POOR WOMEN, POOR WORKERS, POOR MOTHERS: USING CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS TO EXAMINE WELFARE-TO-WORK PROGRAM MANAGERS’ EXPECTATIONS AND EVALUATIONS OF THEIR CLIENTS’ MOTHERING

A thesis submitted
To Kent State University in partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

By
Brianna Turgeon
May, 2014
Thesis written by
Brianna Turgeon
B.A., Mississippi State University, 2012
M.A., Kent State University, 2014

Approved by

Tiffany Taylor, Advisor, Department of Sociology

Richard Serpe, Chair, Department of Sociology

James Blank, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..............................................................................................................iv  

I.  INTRODUCTION.....................................................................................................................1  

II. LITERATURE REVIEW.........................................................................................................4  

III. METHODS..........................................................................................................................9  

IV. FINDINGS..........................................................................................................................13  

V. DISCUSSION.........................................................................................................................29  

VI. CONCLUSION.....................................................................................................................34  

VII. REFERENCES....................................................................................................................36
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee, consisting of Dr. Tiffany Taylor, Dr. Clare Stacey, and Dr. Kathryn Feltey, for their help and the feedback they provided during both my thesis proposal defense and my thesis defense. The feedback during the proposal stage was instrumental to the shaping of my project. They have also generously provided feedback for continuing my work on to publication. I would like to extend additional gratitude to my committee chair and advisor, Tiffany Taylor, for letting me use her data, all of her support, her generous and expedient feedback, and her instructive guidance throughout the thesis process. I would also like to thank Jackie Towne-Roese for allowing me to consult the documents she turned in during her thesis process, including her IRB proposal, thesis proposal, and the thesis itself. These drafts were immensely useful in understanding expectations and crafting and structuring my own work. I also appreciate her taking the time and energy to format my thesis. My family, boyfriend, friends, peers, and professors have all been incredibly supportive and helpful throughout this process. Finally, I would like to thank the Sociology Department for the opportunity to write and defend this thesis
INTRODUCTION

Despite the persistent presence of poverty in the United States, the country has never been very receptive of public assistance programs. Since the 1960s, family programs have been stigmatized and associated with a dependency discourse (Misra et al. 2003; Strauss 2002). Current U.S. public assistance policies include the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) which dismantled Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and created Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Enacted in the mid-1990s by the Clinton administration, these policies intended to end dependence on welfare and make clients ‘self-sufficient’. The major changes to public assistance include work requirements, time limits, and family caps (Hays 2003; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). Despite the reforms, welfare policy remains a highly racialized and gendered policy that aims to regulate the lives of poor women, and often specifically poor women of color.

Reform policies also lean heavily on personal responsibility and family values, suggesting that individuals are solely responsible for their successes and failures and proposing that marriage and family structure are solutions to poverty (Hays 2003). These programs advocate for a “mothering via work” model by requiring welfare recipients—who are predominantly poor mothers—to work outside of the home for a designated number of hours per week, rather than spend time at home with their children (Chavkin
1999; Hays 2003; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). Additionally, public assistance policies no longer mandate that child care be offered to welfare workers, which may threaten child care arrangements that enable work outside of the home (National Governors’ Association Center for Best Practices 1999; Chavkin 1999). As such, welfare mothers must often draw on limited and unreliable social support networks in order to meet work requirements (Cook 2012).

The officials administering these policies are situated in a bureaucratic structure, in which they are often subject to depersonalized, isolating, and highly constrained regulations (Ferguson 1984; Swift 1995). Swift (1995:13) points out that “everyone involved in the planning and delivery of human services plays a role in maintaining the status quo, via such seemingly innocuous activities as file recording,” illustrating that even mundane day-to-day operations play a role in reproducing the power relations and ideologies embedded in bureaucratic structure (Ferguson 1984). As such, welfare officials may have minimal leniency in implementing policies, whether they are accommodating or punitive. While it is important to consider the organizational context of welfare officials, this does not dismiss the power relations between them and clients, who often depend on services for survival.

In this paper, I use interview data from welfare-to-work county program managers in Ohio to analyze how these managers use discursive strategies to talk about and evaluate the mothering of their clients. To do this, I use critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1985, 2010; Van Dijk, 1987, 1993) to illustrate how program managers manage the meaning of their speech in constructing the mothering of their clients. I find
that managers talk about the mothering of welfare mothers in terms of (1) child-centered mothering (2) the “culture” of poverty and (3) mothers (mis)managing child care. By making use of discourse strategies in their talk, program managers illustrate and draw attention to the differences in parenting between welfare mothers and middle class mothers.
LITERATURE REVIEW

*Intensive Mothering*

As the primary recipients of welfare benefits tend to be poor, single mothers of color, discourses surrounding welfare are also influenced by dominant ideologies about mothering. Mothering and motherhood are socially constructed phenomena that vary across time and place (Ferguson 2007; Hays 1996; Arendell 2000). Current constructions of motherhood in the US privilege intensive mothering, which is founded on middle class values and requires a child-centered and resource intensive approach to parenting (Arendell 1999; Hays 1996; Lareau 2003). *Good* mothers are expected to embrace intensive mothering, which holds that mothers should be self-sacrificing, prioritizing their children above all else and investing time, energy, and vast resources in order to facilitate the child being the best s/he can be (Arendell 1999; Buzzanell et al. 2007; Hays 1996). Thus, in order to be a *good* mother, a woman is expected not to act selfishly or prioritize her own wants and needs (Arendell 1999; Hays 1996). Hays (1996) argues that these expectations are internalized by mothers, regardless of class; yet mothers face differential opportunities and barriers in enacting this motherhood (Taylor 2011). Furthermore, Hays (1996) notes ideological buy-in, wherein mothers believe that child-rearing *should* be highly labor-intensive and time-consuming. Yet, constructions of ideal motherhood tend
to take on specific racial and class components. That is, while women across classes may embrace the ideology of intensive mothering, white middle class women are the most likely to be able to “successfully” enact intensive mothering (Hays 1996, Collins 2006; Johnston and Swanson 2003). While alternative mothering ideologies exist, none appears as influential and normative as that of intensive mothering. Studies involving mothers’ discourses suggest that women and mothers themselves invoke the logic of intensive mothering in their constructions of motherhood and justifications of the choices they make (Arendell 1999; Brown 2006; Buzzanell et al. 2007; Damaske 2013; Kirkman et al. 2001). Discourses of white mothers (Miller 2007), teenage mothers (Kirkman et al. 2001), middle class mothers of color (Buzzanell et al. 2007), and rural African American mothers (Brown 2006) alike draw on overlapping themes of intensive mothering, such as child-centered care, and the desire to be a good mother (Arendell 1999; Damaske 2013). Thus, we see that despite variations in motherhood and women’s involvement in their own discourses about motherhood, intensive mothering is a pervasive and normative ideology that underlies discourses of motherhood. Additionally, diverse forms of parenting are perceived as invisible, deviant, bad, and non-ideal because they vary from normative conceptions of what motherhood should look like (Arendell 1999; Collins 2006; Hays 1996).

The “Culture” of Poverty

The history of the “culture” of poverty literature is laden with ideologies of individualism, personal responsibility, and victim blame (Lewis 1959; Moynihan 1965; Ryan 1976). “Culture” of poverty arguments hold that certain values, attitudes, and life
styles are responsible for the creation and reproduction of poverty (Banfield 1970; Grusky 2007; Lewis 1959; Moynihan 1965; Ryan 1976). This argument, however, ignores the role of structural forces—such as joblessness, economic crises, and lack of resources—that contribute to inequality. Although this literature has experienced reform and scholars are re-examining the relationship between “culture” and poverty to include structure and remove “victim blaming” conceptions and language (Charles 2008; Harvey and Reed 1996; Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010), the general public tends to draw on these earlier conceptions of “culture” to account for poverty.

Conceiving of poverty in this way suggests that poor parents pass certain values, attitudes and lifestyles to their children that are incompatible with labor market success and therefore responsible for reproducing poverty (Lewis 1959; Moynihan 1965). Lareau (2003), for example, demonstrates how working class and poor parents invoke a “natural growth” model of parenting, wherein they teach their children behavioral constraint and autonomy in organizing and directing many of their own activities. While these values and behaviors have intrinsic value, they are often perceived as insufficient compared to those taught by middle class parents, as middle class values are often more intertwined in institutions such as work and school (Lareau 2003). Furthermore, describing poverty as an issue of deficiency of values suggests that poverty can be “fixed” if poor persons adopt middle class values. This is reflected in the 1996 welfare reform, which “asserted and enforced a newly reformulated vision of the appropriate values of work and family life” (Hays 2003:4). Being a good mother, then, involves passing middle class values, attitudes, and lifestyles to one’s children, which is intended to protect their social position
in the future (Crittenden 2001; Lareau 2003). The prescribed route to achieve the skills necessary for labor market success requires parents involving their children in various organized activities (Hays 1996; Lareau 2003; Vincent and Ball 2007). Yet, organized activities often place substantial burdens on parents in terms of both time and money (Hays 1996; Lareau 2003; Vincent and Ball 2007).

**Mother Blame**

Thoroughly interwoven in dominant ideologies of mothering are messages of mother blame. Mother blame suggests that mothers are solely responsible for their children’s care, behaviors, and outcomes (Arendell 1999; Bobel 2004; Ladd-Taylor 2004; Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan 2003; Vinovskis 1987). This practice ignores fathers, structural issues that affect mothering practices, and additional explanations for children’s outcomes. Mother blame is evident in many institutional expectations. For example, within the family mothers are expected to assume responsibility for caring for children and managing child care arrangements (Crittenden 2001; Hays 1996). Additionally, myths that maternal employment harms children simultaneously blame mothers and discourage them from workforce participation (Bengston et al. 2002). Schools also reinforce mother blame by expecting mothers to get involved with children’s projects and education (Arendell 1999). Given the prevalence of this maternal culpability, many women also internalize this blame and hold themselves responsible for many aspects of their children’s lives—even those outside of their control, such as health care issues (Jackson and Mannix 2004).
While women are expected to embody middle class mothering ideologies, society does not always provide sufficient support for them—especially socially and economically (Arendell 1999; Bobel 2004; Ladd-Taylor 2004; Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan 2003). Specifically, the centrality of resources involved in middle class parenting tends to preclude welfare mothers from enacting this type of parenting. As such, welfare mothers are often demonized and held responsible for their children’s life circumstances (Hays 2003). In order to live up to their responsibilities as mothers, working- and lower-class mothers are often expected to work in order to make ends meet for their children and to serve as a role model of how to work (Arendell 1999; Bloch and Taylor 2014; Kennelly 1999; Chavkin 1999; Taylor 2011).

In this paper, I focus on how welfare-to-work program managers in Ohio talk about the mothering of their clients. Program managers draw on intensive mothering, the “culture” of poverty, and mother blame to express expectations and evaluations of clients’ mothering practices. Thus, these literatures come together to inform conceptions of poor women’s mothering and its implications. As a dominant and pervasive ideology, intensive mothering acts as the standard against which the mothering of all women is measured. Further, program managers draw on the “culture” of poverty and mother blame to account for clients’ poverty and to hold clients personally responsible for the successes and failures of their children.
METHODS

The data I use in my analysis were collected by Tiffany Taylor and consist of 69 qualitative interviews with Ohio Works First program managers from 69 of the 88 counties in Ohio. Program managers have a range of responsibilities associated with the implementation of the Ohio Works First program. Many program managers were in charge of supervising caseworkers, played a role in managing the work experience program, verifying completion of program requirements, and making arrangements for supplemental services. Undergraduate and graduate research assistants conducted the interviews over the telephone and asked program managers a series of 48 questions pertaining to information about the program, opinions of how the program is running, opinions about clients, and demographic information. The questions were all open-ended (e.g. what are some of the challenges in helping people become self-sufficient?, what do you think is the most common reason that people do seek the OWF services?) and many questions involved probes to follow-up the main question (e.g. do you have any specific examples of clients who have been able to achieve self-efficiency? what kinds of things do they seem to do differently?). The interviews range from less than an hour to over two hours. All of the interviews were recorded, allowing the researchers to transcribe the data upon collection. The program managers interviewed were predominantly white (95%) females (75%) with a wide range of educational attainment (11% high school, 12.5% some college, 21% associate’s degree, 40% bachelor’s degree, and 15% graduate degree).
Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software program, was used to first open code, and then focus code the data. I split my coding into 3 phases. In the first phase of coding, I systematically read through the data, and used theoretical coding (Charmaz 2006) to code for semantic moves (Van Dijk 1987). This involved examining and taking detailed notes of how program managers made use of discourse strategies in their speech. I based the operationalization of the semantic moves on van Dijk (1987), in which he discusses the use of semantic moves in the context of racism. I adapt semantic moves from this perspective to look at how the managers use discourse to manage their prejudiced talk in general.

The semantic moves included in this analysis are contrasting, explanation and example, and generalization. While Van Dijk (1987) describes several more semantic moves, contrasting, examples and explanations, and generalizations were the most prominent and the most central to the ways in which program managers constructed their clients’ mothering. Contrasting refers to focusing on how two groups are different. Often, contrasts intend to highlight the positive attributes of one group, while highlighting negative attributes of another group. I combined explanation and example into a single semantic move. There is a lot of overlap in how these concepts are used, which is often as supporting evidence when speaking positively about oneself, or when speaking negatively about others. Generalizations were defined as statements involving assumptions made about a group based on the characteristics, attitudes, or behavior of some group members.
I initially coded the data for semantic moves for another project, which involved looking at how program managers used discourse strategies to make contrasts with clients (Turgeon et al. forthcoming). Although this past project was not specific to mothering, throughout the coding and analysis process, it became apparent that these discourse strategies were also prominent in the ways that program managers constructed the mothering of their clients. Additionally, adopting a critical discourse approach offers insight into how discourse acts as a site for the reproduction of inequality. This reproduction of inequality via discourse is especially relevant given the power relations between program managers and the welfare mothers who depend on the system.

In the second phase of coding, I flagged any speech pertaining to family, parenting, upbringing, etc. with the code “Family” in order to capture all aspects of discourse that pertained to family. To do this, I first used the search function in Atlas, searching for family-specific terms (i.e. mother, child, family, parent, etc.). Following this search, I systematically read through the data, capturing additional speech pertaining to family that may have been overlooked using the search function and taking notes on emerging themes in the ways program managers spoke about clients’ mothering. I used my notes from this systematic combing of the data in order to develop memos that spoke to the overarching mothering themes in the data. From these memos, I created a coding scheme, which initially involved four themes (later combined into three) in the way program managers construct the mothering of their clients: (1) desiring to improve for children (2) the importance of being able to afford children (3) the “culture” of poverty and (4) mothers (mis)managing child care.
In the third phase of coding, I created an output of the “Family” code, which captured all instances that I flagged during the second phase of coding. I then created codes for each of the four themes that emerged in the second phase of coding. I systematically read through the “Family” output and used axial coding (Charmaz 2006) to delineate the presence of these four themes in the data, while simultaneously transferring the semantic move codes into this output. In this part of the coding, then, I was implementing critical discourse analysis by breaking down the semantic moves (Van Dijk 1987) that managers use when talking about clients as mothers in order to show how managers construct the mothering of their clients. Throughout this analysis, I also expanded on my memos, incorporating the use of these discourse strategies into my themes pertaining to clients’ mothering. Ultimately, I found that the themes pertaining to “desiring to improve for children” and “the importance of being able to afford children” contained significant overlap and decided to combine them into the single theme of “child-centered mothering”.


FINDINGS

My findings suggest three themes in the way program managers talk about their clients’ mothering. The themes are (1) child-centered mothering (2) the “culture” of poverty and (3) mothers (mis)managing child care. These themes are all rooted in “mothering via work” in order to teach their children to value work and gain economic resources for their children. They represent a combination of evaluations of clients’ mothering and accommodations that the welfare program makes for parenting issues. Some of these accommodations seem to represent ways in which the state is providing supplemental parenting to clients’ children.

*Intensive, Child-Centered Parenting*

The first prominent theme in program managers’ construction of their clients’ motherhood is an expectation for them to enact the child-centered component of intensive mothering. Child-centered discourse involved mothers being able to afford a certain standard of life for children, mothers being motivated to improve their life circumstances on behalf of their children, and mothers wanting to invest significant time and resources in their children. As such, a child-centered model of parenting relies heavily on having/obtaining economic resources in order to provide for both the children’s needs and wants. Having these expectations for clients’ mothering often led program managers
to negative evaluations of the way many clients mother. In talking about child-centered parenting, they would contrast the mothering of clients to their own mothering, gives examples of both ways in which clients succeeded and failed to enact child-centered mothering, and make generalizations about what mothers wanted for their children.

The expectations of child-centered mothering often served as a lens through which program managers evaluated the mothering of their clients. In the following quote, a white, female program manager provides an example of a typical OWF client and contrasts the mothering of clients to that of non-client mothers by drawing on “common sense:”

“…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.” (P9 Q25)

The program manager contrasts welfare mothers and non-welfare mothers in regards to having children when they “can’t afford the ones that [they] have.” The program manager also suggests that “affording children” means more than just providing for the child’s needs, such as “afford[ing] to send them to school, college.” Thus, mothers are expected to strive to afford a certain standard of living for their children, which includes a college
education. And, mothers shouldn’t have more children if they are unable to afford to do things like send the ones they have to college.

As poor mothers, child-centered mothering often involves expectations about work as well. Program managers would draw on these expectations of poor mothers parenting via work in evaluating their clients’ motherhood. A Hispanic male program manager talks about how work ethic indicates that mothers are willing to do what it takes to provide for their children. He says:

“Well, you know, if they have a work ethic and they want to get out there and some people aren’t willing to take lower paying jobs. But if they have a good work ethic and they’re willing to take whatever job comes their way to help provide for their family, then they’ll take it. A lot… a lot of the clients don’t have that. A lot of participants don’t have that work ethic or that work attitude.” (P44 Q33)

This program manager contrasts clients who “have a work ethic and [ ] want to get out there” and those who “aren’t willing to take lower paying jobs” regarding doing what it takes in order “to help provide for their family.” The program manager also explains that mothers must be “willing to take whatever job comes their way,” thus obliging mothers to work in order to fulfill a child-centered model of mothering. The program manager further generalizes that “a lot of participants don’t have that work ethic or that work attitude” to do what it takes to provide for their families. Yet, the suggestion that mothers
should take low-paying jobs in order to provide for their families defies the reality that these low-paying jobs often do not pay enough to support a family, and leave families no better off than they were on public assistance.

Another way in which program managers talked about child-centered mothering, is by talking about how children motivate mothers to act for their sake. A white, female program manager when asked about why clients apply for OWF, responded:

“They um, they have, they just have nowhere else to go. They have no employment, they have no opportunity for employment, um, it’s, it’s just the basic need of caring for themselves and their children. So, one of the things that happens is people will do things for their children that they won’t do for themselves. You know, so if I can uh, help my kids, I’ll go there, I’ll fight for all these benefits and deal with those people, because I can’t make it on my own, I don’t have enough money to pay my rent, I don’t enough money to buy groceries. Um, so it comes out of need.” (P29 Q8).

In this quote, the program manager gives an example/explanation of how parents “will do things for their children that they won’t do for themselves.” Thus, the program manager gives mothers credit for being willing to “fight for all these benefits” in order to provide for their children. She acknowledges that applying for benefits in-and-of itself is a way of enacting child-centered parenting, since mothers are often applying in order to care for their children. One program manager (white, female) even criticized clients who didn’t
apply for OWF, suggesting that clients endanger their children by “jeopardize[ing] the roof over [their] kids’ head, or the heat when it’s 20 below zero” (P66 Q8). This was a unique quote, however, as this was not a common sentiment among managers.

Yet, often times, program managers would make child-centered mothering about more than just meeting children’s basic needs, as many program managers said that mothers should want more for their children and desire that their children live a certain type of life. A white female program manager said:

“…they’re satisfied with what they got, they don’t have the want of I want better clothes, I want a better car, I want my kids to have education, I want my kids to have better. They’re, they’re just, they’re, they’re okay with what they’ve got. And I’m not sure if that’s right or wrong. You know, we, we always strive to make it better for our kids, and make sure our children are educated, get a good job, but they, some of these people live the way they want to live and like I say, I’m sure that’s wrong, but that little bit of OWF they get doesn’t really a lot of times make or break them” (P37 Q7).

In this quote, the program manager makes generalizations about how clients are “satisfied with what they’ve got” and contrasts this with non-clients in terms of “striv[ing] to make it better for our kids, and make sure our children are educated, get a good job…”. Yet, there is also evidence that the program manager is trying to make sense of these differences in ideas about mothering without imposing judgment, since she says “I’m not
sure if that’s right or wrong.” While the program manager struggles to reconcile this, it kind of ignores that even if the mother did want more for her child, it may not be structurally attainable. Additionally, it imposes a certain ideology of mothering on clients that involves more middle-class expectations of what mothering should look like.

While this belief exists about welfare mothers enacting child-centered mothering, some program managers acknowledged that the jobs available are unable to reach the standards of mothering that it requires. A white, female program manager said:

“I don’t think that they’re stepping into quality employment. I don’t think that they’re stepping into jobs that allow them to support their family and have an improved quality of life.” (P65 Q24).

In this quote, the program manager explains that the jobs available don’t “allow them to support their family and have an improved quality of life.” This program manager acknowledges some of the structural issues involved with supporting a family and enacting a child-centered approach to mothering. The program manager also differentiates between supporting the family and having an improved quality of life.

The “Culture” of Poverty

The second theme pertains to the “culture” of poverty. Many program managers talked about how clients’ mothering style affects children’s opportunities and outcomes. This stems from believing that certain mothering styles facilitate the development of
values, attitudes, and lifestyles necessary to succeed and consequently improve children’s life chances; while other mothering styles fail to accomplish this and instead indoctrinate children into a “culture” of poverty. Poverty, then, is an outcome of poor mothering that can be transmitted from generation to generation, unless mothers teach and model the appropriate values, attitudes, and lifestyles for their children. As such, the mothers who have had predecessors on the welfare system are often referred to as “generational clients.” In discussing the mothering of their clients, program managers, then, would not only be criticizing the mothering of their clients, but also that of the mothers of their clients. Framing poverty as either perpetuated or overcome by mothering styles blames mothers for their children’s outcomes. In discussing how the mothering of their clients affects children’s outcomes, program managers offered examples of welfare mothers transmitting the “culture” of poverty to their children—or in a few cases examples of mothers acting as good role models and helping their children, generalizations about how welfare mothers mother, and contrasts between “generational” ways of mothering and “non-generational” ways of mothering.

Program managers would often express concern about mothers on public assistance failing to provide their children with the appropriate values, attitudes, and lifestyles to succeed and the potential consequences it might have on the children’s lives. One program manager, a white male, spoke to this sentiment, saying:

“I don’t know how parents explain to children-when they make their children go to school that parents don’t go to work. Um, I think when parents don’t work we
have children that don’t want to go to school. And then that becomes a problem. I just think that parents that don’t work outside the home that are able, should.” (P4 Q17)

In this quote, the program manager contrasts clients who work and clients who do not work in terms of their children “want[ing] to go to school.” The program manager uses an example of how children might react if their parents don’t work—by not wanting to go to school—in order to show how parents’ behavior can influence their children. This quote stresses the importance of parents making sure that they pass the appropriate values, attitudes, and lifestyles to their children by modeling valued behaviors and attitudes, such as work ethic. Yet, many clients are unable to work because of the lack of jobs due to the recession.

In some cases, the transmission of poverty was more than welfare mothers failing to teach their children certain values, attitudes, and lifestyles. Rather, it involved specifically teaching their children about applying for public assistance. In the following quote, a male program manager who declined to offer his race said:

“I had a client that came in and said I want to... she act like this was how she was showing the ropes. On how to, uh, how to make it in life. She was showing her pregnant daughter what to do, come on down here like, like this is a job, coming in to apply.” (P14 Q24)

The program manager generalizes that welfare mothers teach their children to apply for
assistance, thereby perpetuating poverty. He also gives an example of a mother teaching her daughter how to apply for public assistance by “showing [her] the ropes” and “showing her pregnant daughter what to do.” This example shows mothers on assistance actively encouraging their children to apply for assistance. Consequently, children are not only deprived of the values, attitudes, and lifestyles they need to succeed, but they are also being taught a lifestyle that serves to reproduce their social position.

Given this belief that poverty is a learned behavior or a deficiency of values, attitudes, and/or lifestyles, many program managers believed that it was too late for the current generation of clients and suggested that efforts to alleviate poverty should focus on the next generation by teaching children the skills and behaviors they need in order to rise out of poverty. A white, female program manager wrote an email to the researchers after the interview, saying:

“If we could start with the children, in the schools, encouraging them to stay in school, stay out of trouble, make good choices, give them good role models / mentors, and encourage them to set goals, perhaps this system could become what it was intended to be - assistance during a bad patch in someone's life instead of what it's become, 36 checks that make things a little easier… ”(P48 email)

In this quote, the program manager explains that assistance might be more effective if it “start[ed] with the children” and aimed to “encourage[ ] them to stay in school, stay out of trouble, give them good role models/mentors, and encourage them to set goals.” Thus,
according to the program manager, it is teaching children specific values, attitudes, and lifestyles and giving them role models to exemplify these skills that would help them succeed and rise out of poverty. It minimizes poverty to a set of unlearned skills and poor role models, rather than considering the structural problems. Further, it ignores the ways in which higher-class individuals often protect/safeguard values, attitudes, and lifestyles in order to preserve the existing social order.

The validity of these assumptions about the need for certain values, attitudes, and lifestyles to succeed was offered by examples from some of the program managers. In the following quote, a Hispanic female program manager gives an example of a mother successfully transmitting the “appropriate” values, attitudes, and lifestyles to her children.

“So she works full time, her kids have uh (pause) gone through school, um (pause) um, her uh, one son is uh, a recruiter for one of the big baseball, or bask..er, not basketball, football teams, and just was married to, his wife is a doctor, and uh, I mean, you see these big changes in her really motivating her kids” (P55 Q40)

This program manager uses an example to illustrate a mother acting as a good role model and how “you see these big changes in her really motivating her kids.” Thus, this example shows the importance of a mother being a good role model to the outcomes of her children. By doing so, it relies on mother blame. In this instance, the mother gets the credit for the positive outcomes of her children, but it holds her responsible nonetheless.
This overstates the mother’s role in the outcomes of her children and diminishes both the role of structure and her children’s own choices.

Mother Blame: Mothers (Mis)managing Child Care

The third theme that I found concerns the importance of mothers being able to manage child care arrangements. Mothers being able to effectively manage child care ties in with transmission of values, attitudes, and lifestyles via example, or being a role model. In order to be a good role model for their children, mothers need to work, but in order to work, mothers need to effectively manage child care arrangements for their children. In a lot of this talk, program managers mentioned the ways in which the welfare program makes accommodations to help mothers manage child care through things like providing day care or transportation to day care. Yet, this type of talk (involving accommodations) was typically devoid of discourse strategies. Program managers did make use of semantic moves to contrast mothers’ ability and willingness to manage their children’s child care, generalize about why mothers may or may not be able to manage their children, and offer examples and explanations to illustrate mothers succeeding or failing to manage their children.

While many program managers mentioned that child care is available through the county—or an outside agency that mothers can get referred to—their talk also involved describing how mothers were often reluctant to leave their children with these child care providers. In the following quote, a white, female program manager suggests an alteration to the welfare program intended to help mothers manage their children.
“Um, it would be, there’d be a day care that these people would trust their children with so that they can go to job, go to a job and not have to worry if something was wrong with their child or about leaving their child. Uh, that’s one of the complaints we usually get a lot of. They don’t want to leave their kids with anyone” (P6 Q42)

In this quote, the program manager explains how central having a trustworthy day care provider is in order for mothers to “go to a job and not have to worry if something was wrong with their child.” The program manager also generalizes that mothers receiving public assistance “don’t want to leave their kids with anyone.” Thus, it appears that while the program manager can identify with mothers’ concerns about child care providers, there is still some tension between the program trying to be accommodating by providing child care and mothers being resistant to these efforts to help them manage child care arrangements for their children.

In addition to offering day care, in some counties, program managers have some leeway in deciding whether or not to sanction, or take benefits away from, a client when they fail to fulfill the requirements of the program. Thus, in some cases, program managers spoke of their leniency and accommodation of child care interruptions. In the following quote, a white female program manager said:

“We had one that she didn’t go for two weeks. You know, we were thinking about sanctioning for next month, but she was new, new to the area, so we told her, hey, listen, we understand that you, you’re not familiar with our, our area, you have a
little child, you know, who wasn’t very old, you know, was crying a lot, she was upset. You know, start Monday, get there Monday, do your hours, and you know, we will not sanction you. You know she did? We never had another issue with that little girl” (P34 Q38).

In this quote, the program manager uses an example of how the program manager took into account that the mother was “not familiar with [the] area” and “ha[d] a little child, you know, who wasn’t very old, you know, was crying a lot” and decided to accommodate for the interruption in child care resulting from moving and the child being upset. In some cases, then, program managers were able to empathize and assist mothers in managing child care arrangements by providing them some leniency.

Yet, these accommodations were often juxtaposed with the conditions and latitude available in “real jobs,” which tend to be less flexible in accommodating child-related absences. A white, female program manager, when asked about the effectiveness of the program, responded:

“I’d say it’s not effective. Probably because it’s not realistic, I mean, you know, these things like the one client we have has 80 some hours that she’s suppose to do, or 30 some hours that she’s suppose to work each week and she’s worked two days out of the month because she’s taken her child to the doctor, she’s had all of these excuses. And if, you’re in the real world an employer can’t handle that. They can’t deal with that, you’re going to lose your job. But, because she’s OWF she provides us the doctor’s slips and we have to grant her good cause. And I
don’t think that’s teaching them anything. You know, they’re gonna go get a job and think they can do the same thing and it’s not going to work” (P23 Q39).

This program manager contrasts OWF and “real world” jobs in terms of accommodating child care. The program manager also gives an example of a mother who has “worked two days out of the month because she’s taken her child to the doctor, she’s had all of these excuses” to illustrate this difference in accommodation between OWF and “real world” jobs. Thus, in order for mothers to succeed in “real world” jobs, they need to be able to manage child care for their children more effectively. The program manager also generalizes that the mother uses taking her child to the doctor as an “excuse.” This implies that welfare mothers may be using difficulties in managing their children as a way to escape participation in the work requirements of the program.

Some program managers took some of the heat off of clients in regards to finding child care. A white, female program manager said:

“Um, so people seem to kind of think well how am I going to be able to manage that you know? I can’t get good day care, uh, you know, um, the counties are supposed to make that available but because of the funding cuts and child care levels, and finding local providers, that’s a big challenge right now. So uh, child care is still one of those issues. If we can’t provide child care access, you know, for the family they’re not required, I mean they have a loophole for not participating. But those are real challenges, you know, still for people” (P52 Q 7)
The program manager in this situation uses an example of a client who “can’t get a good day care” in the process of explaining that “if we can’t provide child care access, you know, for the family, they’re not required, I mean they have a loophole for not participating.” This county, then, took these structural factors, such as the availability and access to day care, into account when considering participation. By making some accommodations, the county helps mothers manage child care arrangements and puts less pressure on them to be able to manage children on their own.

While some program managers and agencies were more accommodating of clients, others saw child care as an issue that mothers need to learn to manage effectively. A white female program manager said: “…so it’s a multitude of things that they need to stabilize...child care, all those things, you know, have to come together in order for them to be able to get that point where they can become self-sufficient. They have to establish, you know, day care, transportation, and get all that under control, because it all kind of leads into each other.” (P47 Q6)

In this quote, the program manager explains that in order to “become self-sufficient” mothers “need to stabilize…child care.” Thus, rather than feel like the program should accommodate for interruptions with child care, some program managers felt that mothers should be able to “get all that under control” on their own. This mindset faults mothers’ for not being able to manage child care arrangements, rather than considering that they may not have support networks available that would be able to fill in at the drop of a hat to help manage the child care issue.
Program managers would also describe how child-management was especially a challenge for mothers who had multiple children. From this perspective, then, having more children makes it more difficult for mothers to manage children and consequently threatens her ability to work and rise out of poverty. A white, female program manager said:

“I believe in somewhat birth control, as long as you’re um, you know you’re struggling and you’re really, it’s really hard to make ends meet because, the ones that I think fail the most are the ones that have more kids. You know, the more kids they have, the deeper they get into it and um, the, you know the harder it is to work your way up” (P69 Q40)

In this quote, the program explains that “the ones that [ ] fail the most are the ones that have more kids” because “the deeper they get into it and um, the, you know the harder it is to work your way up.” According to the program manager, then, when mothers have more children it introduces further complications to managing child care arrangements for their children and makes it harder to rise out of poverty. This provides an argument for discouraging poor women from reproducing. It also re-emphasizes the program’s focus on efficiency and how children interfere with clients’ ability to work and meet participation rates. Finally, this mentality also blames mothers for having children and putting themselves in a position where it is harder to rise out of poverty. This blame is especially evident in the program managers’ inclusion of birth control in her response.
DISCUSSION

Program managers talk about clients’ mothering in terms of enacting child-centered parenting, the “culture” of poverty, and mothers (mis)managing child-care arrangements for their children. In this talk, the managers use discourse strategies to reinforce dominant mothering ideologies by contrasting clients’ mothering to intensive mothering (see Hays 1996), making generalizations about clients’ situations, and offering both examples of clients who reach the desired expectations and those who do not. While program managers provide some examples that portray clients in a positive light, these are used to glorify the “success” of enacting intensive mothering. As such, all of these discourse strategies play a role in reinforcing dominant ideas about mothering that privilege middle class women. This is consistent with Damaske (2013), who suggests that discourses surrounding mothering involve reference to dominant ideas about mothering. Overall, I find that program managers use discourse strategies and the standards of intensive mothering to evaluate welfare mothers in terms of child-centered parenting practices, the “culture” of poverty, and child care management.

Program managers often expressed expectations for welfare mothers to engage in child-centered mothering—one of the central components in intensive mothering (Hays 1996). Child-centered mothering is associated with the middle class and is therefore often perceived as more valuable than other mothering practices (Lareau 2003). Program
managers expressed expectations for clients to invest significant time and resources into improving the lives of their children. For instance, some program managers relayed expectations for mothers to afford a certain life for their children; often suggesting mothers need to “want more” for their children and be able to send them to college. Yet, poor mothers often lack the resources to be able to enact this type of mothering (Taylor 2011). Even so, a few program managers suggested that if mothers are unable to meet this criteria, they should not have children in the first place. Mandating that women meet certain financial criteria in order to reproduce calls mothers to account for decisions to have children, as well as birth control methods (Hays 2003). As such, it invokes mother blame, suggesting that poor women’s reproductive “choices,” which are often framed as “bad choices,” disqualify them from being able to engage in child-centered mothering (Collins 2006; Hays 2003; Ladd-Taylor 2001) and therefore harm their children’s life chances.

Program managers also suggested that welfare mothers facilitate the perpetuation of the “culture” of poverty (Banfield; Lewis 1959; Moynihan 1965) by failing to pass desired skills and values—those associated with the middle class—on to their children. In doing so, they tend to compare intensive mothering to the mothering enacted by poor mothers. While research shows poor mothers teach their children skills such as constraint, autonomy, and obedience, these skills are often less associated with labor market success and consequently considered less valuable (Lareau 2003). Thus, in order to be good role models for their children, welfare mothers are expected to embrace and embody neo-liberal ideals, which stress the importance of work ethic and personal decisions in
achieving labor market success (Baker 2010; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Yet, the jobs that poor mothers are forced into often require long hours and pay low-wages (Hays 2003). The 1996 welfare reform further reinforces “culture” of poverty logic, as it is embedded with the assumption that clients “do not share American values and are, in fact, responsible for undermining our nation’s moral principles” (Hays 2003:215).

In suggesting that children’s future success hinges on mothers teaching them the “appropriate” skills, program managers create a discourse centered on “blaming the victim,” a common criticism of “old wave” “culture” of poverty research (Charles 2008; Harvey and Reed 1996; Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010). In this case, “blaming the victim” overlaps with processes of mother blame, wherein mothers are responsible for the intergenerational reproduction of inequality (Arendell 1999; Bobel 2004; Ladd-Taylor 2004; Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan 2003; Vinovskis 1987). While there is some evidence that children learn from and model themselves after their parents (Bengston et al. 2002), program managers overlook structural aspects of poverty that have been incorporated into “new wave” “culture” of poverty research (Charles 2008; Harvey and Reed 1996; Massey and Denton 1993; Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010). Specifically, by suggesting that mothers alone are responsible for transmitting their social position to their children, program managers ignore the role of structural forces such as the economy (Henry and Reed 1996), segregation and neighborhood conditions (Massey and Denton 1993), and ideologies (Charles 2008) in the reproduction of inequality.

Program managers also use discourse strategies to talk about expectations for welfare mothers to manage child care arrangements. Being able to negotiate child care
arrangements is necessary in order for mothers to be able to “mother via work.”

Additionally, this comes back to mother blame, wherein mothers alone are held responsible for their children’s care, behavior, and outcomes (Arendell 1999; Bobel 2004; Crittenden 2001; Ladd-Taylor 2004; Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan 2003; Vinovskis 1987). Further, research shows that many women themselves perceive child care arrangements as an individual problem (Crittenden 2001). Additionally, Crittenden (2001) found that some women believe that if mothers cannot afford child care for their children, they should not have them. Some mothers rely on kin or neighbors for child care; yet these informal forms of child care are often considered unreliable and insufficient (Cook 2012).

Throughout their speech, program managers provided both inter-connected and contradictory expectations of their clients’ mothering. Program managers reflect inter-connected expectations for clients by expecting them to “mother via work” to be a good role model for their children and to be able to efficiently manage child care arrangements. These expectations are inter-connected because in order to work clients must first secure child care arrangements. Further, when mothers effectively manage child care arrangements, they are modeling this skill for their children. Another point at which program managers’ expectations are inter-connected across the themes relates to mother blame and holding mothers personally responsible for their children. Specifically, program managers blame mothers for making “choices” that prevent them from enacting child-centered parenting, for the intergenerational transmission of poverty, and failing to secure adequate child care for their children. Blaming mothers, however, ignore structural
constraints involving lack of available jobs (especially jobs that pay a living wage), transportation issues, difficulties finding and maintaining trustworthy child care and shortages of resources.

Yet, program managers also send contradictory messages about mothering. Welfare mothers are expected to simultaneously enact child-centered mothering and work. As previously iterated, the work available to poor mothers tends to be low-wage and require long hours. Consequently, work would mean spending a significant amount of time away from children, which is inconsistent with the mandates of child-centered parenting. Furthermore, program managers talk about the need for mothers to efficiently manage child care arrangements. Sometimes this speech involved criticisms of clients being too reluctant to leave their children at day care centers. Again, this conflicts with child-centered mothering, wherein mothers are expected to prioritize the needs and well-being of their children. Consequently, poor mothers face contradictory demands of their time, energy and resources, leaving them in a no-win predicament (Hays 1996; Taylor 2011).
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, welfare program managers express both inter-connected and contradictory expectations for welfare mothers to enact child-centered parenting, while effectively managing their children so that they can “mother via work” in order to be good role models for their children. Thus, poor women are additionally left to manage and prioritize contradictory messages regarding their mothering practices. Program managers also use discourse strategies in expressing these evaluations, through which they use contrasts, examples, and generalizations to illustrate and draw attention to the differences in parenting between welfare mothers and middle class mothers. As such, program managers draw on “classtalk” (Turgeon et al. forthcoming) to establish a “discourse of difference” (Wodak 1997), which can be used to justify and legitimate the existing social order and policies that are in place to help maintain it. These clients are often in a position where they depend on public assistance to survive, and are thus at the mercy of a system in which others, including program managers, have power over them. Yet, ultimately, the program managers are not to blame for the outcomes of poor women. Rather, the existence of negative stereotypes of welfare mothers and exclusive definitions of mothering are more indicative of structural problems. On the whole, the United States provides a hostile environment for poor mothers, who face a no-win predicament in balancing family and work and are held personally responsible for subjecting their children to a life of poverty.
While this analysis provides insight into how program managers draw on and reinforce dominant ideologies about mothering and use discourse as a site to maintain power relations, there are some limitations to this project. First, the program managers and client base in this research are primarily white women. While women are most likely the primary administrators and recipients of welfare benefits regardless of region; the racial composition of Ohio does not contain the racial diversity to consider race as a variable in how program managers talk about the mothering of their clients. A second limitation is that my findings are not generalizable to the population, since I use qualitative data in my analysis. Finally, while coding was conducted systematically and was guided by theory as well as emerging themes, the majority of the coding was not checked for inter-coder reliability. Future research could incorporate racial diversity and among both program managers and clients to examine whether variation in the race of program managers and/or the race of clients affects how program managers talk about the mothering of their clients. Additionally, future work could compare program managers and caseworkers to see if having more or less direct interaction with clients makes a difference in how they talk about and evaluate the mothering of their clients.
REFERENCES


Miller, Tina. 2007. “‘Is This What Motherhood is All About?’: Weaving Experiences and Discourse through Transition to First-Time Mothering.” *Gender & Society* 21(3):337-358.


Vincent, Carol and Stephen J. Ball. 2007. “‘Making Up’ the Middle-Class Child: Families, Activities, and Class Dispositions.” Sociology 41:1061-1077.
