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dissertation:

Complicated Lives:
Engendering Self-Sufficiency after
Welfare Reform in San Antonio, TX

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**Complicated Lives:
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by

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Dissertation

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Dedication

To my proud and loving parents.

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Complicated Lives:
Engendering Self-Sufficiency after
Welfare Reform in San Antonio, TX

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Supervisor: Martha Menchaca

This dissertation is an ethnography of U.S. women negotiating the shifting terrain of reforms to federal welfare policies. Chapter one reviews literature relevant to the dissertation themes. I discuss the work of anthropologists relevant to understanding U.S. welfare reform and gender, public policy and kinship, as well as the concepts of neoliberalism and neoconservatism which frame my analysis of the ethnographic material. In chapter two, I introduce a context for understanding everyday life in San Antonio for low-income women. After providing a brief

historical context for understanding the public housing and urban poverty in San Antonio, I parse out events and themes related to public housing that punctuate and constrain the lives women, including the disparities among different City neighborhoods and significance of public housing in women's lives. Chapter three critiques flexibility as a strategy to meet the requirements of welfare reform and attain economic self-sufficiency. I describe gendered and classed perspectives on the marriage promotion component of welfare reform and contextualize these programs with women's lives and relationship choices. In chapter four, I look at marriage and marriage promotion as a component of welfare reform. I review complications and obstacles that women associated with marriage, such as blended families, domestic violence, and barriers to continued public assistance. These factors all affect women's considerations about marriage as a timely and appropriate choice or a way to improve their social and economic situation. Chapter five explores child care dilemmas encountered by women receiving and leaving welfare for employment. While subsidized child care is an option for some women, the employment opportunities available to them require a high degree of individual flexibility are frequently inconsistent with the surprisingly inflexible available formal and informal child care arrangements. Without subsidies, women are often unable

to secure and maintain low-wage jobs that are available to them. I understand this predicament in the broader context of the gendered aspects of neoliberalism and welfare reform.

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Introduction

In 1996, reforms to federal welfare in the United States introduced several significant policy changes, including marriage promotion programs, time limits to cash welfare benefits and work requirements for welfare recipients, in order to reduce the number of women dependent on welfare. In February 2003, the hour requirements for work and work-related activities were increased for welfare recipients, mandating that recipients spend 40 hours a week engaging in work-related activity. As a state, Texas asserted itself as a leader in welfare reform in 1995 by preempting federal welfare reforms and implementing its own time limits to welfare benefits and work requirements for welfare recipients (Commission 2007). Since 1995, the number of welfare cases has fallen remarkably not just in Texas but also throughout the U.S. Advocates of reforms to welfare emphasize the decline in welfare roles and laud the triumph over intergenerational dependency on government handouts, while critics emphasize the increasingly exclusionary criteria for eligibility and limitations that low-income individuals face in attaining economic self-sufficiency in the local and global economy.

In this dissertation, I illustrate how changing welfare policies in the United States indicate much more than a movement to reduce individual dependency on governmental support; these policies also index shifting constructions in women's roles and definitions of work (Kingfisher 2001). While care work and domestic labor were initially recognized as socially valuable work and supported by welfare policies (Nelson 1984), proponents of U.S. welfare reform posit full employment as the key to personal responsibility and family self-sufficiency by prioritizing women's potential roles as wageworkers.

Implicit in these reforms to welfare policy is the anticipation that women will turn for assistance to marriage and the support of men instead of to the state. Despite this impetus, the number of families headed by women is increasing in the United States; approximately 10 million families are now mother-headed in contrast to 3 million in 1970 (Fields 2003), and at least 35 percent of these female-headed households exist at or below federal poverty thresholds (U.S. Bureau of Census 2004). Welfare reform presents specific challenges to low-income women; without adequate economic and social capital to supplement services and resources formerly sustained by welfare benefits and work, women and their families are now increasingly at risk for becoming more impoverished while relying solely on wages

earned from working. Additionally, as I explore in this dissertation, for women with young children to care for, securing reliable, affordable, and flexible child care is crucial to whether or not they may even earn income from working outside the home.

What is more, this ethnography on welfare reform indicates that child care responsibilities intersect and conflict with the emerging prioritization of women as workers, and child care concerns significantly influence the ways that women talk about their expectations of work and their perceived social networks. In the context of interviews, women repeatedly expressed the experience of "being all alone" with "no one to count on but me" for child care while they worked or looked for work. I suggest that these narrative expressions of self-reliance and self-sufficiency imply that when and if these women do receive help from family, friends, or neighbors, informal assistance does not completely replace formal benefits or services. Low-income and working-poor respondents identify the social networks available to them as unable to provide economic, emotional, or child care support because these networks are tenuous, already strained, or simply unavailable for reliable and sustained assistance. As Portes and Landolt, critics of neoliberal government policies, assert, "Contrary to the expectations of policy-makers, social capital is not

a substitute for the provision of credit, material infrastructure, and education" (2000).

However, despite the critiques of welfare reform and neoliberal politics, the population most affected by these policies must respond to the changes. Individual responses to collective concerns for meeting financial, emotional, and care needs for a family vary according to individual experiences and change across time. While some women embrace the prevailing sentiment that work represents economic independence and an opportunity to "do better" for one's self and family, other women resent and react against the valorization of "workfare" and express the futility of trying to function as a self-sustaining single parent and wage laborer while raising young children. Above all, child care is a prevailing concern among all working mothers and a factor that every parent must initially contend with before they can imagine themselves as workers. Careful consideration of these women's voices emphasizes the necessity for affordable, accessible, and flexible child care options for women who are able and willing to work, and, conversely, to the desires of some women to delay working until it is emotionally and economically feasible (Bruinsma 2006).

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of U.S. women negotiating the shifting terrain of reforms to federal

welfare policies. In particular, I concentrate on the implementation of federal policies such as the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reform Act (PRWORA) and Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) programs in the context of the everyday lives of individual women on welfare or transitioning from welfare to work in San Antonio, Texas. The purpose of this research is to better understand the intersections of economic class, gender and public policy in contemporary U.S. society. Because of the increasing privatization of federal welfare services, the uneven distribution and quality of public services at the state and local level, and the focus of welfare reform policy on individuals, it is essential to research these themes at a local and individual level.

I concentrate on how welfare reform shapes the everyday lives and future aspirations of low-income women in the U.S. and discuss how low-income women are faced with any array of complex choices as they attempt to meet the requirements of welfare-to-work policies alongside the daily material and social needs of their families. Access to affordable or subsidized child care, episodic relationship violence, and frequent residential moves emerge as defining features in each woman's transition from welfare to work, making self-sufficiency a difficult, if not impossible, undertaking. In addition to the role of welfare policy in women's lives, I

also consider how gender, neoliberal ideology, and the ideology of the American dream are at work in the narratives and everyday practices of individual women in San Antonio. Factors such as ethnicity, educational background, employment history, available resources, and personal beliefs intersect to engender diverse results for the same welfare reform policies. Drawing upon theories of flexibility, neoliberalism, and poverty, I discuss how some women negotiate the receding support of welfare and the demands of low-wage work while other women and their families end up in a more tenuous economic and social situation after welfare benefits subside.

METHODOLOGY

The fieldwork for this dissertation was generated from my experience as an ethnographer for the Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three City Study (WRAC) project. This project was designed in response to the 1996 federal welfare reform laws that signify an overall shift in U.S. social policy. Three geographically and demographically different cities (Chicago, Boston, and San Antonio) were selected for longitudinal study and survey (Winston 2002; Winston 1999); and from 2000-2003, I participated exclusively in the ethnographic study in San Antonio, TX.

Overview of WRAC

The ethnographic component of the WRAC project focused on collecting data about the daily lives of African-American, Latino, and non-Hispanic White welfare recipients and low-income families with at least one dependent child between two and four years of age. In San Antonio, between 1999 and 2003, approximately 65 female-headed families were recruited and interviewed on a monthly basis for 12-18 months by a team of WRAC ethnographers and subsequently for two six-month follow-up interviews (Winston 2002). Respondents were interviewed at their convenience in their homes, places of employment, at child care centers, and at other local establishments, and respondents were given in-kind gifts for their participation in the project.

While the objectives of the WRAC project focused on specific material and social features of welfare reform and generated a large body of qualitative and quantitative data about low-income families in the U.S., all the interviews were open-ended. As a whole, the WRAC project involved a battery of interview topics for discussion with each respondent throughout their participation in the study; however, the ethnographer and the respondent negotiated interview topics, often spontaneously, throughout each interview. Interviews were often focused on current events in the lives of respondents and their families, and the

formal objectives of the WRAC study were appropriately addressed as they pertained to life events and changes in respondents' lives.

Complicated Lives Fieldwork

The fieldwork for this dissertation was generated from bi-monthly open-ended interviews with low-income women in San Antonio, Texas from 2000-2003 as a part of the Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three City Study. While working as an ethnographer for the WRAC project in San Antonio, I interviewed 12 women bi-monthly yielding between 15 and 30 interviews with each respondent and contributed my findings to the WRAC study. All interviews were taped and transcribed by the ethnographer, and field notes and observations were recorded immediately after each interview. I received ongoing approval by the University of Texas IRB until the completion of this dissertation to allow for any continuing contact with respondents.

While I completed the research objectives of the WRAC project, I was also able to incorporate my personal research interests into the interviews and become more personally involved in the lives of the respondents and their families beyond the parameters of the WRAC objectives. In particular, I was interested the ways in which different women articulated their understandings of a similar experience of the overlap of care giving/family responsibility and work,

and future aspirations that women had for themselves and their children. I also looked for the kinds of social networks women had available to them and ways in which women were able to or unable to draw upon their networks to meet any needs (child care, employment, economic, food, etc.) once provided indefinitely by welfare.

It was important to keep in touch with women beyond the boundaries of the WRAC study, but because nearly all of the households lacked consistent telephone service, and because all of the women moved at least once, and sometimes two or three times, a year, I dropped by homes and neighborhoods semi-weekly or weekly to keep current. Sometimes these visits were brief or resulted in an exchange of notes tacked on front doors, but other times a stop by someone's apartment turned into an interview. These impromptu interviews often spilled over into trips to local grocery stores, child care centers, TWC (Texas Workforce Commission) and DHS (Department of Human Services) offices, and workplaces.

The interview data was completely transcribed into deidentified, targeted and verbatim transcriptions with corresponding sets of field notes and observations recorded. Additionally, some of the ethnographic material has been organized into timelines that track the major events, status of welfare participation, employment and educational

opportunities of each respondent. I use the longitudinal nature of the ethnographic data to develop intricate discussions of women's experiences within welfare reform.

Racial and Ethnic Identity

Throughout the course of the ethnographic research, respondents used a range of terms to describe themselves both racially and ethnically. I initially interviewed numerous respondents who identified as White, "just white," Polish, or Caucasian, influenced, no doubt, by my own identity as a White woman. However, by the conclusion of the project's interviewing phase, I had interviewed several other women who described themselves as Mexican, Mexican-American, Hispanic, Spanish, or "White and Mexican." San Antonio as a city has grown tremendously in recent decades and is now home to many different Spanish or Portuguese-speaking populations. No respondents used Latino or Latina as an identifying term, although this category is frequently used in literature and surveys detailing race and ethnicity in the U.S.

Overall, there was some ambivalence expressed by respondents about the identifying terms they chose to assert throughout their interviews. Race and ethnicity were often conflated, and some respondents chose to highlight either Whiteness or Mexican origin, or identify with both categories simultaneously at various points during the

interview process. This reflects not only the local context of San Antonio, which I discuss in Chapter three, but also the complexities surrounding race and ethnicity circulating at the national level¹.

Working from an understanding of race that is always relational to economic class, location, and history, Hartigan (1999) advances understandings of race as socially constructed by adding context to the question of how race may or may not be invoked in certain situations. While it is imperative to actively engage the concept of race in studies of public policy, in the analysis of my interviews and field notes, I will not utilize broad racial categories to explicitly compare material experiences and perspectives of low-income women and welfare reform. Instead, I will attend to race and ethnicity where it appears to take significance and call attention to the predicaments of socio-economic class positions where relevant as well.

To this perspective of race and class in U.S. society, I bring close attention to the way gender compounds struggle in everyday life for low-income women in San Antonio. While attending to the racial and ethnic, as well as economic class, distinctions women themselves assert, I will focus my

¹ The changes made between the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census index the ways that race and ethnicity are still somewhat tentative and emergent categories.

discussion more specifically on the experiences and narratives of particular women and attempt to draw out what these articulations and daily practices add to understandings of how the policies of welfare reform and discourses of personal responsibility affect differently positioned women in similar as well as disparate ways. Overall, this will emphasize how policy indexes the shifting cultural constructions of women's roles as they simultaneously vacillate between caregiver and waged worker in their own words and experiences as well as in political discourse.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In the chapters that follow, I present different facets of the challenges to self-sufficiency and limits to personal responsibility that low-income women must negotiate in their daily lives. Taken as a whole these chapters generate a representation of women's lives complicated by economic status, changing welfare reform policies, shifting family composition, and other personal calamities.

Chapter one reviews literature relevant to the dissertation themes. I discuss the work of anthropologists relevant to understanding U.S. welfare reform and gender, public policy and kinship, as well as the concepts of neoliberalism and neoconservatism which frame my analysis of the ethnographic material.

In chapter two, I introduce a context for understanding everyday life in San Antonio for low-income women. After providing a brief historical context for understanding public housing and urban poverty in San Antonio, I parse out events and themes related to public housing that punctuate and constrain the lives of women, including the disparities among different City neighborhoods and the significance of public housing in women's lives.

Chapter three critiques flexibility as a strategy to meet the requirements of welfare reform and attain economic self-sufficiency. I describe gendered and classed perspectives on the marriage promotion component of welfare reform and contextualize these programs with women's lives and relationship choices.

In chapter four, I look at marriage and marriage promotion as a component of welfare reform. I review complications and obstacles that women associated with marriage, such as blended families, domestic violence, and barriers to continued public assistance. These factors all affect women's considerations about marriage as a timely and appropriate choice or a way to improve their social and economic situation.

Chapter five explores child care dilemmas encountered by women receiving and leaving welfare for employment. While subsidized child care is an option for some women, the

employment opportunities available to them require a high degree of individual flexibility which are frequently inconsistent with the surprisingly inflexible available formal and informal child care arrangements. Without child care subsidies, women are often unable to secure and maintain low-wage jobs that would otherwise be available to them. I understand this predicament in the broader context of the gendered aspects of neoliberalism and welfare reform.

Finally, I present concluding thoughts and discuss this project's implications for future applied anthropological research and welfare reform policy.

Chapter One

Literature Review

In the following chapter, I present an overview of welfare policy, shifting conceptions of gender and families, and finally, neoliberal thought, which frames my analysis of ethnographic material in the subsequent chapters.

WELFARE REFORM AND WOMEN

Changes in welfare policies indicate shifting conceptions of women's roles in families and employment. Dominant perceptions of poor women's responsibilities have shifted from caregivers entitled to financial assistance to roles that now prioritize work over motherhood and increasingly cast low-income women as undeserving recipients of public services and financial support. When these conceptions are complicated with racial and ethnic differences, women are pathologized as permanent social and economic burdens on the state. To break this cycle of dependency, conventional poverty knowledge (Goode 2001) maintains that employment is the solution to poverty and welfare reforms continue to focus on reforming individuals rather than social, economic, or institutional structures; as such, recent welfare reforms are a particular response to

the welfare population itself which index social perceptions of poverty, motherhood, and wage-work.

The role of women as mothers and caregivers was initially supported by welfare policies. Prior to 1960, states supported women through pensions and social welfare programs to maintain traditional family structures and allow mothers to care for dependents at home, instead of placing children of the poor in state custody. During the Great Depression, the federal government assumed more responsibility in maintaining families and provided income support through the Social Security Act (1935).² These forms of assistance still maintained traditional male/female roles, supporting women as caregivers only in the absence of male earners. The Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) Act reinforced this trend and the state assumed a more permanent role in the maintenance of U.S. families.

However, conservative citizens and politicians subsequently critiqued ADC, and its later incarnation, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), for creating the generational 'welfare mother.' Welfare policies were again revised in the 1960s, and rather than focusing on barriers to employment, including the policy itself, public

² However, many groups were excluded from receiving welfare benefits. Farm workers and domestic workers, and laborers who did not pay taxes, were originally left out of welfare policies (Nelson 1984).

criticisms focused on women themselves. The increasing number of female-headed households, especially those headed by ethnic minorities, and extra-marital births exacerbated criticisms of welfare recipients.

The program, according to the conservative narrative, had somehow backfired, and instead of preserving traditional families, public assistance contributed to the demise of poor and low-income families. Poor women were increasingly demonized and represented as undeserving recipients of public assistance.

Services and incentives to work were introduced in the 1960s, but contradictory policies implied that there was still a great deal of ambivalence about women's changing roles as mothers and workers. Survey results from 1967 and 1969 indicated that Americans increasingly viewed poverty as an individual fault and asserted that welfare benefits were too generous (Abramovitz 1996 (1988)). Amendments and revisions to AFDC policies encouraged states to decrease welfare roles. In the 1970s and 1980s, conservative 'family values' campaigns attacked welfare policies for contributing to the decreasing marriage rates and two-parent families in the U.S., while at the same time, single mothers were critiqued for being unemployed.

Changing welfare policies also index social perceptions of work. State policies initially appeared to recognize

motherhood and domestic responsibilities as socially valuable work that should be compensated with financial assistance (Morgen 1990). However, this concept of work gradually shifted by the 1960s (Nelson 1984), and poor women were increasingly expected to work for wages outside the home while simultaneously maintaining domestic responsibilities. Wage-work was prioritized over the social reproductive roles that women fulfilled. Implicit in this welfare reform was the anticipation that women would turn to marriage and the wages of a male breadwinner instead of public assistance, or reduce the number of young children they chose to have.

In one of the initial totalizing feminist critiques of U.S. welfare policies, Abramovitz highlights the fact that welfare policy historically functioned as a reinforcing mechanism for the subordination of women by emphasizing the familial roles and responsibilities of women and economic dependence on men (Abramovitz 1996 (1988)). In the later decades of the 20th century, however, roles for women expanded beyond the home and into the labor market, and now the social and economic benefits of what Abramovitz terms "the Supermom" - a woman of any ethnic or class background that manages work, family, and marriage - is extolled as an appropriate role model for children and other women.

Contemporary popular wisdom about welfare and welfare recipients, and voices that contribute to policy, originate from the perspective of White, middle-class Americans. Poor people are constructed by the media as an 'urban underclass' that have somehow failed to achieve material success (Churchill 1995). Hochschild analyzes dominant discourses about personal success in the U.S. Her work reinforces the prevailing sentiment that individual Americans, regardless of gender, race, or class, are in control of their financial situations. She argues that remnants of the 'culture of poverty' model introduced by Lewis more than 40 years ago still influence perceptions of poverty in the U.S. Many middle-class Americans are descendents of immigrants and subscribe to the 'bootstrap' allegory of work and perseverance. Hochschild presents different aspects of 'the American dream,' all of which pertain to attaining economic and social success through hard work, education, and perseverance (1995). According to this argument, White, middle-class Americans are the barometer for success in the U.S., and White Americans in positions of power increasingly assert that racial and ethnic minorities, as well as more women, are realizing the American dream, while quantitative data indicates the opposite is occurring (Newman 1988; Newman 1993).

While welfare policies are presented as neutral and objective, they are partial and invested in the interests of the dominant social group. In this respect, welfare reform represents a particular interpretation of women's needs and social roles, and this interpretation is intertwined with the changing needs of the labor market and dominant views of the family (Fraser 1989). Current welfare reforms should be interpreted in relation to the rise of neoliberalism as a cultural system guiding social and economic practices (Kingfisher 2001). Characteristics of neoliberal governance include the valorization of economically independent individuals, the deregulation of wages, and the downsizing and privatization of the welfare state (Bourdieu 2002; Cleaver 1997).

Recently, the most significant reform to welfare, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), targets individual women and attempts to transform them into economically self-sufficient people through work. Because domestic work is not considered to be work in a policy setting, it (and any supportive services like child care) is gradually erased from discussions of poverty and self-sufficiency. Motherhood is now reserved as a privilege, not a right, for women who can afford not to work or who can afford desirable child care arrangements. This trend indicates changing constructions of motherhood

and who is allowed to mother, reinforcing the patriarchal nuclear family model.

The rise of neoliberal policies and discourses disrupts previous traditional gender roles and shatters any remains of the public/private spheres for men and women. While this may initially appear as an emancipating force from constraining and subordinating gender roles, prioritizing wage-labor further disenfranchises women by doubling their required workloads inside and outside the family. The costs of economic self-sufficiency are quite high for poor women, despite dominant perspectives that insist that a solid work ethic can ensure that any individual will succeed.

Social constructions of gender and ethnicity are articulated, negotiated, and shaped through state policies and implementation of welfare programs. All are held to expectations of self-sufficiency through wage-work, but this belief does not take into account different experiences of ethnic minority women in the job market. Surveys of employment among women indicate that wages for black women decrease while wages of White women increase or remain the same (Okongwu 2000). Welfare policies clearly affect different populations more adversely than others and it is crucial to include these analyses into revisions of welfare policies.

WELFARE REFORM AND U.S. FAMILIES

Families in poverty have concerned social scientists for decades. Ethnographic representations of poor and low-income families have emphasized differences in kinship and work experiences. Many of these analyses emphasize a strong desire to work among all poor women, and highlight the different tactics they use to meet work and family responsibilities (Churchill 1995; Edin 1997; Keefe 1989; Segura 1994; Zavella 1984). However, while welfare reform attempts to reduce reliance on financial assistance while gradually reducing support services, the need for these services persists. The idea that families will turn to kin and social networks to supplement services that were supplied by the state is implicit in welfare reform policies. While many families do successfully engage their social networks for support, their networks may become strained and disappear as female friends, relatives, and neighbors must work for wages as well (Newman 1999). What is more, these exchanges are often financially and emotionally costly for women who view welfare benefits as an important tool to retain some degree of financial and emotional independence. In this way, welfare reform may erode any existing forms of empowerment for poor and minority women if access to affordable housing and all financial assistance is withdrawn (Piven in (Gordon 1990; Morgen 1990)).

The most significant feature about welfare reforms since 1960 is that policy changes are increasingly targeting recipients themselves as sites for reform, instead of seeking to alter social and economic factors that cause economic disparities. Emphasizing personal responsibility shifts the focus of poverty away from larger, structural problems, such as racial and ethnic discrimination, lack of equal access to meaningful education, or low wage-rates, that are more difficult to tackle. Directing women toward low-wage work resonates with public sentiments that poverty can be alleviated through employment, but it neglects the fact that many women and families remain poor while working. However, poverty knowledge and empirical data that demonstrated this reality were ignored by policy makers, and in this respect, welfare reform indexes the triumph of politics and middle-class interests over the materiality of U.S. poverty (O'Conner 2001).

Discourses of race, class, and gender are central to the formation of social policies. During the past 50 years, welfare reforms have shifted to reflect changing public values of marriage, motherhood, work, and race and ethnicity. During the second half of the twentieth century, definitions of "deserving" welfare recipients became more exclusive as people increasingly associated single-motherhood, female-headed households, and unemployment with

the demise of traditional, patriarchal families. Welfare policies initially sanctioned women's roles as mothers and caregivers and then gradually withdrew from this position as criticism of welfare increased. Wage-work is now the expected norm for poor women as personal responsibility is prioritized by the most recent welfare reforms.

The preservation of nuclear families as the ideal family and household structure is still a important for Americans, as evidenced by support for policies that offer incentives for marriage or abstinence among welfare recipients. Above all, welfare reforms indicate a decline in public and governmental responsibility for poverty, despite the fact that poor women rely upon and expect the state to support them with services even after they are employed. Hochschild (1995) asserts that government policies are the only way to ensure that everyone has equal opportunities to succeed economically in the U.S. If this were ever true, the chances of success for poor families are now dwindling along with the downsizing of the welfare state.

As mentioned earlier, the state encourages marriage among low-income families as a provision for economic and social stability. The incentives to marry, or at least include a male partner in their household to ease the financial or child care burden, did not go unnoticed by women I interviewed. While several women were single when I

met them and remained single throughout my fieldwork, several women incorporated men into their families in a variety of ways and for varying lengths of time, although no one married during my study. Overall, despite the social, economic and political pressures to partner with men and form nuclear families, the social and economic costs for collaborating with men were high for these women. Domestic violence also emerged as a common experience among women I interviewed, and despite a cultural and emotional investment in partnership and marriage, all women articulated a preference for self-sufficiency until they found a suitable partner.

Anthropological Constructions of the Family

From Morgan's consanguineous relationships to Schneider's symbolic systems of 'diffuse, enduring solidarity,' kinship remains a controversial subject to which anthropologists have integrated gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and emergent reproductive technologies as sites of analyses, and these perspectives have influenced popular and academic discourses on the family. No longer taken-for-granted as a natural social function, kinship is a complex, flexible social construct that allows social ties to be mobilized and dissolved for particular purposes at different times. A particular configuration of the family as

nuclear, patriarchal, and ethnically unmarked was positioned at the center of most analyses of kinship in the U.S., and anthropologists have increasingly had to alter their perspectives of kinship to recognize alternative arrangements of female-headed and extended-kin families as legitimate.

Early anthropological texts on the family were influenced by Engels' work on private property. Engels linked the emergence of the patriarchal family unit with the advent of private property. The transfer of property relied upon the undisputed paternity of children, restricting women and men to monogamous relationships. He radically refuted the family as a natural development and asserted that contemporary Western families are rooted in the subordination of women based upon their reproductive roles. Women were linked to the domestic sphere because of their association with reproductive labor, and according to Engels, transferring the means of production into common property was the only way to dissolve the individual family and liberate women from the responsibilities of biological reproduction and domestic labor (1972 (1891)). Feminists subsequently mobilized this notion of the patriarchal family as a site for the subordination of women to undermine constructions of gender as natural and neutral.

Despite Engels' work on the family and private property, Malinowski's forewarning that kinship arrangements are adversely influenced by the imposition of western notions of 'the family' to all societies, subsequent analyses of kinship were rooted in gendered assumptions of male and female roles (Malinowski 1913). Biological reproductive ability was continually utilized to naturalize women's roles as caregivers and domestic laborers, and assumptions of male-centered nuclear families in the U.S. constrained the recognition and legitimation of alternative kin arrangements. Schneider (Collier 1987) maintained this point and cautioned against interpreting symbols and patterns of kinship through a Eurocentric lens, and his critique of kinship signified a turning point in kinship studies.

However, Schneider's work on kinship and class in the U.S. confirmed that the ideals of American kinship are oriented toward middle-class, Anglo, nuclear families. Biological relationships and sexual relations provide the material for the construction of the symbols that define social relationships in the U.S. (Schneider 1973). Class differences in Schneider's analysis were variations from the 'normative' organization of sex-roles; hence, family roles are described as a composite of sexual and social relationships. Schneider noted that ethnic identification

and diverse kin relations signified differences between middle-class and lower-class families. Middle-class patterns of kinship were confined to closed nuclear families, and individual families functioned as self-sufficient units. Families that deviated from middle-class norms were perceived as lower class. Analyses that followed Lewis' "culture of poverty" theory affirmed Schneider's point, and further pathologized poor families as abnormal. Anthropologists wrote against "culture of poverty" narratives to counter stereotypes of poor or ethnically and racially-othered families as deficient (Leacock 1971; Valentine 1971).

Stack highlights the significance of bonds between women and other female kin within and beyond the nuclear family. Households are formed from a "pool" of kin, disrupting perceptions of functional families as closed nuclear units (Churchill 1995). Her analysis illustrates that while an ideology of male-dominance and male-centered households may continue to inform constructions of families, in reality, female-headed households are constructed out of preference and necessity. Stack's analysis anticipated Ortner's revision of her nature/culture and private/public dichotomies explaining universal sexual asymmetry in which she maintained her universal claim but added that the hegemony of patriarchal societies is never complete or even

and women may construct situations that disrupt male dominance (Ortner 1996).

The division between public and private spheres draws upon seminal structural-functionalist's analysis of kinship and attempts to locate the universal subordination of women in division of women's responsibilities to the family and men's participation in public sphere of paid labor and public relations (Collier 1987). While acknowledging that there may be variations to the degree to which this opposition would be realized in different societies, the public/private dichotomy posited by Rosaldo (1974) resonated with Engels' claims. Rosaldo's aim at developing a schema to understand why women were universally associated with the domestic sphere addressed economic factors as well as biological differences between men and women, but the dichotomy still turned to biology to explain sexual asymmetry, reinforcing and legitimating the association between reproductive and domestic labor.

Anthropologists working to move beyond binaries of domination and subordination subsequently critiqued analyses of sexual asymmetry and kin roles that subscribed to the public/private dichotomy (Stack 1974; Zavella 1997). Feminists who highlighted class, race, and ethnic differences deconstructed the sharp division between male roles as wage-laborers and women's roles as mothers and

domestic laborers. They argued that this dichotomy also privileged Eurocentric and middle-class family structures and neglected the complex and overlapping roles of poor women who negotiated roles as domestic workers and wage-laborers.

Of pivotal significance to this anthropological critique was the research of Glenn (Glenn 1985), a historian who offered interjected race with theories of the public/private dichotomy. Glenn reviewed racial and ethnic women's labor from the nineteenth century through the 21st century, arguing that capitalism and patriarchy idealized gender roles and created the public/private divide. She asserted that as soon as the patriarchy and capitalism converged, it was immediately impossible for all families to maintain the public/private gender division of labor as wage-labor did not afford all men to maintain the family without the supplemental wage-labor of women. Glenn asserts that Anglo and ethnic minority women were drawn into the workforce as early as the late nineteenth century in the U.S. as unskilled or semi-skilled laborers (1985).

Anthropological analyses of contemporary dual-earner families supported Glenn's point that men and women both struggled to meet social expectations of the self-sufficient nuclear family. While the income generated from two working parents relieves economic stress and provides women with an

alternative to domestic labor, working women were not relegated from domestic responsibilities, and lower-income women frequently experienced significantly longer work-weeks than men as they tried to fulfill social expectations of both mothers and workers (Hartmann 1987). What is more, working women were also cast in opposition to ideals of the 'typical' American family, and shifts in family organization have historically generated anxiety about the stability of American families (Lein 1984).

Additionally, while women of all social and economic groups increasingly participate in wage-labor, the number of female-headed households in the U.S. is also rising. Of these families, an increasing number are low-income households. Historically, women have earned less from wage-work than men and women that are also head-of-household must provide most or all support for dependents on their limited earnings. These factors contribute to the 'feminization of poverty,' the theory that acknowledges that women have historically experienced more poverty than men, and still higher rates of poverty among ethnic minorities and female-headed families.

Families as "Other"

Despite the dwindling number of families that actually meet the criteria of "normal," female-headed households are continually positioned as the "other" in relation to the

nuclear, patriarchal middle-class family. While women's experiences of poverty vary by family and ethnicity, poor women are increasingly subjected to policies designed for male-headed nuclear families (Gordon 1990). Thus, policies designed to assist families operate from the assumption that the primary cause of poverty is male joblessness, not wage rates or unrealistic expectations for single-earner families.

Women heads-of-household are also perceived differently according to their ethnicity or economic status. While Anglo middle-class female-headed households may be attributed to the rise of feminism or growing workforce participation, lower-income or ethnic minority women may be critiqued as promiscuous or contributing to the decline of U.S. families (Mullings 2001).

What is more, Segura (1994) added that women might have diverse attitudes toward work and family that vary within ethnic populations. She notes that U.S.-born Mexican women express greater ambivalence toward working and identify with dominant ideals of prioritizing women's domestic roles while Mexican women living in the U.S. do not see work and family as conflicting spheres. However, poor or working-poor female-heads-of household of all ethnicities are increasingly penalized by changing welfare policies for their economic hardship and choice to remain unmarried.

Recent ethnographic studies of Mexican-American families in the Southwest have drawn attention to kinship variations between families, asserting the different factors that call for the mobilization of kin networks. Kinship is salient to understanding why women choose to, or not to, work. Mexican-American families are presented as extended and stable networks that support women's choices to work (Keefe 1977; Lamphere 1993; Zavella 1984). However, emotional or financial support is often part of complicated networks of kin exchange. Stack (1974) describes a system of 'organized delayed exchanges' linking people and households together. Since support must be given as well as received, gifts of time or money from kin are often quite costly to women (Eden and Lein 1997). Moreover, Segura (1994) cautioned that focusing on social and kin networks and women's ability to work neglects structural barriers to participation in the workforce, such as low-wage rates, increasing child care costs, or access to education.

As Franklin noted, anthropologists have shifted interpretations of kinship, framing it as more than a functional system to order genealogical relations (2001). Kinship as a social construct is created and mobilized to incorporate and exclude individuals and groups. Social constructions of gender, ethnicity, and economic difference structure the organization and representations of families

in contemporary social analyses. Analyses of kinship in the U.S. must continue to challenge conservative ideals of the nuclear family constructed from a middle-class perspective and question how social constructions of gender, race, ethnicity, and class influence kin networks and women's roles.

However, studies of kinship that include families outside the Anglo, middle-class ideal must do more than present these families as different or anomalous to the norm. Analyses of lower-income African-American and Mexican-American families tend to essentialize their kin networks as extended, harmonious, and racially and ethnically homogenous. Presenting more complicated representations of American families is crucial to avoiding further denigration of families engaged in diverse strategies and attempts at realizing family self-sufficiency and stability.

Concentrating on case studies of women negotiating their emerging roles as workers and mothers in San Antonio, I attempt to describe how some low-income women contend with their responsibilities as caregivers alongside welfare reform and the subsequent prioritization of poor women as potential wage laborers. These experiences, as related to me in consecutive monthly interviews between 1999 and 2002¹, represent the arduous attempts and frustrating setbacks of women who are negotiating their roles as mothers and

wageworkers. While the situation of every family connotes a distinct experience with welfare reform, this longitudinal fieldwork in San Antonio suggests that long-term employment is contingent upon many factors that sometimes overwhelm the social and economic resources available to a family.

Gender, family, and work materialized as central threads throughout my interviews and observations with women transitioning from welfare to work in San Antonio. Because I exclusively interviewed women with pre-school-aged children, it was not surprising that child care arrangements also emerged as a common and defining feature in women's daily experiences with meeting the requirements of welfare reform and work. However, the frequency of daily difficulties with child care arrangements related to a myriad of factors, including incompatible work hours and child care center hours, domestic violence, transportation, lack of affordable child care or subsidies for child care, and a scarcity of social networks available for child care, was unexpected. Welfare reform places women in a marginal social and economical position from which they define what it means to be a "good mother," and at different points during my fieldwork all women articulated the experience of feeling forced to choose between working or providing child care for their own children.

Furthermore, dominant ideas about what constitutes work have shifted over the course of the last six decades. Work is now almost exclusively limited to activity that returns a wage, rather than necessary activities that go unpaid, such as most domestic labor. Within the context of welfare reform, this affects adults with dependents in particular ways since the value of an individual is not placed on their economic productivity rather than on essential social labor such as the organization of care work.

Flexibility

The concept of flexibility is implicitly present in discussions of neoliberalism and welfare reform policy. It is simultaneously a concept and also a tactic essential to survival and achievement in late capitalist societies. Harvey describes the concept of flexible accumulation as the fundamental shift in economic and social organization that materialized in postmodernism. This shift is evidenced by rapid change, continuous alternation in patterns of consumption, and constant movement of capital across the globe which stands in contrast to the rigidity characteristic of Fordism (Harvey 1990). Likewise, Martin elaborates on the theory of flexible accumulation and describes how contemporary corporations and organizations must now practice flexibility in order to meet the needs of consumers and stock holders. Martin extends this notion of

flexibility to the individuals who work for these organizations.

De Certeau is also helpful to understanding how flexibility can now be understood as a strategy used by individuals as he discerns that a tactic is "a calculus which cannot count on a proper, nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality." And disenfranchised individuals, being unable to fully control the structures around them, use tactical maneuvers and "must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities" (Certeau 1984).

As neoliberal policy increasingly shifts responsibility from government agencies to individuals and families, and as policies are continually revised and reformed, individuals are also compelled to change and adjust to economic and policy transformations such as welfare reform.

The American Dream

This dissertation closely connects my observations of daily events, practices, and narratives with themes of local and global significance. The context of this research is oriented toward the materiality of welfare reform policies and their daily impact on women in San Antonio; however, I choose to call upon the narratives of women I interviewed not simply to add to existing accounts of the daily hardships of poor women in the U.S. but more so to enhance

an understanding about how these women maneuver through complex welfare policies and daily struggles with the social and economic resources available to them. Part of this maneuvering includes an understanding of their current circumstances and aspirations for a different future and their shifting relationships with the American dream.

In addition to understanding the material hardships, low-income women in the U.S. are living with the social effects of welfare reform. Several major changes were introduced by the 1996 welfare legislation including: conditional availability of cash assistance (as opposed to entitlement), promotion of rapid entry into the labor market ("work first", instead of focus on education), increased emphasis on services that support work, and the limited expansion of services for non-working TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) recipients. What is more, these federal reforms occur within the devolution of federal responsibility that shifts the bulk of responsibility about the resource allocation to individual states and charitable organizations. This shift generates an uneven national terrain of liberal and conservative welfare states.

Receding welfare support is a change that dramatically shifts the nature of women's relationships with the federal government, the labor market, caseworkers, their families, and finally with their own aspirations for the future.

Whereas welfare was usually a last resort for most impoverished families in past decades, that safety net has been unraveled in an attempt to curtail generational participation and to promote economic self-sufficiency among U.S. families.

I reflect upon my interviews with women in San Antonio, Texas to directly engage with this theoretical and ethnographic work on welfare reform, the American dream, and women in the U.S. One of the main objectives of this dissertation is to focus on this period of political and social transition and to closely engage with welfare reform policies and the ideology of the American dream. During my fieldwork, some respondents expressed emotional distress and even depression as they shouldered the weight of expectations from their families, employers, caseworkers, and, implicitly, from their own relationship to the American dream. This research examines these women's narratives of a sign of the risks involved with trying to access the American dream from the social, economic and political margins of U.S. society.

Jennifer Hochschild (1995) defines the dream as the reasonable expectation of increasing economic prosperity throughout one's lifetimeⁱ. Part of the dream is the belief that all individuals, regardless of class or ethnic background, may participate in the dream and also have a

reasonable anticipation of succeeding through hard work and perseverance (Hochschild 1995). The counterpart of the dream ideology is that people who are unsuccessful have failed due to their own shortcomings or unfortunate decisions. In this sense, people fail to realize their American dream because they do not manage their own risks efficiently.

The American dream is also invoked more abstractly by Kathleen Stewart (1990) to engage with the relationship between individual and cultural desires for prosperity and the traumatic negation of these desires in poverty and marginality. This theoretical orientation opens up a productive space for understanding the American dream as a dynamic concept that is constantly challenged and recharged by different perspectives of poverty and wealth. Following from my ethnographic fieldwork, I closely examine the narratives and experiences of women who supposedly occupy the space of negation, marginality and trauma that exists in relation to the American dream. While the materiality of their situations could position the American dream as an unattainable desire for low-income women, many still maintain a relationship with the dream through their expectations of future jobs, homes, and the accomplishments of their children. I focus on the points where women invest (implicitly and explicitly) in the ideology of the American dream and welfare reform policies as well as instances where

they express ambivalence or disillusionment. The longitudinal aspect of the WRAC project and of my contact with the same core of respondents facilitates an analysis that tracks changes in the perspectives of women over the course of several years.

Drawing upon the ideology of the American dream, I outline a cultural context for welfare reform policy as well as for women's narratives of their own aspirations and apprehensions about the future of their own lives and of their families. I maintain that the American dream is threaded through the narratives and inform the choices which low-income women make. Similarly, they interpret the work requirements and time limits, are now components of welfare reform, as part of the path to economic and social success. However, welfare reform mandates impose an accelerated structure to economic self-sufficiency progress that some women resist and resent.

NEOLIBERALISM AND NEOCONSERVATIVISM

Personal responsibility and family self-sufficiency remain key discourses in welfare reform policies initiated in 1996 and also feature prominently in discussions of neoliberal politics and rhetoric, and more recently, descriptions of neoconservative threads woven into public discussions of welfare reform.

Neoliberalism can be defined as a late twentieth century reinvestment in the principles of classical liberalism, which emphasize the universal rights of the individual and the importance of a free market system. Neoliberalism functions not as a coherent or planned set of discourses or practices, but more nebulously as a constellation of governmental policies and economic activities which thrives on an unregulated market and advances the privatization of what were formerly constituted as government functions, in particular social services, education, and public housing (Bourdieu 2002; Cleaver 1997; Harvey 2005; Kingfisher 2001). One impetus for these political and economic trends is the hegemonic belief in the power of the free market to bring the greatest realizable societal and economic benefits. I maintain that reforms to federal welfare policies that originated in the 1960s and were expanded in the 1990s are characteristic of contemporary U.S neoliberal policy.

I draw from literature which understands neoliberalism as an emerging "cultural system" indicative of contemporary capitalism, which exists both as a discourse and as a tactical system fostering the privatization of services and production through free market exchange (Bourdieu 2002; Cleaver 1997; Harvey 2005; Kingfisher 2001). More specifically, neoliberal policies primarily benefit the

middle and upper classes, particularly in urban areas (Davila 2004).

Kingfisher and Goldsmith highlight the gendered implications of neoliberal rhetoric and policies that, on one hand create new, empowered spaces for women, but ultimately impact the way public policy attends to gender and individuals. Neoliberal practices and discourses have subsequently recast women in roles of 'gender-neutral-worker-citizens" (Kingfisher and Goldsmith 2001) which stand in contrast with previous conceptions of women as primary caretakers first, and as breadwinners second. What is more, neoliberalism favors flexible organizations and individuals that can successfully compete in a free market economy by fluctuating with market demands for wage-labor (Martin 1994).

In contrast to the effacement of gender differences in neoliberal capitalist praxis and discourse, "poverty knowledge" (Goode 2001) in the U.S. has been constituted as a gendered and individual predicament, with the state functioning as a final, yet temporary, recourse for individuals who have exhausted all other opportunities for support. The shifting objectives in the public assistance system from AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) to the PRWORA (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reform Act of 1996) and TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy

Families) have emphasized the transitory nature of contemporary public assistance and the necessity of work. In addition, and perhaps more alarmingly, children have also been displaced, rhetorically as well as officially³, from the foreground of the recently restructured benefits system, despite the rhetoric that many changes to policy, such as the added emphasis on two-parent families, are in fact, invested in children's development.

One effect of neoliberal policy on women's distinctive identities is that differences between individuals and social groups are obscured, resulting in the collapse of previously gendered categories of caregiver (private) with that of worker, and the subsequent prioritization of wage labor (public) over unpaid (private) activities, such as care giving. According to Kingfisher and Goldsmith (2001), the collapsing of differences between wage-laborers ultimately results in the effacement of all other activities positioned inside the realm of reproductive and unpaid labor. In this way, the significance of such activities as child care and mothering are depreciated and, ultimately, silenced in the public discourse surrounding work and welfare. Within welfare reform, low-income women must still

³ Ida Susser (1997) discusses the phenomena of increasing work expectations and decreasing child care assistance within the 1996 welfare reform policies.

continue parental duties alongside emerging emotional, social, and economic demands to become a self-supporting worker-head of household for their families.

Neoconservatism adds to neoliberalism the dimension of social morality. As Harvey posits, neoconservatism has altered the trajectory of neoliberal policy in the following manner:

First, its concern for order as an answer to chaos of individual interests, and second, in its concern for an overwhelming morality as the necessary social glue to keep the body politic secure in the face of external and internal dangers...it therefore seeks to restore a sense of moral purpose, some high-order values that will form the stable center of the body politic (Harvey 2005).

According to this framework, the stable center draws its uniting themes from various but related moral agendas: cultural nationalism, evangelical Christianity, family values and right-to-life issues, to name a few.

While welfare recipients have long been subjects of criticism in the public sphere and are partitioned into the 'deserving' and "undeserving" poor, neoconservative themes now filter into the political discourse of welfare reform and the experience of women involved in the welfare system in particular ways. Hancock identifies the accumulation of negative public attitudes toward welfare recipients as "the politics of disgust." She describes these politics as

an emotion-laden response to long-standing beliefs about single, poor, African-American mothers that has spread, epidemiologically, to all recipients of

AFDC/TANF and to recipients of other welfare programs...for what citizens previously considered the deserving poor (Hancock 2004).

To this framework, I argue that the recent proliferation of neoconservative political discourse and politics place yet another layer of morality to the category of the undeserving poor. Concerns about the escalating number of low-income households headed by women are related to anxieties about the declining of marriage as a social institution in the U.S. The movement to promote "healthy marriages" as a way to alleviate poverty among low-income single-parent families is one aspect that is explored in Chapter five.

Chapter Two

Public Housing: Everyday Challenges to Personal Responsibility

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I create a context for understanding welfare reform in San Antonio and outline the social, political, and economic forces at work in the everyday lives of low-income women and their families. These topics may vary in their impact on individual families, but taken as a group, they speak to themes that circulated among most families I interviewed during my fieldwork. In particular, nearly all low-income families in the WRAC study lived in public housing at one time or another; and this is especially true for women I interviewed where all but one of whom lived in public housing as an adult or child. Similarly, since all women were also mothers, and most often single parents, and they faced constant challenges to parenting their children under social and material hardships. Interpersonal violence, both within and external to the home, affected women through my fieldwork. Taken as a whole, these topics affecting women in San Antonio also speak to the cultural context in which many low-income women in the U.S. live and work; shifting welfare policy, demands

of wage-work and family, and local and interpersonal violence all amplify the social and material conditions in which women try to parent and raise families.

SAN ANTONIO: BACKGROUND AND PRESENT

Linguistically, culturally, and architecturally, contemporary San Antonio embodies the layers of its history. To understand the current predicament of low-income women in San Antonio is to recognize that the current racial, ethnic and class disparities now present in San Antonio are largely the accumulation of discriminatory practices by Anglos against Mexican-origin and African-Americans.

Founded in 1781 by Spaniards and their colonized Mestizo, and Afromestizo subjects, the native Indian population was gradually integrated as part of the colony. In 1836, San Antonio transitioned from a Spanish-Mexican governed city to an Anglo-dominated one after Anglo American immigrants rebelled and gained independence from Mexico. Texas existed as a fledgling but independent Republic for the next nine years before the U.S. annexed it in 1845.

As noted by Foley, a confluence of economic and social forces, largely the result of the spread of Southern "cotton culture," created in central Texas "ethnoracial borderlands...where whiteness fractured along class lines and Mexicans moved in to fill the racial space between whiteness and blackness" (Foley 1997). Later in the 19th century, the

mechanization of farming, the closing of the open range, and the industrialization of cities all brought about a change in class order that coincided with shifting social relationships between ethnic and racial groups (Montejano 1997).

While San Antonio was initially populated predominately by people of Spanish, Mexican, and Mestizo origin, after statehood, San Antonio became the largest Anglo American city along the U.S.-Mexico border. European immigrants, predominately of German origin, arrived in San Antonio, and politically and economically, these Anglo residents came to dominate public life in the city while the growing Mexican-American population were structurally excluded from positions of power and visibility.

The decades immediately following World-War II marked the growth of the Hispanic middle-class in San Antonio, and this population gradually gained greater political momentum and visibility. When Henry Cisneros was elected the first Mexican-American mayor of a major U.S. city in 1981, national attention was focused on the city and a new era of "inclusion" was proclaimed. However, as Rosales cautions, this inclusion does not envelop all the urban residents; rather, the "dominant elite economic development agenda" continues to marginalize the interests of lower income

residents, in particular, those of women and ethnic and racial minorities residing in the city (Rosales 2000).

As noted by anthropologists and historians, the high rates of impoverishment that currently persist among Hispanics in San Antonio is the result of limited access to education and employment opportunities, discriminatory housing practices and spatial segregation in public places within the city and throughout central Texas. While discriminatory attitudes and practices ebbed and flowed somewhat during labor shortages and economic prosperity, a distinct and pervasive social hierarchy remained in place. Social and economic conditions did not improve substantially until after the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and subsequent Chicano Rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s (Flores 2002; Foley 1997; Montejano 1997).

At the beginning of the 21st century, San Antonio registered the ninth largest concentration of Hispanic⁴ residents according to the 2000 Census (Guzman 2001). The city population was recorded at 1,144,646, and 58%, or 617,394, of San Antonians were of Hispanic origin. As a metropolitan area, San Antonio is expanding at a brisk pace.

⁴ Hispanic is the category of analysis used by U.S. Census Bureau. According to the Bureau, "Hispanics may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories" (Bureau 2007). However, Foley argues a contradictory point about race in Texas. In the nineteenth century, "whiteness meant not only not Black but also not Mexican" (1997).

Between 2000 and 2005, the population grew by 9.9%, and 2005 U.S. Census estimates the population to now be approximately 1,881,634 (Demographer 2006.)

However, statewide, the Hispanic population experiences the greatest degree of poverty among all recorded ethnic groups. In 2005, 26% of the Hispanic population was reported to be living at or below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). African-Americans in Texas fare only slightly better than Hispanics, with 23% of this population living in poverty. By comparison, the poverty rate for Asians in Texas is 12% and 7.5% for Anglos (Priorities 2007).⁵

As a growing city on the junction of the emergent U.S. South and Southwest, San Antonio is characterized by its "growing, non-unionized, and industrialized" economy which stands in contrast to the "shrinking, unionized, and de-industrialized northeast and Midwest" (Henrici 2006). The economy depends on the rapidly expanding service sector, which includes the health care and manufacturing industries, government, and San Antonio's robust tourism industry. The large concentration of government workers is due mainly to the location of four military bases in the area—three Air Force bases (Brooks, Lackland, and Randolph) and one Army

⁵ For a family of four, the Federal Poverty Level is \$20,650 (Priorities 2007).

post (Fort Sam Houston). However, in July of 2001, the Kelly Air Force base was closed and repurposed as KellyUSA, a commercial enterprise (Antonio 2007).

Jobs that are most available to women in this study were those in food service, hotel housekeeping, light manufacturing, or convenience store and grocery store cashiers. Women who completed high school and received some postsecondary education or job training could find work in the health care field as nursing assistants, medical assistants, or home health aids. Fewer women worked as administrative assistants, receptionists, or customer service representatives for local or national corporations.

Public Housing in San Antonio

By the middle of the 20th century, many closely populated urban neighborhoods in U.S. cities suffered from aging housing stock and segregated areas of poverty. Meanwhile, more affluent urban residents moved to recently constructed suburban neighborhoods further from the city core and enjoyed new infrastructure and better-funded schools. According to one sociologist, "the suburb had become the exemplar of the normative or "mainstream" American community, built on a culture of progress, while the ghetto was the breeder of a "culture of poverty" (Venkatesh 2000). In San Antonio, the first housing projects funded by the federal Housing Act of 1937 were constructed

in 1939 and initially included five distinct communities: two designated for the Mexican-Americans, two for African-Americans, and one for Anglos (Fairbanks 2002)⁶.

As the city center of San Antonio grew more densely populated not only with residents but with businesses and the burgeoning tourism industry in the 20th century, San Antonio began to participate in the federal funds available through the Housing Act of 1949, which promoted urban redevelopment and slum clearance. The Act required that participating cities prepare a master plan for urban development and include provisions for improved transportation, land use, recreation and utilities as well as slum clearance.

San Antonio city planners subsequently developed a "Master Plan" to replace "blighted" central city neighborhoods with commercial zones and newer housing. Unlike Houston and Dallas, the two largest Texas cities that initially refused to participate in federally-sponsored slum-clearance programs and resisted urban renewal, San Antonio quickly supported urban renewal and the demolition of blighted neighborhoods (Fairbanks 2002). The Master Plan identified 19 residential areas as slum zones and replaced the residential housing of only six areas. In lieu of

⁶ Flores (1995) and Fairbanks (2002) also assert that local leaders in the Catholic church were instrumental in the development of public housing and urban revitalization processes in San Antonio.

housing, the remaining 13 areas were razed and subsequently rebuilt with hotels and amenities for the 1968 Hemisfair.

The implementation of urban renewal plans did not begin until 1959, but the Central West Side was one of the first areas to undergo redevelopment with Housing Act funds. Several hundred families and individuals were displaced, and older industrial and commercial buildings were leveled. City planners mandated that the area be redeveloped predominately as a commercial rather than residential zone due to its proximity to Interstate Highway 35, a road then under construction throughout the city center (Fairbanks 2002).

While the addition of new public housing units now managed by the City provided better quality housing for many residents, several West Side neighborhoods disappeared and predominately Mexicano, Mexican-American, and African-American communities and social networks were disrupted for these massive urban renovations, although these communities did not directly benefit from the development nor was an adequate amount of housing built to replace lost units (Fairbanks 2002; Hope 1991).



Figure 3.1: Map of SAHA Housing Communities (Authority 2007a)

As Figure 3.1 illustrates, the City gradually added more public housing projects throughout the metropolitan area. However, in the 1970s, the privatization of public housing began throughout the U.S.. In contrast with initial federal strategies to house low-income urban residents in

public housing projects, concern and criticism mounted as national attention focused on the "failures" of housing evidenced by relentless violence, fraud and mismanagement of resources, and concentration of urban poverty in the high-rise housing projects of Chicago, Boston, and New York City. Architect Charles Jenks went so far as to declare that modernism symbolically came to a close at 3:15 p.m. on July 15, 1972 when the Pruitt-Igoe project in St. Louis was razed after being condemned (In Harvey 1990).

As a result of the growing public objection to public housing and the enormous resources needed to maintain existing public housing in cities around the U.S., the Nixon Moratorium of 1973 began an important shift marking the privatization of public housing. The federal government began to divest in the addition of new housing projects and allowed cities around the nation to make greater use of available private housing stock through the provision of Section 8 "housing choice vouchers" to eligible tenants. The vouchers allowed renters to pay a portion of the rent and HUD (Department of Housing and Urban Development) the subsidized the entire rent directly to the property owner or paid a flat rate to the owner, and the tenant paid the remainder of the rent. Despite criticism that the vouchers would actually inflate local rental markets and that landlords in economically affluent neighborhoods would

refuse to participate, and thus limit Section 8 renters to low-income and dangerous neighborhoods, the Section 8 program was expanded in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Krumholtz 2004). The inception of the Section 8 program marks the initial divestment in the federal maintenance and expansion of existing public housing projects, as well as a noticeable shift of housing costs onto renters now required to pay up to 25% of housing costs. This trend continued during the Reagan administration in the early 1980s, and renters were required to pay up to 30% of housing costs.

By the 1990s, there was a dearth of available public housing in San Antonio and demand still exceeds supply. This trend will no doubt continue as San Antonio continues to experience economic and population growth. However, federal funds for the maintenance of existing public housing and for Section 8 vouchers to local markets have been progressively reduced since the 1990s, and federal budget cuts to this program leave thousands of families on wait lists for vouchers in cities nationwide each year.

Today, residents of San Antonio public housing pay a portion of their income toward rent; for instance, at most communities, rents are based on 30% of monthly-adjusted income or residents pay a flat rate based on current market values. In some housing communities, utilities are included or partially covered, while in other projects, such as

Alazan-Apache, tenants are responsible for paying city utilities (Authority 2007a). Consequently, residents who do not keep current with City utility payments face eviction from public housing.

However, the existing public housing is largely a transitional place of residence for low-income adults and families in San Antonio. In 1990 it was reported that 68% of public housing residents in the City moved out within 5 years and just 9% remained for more than 15 years (Hope 1991). I observed several families move out of public housing and into publicly subsidized privately owned housing units almost exclusively through the Section 8 program. In recent years, and throughout the course of this ethnography, there is a waiting list for placement in a SAHA (San Antonio Housing Authority) community, and also for Section 8 housing subsidies that allow individuals to rent privately owned apartments and homes. However, funding for Section 8 vouchers often runs out, and it is not uncommon for the waiting list for Section 8 to remain "frozen" to new applicants for more than one year at a time.

Five women I knew transitioned from public housing to Section 8 housing and the Section 8 program received mixed reviews by respondents. Many women, often advised by their welfare case worker, placed their name on the waiting list for Section 8 housing and were almost always eager to get

out of public housing. They fantasized about finding a house, not an apartment, in a "quiet" area of the city and providing a more desirable environment for raising children. Months, sometimes years, would pass until they suddenly received notice that they were eligible for housing assistance. Then the search began for a landlord who would accept the housing voucher and disappointment often followed when a house could not be found within the allotted timeframe.

Women did find apartments available to rent with Section 8 vouchers, but they were often in completely different and unfamiliar areas of the city. Sonia, discussed in the following section, moved from the central West Side to the more recently developed southeast side of the City. Without a car and over one mile from the nearest bus stop, she was isolated with her four sons at her new apartment complex. She was removed from any acquaintances she had at Apache Courts and even further from her mother in the North Side of the City. The apartment buildings, constructed in the early 1990s, were already worn-looking from lack of maintenance and constant occupation. Still, the privately-owned complex had positive aspects: a small swimming pool, wall-to-wall carpeting, a dish-washer, and central air conditioning – all amenities Sonia would have never been able to afford without housing subsidy.

However, critics of the privatization of public housing argue that this policy merely takes advantage of the "filtering" of local housing stock whereby housing units transition from high to low-income occupants as determined by the market (Krumholtz 2004). Instead of eradicating deep pockets of poverty and housing segregation, privatization trends in housing policy further the marginalization and segregation of low-income populations to areas that are less desirable to higher-income renters and home owners. Davila argues that as the cores of cities are increasingly marketed as spaces of cultural consumption, the processes of gentrification and subsidized private development displace low-income and affordable housing (2004). As the city of San Antonio continues to grow and as the West Side continues to undergo revitalization, it is uncertain how long this central neighborhood will continue to be a viable place of residence for working and working poor families.



Figure 3.2: Rows of Cassiano Homes, Hamilton Street, San Antonio, TX. Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) San Antonio organized the mural (Photograph by author).

The 'Courts': Urban Unevenness

As noted by Flores, by the late 1850's, San Antonio had already become noticeably segregated spatially along ethnic lines, and by the 1890's, the West Side was identified as predominately Mexican (1995). Today, "Mexican Americans can be found in every part of San Antonio and in every social and economic class, but it is the West Side that has maintained its identity as an economically poor *barrio mexicano*" (Flores 1995). As the images illustrate in Figures 3.6, 3.7., and 3.8, the West Side is still marked as a

predominately Mexican and Mexican-American place. And it is in these central West Side neighborhoods that the bulk of this ethnography originates.

When I met Ysenia, a soft-spoken but friendly young woman of Mexican-American origin who was born and raised in the central west side neighborhoods of San Antonio, she lived at Lincoln Heights Courts⁷, one of the city's older and least maintained public housing projects with a reputation for gang activity and criminality among residents and neighbors. (Ysenia's neighborhood is pictured in Figure 3.3 and 3.4.) Not far from her apartment at Lincoln Heights was the house where her father lived and where Ysenia lived until she moved to Lincoln Heights with her husband in 1997. Her parents divorced when Ysenia was in high school, and Ysenia remained at home with her elderly father because she clashed with her mother's volatile and domineering personality.

When I asked how she thought 'outsiders,' or non-West Side residents, viewed this neighborhood, Ysenia responded that they probably think it's "'the low side' of the city or, 'oh, you live over there,' in the 'barrio de los

⁷ Lincoln Heights Courts were built in 1940 for the San Antonio Housing Authority (SAHA). The Lincoln Heights Courts are one- and two-story concrete buildings; there are 338 units at Lincoln Heights, with one to four bedrooms each (Authority 2007).

negros.'" Ysenia says people think Lincoln Heights is 'real low,' poor or whatever, and that's bad."



Figure 3.3: Service road running through Lincoln Heights, San Antonio, TX (photograph by author).

Despite the rough reputation that precedes Lincoln Heights and the West Side, Ysenia remains here because

Everything's so close: my mom, the stores, I like being within walking distance of buses, it's just so in the middle. WIC [The office for the Women, Infants, and Children program] is just down the street.

Ysenia mediates her reason for staying in the 'courts' by weighing her lifelong familiarity of Lincoln Heights and the West Side against the dangerous reputation that precedes

the area. Ultimately, Ysenia maintains that it's now where you live, but how you live:

It doesn't matter what part of town you live in, it's how you live it. If I lived on the South Side, I could live all low, too, be all thug-ish or whatever. It's just a matter of how you raise your kids.



Fig 3.4: Defunct *Bail Bonds* establishment; corner of Zarzamora St. and West Poplar St., San Antonio, TX (photograph by author).

Cassiano Homes, another West Side neighborhood where I interviewed respondents, is a set of older public housing courts on the west side of Interstate 35 which runs through

the city center.⁸ Occupancy rates at Cassiano seemed to be lower than at other projects I observed as there were always several boarded up apartments visible, a technique used by the Housing Authority to prevent unsanctioned occupancy of vacant apartments. When I visited residents at Cassiano, they usually recounted the past weeks' episodes: gun shots, drug deals happening in day light, burglaries, and crimes allegedly perpetrated by local members of the 'Mexican Mafia'.



Figure 3.5: Convenience store, adjacent to Cassiano Homes, South Hamilton St, San Antonio, TX (photograph by author).

Several distinctions between Cassiano Homes, Lincoln Heights, and Alazan-Apache Courts were both noted by

⁸ Cassiano Homes was constructed in 1953 (Authority 2007).

residents and subtly observed during my fieldwork. First, the location and condition of the housing communities were important. Alazan-Apache Courts is the very first public housing development project in the City, and it is still provides about 1000 apartment homes to low-income families. Built on the north side of Guadalupe St. in 1939, the Alazan section buildings and grounds appear to be ungraciously aging, while its counterpart, the Apache Courts, situated on the south side of Guadalupe St., were completely refurbished in the mid-199's. In 2000, the Guadalupe Homes, which feature the modern convenience of central air conditioning, an amenity many low-income families in the city go without, were added to Alazan-Apache on the south side of Guadalupe St.



Figure 3.6: Entrance to Guadalupe Neighborhood, Alazan-Apache Courts visible on the left (photograph by author) .

The greater Alazan-Apache area is situated close to downtown San Antonio and the Interstate 35 corridor, and a mural painted by the neighborhood association welcomes you to the area. Guadalupe St., a main thoroughfare that divides the old and newer sections of Alazan Courts, is being revitalized by the city and several community organizations. Figures 3.7 and 3.8 depict some of the recently refurbished buildings on Guadalupe St. and the services offered to many neighborhood residents. Medical offices and NGO's serving low-income residents, as well as restaurants and a cultural center, flank both sides of the Guadalupe corridor closest to Interstate 35 and downtown. The street front businesses

are coated in bright paint, tile mosaics, and sidewalks are kept relatively free from trash and debris.



Figure 3.7: Avenida Guadalupe Association, a local NGO, Guadalupe St., San Antonio, TX (photograph by author).

Second, the material differences in the public housing communities and surrounding neighborhoods did not go unnoticed by the residents. Rather, women correlated their perceived social value based on the housing community to which they and their family were assigned to live. In particular, women I spoke to felt that the public housing complex they were assigned to was a direct reflection of their perceived social value relegated by their 'worker'

(assigned welfare case manager). Karen, a woman in her late 30's who moved to San Antonio only a year before I met her, applied for public housing assistance after she was laid off from work. She heard that Alazan Apache had the best location and the most services of any public housing project in the city, but was told that there were no openings and she was assigned to an apartment at Cassiano Homes instead.

Lori, then 26 years old, lived with her two children in public housing in central San Antonio when I met her in the fall of 2000. Like other women I interviewed, Lori moved into public housing after leaving a long but turbulent relationship with her son's father. After a short stay at a shelter downtown and then with a friend, Lori moved to a two-bedroom apartment in 1999. Though Lori had never received cash welfare benefits, she did qualify for food stamps and a housing subsidy that allowed her to live at Alazan-Apache Courts Homes and pay reduced rent. Lori describes her arrival to Alazan this way:

My friend Erica lives over on the other side of Guadalupe and she told me that since I was already going to school, I was going to college, I could move in here because it was FSS, family self-sufficiency, and so I applied and I moved in...At first, I was kind of hesitant. I was like, I don't want to live out here...because I thought it was rowdy. Because a long time ago, this was a real bad neighborhood. The courts, you think, well, I don't want to live out in the courts, it's bad up there. I was hesitant...I was desperate; I needed a place to live, you know, for me and my son. I did, I moved out here. I liked it because I've been here and I stayed to myself, I didn't talk to nobody and it was good. And I just started staying

here, and I got pregnant with Amy and I've been here ever since.

Of the neighbors in the surrounding area, Lori says now "there is nobody bad here, if you go on the other side of Guadalupe it's bad." Other Alazan Apache residents concur that the "old side" (Alazan Courts) is still full of crime and bad people while the "new side" is quieter and populated by more respectable, working people. Another resident described how she struggled to keep up the requirements of the FSS program⁹ so that she would not be transferred to the "ugly area where it's pretty much welfare people. I'm on welfare too, but at least I'm doing something."

Lori lived in Apache Courts, the newly refurbished part of Alazan-Apache Courts, originally constructed in 1939 as San Antonio's first public housing project (Authority 2007a). She liked her apartment, if not the entire neighborhood. While the inside of her apartment felt like home to her because she made the cinderblock walls "cozy" with all of her decorations and pictures of her children, the most singular feature apartment was not the physical amenities but the fact that it was her own space and she

⁹ According to the San Antonio Housing Authority, "Participating FSS families are required to sign a "Contract of Participation" with the San Antonio Housing Authority. An FSS family has up to five (5) years to complete the specific goals and objectives established by them in their "Individual Training and Service Plan". The "Contract of Participation" outlines the rights and responsibilities of the family during their participation in the Family Self-Sufficiency Program" (Authority, 2007).

felt safe there. Particularly after leaving an alcoholic and sometimes abusive partner, Lori could say that it was her house and "I don't have no man telling me what to do" even if the surrounding neighborhood was still "the courts." The importance of having one's own apartment meant that a woman could be relatively in charge of her personal life, and many respondents felt empowered by their command of their domestic space, even if the material realities of being a single-parent in a public housing community were harsh. Without a doubt, many women would not be able to afford their own apartments without housing subsidies.

As it was, other women I interviewed considered the Apache section of Alazan-Apache Courts to be the most desirable of all the "courts," and some residents of other projects were on waiting lists for a transfer to Alazan-Apache. Besides the newer construction of the buildings, Alazan-Apache is located off Guadalupe St., a main artery that connects the West Side neighborhood to the hotels and restaurants of the Alamo Plaza and the downtown Riverwalk, Several early childcare centers, PCI/Headstart, and Challenge after school programs provided many families with free or cost-reduced child care options close to their apartments at Alazan.



Figure 3.8: El Progreso Community Center, Guadalupe St., San Antonio, TX (Photograph by author).

Like Lori, many Alazan residents participated in the Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program, an initiative from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). As the name suggests, FSS promotes economic independence of families through work by providing some configuration of child care assistance, job training or employment counseling, household skill training or homeownership counseling and escrow (Development 2007). Of course, there are rules and regulations to follow, and some residents found the employment counseling and household skill training sessions a nuisance and not nearly as helpful as the child

care assistance. Lori participated in FSS but mainly to receive child care while she attended class at SACC (San Antonio Community College). She worked steadily since she was 17 and was already enrolled at the junior college before she even heard of FSS.

Perhaps the most important feature of Apache Courts was what it signified to its residents and the residents of other housing projects in San Antonio. If you applied and were assigned to an apartment in the newer, Apache section of Alazan-Apache Courts, it signified to women that their welfare caseworker considered them worthy of the resources and programs available at Apache instead of warehousing them in a crumbling apartment building in a less viable neighborhood populated by the "bad" people who would only "drag you down".

In addition to Cassiano and Lincoln Heights on the West Side, public housing on the northeast side of downtown San Antonio was also stigmatized. The Olive Park Apartments, Wheatley Courts, Sutton Homes, and New Light Village offered fewer services, were situated in peripheral neighborhoods with limited public transportation options, and the buildings and grounds were older and in a constant state of disrepair. Women that I interviewed in those courts perceived their immediate environment as dangerous and bad and were eager to move to Alazan-Apache or anywhere else.

They also traveled further than Alazan-Apache residents for child care, bus stops, or schools.

Third, the housing communities were regarded as racialized spaces. Primarily White and Mexican-American families populated Alazan-Apache Courts; I encountered no African-American families during my fieldwork from 2000-2003, and when I asked other residents, no one could readily identify any African-American families at Alazan-Apache. As Ysenia made reference to earlier in this chapter, housing communities such as Lincoln Heights were marked as spaces inhabited by "los negros" and thus, perceived as unfamiliar and more dangerous places. When Karen was transferred to Olive Park, a public housing community on the northeast side of San Antonio, her boyfriend, a 47 year-old Mexican national, initially refused to visit her in "el barrio de los negros." However, a few weeks after she resettled there, he relaxed his stance and came by regularly to eat and rest there.

Fourth, in addition to different maintenance conditions of buildings and grounds, housing authority rules were enforced to differing degrees at the different public housing communities. While residents in public housing had to adhere to strict occupancy rules and were forbidden from planting vegetation or personalizing their tiny front or back yards, this was more strictly enforced in some public

housing communities than others. At the Apache Courts, residents complained about being fined for having “unsanctioned” items such as lawn decorations, trash, pets, or plantings in the ground. The relatively austere grounds at Alazan, pictured in Figure 3.10, contrast with those of Cassiano Homes and others. At some complexes, like Lincoln Heights, established residents had gardens blooming (similar to the apartment shown in Figure 3.9) and house cats lounging on front walks (pets are generally not permitted in any public housing complex). Ysenia regularly offered me figs and mangos from the long established trees that enveloped her front porch at Lincoln Heights. These infractions seemed to remain overlooked at the older and less visible public housing communities, which were also those located further from the Guadalupe corridor and deeper into the west and northeast areas of central San Antonio.



Figure 3.9: Single-story house with garden, Lincoln Heights, San Antonio, TX (photograph by author).

Decorations on front doors and back porch storage were allowed across the board, though. I always distinguished Lori's apartment from the rest in her row by the seasonal decorations on the door and the permanent collection of stuff on the front porch: a pink plastic child's stove, a charcoal grill, plastic buckets full of dirt and dead plants, and boxes of clothes. Lori would give me a tour of the porch if she acquired any new items from the flea market where she worked weekends, either bought at low prices or gifted to her by her boss or coworkers. She would put these

items on her porch until she could decide where to fit them inside her apartment, which was already overstuffed with furniture and decorations, or until she was able to use them in barter with friends or neighbors.



Figure 3.10: Sonia's apartment, Apache section of Alazan-Apache Courts, San Antonio, TX (photograph by author).

The diverse experiences of quality of public housing and the seeming arbitrariness to the placement of residents resonates with David Harvey's description of the uneven

development inherently visible in the urban spaces operating within postmodern economies of flexible accumulation (Harvey 1989; Harvey 1990). It also reverberates with the critiques of the privatization of public services such as welfare and public housing (Bourdieu 2002; Harvey 2005).

ON BEING A "GOOD" PERSON IN A "BAD" PLACE

Despite the differences between the different public housing communities and different neighborhoods in central San Antonio, women repeatedly described their places of residence as "dangerous" and "low." What is more, these terms were more than just rumor or stereotypes. Irrefutably, many bad things did women in the courts throughout this study. Apartments were broken into and robbed (albeit sometimes by perpetrators known to the residents- enraged boyfriends, revenge-seeking ex-friends or acquaintances, or drug-addled relatives or neighbors), residents cars were stolen and vandalized, and drugs were sold and fought over in common areas and street corners of the 'courts.' Furthermore, all respondents moved several times throughout the course of this research, either as a result of eviction, loss or gain of income, or an attempt to better their circumstances, or to making it tough for women to become familiar with their surroundings and neighbors. Many women, like Vanessa, didn't interact with her neighbors at Cassiano Homes on purpose; she explained it in this way: "In a

neighborhood like this one...you don't really know who's who...I only know a few people and that is because my sister met them first."

As a result of ambivalence or uncertainty about their surroundings, women worried not only about their own safety but how to manage their children in this environment, a challenge that became more and more difficult as their children grew older and approached school age and adolescence. One prevailing strategy used by many women was to imagine a clear boundary between their apartment, their family and work life, and the goings on in the courts outside their apartment walls. Here, the divide between the private and public was made distinct and maintained in daily practice and rearticulated to me.

In this way, the private sphere was created and reinforced as a feminized one in the ways women colonized the space as a separate familial space under their control in contrast with the outside world of public housing, street violence, welfare case workers, and low-wage jobs. The creation of this private space came at a social cost to themselves and the people living around them. Many women viewed most of their neighbors in a disparaging light, especially when they were new to the area; most neighbors were assumed to be "bad," "low-class," or "just getting

their check" and not interested in improving their situation.

It was equally important for most women who had the time and energy to spend hours each day creating ordered interior worlds that stood in contrast with their external urban surroundings. Time was spent cleaning apartments, limited income was used to purchase cleaning products, holiday decorations were crafted and displayed, and furniture was rearranged on a regular basis. And rhetorically, energy was spent describing to me how all the neighbors were unclean, loud, and generally bad.

Furthermore, the children of neighbors were often perceived as a bad influence on one's own children, and most women tried to keep their children occupied indoors for as long as they possibly could rather than allow them to play outdoors¹⁰. These attitudes appeared to be reflected by all women, regardless of ethnicity. However, the fragile boundary between the public world outside the apartment and the private life within was often shattered by occurrences such as burglaries or vandalism, the sounds of gun shots outside, and eviction notices delivered by the housing authority.

¹⁰ As Edin and Lein note, many women went to great lengths to provide cable television to keep children entertained for long periods in doors and viewed this as a necessity (Edin 1997).

In sum, all of these issues related to places of residence create complex layers to the main objectives of welfare reform: economic self-sufficiency and personal responsibility. At the local level, federal welfare reforms are not designed take into account the historical and structural marginalization and subsequent impoverishment of Mexican-American and African-Americans in San Antonio. As noted by Harvey and others, the prevailing practice of neoliberalization, a structuring influence on welfare reform, maintains that the forces of the free market will alleviate poverty. Hence, in this framework, individual economic shortfalls are the result of poor choices and mismanagement of resources rather than linked to any kind of structural disparity, such as the structural exclusion of Mexican-Americans and African-Americans from economic and political influence in San Antonio.

Furthermore, the differences and disparities among public housing communities, and of housing available through the Section 8 program, create an uneven social and material terrain that women must negotiate in daily life. In the following chapters, I explore the various ways that some women contend with some of these concerns. In spite of the prevailing attitudes about their neighbors and surrounding area, and perhaps in contradiction to these attitudes, I discuss the ways that some women do form social networks

with neighbors and rely upon them for child care, financial and material support from time to time, and friendship in order to approach self-sufficiency as welfare benefits and formal government support recedes.

Chapter Three

Exercising Flexibility

INTRODUCTION

The following chapter presents ethnographic vignettes of fieldwork and interviews with San Antonio women transitioning from welfare to work. Through field notes and interview transcriptions, I arrange a narrative from each woman's life and highlight changes through time to emphasize the shifting terrain of policy, jobs, family, and personal relationships. To better understand the experience of women in poverty operating within a milieu of constant change, some of which women both participate in and have some control over and some which they have little or no control over, I turn to the concept of flexibility. As Martin (Martin 1994) argues, individuals and organizations that can constantly change to meet the challenges of continuously shifting political, economic, and social terrains do not only survive but they succeed in contemporary capitalist culture. For women in particular, feminists have also championed the concept of flexibility both as a strategy for resistance and maneuvering within a constrained environment and as way to develop empowered identities and social positions (Sandoval 1991). According to Martin, "flexibility

seems to be the key. These are the commonly opposed extremes of the social positions in which women so commonly find themselves, on the one hand, and wish they could be more often, on the other" (1994). For women negotiating welfare reform, the degree to which they exercise flexibility to keep pace with the changes in their financial situation, family needs, and work opportunities greatly affect their social and economic predicament.

Conversely, as this chapter illustrates, flexibility is both a privileged position and also a impediment. I argue that the concept of flexibility as defined by Martin and others is an ideal that excludes many individuals with limited tactics available (Certeau 1984; Chambers 1991). Poor women may attempt to work and leave welfare, but they may not be able to mobilize the flexibility in terms of job opportunities, wages, or child care to make their attempts at self-sufficiency sustainable. So while flexibility is a favored strategy, it is particularly important to examine the practice of flexibility among low-income women as they negotiate ever-changing but rigid welfare policies, job requirements, and family obligations to better understand the strengths and limitations of flexibility for women in the context of welfare reform.

Oliker (2000) notes that the ways women care for their dependents are changing along with changes to family

structures and welfare policies. She asserts, "in the absence of a social safety net or wage-earning partner, single mothers now must provide financially for their children or risk losing them" (Oliker 2000). Unlike middle-class mothers or married women, now single women receiving TANF do not have the option of limiting their work involvement or work hours. Poor single women, unlike middle-class women or women in dual-parent households, are not as "free to trade their job or income opportunity for flexibility to meet domestic needs" (Oliker 2000) if they expect to meet all their family's basic needs. Hence, individuals with inflexible schedules, limited job skills, or tenuous social networks are at a disadvantage, while individuals and organizations that offer the most flexibility and resilience are favored by contemporary corporate culture (Martin 1994). Flexibility is becoming a constitutive and discriminating factor working upon all individuals today, and it is increasingly being used as an exclusionary criteria or requirement for social and economic advancement.

However, flexibility in employment can be strategically practiced when women have access to low-cost and reliable child care as well as to viable employment opportunities. Women who have friends and relatives who can provide child care and other forms of support have more latitude to decide

whether to work or delay employment until all their children are of school age or older. They also have slightly more options for employment, as they can usually increase their potential work hours beyond those offered by formal care providers. Hence, their access to informal care networks places them in a more flexible situation than mothers who have few social resources to supplement their child care needs. Oliker points out that "the same job opportunities will look very different to a mother who has help with babysitting and one who does not" (2000), and, frequently, flexible and reliable child care determines whether a job is an opportunity or an impossibility.

I open this chapter with the story of Karen and her family. Her work and welfare history illustrates the predicament of a woman approaching the government for assistance as an adult with a long history of employment, marriage, and motherhood. However, in contrast with the expectation of policy makers that poor women will be able to rely upon family, employment, and marriage to sustain themselves materially instead of welfare (Kingfisher 2001), Karen's experiences illustrate the limits of flexibility as a tactic for survival. In Karen's story, welfare and the government figure as one of the last remaining and rigid alternatives available to her after marriages and employment flounder.

Karen's life as I present it in the following chapter rails against contemporary wisdom (Hancock 2004) and the pervasive and powerful "politics of disgust" (Gilens 1999) and culture of poverty (Lewis 1959) stereotypes about low-income women and families. Karen is a college-educated White woman invested from working class family with a strong work ethic evidenced by her long and diverse work history of her own. While she is also invested in marriage, Karen is also periodically a single-parent when marriage is not workable. For the first 37 years of her life, she practiced flexibility as she had children, entered and exited marriages and jobs, and moved from city to city in the US and Mexico. However, shortly after she arrived in San Antonio, a constellation of social and economic events, both external to her family and personal, left her with no room to maneuver. I selected Karen because her experiences signify the swift social and economic decline of women without social networks to draw upon for assistance. Perhaps more importantly, Karen's story speaks directly to the shortfalls in the expectation that marriage, and relationships with men in general, will draw women and children out of poverty in the U.S. while emphasizing that the more important function of welfare policy could be to sustain people temporarily or permanently unable to exercise flexibility.

NEW AND IN BETWEEN: JOBS AND CITIES AND MEN AND WELFARE...

I was finishing an interview with Veronica¹¹, a 28 year-old mother of a two-year-old boy, one steamy spring afternoon at Cassiano Homes when a woman rapped on Veronica's metal screen door and asked to use the phone. Veronica introduced us and asserted that I should really start interviewing Karen because Karen was new to San Antonio and didn't know many people. Karen shrugged her shoulders and said "why not? I've got nothing to hide" perhaps assuming that I was a social worker checking up on a case.¹²

Another morning, a few days after meeting Karen, I waited outside her front door, across the grassy strip that separated her row apartment from Veronica's building. Karen lived at the first apartment in her block of Cassiano Homes, a public housing project on the West Side of San Antonio situated about 2 miles south of Alazan-Apache Courts. It was

¹¹ Veronica initially identifies as Mexican-American. She explained that her father is white and her mother is Mexican. However, she would alternately identify herself as white or Mexican-American only in events she would recount to me. I discuss Veronica in greater detail in Chapter six.

¹² Because they are figures of authority and the primary way that women access welfare benefits and services, social workers, or caseworkers, are both feared and respected by women I interviewed. Initially, women were often not immediately convinced I was not a social worker and had no official impact, either positive or negative, on their welfare status. After respondents realized that conversations about money they had with me could neither increase nor reduce their benefits, they shared this information less hesitantly.

midmorning on a Saturday and Karen was home; even better, she remembered me and welcomed me inside. Karen was much older than any other women I interviewed, and she looked more worn as well. Despite her tired outward appearance, Karen was pleasant to me, saying that she was glad to see me, and making me feel comfortable by showing me a seat on the sofa and offering me some water to drink.

Karen's apartment was identical to her neighbor Veronica's apartment in layout and amenities - a living room and small galley kitchen downstairs and bathroom and two bedrooms upstairs. Beige cinderblock walls lined both the upstairs and downstairs with corresponding worn beige linoleum tiles for flooring. It was more sparsely furnished and much less decorated than Victoria's apartment with just one sofa and loveseat made from a wooden frame with well-worn brown velour cushions that offered a sagging seat. The sofas were neither attractive to look at nor comfortable to sit on, and some of the cushions were moved onto the floor and covered with a sheet to make a bed. A large, outdated wooden TV console sat against the wall next to the door, and it was turned on but played nothing but static. A large plush sofa chair was covered with unfolded clothing and pushed against a half-wall that separated the living room from the small kitchen. In the corner between the sofa and the backdoor, there was a cardboard box that served as toy

box full of some plastic toys and plush animals. Flowered white bed sheets hung on the open living room and kitchen windows. Since there was no air conditioner, Karen kept the front and the back doors of the apartment open with the heavy metal screen doors closed, and a hot breeze flowed through the downstairs. Crayoned and finger-painted pictures were prominently displayed on the dark brown cupboards in the kitchen and were the only personalized decorations in the apartment.

The day I first interviewed Karen, she had just finished cooking breakfast for her boyfriend and daughters. Her boyfriend came out of the kitchen and Karen introduced me to Gerardo, a man that looked about 10 or 15 years older than Karen. He shook my hand and then asked me in Spanish to have a seat on the sofa. Gerardo appeared to be amused by my effort to converse with him in Spanish, and told Karen to get me some water or juice to drink. Karen spoke to Gerardo in Spanish and asked him to keep an eye on the girls while she talked to me. Her daughters were eating their breakfast eggs on the back porch. Gerardo said he would look after them from the upstairs window, and he went back upstairs. In subsequent visits, Karen had few positive things to say about her boyfriend, but today, she seemed relaxed around him, and they gave each other a quick hug and kiss before he went back upstairs. Later that day, when I asked her if she

needed a ride to the store, she said no because Gerardo was there and could watch the kids for her. In future visits, Karen would usually tell me she couldn't depend on him to do anything like looking after or picking up her daughters from daycare. Hence, I understood their relationship to be consistently inconsistent with few expectations of Gerardo by Karen beyond what she could coax out of him in terms of companionship and infrequent contributions to the household.

While Karen identifies herself as Caucasian¹³, she asserted that her daughters are Hispanic because their father (her second husband, not Gerardo) is a Mexican national. Karen's daughters were born in Florida but she and her daughters spent about a year in Mexico with her husband and his family immediately before Karen moved to San Antonio. Although English is her first language, Karen is fluent in both Spanish and English and her daughters' first language is Spanish. Karen learned Spanish from her male partners and their families both in Mexico and in the U.S., and she claims her language abilities now allow her to survive and make contacts with her Spanish-speaking neighbors. According to Karen, "In the Hispanic world, at least I speak their language, ok, and at least to them, I am not a total outcast." In addition to providing her with more

¹³ Karen's identifying terms.

social flexibility, Karen's bilingual abilities also enabled her to acquire many administrative jobs in the construction industry in both Florida and Texas because she could efficiently communicate with contractors, vendors, and trades people. But it could also be a burden for her as she was frequently expected to translate for Gerardo and his extended family. As she complained one afternoon, "they only help when they expect something else in return. Which puts more pressure on, which really isn't much help..."

I wanted to know more about Gerardo and Karen's relationship, but when I asked Karen about Gerardo's role in the household, she was ambivalent. Gerardo "stays" at her house frequently but does not contribute financially with any regularity. Throughout the year and half I interviewed Karen, I rarely saw Gerardo and his lack of assistance to the household was a regular harangue by Karen.¹⁴ However, asking women about whom they include in their household and who contributed what were always delicate subjects to discuss because public housing allocation and rent prices are determined by family income. The more working adults in a household, the higher the rate for monthly rent. So while all but two of the women I interviewed had friends, relatives, or male partners living with them, they did not include these people in their answer to the initial

household question. I suspected that they were still unsure about my role as a researcher and not yet convinced that talking to me would have no positive or negative effects on their public assistance.

Now in her late 30's, Karen lived in many different places; she was born near Tempe, Arizona and moved to Orlando, Florida, then to Minnesota, Houston, Texas, and Monterrey, Mexico before moving to San Antonio. At 37, she was a few years older than the other women I met in San Antonio. At first I thought this was because she had waited to have children until her she was in her thirties. But several months after I met her, she mentioned that she had two other children, both boys, when she was 16 and then 20. So before she had her "new" family, as she referred to her daughters, Karen was in a relationship as a young adult that resulted in her first two children. Instead of leaving high school permanently after the birth of her first child, Karen eventually finished high school and entered Arizona State University in Tempe where she grew up.

Karen stopped attending high school

In the middle of my junior year. So I got most of the way through, but I had gotten pregnant, and I think it was March of my junior year. And as soon as I had my oldest son, I got my GED. Most people went to school to get their GED, but I just went and took the test...I took the GED when I was 17. And I got my GED, and then later on, after I left him [first husband] I went back to college 5 years later. I think I was 22 or 23. And so then, it had been 5 years and I was considered a non-traditional student, I applied for scholarships and

they paid for my first year of college. I did really well. I had a 3.0. [Where were you?] I was at Arizona State University, in Tempe. Most of it was psychology, social sciences, earth sciences. And I really love school. And I had the boys back with me at the time. Their father had kept stealing them and stuff. So by the time it came to my sophomore year, I had lost focus.

The circumstances under which Karen left the relationship and her children were not something Karen would ever discuss with me in detail, but it was clear there were difficult family circumstances that precipitated her departure from Arizona without her sons. However, Karen did have this to say: "I lived in Phoenix all my life, and someday I want to go back and visit, but enough of my life was horrible there that I don't want to stay there."

So, in her mid-twenties, Karen moved to Florida without her two children and started a new life there working at several different jobs, including hospitality work at Disneyland and on cruise ships, attending community college, and eventually meeting and marrying her second husband who worked as a housepainter. They eventually owned a house together, ran a painting business together, and had two daughters. Karen described their life as materially comfortable but punctuated by difficult periods with alcoholism and relationship violence. In an effort to salvage their relationship, Karen, her husband, and their two children moved in with her husband's family in Monterrey, Mexico.

Karen's relationship with her husband did not improve in Mexico after one year, so she moved again, this time to San Antonio and again without her children. Karen spoke about how she moved to San Antonio in January of 2000:

I moved here out of Mexico. I left their father in Mexico, because we lived there and he wouldn't let me work in Mexico, and he wouldn't go to work there, he refused to work [for less money than in the U.S.] in Monterey. And the people there were really bad with Americans, and I think that was one reason he didn't want me to work, but I used to go places all the time by myself there and I didn't worry about it...if I didn't set myself up to be a victim, I wasn't going to be a victim, and I was fluent enough that I didn't worry about not being able to communicate to somebody that I was having a problem...so we got down to zero money and came to San Antonio with \$5 in my pocket. \$5 when I first got here, and I had to leave them with his family; they wouldn't let me bring them with me. They wouldn't do it, even though I had someplace to come to here. It turned out to be his [Gerardo's] brother's house. So when I wanted to bring them back to the states, he didn't want me to bring them back. He wanted me to bring him here and both of us work and leave the girls with his mother. And I said 'I didn't have children to have somebody else raise them, and your mother's not very healthy...' So when I went back to Mexico to see them, he started his garbage, but I think that he knew that I was going to take them. But that is why I had come down there. So within two hours we were at the police station and I literally had to hold them for five hours. Because they can be considered either Mexican or American because he doesn't have nothing here, so they have dual citizenship. So there, it's whoever has possession, basically...

Karen was able to bring her daughters to San Antonio about six months after her arrival. After working a string of convenience store jobs, she was able to secure a full-time job with benefits at Trammel-Crow, a property management and construction company. But after about six

months, in November of 2000, she was laid off because the company downsized its operations in San Antonio. Karen quickly ran through any savings she had while she applied for TANF and waited for her unemployment benefits to begin. She received about \$1000 each month for six months in unemployment payments, but the unemployment benefits ended in June 2001.

In fact, Karen applied for TANF for the very first time in January of 2001 after being laid off from her construction administration job in San Antonio, and she received TANF during February, March, and April until the paperwork for her unemployment benefits was properly processed (her former employer tried to deny her benefits). Then she received unemployment, including back payments, until June, which is when I met her.

The first time I interviewed Karen in June of 2001, she explained her welfare status to me:

The state has me on a 12 month limit; I guess that's food stamps though. I don't know though, I really don't understand what's state or federal, but I know right now I'm nowhere close [to the time limit], because I have never been on it before...And the caseworker almost put me down, the one that processed me the first time. And she was a Caucasian also. She goes 'I can't find you in the system. Are you going to tell me you've never been on the system before?' and I was like, 'yes, as a matter of fact, I have never been on the system before.' And she was just mean...I was like, 'why is this woman upset with me because I haven't been on the system before?'...To me, it made no sense, she didn't believe me, and she made me verify everything..."

Karen was defensively proud of the fact that she had never needed to apply for cash welfare benefits even though she had received food stamps and housing assistance in 1987 when her sons were young and she was attending Arizona State University in Tempe.

When I first met Karen, she compared her life in San Antonio to her life in Florida:

When we lived in Orlando, we had what we needed. We had a washer and dryer, we had TV, we had VCR, we had a microwave. We had everything, I mean we weren't rich, but when I needed to buy clothes for them, I could, or shoes. It wasn't like it is now. I mean there were times when we had hard times, but it was nothing compared to what we go through now. And I've even considered going back to Florida, to their father. He's a really good father to them, to a point. Although he's taught them not to listen to me, not to mind. But there have been times that, just because I have friends there, that I've thought about going back to him in Florida because I know I can get a better job there and...but, we're trying to stick it out [in San Antonio].

As it was, a month after I met Karen, in May 2001, her second husband called to inform her that he was on his way to San Antonio to bring her back to Florida. Initially, she was afraid of his arrival and resisted the idea of returning to a marriage that she worked hard to leave. But, life in San Antonio was not easy for her that year as she went from a promising full-time job with a large construction company to welfare in six months. She was never able to find another job that allowed her to afford child care and was never able

to secure a child care subsidy. In her experience, "You get a job, and can't keep it. And I've been looking again."

In the past, jobs were not that difficult for Karen to find. But in 2001, she found herself unemployed in San Antonio as a singleparent during an economic downturn in San Antonio in 2001, the six-months of unemployment benefits passed quickly, and she turned to cash welfare assistance for the first time in her life. At this point, it was almost impossible for Karen to be flexible to employers as she could only work during the hours when she had child care. And if she found a job and child care, she needed a job that paid an hourly wage high enough for her to afford the child care.

Karen's decision to get in the car and drive back to Florida with her husband was complex. She wanted to provide more for her daughters than she was providing as a single parent without a job, including material necessities and, perhaps more importantly, a life with two parents. As Karen stated a few days before she left for Florida,

I know it's the best thing for them [her daughters]...but, I don't know if it's the best thing for me...Well, one, their father is really great with them. Two, financially, because there is no way I can force child support on him because he's not a national. So they can't enforce it. This week he has been sending me money. And normally I don't get that help...and it's not the material things, but for them it has to be considered. I need their clothes and things, and if I were to go back to him, I would feel like a real failure...

One year after arriving in San Antonio, Karen's experience as a single parent left her overwhelmed and completely impoverished, and her lack of social networks provided no financial or emotional cushion; but since Karen was 36 years old and never yet received welfare, she was clearly willing to do almost anything to avoid it, including returning to an abusive partner. And, even when things started to go wrong immediately after her husband arrived in San Antonio, she went with him anyway and tried to remain hopeful that things would work out. For the first few days they were in Florida, she thought, "maybe I can make it work. Because the first day here was all right...I thought I might as well get a job if I was there, and that's what I was going to do. And then he just kept getting more violent and more violent."

Karen had a boyfriend in San Antonio, but Gerardo did not go out of his way to help her provide for her daughters. That does not work for a woman in Karen's situation: "I mean, because I love Gerardo [who was upstairs sleeping], but he's just not doing anything. This whole week, he hasn't even got off the couch to go to work. Because he knew that I was getting my unemployment check. This guy offered to help him fix his truck, and he goes, 'oh tomorrow, tomorrow...and I'm out there everyday...' And while Gerardo avoided work whenever possible, Karen's husband, a 35 year-old painter of

Mexican origin "always works, that's one thing. He's not afraid to work." At least her husband was there for her financially, even if the emotional costs were exorbitant.

Besides, Karen wanted to try to reconcile with her husband because she was "still legally married to him, so I at least have that obligation. In my heart, I feel that. I'm not super religious, but in my heart I feel that. I was trying to get that resolved before, but I didn't have the money to do it, and now it looks like God made it that way to where I have it, so maybe there's a reason" (Edin 2005).

However, after a several rough weeks in Florida, her reconciliation trip ended with three one-way bus tickets to San Antonio purchased by an Orlando battered women's shelter. Miraculously, when Karen arrived back in San Antonio, she had not yet been evicted from her apartment at Cassiano Homes. But since Karen missed several welfare certification appointments during her departure, her cash and food stamps were terminated. Her daughters had missed too many days at the YWCA child care center, so her child care subsidy and placement was revoked as well. It was a month before her welfare benefits were reinstated and in the meanwhile, Karen donated plasma, visited food pantries, and implored Gerardo for support, which he occasionally and reluctantly provided.

Karen noted a memorable experience when she reapplied for welfare after returning to San Antonio from Florida. A male caseworker told her "in order for the system to work for you to get the benefits, he says, you need to work the system." According to Karen, he said,

you weren't on TANF last spring long enough to qualify for the transitional Medicaid. You need the Medicaid'...he says, 'stay on the program for three months...don't get yourself disqualified for three months. You have to get TANF for three months...not just food stamps, but the TANF, in order to get the transitional day care and ...Medicaid.' Otherwise, I lose them. And I didn't know that before...so I think what I'm going to do for three months is just take it easy, not really get myself disqualified from the (Texas) Workforce (Commission), but my girls are going to be going to school and stuff too, so I might just take it easy for three months...because I really feel like I need the rest anyway....

Karen was most likely directed to apply for welfare and to stay on for a period of time in order to get ancillary benefits such as child care because, under PRWORA, TANF recipients were given priority to receive child care subsidies (Services 1996)¹⁵.

And when her welfare was reinstated in August of 2001, Karen experienced some flexibility in her schedule for the

¹⁵ According to the Department of Health and Human Services, child care funds for states must be distributed in the following manner: "A State shall ensure that not less than 70 percent of the total amount of funds received by the State in a fiscal year under this section are used to provide child care assistance to families who are receiving assistance under a State program under this part, families who are attempting through work activities to transition off of such assistance program, and families who are at risk of becoming dependent on such assistance programs" (Services 1996).

first time in many months. With her daughters in subsidized child care at the YWCA, she felt like she could "take it easy" after her 30 hours a week in work-related activities, like searching for and applying for jobs, were complete. I asked Karen what kinds of jobs she wanted for and she described herself as a

construction administrator...and right now I can't get the kind of work that I want because I don't have a car. And so, the last job I took was kind of what I wanted, then it turned out not to be anything that they told me. So, they laid me off. But, I'm even thinking about just going back to being a cashier again. Because it's just, I don't know if I can find something closer to here. The difference is it could be up to \$6/hour difference. And see, I don't know if I can handle that much of a difference because I got used to making a good wage, it still was barely livable, because I don't get child support, I don't get anything, so if it was barely livable then, and if I am ever going to get a car...or if I am ever going to get out of here...

So for the next year, from July of 2001 until August of 2002, Karen pieced together a variety of sources to make ends meet. Subsidized housing was a constant, despite the fact that Karen moved three times that year. Karen received TANF, food stamps, Medicaid, and child care through either Head Start or the WYCA, and she continued to donate her plasma twice a month. Fully dependent on welfare, she also knew her six month time limit to TANF would pass too quickly so she applied for dozens of jobs, in part to comply with her welfare-to-work requirements and in part to find a job that paid as the \$11/hr job she held at the construction firm a year earlier. Karen considered any part-time job,

even ones minimum wage work and jobs for which she was overqualified. But it was a slippery slope to negotiate if she was to maintain health care and the necessary child care subsidies for her daughters that allow her to work: "I won't lose my Medicaid if I take something that pays low enough. See, that's the whole thing. You have to think of something that pays low enough. I won't lose my Medicaid if I find something that pays low enough. I might be able to get help with day care, depending upon what my hours are."

However, for Karen, work has more than just economic benefits for her family. In her estimation, work hasn't yet been financially rewarding, "But at least they [daughters] wouldn't have to think we're poor. It would give me independence, a lot more strength to tell him [Gerardo] to hit the fucking road. Excuse my French, but right now, that's the way I feel."

Besides, Karen had worked for nearly all of her adult life, even while married and rearing her two older children. And, while she constantly expressed how much she loved her daughters, being alone with them all day and all night in a unairconditioned, sparsely furnished apartment was not how Karen thought of being a mother. She admits, "well, you know, I've never, ever imagined being a full-time mother." Even while she was married, Karen worked for the family business or attended community college. Clearly, the spheres

of work and mothering coincided in Karen's life, and work even allowed her to be the kind of mother that she wanted to be - one who provided material comforts for her family (Kalil 2000; Segura 1994).

However, as a single-parent, Karen faced barriers to fulfilling her desire to provide for her family by working. During June 2001-August 2002, Karen looked for a job she could manage along with her parental responsibilities. Karen was successful at finding either subsidized child care or pre-school programs for her daughters during the day, but less successful at finding a job that was limited to the hours of pre-school and child care facilities. Six months after receiving welfare benefits, and at the end of her time limit for cash assistance, Karen found a job through a temporary agency as an office assistant for a small construction firm. The job paid \$8 an hour, and it involved a complex web of bus rides and child care arrangements, and resulted in 14-hour days for Karen and her daughters. Karen managed the job, transportation, and child care for about two months before her job assignment ended. She was out of work for several more weeks before she desperately applied for and found a night shift position at a convenience store around the corner from her apartment. This arrangement was predicated on paying a neighbor with whom she became acquainted to watch her daughters at night. This informal

arrangement quickly fell through after Karen and her neighbor had a falling out over care giving arrangements and payment, and Karen left her night job.

After several more months, and about a year and a half after I first met Karen, she was still struggling but she achieved some stability. She joined Americorps and found a full-time appointment that paid a modest but consistent monthly stipend. This position was also during the day and coincided with child care hours. Perhaps more important than the stipend, Karen qualified for a child care subsidy and found a day care center in her neighborhood. She was also estranged from Gerardo at this time and had not heard from her husband in over a year.

Karen concluded one of our last interviews by saying, "that's how I make it, it's like everyday, day to day." She still did not feel she was anywhere near approaching self-sufficiency even though she had secured a job and child care. In her experience, which resonates with that of many other women, life is lived very much in a day to day existence as the fallout of child care arrangements, job loss, or relationship problems can quickly erode any stability and flexibility one may have attained.

SOCIAL NETWORKS: RESTRICTING OR ENGENDERING FLEXIBILITY?

While Karen had children as an adolescent, she did not immediately turn to public assistance. So what circumstances

allowed Karen to eventually become a part of the welfare system so late in life, after high school and some college, marriages, home ownership, and a series of paying jobs? As it was, Karen's personal life was punctuated with many features that made it remarkable she had avoided welfare until her mid-thirties. Personal violence, low wage jobs, and scant kin support were part of not only Karen's life but also the lives of all other women I interviewed. I argue that one resource that could not easily be quantified and thus disqualify a person from welfare benefits was one's social networks - who you could count on for a ride to work if you found a job, who could pick up your kids from day care if you missed a bus home from work, or who could fill an empty refrigerator with groceries between pay checks. Welfare case workers take an inventory of all the material resources that could be liquidated before welfare was disbursed, and asked about any kin that could be pressed into service for housing or financial support. But social resources are easier to disguise from "the system," and it is more difficult to quantify the value of a grandmother, partner, or neighbor who can consistently provide child care.

A distinction that emerged between women I interviewed who had some social networks to rely upon for child care and those who did not. Despite the availability of subsidized

child care, which is almost always helpful during the job search period, there are always gaps between the hours that child care facilities provide and the hours that employers offer. To fill that gap, women have to fall back on social networks, or forgo work until they can put together a system of formal and informal resources for child care.

A further distinction also emerged in the gendering of women's social networks. Women like Karen and Victoria (to be discussed in another section) frequently incorporated men into their social networks, even though such men were often a burden to them, and minimized reliance upon women friends, neighbors, and relatives. For instance, Karen maintained contact with Gerardo for the two years that I interviewed her, despite the fact that she regularly denied him entry to the apartment and that Gerardo disappeared from her life for days or weeks at a time. His inconsistent and infrequent financial contributions and occasional good moods were enough to stop her from completely cutting him off. But during the off-periods with Gerardo, I would often find a new 'friend' hanging around the apartment or lending her a car. Men often had cash to spare but were in need of a place to sleep or take a shower, and women like Karen were often in need of another adult to talk to and some extra assistance at the end of the month. Karen talked abstractly of marrying again but not with Gerardo. As I discuss in the

following chapter, women weigh many factors when considering marriage, and economic viability of partners is of particular importance.

Karen reflected on opportunities she had to be with other men and explained why she still remained committed to Gerardo:

The sad part is that when I was working, I had access to all these professional men, and all these professional men that wanted to take me out. And that wanted to have a relationship, long-term, eventually get married and all this. And I turned them down because I'm that type of person, if I'm committed to one person, I'm committed, and I turned them down because I was with Gerardo...he thinks I can't live without him. And I say, 'without you, I'd live 100 percent better.' Which I would, think about it, Beth [ethnographer]. So I don't know...that's the way life is here. The only reason he's still around is because I need help with some things for another month. One more month and I'm caught up and I don't need him anymore.

And, one month more turned into a string of eighteen months during which Gerardo was in and out of Karen's life, seemingly providing help and draining her resources at once. By allowing Gerardo into her social network, Karen was paying quite a high price for the financial help that he did reluctantly provide. What is more, many male partners, such as Gerardo, actually constrained or reduced the density of a woman's social network by not helping with domestic work and actively discouraging women from going out of the house to socialize, even with other women, for fear they would be unfaithful. The cumulative effect was that women in relationships with men often had less socially dense

networks with people outside their own household, and as a result, were more dependent on their male partner.

DEPRESSION: DISRUPTING FLEXIBILITY

Emily Martin's construction of individual flexibility (1994) offers many prospects for thinking about social processes at work within welfare reform. While women themselves must negotiate what they perceive to be rigid welfare policies, they must constantly maneuver through different roles simultaneously everyday as "single-parent", "employee," "student," and "survivor" as they struggle to "make it" by meeting expectations of caseworkers, employers, friends, and families. While flexibility as a strategy for survival is practiced out of necessity, ultimately, women often express a desire to return to normalcy, which they articulate in terms of financial and emotional stability.

Sometimes, however, strategies to be flexible and negotiate economic and social demands fall short, and women find themselves at odds with their desires and what is required of them by families, caseworkers, and public policies. Ethnographic studies indicate that turning to welfare is usually a last resort after women have utilized all other social and economic possibilities (Edin 1997). And throughout their experiences with welfare, some women articulate their material and emotional hardships in terms of feeling depressed.

The correlation between poverty and depression is already well-established; one recent study posits that as many as one quarter of women on welfare met the diagnostic criteria for major depression (Seifert et al 2000 in (Belle 2003). However, I focus on individual narratives of feelings of depression, although some women have been diagnosed by physicians and treated with medication. This is not to diminish the significance of depression as a physiological or psychological condition, but a way for me to connect the individual experiences of depression to a larger social context.

In Texas, TANF recipients usually qualify for medical care through the Medicaid program so long as they continually comply with welfare-to-work program requirements¹⁶. This allows access to at least primary care providers as well as some limited employment training and educational opportunities. Sonia, a mother of four boys under the age of 10, struggles to meet welfare-to-work requirements and family responsibilities. After one interview with Sonia in 2002, I wrote:

Sonia stopped going to her job at Goodwill Industries on Monday of this week. She basically asserted that it just became "too much for [her]" to work all day and that she did not feel up to it at this time. Sonia said: "I just stopped, it's easy, but I guess it's

¹⁶According to the Texas health and Human services Commission (Commission 2007).

just....I'm depressed, I don't know. Just didn't want to go, just didn't want to get up from bed...but they know, they know because I talked to them." When Sonia first began working at Goodwill three weeks ago, an employee asked her if she was depressed or under a lot of stress, and then offered to set up an appointment with a counselor. She hasn't yet talked to a counselor. Sonia says her level of stress is very high right now, "my bills and all that, and I told them at Goodwill...I told her about me getting stressed out and the depression...and I think getting someone to talk to, that could probably help me too."

Looking at Sonia's circumstances, it is not difficult to understand how women would articulate that they are depressed when faced with work requirements that seem overwhelming when coupled with already stressful life conditions. However, while therapy and counseling are two widely acceptable means of countering feelings of depression, Emily Martin notes that depression is now biologized to a great extent (2004). This context for depression has generated widespread public attention by the medical and pharmaceutical communities. A quick scan of television commercials and websites cautions that we may be approaching a "new," "silent," "epidemic of depression," while pharmaceutical companies market their medications as a ready solution to the disease. Many Americans now have access to information about medications through new forms of advertising and through primary care providers. In Sonia's case,

She has been taking Zoloft, which her doctor prescribed to her a few weeks ago. "The Zoloft is supposed to help me out, but I don't think it's.... I took it last night

and I could feel it, barely. I didn't feel it last night; I feel it right now. [How long have you been taking that?] I just started again, because I wasn't taking that for a long time. I tried it once or twice and I didn't like the way it made me feel, and this is the way I feel. It's like all calm, I guess because it's not me, that's why...." Sonia says that the Zoloft makes her tired and sleepy, and that the hot summer weather definitely compounds her feelings of depression, making her even more unmotivated to get up and move about.

And within the same day as my interview with Sonia, I interviewed Veronica. Veronica mentioned that she had seen a psychiatrist this month, and that she had been diagnosed with depression. She said the doctor recommended that she begin taking Zoloft for her symptoms of depression, but Veronica

"Did not want to start taking medication, because...most people I know that take Zoloft, they take it during the day. But the doctor had prescribed it to me to just take one before I go to bed, and I didn't finish taking them because I could get busy and I would forget. But when I was getting up in the morning, I was getting up with a different attitude in the morning. Like, I would get up with a better attitude, instead of being sluggish and not really wanting to do anything. And I guess that's what they were for. I was thinking, now that I'm on Medicaid, and going to see the psychiatrist on my own, and going to see what he was going to do." She has a second appointment next week with her psychiatrist and she will see if he can recommend some counseling or a different prescription for her.

The prevalence of Zoloft, a brand name anti-depressant, in these narratives is noteworthy. According to the Zoloft website, "Depression is not a sign of weakness or a character flaw. It is a medical condition." Here, depression is explicitly excised from any social or individual

circumstances; thus an individual solution to the medical condition is appropriate. What is more, Pfizer, Zoloft's manufacturer, recommends that the medication be taken for at least "6 months to 1 year. Studies have shown that to prevent depression from coming back, people should keep taking their medicine for at least 4 to 9 months after they feel better.¹⁷" This course of treatment conflicts with the ways some women are consuming their medication. Sonia took Zoloft for just a few days and Veronica took it for a few weeks before deciding to switch to a new prescription. Clearly, medication for depression has a particular meaning for women who are perhaps not fully informed by health workers about how long it takes for the medication to have any desirable results. Additionally, some poor women may choose to understand their depression as a situational or transitory set of feelings necessitating sporadic doses of medication rather than an ongoing medical condition requiring long-term treatment.

While many low-income women do have access to subsidized health care, the effectiveness of any medical treatment for depression presupposes continued access to affordable services, and this is an increasingly tenuous relationship as access to Medicaid becomes more difficult to

¹⁷ According to the manufacturer's guidelines.

obtain or maintain over time. In Texas, Medicaid eligibility has been described as "quite restrictive" by a recent (Wiener 1997) report on health policy for low-income people in Texas. Additionally, employment opportunities for low-income women are rarely accompanied by health insurance benefits. Inconsistent access to affordable health care can lead to the following scenario, as recorded in my field in from March 2001:

Lori says that she never really sees a doctor, but while we were in the car riding to the store, she told me about other ways that she tries to help herself if she doesn't feel well. She has occasionally self-medicated with Zantac for depression. She said that she would rather go to a doctor to get these things, but that she couldn't afford them at a pharmacy even if she were prescribed them now, so she sporadically takes these medications now when she feels she needs them. She said that her friend gets these things from Mexico.

Here, I call attention to Lori's use of Zantac, a medication for the treatment of ulcers, to self-medicate her feelings of depression. Regardless of whether Lori mistakenly said Zantac instead of Zanax, or is actually taking Zanax to treat her own depression, this narrative is significant. She only takes this medication sporadically as she has a need for it, but she also has no consistent access to health care to sustain any prescribed course of treatment.

In this analysis, I am not saying that screening, medication, and treatment are unnecessary or unhelpful to people who struggle with depression, but that quick

treatments to this problem still leave intact fundamental structural issues for women at risk of depression and poverty in the U.S. Because the link between depression and poverty is so well established, and many causes are identified, and because it is understood that depression can affect an individual's ability to be socially and economically productive, the social responses to poverty and depression have been largely directed at making individual interventions. Maintaining an individualized understanding of depression and poverty obscures the relationships that these experiences have with larger social, economic, and political conditions. Perhaps poor women articulate feeling depressed during the current period of transition from welfare to workfare due to the demands of flexibility. These findings may also represent a more exaggerated experience of what many U.S. women undertake everyday as they negotiate gendered roles with American dreams in an increasingly demanding market economy.

Above all, individuals now taking part in the welfare system are given a bounded and limited framework of support. After this period ends, individuals must assemble their own webs of financial and social support. While some women can effectively exercise some degree of flexibility, most are seriously limited and slip further away from self-sufficiency.

Chapter Four

Domesticating Responsibility: Marriage Promotion and Welfare Reform

INTRODUCTION

Recent reforms to U.S. welfare policies now include programs encouraging marriage among low-income families as a strategy to improve the overall well being of women and their families. Current marriage promotion policies are predicated on assumed economic and social benefits of traditional two-parent families while critiques of these policies focus on barriers to marriage and the limitations of marriage among low-income women. To be sure, the economic prospects for middle-class dual-income families are considerably better than for single-parent families. However, the attitudes of low-income women toward marriage and the projected social and economic benefits of marriage remain, for the most part, absent from discussions about marriage promotion.

As one component of welfare reform, federal marriage promotion programs have lasting economic and social effects. On the one hand, they redirect financial responsibility for citizens away from the state and onto individuals and families. On the other hand, they relay the message to poor

women that, in addition to wage-work, marriage to a man, and not employment and federal assistance, will provide social and economic security. However, women understand that relationships with men do not always provide economic and even deliverance from the social and economic hardships of poverty. Instead, many women focus on self-reliance and a combination of jobs, family support, and subsidized housing and child care to sustain their families.

In this chapter, I review recent welfare policy concerning marriage as a means to reduce the number of women and children in poverty to create a context for understanding the current debates surrounding low-income women and marriage in the U.S. I then review the narratives and life experiences on marriage among both married and never-married women in order to better understand their aspirations of marriage as well as their perceptions of the effects of marriage on their social and economic predicament. While my research builds upon the recent work of Edin and Kefalas (2005) and finds that women are still invested relationships with men, as well as in the idea of marriage, I aim to present a more complicated discussion of relationships and marriage that are not yet prominently featured in the political discourse about marriage among families in poverty. Issues such as complications associated with blended families, low wage work, and barriers to

continued public assistance affect women's considerations about marriage as an appropriate choice for them to improve their social and economic situation.

I discuss the life experiences of Ysenia, Lori, Sonia, and other women from San Antonio to reveal their attitudes toward marriage and family, and their changing perceptions of their own roles as women and mothers. Ysenia is a young, married Mexican-American woman with a five-year-old son when I met her. Though she is married, Ysenia had been estranged from her husband for at least two years before I first met her in 2001. She married her husband before the birth of their son and planned on a traditional, long-term relationship that included children. However, their relationship dissolved after the first few years, and Ysenia's views on relationships, family, and her own life began to change.

Lori is a never-married Anglo woman with two children by two different fathers, and she is in an on-and-off relationship with the father of her oldest child; the father of her younger child is a Mexican citizen with whom Lori has lost contact. Lori has no immediate plans to get married and instead focuses on working and going to college in hopes of providing a "decent" life for herself and her children.

Sonia is also a never-married Mexican-American mother of four boys who vacillates between relationships with the

father of her two older sons and the father of her two younger sons. When the father of her older sons is incarcerated, she found a new mate and had two sons; conversely, when he is incarcerated, the other father is released and she resumes her relationship with him. Sonia works sporadically and reluctantly and relies heavily on support, however inconsistent, from her sons' fathers and her own family. With no concrete plans for marriage in her future, Sonia has no intention of being single either. Sonia feels as if her choices in men are dominated by who will be not only a mate but also a father to her four boys.

Using Edin and Kefalas' (2005) analysis of women's choices and expectations of marriage and family, I add to this discussion the dimension of how attitudes toward marriage change through time. While Edin and Kefalis present these perspectives as fixed attitudes, I highlight the shifting attitudes reflected in women's narratives as they experience in marriage and relationships as they progress through different life stages and personal circumstances. Only 15 out of 51 San Antonio women interviewed in the WRAC study (discussed in the introduction) had ever been married, and out of those 15 women, all had been a single parent at one time as marriages dissolved or reformed. However, according to some of the women, while many men may not be marriage material, they can still function as fathers, some

even good ones. Instead of focusing on legally forming relationships through marriage, as either an intentional choice or as one of the only tactics available to them, women put together flexible constructions of family that may or may not involve marriage. What is more, by focusing on the life experiences and attitudes of low-income women on which marriage promotion policies are focused, it becomes apparent how marriage does not always lead to economic or social benefits for women and their families.

OVERVIEW OF MARRIAGE PROMOTION AND PRWORA OF 1996

Under the Clinton Administration, the initial provisions the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, what is commonly known as the beginning of federal welfare reform, include promoting economic family self-sufficiency through marriage as a means to reduce welfare dependency among low-income Americans (Anderson 1996). In following years, the Bush Administration made marriage a priority in welfare reform with the reauthorization of the Act in 2003 which further increased the policy focus on marriage as a poverty reduction strategy (Ooms 2004). The 2003 reauthorization implemented more specific incentives to marriage, including greater tax incentives for low-income married parents and increased funding for states to develop community-based programs to promote abstinence and marriage and to reduce non-marital

births (House 2002). For instance, Texas has implemented marriage incentives for welfare recipients which include the exclusion of the first six months of new spousal income when determining eligibility (Ooms 2004) and state and publicly-funded programs to promote marriage (Gardiner 2002). The inclusion of marriage in poverty policy discourse moves beyond the privatization of government services brought by neoliberalism and signals the formal inclusion of neoconservative ideals of morality into welfare reform.

However, the definition of marriage put forth in the PRWORA and subsequent revisions to "strengthen" families is limiting. While welfare policies are preemptive and aimed at preventing non-marital births, encouraging marriage and fortifying existing marriages, unmarried women who are already mothers, sometimes with children by more than one man, and separated or divorced women, are left out of the discourse, and perhaps more importantly, increasingly outside of the realm of support programs and resources. However, non-marital family arrangements persist for a great number of low-income women, many of which rely upon some form of welfare to sustain their families and supplement low-wage work.

Also overlooked is the reality that many low-income adults face when receiving welfare. Any additional income can quickly lower the amount of assistance and can make a

family ineligible for not only for cash welfare benefits but the valuable services and subsidies that are also available, such as housing subsidies, child care subsidies, Medicaid for children, or food stamps. These supporting services are often crucial to a family's survival, and many women acknowledge that it would be impossible to be economically self-sufficient on the income from one or two low-wage jobs.

What is more, marriage is more than an economic relationship, as even the policy language advocating "Healthy Marriages" recognizes (House 2002). These policies are also attached to gendered and classed experiences that prescribe middle-class perspectives of healthy marriages and assume the economic and social benefits associated therein. As Mink asserts, welfare policies in general reflect White middle-class mores (Gordon 1990).

Accordingly, policymakers outline two-parent families as the most suitable atmosphere in which to raise children, for both economic and social reasons, and moreover, they specify that married parents provide the "ideal environment" (House 2002). The policy further specifies that "cohabitation is not equivalent to marriage in promoting the well-being of children" because marriage rates decrease for cohabitating couples and separation rates increase (House 2002). Thus, policy about marriage indicates that "strong" and "healthy" families are formally married, fixed units as

opposed to committed couples, single-parents, or any other variation of friends or relatives raising children.

Likewise, ongoing national debates legalizing same-sex unions indicate that the definition of ideal and healthy families is limited further to heterosexual family arrangements.

While welfare policies are preemptive and aimed at preventing non-marital births, encouraging marriage and fortifying existing marriages, unmarried women who are already mothers, sometimes with children by more than one man, and separated or divorced women are left out of the discourse, and perhaps more importantly, outside of the realm of programs and resources. These are the family arrangements for the greatest number of welfare recipients.

Additionally, while policymakers state that married parents provide the ideal environment for children, there is little research that supports these claims. Conversely, ethnographic research indicates that women are more often able to provide stable and more suitable arrangements for themselves and their children outside of marriage (Churchill 1995; Edin 1997; Edin 2005; McLanahan 2000).

It is also important to recognize that ethnographic research indicates that marriage does not automatically improve a family's economic prospects and, in fact, Wells and Zinn (Wells 2004) assert that dual incomes, rather than

a male income, makes the difference between poor and working poor families. In other words, as these authors point out, "inequalities of social class and race predict that most poor single mothers are not just a husband away from economic well-being (Wells 2004).

As illustrated in this chapter, women are acutely aware of what is to be gained and lost in terms of marriage and make their choices accordingly. I devote some attention now to the family arrangements women make in lieu of marriage, such as self-reliance, involving extended family, and incorporating multiple fathers outside of marriage. There are significant reasons why women choose to have children out of wedlock, to cohabit instead of marry, to not legally wed the father of their children, or to make other social arrangements for their families. Of critical importance is fact that unmarried families take many forms that are not recognized by policymakers and unmarried adults may benefit even more from economic and social support that is recently being directed at marriage promotion programs.

MARRIED WOMEN: TESTING THE BOUNDARIES

In this section, I discuss examples of women working within and outside the category of marriage, reifying and stretching the boundaries. In these cases, marriage does not translate into economic stability or benefits for women and children.

Ysenia's situation: "I'm still married, but I'm not with my husband."

After leaving high school and the GED program completely during her sophomore year in 1993, Ysenia would "just, would stay home, stay home, go out with my friends, and stuff like that." A few years after leaving school, Ysenia met her husband, who was still a high school student at that time. She vividly explained to me how they met:

By his cousin, or his friend. (laughs)...I don't even know how I got his number. But then when I met him, he scared me! (laughs) Cause he was weird looking, he had a big old tongue ring here, you know, like roll his tongue out, and I was like, "Ooh-ie," [negligible]. And I, I forgot how I met him, I don't know if it was by phone, I know it was by phone, but I don't remember how I got his number, or what, we just started talking and then, he wouldn't leave me alone, he would all, he would even miss school to come to my house, "I don't wanna go to school," and stuff like that. He'd just come every day, every day, every day, and, just stuff like that, and then we, we decided to [be] together. (Laughs) [I: So you all dated like, for 9 months [or so] before you got married?] I don't know, cause we got together February 7th of 96. [I: And then you got married in?] September.

After she and her husband were married in a small church ceremony in San Antonio in September of 1996, they lived with Ysenia's father until after their son was born. Her husband went to high school during the day and Ysenia stayed at home with their infant son. However, after a house fire ravaged her father's house and left it without electricity or running water, Ysenia and her husband went to

live at a shelter. She describes that the main reason why they left for a shelter was because:

you know how the people get involved, the CPS [Child Protective Service] workers? Like you can't have a baby in that environment, cause there's no light, how we gonna see? So we had to live at the SMMM [San Antonio Metropolitan Ministries] Shelter. We lived there, I don't know how long. I don't remember how long. Maybe a half a month, we lived there. And, and that's when the SMMM [San Antonio Metropolitan Ministries] shelter helped me get this place.

Ysenia and her husband settled into their apartment and Ysenia began to take advantage of some of the resources available to her at Lincoln Heights. She started taking GED and parenting classes at AVANCE, and her husband left school and waited tables at a popular downtown restaurant on the Riverwalk. However, while her husband worked and participated as a father to their son, it was a difficult relationship for Ysenia. She explains:

I used to get beat up, he was jealous...Because he will put stuff in my head about my friends, you know...because I had to stay at home. Cook, clean. Come home and have dinner ready. Because if I went to the mall with one of my friends, when I got home, I'd get it. I'd get it.

Still, Ysenia stayed together with her husband and did not question the harsh realities of their marriage until he began a relationship with another woman.

Her husband moved out of their apartment in January 2001 and Ysenia and her son were living alone. For six months after she and her husband separated, Ysenia became

too depressed to live alone with her son and too scared to stay by herself at her apartment at Lincoln Heights. She stayed with friends and her father during the night and returned to her apartment periodically during the day. Ysenia describes her initial experience and shifting perceptions of marriage:

I got married at 18, but I thought we were going to be having our kids but I don't know what I did wrong, but I never put the blame on myself because I did everything for him. Everything. So, it was him. I was like, you chose that over your family? Fine. Go ahead. That's when I was depressed and everything

In her view, she fulfilled her image of marriage by having a child and making a home for her husband and son. Her husband was unfaithful to her and she left the marriage to be with another woman. Still Ysenia did not divorce him: "I'm still married, but I'm not with my husband. This year was 6 years. But we aren't together." Her reasons for staying married are complicated and Ysenia prioritizes his relationship with their son over her own hard feelings:

he is not mean and my son loves him...and he [husband] likes me to take him [son] over there. So I have no problem there, but he's not doing nothing...I don't miss him and I don't love him, I just care about him because he's my baby's dad.

However, as I got to know Ysenia, her attitude toward marriage and relationships with men kept evolving. By 2002, Ysenia had begun to work a weekend job and become more involved in AVANCE, a San Antonio organization that provides education and family support with counseling and parenting

classes. Ysenia was even a representative for the Lincoln Heights resident council. A friend let her use her car to take her driver's license exam and after she passed the test, she bought her first car, a 1989 Oldsmobile for \$1300, with her tax return. Her weekend job as a security guard, the car, and her GED classes during the week together helped ease the transition from being married and dependent on her husband to being a more self-reliant and resilient. In Ysenia's perspective,

Now I'm doing better. I started working. That's when I started working at the Court House and it was good, you know. So...I like it like this, better. I was all cooped up. I couldn't even have friends. Now I have friends visiting me and it's like, I like it. You don't have to worry about nobody. But it's nice to have a family and be with that person, but if you are fighting, if you are jealous, you are not going to get nowhere.

And being newly single meant that Ysenia expanded her social networks which was a change from her marriage. These friends were invaluable to Ysenia in the summer of 2002 when she could not pay her utility bills and was in danger of losing her apartment. According to Ysenia, everyone she knew "hustled" and pawned their VCR's, television sets, and jewelry and drove her downtown to pay her utility bill just in time. Ysenia was surprised and relieved at the unexpected generosity of her friends.

The story of how her friends helped her lead Ysenia to share with me her philosophy on how she lives her life and how she views men now:

I was taught to take care of my own bones and take care of myself...so I'm like, Girl, I ain't going to have a man here. If he ain't going to do nothing for me, go. If you like to get beat up and all this...I learned the hard way. I learned that a man, hey, and man touches you once, that's it. Because I didn't learn the first time. I learned after 4 or 5 times. The bad thing about me is that I give them chances. I will let them slide. The cops wouldn't take him. That was the bad the bad thing. If I ever went back, girl, I would have put him in jail all those time for hitting me. But it's like, you love this person, why would you do that. And I'm like, my son is seeing this. You got to think about your kids, girl, and forget about the man. They're just going to use you and find another woman. You know, make more kids over there. And you cannot keep a guy tied down if you have a kid with him. That's what some of these girls think...NO you cannot. No Ma'am..."

Furthermore, Ysenia intentionally resists expanding her family to include another male partner or more children for the foreseeable future. She states:

I'm just with my son. All my other friends have 3, 4, 5 kids. Everybody is like, 'how come you don't have any more kids?' Why do I need, if I can't really handle this one, and you know, financially or nothing, I don't want to have my kids all on welfare all the time, you know. I would like to pay for my own and do for me and then bring a kid in here. No, I'm not in no rush, girl, no. I'm still married, but I'm not with my husband. This year was 6 years. Be we aren't together."

When I asked Ysenia if her husband helps her financially, either voluntarily or through child support, she said:

No, nothing. Since we've been separated, let's see, he has not bought my son one single underwear, one single sock. Not even a pair of shoes from at least a thrift

store or nothing. Sometimes I send him [to visit] with little old clothes, to see if he comes back with something new. No. He was working when we were together, and then I sent him to child support, they took out \$69 out of his check...I was going to get \$69 every week. Well, then he goes quitting his job just because of the \$69...I'm like, this is your son...it would be different if it weren't and I wanted you to support him. But he asked me for DNA tests after 4 1/2 years...I was like, ok go for it. I just laughed. Yes, I just laughed in his face. I gave him the paper, I was like there, I will have more chance to getting my child support. Because they said they were going to put him in jail. I don't know how that goes, but now I know he owes me about \$3300 dollars...

Ysenia's experiences indicate that there is investment in marriage among low-income young women, as Edin and Kefalas (2005) maintain, but I find that these attitudes are not fixed and change over time as women get older, move into and out of serious relationships with men, marry, have children, and separate.

Ysenia chooses to maintain her marriage, if only in a legal sense, and strives for independence now for her and her son. She still values her husband's role as a father, a role that needed to be biologically reified by a DNA test during the separation negotiations, and that also has a monetary value attached to, in terms of child support payments and food, and clothing. Perhaps more importantly, maintaining some kind of a formal relationship with her son's father also allows him to provide child care for her son, and also allows her access to in-laws, another source of support. Maintaining some flexibility in her marital

configuration allows Ysenia to avoid any undesirable stigma or trauma of divorce and allows Ysenia to negotiate the resources available to her, and perhaps, more importantly, allows her to leave an opening for recuperating the marriage in the future.

Nora: Child Sharing

Finally, I turn my attention to Nora, a Mexican-American mother of three school-age girls. Nora is divorced from the father of her youngest daughter and has two other daughters with different fathers. She receives little support from any of the three men now, but Nora's younger sister lived with her and cared for her daughters while she worked at a convenience store every night. Additionally, Nora's sister took all of her Nora's children to live at her home in Florida during the summer of 2003 so that Nora could work even more and save money toward a down payment on a home.

About one year after I met Nora, she reflected on her decision to save money for a home. She said:

From where I was to where I am now, I've done a lot....I'm just ready to really settle down, you know, find that 'special someone' later on, 'cause I'm not looking for it, if it's pops up, it's there, if not 'ok,' I'm doin' it on my own. I want the house; I want them [her children] to grow up in their own house, where they can say, 'I have a house, I have a yard, I have my dog, I have something.'...Then they can see that they don't really need a man to really accomplish anything in their lives; they can be theirselves, independent girls, they want to go to college. I'm

installing in them that education is the thing, that's it.

Nora practiced what Stack described as child sharing across geographically separate but socially and economically related households (Stack 1974) as a strategy to allow her to work more and generate more earnings for her family. One important distinction here is that Nora is participating in the 21st century notion of child sharing, where her children are spread across family households located in states in different time zones rather than in the same neighborhood or city.

NEVER MARRIED WOMEN

Sonia: A Package Deal

In contrast with Ysenia, Sonia is a young woman of Mexican-American decent, never married, with four boys by two different fathers. She lived in the new addition to Alazan-Apache Courts, just one mile west of downtown San Antonio. Her apartment was just across Guadalupe St. from the one where she lived as a child in the older section of Alazan Apache. Sonia and her two siblings were raised primarily by her mother and they moved from Alazan to other subsidized apartments in west central San Antonio until they finally settled in 'the North side.'" Although her mother wanted Sonia to finish high school, school was hard for Sonia. Her mother worked a lot and Sonia was "on her own"

after school. In the middle of repeating ninth grade, Sonia dropped out after learning she was pregnant by her older brother's friend, Jerome. Her mother was angry, but even after her first son was born, she never returned to high school because "I was embarrassed to go back. Because I knew that my friends were going to talk and they weren't going to talk to me no more...they had some certain schools for pregnant girls" which Sonia did not want to attend.

Instead, she lived at home with her son until she was pregnant with her second son by Jerome. Her mother did not want her to move; even her brother did not want her to move in with Jerome, perhaps because he was familiar with his friend's lifestyle of stealing and using drugs. However, Sonia eventually moved in with Jerome and his family. She reflected back on her decision and said the reasons she cohabitated with Jerome were "I guess because I was pregnant and I wanted to be with him." After one year, Sonia was able to get a subsidized apartment at Alazan, but she moved back to her mother's house after Jerome was arrested for auto theft and drug possession. Although they were together for three years, Sonia says that "when he was with me, he was with all kinds of different girls. With me, he would come around when he wanted to sleep with me. That's it." Even though Sonia wanted to end the relationship, she was afraid to until Jerome went to prison. She described how "in court,

when they gave him his sentence, I took off. I said, 'it's my chance to leave.' He wouldn't let me leave his family or him."

Soon after Jerome went to prison, Sonia met Brian. She moved into his apartment and they eventually had two sons together. After a few years, Sonia moved into her own apartment at Alazan. She was still involved with Brian when I met her and he frequently stayed at her house. During interviews, Sonia frequently referred to Brian as her "husband," and it was several months before I found out from Lori, Sonia's neighbor and another respondent, that Sonia and Brian were not legally married. My assumption that they were legally married was reinforced when I would see Brian return home from work in the afternoon and start in on house work or making dinner. All the boys referred to him as their father and he took them all on fishing trips to Corpus Christi.

Despite Brian's introverted nature and Sonia's need to be more social, Sonia was quick to point out that Brian is "good with the kids" and the "one that pays me my bills." Brian would help watch all the boys when he had no work roofing houses although he was not supposed to be living in Sonia's subsidized apartment. Anyone not on the lease and whose income was not factored into the rent is not allowed to stay overnight in subsidized housing. Sonia joked about

this one day: "You don't see much things of Brian's...I guess they report you. But around here, I mean, God, that's all you see around here is nothing but men."

Sonia has only held two jobs, each for just a few weeks time, in the past two years. She cites the stress of working and raising four boys, combined with the absence of any sustained social support, as her reason for not maintaining her jobs in seafood and barbecue restaurants. Sonia is not eager to go back to work and has instead relied on her family or son's fathers for their financial support. She commented, "I wouldn't be sitting here with all this (motioning towards the furniture and washing machine in the apartment) without him (Brian)." Sonia says that until her youngest son reaches school age, it will be hard for her to get a job and afford childcare for four children. She says that once she finishes her GED and gets a job, she will have to pay a percentage of her income for childcare; "I'll be paying something for it, I'm sure."

Sonia was with Brian, the father of her two oldest sons and he supported them "until he went to prison. Well, not really all the time, sometimes, but when I was with him he did...When I met the [younger] boy's dad, 'cause I told him 'If I'm going to have a baby by him, to support the other kids', that's what I told him."

Sonia's two oldest sons

never see him (their father), they were little [when he went to prison], they never seen their dad. I know they are probably going to have some hate against him. Because they were little. Jerome Jr. was one, and James was six months. And they know about their dad, but Brian is the one...I told them that 'he has been there for you; he's the one that has raised you. If it weren't for him, who knows where we would be at.' Because I didn't have anything back then, none of this.

However, in the fall of 2002 Brian was incarcerated for buying cocaine from an undercover police officer. His arrest coincided uncannily with Jerome's release from prison.

Jerome immediately located Sonia and their sons. Despite her initial reasons for leaving the relationship, including his criminal activity and violent temper, Sonia was under financial stress after Brian was incarcerated and Jerome seemed to accept her two younger sons fathered by Brian. In her estimation, they could be in a relationship "as long as he [Jerome] gets along with my kids, because if not, it would be something different."

Sonia expressed repeatedly that she was a "package deal" for any male suitors; she came complete with her four children and anyone that wanted her time or energy had better be ready to contribute to the household economically and socially. Sonia described her relationship with Jerome as different than it was when they were together 10 years ago because Sonia has her own apartment now, whereas when she was younger, they would stay with Jerome's sister or

mother; she notes "now, it's like I have my own place and he's here with ME."

Jerome is 31 now. She first became involved with him when she was 15. She says ambivalently, though, that being with Jerome "is better, I guess..." than being with Brian, the father of her two younger sons. Although Sonia recognized it had only been a matter of months since Jerome left prison, he gave her more attention than Brian did, and they go out of the house more as a family, which Sonia enjoys. Still, she is very pragmatic about her future with Jerome, and frankly stated that, "he says he doesn't want to go back there [to jail], but he'll probably mess up."

By oscillating between the two fathers of her children, Sonia is able to maintain relationships with both, garnering social and economic support, and still provide a father for her sons. As Sonia's experiences illustrate, many men live difficult lives with few opportunities as well. Women like Sonia are very aware of the hazards that can befall men and therefore tend to prioritize men as fathers, and less frequently, if at all, as marriage partners.

Lori: Single and stable

Lori, then 26-years-old, lived next door to Sonia at Alazan with her two children in public housing in central San Antonio when I met her in the fall of 2000. Her son, Victor, was 7-years-old and her daughter, Annie, was one

year. She considers Victor to be half White and half Mexican-American because his father is of Mexican-American descent, and her daughter is also half White and half Mexican because her father is a Mexican national, although Lori notes that no one speaks very much Spanish¹⁸

Originally from Chicago, Lori was one of two women I interviewed, both White, who moved to San Antonio from out of the state. Her family of origin is of German and Polish decent and Lori says she is "Caucasian or white".¹⁹ The earliest memories that Lori has of living in a house are from Chicago:

We lived in the suburbs...it was nice...it was a real pretty house, I remember it was a real pretty house. We had a basement, and my Dad, he was making, he made good money. He was an alcoholic so we lost everything. My mom left him and that's when we moved over here to San Antonio.

Lori moved to San Antonio with her mother and brother when she was six-years-old. Her parents were married for eight years before they divorced and her father moved to several different states before settling in Kentucky a few years ago. I asked Lori to describe her father to me and she

¹⁸ Even though her son Victor was only six, she said, "I don't know if he'll ever go with a white girl, most of his friends are Mexican-American. He'll sit there and tell you 'I'm both.' He doesn't say one or the other."

¹⁹ Lori's identifying term.

said, "He was really intelligent. He worked for Zenith and my mom told me he used to make like fifteen dollars an hour back in the seventies."

However, despite being a good provider for the family, her father drank and gambled, and her mother could not handle the stressful marriage. According to Lori, her mother "had her first nervous breakdown, and after that they split up. He left us and I didn't see him since I was like six years old until I was eighteen." After her mother's breakdown, Lori and her brother stayed with her father briefly before her mother's sister moved them down to San Antonio.

Despite their past difficulties, after moving to San Antonio, Lori's parents made one last attempt to rekindle their marriage. Lori describes how this experience ended:

He took us to Kentucky and he brought us back. And he told my mom 'I'll be back.' They sold the house. They got like a large clump of money. They bought a car. And he told my mom 'I'll be back, I'm going to go find a job.' In Austin, or something, he told my mom. He left us after Kentucky. We went to Kentucky, him, my sister, me, and my brother. And then we came back and he told my mother 'I'm going to go find a house.' He took the car and never came back, never. Not until I graduated from high school. Never called, never nothing. And we had a brand new station wagon. I remember that. To this day he'll say 'it was your mom this, your mom that.' You can remember certain things, you know. I think I was seven the second time.

After her father and mother separated for the second and final time, her mother's mental health deteriorated, and Lori and her brother moved constantly between relatives,

foster homes, and group homes throughout San Antonio. Somewhat miraculously, Lori earned her GED and began working at 16. She liked her first job at McDonalds, which she began working at night after high school, and was quickly promoted to a managerial position. After graduating from high school, she took a higher paying job as a night cashier at a convenience store and began a weekend job working for friends at a large outdoor flea market on the outskirts of the city. It seemed like Lori took easily to work and thrived on being independent even as an adolescent. She also wanted to be a professional woman and attended community college to study business off and on after high school. The entire time I interviewed Lori, from 2000-2003, she worked, sometimes during the week as well as on the weekends, in addition to taking college classes.

When Lori was 19, she was working the 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. shift at a convenience store. There she met Victor Sr., the man who would become her son's father, and moved in with a more rowdy group of friends and her house became the staging ground for nightly parties that eventually led to her eviction. In hindsight, Lori thinks that moving in with her friend accelerated the seriousness of her relationship with Victor's father because she began spending more time with him and soon became pregnant with Victor. Eventually, she quit the convenience store because she didn't want to

work the night shift while she was pregnant and her boss wouldn't let her work the day shift. Without her own apartment, she moved in with Victor Sr.'s family.

After about two years, Lori, Victor Sr., and their son moved out of Victor's grandparent's home and into their own house. It was a run-down house on the outskirts of the city and they both had to work to pay the rent. She was going to school and working at this point as well, and her relationship with Victor's father was strained because of his drinking. Lori was never much of a drinker, and hardly ever had a beer after her son was born. Her aversion to alcohol, fueled by experiences with her own father, made her particularly reactive to men and alcohol abuse. She wanted to leave the relationship, but was afraid she would not be able to support herself and Victor.

In similar fashion with other women I interviewed, Lori moved into a shelter and then public housing after leaving a long but turbulent relationship with her son's father. She described this period in her life:

I lived in this women's shelter for a while. I got into a bad fight with his dad, and he hit me real bad...So I came in there with the cops and I took him [Victor] to a shelter. And I stayed away from him [Victor Sr.] for like a month. And there I go like an idiot going back to him. I didn't stay in the women's shelter too long. I stayed there for a couple of days.

Lori had been involved with Victor Sr. off and on for about 10 years when I met her. She describes her tenuous relationship with her son's father:

He can manipulate me really good [Victor Sr.]. And I was always vulnerable to him, I don't know why. Sometimes I see myself...Like he still can...I don't know what it is. I know it's not love, or maybe it's just stupidity. But he still can make me think he's a better person when I know he's not. I couldn't see myself going through that again.

After a short stay at a shelter downtown and then with a friend, Lori and her children moved to a two-bedroom apartment in 1999. Though Lori had never received cash welfare benefits, she did qualify for food stamps and a housing subsidy that allowed her to live at Alazan-Apache Courts and pay reduced rent.

Throughout my fieldwork, Lori was in regular contact with the father of her oldest child; the father of her younger child is a Mexican citizen with whom Lori has lost contact. Lori lived independently from any of her immediate family in subsidized housing and worked on the weekends and took classes at a junior college during the week. Toward the end of my study, Lori secured a full-time job in customer service for a major financial corporation but still kept working her weekend job.

Despite any difficulties between them, Lori never disparaged Victor Sr. as a father. Victor Jr. always spent weekends and holidays with his father, which allowed Lori to

keep her weekend job at the flea market. Victor Sr. is "real helpful" to Lori, and one weekend when I visited Lori, she described how she had recently been sick and Victor Sr. volunteered to take care of both Annie and Victor so she could recuperate:

he showed up on Friday, he came to pick up Victor from school and he was at the house he said he would come and watch the kids and he did. I slept; I fell asleep as soon as I got home, Friday and Saturday. He went to the store and he bought me some soup.

While Lori and Victor Sr. have both had other relationships, neither has ever married, and Victor Sr. has no other children besides Victor. This perhaps allows him to be more involved with his son than other fathers I met, especially fathers with multiple children by different mothers. However, when they broke up Lori quickly became pregnant with her daughter, Annie, by another man. They were only together for about six months and, in hindsight, Lori said she knew when she was dating Annie's father that he probably wouldn't support her and her child. She broke up with him when she was several months pregnant and since he is not residing in the U.S. legally, she has no recourse to collect child support. He infrequently contacts Lori and rarely sends her money through Western Union. She feels that Annie's father is fortunate that she receives aid from the state and federal government to help pay for her birth and delivery and now, her health and housing.

Lori was always reluctant to talk about Annie's father with me, especially while a tape recorder was present, and spoke of him infrequently and with contempt in her voice. She used several expletives to describe her last conversation with this man over the telephone. She was fearful of the "government" finding out about the unreported support, however infrequent, from Annie's father:

He would never sign a paper or anything...and he's never going to send it to me again...it's extra...but I'm supposed to report it... They want me to go after him for child support for Medicaid, but I can't...because he's not a citizen, and even if I tell them that he's here, they'll look for him and deport him [and then I'd never get anything from him.]

If he ever becomes a legal resident, Lori admits that she will pursue him for child support. Now, though, she must take his deportation papers to her welfare caseworker because "they will take my Medicaid if I don't cooperate...You have to cooperate...But I don't have his address...all I know is the phone number..."

However, Lori would prefer not to rely on either man or public assistance to support her family. Instead, she anticipates an entirely different life: "Eventually, hopefully I will be off of the system. But it's a hard thing to do. Just to find some work and hopefully you can make enough to be off the system and live comfortably."

Lori hasn't had any serious relationships with men besides the fathers of her two children in the past three

years. This is mainly because she does not want to have anymore children right now, and, in her estimation, being involved with a man seems to result in having children. At one point during my fieldwork, a coworker showed an interest in Lori by buying her cigarettes and asking to take her out. She thought he would be a good person to be with because he is stable, owns a house and a truck, and is a few years older than she. However, she eventually stopped returning his affections. At 27, she had enough of relationships with men for a while because relationships were costly to her and she wanted to protect her family from any unnecessary upheavals.

Perhaps most importantly, as a single parent, and with the assistance of welfare, she had been able to achieve some amount of stability for herself and her children. "I have a place to stay, I have two healthy kids, and I have a car. It don't run that good, but I have it. I have a job. I could be doing worse." Speaking from a point of confidence and experience, Lori asserted that it was best for her to not rely on men for a while because "If you're real weak, somebody can bring you down. That's why I don't want no man to bring me down like that. Your kids suffer in the long run."

Barb: Strength in Numbers

In contrast with the Sonia, Ysenia, and Lori's arrangements as single-parents, I also encountered women who do receive sustained assistance from family members as well as fathers. When I met Barb, she was a twenty-nine-year-old White mother of three daughters, all by different fathers. She had her first child when she was 14 and relied greatly on family support for several years. But as an adult, she has worked in manufacturing jobs and relied on welfare in between jobs. Her mother and stepfather lived with her in a house trailer that Barb owned. In exchange for a place to live, Barb's mother, who was temporarily unable to work, cared for her eighteen-month-old granddaughter and school-age granddaughters during the day while Barb worked.

Barb never married and instead relied on her immediate family and the families of her children's fathers to help her raise her family. Barb's family arrangements allowed her to work full-time and make payments on her house trailer while her daughters were being looked after in their own home. In this situation, kin support for child care promoted a woman's entry into the work force and contributed to her ability to continue working.

Barb negotiates complex, yet helpful arrangements with the fathers of her children. For instance, in addition to financial support, she says the father of her youngest

daughter, "usually comes on the weekends to take her; it gives me a break and gives my mom a break...his family does help me out a lot with stuff like that. If I need for somebody to watch her, his mom will help me out."

Additionally, her second oldest daughter visits her father and his family out of state every summer and she receives child support for her two oldest daughters.

Despite all of the ways in these men function as fathers for Barb, none have been marriage material. Of her latest boyfriend and father of her youngest daughter, she said to me one afternoon, "You know how men are though, you can't depend on that. They say one thing and do another [laughs]." Barb said that she and her boyfriend "sometimes get along, more or less. But sometimes, he gets in moods where he wants to drink and I tell him, 'when you want to drink, I don't want to be around you.' Because he's ugly."

It is important to point out that in Barb's case, it takes several adults - her parents, the fathers of her children, and their families - contributing finances and child care to sustain her family. Recalling Wells and Zinn's (2004) words, Barb is "more than just a husband away from economic security." Until Barb finds a partner that behaves appropriately for her, she is determined to keep men at a distance by controlling their access to her home and choosing not to settle for any particular man in marriage.

MARRIAGE, THE DREAM, AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY

The narratives of self-sufficiency indicate the gendered identities that women create for themselves and in turn, model for their children. For Nora, Lori, and Barb, it is work and family first, and then they may turn their focus to husbands and marriage. Edin and Kefalis (2005) assert that low-income women want what middle-class women want, which is to be established economically before they marry so that they may participate in more equitable and meaningful relationships with men and, in turn, many women are willing to delay marriage for these reasons.

I also reflect on Rayna Rapp's concern with the normalization of nuclear families to better understand the family choices women construct and welfare reform's marriage promotion. Rapp warns that, "Kinship has been overtly politicized as the material conditions of sexuality, marriage, and maternity are transformed" (in Collier 1997), and she also notes that changes in families, such as the ones I described for Lori, Barb, and Nora's families, are usually labeled negatively and marked as a decline.

As the ethnographic research presented in this dissertation indicates, despite the fluidity of their relationships, non-nuclear families may not be as fragile and unstable as policymakers contend, and many women do try

to cultivate sustainable relationships between children and fathers and between themselves and men instead of marriage.

In terms of welfare policy, women and men require sustained economic and social support that allows them a stable economic foundation on which to base their relationships. Women, especially those that have already been married, realize the risks associated with relying primarily on a husband to improve their economic status. Instead of uplifting them, reflecting back on Lori's words, it can often bring you down, I argue that there is a need for continued welfare support for low-income women so that they may create families of their own choosing and enter marital relationships from an economically and socially empowered position.

All these women have experiences with men that lead them to believe that they can be no worse off, if not better off, as a single parent than cohabitating or being married to their child's biological father. In this frame of reference, women tend to resist the possibility of marriage as a way to improve their social and economic circumstances in order to retain a bit of flexibility. By delaying marriage until they are older, or eschewing it entirely, women create the possibility to maintain relationships with some of their children's fathers, rely on family support

networks if available, and develop a sense of independence and accomplishment along the way.

Chapter Five

Wage Work or Care Work?

INTRODUCTION

Working is, above all, one decision out of the multitude of choices that women must contend with as they weigh the well being of themselves and their dependents against receding public services and family benefits. However, a women's range of possibilities out of which she chooses whether to work are circumscribed by the available material and social resources, her own personal experiences and aspirations, and larger, social factors such as the current economic demand for wage-labor. This assertion follows from recent anthropological literature that reformulates perceptions of poverty as a gendered experience that must be critiqued in the context of changing social structures, communities, and globalizing trends (Abramovitz 1996; Franklin 2001; Newman 1988).²⁰

In keeping with welfare reform policies, which emphasize work and family self-sufficiency, there is

²⁰ Selections from this chapter appeared in "Flexible Families" from *Doing Without: Women and Work after Welfare Reform* by Jane M. Henrici, editor. © 2006 The Arizona Board of Regents. Reprinted by permission of the University of Arizona Press.

considerable pressure for low-income women to meet all the obligations placed on them by caseworkers, employers, children, and, more implicitly, American social structures. However, not all women respond to these social and economic pressures in the same ways. Women may have diverse attitudes toward work and family that vary across time and place. Segura found that U.S.-born Mexican women living in the United States are more likely to identify with American ideals that venerate women's domestic roles and to express ambivalence toward women's economic roles as wage-workers, while, according to Segura, Mexican women living in the United States do not view work and family as conflicting spheres (1994).

Similarly, racial and ethnic minority women and their families have been thought of homogeneously as having extended and stable kin networks that support their participation in the workforce. However, individual narratives such as the following comment from Veronica, a young woman who alternately identifies as White or Mexican-American, destabilize this position. At one point during the project, Veronica lived in the same subsidized housing complex as her mother and younger siblings. When I asked Veronica if her family members were available to care for her son while she worked, she exasperatedly replied:

Everyone says why don't I ask my mom. Well, my mom is not the kind of person that—she's not going to help me out. I have to pay her every single time—15, 20 dollars, even if it's just for two hours.

What is more, assumptions about women's kinship and support networks efface structural barriers to workforce participation, such as low wage rates for women, increasing child care costs, and access to education. As Table 6.1 illustrates, several factors are involved in the experience of moving from welfare to work for one woman.

Table 6.1: Work-related Activities and Child Care Arrangements for Veronica, 1999-2002

	1999		2000	2001		2002	
TANF		Yes		Yes		Yes	
Job Training/ Education				Certified Nursing Assistant			
Employment 21	\$8/hour		\$7/hour		\$7/ hour		
Child Care	Subsidized care			Subsidized care			
Reason for Leaving Employment	Job hours extended beyond available child care		Domestic violence precipitated absences from work and termination	Subsidized care arrangements did not meet work hours		Waiting for child care subsidy	

The obstacles that Veronica experienced included obtaining and utilizing child care subsidies as well as undergoing intense periods of domestic violence that precipitated a total disruption of work, child care arrangements, and, finally, welfare benefits. Bell et al

21 Amounts represent hourly wage.

explore further the relationship between domestic violence and workforce participation among welfare recipients (2006). Simply put, the transition from welfare to self-sufficiency through employment is not a seamless process.

However, it is important to note that for all of the women referenced in this chapter, access to subsidized child care is related to attaining and maintaining employment. Table 6.2 illustrates Lori's experiences with work, education, and child care.

Table 6.2: Employment, Education, and Child Care Experiences for Lori, 1999-2002

Variable	1999	2000	2001	2002
Employment				
Weekend	\$8/hour	\$8/hour	\$8/hour	\$8/hour
Full-time	---	---	\$8/hour	\$8/hour
Education				
	Junior college	Junior college	---	---
Child care				
	Subsidized child care	Subsidized child care	Subsidized child care	Subsidized child care

A 28-year-old mother, Lori works full-time during the week and at a flea market each weekend. She has completed some college courses toward a business degree and now works for a financial corporation. During interviews, she often

commented on the subsidized child care she received from the Texas Workforce Commission. At one point she asserted:

If it wasn't for CCMS [Child Care Management Service], I couldn't work.... I couldn't pay the day care, plus rent.... Most of the time, I work Saturdays, too.... I need extra money because, you know, for groceries and stuff around the house.

Lori, a White mother with a daughter and son fathered by two men of Mexican-American decent, arranged for her daughter to attend day care during the week at the Inman Center at Alazan-Apache Courts while her son attended school. Her son's aunt received a subsidy to care for both children each weekend. This assistance allowed Lori to work more than full-time. Lori and her children recently moved out of a public housing complex and into a new subsidized house, where Lori has the option to apply her rent toward the mortgage. Working as much as she was able and moving toward her goal of home ownership were two components of Lori's desire to "do better" for herself and her children. Yet a second job was necessary for Lori to make ends meet, and groceries were still considered "extra" for her household. Lori's experience highlights the fact that self-sufficiency for a single parent may require subsidized child care and a sustained period of working more than full-time.

Despite various obstacles, some women positively frame the prospect of working as a means to individual and financial independence that will allow them to feel that

they are "doing better" for their children and themselves. Indeed, most welfare recipients actively counter prevailing conceptions of them as lazy or dysfunctional, sometimes criticizing and distancing themselves from neighbors and kin whom they perceive as unmotivated to "do better" for themselves. The desire to "do better" is intimately connected to providing their children with material resources and a better place to live.

However, poor and working-poor women with young children unanimously cite child care as one of the many factors related to achieving their own goals toward work, as well as the expectations of caseworkers and members of the public sphere. Often a woman's opinions about work are paired with an expectation for state assistance with child care and household expenses. Women frequently speak to the futility of single-handedly negotiating work requirements and parental responsibilities. Karen, an articulate White mother of two young daughters, expressed her frustration at attempting to work and meet the child care needs of her preschool-age children.

Karen stated that the difficulties arranging child care around her employment prospects had been

a nightmare...I just passed a job by last week. It was a second-shift job, like from 3:30 to 12:30 a.m. I couldn't do that.... And it paid pretty good, but it was second shift. I wouldn't have anybody to watch them at night. Plus they are in school, and I want them to continue to go to school. I wouldn't have anybody to

pick them up that I would trust and rely upon.... So what was I going to do? I just told them I couldn't do it.

Karen, like Veronica and many other low-income women, was often put in a stressful predicament when she conducted a job search. Low-income women are often underemployed and spend periods of time cycling between employment and underemployment. Both Veronica and Karen had skills and job opportunities, but, for them, taking a job was impossible without reliable child care.

Encouragement from caseworkers to rely on kin for child care may only compound a mother's frustration with the effort to meet expectations of self-sufficiency. As K. Newman contends, welfare workers' anticipation of kin support rests on an assumption of traditional roles of elder women as caretakers, not as working women (Newman 2001). Recent ethnographic work illustrates that with the implementation of PRWORA, older women are being drawn into the workforce, either for the first time or after an extended pause (Edin 1997; Newman 1988). Veronica completed her certification as a nursing assistant in a program sponsored by the Texas Workforce Commission⁵ in 2001. However, it was a struggle for her to find a job that made use of her new skills and accommodated her five-year-old son's school schedule. Even though she lived near her mother and frequently spent time with her family, Veronica couldn't count on her mother to help her with child care because her

mother already worked full-time to support Veronica's three school-age siblings and to supplement her Social Security benefits. Veronica explained,

I don't have any family support for them to help me watch my son. My mom works from eight in the morning till 9:30 at night. The only other people that are here are my two sisters that are in high school and my younger brother. So, as far as family support, I don't have nobody to watch him. If I did, I wouldn't be on TANF. I'd be out there working and going to school at the same time.

There were positions available for nursing assistants during the daytime, when her son attended preschool, but, Veronica stated,

The shifts are from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.... And they don't start breakfast at school until 7:30.... So I guess I'll have to keep looking for one that starts at eight.... And there's nobody that I know that would watch him for that amount of time, every day.

Thus, Veronica could not rely on her mother to watch her son before and after school each day, so she continued to look for work and a child care arrangement she could afford.

Her experience illustrates the unintended consequences of welfare reform described by K. Newman (1998) and Kingfisher and Goldsmith (2001) on women who are expected to draw upon informal care provided by family, friends, and neighbors. While seminal work by Stack (1974) highlights the complex social networks between women and other female kin within and beyond the nuclear family, more and more women who previously cared for other children in their home as

part of a complicated informal exchange network are now being required to perform wage labor outside their home and to make arrangements for the care of their own children. This is not to say that social networks are no longer an important support system for low-income women but rather that these networks are increasingly unable to provide consistent and low-cost child care necessary to sustain women's work efforts.

Meyers et al. point out the increasing demands for formal child care providers and child care subsidies as women of all ages enter the workforce (Meyers 2001). The demand for subsidized child care increases concurrently with the number of women redirected into the workforce. In San Antonio, many mothers commented that child care subsidies are often depleted long before the end of the state's fiscal year. To cope with the rising demand on finite and already scarce subsidies, women are encouraged to draw upon resources that they feel their family members cannot or should not be expected to provide. However, while many low-income women I interviewed agree with the premise of welfare reform and the significance of employment, they still expect the state to subsidize what they and their social networks cannot. Some women even noted that they applied for TANF specifically to receive secure subsidized child care while

they searched for work, with the incentive that they will be able to maintain this subsidy after they begin working.

Within welfare reform, all individuals are held to the tenets of self-sufficiency through employment regardless of gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic position, or personal circumstance. What is more, the emphasis on work operates from the assumption that women's kin are available and willing to provide support (Oliker 2000). Thus gender, along with class and ethnic differences, is elided from emerging public-policy discourse about working women. Some respondents reacted against demands to work made by caseworkers and welfare reform policies, resisting the pressure to embrace their roles as potential workers. Lori, Ysenia, Sonia, and Veronica described their struggles to arrange child care around work schedules and their subsequent resignation that they would "just have to wait until they [the children] go to school."

Child care limitations, combined with the available transportation, educational, and employment resources, are some of the persistent causes that these women cited for abandoning expectations of working, at least temporarily. Sonia had only worked twice, for a few weeks each time, in the past two years. She cited the stress of working and raising four boys, combined with the absence of any sustained social support, as her reason for not maintaining

her jobs in seafood and barbecue restaurants. Ysenia worked intermittently as a security guard on weekends in various places around San Antonio, and she relied entirely on her mother-in-law or estranged husband to watch her four-year-old son during court-ordered visitation times. However, Ysenia became increasingly concerned about her son's well-being when he spent time alone with her husband and his girlfriend, and so she was reluctant to leave him in their care beyond the visitation period. These factors, combined with the fact that she was unable to secure a job in her desired position as a security guard during the abbreviated weekday hours when her son attended a Head Start⁶ program, contributed to her lagging motivation to look for a job until her son was enrolled in kindergarten in the fall, when he would have a longer school day and the possibility of after-school activities.

FORMAL CHILD CARE AND FLEXIBILITY

While acquiring subsidized or affordable child care is initially important, women must still contend with stringent schedule restrictions when considering work opportunities. Providers and preschools often strictly enforce policies regarding pickup times and payments. Mothers operate under extreme fear and intimidation about returning for their children by a certain time at the end of the day. Karen, a mother of two preschool-age girls, described her experience

at a Head Start center and at a YWCA, where late-pickup penalties ranged from fines to reports to caseworkers to, in extreme cases, the termination of a child care subsidy. Being released late from a job by a manager or missing a bus can be ruinous to a parent's day care arrangements.

Hence, there is an inherent contradiction at work on poor mothers trying to negotiate employment and formal child care arrangements, which points to a central contradiction for low-income working mothers: A woman must remain flexible in order to optimize her chances for employment, yet she is not allowed the benefit of flexibility within all other aspects of her life in terms of children's schedules, child care provider's hours, and work responsibilities. Martin's conception of flexibility (1994) also offers many prospects for thinking about social processes at work in the lives of women in San Antonio. While women must negotiate what they perceive to be rigid welfare policies, they must maneuver every day in numerous ways, shifting between various and overlapping identities as single parent, employee, student, and survivor as they struggle to "make it" and meet the expectations of caseworkers, employers, friends, and families. While flexibility as a strategy for survival is practiced out of necessity, women ultimately express a desire for a return to an imagined unbounded period of

stasis, which they articulate in terms of financial and emotional stability for their families.

CHOOSING CARE

As welfare reform policies mandate, all recipients are initially evaluated for their projected ability to work, but child care responsibilities (as well as care for elderly or disabled kin) do not exclude an applicant from work requirements. As Skinner et al assert, this fact makes it particularly difficult for women with disabled children or family members to maintain employment (Skinner 2006). Within welfare reform, care giving is constructed as a temporary, private problem, not a long-term, public concern. Nor is parental child care prioritized in the same way that wage work is for welfare recipients. As a result, limited amounts of subsidized funds for child care have been made available to women, and time limits for welfare benefits reduce opportunities for women to be primary caregivers to their own children.

However, many respondents do indeed consider parenting young children as work, which is why they desire to delay wage work outside the home until their children are old enough to attend school. When faced with work requirements and time limits to benefits, many low-income women emphasize the necessity for sources of formal child care arrangements that will allow them to work. Arrangements with subsidized

and affordable day care providers are articulated in contrast to informal arrangements with friends or relatives, which usually occur in the context of a reciprocal exchange, initiating a series of obligations for mothers that are financially and emotionally taxing.⁷ In some cases these costs outweigh the perceived benefits of working, and, what is more, for some women informal child care arrangements are not even perceived as available or possible.

Negotiating child care and working is very difficult for women who arrived in San Antonio more recently. While some women, such as Veronica, had kin networks available, albeit unwilling or unable to help, Karen, a thirty-six-year-old mother who recently moved to San Antonio, had no kin networks on which to depend for child care when she worked. Karen had no relatives or friends in San Antonio other than members of her partner's family, and she repeatedly identified herself as "all on my own" with "no one to depend upon" where child care was concerned. Karen had worked temporarily as an office assistant and as a cashier and had participated in the required programs under the Texas Workforce Commission. Nevertheless, she felt that her options for work were acutely reduced by her availability between the weekday hours of 7:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m., when her daughters attended a charter preschool near the public housing complex where they lived. She stated that

she needed more help with child care to get on her feet again. She was willing to pay for child care, but she needed a job before that would be possible. In the event that she did find full-time or part-time employment as a cashier or in an office, she doubted she would be able to spare more than \$80 a week for child care, at least initially, which was about half the cost of care for two children by a licensed provider.²²

Table 6.3 presents a brief sketch of Karen's most recent struggles to attain economic independence through employment.

²² In 1999, the average price of weekly full-time child care for one infant or toddler was eighty-two dollars; the average price for the same amount of child care for a child of pre-school age was around seventy-two dollars in Bexar County (where San Antonio is located) These averages consider the costs of care in child care centers as well as private homes (Agencies 2005).

Table 6.3: Periods of Employment, TANF Receipt, Residential Mobility, and Subsidized Child Care for Karen, 2001-2003

	2001				2002			2003	
TANF	---	---	Yes	Yes	Yes	---	Yes	---	
Employment ²³	\$12	\$12	---	---	---	\$8	---	Americorps	
Subsidized child care	---	---	Yes	---	Yes	---	---	Both children in preschool	
Domestic violence	---	---	Yes	---	---			---	
Residential mobility	TX	TX	FL	TX	Southeast San Antonio		Northeast San Antonio	Southwest San Antonio	
Reason for leaving employment	Laid off				Could not afford child care at night			Still with Americorps	

As with other women, Karen's life had been punctuated with various periods of domestic violence and residential mobility throughout San Antonio. These facts made maintaining child care arrangements and employment difficult for Karen. Although she had some post-high school education and experience in the construction industry, the tight labor market in San Antonio, compounded with her ongoing need for flexible and affordable child care, made it difficult for her to locate work that paid as much as the \$12 per hour she

²³ Amounts represent hourly wage.

had earned as an administrative assistant for a construction company in 2000.

Despite her need for affordable and flexible child care, Karen could not count on her partner's relatives for help. In exchange for a few hours of child care, she was obligated to several weeks of requests for services and errands from the family. Child care for her daughters before and after preschool hours was not, in Karen's estimation, "worth" the persistent requests for groceries, errands, and money from her partner's family for assistance while she worked. Karen felt that she could not rely upon her partner's family to help even when they offered or agreed to care for her daughters because

they only help when they expect something else in return. Which puts more pressure on, which really isn't much help.... They either expect money, or the favors they expect take more hours.... The favors they expect are time-consuming.... If they watch the girls for four hours, they expect 20 hours worth of favors.... At times, it's just too much.

Consequently, when employment opportunities occurred outside her daughters' preschool hours, Karen was left with no resources to fall back on for care.

As Edin and Lein (1997) explain, informal arrangements may be available to women, but usually at a cost. Following from Portes and Landolt's (2000) discussion of social capital, Karen's and Veronica's narratives evidence the consequences of social ties, where the motives of donors

must be considered when receiving a gift or service, and the possibility of excessive requests for repayment must be considered alongside the positive attributes of social networks. Child care is almost always part of a reciprocal relationship in which money or services will be expected in return, sometimes at a greater cost than women feel the child care is actually worth (Edin and Lein 1997). From this perspective, working becomes socially and financially costly for many women.

In conjunction with this idea of reciprocal relationships, interviews with Veronica and Karen also suggest that members of the social networks available to poor women for assistance with child care are themselves experiencing financial stress. While Veronica's mother or Karen's partner's relatives may be available to help with child care, they are also themselves in need of resources. These women's experiences support Mink's position that care giving is work, which is precisely why formal child care providers exact money for care from those who can afford to pay for it (Mink 1998).

However, financial subsidies for family and friends who do provide much-needed child care for working mothers have allowed some women to take weekend and evening jobs to support their families. Lori completed her associate's degree while receiving subsidized child care and now works

full-time during the week as a customer service representative and fifteen hours each weekend at a local flea market. Her caseworker helped her secure subsidized funds for child care, and the funds were sent directly to an aunt who needed income and agreed to care for Lori's children on the weekend. Lori described the arrangement with her relative in this way:

I need it, and they don't have any day care facilities open for the weekends. And they said it could be an aunt or uncle of the child... His aunt wasn't doing anything, so I said, 'Do you want to babysit?'... She's going to make pretty good money. She's going to make almost what I make a month off of that.

But this arrangement was satisfactory for Lori only "as long as we get along [her son's father, the aunt, and herself].... Because that's it.... If we get into an argument... she's not going to watch my kids." Lori feels that her son's aunt "only does it for the money; that's all right, I guess. She needs a job; she needs to make money herself." Lori would have preferred to make an arrangement with a close friend's mother, but the subsidized funds were restricted to a close relative. As Lori's experience illustrates, child care is work that even next-of-kin expect to be compensated for, and subsidies that are flexible for mothers to use at their discretion with relatives provide necessary and flexible child care options for mothers who work during the hours when most child care facilities are closed. However, as Lori, Karen, and Veronica articulate, state-subsidized

informal arrangements are restricted and often emotionally stressful for mothers, and thus, formal arrangements frequently emerge as more desirable.²⁴

The reliability and long-term availability of child care arrangements are crucial factors for mothers who work or who are looking for work. While it may be difficult to find a day care facility that meets the temporal, financial, and emotional requirements of everyone involved, mothers feel that they can at least depend on formal arrangements over time if they meet the established rules and financial obligations to those who provide child care services. Since most respondents emphasize that they have no family or friends available to consistently provide care at the same time each day or for months at a time, they feel that if they can afford to pay for it, a day care center or individual who is paid an established fee will at least be reliable; thus, they may work indefinitely.

Frequent and sudden relocation also contributes to women's desires for and the necessity of formal child care providers to accommodate their financial and scheduling needs.

²⁴ Presser and Cox substantiate this point, documenting the prevalence of low-wage or undereducated workers with non-standard work schedules, and, subsequently, their desires for formal child care arrangements to meet their needs (Presser 2005).

From the cohort of eight women that I discuss in this chapter, all but two moved at least once during the two-year interview period. Moving to a different neighborhood may position families out of the immediate reach of networks of neighbors, friends, and kin that they may have developed around their previous residence. As Table 7.3 illustrates, Karen moved four times in three years, and one move was to another state before she moved back to San Antonio.

Moving, working, and parenting can sometimes be so time-consuming that it takes many weeks, even months, to establish contacts with new neighbors, and any prior informal child care arrangements may dissolve. Lori's and Sonia's families were friends and neighbors for about two years, continuously exchanging babysitting, food stamps, and car rides until Sonia moved from the public housing courts where they both lived and into a privately managed apartment complex. Sonia and Lori still remained friends, but Sonia's new apartment was several miles away on the outskirts of San Antonio, and she did not own a car or drive. Still, Sonia's youngest sons occasionally spent the night at Lori's home, and Lori gave Sonia rides to the store whenever possible, but both felt the loss of a convenient and trustworthy child care option.

In contrast with the situations I have just presented, women who do receive sustained assistance with child care

from family members have more opportunities to work and are able to use their earnings for expenses other than child care. Nora, a Mexican-American²⁵ mother of three school-age girls, had a younger sister who lived with her and cared for her daughters while she worked at a convenience store every night. Additionally, Nora's sister took all of her nieces to live at her home in Florida during the summer of 2003 so that Nora could work even more and save money toward a down payment on a home.

When I met Barb, a twenty-nine-year-old White mother of three daughters, she was working forty hours a week at a San Antonio shoe factory. Barb had weekends off, and her mother and stepfather lived with her in a house trailer that Barb owned. In exchange for a place to live, Barb's mother, who was temporarily unable to work, cared for her eighteen-month-old granddaughter and school-age granddaughters during the day while Barb worked. Additionally, her mother babysat for other children in their trailer park in exchange for money, using some of her earnings to help Barb make the land payment. Barb described this arrangement in the following way:

My mom helps me with the housework and with the girls in exchange for staying here.... I let her move in with me because, you know, my mom has helped me with all three of my kids. I was fourteen when I had my oldest

²⁵ Nora identifies as "Mexican or Mexican-American."

daughter. So, you know, my parents really helped me out a lot. So when they lost their apartment... in exchange for having to find a babysitter, I let them move in here. My mom takes care of the kids when they get home from school, takes care of her [Barb's youngest daughter] during the day, and she cleans my house, and she has supper done for me a lot of times when I get home. So, my mom helps me out a lot for me letting her stay here.

Barb's family arrangements allowed her to work full-time and make payments on her house trailer while her daughters were being looked after in their own home. In this situation, kin support for child care promoted a woman's entry into the work force and contributed to her ability to continue working.²⁶ Thus, it was affordable for Barb to work and meet her child care needs, as well as to direct her extra income toward owning a home.

However, the return of older women into the workforce has resulted in the erosion of social support networks for some women like Barb. When I first became acquainted with Barb, her mother, Pam, was unable to work, positioning her and her husband in need of a place to live. Even before Pam was reemployed, Barb asserted her desire to secure formal day care for her youngest daughter so that she could relieve her mother from her child care responsibilities and, more importantly, because she felt that her arrangement was

²⁶ Hao posits the price-of-time hypothesis, in which some form of co residence or income support reduces the price of a woman's household time through assistance with housework or childcare, thus reducing the cost of job searching or working and promoting her ability to continue working (Hao 1994).

"temporary" and contingent upon her mother and stepfather's necessity for a place to live and her mother's pending return to work. However, she said, "Every time I call, my caseworker just says that they don't have any openings, or there's a freeze on it.... To me, it feels like my caseworker don't help me try to get day care."

After-school care for older children, especially adolescents, is an essential child care arrangement for some mothers. Keeping school-age children "out of trouble" is a dominating concern for many parents in central San Antonio, and some mothers want to make sure that their children are supervised after school and not "running the streets." After-school programs are popular among low-income families with elementary- and middle-school children in central San Antonio. However, one of the drawbacks of after-school programs is that they follow the school calendar, leaving women to fall back on their own resources to supplement supervision during weekends, holidays, and summers.

Prioritizing employment may push more women towards a space where child care arrangements are not a choice but the best solution out of a narrow range of less appropriate alternatives. While some children go to child care centers after school and during school vacations, despite protests (Sonia's older sons "don't like it, but they have to go"), women like Karen are forced to make difficult choices about

work and child care. She feels she often has no alternative but to leave her daughters in the care of a neighbor she does not approve of or an alcoholic partner for several hours between when preschool ends and when she returns home from work.

MEN AND CARE WORK

While some respondents asserted that biological fathers and partners should help with providing or paying for child care, for many women this was not a possibility. Karen expressed the desire for her partner, a Mexican "national"²⁷, to help her watch her children, but she countered,

because of his culture, the man is not accustomed to taking care of children. He is good with them, and he will feed them, but when it comes to long-term care, I would not leave them with him during their waking hours.... During their waking hours, there is just too much to do, and he is not equipped. He is almost fifty years old, and he stands by the Mexican culture that the men don't take care of kids.

Thus Karen only expects her partner to watch her daughters for brief periods of time, and not consistently, either. Many women I interviewed involved with men of Latin American origin do not expect them to provide sustained and reliable child care, and they invoke culture and gender as barriers to care giving. However, from what I observed, there was more than a cultural bias against men and child

²⁷ Karen's term.

care at work. While it is one thing to lend a ride to the store or to buy some groceries for the household, it is another thing entirely to care for young children for several hours at a time.

This is not to say that fathers, even nonresidential ones, never spend time with their children or assist with child care. Some women were able to arrange work during the weekends when fathers had court-ordered visitation periods with their children. Lori and Ysenia were able to use weekend visitation times to substitute for the absence of available or affordable day care. However, this is only possible when fathers take care of all of a woman's children, including children they are not biologically related to, as in Lori's case. Therefore, another complication with informal child care by kin and fathers arises for mothers who have children by multiple partners and cannot expect their families to take care of all of their children.

CHILD CARE, WORK, AND THE DREAM

As more welfare recipients contend with time limits, informal child care arrangements will most likely become more scarce and more costly to women who rely on them while

they work.²⁸ Recent qualitative analyses support the idea that with the withdrawal of public benefits, families are increasingly expected to turn to their available social resources to sustain themselves (Bell 2001); Edin and Lein 1997). While some poor families do sustain themselves with organized and mutually beneficial networks of support, other families have fewer reciprocal systems of exchange, allowing some individuals to be drained by unbalanced exchange relationships. Still other families must function without the asset of economic support from others. This does not mean that they are totally estranged from kin and friends, but that these people are also economically strained and themselves in need of assistance.

These interviews and field work conducted with women in San Antonio illuminate the multifaceted and complex nature of situations and options poor or working-poor families find themselves maneuvering within in terms of kin support, work, and child care. Kin support cannot be assumed as a universal child care option for poor mothers. Grandmothers, aunts, and sisters fulfill multiple roles, often with children and jobs of their own. Consequently, these relatives are often also

²⁸ Newman describes how welfare reform affects the intertwined lives of welfare recipients who reside together and exchange child care responsibilities (Newman 1998).

economically strained and increasingly seek wage labor or require that child care be compensated for with wages.

While wage work for all low-income mothers remains the focus of welfare reform, women demonstrate the desire and necessity for formal child care options to support their roles as mothers. Subsidized child care is an essential albeit scarce resource for working poor mothers. As Veronica's, Lori's, and Karen's experiences indicate, informal arrangements are tenuous and costly to mothers, and the family and friends that are willing to assist with child care are themselves in need of income and subsidized services. If mothers cannot afford to pay acceptable wages to or do favors for friends or relatives, they cannot expect to rely on these arrangements for consistent or long-term support. The situations of these women speak to the notion of "mobilization of ties" (Newman 1988) that distinguishes between whom one knows and whom one can actually count on for support. While Veronica and Karen may have kin and friends to call on for other forms of support, none are perceived as willing and able to provide child care assistance.

Additionally, there is often a lack of child care providers near residences or workplaces that accept children paying with subsidized funds. While Mulroy (1995) and Edin and Lein (1997) demonstrate that low-cost and easily

accessible child care is essential to mothers who must work, I emphasize that flexibility and reliability are also key components to the child care needs of working mothers. Women are often able to locate employment options as retail, food-service, or health care workers, and these jobs frequently require that employees remain flexible to work available shifts that change from week to week, not only during hours when day care facilities are open. Women such as Lori, Karen, and Veronica, who have skills and experience in retail or health care, are willing to work, but they first need to secure affordable, dependable, and flexible child care arrangements. Furthermore, kin cannot, nor should they, be the only option for child care assumed by welfare policies.

This preliminary research indicates the complex nature of women's needs and desires for child care and the tenuous relationship of low-income families, welfare reform policies, and employment opportunities. It also augments our understanding of women's experiences as they struggle to improve their social and economic situations. While mothers are directed toward work to meet time limits for benefits and to achieve financial self-sufficiency, the experiences of some women in San Antonio suggest that child care needs are directly related to whether work is feasible or affordable. What is more, families without relatives and

friends to supplement subsidized child care are doubly burdened by work requirements and child care needs. Recalling the words of Mink (1998), it is essential "to make work pay" by creating flexible relationships between women and policy so that families may transition not only off welfare but out of poverty as well.¹² It is also crucial to think critically about the social consequences of emphasizing "work first" for families to be sure that we are not situating a family's physical and emotional well-being at a lower priority than a parent's earning potential.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of this ethnographic research, I maintain that women contended with many competing issues as they underwent the transition from welfare assistance and subsidies to wage-work. The central concern of this dissertation is to understand how welfare reform policies are affecting women and to create a local context for understanding these policy reforms in San Antonio, TX. I also examined the gendered and classed aspects of welfare reform and what the categorical transformation of women into wage-workers indicates about the cultural expectations of low-income women in contemporary U.S. society.

Each of these chapters takes into consideration different but interrelated facets of the predicaments that women face everyday as they emerged throughout the course of fieldwork. Mexican-American women born and raised in the West Side of San Antonio must work within a social and economic milieu that has historically offered them limited access to quality housing and educational opportunities; White women recently arrived in the City are challenged with unfamiliar social surroundings and limited social networks. In this dissertation, I have argued that while flexibility is expected of all individuals today, women working in low-wage sectors of the urban economy are often least able to

strategically practice flexibility. Women are most often primarily responsible for care giving which presents a gender specific barrier that positions women at a particular disadvantage in the low-wage job market. Moreover, I illustrate how the possibility of diminishing poverty among female-headed households through the formation of marriages is not viewed as a realistic solution for most women, or has not been advantageous for those who have married.

Drawing upon the work of Harvey, Bourdieu, and Kingfisher, I maintain that welfare reform is a social policy that deploys a host of neoliberal policies. Neoliberalism is described as the set of discourses and practices that prioritize the free market system of exchange and the importance of the individual as an economic being as well as encourage the privatization of governmental services, of which welfare reform is one. As this dissertation and the works of others show, neoliberalism functions not as a coherent or ordered set of policies, discourses and practices but more so as a shifting constellation of policies and economic activities driven by privatization and an unregulated market. The different incarnations of welfare reform policies as they are interpreted and implemented by state and local governments, as well as new presidential administrations, and the ensuing confusion among welfare workers and recipients alike is one

such register for the seeming incoherence and constant change endemic to neoliberalism.

Welfare reform is aptly described as a neoliberal scheme as it involves the devolution of federal responsibilities to individual citizens. The privatization of public services and gradual withdrawal of support for individuals are features of welfare reform that align with neoliberalism. The information about welfare reform that women receive from welfare caseworkers communicates different aspects of the neoliberal ideal. In particular, caseworkers communicate that there are now time limits to cash assistance with no guarantee of continued assistance and that it is now up to women as individuals to become economically self-sufficient within the prescribed amount of time.

The discourse of welfare reform rests squarely on the fundamental concepts of self-sufficiency and personal responsibility, ideas that are also coterminous with neoliberal schemes of shifting governmental responsibilities onto local sites and the individual. However, as I argue in the previous chapters, what self-sufficiency comes to mean for individual women is economic independence from government support, which is not necessarily the equivalent of individual self-sufficiency. While the number of active welfare cases does actually register a decrease in the years

following welfare reform, the economic situations of women and families will continue to decline as social networks and material resources diminish in the absence of meaningful educational opportunities, continued subsidies for housing and child care, and viable employment prospects. In the absence of social networks or government support, many women turn to local NGO's for emergency aid for housing costs, medical care, and food assistance.

As women contend with the daily challenges presented to them, it is clear that the majority of poor and low-income women in the U.S. are not simply one job, one husband, or one apartment away from self-sufficiency. As this analysis makes apparent, self-sufficiency is the ultimate conundrum as the few women able to approach economic stability after welfare must rely on a complex web of friends, family, and local NGO's to piece together their existence.

Personal responsibility emerges as yet another mystifying concept laden with contradictions. As I argue in this dissertation, women do represent their choices as responsible in their understanding even though these tactics may not be evaluated as such by policy makers or conventional wisdom. Choosing to delay work until children reach school age in the absence of a suitable job and reliable and desirable child care is a choice that stands at odds with time limits to welfare benefits and diminishing

funding for child care subsidies. Similarly, viewing men as suitable fathers but not necessarily marital partners may, on the surface, appear to signify a declining investment in marriage, when actually the opposite may be the case; women eschew or delay marriage because they are invested in it.

I expand discussions of welfare reform and neoliberalism by deploying the concept of flexibility to describe the both the expectations made on individuals in late capitalist societies as well as a tactic essential to survival and success. I draw upon Harvey and Martin to understand flexibility as a mode of being for corporate and individual survival and extend this concept to low-income women struggling to maintain their families in the context of shifting welfare reforms. I argue that as welfare policy increasingly shifts responsibility from government agencies to individuals, who are disproportional women, and as policies are continually revised and reformed, individuals must remain flexible to these policies, jobs, and social needs of their families.

In each chapter in this dissertation, I explore the different factors that allow individual women to be flexible, or conversely, what hinders them from practicing flexibility as a tactic for survival. As chapter two illustrates, the privatization of public housing and the unevenness of the attributes of distinctive housing options

for women in San Antonio can limit their flexibility. The proximity to public transportation, social services, and social networks can influence the amount of latitude a woman has for maneuvering. In chapter three, I argue that women with a dense network of social and economic resources to draw from are able to be somewhat more flexible than women who are newer arrivals to the city or who are more socially isolated. Chapter four illustrates that women carefully consider marriage as an option to improve the social and economic circumstances of their families and that, in some cases, marriage can actually pose more limitations on individual flexibility. Women who are single or separated practice various strategies to meet their needs, including child sharing, employment, and cohabitating with relatives in order to practice flexibility in lieu of a nuclear family. Finally, in chapter five, I analyze child care dilemmas that women negotiate and argue that reliable and affordable child care is a necessity in order for women to participate in wage-work and meet the expectations of welfare reform.

Paradoxically, I argue that it is fixed and formal support, provided in the form of housing subsidies, child care subsidies, and food stamps, that actually engenders flexibility in women's lives, rather than marriage and sole reliance on social networks. In this way, the consistency

and apparent rigidity of child care facilities and schools allows women to continue to support themselves on wage work. Hence, I argue that a lack of flexibility can be one way to understand why many low-income women continually struggle to attain economic self-sufficiency.

I also emphasize the ethnic and gendered experiences of neoliberal policies and discourse that can engender a transformation of the roles of low-income women roles by emphasizing their economic value as wage-workers while simultaneously ignoring the gendered, classed, and cultural aspects that may impede a women's participation in the workforce. As I argue in this dissertation, many Mexican-American women in San Antonio are living with a legacy of exclusion from structural resources and may approach the labor market at a disadvantage in comparison with Anglo women. What is more, often women are impoverished because they are a single parent, which means that must balance their entry into the labor market with caregiving responsibilities. By leaving cultural, ethnic, and gender-specific attributes out of welfare policy and discourse, not only are the social distinctions between men and women in the domestic and public spheres collapsed, but cultural differences are elided as well. Therefore, I argue that it is essential to understand how welfare policies are impacting women of different ethnic groups in order to more

accurately understand the multifaceted successes and failures of welfare reform.

Finally, I draw upon the ideology of the American dream to understand the cultural context for welfare reform policy as well as for women's narratives of their own aspirations and apprehensions about the future of their own lives and of their families. While the greater part of this dissertation is oriented toward the analyzing the materiality of welfare reform policies and their daily impact on women in San Antonio I also chose to focus on the narratives of low-income women not simply to add to existing accounts of the daily hardships of poor women in the U.S. but to additionally look at how part of their daily maneuvering includes references to their aspirations for a different future and their shifting relationships with the American Dream. I register the American dream in women's aspirations for home ownership, their investment in education for themselves and their children, and their desire to participate fully as consumers in the market economy. In these ways, the motivation of women to work and to be economically successful and socially independent from men not only aligns with but also surpasses the mandates of welfare reform economic self-sufficiency.

The cumulative impact of this ethnographic work on welfare reform and U.S. poverty is that it illustrates how

lives lived in poverty are indeed complicated by layers of compounding issues and circumstances.

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