

# Great expectations: single mothers in higher education

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This ethnographic study examines the educational experiences of 10 women who are both social service recipients and higher education students. Study participants view higher education in a variety of ways that include both instrumental and transformational purposes. By situating participants' experiences in the larger economic and social context of welfare reform and shrinking employment opportunities, this paper provides a critical analysis of their assumptions concerning higher education.

This study examines the post-secondary educational experiences of 10 women who are single mothers through in-depth interviews and abbreviated life histories. Single motherhood is not a new phenomenon in the United States; indeed, single mothers have been the focus of social service intervention for nearly two centuries. However, contemporary US society—increasingly characterized by economic retrenchment and conservative welfare policies—is particularly disturbed by mother-headed families. Negative images of single motherhood abound and single mothers are blamed for social ills ranging from growing inner-city crime rates and drug use to nothing less than the demise of the American family. Further, single mothers in the United States are currently the objects of punitive welfare reform that severely limits their educational and financial opportunities while reinforcing stereotypes directed toward them (Abramovitz, 1996). While the data collected here indicate that single mothers frequently view postsecondary education as a mechanism for moving from poverty to middle-class status, the increasing globalization of the workforce (Rifkin, 1995; Castells, 1996; Witheford, 1997) and the erosion of the value of a college degree (Newman, 1993) make this goal increasingly questionable. This paper explores the ways stereotypes of single motherhood are both reinforced and contested in the lives of a group of women who are both social service recipients and higher education

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students. Further, it interrogates the role welfare reform plays in limiting social mobility for single mothers in the context of global capitalism.

Rhetoric concerning single motherhood influences government policies directed toward single mothers and their children. Even more importantly, this discourse influences how single women think about themselves. The phrase ‘single mother’ often conjures images of poor, welfare-dependent, and frequently minority women who lack adequate education and employment skills and the motivation to acquire them. While this image is largely derived from stereotypes, it continues to affect contemporary views of single motherhood. By focusing attention on individual shortcomings, these stereotypes deflect responsibility from the broader social and economic factors that act on welfare recipients. Policy decisions that influence the lives of single mothers and their children are frequently based on stereotypes of single motherhood rather than on the lived experiences of single women and their families (Fraser, 1989; Polakow, 1993). The women and children directly affected by these policies are routinely viewed as passive objects of intervention rather than active subjects involved in creating their own experiences and capable of self-definition. Researchers and policy-makers seldom ask single women for input into the decisions that directly affect their lives and well-being.

This study examines the individual narratives and experiences of 10 women who are simultaneously social service recipients and students at a major research institution. While the women whose stories are examined here are well aware of negative images of single motherhood, they also realize that these portrayals are frequently contradicted by their personal experiences.<sup>1</sup> Their educational experiences often provide an opportunity for disrupting negative expectations directed toward them and also symbolize for the women the possibility of realizing the hopes and dreams they hold for themselves and their children. Moreover, the women often attach contradictory meanings to post-secondary education.

I begin by briefly outlining the research design and discussing important characteristics of the study participants. Next, I summarize the major themes that emerged from the study. The core of the paper specifically examines participants’ expectations for post-secondary education and its perceived significance in their lives. This study identified three primary purposes of education held by the women: (1) education as instrumental; (2) education as transformative; and (3) education as modeling desirable outcomes for children. Each theme is examined in further detail and illustrated by examples from the women’s lives. The paper concludes with a brief analysis of the implications of these expectations within an increasingly global economy characterized by hierarchical arrangements where single mothers are likely to remain in the lower economic tier in spite of post-secondary educational attainment. Implications for welfare reform in what Rifkin (1995) calls the ‘post-market era’ are also examined.

### **Social context and research design**

While single mothers are distributed throughout the US population, they are found more frequently in some circumstances than others. Mother-headed families are

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Participant	Race	Age at Interview	Number of Children	Age at Birth of First Child	Relationship* Status	Family of Origin Composition
Annie	White	28	1	24	LR	Adopted/Single mother
Rebecca	Mixed**	20	1	17	BR	Divorced/Single mother
Chelsea	White	23	1	18	BR	Two-parent family
Jean Ella	Black	24	1	18	LR	Divorced/Single mother
Elaine	White	28	2	22	D	Two-parent family
Gloria	Black	34	1	29	LR	Two-Parent Family
Dawnita	Black	22	2	18	LR	Divorced/Single mother
Frankie	Black	19	1	17	E	Two-parent family
Hannah	White	23	1	19	LR	Grandparents/Father***
Irene	Black	22	1	18	BR	Foster mother

\*Relationship status refers to the relationship between the women and their children's fathers. The codes are: LR = long relationship, BR = brief relationship, D = divorced, E = engaged.

\*\*Rebecca's mother is White and her father American Indian; she described herself as 'mixed.'

\*\*\*Hannah's parents were divorced and she lived alternately with her paternal grandparents and her father.

over-represented among the poor (Fraser, 1989; Polakow, 1993; Abramovitz, 1996) and among African-Americans (Arnold, 1995). Single mothers tend to have less education and fewer job skills than the larger population (Fraser, 1989; Polakow, 1993). These characteristics—in combination with continuing workplace discrimination and limited economic opportunities—often jeopardize the ability of single women to support their families independently. The women who participated in this study are unique in that in addition to being social service recipients, they are also post-secondary education students. Additional participant characteristics are summarized in Table 1. To protect the women's privacy, pseudonyms are used for both individual respondents and the program from which they were recruited.

Because I believe single mothers are purposeful agents (Fraser, 1989; Collins, 1991) who actively construct their lives, I intentionally sought out a research site that shares this perspective. The Single Parent Program (SPP) is a self-sufficiency program designed to meet the complex needs of single parents and their families. While SPP has close ties to the local research university, it is an independent nonprofit organization and SPP participants may choose to attend other regional postsecondary institutions including the local community college. Thus, the program is not directly linked to any specific higher education institution. Economic self-sufficiency is an explicitly stated goal of the program. All program participants are pursuing postsecondary degrees in preparation for employment that will provide financial independence. In addition, SPP participants receive numerous services including Section 8 housing,<sup>2</sup> on-site child care, medical and dental care, counseling, legal advice, and group support as well as referral to community services when necessary. If eligible, participants are encouraged to receive food stamps and

Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), the work-based self-sufficiency program that replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P. L. 104–193). This, then, is a unique population of single mothers that differs in significant ways from the larger population of single mothers nationwide. Ten women who were enrolled in the Single Parent Program in January of 1996 agreed to take part in this research. The timing of the study was thus particularly significant given the changes that occurred in the US welfare system during that year. Welfare reform<sup>3</sup> enacted at national and state levels directly affected the lives of these women in profound ways.

The purpose of the study was to document the ways these single mothers describe and make sense of their educational experiences in the context of a larger society that typically evaluates them negatively. Individual perspectives were thus the primary focus. Information was collected through in-depth interviews and focus groups. All interviews were fully transcribed and coded. Conducting long interviews enabled me to construct abbreviated life histories of the participants, a technique utilized by Etter-Lewis (1993). Study participants reviewed their respective life histories to insure accuracy of both content and representation. Analysis of the coded transcripts resulted in the identification of three primary themes: (1) study participants experienced widespread stereotypes of single motherhood that revolved around issues of family form, welfare participation and race; (2) while well aware of and frequently confronted with these stereotypes, study participants nonetheless actively contested them; (3) educational experiences and goals often served as important mechanisms for contesting and transforming these stereotypes of single motherhood.

### **Stereotypes reinforced and contested**

The women who participated in this study were well aware of and frequently related experiences where negative images and expectations of single motherhood were imposed on them. These experiences occurred in welfare offices, college classrooms, grocery stores and other everyday public places. Oftentimes these negative images were based on family form and the fact that their families differed from the normative two-parent family. That is, single-mother-headed families were frequently compared with two-parent families and deemed inferior. Elaine's experience when applying for private schooling for her daughters illustrates the preference for and presumed superiority of two-parent families:

One of the things that they made you sign was a little blurb that they have at the beginning of the application that explains their philosophy. Throughout this paragraph, which pretty much portrayed the kinds of children that they want there and the kinds of backgrounds they come from, they kept using the word 'parents'. 'Parents living in the sight of God,' you know. And it painted this whole picture of the good mom and the good dad—the mom stayed home and the dad went off to work. And they were married before they had their children, and they were married after they had their children, and they continued to be married, and it was *two* parents.

Elaine felt that her daughters were unlikely to gain access to this school because their family did not approximate the idealized and preferred nuclear family model. By definition, mother-headed families disrupt the ideal image of the patriarchal nuclear family, a form that accurately represents fewer and fewer US families (Coontz, 1992). Indeed, the experiences of the women interviewed here make it clear that their single-mother-headed families were frequently judged as inferior to two-parent families.

A second category of stereotypes experienced by these single mothers resulted from welfare participation. Ironically, social service contact was frequently a location where stereotypes were imposed on the women, as Jean Ella's comments indicate.

I know that a lot of women feel intimidated about goin' down there [to social services], bein' it's right there downtown. They're like, 'Who's gonna' see me goin' in here, what are they gonna' think of me?' I think it hurts your self-esteem more than anything to go down there and ask for help. And their attitudes. It's like, 'We're givin' you this money out of our pocket.' And that's not the case.... They don't have to sit there and talk to me like I'm some dog out on the street. And they will try to do that. Me, personally, I don't let 'em talk to me that way.

Similarly, Dawnita reports 'just because I'm applyin' for help doesn't mean I'm less of a person.... Sometimes they just look down on people.' The experiences of the women who participated in this study indicate that social service providers often hold many of the same stereotypes about single mothers that the larger society holds. Encounters with these stereotypes, of course, were not limited to social service contacts. The women reported being deliberately embarrassed by grocery store clerks when using food stamps and treated as ignorant by medical providers because they were Medical Card users.<sup>4</sup> One participant related that someone had written on her son's medical chart 'mother is educated'—presumably in contrast with the assumption that most Medical Card users are not. The women were repeatedly stigmatized by their daily participation in the social service system. Recipients were often in the particularly painful double bind of desperately needing services for which they were first humiliated and degraded, making welfare participation an agonizing but necessary experience for them.

Finally, the Black women who participated in this study indicated that race continues to be a critical factor in constructions of single motherhood. Mary Smith Arnold (1995) states 'the "master narrative" of our time implies that African American families are inherently deprived, suggesting that they generate from within a deep-seated pathology that has no basis in their experience' (p. 144). Their awareness of this attitude made the Black participants in the study especially sensitive to negative stereotypes. Jean Ella comments:

They figure everybody is on welfare, and they're sittin' at home not doin' anything and eatin' bonbons while their kid's at school! No, it's not that way. Maybe there's a few out there doin' that. They feel like all Black women are home havin' children and gettin' all the welfare that they can get—having children just to get welfare.... They're like, 'Our tax money is payin' for this and payin' for that. And these Black women are sittin' at home havin' all these kids.' And it pisses you off, that people are thinkin' this about you.

Not only did the women perceive hostility directed toward themselves as Black single mothers, they also worried that it might be directed toward their children as well, as Gloria's comments indicate:

No matter whatever label people want to put on you, everybody deserves respect. I want to teach my child that, I want him to have that legacy that I have. I want him to be comfortable with who he is and he's a little Black kid. And they treat you differently if you're Black; that welfare woman, she treats you differently. She makes assumptions about you.... I'm not gonna be treated like I'm some kind of second-class citizen because I'm not. Not because I'm a single mom, Black, woman, any of it. I shouldn't be treated like that.

Gloria directly attributed her treatment and that of her son ('When they say, "Oh, he's so smart" or "He's so cute" they mean for a Black kid, not a White kid') to race, indicating that African-American women remain especially vulnerable and sensitive to stereotypes.

Even though they often related experiences where negative stereotypes were imposed on them, the women who participated in this study frequently contested these depictions and challenged the negative appraisals they encountered. Chelsea states:

When you get pressured with negative attitudes—and I have experienced it—you start to question, 'Okay, who am I? Is this what I am like?' And you realize, 'No, that's not who I am. I'm not like what these people are saying.' And you become more confident in a way. Sometimes, if you are not a strong person, you can let it bring you down. But I think it just makes me question more who I am and what I'm doing. Because it's okay, it's a good thing.

Similarly, Jean Ella reported of her contact with social service providers, 'I don't let 'em talk to me that way.' While they contested stereotypes of single motherhood in a variety of ways, one important method these single mothers used to disrupt the stereotypes they encountered was through their educational experiences and aspirations.

### **The importance of education**

The relationship between education and earning potential has been documented by numerous researchers (e.g. Piven, 1986; Berube, 1988; Dunkle, 1988; Withorn, 1988). While postsecondary education historically has been associated with White middle- and upper-class status (Coontz, 1992), increasing numbers of minority and working-class students are pursuing higher education as an avenue toward upward social mobility (Collins, 1999). With the shrinking of the welfare state that is accompanying increasing economic globalization, investing in higher education—which is increasingly costly—is seen as evidence of personal responsibility: 'The assumption of financial risk through personal indebtedness serves as a crucial disciplinary technique in the new social paradigm of restricted welfare provision and individual responsibility' (Stevenson, 1999, p. 316). Thus, while the cost of post-secondary education to individuals is increasing, its value in the workplace is diminishing as the competition for jobs becomes fiercer.

That women's earning potential is dramatically improved by post-secondary education has been documented by Dunkle (1988):

Higher education can make a substantial difference in a woman's lifetime income. A woman with less than a high school education can expect to earn \$500,000 over her lifetime (in 1981 dollars). If she has a high school diploma she can expect to earn \$634,000, and, with some college, \$716,000. However, a woman with a college degree will earn \$846,000, and a woman with five or more years of college, \$955,000. (p. 128)

While these figures have obviously increased since 1981, women's earning power—regardless of educational level—remains significantly lower than that of men (Piven, 1986; Dunkle, 1988) leaving households headed by single mothers especially vulnerable to economic hardship. Piven reports that 'the relative stability of the ratio of female earnings to male earnings, despite the large gains made by some women, is striking evidence of the weak position of these workers' (1986, p. 331). Female poverty—and the poverty of children in households headed by single mothers—continues despite strong workforce participation (Abramovitz, 1996). Ehrenreich (1986, p. 20) reports 'there is a fundamental difference between male and female poverty: for men, poverty is often the consequence of unemployment, and a job is generally an effective remedy, while female poverty often exists even when a woman works full-time'.

Single mothers are thus especially needful of post-secondary education and the increased earning potential it represents in the present context. The economic difficulties experienced by many single mothers are compounded by a lack of education that virtually guarantees the continuing poverty of single-mother-headed families. Aries (1986, p. 130) identifies a cycle to which adolescent mothers are especially vulnerable: 'They are poor because they do not have the education to find better jobs.'

Table 2. Educational levels of participants and children

Participant	Secondary education*	Present educational level	Present educational status of child(ren)
Annie	HS Graduate	BA Program (Junior)	SPP** Daycare
Rebecca	HS Graduate	BA Program (Sophomore)	SPP Daycare
Chelsea	HS Graduate	BA Program (Junior)	SPP Daycare
Jean Ella	HS Graduate	MSW (Graduate)	Public School Kindergarten
Elaine	HS Graduate	BS Program (Senior)	Older Child in Public School First Grade, Younger Child in SPP Daycare
Gloria	HS Graduate	BS Program (Senior)	Public School Kindergarten
Dawnita	HS Graduate	BS Program (Junior)	Both Children in SPP Daycare
Frankie	HS Graduate	BA Program (Sophomore)	SPP Daycare
Hannah	HS Graduate	BS Program (Junior)	SPP Daycare
Irene	HS Graduate	BA Program (Junior)	SPP Daycare

\*All study participants completed their high school careers on schedule in spite of adolescent pregnancies.

\*\*Single Parent Program Daycare

They do not have the education because they dropped out of school. They dropped out of school because they had children to support.' Even though seven of the 10 women who participated in this study were adolescent mothers, all 10 came to the Single Parent Program with high school diplomas (see Table 2) and were thus—unlike many single mothers nationwide—adequately prepared to enter postsecondary programs.

### **Education as instrumental**

The participants in this study clearly viewed postsecondary education as an opportunity to move not only beyond welfare but also beyond poverty as well. Thus, they believed that education served an important instrumental purpose, as Rebecca's comments indicate: 'I *had* to go to school, there wasn't anything else, there wasn't any other option because if I just went out and got a job I wouldn't have enough money to pay bills or day care and everything. So I had to go to school first.' Similarly, Annie reported that prior to entering SPP, 'I wasn't able to get better employment without education, but I wasn't in a position where I could get education and support my son'. Even as a full-time employee at a regional university where she could take one class each semester free of charge, Annie felt unable to make any real progress toward her degree and the higher economic status she anticipated. She reported, 'I could get through school in 10 years, you know, or something like that!' The combined costs of housing, food, and childcare leave few remaining financial resources for single-mother-headed families and it is no surprise that many live in poverty. Thus, the women who participated in this study clearly viewed post-secondary education as their most realistic avenue toward financial security. This position was encouraged by the Single Parent Program through its explicitly stated goal of economic self-sufficiency.

Changes in the US economy in the second half of the twentieth century, however, raise important questions concerning the validity of this assumption. In her discussion of the declining economic status of American middle-class families, Newman (1993, p. 49) reports: 'in the 1980s one in five college graduates ended up in jobs that the Bureau of Labor Statistics defines as not requiring a college degree'. While education continues to serve a critical sorting function in the workplace, the relative value of post-secondary education is eroding and the link between education and economic security is less stable than in the past. This leaves workers—especially those just entering the workplace—vulnerable to the vagaries of a globalized job market:

Increasing educational qualifications, either general or specialized, required in the reskilled positions of the occupational structure further segregate the labor force on the basis of education, itself a highly segregated residential structure. Downgraded labor, particularly in the entry positions for a new generation of workers made up of women, ethnic minorities, immigrants, and youth, is concentrated in low-skill, low-paid activities, as well as in temporary work and/or miscellaneous services. (Castells, 1996, p. 251)

While all workers are affected by these changes, gender remains a salient though often ignored variable in the US workplace. DeMarrais (2000, p. 167) reports, 'In 1990,

more than two-thirds of working women were in service sector industries, in wholesale and retail trade, and in protective service fields such as teaching and nursing'. Thus, women are consistently disadvantaged both by lower pay and by jobs that continue to be gender segregated along traditional lines (see also Montgomery, this issue). Standing (1989) links the decreasing economic power of women to what he calls 'global feminization' and argues that 'the supply-side politicoeconomic agenda that has dominated policy making in most of the world in the 1980s ... has led to a series of changes in women's economic roles, increasing their use as workers but weakening their income and employment security' (p. 1077). This argument is especially meaningful for single mothers, who are solely responsible for the economic status of their families.

### Education as transformation

In addition to its substantial instrumental purpose, education was also frequently viewed by study participants as an avenue for personal growth that transcended economic benefits, as Jean Ella's comments indicate:

I know that I'm changin'! I just feel like education is the key to everything. I just feel like, if you want to know something, go to school. I feel like that's the key to this whole world—if people were educated, we would probably live a little bit better.

Thus, in spite of the difficulties involved in balancing school and parenting responsibilities, student roles were often personally rewarding for study participants and comprised an important part of their identity. Further, student success frequently served as a source of pride that bolstered the women's self-confidence. Irene states:

To know that I'm goin' to school is okay, but to know that I be Honor Society, they can't believe that. I experience it a lot of times.... When I meet guys or whatever, the first thing I tell 'em is my name, and I'm a single mother and I'm goin' to school.

Thus, Irene takes pride in her identity as a successful student and uses this identity to disrupt the assumption that, because she is a single mother, she is uneducated and unmotivated.

This account of education as transformational provides an important counterpoint to a strictly instrumental interpretation. Shapiro (2000) points out, however, that the discourse of personal empowerment is frequently used to obscure structural inequalities and further condemn individuals who 'fail' to achieve in the meritocratic competition that it purports:

School's meritocratic emphasis on personal ability and achievement obfuscates the deep structures of power—and lack of power—that are constitutive of United States society. Of course, this emphasis on personal achievement and effort, with its strong concern for the moral disposition of individuals, is resonant with the individualistic mythology of American Protestantism.... Systemically reproduced structures of social inequality are converted into individual deficiencies of intellect, effort, or moral fortitude. (Shapiro, 2000, p. 104)

This is not to claim that education does not serve transformational purposes for individuals, only to acknowledge that personal empowerment does not preclude

structural inequality and that success is not guaranteed by effort, as US society often implies.

This study revealed that the classroom setting also occasionally served as a site for disrupting the negative views held by other students, as Annie's experience illustrates:

I was in an English class and this little nineteen-year-old girl had no clue about the world, you could tell. She had the clothing and car—it just looked like she came from a wealthy environment. And she was writing this paper and negatively portraying—you know, I can't remember if it was single parents or welfare, but it was something that just hit too close to home. And the thing the English teacher had us do in class was switch papers and edit each other's paper, so I was reading her paper. And I remember sitting there and reading it and then afterwards I told her my situation. And I was like, 'I am *not* these things, these stereotypes.'

While being confronted in class with this negative portrayal of herself was uncomfortable for Annie, she used the experience as an opportunity to dispel inaccurate beliefs about single motherhood and to educate her classmate. She added, 'I would like to go out and sit everyone down and just tell them the way it is—or just open their eyes a little bit'.

Jean Ella related a similar experience in which she felt other students were making judgments based on inaccurate and distorted information. In this case, Jean Ella was pleased to find that the professor actively disrupted these inappropriate assumptions:

I feel like the professors I've had, they usually put them in their place. I've been really impressed with the educational system as far as when the class is feedin' out those stereotypes, they usually put them in their place.

Thus, by providing a forum for challenging stereotypes about single motherhood, the classroom can serve as an arena for educating other students. In addition, study participants often 'surprised' others by their status as single mothers—their success as post-secondary students contradicted and disrupted expectations about them based on their single-parent-family form. Thus, for the participants in this study, education was clearly more than just the process of acquiring a credential necessary for competition in the workplace. It also provided an avenue for personal change and the possibility of transforming the views of others as well.

### **Modeling positive educational outcomes for one's children**

Several study participants believed their own educational experiences provided important models of educational success for their children, as Elaine points out:

I think if I do the best I can do and go the farthest I can go, then my children are going to do that too. And they know I'm in school and they know I'm going on to graduate school. They know what graduate school is because I've told them. They know that I get good grades and they know why that's important. And I think that's something they'll carry with them.

Similarly, Gloria reports, 'It's important for me to go to school because of my son. I want him to realize, I want him to take *doctoral* work for granted, to get his Ph.D.' The

significant role parental expectations play in determining academic success for children has been well documented (e.g. Berube, 1988; Dunkle, 1988). Other factors such as inadequate family income and single-mother-headed family status presumably place poor children 'at risk' for negative educational outcomes (Arnold, 1995; Polakow, 1993). The women who participated in this study believed that the value they placed on post-secondary education modeled positive educational expectations for their children that might offset other risk factors. The importance they placed on education thus extended far beyond a strictly instrumental purpose; they believed it affected the lives of their children in vital ways.

The belief that education is the ultimate pathway to economic success and that educational aspirations can be transmitted intergenerationally is an important part of the American Dream. Newman (1993), however, points out the erosion of this dream and demonstrates that its promise is less viable in contemporary society than in the past:

It is an article of faith among middle-class Americans that every generation will do better than the one that preceded it and that upward mobility is a birthright for those who work hard.... Indeed, the promise of economic success defines our national identity, but it is a cultural premise built upon shifting sands. Our economy has grown increasingly more fragile, buffeted by forces we barely understand and cannot seem to control. (Newman, 1993, p. 211–212)

Although education continues to be envisioned as an important avenue toward economic success, as the present study indicates, this possibility seems increasingly unlikely given the shift toward a globalized economy. The stark reality of economic restructuring and job competition sharply question the 'meritocratic dream of prosperity and mobility-through-education' (Collins, 1999, p. 232) that has traditionally characterized US society and that is evidenced through the narratives of the women interviewed here. This study suggests that while the dream persists, the promise of improved socioeconomic well-being often remains unfulfilled.

## Conclusions

This study has examined the multiple meanings attributed to post-secondary education by 10 single mothers who are simultaneously welfare recipients and higher education students. While participants primarily viewed post-secondary education as instrumental, they also valued it as an opportunity for personal growth and an important way of modeling educational success for their children. These women's aspirations for achievement through post-secondary education demonstrate their strong belief in the American Dream of prosperity and upward mobility through hard work. These women have invested in this dream, not only for themselves but for their children as well. While the women interviewed here occasionally worried that they might not 'make it' off welfare, they attributed the possibility of failure to personal factors rather than structural ones. Thus, the shrinking role of the welfare state as an entitlement is disguised beneath the rhetoric of meritocracy.

The goal of 'rolling back the State' means focusing on rewarding merit and combining fiscal reform with a minimalist rather than 'redistributive' welfare state; poverty alleviation and universal social security are no longer priority issues. (Standing, 1989, p. 1078)

This restructuring of the politicoeconomic state 'within a global order coercively unified by the dominative logical of capital' (Witthford, 1997, p. 233) has profound implications for higher education. As postsecondary education becomes increasingly market driven, institutions respond by 'selling' to students skills and degrees that translate into favorable employment opportunities that will supposedly enable them to climb the meritocratic ladder (Shumar, 1999).

Withorn cautions against automatically equating college degrees with employment and financial stability, pointing out how such promises are 'an overstatement for any student anywhere, let alone for a single female head of household' (1988, p. 91). Single mothers in the United States continue to face formidable barriers to the successful completion of post-secondary education programs. These barriers include both welfare reform and the increasing globalization of the workplace. For many US single mothers, including the women in this study, 1996 welfare reform decreases rather than increases their likelihood of obtaining post-secondary education degrees. Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) requires recipients to work part time in order to continue receiving benefits and in most cases limits social service participation to a lifelong maximum of two years. These requirements are especially problematic for single mothers who attend school full time and must add part-time employment to already extensive student and parenting responsibilities. Further, the two-year time limit will not enable welfare recipients to complete four-year degrees and is likely to result in their participation in briefer job-training programs that may prepare them for lesser paying jobs and consequently perpetuate their economic difficulties. This possibility was explored by Riemar (1997) who reported that 'welfare identities' frequently followed welfare-to-work participants as they moved from welfare to working poor status.

Single mothers who are postsecondary education students also face the difficult task of simultaneously balancing parent, student and provider roles. Susan Berube, herself a former AFDC recipient and participant in Smith College's Ada Comstock Scholar Program for single mothers, points out:

A student enrolled in a degree program who is receiving public assistance has two major preoccupations. First, an overriding fear of losing her financial benefits; and second, a concern that the difficulty of handling multiple tasks successfully will overwhelm her. (Berube, 1988, p. 55)

Like Berube, many study participants reported being 'stressed out' by the combined responsibilities they faced. Student and parenting demands were frequently in conflict, as Frankie reported: 'It's hard findin' time to spend with Darron and do homework ... it's just hard goin' to school and managin' my time.' Like Frankie, Rebecca also indicated that parenting responsibilities often interfered with student requirements:

At first I had a hard time. It's not so bad now because like I know his schedule and he's bigger and better, but like when he was a baby it was hard to do my homework ... 'cause he wanted all my time and attention. And every time I would get homework out he would wake up hungry.

Because infants' needs differ dramatically from those of older children, Annie points out 'I think the age of your child has a lot to do with whether or not you can go to school'.

Successful completion of post-secondary education programs remains an elusive goal for many single mothers. The women who participated in this study clearly believe further education is their most probable path to economic security. Single Parent Program participants are unique in that they are able to pursue post-secondary education in a supportive environment. Theoretically, social service support can alleviate part of the financial strain experienced by single mothers while enabling them to improve their economic status through further education. Viewed in this way, education is a temporary investment in the future well-being of single mothers and their children. This is clearly how Annie sees her welfare participation:

I feel like a classic welfare case, you know? And I'm not gonna' be like this forever. Because if it wasn't for an AFDC check, if it was not for food stamps, and if it was not for the [JOBS] program that pays for my son's daycare, if it wasn't for Section 8 [housing]—all of this is subsidized, I live off the subsidies—I couldn't be in school. I wouldn't be here. Housing, food, daycare—people have a *right* to that. Even if the system is being abused by other people, don't take it away from me, because I'm using it correctly.

Similarly, Dawnita reports, 'I'm tryin' to get a college degree so I won't have to be on public assistance and I will be able to take care of myself and my kids'.

Recent US welfare reform, however, makes successful completion of postsecondary programs less likely for single mothers. The focus of the 1996 reform is to move women as quickly as possible from welfare to work, a short-term solution that is unlikely to result in lasting improvement in the financial status of single mothers.

Under AFDC, education is only grudgingly provided—and only for short-term, basic skills training in order to get women into low-level jobs. Four-year institutions of higher education play little or no role in the lives of most welfare recipients.... If, by some chance, a woman on welfare actually is accepted by a college, she is to be treated just 'like everybody else' and not provided with extra 'coddling.' Women on AFDC in such institutions learn to keep very quiet about their status. (Withorn, 1988, p. 90)

Reforming welfare by replacing Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) has unfortunately magnified rather than reduced the difficulties facing single mothers who are post-secondary students.

In addition to its significance for welfare reform, this research also has important implications for post-secondary educational institutions. The role of higher education is changing dramatically with the shift to a post-industrial economy (Rifkin, 1995; Collins, 1999; Shumar, 1999) that requires increasingly technical knowledge and skills. Post-secondary institutions could recognize the increasing diversity of families and become more 'family friendly' by providing affordable, quality childcare near campus during hours that meet a variety of student needs. Further, institutions could

sponsor loan and grant programs specifically designated for parenting students. Although there are few incentives for post-secondary institutions that labor in an increasingly competitive market to adopt them, these measures would demonstrate a deeper understanding of the challenges single parents face both in and beyond the classroom and would further enable single mothers to fulfill the dreams they hold for themselves and their children.

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### **Notes**

1. While I argue that study participants actively contested stereotypes directed toward them, they also at times demonstrated similar stereotypes of (other) single mothers. This tension between accepting and resisting assumptions concerning single motherhood indicates the complexity and variety of the women's experiences and attitudes. Although their responses often indicated they believed the stereotypes directed toward them were inherently wrong, there were individual differences among the women that suggested they too occasionally made judgments based on similar stereotypes.
2. Subsidized housing is available to low-income families in the US who meet specific eligibility criteria. Like other Section 8 housing, rent for SPP participants is dependent on income levels.
3. Although the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 is a comprehensive program that affects eligibility for a variety of social services, it is the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) provision of P.L. 104-193 that is typically referred to as welfare reform. TANF replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), ending the entitlement status for single-mother-headed families established with the Social Security Act and replacing it with work-based temporary assistance.
4. Medicaid provides subsidized health care for low-income families. Medicaid is often referred to by the 'medical card' that identifies participants.

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