

It's Not Just About the Money:

Governmentality and Resistance in Post-Reform Welfare Offices

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ABSTRACT

The substantial decline in the welfare rolls, expansion of child support collection, and increased labor force participation among low-income mothers in the late 1990s demonstrated that welfare reform, along with a booming economy, compelled many welfare recipients to restructure their relationships with the state. This paper draws upon Foucaultian concepts of governmentality and resistance to explore how power and regulation were deployed in local welfare offices in ways that encouraged these outcomes. It uses interview data from 30 female clients who participated in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program along with ethnographic data collected in some of the TANF offices frequented by study participants. It considers the governance of low-income mothers within (and outside) these institutions and explores how women who relied on these bureaucracies read and responded to attempts to transform their conduct. Analysis shows that a casework model of *surveillance-based support* and cultural narratives about impoverished mothers were deployed to justify and enforce the new welfare policy. The paper also examines the ways that TANF-reliant mothers contested or co-signed regulation through their engagement with the office, including methods that might be considered subversive or even “deviant.” It analyzes “the concealment strategy,” the calculated presentation of information regarding one’s case to a welfare caseworker, and the purposeful omission or altering of details. This paper contemplates whether and how this might be conceptualized as not simply an economically driven choice, but also as resistance to increasing social regulation.

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INTRODUCTION

The passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) set a new and definitive tone in the stance of the United States toward aid to the poor, that of time-limited assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Program. TANF provides cash assistance, in-kind resources, and work opportunities to needy families through block grants to states, which have flexibility to develop and implement their own welfare programs. Increasing the employment and earnings of needy families, reducing welfare caseloads, and enforcing child support collection are three much-publicized goals of the policy (Administration for Children and Families 2000).¹

Such an extensive policy shift had the potential to trigger a vocal response, such as a mass and organized protest by welfare recipients who were no longer entitled to cash assistance. However, the substantial decline in the welfare rolls, the expansion of child support collection, and the increased labor force participation among low-income mothers starting in the late 1990s demonstrated that welfare reform, along with a booming economy, encouraged many welfare recipients to restructure their relationships with the state.

Were power and regulation deployed in the local TANF offices charged with implementing reform in ways that encouraged these outcomes? To address this question, I analyzed the described experiences of 30 female clients² who received TANF from the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA). I also incorporated ethnographic data collected in some of the same TANF offices frequented by study participants. I considered

the governance of low-income mothers within (and outside) these institutions and how women who have relied on these bureaucracies read and responded to attempts to transform their conduct. What strategies sought to “manage” women off the welfare system or to pose new expectations if they remained? How did TANF recipients, through the ways in which they engaged with the office, contest or co-sign these terms of social regulation? What did this reveal about the current demands of post-reform welfare offices and the street-level manifestations of public policy?

This paper uses the paradigm of governmentality to analytically traverse the landscape of post-reform welfare offices and the experiences of TANF recipients. Introduced in a 1978 lecture by Michel Foucault (1991), governmentality parses the multiple ways that “we *think* about governing” and how such thinking is operationalized in the management of others and ourselves (Dean 1999:16, emphasis added). It delves into the collective and taken-for-granted beliefs that fuel practices of government, the calculated direction of behavior commonly referred to as the “conduct of conduct” (Foucault 1982).³ Governmentality studies “provide a language and a framework for thinking about the linkages between questions of government, authority and politics, and questions of identity, self and person” (Dean 1999:13). It is not only concerned with how individuals govern and are governed toward particular ends through agencies, techniques, and bodies of knowledge and expertise, but also how these relationships give way to power dynamics that result in myriad possibilities of individual action (Dean, 1999). Concerned with the broad-based institutional regulation of everyday life, governmentality is particularly relevant to the theoretical and policy questions and debates that this article addresses.

I begin by briefly reviewing the literature on the evolution of the supervision of low-income mothers and summarize the latest research on institutional change in TANF offices.

What current work has not captured is the variety of ways in which TANF recipients engage with (or disengage from) both the organizational tactics and the cultural messages that seek to guide their conduct. This paper addresses that gap by employing a conceptual framework that takes seriously the range of methods—both substantive and symbolic—that articulate how individuals should perform as claimants to state benefits, as mothers, and as workers. As tools (or technologies) of regulation, I argue that the casework model of *surveillance-based support* as well as the cultural constructs of the “trapped mother” and the “welfare queen” are deployed both inside and outside welfare offices both to justify the current welfare system and to attempt to govern the behavior of welfare recipients.

Next, I present one model of how recipients engage with this regime of regulation, centered largely on compliance with procedural dictates. As their own desires and goals coincide with agency objectives, the women use the tools of the welfare office to pursue employment and child care, with the hopes of reducing their reliance on the state. They find ways to navigate surveillance-based support, perhaps questioning its tactics and motives, but not openly challenging it in the pursuit of economic resources. Ironically, the avenue to the economic freedom that welfare reform promotes requires the women to allow the welfare office, at least initially, to regulate multiple areas of their lives. Therefore, I see the 1996 reform as a retooling of the already expansive regulation of the lives of low-income women. They are voluntarily and involuntarily “managed” from dependency on the system by the increased regulation of their conduct.

Finally, I explore an alternative model of recipient engagement with the welfare office that evolved from the data, one that attempts to circumvent the powerful regimes of governance to which the women are subject. I highlight the ways in which some recipients challenge the

regulation that they deem oppressive and out of sync with their own ideals of what is appropriate. Respondents sometimes marshaled alternative rationales and tools for managing themselves and their dealings with the TANF office, including tactics that might be considered subversive or even “deviant.” I explore in-depth what I call “the concealment strategy,” the calculated presentation of information regarding one’s case to a welfare caseworker and the purposeful omission or altering of pertinent details. I consider whether and how this deed might be conceptualized as not simply an economically driven choice, but also a form of resistance to the increasing social supervision of the women’s lives.

AGENCY SUPERVISION OF LOW-INCOME FAMILIES UNDER PRWORA

The approximate 60% decline in the US welfare rolls from 1996 to 2003 (Administration for Children and Families 2005) is one of the most intriguing stories in the history of American social policy. Many studies have examined how this phenomenon came about, evaluating the quantitative impacts of macro-level changes to welfare policy, the booming economy of the 1990s, the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, and the increase in the minimum wage (Blank and Ellwood 2002; Ziliak et al. 2000). Other scholars have interrogated the economic and social consequences of welfare reform for parents and children in terms of income, health, school achievement, child behavior, marriage and cohabitation rates and attitudes, fertility, immigrant rights, and poverty rates.⁴ Of central concern also has been capturing the day-to-day experiences of TANF “leavers,” “stayers,” and “cyclers,” documenting the ongoing successes and challenges of individuals’ movements, ideally from the rolls into long-term work (DeParle 2004; Hays 2003).

A complementary stream of research considers welfare reform from an institutional perspective, drawing primarily from the conceptual tools of organizational, public management, and public policy studies, to explore the “street-level” incarnations of this policy shift and their implications for recipients and service providers (Lipsky 1980). This contributes to an “organic” understanding of public policy, one that observes its various forms as it is interpreted and “performed” by actors who bring their own expertise, experiences, and understandings to bear in institutional settings. Organizational perspectives document how welfare reform was implemented; such approaches also impart broader lessons about how street-level bureaucrats, clients, and other stakeholders create and navigate institutions in ways that implicate them in distinct configurations of power relationships. As such, TANF offices are laboratories to explore human dynamics that emerge when institutional shifts jostle the social relationships that affect marginalized groups.

Although the degree of diversity among welfare recipients (and front-line workers) problematizes a causal institution-based explanation of caseload decline, recent TANF office implementation studies have traced three dominant themes concerning the systems of governance to which welfare recipients are subject: the difficulties of creating effective institutional change; the power inherent in evolving caseworker discretion; and the complex “moral work” of welfare offices. These dynamics are situated in an extensive history of relief services, but their current manifestations represent a break from long-standing approaches to managing the poor.

Many studies attempt to uncover emergent institutional challenges, as welfare offices alter their structures, day-to-day processes, cultures, and approaches to casework.⁵ The operational difficulties of melding client surveillance and supportive functions in TANF offices

have emerged as primary sources of conflict between and among caseworkers and clients (Beckerman and Fontana 2001; Danziger, Sandfort, and Seefeldt 1999; Watkins 2003). The emphasis on tracking client eligibility has a long history in welfare offices (Kane and Bane 1994; Brodtkin 1986), but its rigid guidelines, the increased focus on rule compliance, and the ability of caseworkers to penalize clients for non-compliance became the cornerstones of welfare casework under PRWORA. Recipients are now subject to benefit clocks, higher hurdles for eligibility, expanded technological tracking capabilities of their finances and other personal information, and sanctions to usher them away from the rolls (Cherlin et al. 2002; Lurie 2001). Caseworkers are responsible for ensuring that clients report absent parents, barriers to work, and reasons for noncompliance with the rules of policy. In addition, caseworkers' frequency of interaction with clients has increased in states such as Massachusetts, where the yearly re-certification for benefits no longer comprises the full extent of one's interaction with the welfare office. For example, in the last 12 months of their 24-month benefit allotments, recipients must turn in documents and meet with their caseworkers monthly.⁶

Just as the monitoring of recipients has become more stringent under TANF, the model of surveillance-based support of low-income families also has seen a shift in how it defines assistance. Monthly cash allotments are time-limited, but employment-related services are more readily available. In some TANF offices, the same frontline workers who dispense cash benefits administer services. As a result, financial resources, mechanically distributed based on quantifiable family and economic characteristics, are no longer the "end game" of client-caseworker interactions. Rather, support packages have become dynamic organizational tools that are actively assembled and managed by caseworkers and include child care vouchers,

transportation assistance, referrals to drug and alcohol treatment programs and mental health services, and a cadre of welfare-to-work training program and employment center referrals.

Clients are constructed by caseworkers less as passive beneficiaries of an ongoing supply of public services and more as individuals with the capacity and need to leave cash assistance behind and to fend for themselves through work, private charity, or their own social support networks. To facilitate this process, the tense and adversarial dynamic of enforcement is mediated in some offices by the expectation that caseworkers also will be sympathetic advocates for their clients. Many states have changed the job titles of their caseworkers to incorporate words such as “social work” and “support” to signal that a new kind of relationship is to emerge between bureaucrat and client. Under surveillance-based support, even clients who remain on the rolls can receive resources dispensed by caseworkers, who can decide to help them obtain exemption status from time limits and work requirements, appeal case closing decisions, or apply for benefit extensions. In short, the active “management” of recipients through casework has become a critical component of PRWORA’s implementation.

One should not overstate the transformation that has taken place within TANF offices.⁷ Gais et al. (2001) observe that, in many offices where responsibilities exist under the same roof, the new work-focused environment of welfare offices “has not replaced the older AFDC agency operational goals of minimizing eligibility errors and ferreting out fraud and abuse; rather, it has been added onto the AFDC culture” (63). Identifying and responding to clients’ skill deficits, health issues, and other barriers to employment have proven difficult for caseworkers, who typically do not have the training or time to make such diagnoses, and for welfare offices, whose offered services are frequently limited to rapid-employment services, childcare, and transportation assistance (Danziger and Seefeldt 2000, 2003).

In fact, this reconfiguration of the nature of interaction between clients and TANF street-level staff has contributed to a disconnection between client needs and the services provided in many offices. This schism potentially shapes how recipients view the social regulation that is embedded in the welfare system and how they subsequently strategize, pursuing their interests within it.

A second theme in recent welfare reform research is the consequences of the increased discretion that individual front-line workers now have. Caseworker discretion, reminiscent of the days prior to the War on Poverty, Welfare Rights Movement, and numerous court cases challenging restricted access to welfare rolls, has returned with a new focus on client employment. Each caseworker has the power to be simultaneously charitable and punitive, with a larger “bag of tricks” of services and sanctioning muscle, depending in part on his or her professional orientation and job skills (Watkins 2003). Clients thus can have very different experiences in the welfare system, not only across, but also within, offices.

For instance, the high level of variation in sanctioning, removal of part or all of a family's grant for failure to comply with program rules, suggests that regulations can have multiple interpretations and that sanctions may be affected in part by an individual client's interaction with her welfare office (Lurie 2001). Cherlin et al. (2002) concluded that, across three metropolitan areas, sanctions and procedural case closings were most likely to be imposed for bureaucratic reasons, such as missing a meeting or failing to produce required forms or documents, rather than for failure to attend a work-related activity or refusal to work. Additionally, the desire and ability of caseworkers to leverage their own social contacts to help clients find jobs, documented by Livermore and Neustrom (2003), has critical resonance for clients. Discretionary practices can help clients to stay in compliance with mandates and perhaps

position them for economic stability, whereas those who do not receive such tailored services might find themselves marginalized and alienated. As discretionary power, at both the institutional and caseworker-client levels, establishes how TANF recipients are supervised under welfare reform, both tangible resources and social meaning become valuable commodities within TANF offices.

A final observation about welfare bureaucracies is what Hasenfeld (2000) terms the “moral work” of TANF offices. The ideological nature of the welfare enterprise has given agencies the ability to reward or punish behavior and to communicate certain values, along with distributing economic assistance. Underpinning governance is the presumed awareness, “with varying degrees of explicitness and using specific forms of knowledge, [of] what constitutes good, virtuous, appropriate, responsible conduct of individuals and collectives” (Dean, 1999: 12). Competing desires—to provide for, to “fix,” and to discipline the poor—have fueled the surveillance that determines need, tracks the allocation of resources, and determines when provision should be terminated.⁸ Societal tensions around work, family, money, sex, gender, race, and the state undergird the system and make welfare offices prime locations for values and beliefs to be contested (Gilens 1999; Hasenfeld 2000). Under the public gaze, caseworkers’ own normative assumptions, attitudes, and prejudices also can affect interactions with clients in subtle and not-so-subtle ways (Haney 1996).

For example, there is a longstanding history of intense battles between white caseworkers and clients of color, grounded in racial hostility and the systematic role of welfare offices in the racial subjugation of mothers of color through the denial, under-provision, and tense provision of public resources (Gooden 1998; Katz 1996; Lieberman 2001; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Piven and Cloward 1971). Others have argued that the expanded access to welfare following the

Welfare Rights Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and the War on Poverty assumed that recipients were uninterested in or incapable of competing in the larger economic and educational arenas, reducing the stigma of welfare and framing recipients as victims who could not care for themselves (Murray 1994). Also woven into the fabric of these institutions is the discourse between and among recipients and caseworkers as they assess whether welfare receipt is a hindrance to or necessity for the ability of poor women to be “good” mothers and “good” citizens (Kingfisher 1996; Korteweg 2003; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). This historically embedded social context suggests that, to truly understand the mechanisms of social regulation that operate within TANF offices, we must take into account how recipients read and engage with both the administrative practices and the “moral work” of welfare offices.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Despite some historical continuity, there has been a noticeable institutional change within local welfare offices since the 1996 reform. As Yvonne Hartman (2005) pointed out, “though welfare may now be leaner and meaner for some, the welfare state has not shrunk; rather different forms of welfare have arisen coupled with new modes of administration and underpinned by a theoretical rationale which has shifted from entitlement to obligation” (61). How are TANF recipients “managed” within local offices in ways that reflect this new policy regime’s goal of generating particular behaviors among low-income mothers? Is this governance exclusively “top-down” from state and local policy to “street-level” TANF offices to clients? Do aspects of governance emerge from other entities as well?

Governmentality, with its emphasis on the how and why of regulating, “directs attention to the nature, problems, means, actions, manners, techniques and objects by which actors place

themselves under the control, guidance, sway and mastery of others, or seek to place other actors, organizations, entities or events under their own sway” (Rose 1999:16). The paradigm of governmentality places the state and its affiliated institutions in context by avoiding the temptation to overemphasize the reach of formal state power as a unified and uncontested functionality or to reduce it to the amalgamated actions of bureaucrats (Foucault 1991:103). Instead, governance goes beyond the activities of the state and the classic state-citizen model of political power and takes place “through a multitude of agencies and techniques, some of which are only loosely associated with the executives and bureaucracies of the formal organs of the state” (Miller and Rose 1990:75). As such, government refers to “*any* calculated direction of human conduct,” rather than the common definition of the nation-state (Dean 1999:2, emphasis added). This conceptual approach requires that we explore not only how welfare offices are implicated in the social regulation of recipients, but also how other non-state institutions, welfare observers, the general public, and even the recipients themselves may be incorporated into forms of governance.

As Mitchell Dean (1999) and others have pointed out, governmentality as a concept helps us understand how neo-liberalism shapes the conduct of populations through the deregulated market. Neo-liberalism can be understood as an economic doctrine that promotes participation in free markets and limited government dependency for one’s economic needs. Economic freedom is thought to give rise to improved social welfare, and non-economic freedoms, such as sexuality, are expected to be tempered in the service of this social order. Scholars of governmentality have explored what the emergence and evolution of neoliberal regimes around the world have meant for social welfare services, such as housing, work, health care, and cash assistance. Neoliberalism’s explicit and implicit assumption of an autonomous, responsible, and

self-regulating subject, who no longer has the option of being a passive recipient of government services, is currently being operationalized in a variety of street-level services to sometimes mixed results (Maskovsky 2000; Moore 2004; Tulle and Mooney 2002).

During the US welfare reform debate, emphasis was placed on self-improvement and self-discipline on the part of low-income mothers via control of child bearing, labor force attachment, and limited dependency on cash welfare. Poor women were expected to be “more responsible,” to liberate themselves from dependency, and to increase their participation in the labor market.⁹ Private and public employment and training agencies were empowered to emphasize how recipients should speak, dress, and socially interact so as to get and keep jobs (Korteweg 2003). De-emphasized in these discourses were the structural and individual constraints on one’s “choice” to adopt prescribed behaviors or alternative ways of being that poor mothers might desire (Danziger and Seefeldt 2003; Moore 2004).

Scholars of governmentality frequently conceptualize individuals as both *objects* of governance and *subjects* of self-control and discipline in every social interaction. Just as social regulation is externally imposed by various entities through techniques of governance, individuals also engage in self-preservation and self-management. We therefore consider the ways in which authority is applied and the “contact points” where structurally- and culturally-embedded mandates interact with what Foucault calls “technologies of the self.” Technologies of the self can be thought of as the internally-embedded governance mechanisms of social actors, articulating what is desirable, feasible, and acceptable behavior in particular social situations (Rose 1999:22). These ideas, aspirations, interests, and beliefs are informed by regimes of practices that structure ways of imagining one’s relationship to governance and the actions that are possible and “thinkable” (Gordon 1991).

Previous research on welfare offices and the social regulation of the poor emphasizes how the state, through “top-down” policy mandates and “ground level” implementation, applies power to low-income populations (Kane and Bane 1994; Piven and Cloward 1971). By broadening our definition of governance, we can discover how social control is applied by both state and non-state entities and even involves some degree of self-governance by welfare recipients. We consider how TANF recipients think about how they should engage with the TANF office, while we simultaneously explore how the office seeks to manage their behavior. This makes the forms of everyday regulation operating in TANF offices more intricate and pervasive than are practices of rule or domination, for which the emphasis is on a hierarchical understanding of power dynamics. It also makes the charge of policy makers and implementers who assist marginalized groups more complex.

Paraphrasing from H.K. Colebatch (2002: 425), the question extends from “How do welfare offices govern recipients?” to encompass “How do welfare recipients govern themselves and from where do they take cues about the best ways to pursue resources and preserve their dignity within welfare offices?” This approach emphasizes the agency of low-income women, as they respond to social regulation, navigate the welfare office, and determine how to pursue their interests.

**METHODOLOGY: THE WELFARE, CHILDREN,
AND FAMILIES THREE-CITY STUDY**

I analyzed ethnographic data collected from 30 welfare recipients in Boston, who described their interactions with their local welfare bureaucracies. These data are derived from the *Welfare, Children, and Families Three-City Study*, which examines how, over time, welfare

reform policies influence the day-to-day lives of low-income African-American, Latina, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic white families living in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio.¹⁰ The ethnography analyzes how the decisions of low-income families are influenced by the welfare system and how recipients experience welfare reform (Burton 2001).¹¹ As a Boston-based ethnographer, I conducted participant-observation and longitudinal ethnographic interviews from 1999 to 2001 with five African-American mothers. The experiences of the three women who received TANF at the time of data collection, along with those of 27 other Hispanic, African-American, and non-Hispanic white TANF recipients, whose experiences were captured by other researchers, provide the data for this paper.¹² All study participants were low-income mothers with young children living in concentrated areas of poverty in the Boston area. All were on welfare at some point between 1999 and 2001.

Previous research has highlighted the utility of recipients' accounts of their experiences in TANF offices in the absence of data that document the exact content of their interactions with office staff (Cherlin et al. 2002). Although these reports portray one version of events and may be misunderstood by clients in light of the vast and often confusing TANF policy regulations, recipients' perceptions provide insights as to how they interpret the structure of governance that they are experiencing. In this analysis, respondent reports are supplemented by ethnographic work I conducted in some of the same welfare offices frequented by the women. I explored organizational dynamics in two Boston TANF offices and a third office outside Boston from September 2000 to July 2001. I shadowed individual office staff members, conducted in-depth interviews, and observed various client-caseworker meetings, during which intake, case maintenance, and case closing services were delivered.¹³ To protect the confidentiality of study

participants, I did not discuss the specific content of interviews with TANF workers or *Three-City Study* respondents.

**“TRAPPED MOTHERS” AND “WELFARE QUEENS”:
THE SOCIAL REGULATION OF TANF-RELIANT WOMEN**

To pursue PRWORA's goals of reduced welfare rolls, increased work, and expanded cooperation with the child support enforcement program, policy makers had to specify a revised program of conduct for poor mothers. This program required various devices to change the delivery of welfare services and to modify the behaviors of low-income mothers. Although there were competing views about how it should be done, most stakeholders agreed that the welfare system demanded an overhaul. What were disputed were the tools, the technologies, that should be wielded to change the system. The law granted state governments greater regulatory power to “free” recipients from dependency. Such a program culturally defined welfare-reliant mothers and put in motion a series of institutional practices that sought to enforce specific behaviors and instill in TANF clients particular ideals that would serve policy interests.

Cultural Narratives

The early 1990s debate over welfare can be thought of as a “discursive formation,” a set of statements, of various positions, that was dispersed with some regularity and existed as a domain of discourse (Foucault 1972). The debate emerged out of decades of empirical research, administrative practices, and political ideologies and provided a common language to talk about dependency, parenthood, work, and poverty. What became part and parcel of this discourse were cultural narratives about welfare mothers, what I define as social constructions that classified

these women in distinct ways, mapped what their investments and motivations might be, and justified the particular regime of social regulation to which they should be subject.

Placing significance upon these narratives to help explain the emerging welfare reform implementation process reflects what has been called the “cultural turn” in social science, “the capacity [of culture] to actively shape and organize—to constitute from within—a whole range of economic, social, and political relationships and practices” (Bennett 2003:50; also see Hall 1997). Specific practices and techniques, frequently coinciding but sometimes conflicting with these cultural narratives, were deployed to define the population and to guide how its members should conduct themselves (Rose 1999). “Such discussions,” Mitchell Dean argues, “are almost invariably evaluative and normative, i.e. they presume a set of standards or norms of conduct by which actual behavior can be judged, and which act as a kind of ideal towards which individuals and groups should strive” (1999: 10).

Cultural narratives were, and continue to be, circulated by welfare observers, street-level bureaucrats, the general public, and recipients themselves about low-income women who seek state economic assistance. These attitudes give rise to political support for particular policies and can influence the adoption and implementation of public policy (Gilens 1999). Cultural narratives also can serve as forms of “political power beyond the state” (Rose and Miller 1992), ideologies that seem to be “everywhere,” promulgated by news coverage, popular culture, and public attitudes. They are not abstract concepts or stereotypes; they are, borrowing from Dean (1999) “thought . . . embedded within programmes for the direction and reform of conduct” (18) and “seek to unify and rationalize . . . techniques and practices in relation to particular sets of objectives, diagnoses of existing ills, schemata of evaluation and so on” (29). More specifically, the cultural belief that the welfare rolls were comprised of “welfare queens” and what I call

“trapped mothers” played prominently in the recent welfare reform debate and was leveraged to problematize the welfare system in a way that would lead to wide-scale remedy. The validity of these constructs is not the primary concern of this paper.¹⁴ Instead, the focus is on how these concepts came to be explicitly and implicitly deployed in TANF offices and how they subsequently regulated the conduct of TANF clients.

One camp within the welfare reform debate argued that most welfare recipients needed a new configuration of targeted assistance to leave the rolls. Empirical work contending that the low-wage labor market and the welfare system constrained poor women’s options, essentially “trapping” them in a system that greatly limited their mobility, gave credence to this perspective (Bane and Ellwood 1994; Edin and Lein 1997). Without decent wages, improved skills, increased job opportunities, child care, and transportation, this group would find welfare receipt to be as economically rewarding as available work (Wilson 1987, 1996). Others observed that, as care work has been surpassed by paid work as a means for women to assert their status as citizens over the past several decades (O’Connor, Orloff, and Shaver 1999; Orloff 1993) and support for state-sponsored care work diminishes, it has become increasingly important for women as economic, political, and social actors to define their status primarily as workers. The pre-PRWORA welfare system, they worried, mired poor women in dependency and marginalized them relative to men and other women who supported their families through paid work. Acceptance of state-sponsored assistance for low-income mothers to care for their children at home was not a politically viable solution (DeParle 2004). These reformers concluded that many “trapped mothers” could work, wanted to work, and in some cases were already working under the table. Poor women needed the welfare office and other agencies to provide them with the right mix of services to expand their labor force participation.

Some policy makers highlighted the desire of “trapped mothers” to “do right” despite very limited means, implicitly rendering them as slightly more “moral” and perhaps arguably even more “deserving” than many of their counterparts.¹⁵ Under welfare reform, “trapped mothers” received a new arrangement of support from the state and policy makers could publicly present them as “success stories” when they “played by the rules” by leaving the rolls, increasing their work hours, and assisting the state with child support enforcement.

“Welfare queens” suffered a harsher characterization. Ange-Marie Hancock (2004) has argued that “the public identity of the welfare queen” is loaded with stigma because Americans have always looked down on welfare recipients.¹⁶ In many people’s minds, being on welfare derives from promiscuity, laziness, and a parasitic relationship to the state and its taxpayers. As Wahneema Lubiano (1992) observed, “the welfare queen represents moral aberration and an economic drain, but the figure’s problematic status becomes all the more threatening once responsibility for the destruction of the ‘American way of life’ is attributed to it” (337-338).

While “trapped mothers” found their champions among several academics, left-leaning politicians, and some conservatives who subscribed to the narrative but who still wanted to see more restrictive measures in welfare policy, “welfare queens” were invoked by political leaders who sought to massively reduce the welfare rolls and to significantly increase the power of the state to punish behavior. Appeals on the House floor during welfare reform debates in 1995 encouraged lawmakers to “not feed the alligators,” speaking of welfare-reliant mothers.¹⁷ Research that argued that jobs were available, but many welfare mothers refused to accept them and thus weren’t living up to their end of their societal obligations (Mead 1992), lent strength to this perspective. Some political and media portrayals capitalized on stereotypical images of

Black and Latina mothers of multiple children by multiple fathers driving a luxury car while contentedly collecting government assistance from hardworking and tax-paying Americans.

Yvonne Hartman (2005) has characterized anti-welfare discourse that fuels characterizations such as the welfare queen as “a functional ideological smokescreen for” the forms of governance that evolve from it (67). Others have made similar claims, arguing that discourses that demonize the poor have multiple purposes that include the social regulation of individuals both inside and outside the welfare system (Gans 1994). Are discourses that depict segments of the poor in alternative ways, as “trapped mothers” for instance, also serving particular social regulatory purposes?

Organizational Tactics

Welfare reform and its strategies of governance would theoretically “rescue” the “trapped mother” and “dethrone” the “welfare queen.” Although the political rationalities that created these narratives constituted different ways of thinking about welfare recipients by people from opposite sides of the political spectrum, PRWORA ushered in a new set of regulatory tactics—policies, procedures, and styles of interaction—that each state had to implement. PRWORA gave states expanded surveillance authority to remove welfare “queens” from the rolls and expanded discretion to provide more resources to “trapped mothers” to help them move to self sufficiency. I am not suggesting a causal relationship between these cultural narratives and organizational tactics. Rather, these tools intermingled to produce the regime of governance that TANF recipients experienced.

One strategy that Massachusetts and other states adopted for moving TANF recipients off the rolls and into the labor force was to meld welfare-to-work case management to the pre-

reform eligibility and income maintenance roles of caseworkers. Along with ensuring that their clients were following the rules, caseworkers now would also provide coaching, guidance, work program referrals, and in-kind benefits, such as childcare and transportation vouchers to help “trapped mothers.” The rhetoric of a welfare reform that “helps women to help themselves” and the job title change of Massachusetts caseworkers from *Financial Assistance Workers* to *Temporary Assistance Social Workers* (TASWs) signaled the state’s desire to modify how they conceptualized and supported their clients.

The feeling of being “managed” becomes part of the process and surveillance is embedded within the support. With many more benchmarks that can disqualify a client from receiving benefits, tensions in many TANF offices are high and mistrust often frames client-caseworker interactions. For example, Cordelia, a disabled 36-year-old mother of a 5-year-old daughter, had received \$300 per month in TANF benefits for her daughter for the past three years. Cordelia is summoned by her caseworker to the office approximately once every six months to re-certify her daughter’s case:

Cordelia: I hate going there. They ask too many questions. “Do you have a boyfriend? Do you ‘catch up’ with her [daughter’s] father?” Personal stuff . . . I tell them, “no I don’t have a boyfriend, but do you know anybody that’s available?” Jeez! [And the caseworker is] a hard-core lady. She’ll ask you the most personal stuff without blinkin’ an eye! I wish I could get my daughter on Social Security because it is so much easier dealing with them. The welfare office is . . . they’re ghetto. They don’t speak proper English. They’re ignorant. I just don’t like to deal with that.

The caseworker’s questioning is designed to unearth potential inconsistencies in Cordelia’s story and is within the office’s parameters of acceptable inquiries. Although Cordelia

receives Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI) and is therefore exempt from work requirements and time limits, she must still cooperate with the state's child support enforcement initiative.

Asking about romantic relationships is a common caseworker technique that may reveal information about the father of Cordelia's daughter's that her caseworker can use to pursue child support from him or to demonstrate that Cordelia receives unreported income.

To Cordelia, however, the level of intrusion and mistrust to which she is subject is palpable. She responds by challenging her caseworker's professionalism and questioning the line between the collection of information to administer her daughter's benefits and inappropriate probes into her private life. Cordelia's labeling of staff members as "ghetto" and "ignorant" attacks their roles as professionals; she dismisses them as uneducated and unqualified to regulate her life even if they are state agents of a higher socioeconomic class and occupational status who can do just that.

Along with clients' participation in child support enforcement and their compliance with TANF's new eligibility requirements, TANF offices also regulate the ways in which low-income individuals seek assistance and the rules under which assistance will be granted. Caseworkers and other officials involved in service-delivery, informed by policy and organizational procedures, control the behavior of clients by dictating the agenda, timing, and tone of their clients' interactions with the state.¹⁸ For clients who are most harshly experiencing this regulation, the feeling of subordination descends early. For instance, in the offices frequented by this study's participants, while many clients initiate contact with their workers when they have a request or question, more often, workers decide when contact begins. Being summoned to the TANF office by a caseworker's letter or phone call, with the threat that her case can be closed

for failure to comply, can set in motion a defensive and feverish desire to guard one's dignity against the system.

When the client-caseworker relationship has evolved into confrontation, even the waiting room becomes a site of humiliation. Waiting to be called in to speak with her caseworker, waiting while her worker completes the necessary documentation, waiting for cash benefits and food stamps to arrive, and waiting for benefit time clocks to expire is a fundamental part of being on TANF. Although explanations for delays might lie with a caseworker's cramped schedule, events such as these are frequently interpreted by clients as signals that the bureaucracy's time is more valuable than theirs and that workers use long waits to penalize clients whom they do not hold in high regard by "teaching them a lesson." Regina was a client in two different offices and described her experiences in these terms:

Regina: They make you wait . . . [My worker] sits there like she's "all this, all that" . . . You have things to do, but they don't care. You're there to see them . . .

Although Regina might not approve of the ways in which she is being "managed," her visible compliance is required if she is to maintain her benefits. How she and others maneuver through and around this management becomes an empirical question. As the following sections will show, as TANF recipients formulate their own impressions of the new welfare enterprise, they create various strategies for how they will interact with their local offices and the cultural narratives that circulate. Clients find ways to "manage" both themselves and their caseworkers, who are simultaneous allies and combatants in the service delivery process. With reputations, privacy, and dignity on the line, the women strategically engage with the TANF office to secure necessary resources to pursue employment or other goals, while trying to assert some autonomy within a highly regulating system.

**FOLLOWING THE RULES: RECIPIENTS NAVIGATE WELFARE'S
LATEST PROGRAM OF GOVERNANCE**

It is widely assumed that TANF clients adhere to welfare mandates solely out of economic need. Clients simply have to follow the rules to receive continued resources. For this system to operate effectively, however, practices and techniques must reflect, for individuals, the “appropriate,” “desirable,” and “thinkable” ways to conduct themselves to receive desired resources (Dean 1999). “To analyze government,” Dean contends, “is to analyze those practices that try to shape, sculpt, mobilize and work *through* the choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals and groups” (12, emphasis added). These kinds of obligatory relationships exist in most facets of everyday life, regardless of socioeconomic status.

For TANF recipients, the morally embedded constructs of the “trapped mother” and the “welfare queen,” the restructured casework model of surveillance-based support, and the expanded discretionary power of caseworkers to enforce sanctions and provide support constitute a new relationship between the welfare office and themselves. Clients learned how to “play by the new set of rules” to receive state benefits, perhaps voicing disdain over the tactics, but rarely openly contesting the motives or purpose of the welfare office. The women’s conduct became effectively managed because behaviors and attitudes were not simply imposed; some aspects were also accepted and went unchallenged by the women. This is due, in part, to the fact that welfare reform, and its new tools of governance, is not uniformly repressive or punitive for clients. Caseworkers have the power to supply tangible benefits, such as cash assistance and employment support services, as well as intangible benefits, such as an opportunity to rejoin the world of work and a degree of independence from over-reliance on social support networks. For

some clients, these advantages align with their own desires and outweigh the potential payoffs of resisting the system.

To respond to the variation in work effort among recipients, states nonetheless imposed work requirements and sanctions to convince mothers to embrace the directives of the TANF office. Brenda, a mother of four, was mandated to work because her youngest child was over the age limit of two. However, she saw the requirement as consonant with her own wishes:

Brenda: They [the TANF office] told me that I would need to find a job, which is what I wanted anyway. So I'm at Maurice's [her youngest son's] day care center, helping out there. They [TANF office] pay for Maurice's and Tomika's [her youngest daughter] day care. You gotta do like 20 hours a week, which is fine with me. I just wish they [the job] paid more.

Brenda might not have taken this particular low-paying job prior to PRWORA. However, the new system ensured that both her ambitions and her actions aligned with the preferences of the state (Dean 1999). Surveillance and support converged to broker this arrangement, enforcing time limits and work requirements, while providing her with subsidized day care. Through her expressed self-motivation, Brenda subscribes to the belief that work will be beneficial for her family, asserting the institutionalized mandate. She expresses some ambivalence about the overall improvement that low-wage work has on her finances, but the welfare office's program of governance makes a strong case for congruence between its policy goals and Brenda's behavior.

Part of the effectiveness of the regime of governance to which study participants were subject is that the caseworkers who surveil them are also charged with helping them gather resources and move to economic self-sufficiency via employment.¹⁹ When their caseworkers de-

emphasized surveillance, study participants often viewed the omnipresent regulation as less problematic, even if they had to follow the same set of institutional norms as other clients, provide extensive information about themselves, and demonstrate that they were following policy objectives. Expanded case management gave TASWs some discretion to define what a model of surveillance-based support would mean for their relationships with their clients and some caseworkers prioritized the advocacy powers of the job. As long as their clients followed the rules, they could receive expanded support services and a protective approach to case management.

Having a caseworker who she viewed as supportive eased Adele's acceptance of the new rules. A mother of four, she described being thankful for what she saw as an advocate in her caseworker, a buffer against the harsher demands of state surveillance. Ms. Carson helped Adele navigate the bureaucratic hurdles to services and communicated that, at the frontlines, the state could be an accessible and supportive entity that had the resources to help her. When Adele received a sanction notice for forgetting to report to the welfare department that her eldest daughter had taken a part-time job, Adele saw her caseworker, Ms. Carson, as supportive. Ms. Carson helped Adele understand why her benefits were cut and allowed her to vent about the unfairness of the process. When her daughter later moved out of Adele's home, her wages were no longer counted as part of the family's, so Ms. Carson made sure that Adele's benefits were quickly reinstated. Adele recognized that state support involved a high level of supervision of her life, but saw her caseworker as her partner in helping her follow the rules.

Other clients were motivated to follow the regulations not only by the organization's tactics, but also by the normative messages that articulated what "responsible mothers" would do under welfare reform. Part of what seemed to inform how respondents opted to conduct

themselves in the TANF office was their own understanding of who they were (and were not) as welfare-reliant mothers. The stigmatization of welfare is something that respondents were aware of and battled constantly.²⁰ To contest the less favorable depiction of the “welfare queen,” many women implicitly asserted their identities as “trapped mothers.” They frequently testified to their competence and their abilities to play by the established rules. Sadie, a mother of one, made such a declaration:

Sadie: I hate this. People on welfare, for the most part, have no choice. *I'm not lazy or stupid. I'm just poor.* People talk to you like you're less than human, like all of us are crackheads or something.

The tools by which TANF-reliant mothers are governed extend beyond the policies and procedures of the welfare office to encompass the cultural narratives with which they engage. Circulating cultural constructs become powerful regulators, holding the women's behavior in check as they battle one construct (welfare queen) and attempt to align themselves with another (trapped mother). The desire to repel or prove particular beliefs about who they are as TANF recipients, as mothers, and as workers becomes linked to the adoption of both particular assertions of self and actual behaviors.

In this context, provision of information about a noncustodial parent for the child support enforcement process can become not only a substantive area of policy participation, but also a symbolic terrain through which women can debunk the “welfare queen” stereotype and assert themselves as responsible, respectable women. Maria, a mother of three, had this to say:

Maria: None of their fathers are helping, no. And it's not fair to the kids, and *it's not fair to me because I'm working.* And it's hard when you're, you know, when you're a

single parent and there's not enough income coming in . . . So yeah, I am giving his information to the welfare department.

Although any monies collected from the fathers of Maria's children beyond a \$50 per month disregard would be recouped by the state, organizational practices and circulating cultural narratives encouraged Maria to participate as "the right thing to do." By submitting to the office's request, Maria distanced herself from the stereotype that welfare recipients do not know who the fathers of their children are, while simultaneously asserting her worth as a working mother who is living up to her responsibilities.

Practices such as surveillance-based support and expanded caseworker discretion worked hand-in-hand with cultural narratives to shape the management of recipients within TANF offices. It was largely effective because it regulated TANF recipients from the "top-down" and from the "street-level" by imposing directives, but it also enlisted recipients through their own desires as mothers, as benefit claimants, and as workers. The desire to distance themselves from the "welfare queen" construct and to assert themselves as mothers who could function with the right mix of services encouraged compliance. At the same time, strong relationships with caseworkers, who used their discretionary power to emphasize the "supportive" side of "surveillance-based support," encouraged others to try to follow the rules with minimal protest. This suggests that the TANF recipients in this study were governed using a host of substantive and symbolic tools, not simply through the policy "carrots" of cash benefits and the "sticks" of time limits and sanctions. However as we will see, full compliance with the dictates of welfare reform did not always occur. At times, they were usurped, even among clients who managed to remain on the system and who "appeared" to be compliant.

**“WHY DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?”—SELECTIVE COMPLIANCE
AND THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF BOUNDED RESISTANCE**

In *History of Sexuality, v1*, Foucault argues that “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power . . . [O]ne is always ‘inside’ power, there is no ‘escaping it’” (1980:95).²¹ Not all TANF recipients willingly complied with institutional mandates; some contested welfare reform’s new program of governance (Dean 1999:13). Some left the system altogether, unwilling or unable to comply with the office’s new demands. As Sharon Hays (2003) has observed, dissent via exiting the system became a strategy for some because “a central result of welfare reform . . . is that a large proportion of desperately poor mothers and children are now too discouraged, too angry, too ashamed, or too exhausted to go to the welfare office” (50). Others mount formal challenges, taking their grievances through the administrative fair hearings process (Lens and Vorsanger 2005), obtaining legal advocacy, or participating in civic activism for improved TANF services.²²

While political conservatives might applaud “exit” from the system and liberals apt to celebrate “voice” within it (Hirschman 1970), a third strategy exists. Some respondents in the *Three-City Study* contested the system in ways that some would consider to be subversive or “deviant” and others would worry is a highly risky approach to battle powerful regulation and their marginalized status.

The concealment strategy, the calculated presentation of information regarding one’s case to a welfare caseworker and the purposeful omission or altering of pertinent details, is a tactic used by some low-income mothers to procure resources to which they are not legally entitled. In *Making Ends Meet*, Kathy Edin and Laura Lein (1997) argue that most welfare recipients who

conceal do so because they see no other reasonable alternative and reluctantly conclude that they have no choice but to hide information that could reduce the cash allotment needed for their families.²³ Concealment can include the omission of other residents in the home who contribute financially, underreporting income received from a boyfriend or a child's father, or failure to report an off-the-books job to the welfare department.

Concealment becomes a tactic of resistance, however, when the motives for doing so move from solely the economic to encompass the political. The approach has been documented in welfare offices, although the emphasis has been on resisting computer surveillance in ways that also result in economic gain (Gilliom 2005). Extending this work by linking the Foucault-inspired work on what Scott (1985, 1990) calls "everyday forms of resistance" with emerging conceptual frameworks in governmentality is promising, particularly as analysts attempt to theorize some of the observed dynamics in post-reform TANF offices where recipients are thought to be heavily regulated. This approach is supported by the work of Ortner (1995), Cohen (2004), Kelley (1994), and others who call for more complicated definitions of opposition that address the "immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt and that, for better or worse, is the political environment of subject classes" (Scott 1990:199).²⁴

Some respondents, in describing their choices to conceal or alter information, saw themselves as challenging the goals and tools that had been put in place to control them. Central to their narratives was a contestation of the organizational practices *and* the cultural narratives that drive welfare reform. Although the women did not necessarily articulate their decisions to conceal or alter information as "political," they were in conversation with the political logics that undergirded the implementation of welfare reform.

For example, Sadie still used a monthly bus and subway pass that the TANF office supplied to help her get to a job training program, even though she had not attended in over ten months. Sadie learned that, in a large bureaucracy, the inefficiency involved in managing others can sometimes be used to one's advantage. "They're so behind in stuff," she explained. "They don't even know; and I'm not going to tell them. They *owe* me that much." Sadie reasoned that, because the welfare office "sent" her to a work preparation training program that she found to be largely ineffective and because the office treated her poorly in the past, it was fair for her to keep the transportation voucher. She had this to say about her caseworker:

Sadie: Before I go to that bitch, I would do everything in my power to handle [any problem] on my own . . . There's a lot of people that feel this way, but don't ask for the case worker's supervisor. It took me a long time to feel okay enough to *fight for my rights*.

To Sadie, the free transportation pass was a "right," a resource for her family, and fair compensation for having been put through the welfare department's bureaucratic hurdles. Keeping the bus pass also represented an avenue to subtly challenge the ways in which Sadie's experience with welfare reform's employment and training thrust had not lived up to its promise.

The concealment strategy might be decried as "deviant behavior." However, concealment as an affront to the TANF office was not unusual, and its political relationship to the larger structures of governance must be explicated. Termed by political scientist Cathy Cohen (2004), a politics of deviance posits that through the agency and intentional deeds of nonconformity of those situated on the margins of dominant society emerge acts considered "deviant" by those normalizing influences. This conduct often has deeper relevance. The cumulative impact of these acts "might be the creation of spaces or counter publics, where not

only oppositional ideas and discourses happen, but lived opposition, or at least autonomy, is chosen daily” (Cohen 2004:27). As such, resistance is a form of self-management that engages with the dominant prescribed regime of governance by creating rationalities and techniques that seek to challenge and undermine what actors deem systematically oppressive practices of power.

The child support enforcement process both imposes new forms of regulation on welfare recipients' sexual pasts and holds non-custodial parents financially accountable for their children. It is a fertile site for potential resistance. Although created to make non-custodial parents financially accountable for their offspring (Bloomer, Sipe, and Ruedt 2002; Lin and McLanahan 2001), the process is freighted with symbolic meaning. During interviews, a caseworker asks the custodial parent applying for benefits, typically the mother, to identify the name, social security number, last known addresses and places of employment, and parents' names and addresses of the father(s) of her child(ren). From policy makers to front-line TANF workers, the child support enforcement process has been touted as a success story in welfare reform. In interviews, welfare-reliant mothers raised the rhetorical question (in various forms), “why should the father be off the [financial] hook when the mother of his children has to turn to the welfare system to survive?”

While many respondents submitted to this new directive, child support enforcement was soured for others.²⁵ It is not that the women disagreed with *the spirit*, the moral justification of child support collection. Rather, *the process* of inquiring about the fathers of their children felt like an indictment of their sexual pasts and a leveling of the “welfare queen” construct of the promiscuous and reproductively irresponsible woman.²⁶

Further, the casework model of discretionary surveillance-based support was simultaneously mapped onto the process. Caseworkers must attempt to strike “intimate distance” with clients, walking a line between being investigative versus intrusive in every interaction that even the most competent and savvy caseworkers can breach. Surveillance requires that clients share delicate details of their lives, circumstances around the men with whom they have had sexual relations, whom the state now seeks for economic accountability. Clients wrestle with these issues in the presence of caseworkers who vacillate between being advocates and interrogators. Goffman (1959) reminds us that, in social interaction, people often read and interpret each other’s performances differently. Clients don’t always see caseworkers’ questions as “just business” and can feel as though lines of propriety are crossed. As a result, what seems like a routine collection of information to a welfare worker can become an accusatory and probing cross-examination of life choices to a welfare-reliant mother, another attempt by the state to assert control. What can result is a defensive stance from mothers where a battle erupts between multiple and conflicting notions of self-government. Such a contestation then indirectly shapes the success of policy, in this case, the child support enforcement program.

Natasha, a 40-year-old mother of six sons—ages 21, 20, 12, 6, and 2-year-old twins—lived through a turbulent life of sexual and physical abuse, alcoholism and drug addiction, and economic instability and had no intention of letting the welfare system indict her on past choices. As an additional stressor, Natasha’s two oldest sons suffer from paranoid schizophrenia and she has spent more than a decade trying to secure consistent and effective mental health services, housing, and support for them from various state and non-profit agencies and hospitals. As a low-income mother with a difficult history, she stated that she has “been through the bureaucratic wringer more times than [she] can count” and has cultivated an increasingly

antagonistic stance toward the high levels of control that she has had to relinquish in order to get help. Having cycled on and off welfare for almost 10 years, in 2001, Natasha was receiving a child-only grant for two of her sons and described the level of control that the TANF office wielded in this way:

Natasha: What another way to put somebody back on the chains. That's what I call it—chains. Invisible chains. They may be invisible, but we can still feel the weight . . . They say, “well you better do this or else . . .” or “look how good we've been to you so far . . .” I had one worker say that, that I should be happy she doesn't call me in [to the welfare office] a lot. I don't need the weight on me.

It was during the child support collection process that Natasha felt the most scrutinized by street-level welfare bureaucrats. Natasha and her caseworker had very different ideas about what she should reveal and how she should cooperate with the directives of the welfare office. Roberta, her caseworker for the last two and half years, was required to try to obtain any information that she could on any of the four fathers of Natasha's six sons. Although she had no current intimate involvement with any of them (and a rather strained relationship with three of them; the fourth is deceased), Natasha refused to comply with Roberta's request. A DNA test for the child support enforcement process two years ago soured her:

Natasha: I went through it already with Timone [her 6-year-old son]. I went to court for the child support. Then they had me and Timone go to this place; it was really far, a laboratory. They took blood from me and Timone. They took our picture and our thumbprint. I said, “I don't like this.” And we didn't get anything anyway. I didn't get no child support. But I had to do it or they were gonna take his welfare check away. So you see, you're threatened! *You don't have to threaten me to take care of my child!* No!

I'm not doing anything else *for them* [the welfare office] because this, to me, is pathetic.

I'm not the disappearing parent. How you're treating me, it belongs to the father, and

I'm not letting anybody dump on me!

Natasha made an important point. It is the father whose accountability the state sought, but the mother took the (initial) brunt of the scrutiny and regulation. The state cannot get to him, except through her. As a result, Roberta persisted in requesting information on the fathers of Natasha's other children. However, Natasha was convinced that the effort to collect would yield nothing except leverage the welfare department would use to make demands of her later. For her, cooperation meant helping an agency that has subjected her to disrespect over the years, as she believed that any monies collected through the process would be recouped by the state. The tense situation between Natasha and Roberta escalated when Roberta diligently focused her efforts on trying to get Natasha to volunteer information on the father of Jawanza, her 12-year-old:

Natasha: I said to her, "Excuse me, he's my batterer!" My worker said, "But it happened a long time ago." I said, "Excuse me! See these scars? [Pointing to healed burn marks on her arms, knees, and scalp] These scars are here for life . . . Why do you think I'm on SSI? *I'm not on SSI for drugs!* I'm on from being traumatized for three years with no help from the courts, no help from the police."

Rather than cower to the welfare department, Natasha approached the institution with defiance. "They want you to go back to some trauma in your life. They want you to remember some trauma in your life just for their satisfaction," Natasha charged.

Roberta then assiduously pressed Natasha about Miguel, the father of her twin boys. Miguel has a drug problem and did not contribute regular child support. In addition, Natasha

saw his sporadic visits as detrimental to the twins, as she never knew whether or not he would arrive inebriated. A child support garnishment of whatever wages he was receiving, no matter how sporadic and minimal, could allow him to argue that he should have more access to the children. Roberta suggested that Natasha file for child support from the twins' father anyway. Natasha's resistance had as much to do with her disinterest in cooperating with the welfare department as Miguel's inability to pay and her tense relationship with him:

Natasha: There wouldn't be a point because he has no consistent income because of the drugs. *And I am not interested in dealing with the questions from the government bureaucrats about his whereabouts and what I know about him. It's too bad that a lot of women are protecting these no-good, dead-beat dads and still being involved with them. But I don't do that. But just because I'm out of a group [single mothers] who do that, I'll still be treated the same way . . .* So I'm not putting all this work into getting money for the twins, especially when drugs are involved. *These twins will be alright as long as I'm alive . . .* I'm not wasting my time with that system. They'll mistreat me because he's on the drugs.

Recent literature has raised concerns that the rules around child support collection are about regulating fathers' financial responsibilities, but mothers are worried about issues of safety, the level of access that fathers can subsequently request, antagonizing an individual who may have disrupted their lives in the past, or even disturbing informal child support arrangements where the money goes directly to the family rather than to the state (Kurz and Hirsch 2003; Waller and Plotnick 2001). Nevertheless, the symbolic elements of the relationship between Roberta and Natasha illustrate how policy can lead to battles for control, dignity, and power that result in programs of conduct (and particular policies) being undercut. While many

mothers' *economic* realities may make them reluctant and even resistant to sharing information about their children's fathers, Natasha's *social* experiences within bureaucracies hinder her full participation in the child support collection process. What may be impersonal and routine inquiries to a frontline caseworker are, to Natasha, insensitive and palpable indictments of the kinds of choices Natasha has made. As Dean and Hindess (1998) remind us, "practices of government, as much as practices of self-government, or modes of resistance, attempt to specify and fix our identities in definite ways in the service of particular ends" (11). Natasha attacked the suggestion that she is a just another stereotype, a drug-using welfare mother who is complacent about receiving welfare, while the fathers of her children provide no economic support. This negative depiction does not fit her (as she sees it), even if aspects of her biography fit the bill. At multiple points in the interaction, Natasha countered that she provides for her children as a responsible and loving parent, resisting the "welfare queen" narrative that seeks to classify and define her. She rejected the labeling process in play, which she believes influences how the TANF office deals with her and makes "moral" claims about why her approach to governance is "correct."

As the cultural subtext of the promiscuous "welfare queen" underlies the interaction, Natasha interpreted Roberta's probes as covert critiques of Natasha's morality. Natasha's large family and multiple partners are the subjects of much curiosity among the welfare workers with whom she has interacted over the years:

Natasha: "Oh, you have six boys!" they say. And they poke around to see, "Well, are they all by the same father?" Like looking down their noses and stuff . . . I don't want no welfare! I'd rather get it from their fathers, but . . . we don't know where they're at . . . I don't have to walk into those traps when I know that *I know how to be a mom and how to*

be responsible. I don't have to open the door to the chaos, coming home [from meeting with them], crying and slamming my purse down and then responding to my kids rudely because the system hurt me and embarrassed me and used me . . . *I let them know that they can't mess with me.*

Again, Natasha relied on the tropes of motherhood and responsibility to battle the popular discourse about the irresponsibility of multiple-partner fertility that she feels is embedded in the welfare office and its “traps,” mapped onto the ways in which Roberta and others have attempted to manage her. Resistance occurred as Roberta and Natasha's differing logics and strategies conflict with each other. As a result, while many mothers actively participate in the child support collection process, Natasha refused, choosing to conceal information that could assist the welfare department.

Perhaps Roberta's persistence in the face of Natasha's dissatisfaction with the process was grounded in a desire to counter Natasha's resistance, to attempt to trump Natasha's insistence on her own brand of self-governance (one that is contradictory to current policy and the demands of Roberta's job). While Roberta had the individual discretion to stage how she would secure the information, the office's model of surveillance-based support placed Roberta in the contradictory of position of presenting herself as “a helper,” while engaging Natasha in a painful enforcement process.

Perhaps Roberta did not place as much symbolic emphasis on the interaction as did Natasha or realize that part of what Natasha saw herself battling was the “welfare queen” cultural narrative and the level of outside supervision in her life. Bureaucrat and client therefore read a seemingly benign function—the routine collection of information on a non-custodial parent—very differently. This is a common occurrence when “marked identities and regulatory

processes” intersect and the relative powerlessness and limited and contradictory agency is felt by those who live on the margins of (and in conflict with) societal expectations (Cohen 2004). While under the direct surveillance of the state, those life choices that fall out of line with normative behaviors come under scrutiny and the stigmatized individual has little means through which to resist if she desires continued resources.

Concealment as a strategy of resistance certainly has its risks. Towards the final months of the study, Natasha landed a job working in the kitchen at her sons’ daycare center. With extra income and the opportunity to spend some time outside of her home, Natasha was happy to be back in the world of work. However, just as she had during the child support collection process, she refused to report the new job to the welfare department. When I asked her why, Natasha’s explanation had as much to do with her anger toward the welfare department as with her desire to avoid a benefit reduction. Fed up with the bureaucratic maze of surveillance and evaluation for minimal reward and the informal comments that workers over the years lobbed, “about [her] kids, [her] past, whatever,” Natasha saw withholding information from the welfare department as a way to gain control:

Natasha: I’m not rushing to tell them and I’m not in fear of anything with the system . . . It’s how I feel. It’s about my motivation. It’s nobody else’s business, but they’ll make it theirs . . . If I get approached, I’ll just look at them and say, yes. It’s not good that as soon as I get something I should be penalized. I’m using common sense. Is this job really for me? Let me wait it out. What’s the rush? I know how many pay stubs it has to be [before she must report]. And still I may go over one extra pay stub just for my security. I’ll tell them, “It’s not your life; it’s mine . . . Why are you trying to keep me down?” I’ll say that to whoever will approach me. I will not fear them, period!

Natasha's distrust of the welfare department and her resentment toward the regime of governance operating within it will likely only be amplified if and when her caseworker discovers her employment and decides to either close her case or garnish future TANF allotments (an almost certainty with the increased use of computerized surveillance to track recipients). Nevertheless, Natasha insisted on reacting to the negative experiences and the constant feeling of being "managed" by intentionally and deliberately maintaining tight control over the one resource that the TANF office seeks that she can manipulate—information related to her case. She has adopted a "politics of deviance," that while perhaps viewed as immoral and counterproductive by many, has its own moral justification in Natasha's eyes, asserts her agency, and protects her dignity. It also creates a space where, at least for a brief time, she is freed from the everyday governance that she views as oppressive.

Because of its inherent risks, the freedom gained by the concealment strategy is restricted. While Natasha and others make the distinction between themselves and normative "others" who they believe shamelessly cheat the system out of greed, these moral measuring sticks may not continuously hold up when the office's surveillance requirements call for the women to continuously repeat incorrect or incomplete facts around their cases. The maze of monitoring requires the women to present their fronts many times and it may get more difficult to do so over time.

Further, as a form of resistance, concealment is shaped by the system of governance that it seeks to escape. The "welfare queen" construct nearly ensures that women will actively seek to avoid its leveling by regulating their behavior or asserting self-identities that seek to undermine it; it also discourages women from adopting more public forms of protest for fear of being associated with its narrative. Perhaps due in part to the narrative's embeddedness in the

regulatory structure of poor women's lives, Natasha asserts that she is not a welfare queen, but never directly takes on the validity of the stereotype. The contestation of specific cultural narratives, and the ways in which they regulate women, becomes a private, personalized, and individual fight, rather than a public, depersonalized, and collective one.

Ironically, Natasha's chosen approach arguably serves as a justification for this kind of cultural narrative and the organizational tactics that the TANF office employs. By lying to the TANF office, she reinforces the state's rationale for surveillance-based support. Therefore, the concealment game might be better thought of as a form of "bounded resistance." It emerges out of the particular regime of governance to which the women are subject, but in turn serves to justify it. The strategy does not usurp the power of the state or the existing program of governance in an expansive, lasting way.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS:

INTERPRETING WELFARE REFORM AS A SYSTEM OF GOVERNANCE

This paper set out to explore how welfare recipients are governed by and beyond TANF offices under the latest round of welfare reform. To accomplish this, it illuminated the forms of knowledge and expertise that were engaged during the reform process and the administrative means through which a new program of managing poor mothers was instituted (Dean, 1999). Although we see the high degree of power that the state leverages in the lives of these women, the analytical approach of governmentality allows us to resist the urge to overestimate the *substantive* presence of welfare bureaucracies in the women's everyday lives. Particularly with the increased use of computer technology to do the work of welfare "from a distance," incorporating an understanding of the *symbolic* power that the welfare enterprise commands in

women's lives is a more precise way to discover how these individuals are experiencing social regulation. Through this approach, we see the impact of far-reaching, persistent, and powerful messages about who TANF recipients are as mothers, workers, and women. These presumed identities are coupled with various technologies for the management (and transformation) of the women's behavior, such as TANF offices' particular brand of surveillance-based support and the expansion of caseworker discretion to sanction and reward clients. All of these mechanisms come to have disciplinary effects on welfare-reliant mothers, structuring how they are expected to interact with the office and public policy.

Mitchell Dean (1999) reminds us that "to define government as the 'conduct of conduct' is to open up the examination of self-government or cases in which governor and governed are two aspects of the one actor" (12). I have documented the variety of approaches to self-management that welfare-reliant mothers undertook as they read and responded to attempts to transform their conduct. Along with the purely economic motives for remaining in the TANF program, many respondents saw at least a few of the goals of policy as coinciding with their own. Some were invested in actively asserting themselves as responsible mothers, workers, and benefit claimants vis-à-vis the service-delivery process. They engaged with TANF's system of supervision, following the rules by attempting to leave welfare, find work, and participate in the child support enforcement process. In exchange for resources that would temporarily support their families and possibly position them for independence in the labor market, the mothers had to accept, at least temporarily, an expanded degree of regulation of their personal and financial lives.

As Higgins explains, "while certain outcomes may be codified in programmes, this does not necessarily mean that these will be achieved unproblematically. From the perspective of a

governmentality approach to regulation, the *complexities and difficulties* surrounding attempts to govern . . . should comprise the focus of inquiry” (2004:461, emphasis added; also see Miller and Rose 1990:10-11). The “rationalities of resistance and the programmes to which they give rise” must be parsed out in order to ascertain the theoretical and policy-related implications of various practices (Dean 1999:37).

In this study, when the governance felt particularly oppressive and the scrutiny reminded the women of the negative cultural narratives embedded in their social status, it frequently bred resentment. Welfare offices, as prime locations for the attachment and contestation of stigma, were critical sites where respondents sought to affirm or combat assumptions about who they were as impoverished mothers. Their frustrations were sometimes reinforced by the disappointments that they experienced in their welfare-to-work transitions (see Hays 2003). As a result, some respondents contested the TANF office’s approach to managing them by rejecting more formal modes of protest and by creating their own strategies of resistance. By concealing and altering information pertinent to their cases, this subtle and subversive tactic was not always just about the money. This paper therefore revises the solely economic interpretation of recipient concealment and places this behavior within a broader conceptual framework of power and the management of conduct.

I do not mean to suggest that every time a TANF recipient fails to report income to the welfare office, she is engaging in an act of resistance. After all, many Americans engage in this very process when filing their tax returns. For many, concealment is solely an economic choice. However, for a segment of the women in this study, their motives and explanations for why they concealed was not simply about a desire to maximize funds to feed their families or to “work the system.” Rather, they saw themselves in a fierce battle with the welfare office as an institution

rife with contradictions, with their caseworkers as barriers to their access to support and purveyors of surveillance and with the state as an entity that had created a policy that seemed to limit rather than expand their choices. They were not all simply “keeping a bit extra” to survive (although this might have been part of the motive); they were flexing their abilities to be autonomous agents in an institution that they saw as attempting to rob them of this resource. As Gilliom (2005) pointed out, “[as] surveillance increasingly becomes the defining face of government . . . resisting surveillance programs becomes one key way for citizens to express and act on their disagreement with the norms and rules of the state. And when that resistance becomes sufficiently widespread to be recognized as a pattern in the lives of large numbers of people, it becomes hard not to recognize it as a significant movement on the political landscape” (75).

These data also shed light on some important policy implications by highlighting the diversity of opinions that TANF recipients hold about the welfare system and by demonstrating, in a practical sense, how certain technologies that are deployed to regulate them may, in fact, encourage recipients to attempt to undercut policy goals.²⁷ We are currently witnessing persistent welfare stigma and expanded surveillance, along with the reduction of politically powerful organizations and coalitions that remain invested in an entitlement-based welfare system (Mink 1998) and a public that assumes that welfare has been successfully “reformed.” It is in this era that dispersed, private resistance, such as what this study describes, will likely increase when respondents feel marginalized and isolated within the system. As a policy prescription, because of child support enforcement’s popularity among many TANF recipients (and staff members), who see it as a tool to hold non-custodial parents accountable for their children, this paper does not suggest that it should be abolished. However, considering the high

degree of surveillance that the process entails, a larger economic benefit to the custodial parent for participating and a reconfiguration of the data gathering process will likely reduce the resentment towards the procedure.

Others might suggest that the appropriate policy response is to make surveillance even more rigorous and to make concealment's penalties more severe. However, being caught concealing information already involves strict penalties and requiring caseworkers to expand their scrutiny of clients is potentially costly and time-consuming. One also might conclude that improving the capabilities of computer-based surveillance technologies is a necessary approach. However this does not address the fundamental conflict currently embedded in the welfare system: when clients feel disempowered, they will *create* ways to undermine the system to gain autonomy, preserve their dignity, and assert some level of control over their lives.

This paper might serve as a companion piece to burgeoning work exploring low-income women's more formal strategies of resistance inside welfare offices, such as legal action and administrative hearings (Lens and Vorsanger 2005). Both streams of research suggest that, despite the often confrontational relationship between TANF recipients and the welfare system, clients' ability to wield some degree of power and to challenge regulation that they deem unfair is critical to the process. Client complaint hotlines, recipient advisory boards, and other initiatives designed to give welfare-reliant mothers a voice in the process might go a long way in curbing the antipathy and hostility that leads to concealment as a strategy of resistance. Further, granting caseworkers incentives for ensuring that they provide available supportive services to their clients might also improve caseworker-client relationships in offices where the surveillance function of casework is currently venerated.

Future sociological research might use emerging advances in governmentality studies to explore other areas of the lives of low-income parents where they are subject to deliberate attempts to regulate their conduct. Popular policy proposals such as healthy marriage initiatives and fatherhood involvement programs are such examples. Institutions with distinct regulatory programs in play, such as schools, prisons, and health care organizations also might serve as examples of surveillance operating with, as, and through the support process. Further work also could examine how individuals within these locations, as both regulated objects and regulating subjects, determine whether and which resistance strategies (exit, voice, or concealment) they will adopt. To gain a complete picture of the lives of marginalized populations, scholars must be ready to incorporate a range of protest behaviors into our analyses, alongside the “respectable” forms of resistance on which we typically focus (Cohen 2004). When do technologies of self-governance upend the fundamental rules of engagement to which individuals are subject (and subject themselves)? It is in these moments of contesting “the appropriate” that individuals might revise systems of governance.

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¹ Social changes, such as encouraging the formation of two-parent families and reducing child poverty and the number of out-of-wedlock births, were less discussed, but were also coveted goals when welfare reform was enacted. These goals have gained increased attention in the recent welfare reauthorization debates.

² In this analysis, the terms “clients,” “recipients,” “respondents,” and “informants,” are used interchangeably.

³ According to Lawrence Grossberg, governmentality differs from discipline in that, while all power is conduct on conduct, governmentality is conduct on free conduct. “Governmentality,” he argued, “assumes and constitutes the freedom of the actor in itself” (Packer 2003:39). Of course, the economic vulnerability of TANF recipients limits their freedom to exercise other alternatives to the TANF system. However, because such alternatives exist, I am conceptualizing them as “free” agents.

⁴ For example, see Bennett, Lu, and Song 2004; Blank and Ellwood 2002; Blank and Haskins 2001; Chase-Lansdale et al. 2003; Cherlin and Fomby 2004; Corcoran et al. 2000; Corcoran, Danziger, and Tolman 2004; Danziger et al. 2002; Duncan and Chase-Lansdale 2002; Dunifon, Kalil, and Danziger 2003; Lichter and Crowley 2004; and Mauldon et al 2004.

⁵ For example, see Bishop 2003; Hagan and Owens-Manley 2002; Hays 2003, Lurie 2001; Lurie and Riccucci 2003; Meyers, Riccucci, and Lurie 2001; Ridzi 2004; Rogers-Dillon and Skrentny 1999; and Sandfort 1999.

⁶ This 24-month benefit allotment can be stretched over a 5-year period.

⁷ Within and across-state variation in policies, local implementation, caseload composition, and community context make generalizations about the degree of institutional change that has occurred difficult to pinpoint.

⁸ For more discussion of the more supervisory mission of these institutions, see Anderson 2001; Blau 1960; Brodtkin 1997; Hagen and Lurie 1995; Piven and Cloward 1971; and Rank 1994. In fact, while many supervisory aspects of welfare reform seem “new,” they have longstanding histories grounded in political rationalities about what the appropriate “moral” expectations for poor families should be. For example, the fear that cash assistance leads to dependency and sexual irresponsibility that political leaders invoked during the debates over welfare reform in the early to mid-1990s is reminiscent of the critiques of the English Poor Laws that served as a template for US poverty relief (Somers and Block 2005), as well as the political wrangling that followed ADC and later Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) for decades. Further, the “employable mother” criteria that local administrators used to determine who should receive mothers’ pensions in the early 1900s and Aid to Dependent Children (ADC)

established in 1935 meant that some low-income mothers received the message that they would have to rely on the labor market, rather than the state, for their economic security.

⁹ This charge is even consumed by members who are thought to fall outside of the immediate purview of the governed, who then regulate their own behavior as they witness the technologies of regulation experienced by others. One could argue that welfare reform also serves to communicate to the general public, particularly low-wage workers just outside of welfare receipt, that the way to avoid experiencing the organizational tactics of TANF offices and having to battle the cultural narratives around welfare receipt is to continue to participate in the labor market. In short, the forms of government (broadly conceived to mean ways of conduct) that take place in microsettings such as TANF offices are, borrowing from Burchell (1996), linked to the “macropolitical activities of government directed towards individuals as members of a population, society, or nation” (19). As a state entity, the welfare office’s role is one of coordination, “one that gathers together disparate technologies of governing inhabiting many sites” (Bratich, Packer, and McCarthy 2003:4-5).

¹⁰ The ethnographic sample is comprised of 256 families residing in low-income neighborhoods in the three cities. The study also includes a subset of families with a child that has a moderate to severe mental or physical disability. The broader study is comprised of longitudinal surveys, embedded child and adolescent development studies, and comparative ethnographic work. Its goal is to better understand the effects of welfare reform on the well being of children and families.

¹¹ For a detailed description of the research design of the ethnography, please see *Welfare, Children, and Families: Overview and Design Report* by Pamela Winston, Ronald Angel, Linda Burton, Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, Andrew Cherlin, Robert Moffitt, and William Julius Wilson at www.wjh.edu/~welfare.

¹² Ethnographers gathered data using similar techniques for a total of 71 families in the Boston site. We recruited participants between June 1999 and December 2000 through neighborhood social service organizations, random encounters in public areas, and snowball sampling. We conducted interviews once or twice per month for 12 to 18 months, usually at the home of the respondent or at a location of her preference. We conducted follow-up interviews once every six months until December 2002. During the interviews, we followed interview guides and adhered to essentially the same format, adapting to special circumstances and the flow of information. Topics addressed during interviews included: health and health access; experiences with TANF, SSI, Medicaid, WIC, and other public assistance programs; education and work experiences and future plans; family economics; child

development, parenting, intimate relationships; support networks; family routines; and home and neighborhood environments. Each tape-recorded interview lasted approximately two hours. We conducted interviews in the language respondents reported being most comfortable speaking—English, Spanish, or “Spanglish”—and then, as needed, translated them to English as part of data collection. We also accompanied the women in their daily activities, such as interacting with welfare bureaucracies and other service agencies. Data were selectively transcribed from interview tapes and fieldworkers documented each interaction with respondents in extensive fieldnotes. These data were then coded using a pre-constructed format and inputted into the project’s database.

¹³ While caseworker interview data are not presented in this paper, I also conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 37 frontline caseworkers, 13 supervisors, seven agency administrators, and four specialized operation staff members. I also conducted archival research, analyzing service delivery manuals and documents, client case documents, program descriptions, institutional literature on welfare reform, and worker performance evaluation documents.

¹⁴ Nevertheless, there are several ethnographic accounts that support the “trapped mothers” hypothesis, refute the “welfare queen” hypothesis, and show that many on the rolls actually face *multiple* barriers that hinder employment (Hays 2003).

¹⁵ See for example, President Bill Clinton’s “Remarks on Welfare Reform,” August 22, 1996.

¹⁶ Assumptions regarding what make a good mother and interrogations of one’s past life choices have long swirled around the welfare office. This is as it should be, conservatives argue. Moral scrutiny should go on within the confines of welfare offices to prevent government abuse and to protect children. Labor market participation, reproductive choices, relationships with intimate partners, and the ways in which clients raise their children are all topics open for discussion by caseworkers. A social stigma to discourage use and to encourage work and reproductive responsibility, conservatives would argue, is actually the kind of cultural tool that can work in concert with policy directives to minimize welfare use and abuse. Surrendering one’s privacy is intended to be an unpleasant experience, a disincentive to becoming a public charge.

¹⁷ *Congressional Record*. U.S. House of Representatives, 104th Congress. March 24, 1995, p. H3766. Also see Murray (1992).

¹⁸ While this leaves caseworkers in a powerful position relative to their clients, much of what goes on in a welfare offices that is laid at the feet of caseworkers by clients and others should be attributed to larger systemic policies and

conflicts that erupt during the implementation of policy in a complex institution such as a welfare office. Federal and state-level policy makers and higher-level welfare officials determine much of what goes in these institutions (Hill 2003; Meyers, Riccucci, and Lurie 2001). In fact, studies of the implementation of welfare reform highlight the enormous pressures under which caseworkers find themselves as they must master myriad ever-changing policies, stay current with the technological advances in client tracking, and administer resources to a dynamic caseload (Watkins 2003). Nevertheless, while this work challenges scholars' "workers as powerful," "clients as powerless" conceptualizations of caseworker-client relationships, it must be made clear that caseworkers still wield a great deal of influence over how they react to the institutional parameters constructed for them and how they respond to clients (Lipsky 1980; Brodtkin 1997).

¹⁹ Elsewhere, the less effective side of this casework model is highlighted. With the same workers fulfilling both eligibility-compliance and employment support service duties, clients are frequently frustrated with the seemingly contradictory roles and the shifting alliances of their caseworkers. See Watkins (2003).

²⁰ For an in-depth discussion of welfare recipients' perceptions of stigma and the role that individually-based explanations for poverty play in their attitudes toward other recipients, see Rogers-Dillon (1995), Seccombe, James, and Walters (1998), and Soss (2005).

²¹ See Thompson (2003), who argued that, while "Foucault never abandoned the essential interweaving of power and resistance that he proclaimed in this provocative line, the concept of resistance at issue in it did undergo a profound shift" (113). Thompson argues that Foucault's model of resistance moved from "tactical reversal," which saw resistance as the thwarting of mechanisms involved in a specific configuration of power, to the "aesthetics of existence," which attempts to "forge autonomous forms of life in and through . . . techniques of governance" (113). Resistance is therefore conceptualized in the governmental conceptual of power relations as autonomy or self-formation.

²² However, these methods have their limitations. There is no way to ensure that these strategies will be effective, potentially require the forgoing of economic resources, may bring informal retaliation from office staff members, and are often time-consuming. Hence, they can bring more negative repercussions to clients than to the organization. Other welfare clients may be unaware that a fair hearing process exists. Further, in a study of AFDC recipients conducted in 1994-1995, Joe Soss argues that in part "because the political disadvantages they already

carry are reinforced by the lessons they learn as they participate in AFDC,” many are unwilling to raise questions or grievances with the welfare office and believe that doing so will be ineffective and possibly risky (Soss 2005: 309).

²³ Also see Dodson (2002), Edin and Lein (1996), and Edin (1995).

²⁴ For those who have broadened their conceptualizations of resistance to focus on “everyday actions,” a complication involves under-specifying what “counts” as resistance, thereby minimizing its analytical traction (Ortner 1995; Cohen 2004). Gilliom (2005) warned us of the “danger that depicting something like petty fraud as a vital form of politics may well mistakenly amplify insignificant gestures, place false hope in tiny acts of individual defiance, and give inappropriate, if implicit, approval to what are often selfish and destructive acts” (76). Fegan (1986) and Cohen (2004) argued that actors who do not possess some relatively conscious objective to defy are not engaging in acts of resistance, although, as Cohen pointed out, they may be attempts at autonomy-seeking. While I agree that the intent of the actors is a central consideration, I am also persuaded by Ortner’s (1995) contention that intentionality can be fluid, contextual, and complex. “Individual acts of resistance,” Ortner argued, “as well as large-scale resistance movements, are often themselves conflicted, internally contradictory, and affectively ambivalent, in large part due to internal political complexities” (179). Nancy Naples’ (1991) work on community organizers of the 1960s highlights the ways in which participants who are critically engaged in altering the economic, social, and political order around them do not always see the intent of their acts as “political.” Further, do we explore intentionality at the moment of defiance or after the actor has had an opportunity to process it and assign meaning? These are just a few of the complexities that emerge if we focus solely on intentionality. My emphasis therefore has been on considerations of *intentionality* along with perceptions of *engagement*. When an actor participates in a particular behavior, is there an entity, individual, or set of policies or norms to which she sees herself reacting that she perceives to be systematically oppressive rather than merely off-putting? Cohen (2004) suggested that theoretically, political acts should have the *potential* to be points of entry into a mobilized social movement. Non-political “deviant” or defiant behaviors have no such capacity. Suppose a high number of poor, single mothers, for example, frustrated with the level of intrusion yet the limited economic rewards associated with their participation in child support collection, resist volunteering information to their caseworkers. There is certainly the possibility for a social movement to emerge that challenges the state to rethink its information gathering techniques. This suggests that concealment can, in some instances, serve as a political act of resistance.

²⁵A few respondents complained that the child support collection process hardly seemed worth it when those whose children's fathers could be found and court-ordered to pay child support realized that the money was going directly to the state to recoup welfare payments instead of directly to their children. This has encouraged them to report "father unknown" and set up informal child support arrangements with their children's fathers.

²⁶ Also see Monson (1997).

²⁷ In illustrating how poor women are governed and proposing how policy might better serve them, I sympathize with anthropologist Philip Bourgois's (1998, 1999) concern that one might, in fact, create policy prescriptions that serve to "control" marginalized individuals even more than what they currently experience (also see O'Connor 2001 for a similar critique of the poverty research community). In his work on intravenous drug users, Moore (2004) wrestled with this concern, attempting to bridge the divide between what many define as "applied, problem-oriented work commonly described as sociology *in or for* . . . policy versus highly theoretical research that explores the sociology *of* . . . policy" (Moore 2004:1547). As Moore (2004) explained, "in the former, the aim is to employ sociological perspectives and methods in order to refine or improve . . . policy whereas, in the latter . . . policy itself—its theories, methods, and ideological bases—become the object of inquiry. Those engaged in the analyses of . . . policy criticize those engaged in applied research for their collusion in expert-driven social control. The refinements or improvements made to . . . policy are portrayed as little more than new forms of governmentality. Those engaged in more applied . . . research sometimes characterize the 'of' research as being theoretically elegant but of little practical value" (1547-1548). I agree with Moore's conclusion that his analytical contribution is to present ideas that, in the words of Bourgois (1999), may "produce less social suffering." I borrow from both scholars' proposed remedy of explicitly linking a sociology *of* welfare offices with a sociology *for* welfare offices.