



2020

When “Best I Can” is Not Enough: Welfare Managers’ Appraisal of Clients’ Mothering Practices

Brianna Turgeon

Jacksonville State University, bturgeon@jsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.jsu.edu/fac_res



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Turgeon, B. (2020). When “Best I Can” is Not Enough: Welfare Managers’ Appraisal of Clients’ Mothering Practices. *Sociological Inquiry*, 90(4), 839. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12332>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship & Creative Work at JSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research, Publications & Creative Work by an authorized administrator of JSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@jsu.edu.

When “Best I Can” is Not Enough: Welfare Managers’ Appraisal of Clients’ Mothering Practices

Brianna Turgeon
Jacksonville State University

Abstract

The “mommy wars” are a cultural narrative of conflict between mothers that amplifies the scrutiny placed on mothering practices. While mothers at all social locations face criticisms for their choices surrounding parenting, mothers in poverty lack the resources to enact many socially mandated parenting practices and contend with additional scrutiny through participation in programs like welfare-to-work. In this project, I examine the parenting expectations mothers on welfare must navigate. I use 69 semi-structured interviews with welfare-to-work program managers in Ohio from 2010-2011 to examine which mothering ideologies they encourage and discourage clients to adopt. I find that managers are highly critical of clients’ (perceived) parenting practices and instead promote a combination of intensive mothering and economic nurturing. Managers promote intensive mothering and meeting children’s needs—so long as it does not interfere with the work requirements of the program. Economic nurturing simultaneously allows managers to express concern for children and promote clients participating in the work requirements of OWF, implying that work and family needs are aligned and can be met via work.

Author Bio: Brianna Turgeon is an assistant professor of sociology at Jacksonville State University. Her research focuses on inequality, ideology, discourse and mothering, which she primarily studies through welfare-to-work. In recent projects, she has examined welfare managers’ moral identity construction, feeling rule expectations for clients, and expectations for clients’ mothering practices.

Introduction

Parenting, New Parent Magazine, You & Your Family, Working Mother—these are just a few of the magazines dedicated to advice about how parents (namely mothers) should raise their children. Beyond providing basic information on meeting children’s needs, parenting magazines also (perhaps even primarily) advise mothers on how to navigate the cultural landscape that dictates which parenting practices are “acceptable” in the current historical moment. This landscape is especially treacherous to navigate as family life and expectations constantly change (Gerson 2004). Parenting in general, and mothering specifically, is contentious and subject to scrutiny from a variety of sources (Crowley 2013, 2015; Hays 1996; Milkie et al. 2016). One

illustration of contention surrounding mothering practices is the public debate around breastfeeding (Carter et al. 2018). The extent of disagreement over which mothering practices constitute the “best” way to raise a child has created what we now call “the mommy wars” (Hays 1996; Crowley 2013, 2015). The “mommy wars” are a cultural narrative of conflict between mothers that amplifies the scrutiny placed on mothering practices (Crowley 2013; Gerson 2004; Milkie et al. 2016). Specifically, mothers often face a no-win situation in which they are criticized regardless of their choices (Gerson 2004; Hays 1996).

While mothers at all social locations face criticisms for their choices surrounding parenting, mothers in poverty lack the resources to enact many socially mandated parenting practices and contend with additional scrutiny through participation in programs like welfare-to-work (Turgeon 2018; Crowley 2013). Furthermore, public discourse represents mothers on welfare as “welfare queens,” “welfare chiselers,” “generations of welfare dependency,” and “children having children” (Gilens 1999; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Rousseau 2009). These images often rely on stereotypes of welfare recipients as Black mothers who are dishonest, immoral, sexually promiscuous, exploitative, irresponsible, lazy, and responsible for many social problems (e.g., violent crime, the decline of families) (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Rousseau 2009). Attributing these characteristics to Black mothers is one of the ways that politicians have constructed Black women as unfit mothers who are undeserving of welfare benefits (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Rousseau 2009).

Through the “mommy wars” and the scrutiny and stereotypes levied on welfare clients, mothers in poverty face criticisms for both their statuses as mothers and as “poor people.” In this research, I examine the parenting expectations mothers on welfare must navigate. To do this, I analyze interviews with welfare-to-work program managers to discover the mothering ideologies

they encourage and discourage clients to adopt. While welfare programs have concrete requirements for clients to complete, parenting expectations extend beyond the scope of these requirements. By identifying these extraneous expectations, this research helps shed light on the ideological landscape that mothers on welfare must navigate through the scrutiny of the state and its officials. My analysis further contributes to an intersection of literatures in inequality (race, class, and gender), discourse, ideology, public policy, and mothering.

Mothering Ideology

Mothering ideologies refer to the values that underly parenting identities, decisions, and practices (Curenton et al. 2018). While the reality of parenting is incredibly multi-faceted, parents often draw on the values rooted in mothering ideologies to justify their decisions surrounding children and work (Damaske 2013; Curenton et al. 2018). Previous scholarship identifies several mothering ideologies, including intensive mothering (Hays 1996), concerted cultivation (Lareau 2003), natural growth (Lareau 2003), motherwork (Collins 2016), economic nurturing (Keller 1994; Johnston and Swanson 2003), extensive mothering (Christopher 2012), and “best I can” mothering (Johnson 2014). This list, while not exhaustive, demonstrates the variety of documented mothering practices. Rather than provide a brief overview of all of these mothering ideologies, in the sections below I explore in greater depth the four mothering ideologies that are most central to my findings: intensive mothering, motherwork, economic nurturing, and “best I can” mothering.

Hegemonic Mothering Ideology: Intensive Mothering

While there are a variety of ideas about mothering practices debated in public discourse as well as among mothers themselves, intensive mothering has emerged as a hegemonic mothering ideology—in part because of its pervasive presence in our culture (Arendell 1999, 2000; Hays

1996). Intensive mothering, which is viewed as the criteria for being a “good mother,” involves mothers being self-sacrificing, prioritizing their children above all else by investing time, energy, and vast resources to facilitate children’s growth (Fothergill 2013; Hays 1996). To meet the standards of intensive mothering, women are discouraged from prioritizing their own wants and needs (Arendell 1999; Hays 1996), instead focusing their time and energy on child-rearing. Intensive mothering reflects middle-class values and requires a child-centered and resource-intensive approach to parenting (Hays 1996). Time-use studies demonstrate an increase in the amount of time parents are spending with their children, which is correlated with the growth of intensive mothering ideology (Jacobs and Gerson 2004). As such, mothers striving to meet the demands of this ideology often particularly struggle with reconciling the demands of family and work (Crowley 2014).

Intensive mothering is often a measuring stick by which people (both mothers and the general population) evaluate mothering practices. This is evident in how women in a variety of social positions construct their mothering practices in relation to intensive mothering—often in a way that reaffirms it (Arendell 1999; Brown 2006; Buzzanell et al. 2007; Curenton et al. 2018; Damaske 2013; Kirkman et al. 2001). While women across classes face pressure to adopt intensive mothering, white middle-class women have access to greater privilege and resources that make them the most likely to “successfully” enact its practices (Hays 1996; Collins 2006). Although intensive mothering is often sought after and viewed as the “right way” to mother by many (Hays 1996; Newman and Henderson 2014), recent scholarship critiques how costly it is to mothers. Mothers pay this cost by contending with unrealistic expectations, devaluation of their own needs, mother blame, and lack of institutional support (Turgeon 2018; Crowley 2013, 2014; Gerson 2002, 2009; Johnson 2014; Newman and Henderson 2014; Taylor 2011). For instance,

Johnson (2014:268) describes intensive mothering as “an institutionalized form of discrimination against single, poor, and minority mothers that seeks to ‘other’ and shame women who cannot and/or will not mother this way.”

Motherwork: Black Motherhood & Othermothering.

Much feminist theorizing of motherhood has focused on the experiences of white mothers, often excluding the contexts and experiences of mothers of color (Collins 2016). Motherwork is an approach to mothering rooted in the context of Black motherhood. This approach conceptualizes the complexities of motherhood as work done for individuals, families, and community that builds for current and future generations (Collins 2016). Studies examining the experiences of Black mothers (including single Black mothers experiencing poverty) find representations of Black mothers as sources of empowerment and community mothers (Baca Zinn 2000; Collins 1990, 2006). Mothers may find a strong sense of meaning and value in motherhood, seeing it as an experience that allows for “self-definition” and resistance of the oppressions of the outside world (Collins 1990; Stack 1974).

Motherwork practices involve contending with the fight for the survival of youth of color, structures of power that oppress mothers and children of color, and the complexities of socializing children to form identities. Unlike other theorizing of motherhood, this approach does not take for granted the survival and privilege of children. Motherhood responsibilities are also often shared in African American communities (Collins 1990, 2016). Blood mothers (biological mothers) often create women-centered networks wherein “othermothers” (often kin or fictive kin) and community members (such as neighbors) are involved in childcare (Collins 1990). Notably, women can gain status within the community through their roles as othermothers (Collins 1990). Because community members share responsibilities associated with parenting,

this mothering ideology is more compatible with work outside the home. Collins (1990) also describes how young Black girls are often socialized into the idea of othermothering by participating in childcare activities.

Economic Nurturing

Economic nurturing initially emerged as a means to justify women's (namely white women's) entrance into the workplace (Keller 1992, 1994). Specifically, work outside of the home was paired with a traditionally feminine attribute, "nurturing," to uphold traditional constructions of white womanhood. Magazines were a central space where work outside the home was framed as a form of nurturing to make it compatible with femininity (Johnston and Swanson 2003; Keller 1992, 1994).

Women of all race and class backgrounds continue to face tension in balancing "public pursuits and private attachments" (Gerson 2002: 20). Economic nurturing offers a way to frame family and work demands as compatible rather than competing with one another. Specifically, economic nurturing frames work outside the home as a way to provide for children (Keller 1992, 1994; Johnston and Swanson 2003). This type of parenting is evident in Damaske's (2011) findings that many women frame their decisions to work outside of the home as "for the family," focusing on how their decisions meet the financial needs of their children. As such, work outside of the home becomes a child-centered practice that is not viewed as incompatible with femininity. Through this ideology, work is presented as a way for women to provide for their children.

"Best I Can" Mothering

Finally, "best I can" mothering is a form of parenting that moves away from "the mommy wars." This model arose as a response to the high cost and exclusive nature of intensive

mothering practices (Johnson 2014). Even though most mothers don't believe there is one ideal way to balance priorities, many still fear being judged by other women/mothers for their parenting choices (Crowley 2013, 2014). "Best I can" mothering recognizes that children do not require the extent of involvement mandated by intensive mothering; and further, that the variation in context makes it illogical to have a monolithic set of ideal mothering practices (Johnson 2014).

The "best I can" approach "stresses a mother's right to choose the content and order of her own priorities as a multifaceted subject, and to practice these priorities in her own culturally appropriate and contextually relevant way" (Johnson 2014: 276). Although public discourse often scrutinizes the choices women make while raising their children, the reality is that women parent under a variety of conditions (Gerson 2004; Kurz 2007). Specifically, poorer women and women of color often parent under more oppressive conditions with fewer sources of social support (Kurz 2007). As such, "best I can" mothering moves away from mothers scrutinizing one another's choices and towards broader acceptance of a variety of parenting practices (Johnson 2014).

While there are many differences among the mothering ideologies outlined above, a common feature is that they contend with navigating priorities—most notably the "competing" demands of family and work. There are also significant similarities among these mothering ideologies. Both intensive mothering and economic nurturing focus on providing resources for children and frame this as a way to care for children. For intensive mothering, this is only a portion of how to parent in a child-centered way. Economic nurturing and motherwork both portray work outside the home as compatible with motherhood—and do so as a means to push back against oppression. Economic nurturing originates in justifying white women's entrance to

the workplace and motherwork seeks to center the mothering practices of Black women and the needs of families of color. “Best I can” practices also respond to oppression; specifically, they offer a more inclusive alternative to the exclusive practices and gendered pressure levied by intensive mothering. Additionally, both motherwork and “best I can” practices acknowledge the variation in parenting context and make more space for mothers’ needs.

The Context of Welfare

Beyond navigating the contentious cultural landscape of mothering, mothers on welfare must also contend with welfare policies. In 1996, the Clinton administration reformed welfare, introducing Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) (Handler 2003; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). This reform transformed welfare from an “entitlement” program to one that focuses on wage-labor and transitions to work (Handler 2003; Iversen 2000; Quadagno and Street 2005). The major changes to cash assistance during the transition to TANF include the creation of work requirements, time limits, and family caps (Handler 2003; Hays 2003; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). The work requirements mandate that clients log a certain number of hours per week at a place of employment or a worksite selected by the program to receive benefits (Handler 2003). When clients fail to reach these requirements, states reduce clients’ funding through “sanctions” (Handler 2003). The federal time limit for receiving benefits from the cash assistance program that TANF created is five years, at which point individuals are no longer eligible to receive cash assistance. Finally, TANF implemented family caps for cash assistance, which involve denying families an increase in assistance for any additional children they may have (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001).

The specifics of welfare policies—including criteria to become a recipient, time limits, and guidelines for receiving extended benefits—vary by state (Iversen 2000; Neubeck and

Cazenave 2001), but across the board they provide insufficient assistance to mobilize individuals out of poverty (Gilens 1999; Handler 2003). In this research, I study the welfare program managers who must prioritize and enforce these policy requirements. Through my analysis, I seek to further understand how these managers incorporate mothering ideologies into how they talk about their expectations for clients' mothering within the cash assistance program in Ohio.

Methods

Data

To examine how welfare managers discuss the ideological expectations for their clients mothering, I use qualitative data comprised of 69 semi-structured interviews with Ohio Works First (OWF) program managers from 69 of the 88 counties in Ohio in 2010-2011 (See Table 1).

(Table 1 about here)

Program managers have a range of responsibilities associated with implementing the Ohio Works First program. Many program managers oversee supervising caseworkers, managing the work experience program, verifying completion of program requirements, and arranging supplemental services. The program managers operate in a bureaucratic structure, in which they are often subject to depersonalized, isolating, and highly constrained regulations (Ferguson 1984; Swift, 1995). While it is notable that welfare program managers work in this constrained environment, it does not erase the power dynamics between them and clients, who may be at the mercy of public assistance to survive.

The program managers supervise frontline workers, and thus generally have less interaction with clients. While program managers have less interaction with clients than frontline workers do, they impact welfare implementation by establishing agency priorities and supervising frontline workers (May and Winter 2007; Riccucci 2005; Riccucci et al. 2004;

Pearson 2007). Specifically, program managers influence the program by translating welfare policy goals into organizational goals (Jewell and Glaser 2006; May and Winter 2007; Meyers et al. 2001; Riccucci 2005; Riccucci et al. 2004). The goals that managers prioritize influence the culture of the organization and the way frontline workers do their job. Managers' supervision and delegation can also improve frontline workers' knowledge and thus make differences in terms of helping clients find jobs (May and Winter 2007).

In 2010, there were 65,672 adult TANF recipients in Ohio. The recipients primarily identify as women (nearly 81%) and are predominantly white (59%) (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2012). However, the percentage of African American recipients is disproportionate to the population at 37.3% (compared to 12.2% in Ohio's population) (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2012). The remainder of recipients are Hispanic (2.6%), Native American (0.1%), Asian (0.7%), or Multi-Racial (.4%) (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2012). Adult recipients' ages ranged from under 20 years old (6.3%), 20-29 years, (55.8), 30-39 years (25.6%), 40-49 years, (10.2%), and over 49 years (2.1%) (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2012).

These interviews were conducted (1 per county) over the telephone and involved program managers answering a series of 48 questions about the program's goals and effectiveness, clients' performances and successes within the program, causes of poverty in the county, and demographic information about the manager. The questions were primarily open-ended, though some questions asked the program managers to choose among pre-specified options (e.g., describing the program as "Very effective, effective, somewhat effective, not effective, don't know?"). There were also several questions that involved probes to follow-up the main question. The interviews range from less than an hour to over two hours, with an average length of around

an hour. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and identifiers—for both the county and the program manager—were removed and pseudonyms were assigned to ensure confidentiality. For the purposes of clarity and coherence, I removed excessive “filler words” (e.g., “umms” and “uhhs”) from the quotations I use to illustrate my findings.

Since the interviews were conducted over the phone, the respondents did not know the race of the interviewer. While people still may “linguistically profile” others based on dialectic variation (Baugh 2016), evidence suggests very little effect of race on interviewers on non-racial questions (Cotter et al. 1982). On questions more directly concerning race, respondents are generally more open with members of their own race (Cotter et al. 1982). Since all five interviewers in this study were white and the sample was also predominately white, I expect minimal interviewer-effect resulting from racial differences. Respondents were likely able to guess the gender of the interviewer based on their voice over the phone. Four of the five interviewers were women. Because the interviews were semi-structured, the interviewers all used the same script, but were given leeway to follow-up on the respondent’s answers. This served to provide some standardization to the interviews, which can help to reduce interviewer effects (Padfield and Procter 1996). The interviews conducted by the male interviewer were similar in length and content to those conducted by the women interviewers, which suggests a minimal impact of gender on the interviews.

Analysis

In this research, I examine how program managers draw on mothering ideology when they talk about their expectations for clients. To do this, I conduct a content analysis of the interviews with welfare-to-work program managers. While not involved in the data collection and initial open-coding of these data, I have analyzed them for several previous projects and am

familiar with them. My analysis of the data is shaped by my positionality, academic experience, and personal experience. As a white, middle class woman, both personal experience and cultural exposure have made me more familiar with hegemonic mothering practices. My class privilege has protected me from experiencing poverty or interacting with the welfare system first-hand. I also lack first-hand experience of motherhood. Thus, my understandings of poverty, welfare, and motherhood exist primarily on the basis of academic scholarship, cultural narratives, and observations in my personal life. In discussing these topics, I lean heavily on the voices of other scholars and their informants to present the data in an accurate way.

My interpretation of the data is also affected by the context of this data collection project. The project stemmed from a feminist research group comprised of university faculty and students. The lens we adopted focused on analyzing the structures of power within the welfare system. As such, I approach the data seeking to tell the stories of welfare managers through a lens that recognizes the power structure in which they are embedded: having power over welfare clients while contending with bureaucratic constraints, complex policies, and cultural disgust for welfare.

To code these data for mothering ideologies, I began by creating coding schema for intensive mothering (Hays 1996), concerted cultivation (Lareau 2003), natural growth (Lareau 2003), othermothering (Collins 1990), economic nurturing (Keller 1994; Johnston and Swanson 2003), extensive mothering (Christopher 2012), and “best I can” mothering (Johnson 2014). I also remained open to the emergence of values and practices outside of these existing ideologies. The ideologies I find support for include intensive mothering, economic nurturing, motherwork, and “best I can” mothering. I discuss the coding schema for these ideologies below, omitting discussions of those ideologies that were largely absent from the data.

I drew heavily on the literature to develop codes for mothering ideologies, used these to focus-code the interviews, and wrote analytic memos to capture emerging themes. Developing coding schemes, especially when they are informed by theory, helps to establish validity (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein 1999). I took detailed notes for each quotation that I coded to elucidate the relationship between the quotation and the code that I applied to it. After every five interviews that I coded, I also expanded on my notes by writing theoretical memos that explored additional points of connection among these factors and processes (Lofland et al. 2006). These steps further established validity by exploring the connection between the data and the theory-informed codes (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein 1999).

As I progressed, I also utilized constant comparison (Charmaz 1990; Glaser 1965) to compare trends in the first five interviews to trends in the next five interviews and so-on. As such, my memoing process allowed me to expand on my analysis and build on the themes and patterns that persisted across the interviews. Additionally, frequently revisiting and evaluating the data and my codes in this process strengthened the reliability of my coding (Potter and Levine-Donnerstein 1999). Beyond coding for the mothering ideologies from existing scholarship, I left room for new themes to emerge and shifted and consolidated my themes as they developed.

To code for intensive mothering, I used indicators (based on Hays' (1996) work) of (1) resources allocated to children, (2) energy invested in children, (3) self-sacrifice, and (4) talk about prioritizing or providing more for children. Overall, these indicators reference a strong investment in raising children that reflects the values of intensive mothering. Managers' talk about intensive mothering were closest to the "ideal" when they drew on multiple indicators.

However, in my findings I also discuss instances in which partial elements of mothering ideologies are evident.

For othermothering, I initially focused on program managers talking about mothering practices as shared among social networks (Collins 1990, 2016). As such, this code focused on managers' discussions of childcare and who is involved in caring for children. I used this code broadly, focusing on managers' permissiveness concerning who cared for children in general and managers' opinions of relying on informal childcare networks. During the review process, I expanded my conception of this code to more broadly focus on "motherwork" (Collins 2016). In addition to othermothering, this includes (1) working for children's survival, (2) struggling for reproductive autonomy, (3) contesting the values of the dominant group, and (4) socializing children to have a racial ethnic or cultural identity.

For economic nurturing, I used work by Keller (1992, 1994) and Johnston and Swanson (2003) to develop codes focused on (1) encouraging work outside of the home, (2) talking about the importance of providing resources for children, and (3) making the connection between work outside the home and nurturing children. While the nurturing component is poignant in conceptualizing this ideology, in my analysis I do also discuss partial endorsements for this mothering ideology in which managers encourage work outside of the home without explicitly discussing the connection to how this provides for children. I expand on this point across my findings, noting how managers' endorsement of work outside the home is still consistent with this ideology, though it does not fully capture the nurturing intent.

For "best I can" mothering, I developed codes based on Johnson (2014) that used indicators of (1) when managers expressed openness about the choices that clients made around parenting, and (2) any recognition that clients were doing what they can given their

circumstances. Additionally, I noted when managers discouraged this ideology by expressing disapproval of clients' mothering practices.

Findings

The "mommy wars" initially delineated the tension between the demands of mothering and those of work (Milkie et al. 2016). I find that program managers replicate this tension by encouraging and discouraging mothering practices in ways that center either (1) meeting children's needs or (2) emphasizing the importance of prioritizing work. As is apparent solely from these themes in terms of priorities, managers' expectations also proved to be contradictory. Across both themes, program managers draw on a combination of intensive mothering, economic nurturing, "best I can" mothering, and motherwork to discuss expectations for how their clients should parent.

While there is some gender and race variation among the managers (although most are white women), these themes were consistent across managers regardless of these demographic characteristics.

Meeting Children's Needs with Intensive Mothering & Economic Nurturing

One way that program managers draw on mothering ideology is by expressing concern over whether clients meet their children's needs. Managers do this through (1) how they describe typical clients on the program, (2) questioning clients' ability to provide for children, (3) assuming clients reproduce poverty by failing to teach their children specific skills and values, and (4) acknowledging the role of external factors that limit clients' resources.

Typical Welfare Clients

The first way that program managers emphasize meeting children's needs is visible in how program managers describe "typical welfare clients." In these descriptions of clients, nearly half of managers (45%) are critical of clients' mothering practices (discouraging "best I can mothering")

and motherwork) and highlight the importance of clients having resources to provide for their children. For example, one manager, when asked to describe a typical client, says:

If you are female, most of them have had multiple children with multiple fathers. You know, kind of forfeit their education and they're now trying to figure out a way to make that work. 'Cause they barely have been living hand to mouth, and getting by for more than just their bare, basic needs are. Some of them don't believe they can have more than just your basic needs met. [Thomas, white man]

In this description of the typical client, Thomas focuses on the number of children that clients have and how they are content with scraping by. In her interview, Kaitlyn describes clients in a similar way:

Right now, it's probably a single mom, had her child or children very young. And, just probably made bad choices with the father, so that she has no support. She's probably like 25 years old with two or three kids. And maybe not even a high school diploma, very little education. [Kaitlyn, white woman]

Both Thomas and Kaitlyn describe the typical client as having many children—and Thomas comments on how these children may have “multiple fathers.” The illustrative quotes from Thomas and Kaitlyn demonstrate how nearly half the program managers describe the typical client in a way that is critical of their mothering practices. Further, these descriptions of typical clients show how managers criticize clients' reproductive choices, limiting the bodily autonomy associated with motherwork. Thomas and Kaitlyn also highlight how these descriptions of typical clients encourage clients to attain resources. The focus on clients improving their material conditions to better provide for children is central to economic nurturing and intensive mothering. While both of these mothering ideologies focus on resources, economic nurturing is more applicable because of the emphasis on mothers working outside of the home to provide for their children.

Affording Children

A second way that managers talk about clients caring for their children is by questioning whether clients can afford the children they have. Specifically, 65% of the managers questioned their clients' ability to sufficiently provide (in material and immaterial ways) for their children. Through this criticism, managers discourage "best I can" mothering and motherwork, pointing to resource-intensive models of mothering (i.e. intensive mothering and economic nurturing) as more ideal practices. For example, when asked about what makes clients more likely to reach time limits, Will responds:

Not using, oh, god, I wanna say this politely. Not using family planning. So, they continue to have children when they should not have children. You know, they, it's by different person each time. Every time they have another kid, even if they are working, they're not going to be able to afford the four kids they have. [Will, white man]

Will criticizes clients' reproductive choices by expressing concern about clients having children with different partners and questioning whether clients can "afford" these children—even if they are working. Another manager, Samantha, expresses similar sentiments about clients having more children than they can afford:

I think one of the things that I observe here daily is how many little children that they have and yet they're unmarried and they may have two little kids and they come in and they're pregnant and they're still not married, they're already in a bad a situation but they're having another child. We see that a lot, It's heartbreaking. It's almost like you know you would think common sense would tell you this is not that, you know, you don't need another child. You can't afford the ones that you have and which limits—and again it goes back generational. Those young children don't have a chance for that parent to be able to afford to send them to school, college—let alone prom. Or you know take them to the doctor because they don't have transportation. It's a horrible vicious circle. [Samantha, white woman]

Both Will and Samantha demonstrate how managers chastise clients for their decisions surrounding having and raising children. In doing so, these managers illustrate how many program managers deem clients' choices inadequate, dismissing both motherwork and "best I can" practices. Assumptions about mothers not being able to afford children are often used as

justifications by the state to remove children from their parents' care. This practice undermines motherwork's emphasis on mothers maintaining autonomy and getting to keep their children.

These quotes also show how managers encourage intensive mothering practices by talking about the importance of investing resources in children (e.g., sending them to school or the prom). Will and Samantha further highlight how managers encourage mothers to provide for their children's needs via resources and work—practices central to economic nurturing—by placing emphasis on “affording” children. While resources are certainly important for raising children, managers often fail to acknowledge the systemic nature of clients' disadvantage.

Clients Reproducing Poverty

Program managers are also critical of clients' ability to meet their children's needs by implying that clients lack the skills necessary to help their children succeed. This is evident in how two-thirds of the managers associate mothering practices with the reproduction of poverty. In much of this talk, managers focus on generational poverty, suggesting that clients' upbringing and the way they raise their children reproduces poverty. This line of thinking assumes clients lack the skills and capital to help their children “break the cycle” of poverty. In talking about clients reproducing poverty, managers highlight the limitations of “best I can” mothering and motherwork, focusing on how resources and capital (which are central to intensive mothering and economic nurturing) benefit children. For instance, when asked about generational poverty in the county, Rose responds:

It, it doesn't end, it is generational, and a lot of it is the problem of the parents that I had on in the 70's and early 80's, didn't have the want to care. And it's not a neglect, it's not, it's just that they are satisfied with what they have, and that may not be moving their kids to a college education, to a better house, to a better car, to whatever we think is necessary. I'm not sure, you can't make a, a judgment call on where they're, you know, should they stress and worry about what a better life is considered. I don't know [...] You can't judge them. It's their right to decide if they want their child to be a doctor or they

want their child to just work at a manufacturing job or a labor job. That's, that's really up to them. Or if they want them to work at all. [Rose, white woman]

In this quote, Rose describes generational poverty in the county. Unlike many other managers, however, Rose differentiates between meeting children's needs and "wanting more" or "providing more" for children. In a similar quote, Marina describes one of the challenges of helping clients become self-sufficient:

Probably a work ethic or a work attitude. And I think that that stems from just not seeing that, not having that role model in their lives. Especially when we're talking about long term clients whose family has been on assistance for a number of years. I mean, the parents grew up on assistance and their children are growing up on assistance. [Marina, white woman]

In these quotes, Rose and Marina illustrate how program managers draw on stereotypes of the welfare queen to describe clients and question whether their parenting practices sufficiently meet their children's needs. While Rose talks about not wanting to judge clients, both she and Marina, like 2/3 of the managers, imply that clients' parenting practices can prevent children from achieving social mobility. This line of thinking dismisses how mothers "passing down" information on how to navigate the welfare system may be a vital lifeline that ensures their children's survival—an idea consistent with motherwork. Overall, Rose suggests that "best I can" practices are sufficient—so long as mothers accept responsibility for keeping their children in poverty. Marina, whose approach is more representative of other managers, is less accepting of "best I can" practices. This is evident in how she attributes children being in poverty with clients not acting as a "role model" by working outside the home.

Rose and Marina also demonstrate how managers imply that clients ultimately lack the resources and self-sacrifice to meet the criteria of intensive mothering. This is apparent in how they describe clients as "satisfied" (read: complacent) and lament their lack of "role models," respectively. Like the other 2/3 of managers who talked about clients reproducing poverty, Rose

and Marina stress the importance of working outside the home to become self-sufficient and provide for children. Managers' push for clients to work and serve as role models for their supports economic nurturing, since it emphasizes work to provide for children.

Acknowledging External Factors

So far, this section has detailed the more prevalent event of managers criticizing clients' mothering practices. While less common throughout the interviews as a whole, at some point nearly half of the managers acknowledge additional factors that limit the resources clients have at their disposal with which to mother. In doing so, these managers recognize that external factors, rather than mothers themselves, are often to blame for the lack of resources clients have at their disposal. This recognition indicates a greater receptiveness to "best I can" practices and motherwork. For instance, in describing typical clients, Elena notes:

OWF is not something you're gonna make a living on. I mean that's obvious. So the people that are on OWF, they're in desperate need. Nobody wants to, to have to live on OWF, it's just not a lot to live on. But, at this point in time, and I'm going to say a lot of our, the individuals that come in, are coming in and getting on the OWF because they have no other choice. And the other thing is, is that that most of them obviously are single parents. And it also makes it more difficult. You know if kids are with mom, and mom's the only income and she loses her job, then what other choice do you have than assistance? [Elena, white woman]

Here, Elena acknowledges the dire situations that mothers are often in—especially when they are operating on a single income. She suggests these families apply for welfare because they "have no other choice." Echoing this language, Gene responds to a question about why people apply for OWF, saying:

I would probably [say] because there's just a lack of any other support system at the time for them and it's a last resort is usually what we see. [Gene, white man]

In these instances, managers would describe clients in a way that places a greater emphasis on the situational constraints that they face. They acknowledge that clients often use welfare out of

desperation and see it as “a last resort” (Gene). By framing assistance as a logical choice for single mothers who lose their jobs, these managers encourage “best I can” mothering. They also acknowledge how mothers are working hard to ensure their children’s survival—a tenet with roots in motherwork. In these excerpts, managers demonstrate a more realistic grasp of the parenting resources clients have at their disposal. As such, managers were much less likely to simultaneously acknowledge clients’ limitations and emphasize resource-intensive mothering practices (i.e. intensive mothering).

Summary: Meeting Children’s Needs

Overall, there are many ways that program managers question clients’ ability to meet their children’s needs. In much of this talk, managers imply that clients could improve their children’s lives and achieve social mobility by embodying specific mothering practices and abandoning others. Managers generally promote economic nurturing and select components of intensive mothering by emphasizing the importance of resources in meeting children’s needs. They also promote intensive mothering by encouraging mothers on welfare to sacrifice to provide for their children. Yet, managers also often draw on stereotypes of mothers on welfare to discourage mothering practices associated with “best I can” mothering and motherwork. In doing so, managers are critical of the mothering practices that mothers on welfare *do* have the resources to engage.

Prioritizing Work with Economic “Nurturing” and “Reliable” Childcare

As seen in the previous section, program managers talk a lot about if and how they believe clients meet the needs of their children. While managers have a lot to say about meeting children’s needs, they often focus more extensively on the importance of clients prioritizing work. Since the interview questions primarily asked about the components of the work program,

this is not entirely surprising. I find that program managers encourage clients to embody work-centered parenting practices through (1) talking about childcare services, (2) focusing on teaching clients about work/life balance expectations, (3) praising clients when they embody specific mothering practices, and (4) chastising clients who want to stay home with their children.

Childcare Services

One way that OWF promotes work-centered parenting practices is by providing clients with access to subsidized childcare through the county. Forty of the program managers (58%) talk about how their county offers childcare. While childcare may be offered as a resource, over one-third of managers (38%) describe barriers to clients taking advantage of these programs, such as transportation, having multiple children, and clients' reluctance. In this talk, managers question clients' childcare choices, and so question "best I can" practices and motherwork. Managers also emphasize the importance of working outside the home—promoting economic nurturing and discouraging intensive mothering.

One manager describes childcare as one of the biggest challenges in the county, and then goes on to say:

Not that there's not childcare available but people have issues with using childcare that is available, or they probably have transportation issues getting to the childcare. There's always openings for childcare some place but in this county it seems like they don't want to use them. They want to use they always tell us they have their own providers that they want to use but it's not reliable. [Leslie, white woman]

In this quote, Leslie describes clients' reluctance to use childcare provided by the county. She places an emphasis on the reliability, claiming that clients' choice of provider is less likely to be reliable. In a similar quote, Geraldine notes:

We have a lot of people come in, they want to apply for cash, first when they hear they have to go to a work site, they-they say forget about it. You know I want to be with my

kids. We do offer daycare here. They-they just, you know don't-don't want to bother.
[Geraldine, white woman]

Both Geraldine and Leslie illustrate how managers question the reliability of the childcare providers that clients choose. This discourages “best I can” mothering practices by implying that mothers on welfare do not make good choices surrounding childcare on their own. While Leslie does not specifically mention kin-based care, she implies that any childcare provider outside of those offered by the county is not reliable. Thus, while motherwork conceives of a more fluid relationship between work and family, suggesting that other childcare providers are unreliable is antithetical to othermothering and motherwork.

Leslie and Geraldine also highlight how managers encourage clients to delegate childcare to work outside of the home. This illustrates a work-centered focus, rather than the child-centered one mandated by intensive mothering. Managers’ emphasis on securing childcare to work outside of the home is consistent with the economic nurturing mothering ideology. However, the managers do not explicitly connect work outside of the home to providing for children—which is notable since this is a key component of economic *nurturing*.

There are five program managers that are more open to the prospect of clients drawing on informal networks as a means of childcare while they attend the work assignment. For instance, James says:

We don't have a daycare issue in our county and if they don't want public daycare, they have kinship, they have relatives that will take their children for the day. [James, white man]

While most managers either ignored the prospect of othermothering or discouraged clients from drawing on “unreliable” informal networks, James suggests that drawing on these networks is a feasible option for clients. In promoting clients making their own choices around childcare, these managers reflect motherwork and “best I can” parenting practices. Involving kin

and fictive kin in childcare is also consistent with the economic nurturer mothering ideology because it involves securing childcare as a means to clients working outside of the home. While involving relatives in childcare, rather than placing children with unknown care providers, appears child-centered, according to intensive mothering the burdens of motherhood are reserved for mom alone (Hays 1996; Stack 1974). Additionally, delegating childcare to work outside of the home is inconsistent with the ideal standards of intensive mothering (i.e., being a stay-at-home mom).

Negotiating Balance

The second way that program managers emphasized clients prioritizing work is by discussing how the welfare program teaches clients to balance family and work. Throughout the interviews, over half of the program managers criticize clients' existing arrangements (i.e., best I can) and pushed clients to create a balance that involves more work (i.e., economic nurturing). Annalee, for instance, says:

My goal is for them to get some, depending on the consumer, but overall, it's for them to learn some good job readiness skills. Really just getting up, get their kids to daycare, or school, getting to the sites, building those job readiness skills so that when they are hired they've already learned how to deal with things like what happens when Johnny's sick today and he can't go to school, what happens when I miss the bus. [Annalee, white woman]

Here, Annalee describes her goal for clients to learn "job readiness skills," which appear to involve learning how to navigate the demands of work and family. Alithea expresses similar expectations, saying:

[My] goal is basically to give them work ethic. Meaning, you know, time management skills, not only to learn a skill that you are doing at the site, but you have to plan ahead. You have to arrange childcare, you have to arrange transportation. You have to multi-task, you know, you can't just say well I'm not going to go to work today because I have a three o'clock doctor's appointment. You have to get both of them in. Getting up in the morning and, you know, starting out to go some, you know, get up and go somewhere. [Alithea, white woman]

Annalee and Alithea, like over half the managers, imply that clients struggle to “multitask” (Alithea) and do not know “how to deal with things like what happens when Johnny’s sick today and he can’t go to school” (Annalee). In doing so, managers suggest that “best I can” practices are insufficient. Furthermore, images of poor women and women of color as ignorant at managing work-life balance are flawed because historically poor mothers and mothers of color have had to navigate these demands; while white, middle class women did not because of their lack of access to the workplace (Collins 1990; Rousseau 2009). Thus, these managers undermine the legacy of motherwork. Annalee and Alithea, like over half of the managers, also do not consider clients’ lack of resources (e.g., transportation, access to alternative childcare, etc.) and the rigid scheduling in lower-income occupations that impede clients’ ability to create balance (Landivar 2014).

These quotes from Annalee and Alithea illustrate how managers’ emphasis on the work requirements of OWF often takes priority over encouraging intensive mothering practices. They focus less on child-centered approaches to parenting and instead concentrate on placing children in schools and day cares and figuring out contingency plans for childcare in case a child falls ill. Again, managers stressing securing childcare so that clients can work outside the home is consistent with economic nurturing. Managers encourage clients to prioritize work and to learn how to manage competing demands (e.g., childcare interruptions) to do so. Overall, managers’ discussions of childcare and “balance” focus more extensively on managing any potential family spillover into the workplace.

In terms of balancing work and family, it is also notable that the work requirements of the cash assistance program include some room for family interruption. This is visible in how many of the managers describe having a sick child as “good cause.” “Good cause” refers to situations

that are considered valid excuses for clients to call in and not attend the work activities for that day. While having a sick child is often considered a valid (if appropriately documented) reason for not attending the work site, there are limitations to this accommodation. The broad impression from managers is that if clients try to use a sick child as “good cause” too frequently, then they are using their barriers as “excuses” to get out of work. A few managers specifically address these expectations. For instance, one manager said:

Say you missed, your kid was out for three days cause they're sick and [...] you didn't go to the doctor 'cause they may have a cold, got kicked out of daycare, whatever. They have nothing to verify that, just their word. And sometimes, if it seems legitimate, the worker will take it- sometimes not ask for a verification. If it's a pattern...reporting attendance that way. It's not blatant things that they can't verify. They have to verify everything. [Katie, white woman]

In this quote, Katie's description of the rules for missing work for a sick child suggests that the cash assistance program does not allow for “best I can” practices. Clients must provide verification for missing work for a sick child and caseworkers can sanction clients if they do not deem their excuses “legitimate.” This constrains clients' choices surrounding parenting—especially when it comes to sick children, which undermines the tenets of agency and fighting for children's survival embedded in motherwork. These rules illustrate how mothers on welfare are under additional surveillance that requires them to provide justifications for their decisions concerning parenting and work. The fact that clients can miss some work to care for their children does reflect some degree of child-centeredness (consistent with intensive mothering). However, the limitations on the amount of time that clients can take to do this is less child-centered.

Praising Clients

A third way that program managers prioritize work is by praising clients' success with work goals. While managers do not always criticize clients' mothering practices, the praise they offer

primarily focuses on how clients achieve work goals *despite* their parenting demands. Twenty-eight of the managers (40.5%) offered this type of praise to clients, promoting various components of “best I can,” intensive mothering, and economic nurturing mothering ideologies.

For instance, one manager recalls the success story of one of her clients:

Oh sure. Like I said, that little girl in December [...], she obtained enough employment to take her off her cash assistance and she can still go to school, and they pretty much guarantee her a job and [...] she said ‘I’ve not missed one day, one hour, one minute.’ And we just praised her, we said, ‘it’s terrific, we’re so glad for you.’ And she has three small children that, there’s, none of them’s in school, so I think that’s a success story.
[Carrie, white woman]

Here, Carrie praises a client for being successful at getting off of cash assistance. Carrie notes how the client was able to accomplish this, even though she has three small children. In a related quote, Connie describes clients most likely to succeed on the program:

I think their parents not being on assistance helps. It’s a generational problem, social problem. And the people that have had parents who worked and seen that role model are more likely to get to that point also. [Connie, white woman]

While a bit different from one another, Carrie and Connie both show how managers would not only praise their clients’ work ethic, but also praise their ability to prioritize work despite the competing demands of children. This demonstrates an endorsement of prioritizing work over family. While perhaps on the surface these managers are not critical of clients’ mothering practices, they also express very particular criteria for clients to receive praise (i.e., not missing “one minute” of work, serving as a “role model”). Because of this, managers ultimately do not accept “best I can” as a suitable approach to parenting.

The focus on self-sacrifice to accrue resources for children—by working tirelessly to be a “role model” (Connie) and “not miss[ing] one day” of work (Carrie)—is consistent with economic nurturing and intensive mothering. However, the fact that managers encourages work-centered—rather than child-centered—practices contradicts the expectations of intensive mothering. These

quotes are also consistent with and economic nurturing because of the focus on work outside of the home being perceived as the best course of action for the family. In Carrie's client's case, she was able to leave cash assistance and secure a job and is now considered "self-sufficient," which suggests an ability to adequately provide for one's family. Similarly, motherwork does not conceptualize work and family as competing domains, so highlighting the benefits of work is not incompatible with this model of mothering. However, motherwork also emphasizes pushing back against dominant values, which could involve pushing back against neoliberal ideologies that expect work at any cost.

Stay-at-Home Parenting

There are also five managers who further reinforce the need for clients to work by discouraging clients from staying home with their children. For example, Samantha said:

You know we all would have loved to stay at home with our children. You know and that has not changed. You know in today's economy unfortunately it doesn't allow us to do that but there seems to be that mindset, well I want to stay home with my children. Well, you know, it's not always possible, especially in their situation. [Samantha, white woman]

In this quote, Samantha talks about how it isn't feasible for clients to stay home with their children, attributing this to the economy and clients' financial need. Another manager, Krystle, further comments on how "good cause" (being excused from the work activities) does not include wanting to stay home with their children:

Good cause isn't just because I want to stay home, my child is only three years old and I want to stay home for two more years. We can't, that's not, you know, that's not the way our society is supposed to work. [Krystle, white woman]

Samantha and Krystle, along with this small group of managers, discourage motherwork and "best I can" parenting by suggesting that mothers on welfare choosing to stay home and take care of their children is not a suitable choice. While staying at home to raise children may be

framed as a meaningful choice for some (i.e., white, middle class) mothers, mothers who lack race and/or class privilege often face greater criticism and surveillance for their mothering choices (Collins 2016; Rousseau 2009). In framing it as unacceptable for clients to want to stay home with their children, these managers also discourage clients from enacting intensive mothering practices. Samantha and Krystle illustrate this by implying clients' financial situation makes it an impossible option (Samantha) and, more forwardly, by saying that "that's not the way our society is supposed to work" (Krystle). By making this decision more about a lack of desire to work than a decision to care for children, these managers overlook the possibility of clients enacting more child-centered practices.

While rare for managers to explicitly discourage clients from staying home with their children, Samantha and Krystle are like the majority of other managers in their expectation for clients to embody parenting practices that enable them to work outside of the home. As such, these managers' talk is consistent with the emphasis on work found in the economic nurturing mothering ideology. Specifically, by framing the desire to stay home with kids as a matter of lack of effort, they imply an expectation for mothers on welfare to work outside of the home.

Summary: Prioritizing Work

Through talking about childcare services, "teaching" clients work-life balance, praising clients who work outside the home, and discouraging stay-at-home mothering, managers emphasize the importance of work over mothering. In these conversations, managers are broadly dissatisfied with "best I can" mothering practices and motherwork. This is evident in how managers express very specific ideas about what clients' mothering should look like, limiting mothers' agency to make their own decisions about family and work. This section also illustrates how managers push for clients to work outside of the home, which is less consistent with intensive mothering.

Across both sections, managers most frequently endorse economic nurturing by emphasizing clients attaining resources and framing work outside the home as the path to achieve this.

Discussion: When “Best I Can” Is Not Enough

This research builds on existing work in mothering ideology and welfare, by analyzing how welfare managers incorporate mothering ideologies into how they talk about their expectations for clients’ mothering within the cash assistance program in Ohio. Overall, these managers conclude that “best I can” is not enough when it comes to their clients’ mothering. The content of many managers’ criticisms extends beyond the scope of the welfare program’s requirements and demonstrates the surveillance and scrutiny of the program and its officials. Managers criticize clients for having too many children, failing to strive for “more” for their children, manage childcare, or navigate balance, and wanting to stay home with their children. In doing so, managers contribute to the “mommy wars” and the contentious cultural landscape of mothering practices. Managers further connect these perceived shortcomings to the reproduction of poverty. In doing so, they present mothers on welfare as “unworthy poor” and place undue focus on individual effort while selectively acknowledging the role of larger structural factors in poverty and children’s outcomes (see Allahyari 1997).

Beyond “best I can” practices, the welfare managers also generally discouraged motherwork by limiting mothers’ agency, prioritizing dominant values, and dismissing community-rooted mothering practices (othermothering). Additionally, some of the managers’ criticisms are reminiscent of stereotypes of the lazy, promiscuous, and complacent “welfare queen,” which is especially troublesome since the welfare rolls in Ohio are disproportionately Black (triple the rate of the population). Managers’ dismissal of motherwork likely reflects their positionality as predominately white. Many constructions of mothering center the experiences,

needs, and priorities of white women (Collins 2016). In this instance, the managers are mostly white and likely define mothering in a particular way that excludes practices rooted in communities of color. Managers do this in their discussions about clients “affording” children, discouraging clients from teaching their children how to use welfare, and emphasizing clients using “reliable” sources of childcare provided by the county. Managers’ frequent dismissal of kin networks is especially noteworthy since previous work has demonstrated the importance of informal networks for raising children and exchanging other resources (Nelson 2005; Puchalski 2016; Stack 1974).

In lieu of “best I can” practices and motherwork, managers cobble together a mothering ideology for clients that is laden with contradictions. Managers selectively promote particular tenets of intensive mothering. Specifically, managers emphasize the importance of clients self-sacrificing and providing resources for their children (in line with Hays 1996)—so long as it does not interfere with the work requirements of the program. Furthermore, managers’ high expectations for mothers to provide a variety of resources for their children reflects the emphasis on materialism and capitalism (Rothman 2000). However, poorer women and women of color often parent under more oppressive conditions with fewer sources of social support, which limits the resources that mothers on welfare have access to (Crowley 2013; Kurz 2007). While managers do encourage clients to provide more for their children, at the end of the day, their insistence that clients delegate childcare and work outside the home shows that they do not fully support clients practicing intensive mothering.

Managers’ emphasis on economic nurturing is evident in their expectations for both meeting children’s needs and prioritizing work (see Keller 1992). The demands of work and family are often presented as incompatible, resulting in a “no-win situation” that mothers must

navigate (Hays 1996). Economic nurturing simultaneously allows managers to express concern for children and promote clients participating in the work requirements of OWF. When program managers promote economic nurturing, they superficially resolve the “no-win situation” by implying that work and family needs are aligned and can be met via work. However, program managers often fail to consider how the long hours and low-wages of welfare and other low-wage jobs can be costly to both mothers and children (Edin and Lein 1996). The emphasis on the “work” component of economic nurturing is especially interesting since this mothering ideology was the product of 1950s magazines targeting middle class mothers as a way to frame “work” as compatible with mothering (rather than the other way around; Keller 1994).

Conclusion

While the interviews I use provide many details regarding program managers’ jobs, the cash assistance program, and opinions about clients; they do not include information regarding managers’ length of employment as welfare officials or the training process to become a welfare official. Having information about managers’ experience and training could provide insight into the values and perspectives they are socialized into through their careers. Thus, this information would provide a sense of how much the workplace culture influences managers’ understandings of clients and the cash assistance program.

Additionally, these data do not indicate whether managers express these mothering expectations directly to clients. Yet, managers do play a role in setting the tone for the organization (Jewell and Glaser 2006; May and Winter 2007; Meyers et al. 2001; Riccucci 2005; Riccucci et al. 2004). Further, the prevalence of these ideas about mothering ideology across the interviews and public discourse suggests that it is likely that at least some of these ideas permeate the organizational climate. Previous scholarship indicates that organizational pressure

can affect the mothering practices women strive toward (Newman and Henderson 2014). However, other scholarship suggests that mothers often adapt their understandings of what makes a good mother around their circumstances (Hays 1996). One way mothers on welfare do this is by emphasizing ways they spend time with and care for their children (McCormack 2005).

These findings contribute to an intersection of research in discourse and ideology, mothering, poverty, and policy. I build on existing work in these areas by analyzing specific mothering ideologies that welfare-to-work managers endorse or discourage. By identifying managers' expectations for their clients' mothering practices, this research provides insight into how state scrutiny shapes the ideological landscape that mothers on welfare must navigate. Notably, many of the managers are critical of the mothering of their clients and may further evaluate clients' mothering practices based on stereotypes, rather than reality. This leads managers to the conclusion that motherwork and "best I can" practices are not enough. In response to this perceived deficiency, managers promote a contradictory combination of economic nurturing and select pieces of intensive mothering that superficially values children so long as it does not interfere with welfare's work demands. Ultimately, managers superficially resolve the tension between family and work with economic nurturing's emphasis on work outside of the home as a means to provide for children.

Managers perpetuating discourse embedded with stereotypes of mothers on welfare can also have practical implications (Gilens 1999; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). Discourse on poverty influences how policies are created and viewed and thus has repercussions for maintaining or resisting inequality (Gilens 1999). Additionally, policies and discourses often frame people experiencing poverty and their needs in a way that emphasizes "individual" shortcomings and is not accurate or helpful to fixing structural inequality (Sykes 1988).

Similarly, explanations of family outcomes that focus blame on mothers “hold women responsible for social conditions beyond their control” and “obscures the ways that options and opportunities are unequally distributed” (Gerson 2004: 165). While it is problematic that program managers draw on ideological discourse and stereotypes of clients, it is largely reflective of the existing climate, the training they receive, and the way welfare policies themselves have evolved (Gilens 1999; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). This work, like others before it (e.g., Gerson 2004, 2009; Hays 2003) iterates the need for families to have substantially more social and institutional support.

References

- Allahyari, Rebecca A. 1997. “The Micro-Politics of Worthy Homelessness: Interactive Moments in Congressional Hearings.” *Sociological Inquiry* 67(1): 59-71.
- Arendell, Teresa. 2000. “Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood: The Decade’s Scholarship.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62: 1192–1207.
- , 1999. “Hegemonic Motherhood: Deviancy Discourses and Employed Mothers’ Accounts of Out-of-School Time Issues.” *Center for Working Families Working Paper* 9.
- Baca Zinn, Maxine. 2000. “Feminism and Family Studies for a New Century.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 571:42-56.
- Baugh, John. 2016. “Linguistic Profiling and Discrimination” Pp. 349-368 in *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Society*, edited by Ofelia Garcia, Nelson Flores, and Massimiliano Spotti. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Christopher, Karen. 2012. “Extensive Mothering: Employed Mothers’ Constructions of the Good Mother.” *Gender & Society* 26(1):73-96.

- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2016. "Shifting the center: Race, class, and feminist theorizing about motherhood." Pp. 45-65 in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, edited by Evelyn Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Forcey. New York, NY: Routledge.
- . 2006. *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- . 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Cambridge, MA: Unwin Hyman, Inc.
- Cotter, Patrick R., Jeffrey Cohen, and Philip B Coulter. 1982. "Race-of-Interviewer Effects in Telephone Interviews." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 46(2): 278-284.
- Crowley, Jocelyn Elise. 2015. "Unpacking the Power of the Mommy Wars." *Sociological Inquiry*. 85(2): 217-238.
- . 2014. "Staying at Home or Working for Pay? Attachment to Modern Mothering Identities." *Sociological Spectrum*. 34(2): 114-135.
- . 2013. *Mothers Unite! Organizing for Workplace Flexibility and the Transformation of Family Life*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Curenton, Stephanie M., Jocelyn Elise Crowley, and Dawne M. Mouzon. 2016. "Qualitative Descriptions of Middle Class, African American Mothers' Child-Rearing Practices and Values." *Journal of Family Issues* 39(4): 868-895.
- Damaske, Sarah. 2013. "Work, Family, and Accounts of Mothers' Lives Using Discourse to Navigate Intensive Mothering Ideals." *Sociology Compass* 7(6):436-444.
- Damaske, Sarah. 2011. *For the Family? How Class and Gender Shape Women's Work*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Edin, Kathryn, and Laura Lein. 1996. "Work, Welfare, and Single Mothers: Economic Survival Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 62(2):253-266.
- Ferguson, Kathy E. 1984. *The Feminist Case Against Bureaucracy*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Fothergill, Alice. 2013. "Managing Childcare: The Experiences of Mothers and Childcare Workers." *Sociological Inquiry* 83(3): 421-447.
- Gallagher, Charles A. 2003. Color-blind Privilege: The Social and Political functions of Erasing the Color Line in Post-Race America. *Race, Gender & Class* 10(4): 22-37.
- Gerson, Kathleen. 2009. "Changing Lives, Resistant Institutions: A New Generation Negotiates Gender, Work, and Family Change." *Sociological Forum* 24(4): 735-753.
- , 2004. "Understanding Work and Family Through a Gender Lens." *Community, Work & Family* 7(2):163-178.
- , 2002. "Moral Dilemmas, Moral Strategies and the Transformation of Gender: Lessons from Two Generations of Work and Family Change." *Gender & Society* 16(1):8-29.
- Gilens, Martin. 1999. *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media and the Politics of Anti-Poverty Policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Glaser, Barney. 1965. "The Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Analysis." *Social Problems*. 12(4):436-445.
- Handler, Joel F. 2003. "Social Citizenship and Workfare in the US and Western Europe: From Status to Contract." *Journal of European Social Policy* 13(3):229-243.
- Hays, Sharon. 1996. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. Yale University Press.
- Iversen, Roberta. 2000. "TANF Policy Implementation: The Invisible Barrier." *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 27:2.

- Jacobs, Jerry A. and Kathleen Gerson. 2004. *The Time Divide: Work, Family, and Gender Inequality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jewell, Christopher J. and Bonnie E. Glaser. 2006. "Toward a General Analytic Framework: Organizational Settings, Policy Goals, and Street-Level Behavior." *Administration & Society* 38(3):335-364.
- Johnson, J. Laura. 2014. "The Best I Can: Hope for Single Parents in the Age of Intensive Mothering". In *Intensive Mothering: The Cultural Contradictions of Modern Motherhood*, edited by Linda Ennis. Toronto, ON: Demeter Press.
- Johnston, Deirdre D. and Debra H. Swanson. 2003. "Invisible Mothers: A Content Analysis of Motherhood Ideologies and Myths in Magazines." *Sex Roles* 49:21-33.
- Keller, Kathryn. 1994. *Mothers and Work in Popular American Magazines*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- , 1992. "Nurture and Work in the Middle Class: Imagery from Women's Magazines." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 5(4):577-600.
- Kurz, Demie. 2007. "Poor Mothers and the Care of Teenage Children." Pp. 754-770 in *Shifting the Center: Understanding Contemporary Families*, 3rd ed, edited by Susan J. Ferguson. New York, NY: McGraw Hill Higher Education.
- Landivar, Liana Christin. 2014. "Opting Out, Scaling Back, or Business-as-Usual? An Occupational Assessment of Women's Employment." *Sociological Forum* 29(1):189-214.
- Lareau, A. 2003. *Unequal Childhoods: Class Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Lofland, John, David Snow, Leon Anderson, and Lyn H. Lofland. 2006. *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- May, Peter J. and Soren C. Winter. 2007. "Politicians, Managers, and Street-Level Bureaucrats: Influences on Policy Implementation." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*: 19:453-476.
- McCormack, Karen. 2005. "Stratified Reproduction and Poor Women's Resistance." *Gender & Society* 19(5): 660-679.
- Meyers, Marcia, Norma Riccucci, Irene Lurie. 2001. "Achieving Goal Congruence in Complex Environments: The Case of Welfare Reform". *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 2:165-201.
- Milkie, Melissa A., Joanna R. Pepin, and Kathleen E. Denny. 2016. "What Kind of War? 'Mommy Wars' Discourse in U.S. and Canadian News." *Sociological Inquiry* 86(1):51-78.
- Monnat, Shannon. 2010. "The Color of Welfare Sanctioning: Exploring the Individual and Contextual Roles of Race on TANF Case Closures and Benefit Reductions." *The Sociological Quarterly* 51:678-707.
- Neubeck, Kenneth J. and Noel A. Cazenave. 2001. *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card Against America's Poor*. New York: Routledge.
- Newman, Harmony D. and Angela C. Henderson. 2014. "The Modern Mystique: Institutional Mediation of Hegemonic Mothering." *Sociological Inquiry* 84(3):472-491.
- Padfield, Maureen and Ian Procter. 1996. "The Effect of Interviewer's Gender on the Interviewing Process: A Comparative Enquiry." *Sociology* 30(2): 355-366.

- Pearson, A. Fiona. 2007. "The New Welfare Trap: Case Managers, College Education, and TANF Policy." *Gender & Society* 21(5):723-748.
- Potter, James W. and Deborah Levine-Donnerstein. 1999. "Rethinking Validity and Reliability in Content Analysis." *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 27(3): 258-284.
- Puchalski, Vance Alan. 2016. "Credit at the Corner Store: An Analysis of Resource Exchange among Detroit-Area Urban Poor." *Sociological Forum* 31(4): 1040-1062.
- Quadagno, Jill and Debra Street. 2005. "Ideology and Public Policy: Antistatistism in American Welfare State Transformation". *Journal of Policy History* 17(1):52-71.
- Riccucci, Norma M. 2005. "Street-Level Bureaucrats and Intrastate Variation in the Implementation of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families" in *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 15(1):89-111.
- Riccucci, Norma; Meyers, Marcia; Lurie, Irene. 2004. "The Implementation of Welfare Reform Policy: The Role of Public Managers in Front-Line Practices." *Public Administration Review* 64:4.
- Rothman, B. K. 2000. *Recreating Motherhood*. New York: Routledge Press.
- Rousseau, Nicole. 2009. *Black Woman's Burden: Commodifying Black Reproduction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stack, Carol B. 1974. *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Taylor, Tiffany. 2011. "Re-examining Cultural Contradictions: Mothering Ideology and the Intersections of Class, Gender, and Race" *Sociology Compass* 5(10): 898-907.

Turgeon, Brianna. 2018. "A Critical Discourse Analysis of Welfare-to-Work Program Managers' Expectations and Evaluations of their Clients' Mothering." *Critical Sociology* 44(1):127-140.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2012. "Characteristics and Financial Circumstances of TANF Recipients, Fiscal Year 2010." Retrieved July 29 2016 (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/resource/character/fy2010/fy2010-chap10-ys-final>).

Van Doorn, Bas W. 2015. "Pre- and Post-Welfare Reform Media Portrayals of Poverty in the United States: The Continuing Importance of Race and Ethnicity." *Politics & Policy* 43(1): 142-162.

Table 1: Program Manager Demographics

| Variable | Percent Distribution |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Respondent Gender | |
| Male | 16 (23%) |
| Female | 53 (77%) |
| Respondent Race | |
| White | 66 (95.6%) |
| African American | 1 (1.4%) |
| Hispanic | 1 (1.4%) |
| Missing | 1 (1.4%) |
| Respondent Education | |
| High School/GED | 8 (11.6%) |
| Some College | 8 (11.6%) |
| Associates | 12 (17.4%) |
| Bachelor's | 29 (42%) |
| Graduate | 11 (16%) |
| Missing | 1 (1.4%) |