to complete education or to look for work. But what about the men and women who were sanctioned and did not return to compliance—those who chose, for whatever reason, not to do as they were required to do to receive cash aid for themselves? Their story, to the extent that it differs from compliant, or sometimes-compliant families, is absent from this dissertation.

Interviews

A little more than a year after I first entered the CCC welfare offices I ended my participant observation. During the time I observed the welfare classes I had requested contact information from some of the women in the hopes that I would be able to interview them later. I began calling the Lewiston women and setting up interviews. I tried reaching about 13 women, and ended up with 5 interviews with participants and one meeting with a woman who was no longer on CalWORKs. Twelve of these women I had met in the Lewiston classes, one additional woman (African American), I knew from tutoring at a nearby low-income housing complex. Of the four women I interviewed whom I met in the
Job Club and Search classes, two had been in Ms. Johnson’s classes and two had been in Mr. James’ classes. Four of these women were African American and one was Filipina. They ranged in age, number of children, education, and experiences. I also interviewed six women from the Strafford office, including a mother/daughter pair. Only one of these women I knew from my observations, the rest I encountered by returning to Bill’s Job Search class and asking for volunteers. Two of these women were white, three Black and one Hispanic. All interviewees were paid $20.

The “sampling” methods were therefore not random, and while I tried to get a racially/ethnically representative group, there was only one Latina participant among my interviewees. In addition, all the women were single, which happened by chance but is not representative of the total population of women on welfare in CCC. I had originally intended to complete another 10 interviews, at which time I would have tried to bridge some of these gaps, however due to the sudden birth and adoption of my daughter, I concluded my interviews sooner than expected. Certainly this dissertation would have benefitted from more interviews; however I fully expect that the trends I have described would have continued even with more interviewees and a more representative sample. My extensive ethnographic work provided many opportunities to get to know welfare-reliant women and to speak with them about their experiences and views, as well as to observe their conversations with other participants. My interviews therefore helped me flesh out some of the ideas and perceptions I had while observing, but did not raise unique issues or contradict my ethnographic data.

The interviews ranged in length from around 30 minutes—with younger, shier women—to about an hour and a half. I expected the interviews to be longer, and was repeatedly frustrated that so many hovered around 45-60 minutes. I had a loose interview
schedule, beginning with a life history section, and then focusing on the women’s experiences on welfare, including the benefits they received, their work activities, and how they made ends meet. I asked them about their experiences at the welfare offices, who their welfare workers were and what their interactions with them were like. I inquired about their experience taking the mandatory classes. Finally, I questioned them on their views of welfare and welfare reform, and specifically what they thought of certain policies, such as time limits and work requirements. Here I really pushed many of the women to be specific, and to be critical of the policies and programs they encountered. Often I shared my own criticisms in the hopes that they women would trust me enough to complain about all that they disliked. A couple of interviewees had quite negative experiences and opinions about welfare, but most were quite positive or complacent, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Reflections

I have already discussed some of the problems and weaknesses in my study—most notably the difficulties I had observing meetings between welfare participants and workers and the small number of interviews I conducted, along with the brevity of some of these. Researchers, particularly white, middle class ones observing in far less privileged locations, must also consider how their presence changed what they were trying to observe, and the extent to which they gained the trust of their subjects. I do suspect that some of the instructors—particularly Mr. James and perhaps Bill, changed their teaching a bit in my presence. Of course I have no way of knowing just how this may have happened, but I was left wondering if Mr. James tried out new curricula ideas because I was there watching him. My sense is that my presence resulted in these two charismatic figures being a bit more charismatic, committed, and engaging. I think they wanted to show me their best faces. As
time went on, both of these men seemed to relax a bit and have “bad days,” when they were preoccupied with their own lives, or short tempered with difficult participants and/or workers and regulations they disliked. To whatever extent they may have been performing for me, it was clearly in-line with their overall beliefs and approach to their job. When I was simply an observer, as was the case during most of Ms. Johnson’s class and the Job Club classes at Strafford, my presence appeared to have minimal effect on the participants, even when I chatted with them during breaks. However some of the instructors encouraged my participation, and this, of course, had an effect on the class. This was most true of Bill and Mr. James, but also took place in Ms. Johnson’s Job Search Class, where I helped participants one-on-one with job search skills. Instead of “skewing” my data, I believe these opportunities helped me to build trust and a rapport with participants and workers. In addition, the extent to which I was able to help was part of the reciprocity I believe should go hand-in-hand with research, particularly research among disadvantaged populations.

In general, I had no trouble being allowed to observe intake interviews and other meetings with welfare workers, getting participants permission to observe in the classroom. I also did not have difficulty getting women to give me their contact information for future interviews. I did encounter a few women who did not accept my presence or who did not want to be part of my study. But this was rare. I think my whiteness was a major factor in their decision. Some women voiced skepticism about what I was doing and why. All instances of this took place at the Lewiston office, where my whiteness set me apart from almost everyone I encountered. In Mr. James’ class I gave a quite detailed account of my views of welfare reform and race, and racial inequality within the welfare system, and doing so appeared to ease the minds of most of the participants. Mr. James, who quickly came to
see me as an ally, was also key to this process. He trusted me and told the class this, and most of the participants accepted me after he showed his support. By the end of the class, most of those who had been unsure were at ease. In this particular class, during a discussion about discrimination and sexual orientation, I came out to the class. This was a gut response on my part, and was an effort to gain their trust even more, as well as to contribute to Mr. James’ goal of opening their minds. But mostly it was a need on my part to be honest. Reactions varied, but were positive or neutral from nearly all the women. There was one woman, however, who was deeply religious and who I believe became uncomfortable with me. When the course was over she did not agree to be interviewed or to have me observe any of her future meetings at the welfare office. This experience was very unusual, even at Lewiston. I do not regret my decision to come out to this class because of the unique nature of this class and the discussion occurring at the time, and because in this particular situation it would have been dishonest to keep my sexual orientation hidden.

It is difficult to determine how honest participants were with me, or the extent to which my whiteness, or my middle class privilege, affected my research. I often shared my views about welfare reform, or race, in an effort to secure women’s trust. I feel confident that the women who spent several weeks with me learned that I could be trusted with most, if not all, things. Of course some women I interviewed without first getting to know them, and in these cases I worked extra hard to prove my trustworthiness in a short period of time. Women’s answers and conversations generally seemed truthful, but I’m sure there were times when they answered in ways that were less than fully honest, or when half-truths were told. This is part of the nature of ethnographic and interview research.
As is the case with most ethnographic studies, this study cannot address the issue of “outcome.” I have described a program I call empowering, but I am unable to definitively show that an empowering program has long term positive results for participants. For example, I cannot show that this program yields higher incomes or less poverty. I also cannot prove that the relationships women formed among themselves lasted more than the 6 or so months I stayed in touch with many of the women. I did see compelling evidence that many participants remained in contact with their instructors, but beyond this I can say little about the long term effects of this program. A longitudinal study, preferably one that compares a repressive welfare program to an empowering one, is a very important direction for future research.

Another set of questions that this dissertation fails to fully answer is why different locations implement such welfare programs with such different approaches. I have shown the significance of state laws and individual welfare workers, but I have not provided evidence to explain why Contra Costa County implemented an empowering approach, while Korteweg’s nearby Burnett County adopted a repressive approach. Archival work and interviews with upper level administrators, and anyone who participated in designing and implementing welfare programs in these counties over the past couple of decades would likely be necessary to fully explore this interesting question.

My hope is that this study will spark discussion and debate both about the theoretical issues I raise—such as my development of the concept of subjugated capital—and more importantly, about welfare reform. Strafford and Lewiston show the possibilities for welfare offices to be positive spaces for poor women, and it is my hope that exploring these spaces will open our eyes to other variations in welfare delivery and open our minds to the many
possibilities that exist, even under the current federal regulations, for welfare programs to be positive forces in poor families’ lives.