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The Transition Of African American Women On Public Assistance To Economic Self-Sufficiency: A Qualitative Study Of Resiliency

Robin Lynn Eubanks
Seton Hall University

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THE TRANSITION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN ON PUBLIC ASSISTANCE TO ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF RESILIENCY

BY

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Dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Seton Hall University

2004
ABSTRACT

THE TRANSITION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN ON PUBLIC ASSISTANCE TO ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF RESILIENCY

African American women have a remarkable ability to effectively cope and survive in diverse and hostile environments. However, minimal attention has been given to their stories about resilience, that is, how they manage their environmental and sociocultural resources so that they are able to move beyond survival to actively thrive and enjoy life. The study is propelled by concerns for the African American female population in New Jersey, as they experience the impact of the welfare reform phenomenon. The intentions and results of welfare reform can not be seen as a cure-all for poverty. More information is needed about these families over time. Although it seems to be the American public opinion that all poor mothers should simply get a job, it is just as important to examine the unstable life and risk factors associated with living on low wages. Those that leave the welfare system still have substantial needs not only financial but also educational, physical, and psychological. The purpose of this study is to describe the process of resilience in this population of African American women who have successfully left the welfare system to become employed. A womanist ethnography was used to gather and interpret the stories of nine African American women. Interviews were taped and transcribed for content analysis and major themes were developed. Concepts from a Black feminist theoretical perspective were used to facilitate non-exploitive
research and examine hidden agendas, power imbalances and assumptions. A qualitative method of research was conducted to yield valuable exploration and explanations of processes including a naturalistic inquiry method and the ethnographic interview was employed for data collection. Nine African American women were interviewed with an age range from twenty-seven to forty-eight. The data analysis led to the identification of three primary themes, with twelve sub-themes, emerging from the data. The primary themes are as follows: (a) The Welfare system was viewed as a “mixed blessing”, (b) Participants identified diverse support systems that made their sustainability and transitional process successful, and (c) Specific transitional experiences were identified that impacted level of resiliency, motivation, and self-confidence. Knowledge generated by this research will increase understanding of resilience and the impact of the transitional process for African American women from welfare to work. Such knowledge would be instrumental in the (a) design of culturally appropriate welfare-to-work programs that may foster resiliency for women, and (b) identification of culturally appropriate resources that may promote resiliency.
Acknowledgements

The completion of a doctoral program has been a process of endurance and growth. The long journey would not have been possible without the interest, support, direction, and prayers of faculty, friends, family as well as the participants in this study. The nine women interviewed allowed me the honor of sharing their personal stories. They allowed me privilege into their world so that others in their situations could be encouraged and given hope in how to successfully leave the welfare system.

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I want to also thank my friends and “sistas” for their constant support and encouragement throughout this process. I have been blessed with phenomenal
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I would be remiss to not acknowledge the most crucial component of my very existence and that is Jesus Christ who is Lord of my life. During those times when human touch and words could not mend a broken spirit, it was my faith and relationship with God that not only comforted me but gave me sight of the victory before the battle was over.

Finally, a special note of gratitude goes to my best friend, my husband, Michael, whose willingness to sacrifice his personal dreams was given lovingly without complaints. He placed his goals on hold so that I could pursue my life-long dream. The words thank you do not seem to express the depth of gratitude I feel for him but I hope the acknowledgement of his role in my success will always be remembered.
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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, African American women have a remarkable ability to effectively cope and survive in diverse and hostile environments. However, minimal attention has been given to their stories about resilience, that is, how they manage their environmental and sociocultural resources so that they are able to move beyond survival to actively thrive and enjoy life. It is also challenging to clarify how African American women define their resilience and environment.

According to Taylor (1998) various environmental factors influence physical, psychological and emotional well-being or health. Increasing number of researchers have broaden the concept of environment to now include cultural, social and political forces, as well as considerations about race/ethnicity, class and gender (Kleffel, 1996). The environment and its resources consist of complex relationships and structures and is dynamic, fluid and constantly changing.

This study has investigated the environmental and sociocultural resources African American women utilize to break the cycle of dependency on public assistance and maintain economic self-sufficiency. For purposes of this study the terms environmental and sociocultural resources will be referred to as community resources which encompass social, cultural, political, environmental, organizational, and familial components.

This study is propelled by concerns for the African American female population in New Jersey, as they experience the impact of the welfare reform phenomenon. The
specific aim of this research is to describe the process of resilience in this population of African American women who have successfully left the welfare system to become employed. The goal of this research is to enhance an understanding of the process of this transition in the face of continual sociocultural adversity and oppression.

**Background: Sociocultural Perspective of African American Women**

African American women maintain a unique position in American culture (Collins, 1991; Hooks, 1981; Taylor 1998). African American women and their descendants belong to perhaps the only group of American women of color whose members were wholly unwilling participants in their immigration (Greene, 1994). Greene (1994) further stated that their forced departure from the coast did not lead, nor was it intended to lead, "to a better life, relief from poverty or an oppressive political regime" (p.13).

African American women’s roles in America were synonymous with work, labor outside the home, and legitimized sexual victimization from the very onset (Greene, 1993). Unlike White women, African American women’s roles as workers were not significantly different from African American men (Collins, 1991; Greene, 1992). Fox-Genovese (1988) explains that African American women’s roles as slaves superseded whatever status was accorded them as women and in effect, deprived slave women of the traditional roles accorded American females.

Their location is the result of historical dynamics and social structures that promote various images of “differences”. According to Taylor (1998) these differences are often seen as “deviant” or somehow outside sociocultural norms. Is it not the social norms that define such things as beauty, gender roles, and even self worth? One is in a
psychologically dangerous position if the creations of such definitions do not include your input. Perhaps, more importantly, it is most detrimental if your characteristics are only used to define the negative.

It is important to note that if one is considered “deviant” instead of “different”, it will then require a component of control. One method of controlling individuals is through the social images that are constructed about them (Taylor, 1998). Collins (1991), an African American feminist scholar, further supports the functional usage of the term deviant because of its needed position in society. She wrote that the position of “others” in society is important because those individuals that “stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries, therefore, African-American women who portray an image of not belonging, emphasize the significance of belonging” (p. 68).

Collins (2000) further states that these controlling images are “designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (p.68). This is continually done by exploiting already existing symbols, or creating new ones.

It is the impact of these images that allow the external observer to feel comfortable in making statements like “they just can’t help it” or “that’s just how they are”, or “it’s in their genes”. Harris (1982) denotes an array of descriptive images of African American women by noting that they have been called...

“Matriarch, emasculator and hot momma, sometimes sister, pretty baby, auntie, mammy and girl. Called unwed mother, welfare recipient and inner city consumer. The Black American woman has had to admit that while nobody knew
the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even to herself" (p.4)

Collins (1991) identified four prevailing images that defined African American women. These images were categorized as the mammy, matriarch, the welfare mother, and the jezebel. For purposes of this study we will further examine the controlling image of the welfare mother which is prevalent, powerful, and damaging. This image was developed for poor, working-class Black women who make use of social welfare benefits to which they are entitled by law.

According to Collins (2000) Black women were originally denied equal access to social welfare benefits which therefore did not create a need for a stereotypic image to evolve. However, when U.S. Black women gained more political power and demanded equity in access to state services, “the need arose for a controlling image” (p. 78).

Contrary to popular belief, African American women struggled for rights denied them throughout history. African American women were not “given” unearned entitlements, but instead had to struggle for rights routinely offered to other American citizens (Amott, 1990; Quadagno, 1994). However these rights came at a time when the economic and labor opportunities in the area of manufacturing and agriculture were diminishing.

The impact of job exporting and the use of illegal immigrants were used to replace the cheap labor force often filled by Blacks (Nash & Fernandez-Kelly, 1983). This now “surplus” populations no longer represented cheap labor but instead, from the perspective of elites, signified a costly threat to political and economic stability (Collins, 2000).
Another image of the welfare mother includes a controlling factor of Black women’s fertility. Her desire for reproduction can actually be seen as unnecessary and even dangerous to the values of the country. Historically, African American women’s bodies were a means of replenishing and ensuring cheap labor. Today, the welfare images “replace those of the breeder, however, the focus still remains on reproduction of Black women” (Taylor, 1998, p. 14).

This controlling image shares qualities with its mammy and matriarch counterparts. According to Collins (2000) like the matriarch, the welfare mother is labeled a bad mother. However unlike the matriarch, she is not too aggressive -- on the contrary, she is not aggressive enough. She further states that:

> While the matriarch’s image of being a bad mother is based on her unavailability, the welfare mother’s accessibility is defined as the problem. She is portrayed as being content to sit around and collect welfare, avoiding work and passing on her bad values to her offspring (p. 79)

It is these types of images that provide the rationalization and justification for initiating oppressive acts based on race, gender and class. The image of African American women using their reproductive organs to receive federal funds continually fuels the images of them as animals and not human beings. According to Barbee and Little (1993) the welfare mother image provides “Euro-Americans (and some African-Americans who have embraced these images without understanding their underlying ideology) with ideological justification” for restricting the fertility of some African American women because “they are producing too many economically non-productive children” (p. 185).
African American Women on Welfare: Making Ends Meet

In August 1996, President Clinton signed legislation abolishing Aid to Family with Dependent Children (AFDC) and replaced it with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) which was posed to move welfare recipients “off the rolls and into the workforce” (Brauner & Loprest, 1999, p.1).

Historically, it was believed that mothers, especially if the children were young, should stay home and care for their children. More recently, however, policymakers and citizens have come to believe that the welfare system prevented long-term economic self-sufficiency and that mothers on welfare should be required to participate in work and employment activities rather than stay at home (Wilson, Ellwood, & Brooks-Gunn, 1995).

Measuring income is extraordinarily difficult. In general, families that get most of their income from a regular paycheck or pension check seem to report their income quite accurately. But the poor get more of their income from irregular sources, and such income is not well reported (Edin & Lein, 1997). At times the resulting data seems implausible at best. According to the Census Bureau, 1.5 million single mothers had cash incomes below $5,000 in 1992. These mothers typically had two children. Most got food stamps and Medicaid, but only a minority lived in subsidized housing (U.S. Census Bureau, 1994).

According to Edin and Lein (1997) if this reported income were taken at face value it would imply that they paid for their rent, utilities, transportation, clothing, laundry, and other expenses from a monthly budget of less than $420. However the
Labor Department's Consumer Expenditure Survey (CES) showed that families with incomes below $5,000 in 1992 took in an average of only $180 a month. Yet these families told the CES that they had spent an average of $1,100 a month. Edin and Lein (1997) stated that this confirms the common-sense belief that families cannot live on air. Single mothers who report incomes below $5,000 seldom have savings or credit cards, and most stay poor for a long time. The question then becomes "How do they manage?"

Almost all-poor single mothers supplement their regular income with some combination of off-the-books employment and money from relatives, lovers, and the fathers of their children. This secretiveness is especially common among welfare recipients, almost all of whom have non-welfare income that they conceal from the welfare department (Edin & Lein, 1997; Rank, 1994; Trattner, 1989; and Loprest, 1999). It is this understanding and/or misunderstanding of irregular incomes that create a dramatic effect on the public's view of welfare mothers' economic status.

Edin and Lein (1997) discovered how difficult it was to investigate how welfare recipients paid their bills. The most obvious explanation they concluded was political.

Conservatives did not raise the question because they did not want to draw attention to the fact the AFDC benefits were too low to support a family. Liberals were equally reluctant to discuss the issue, because they did not want to admit that recipients were balancing their budgets with unreported income. This conspiracy of silence encouraged the public to imagine that welfare recipients could get by on whatever the legislature chose to give them. Once the public accepts this comforting assumption, it becomes natural to cut benefits whenever the state budget tightens. (p. xii)
It is the impact of this research and the reflection of my previous experience of working with women who were receiving welfare that force me to think about what life would be like to live on $300 or $400 a month. What does it really mean to suffer from ‘material hardships’ such as no food, or heat, or electricity? What does it mean to have to choose between paying the rent or getting the medication needed for your child’s illness? It is these types of questions that challenge me to not lose sight of the daily realities faced by many women receiving welfare.

The criteria of what defines “material hardship” is not consistent throughout research (Edin & Lein, 1997; Rank, 1994; and Mayer & Jencks, 1989). Many regard some things as “luxuries” whereas others see them as “necessities”. This is consistent with how many of us maintain a view, even if kept silent, as to what we think poor people ought to be allowed to buy and when we think they are being a “bit extravagant”. This researcher has often heard negative comments regarding particular food items purchased with food stamps that some individuals viewed as “unnecessary” or almost “undeserving”. Such judgements flow partly from the fact that no two people seem to agree on what constitutes a necessity. However, Edin and Lein (1997) highlighted a more fundamental problem and that is “most people find that spending all their money on necessities in unbearably depressing. The poor are as subject to this dilemma as the rest of us” (p. xiv).

Welfare Leavers

Leavers are defined as those individuals who have not received cash assistance for two months (Foster, 1999). The two-month limit is designed to exclude cases that
leave welfare for a single month. Researchers see these individuals as having missed a payment but not as having moved off welfare. It does include clients who continue to “receive other TANF services, such transitional Medicaid or child care assistance” (p. 4).

Even before the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), many states have been operating their welfare programs under federal waivers that allowed them to experiment with new welfare systems with the emphasis on work. According to Brauner and Loprest (1999) some policies emphasized job placement rather than training, requiring recipients to work or participate in work activities, allowing recipients to keep more of their earnings, and stronger sanctions for those who fail to meet work mandates. As a result, welfare caseloads have decreased substantially. From March 1994 (the peak for welfare caseloads) to September 1998, the national caseload of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC; now called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families - TANF) decreased by 43 percent (Brauner & Loprest, 1999).

State and local governments, and others want to know whether those who leave welfare ("leavers") are better off than they were receiving public assistance. The questions of concern are: Have leavers become successfully employed? Is the level of employability enough to raise a family out of poverty? Are leavers relying on other forms of government assistance? What is the recipient’s well being after welfare? Research regarding the welfare leavers has many differences to be considered; geographic areas, varying labor market conditions, urban and rural conditions, and state and local policies (Brauner & Loprest, 1999; Foster, 1999; Loprest, 1999). The majority of the studies combine in their leavers population those who left welfare “voluntarily”
and those who were cut off as a result of sanctions – which means they did not follow the rules of the program.

More information is needed about these families over time. Although it seems to be the American public opinion that all poor mothers should simply get a job, it is just as important to examine the unstable life and risk factors associated with living on low wages. Brauner and Lopez (1999) ask the following questions for consideration: Do these women keep their jobs and have relatively steady incomes? Do they progress in the labor market, moving into higher-paying jobs? What is the impact on families’ well being when they are no longer able to return to welfare because of time limits? Are former welfare recipients different from other “working poor”? Research regarding welfare leavers needs to continue evaluating the total picture of their economic status. It appears that the research lacks good estimates of leavers’ total means of income. It is not yet understood whether low rates of participation in government programs actually reflect higher incomes or do they simply indicate a lack of eligibility (5-yr. plan).

Although leavers may show gains in median wages over time after leaving, a large majority of the families do not seem to escape the poverty lifestyle. There is also the issue of those that unsuccessfully make that transition into the labor market and have to return to welfare. These leavers may face the worst hardships as the option of returning to welfare diminishes over time. Leavers still have substantial needs in trying to adjust to the demands of day to day living and there is a challenge to adjust the area of work-force reform, particularly in the areas of support for working families. Overall, continual research is needed to understand the effects of welfare reform and its impact on these families. The intentions and results of welfare reform can not be seen as a cure-all for
poverty. Those that leave the welfare system still have substantial needs not only financial but also educational, physical, and psychological. The results of this researcher's investigation on the successful transition of African American women from welfare to the workforce will supplement the understanding of this phenomenon. The discovery of how these women who were previously on the welfare system have managed to successfully maintain employment will reveal potential strategies of intervention and impact welfare to work program designs.

*The Process of Resilience Among African American Women*

The literature suggests that the promotion of resiliency does not lie in the avoidance of stress but rather in encountering stress at a time and in a way that allows self-confidence and social competence to increase through mastery and appropriate responsibility (Garmezy, 1991; Palmer, 1991; Wang, 1997).

Researchers have suggested intervention and prevention strategies that may help teach or enhance characteristics associated with resiliency. However the research in this area primarily focuses on children and on identification or characteristics associated with resiliency (Rutter, 1979; Garmezy, 1981,1993). This author will begin to identify factors associated with resiliency in the African American female adult population. It is the research focus of within group successes that can be empowering for the group to which the members belong. It is the understanding of these successes that will positively impact the design of targeted and effective interventions.

However an important distinction regarding the impact and style of child rearing, particularly among African American families, cannot be ignored in assessing the level of resiliency among African Americans. Weigel (1985) found that the many assertive
children tended to be black, older male, and from single-parent homes. These racial differences existed independently of social class. Fine and Schwebel (1991) further suggests that…

Black parents may be preparing their children for life in a racially stratified society by reinforcing assertive/aggressive behavior. Whatever its origin, this assertive disposition may serve black children well in adapting to life in single-parent families. (p. 29)

Others also argue that the black community is more accepting of single-parent status than are white individuals and this acceptance, in turn, may facilitate the adjustment of black children. Mednick (1987) noted that single parenting might be an adaptive strategy in escaping domestic violence or substance-abusing partners. However single-parent families are at high risk for economic strains (Polakow, 1992). Partial or full dependence on welfare is often the result of the competing demands of work and childcare.

Despite these demands, African American women have overcome obstacles that could be viewed by others as impossible. African American women have been viewed as those able to “make it” despite the odds. Brodsky (1999) stated that an attribute essential
to “making it” is cultivating a sense of contentment and appreciation for one’s current situation. This sense – that while life is not perfect, it could be worse – creates satisfaction with one’s progress so far and motivates one to strive for more. “Making it” was seen as an “ongoing process punctuated by attainment of goals along the way” (Brodsky, 1999, p.152.). This researcher believes that in the interviews to come, “making it” will be described as a day-by-day process, which will include the outcomes that will ultimately define their resilience.

**Black Feminist Conceptual Framework**

It is a Black feminist conceptual framework that will guide this researcher’s understanding of the population under investigation. A Black feminist framework draws heavily on an Afrocentric model and conceptual framework. Afrocentricity is an alternative perspective that incorporates the African perspective(s) of human societies (Asante, 1987). This perspective requires the centering of African ideas during the analysis of events that involve African culture and behavior. The general concept includes viewing social and human reality from an African perspective or standpoint. Asante (1990) posits that Afrocentricity is not built on or conceived as a denial of worth and values of others but, conversely, it includes both a particular (African) and universal (human) dimension.

An Afrocentric perspective utilizes key African traditions and values that are the foundation of African American culture. These include the worldview of the interconnectedness of human beings, nature and spiritual worlds (Asante, 1990, 1987). There are three major assumptions underlying the Afrocentric paradigm: (1) human
identity is a collective identity, (2) the spiritual or nonmaterial component of human beings is just as important and valid as the material component, and (3) the affective approach to knowledge is epistemologically valid (Asante, 1990).

According to Akbar (1984) the concept of embracing collective identity does not reject individual uniqueness, but it does reject the idea that the individual can be understood separately from others in his or her social group. Collective identity encourages sharing, cooperation, and social responsibility. Mbiti (1975) best describes collective identity by stating this thought; "I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am".

In essence, each individual is connected to the broader community and as such is collectively responsible for each other. Similarly, Afrocentric models of community involve personal accountability, caring and connections (Asante, 1987, Collins, 2000). An Afrocentric feminist analysis of resiliency must include a holistic analysis of "how race, gender, and class oppression frame the gender ideology internalized by African American women and men (Taylor, 1998). It is this Afrocentric perspective that can provide for a true analysis of the African American women's transition from economic dependence on the public welfare system to economic self-sufficiency. This author is in agreement with Taylor (1998) who stated that "analysis that is not inclusive of Afrocentric premises will most likely lead to incorrect interpretations and conclusions"(p. 50).

As a researcher I must be cognizant of these principles while listening to and analyzing the narratives of the participant’s "surface stories" and the "deeper symbolic"
meanings of African American women’s stories. According to (Etter-Lewis, 1993) African American women’s narratives often conform to dominant cultural language and conversations on the surface, but deeper meaning reveals a discourse of stories full of strategies which emphasize their resistance and resilience.

Taylor (1998) introduced an interesting analogy of “surface stories” and “deeper meanings” by quoting a concept created by Etter-Lewis (1993) that conceptualized the similarities of African American women’s narratives to that of their hair texture.

Like permed or color treated hair, the texture of their narratives is often different above and below the surface. Above the surface, there is acceptable public appearance (e.g. straight hair/”standard language”), but close to the root/core is a more natural and appealing form (e.g. nappy hair/the language of resistance that sometimes is disguised or hidden).

(p. 155)

Taylor (1998) further stated that “nappy” refers to the natural texture of many African American women’s hair. Nappy hair, in its natural state, is very curly and strong. It is far more resilient than chemically treated hair. Nappy hair frequently is chemically treated (e.g. relaxed or permed) to straighten it, thus adhering to European American standards of beauty (Ferrel, 1993). Chemically treated hair is weakened by chemical processes. The goal of using chemicals is “to suppress the natural state of the hair and to ‘socialize’ it to conform to an acceptable standards” (Taylor, 1998, p. 51). African American hair, much like the women, are “oppressed as well as pressed (e.g. by a hot iron or daily living) to conform” (p. 51). However, when the new growth of hair appears,
it is untreated, with a fuller texture and strength. It is referred to as ‘nappy at the root’ and can be thought of as “a site of resistance” (p. 52).

Oftentimes, resistance occurs when women openly and/or secretly contest their current social status and circumstances. Taylor (1998) stated that these women take a stance against being “Othered” by those who seek to colonize or appropriate them in ways that do not serve the woman’s defined interests. Franz and Stewart (1994) commented that women use “inventive strategies for removing or circumventing” (p. 2) obstacles as they act to resist inequalities.

African American women have a long history of resistance. As an historically oppressed group, African American women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression (Collins, 2000). They have creatively confronted and contested social structures established for their oppression and transformed environments to promote their survival, resilience and existence (Collins, 2000; Hooks, 1981; Taylor, 1998).

It is this mindset of resiliency, influenced by the humanistic component of Afrocentricity, that structures the framework of Black feminism. Black feminism, or ‘womanism’ a term coined by the writer Alice Walker, refers to women of color who aspire to include their ethnicity in every aspect of their feminism. This philosophy includes respect for ourselves, other women, men and children of all ethnic backgrounds as well as a reverence for all life. The struggle for empowerment over social injustices must be won by all oppressed groups, or it has never been truly won. Collins (2000) stated the most succinct version of the humanist aspect of Black feminist thought by sharing the words of Fannie Lou Hamer, the daughter of sharecroppers and a Mississippi
civil rights activist, “While sitting on her porch, Ms. Hamer observed, “Ain’ no such thing as I can hate anybody and hope to see God’s face” (Jordan, 1981, XI).

Statement of the Problem

African American women’s lives have been impacted by multiple systems of oppression such as racism and sexism. Often times these systems are invisible, complex, and interwoven within various institutions. Institutionalized racism and sexism within the welfare system devalue African American women and their life experiences. As a result, the strengths and quality of resiliency have often been ignored and/or minimized. There is a minimum amount of research done with African American women that has not frequently focused on pathology and/or deviant behavior. Rarely does this type of research conceptualize or identify cultural strengths and norms among African Americans. Studying the process of resilience among those who experience success in leaving the welfare system will refine our understanding of the crucial variables involved and will assist in designing effective interventions.

The problem is that a perpetual misconception of the “welfare recipient” still rides strong within the economic and political worldviews of this society (Morton, 1991; Smith, 1988; West, 1995). The image of the welfare recipient, that will be discussed later in detail, is that of a lazy, stay at home, baby having, money spending, individual who has no intentions or desires to work. There is a tremendous amount of social stigma attached to being a welfare recipient in this country.

Today the country’s focus is on the impact of the welfare reform process. The institute of welfare reform has now adapted a five-year plan which will only increase the
challenges and pressures to leave the system. Therefore an investigation of the resilient process that impacts a successful transition from the welfare system is most urgent. This research will provide the opportunity to gather information firsthand from those most affected by the changes in the welfare reform process. It is the discovery of these variables that will allow for successful implementation of diverse programming and training services.

In addition, although there is extensive research on the subject of resiliency, the populations examined primarily focus on children and adolescents categorized as high risk. This study will focus on single parent African American female population.

Purpose of the Study

One of the primary focus of welfare reform, as initiated by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, was to “end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparedness, work, and marriage” (Loprest, 1999, p. 1). To this end, the federal government and changes in state policies has increased incentives and requirements for families receiving benefits to move into work and off welfare.

However, while the decline in caseloads mean fewer persons receiving cash assistance, it tells us nothing about the circumstances of the families that leave and whether they are making a successful transition off the welfare system.

This study is propelled by concerns for this population as they experience the impact of the welfare reform phenomenon. Individuals who have been on welfare for long periods of time often face numerous personal or family challenges that make it
difficult to work (i.e. low basic skills, physical disabilities, behavioral problems with children, or domestic violence). Many single mothers on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) worked at one time or another but have lost their jobs quickly and repeatedly due to lack of child care resources, lack of benefits, and low-wage salaries.

Often times African American women who receive welfare have to choose between a system that pays far too little to provide for their basic needs and a labor market that offers them little more than they could get by staying home. In addition, since most low-wage workers do not have access to affordable health insurance or quality child care, it is also a necessity that these mothers entrust their family’s medical care to the local county emergency rooms.

Despite these challenges many African American women who use to receive public assistance have chosen the ‘optimistic’ view and have maintained balance within themselves and households (Collins, 1998). The specific aim of this research is to describe the process of resilience in a population of African American women who have successfully left the welfare system to become employed in the State of New Jersey. The goal of this research is to enhance understanding of how African American women successfully transcend a life on public assistance in the face of continual sociocultural adversity and oppression.

Knowledge generated by this research will increase understanding resilience among African American women who have successfully come off of public assistance. Such knowledge would be instrumental in the (a) design of culturally appropriate
welfare-to-work programs that may foster resiliency for women, and (b) identification
of culturally appropriate resources that may promote resiliency.

Research Questions

The overall research questions for this study consist of the following three categories:

(1) How do African American women perceive the welfare system?

(2) What community resources do African American women use to break the cycle of
dependence on public assistance?

(3) What community resources do African American women use to successfully
maintained employment?

As stated in the introduction, the term community resources includes any familial,
social, organizational, cultural, and political components in an African American
women’s life experiences, environment, and relational interactions. An important
component regarding qualitative research is the development of possible questions to ask
within the interview process. These questions allow the researcher to develop a potential
framework of thought but are not set as structured questions that may need be changed
and expounded on within the interview process. The tables below will provide the reader
with sample questions and sample themes as they relate to each question category.

Table 1

Sample Questions and Themes Regarding Perception of Welfare

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Questions</th>
<th>Sample Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do you define welfare?</td>
<td>Overall knowledge of the welfare system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does the word “system” mean to you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What comes to mind when you hear the term “welfare mother”?

Describe your understanding of the 5-year plan?

What does “welfare reform” mean to you?

Describe your relationship with your caseworker(s)  
Personalized experiences

What were the helpful aspects of receiving welfare?

What were the harmful aspects of receiving welfare?

What effects has welfare had on you as a woman, mother, wife, girlfriend, partner, and friend?

How long should people be allowed to stay on welfare?  
Defining the government’s role

Do you see the government as an “assisting” force or a “controlling” one?

How much “control” should the government have on your life, if it is providing assistance to you?

How might the government deal with poverty in this country?

Table 2
Sample Questions and Themes Regarding Support Systems Utilized to Break the Cycle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Questions</th>
<th>Sample Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What were the circumstances leading to your need to receive welfare?</td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Do you remember the day you went to apply?
Did you go alone?
What was life like on public assistance? Describe a typical week.
Why did you leave welfare?
How many attempts had you made to get “off the system”? Tell me about them.
Where did you go and what did you do when “the check” ran out before the next check?
How did you make ends meet?
How did you handle the pressure to provide for your family?
What did you see are the primary obstacles you experienced while on the system?
What motivated you to make your first attempt to get off the “system”?
If that did not work, what “pushed” you to keep trying?
When did you consider yourself, “off the system”?
How would you assist or what advice would you give to someone else in their attempt to get off welfare?
Do you ever fear that you may one day return to the welfare system?
If so, how do you overcome that fear?

What do you think is the impact on your children?

Table 3

Sample Questions and Themes Regarding Resources Utilized to Maintain Employment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Questions</th>
<th>Sample Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did you have an interview process to go through to get your job?</td>
<td>Preparation for employability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you prepare?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you receive any training in preparation for your job search?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is your success of staying off welfare related to the services you received while on the system?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe the first several days of your life when you began to work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would you describe as the most challenging adjustment you had to make?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you handle the challenge of childcare?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you at anytime doubt your ability to maintain employment?</td>
<td>Mental status regarding employability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If so, what did you do to alleviate that doubt?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you have role models of working women to follow?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How do you describe your work environment?

Have you ever felt like quitting?

If so, what helped you to move forward?

What additional services do you think would improve your ability to remain successfully employed?

Delimitations of Study

The parameters of this study will only include African American women in New Jersey who have previously received welfare living in the Essex, Union, and Passaic county areas. The advantages of this focus will provide the researcher with a population of participants that have access to the same State welfare stipulations and provisions. The welfare system in the United States varies widely from state to state. It is therefore preferable to focus on a state rather than on the nation as a whole. For example, job training programs differ across states, AFDC payments and Medicaid coverage vary, just to name a few.

Also the focus of this study is on participants who received AFDC, Food Stamps, and Medicaid. This is not all the types of assistance programs available in the United States (e.g. Supplemental Security Income or general assistance) however it is this type of assistance primarily utilized by the population of study.

Glossary of Terms

1. African American – Used interchangeably with Black American, refers to those persons born in the United States and having at least one African American parent.
2. **Welfare System** – Used interchangeable with public assistance or the “system”, refers to those persons receiving financial assistance from the government in the form of a monthly check, food stamps, public housing, and Medicaid.

3. **Self-Sufficient** – Used interchangeable with employed, refers to those persons working in a full-time position for at least one-year.

4. **Black Community** – A set of institutions, communication networks, and practices that help African Americans respond to social, economic, and political challenges confronting them (Collins, 2000).

5. **Epistemology** – Standards used to assess knowledge or why we believe what we believe to be true (Collins, 2000).

6. **Eurocentrism** – An ideology that presents the ideas and experiences of Whites as normal, normative, and ideal. Also known as white racism or white supremacy (Collins, 2000).

7. **Oppression** – An unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society. Race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity constitute major forms of oppression (Collins, 2000).

8. **Racism** – A system of unequal power and privilege where humans are divided into groups or “races” with social rewards unevenly distributed to groups based on their racial classification. Variations of racism include institutionalized racism, scientific racism, and everyday racism. In the United States, racial segregation constitutes a fundamental principle of how racism is organized.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

History of the Welfare System

The United States has an extensive history of attempting to assist the poor usually through churches, charities, or local governments and most “poor relief” was handled at the local or county level. Before the onset of the recession, 2.86 million individuals were unemployed in the United States and by 1933, the number had reached 15 million (Handel, 1982). As competition for the remaining jobs increased, wages and salaries fell. Banks and other financial institutions were in severe trouble, with some collapsing. The overall view of the economic decline was unprecedented, with many people joining the ranks of the poor.

However, it was not until the Great Depression that public assistance programs were developed on a national level. It was the Social Security Act and the Federal Emergency Relief Act, both included in Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, that provided economic relief to millions (Trattner, 1989).

Rank (1994) stated that the policymakers in the Kennedy administration strongly believed in the concept of human capital. It was felt that “a major reason for poverty was the lack of skills, and therefore programs should be designed to remedy that lack (e.g., the Jobs Corps, the Neighborhood Youth Corps, etc.)” (p. 15). Other programs were developed to provide more coverage for those in poverty. The Food Stamp program and
the Aid to Family and Dependent Children (AFDC) program expanded to allow states to include married couples whose head of household was unemployed (Rank, 1994).

The issue of government assistance programs remained in the forefront during the 1960's with the War on Poverty. According to Rank (1994) Lyndon Johnson's State of the Union Address declared that those families with incomes too small to meet their basic needs were to be assisted. This assistance was to come in the form of job training and providing better education.

However, the 1980's developed a different mind set. The Reagan and Bush administrations viewed public assistance programs as causing more harm than good, undermining the incentives that move the poor out of poverty and into the economic mainstream (Glazer, 1988). According to Rank (1994) Ronald Reagan often stated, "we fought the war on poverty, and poverty won" (p. 18). Reagan's philosophy on public assistance was clear in his 1986 State of the Union Address...

In the welfare culture, the breakdown of the family, the most basic support system, has reached crisis proportions - in female and child poverty, child abandonment, horrible crimes and deteriorating schools. After hundreds of billions of dollars in poverty programs, the plight of the poor grows more painful. But the waste in dollars and cents pales before the most tragic loss -- the sinful waste of human spirit and potential.

We can ignore this terrible truth no longer. As Franklin Roosevelt warned 51 years ago, standing before this chamber..."Welfare is a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit." And we must escape the spider's web of
dependency" (Rank, 1994, p. 19).

During the Bush administration, states such as New Jersey, Michigan, and California have modified the eligibility, requirement, and benefit structures of their welfare programs. These modifications attempted to alter the behavior of welfare recipients by reducing their benefits if they behave in certain ways. According to Rank (1994) these modifications included cutting benefits to a mother if her child drops out of school, freezing benefits if she has another infant while on welfare, paying women on welfare to use contraceptives, and encouraging marriage by providing higher welfare benefits to couples. The Clinton administration emphasizes the need for training, education, and health care and considers welfare as a “second chance and not a way of life” (Rank, 1994). The emphasis of personal responsibility and empowerment is what has birthed the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act that will be later discussed in detail.

Welfare, itself, has been blamed for the increase in teenage promiscuity, drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse, teenage violence, poor school performance, increase in crime, the creation of dysfunctional families, but most of all, the budget deficit. However the understanding of the welfare system must go beyond the rhetoric and stereotypes that are portrayed by the media and political powers. There is a need of well-grounded evidence in order to make an intelligent understanding of the true issues (Rank, 1994).

In the American culture, necessities are those things required to maintain physical survival (e.g. food, water, clothing, and shelter). Purchases that stimulate pleasure, such as television, stereos, or cosmetics are more so viewed as luxuries and not items
“allowed” for the enjoyment of poor people. If poor people forgo some necessities to
“indulge” in any form of pleasure items they are viewed as extravagant. What is not
understood is the symbolic significance of honor, pleasure, or self respect that human
beings value regarding their self worth. Once we conclude that “people cannot live by
bread alone, we should not expect poor people to spend all their money on either bread or
its equivalent” (p. xiv).

For example, the mother that takes her two children to McDonald’s once a month,
even if it means running short on funds by the end of the month, does not necessarily
make this mother extravagant. Perhaps she knows about buying the extra beans and rice,
as instructed by the nutritionist, but she also knows the smile she gets on her children’s
face simply because they can get the free toy in the kids meal. This does not mean that
she has more money than needed, or that her monthly check needs to be altered, it simply
means that for most people an “occasional luxury is a necessity”.

Even the term “welfare dependency” alludes to issues of control and
“ownership” of the problem. To “own” a certain social problem is to possess the
authority to name that condition a “problem” and to suggest what might be done about it
(Curtis, 1998). It is the power to influence the monitoring of public facilities,
enforcement abilities, opinion, goods, and services to help resolve the problem.
Dependency is an ideological term. For example, naming the problems of poor, solo-
mother families as dependency tends to make them appear to be individual problems, as
much moral or psychological as economic. The term carries strong emotive and visual
associations and a powerful pejorative charge.
The conceptualization of social problems is entrenched in the development of the welfare state and creates what is viewed as a "natural" role for "helping" professionals. Therefore, a social problem is not something abstract or separate from social institutions. To give a name to a problem, Curtis (1998) posits, is to recognize or suggest a structure developed to deal with it, in this case "welfare reform", in which it is claimed "that welfare mothers ought to work, a usage that tacitly defines work as wage earning and child raising as nonwork" (p. 110).

*Image of the Welfare Recipient*

Americans often view welfare recipients as somehow different from the rest of us. They live in inner cities, they have too many children, they are irresponsible, and do not work hard enough, in short, they get what they deserve. The fact that these individuals are referred to as "welfare recipients" implies a type of object or even a disorder. The reality that they are not referred to as people receiving welfare – keeps their humanity afar off.

It has been continually emphasized in my field of study to not refer to the client as a schizophrenic, but rather a person who has a schizophrenic disorder, therefore, so should I view a client as a person, who happens to receive welfare. The conscious decision to view certain individuals as less than human has always been a key factor in justifying and sustaining such institutions as slavery and racism. If seen as property, and not as human beings, one can, sell, trade, and even beat, their property whenever desired.
A member of the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors proposed that the county government begin selling the organs of dead welfare recipients even if they had not given their permission to do so. According to him, it would reduce the county’s burial expenses and it was thought that if they can’t help society while they’re alive, maybe they can help it while they’re dead.

According to Rank (1994) for most Americans, the words welfare recipient evoke the image of a “good-for-nothing freeloader who drives a Cadillac, uses food stamps to buy sirloin steak, or watches soap operas all day” (p. 2). There is a continual public discontent that focuses on the belief that the federal welfare entitlement perpetuates laziness and promiscuity. According to Edin and Lein (1997) welfare mothers are viewed as...

Lazy women who have babies to get money from the welfare system, the story went, and then let lazy boyfriends share their beds and live off their benefits. These lazy and immoral adults then raised lazy and immoral children, creating a vicious cycle of dependency. (p. 21)

There is a tremendous amount of social stigma attached to being a welfare recipient in this country. It often times means degradation, disrespect, and anger at the hands of politicians, the general society, and even some social workers. According to Rank (1994) the use of welfare tends to “jar with the independence in which most Americans take pride” (p.129). Often times those receiving welfare are counted to be among the “lowest-class citizens”.

Many people assume that those receiving welfare want to remain on the system and that they choose relief over work. Historically, it was this type of mindset that created the concept of “less eligibility”, which meant that...

“persons on relief should be kept in a condition necessarily worse than that of the lowest paid worker not on relief, the objective being to make relief undesirable and to provide the recipient with a clear and strong incentive to get off the relief rolls” (Waxman, 1985, p. 82)

Overall, the image of the welfare recipient is not positive. This researcher’s aim is not to attempt to portray women who receive welfare as heroines or martyrs, but neither is it the aim to present them as villains or animals. Poor people in general, have been referred to as “them” and usually remain outsiders, strangers to be pitied or punished, ignored or studied, but rarely as people. The concept of “the poor” is more than just an image it has become people’s identity. Perhaps we simply need to view their humanity as no better or worse than the rest of us. Given similar sets of circumstances, it is wondered how differently anyone of us would act.

One the one hand, the reasons why people have to receive welfare are fairly straightforward (e.g. lack of economic resources) which forces them to depend on the government for help. However, perhaps the more challenging question is how did they arrive at that state? How did they fall below the poverty line? What were their options or means of escape that would have never allowed them to reach such a predicament? These are the questions that force one to reflect on the social constructs of our society. According to Rank (1994) theories of poverty and welfare recipiency are as old as
poverty and charity themselves however he describes three major criteria in attempting to explain society’s view of poverty -- individual, cultural, structural.

The individual explanation for poverty and welfare recipiency can be divided into two categories: a) attitudinal/motivational; and b) human capital explanations. According to Rank (1994) the public’s opinion as to why people are poor relates to their attitudes and motivation (e.g. they are perceived as lacking thriftiness, lack of effort and ability, and loose morals). Likewise, respondents believe that individuals remain on welfare because they lack the motivation to exit. Rank (1994) further states:

The only dependable route from poverty is always work, family and faith. The first principle is that in order to move up, the poor must not only work, they must work harder than the classes above them. Every previous generation of the lower class has made such efforts. But the current poor, white even more than black, are refusing to work hard. (p. 68)

Overall this explanation of poverty is directly related to one’s efforts and motivation to leave the ranks of poverty. Simply put, if you do not leave, it is because you do not want to. A second explanation relates to a lack of human capital – training, education, skills, and experience. According to this perspective, the way to reduce poverty and welfare dependency is to concentrate on upgrading individual skills (Rank, 1994). It is this premise that underlies most job training programs directed at the poor.

A third explanation arose with an emphasis on the culture in which individuals were raised. According to Rank (1994) supporters of the culture of poverty theory contend that “a set of values unique to the poor has arisen as a direct result of the
experience of living in poverty" (p. 26). From this perspective, then, welfare
dependency is part of a cultural process in which children learn from their parents and
their surroundings that relying on public assistance, bearing children out of wedlock,
dropping out of school, and so on, are acceptable behaviors (Auletta, 1983; Dash 1989).
The belief here is that the existing cultural process must change in order to reverse the
dependency on welfare.

Finally, Rank (1994) stated that the structure of the economy, society, and the
welfare system itself, is the explanation for poverty and welfare recipiency. These
structural malfunctions include the role of misguided social policies, the economic
structure of capitalism, and the dual labor market theory that focuses on the way poor
people participate in the labor market.

While it is challenging and important to understand the diverse theories presented
regarding poverty and welfare recipiency, I propose that it is a select combination of
social, cultural, and political factors affecting the lives of poor people. I need not be
convinced that there are tremendous disparities in our society in the area of housing,
health care, and education. Instead of focusing on the whys of poverty it is time to focus
on the alleviation of it.

*The Concept of Welfare Reform*

Welfare reform is meant to foster a new philosophy of work rather than welfare
dependency. Unfortunately, however, little systematic data is available on welfare
recipients to guide the developing policy making process. For 60 years, AFDC assistance
was available to eligible families with relatively few work requirements and no time
limits. Under the new law, Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity
Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), states are required to transform the existing
AFDC program into a work-oriented transitional assistance program called Temporary
Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (Mernin, Steuerle, 1997; and Zedlewski &
Giannarelli, 1997). According to Schram and Soss (1998), this landmark legislation has
given rise to a clash of metaphors used to capture the promise and danger of welfare
devolution.

Optimists suggest that this loosening of the federal tether will turn the states
into 50 “laboratories of democracy” that can develop superior responses to
poverty and welfare. Blending references to science and self-government, the
phrase “laboratories of democracy” evokes images of careful experimentation
conducted in accordance with the will of the people. By contrast, skeptics caution
that the states new-found discretion might be used to intensify a “race to the
bottom”. Foregoing the goal of fighting poverty, each state cuts its welfare
benefits in order to avoid becoming a “welfare magnet” who’s generous
assistance attracts poor migrants from other states. (p. 67).

Overall, the PRWORA is said to reduce federal authority over public assistance
programs, providing states more freedom to fashion their own solutions to the problems
of poverty and welfare dependency. The ending of federal entitlement that guaranteed aid
to low-income families leaves few federal rights for welfare recipients. These legal
changes offer “greater latitude to state policymakers, who are now free to ‘innovate’ with
less fear that they might provoke litigation by violating the rights of recipients”

Nationwide, maximum benefit levels for welfare recipients averaged 42% of the federal poverty line (Zedlewski & Giannarelli, 1997). The TANF families are required to work after receiving benefits for two years and may not receive assistance for more than five years during their lifetime. According to Mermin and Steuerle (1997) many states require work after a much shorter period on aid, though others are allowing welfare families to continue receiving benefits while earning significant amounts of money. The welfare recipients pushed into the workforce as a result of welfare reform will increase the supply of low skilled workers. Whether this influx of workers will put upward pressure on the unemployment rate among all low-skilled workers will depend on how robust the economy is (McMurrer, et. al., 1997).

States must demonstrate that 50% of TANF families are working by 2002. This will be harder for some to achieve than for others. According to Zedlewski and Giannarelli (1997) since the new funding allocations are based on prior federal AFDC spending, states with low current benefit levels will have fewer federal resources per family to prepare recipients for moving into jobs than other states. Zedlewski and Giannarelli (1997) further notes that those States who made progress, prior to the new law, with experiments to replace welfare with work will have less trouble meetings TANF’s time limits because higher percentages of their caseloads are already working.

A strong economy generated almost 10 million new jobs between 1993 and 1997. If the demand for workers continues to grow as fast as it has over the last decade, the
economy can easily produce a sufficient number of jobs to absorb the 800,000 new
workers projected to enter the labor force between 1997 and 2002 as a result of welfare
reform (McMurren, et. al., 1997). However, Zedlewski (1998) states that “new entrants
with few skills and little exposure to the world of work will not necessarily be able to
compete successfully with other workers for these jobs” (p. 3).

Challenges of Getting On and Off the Welfare System

As previously described, there is a stigma and negative image associated with
receiving welfare. For most Americans, receiving welfare represents a failure to provide
for oneself and one’s family (Rank,1994). Therefore this perception can only negatively
impact the initial steps of the very application process. Applicants for public assistance
are disproportionately likely to be poor people, women, and/or people of color (Pearce,
1990). Rank’s research (1994) on welfare recipients described two typical emotions
experienced when applying for public assistance -- embarrassment, anxiety and in some
cases, fear.

The application process requires extensive documentation and probing which only
intensifies the anxiety. Rank (1994) shares an excerpt of a woman, who was separated
and had three children, regarding her feelings during the application process...

Scared (laughter). I’d never done that before, and I really didn’t know what
was going on. Then when I had to sign the paper work for absentee parent,
it made me even more scared. It was something that I’d done on my own,
for the very first time. I didn’t feel like I was capable of doing it. Or if I
had done the right thing to begin with. (p. 39).
Many of the observed applicants continually emphasized that they “intended to remain on the program for only a short period of time” and for most, it was indeed a hard thing to “join that category of people” (Rank, 1994). Eligible people may be deterred if they come to believe that the application process is too difficult and degrading or that their claims are unwanted and unlikely to succeed. If they begin to suspect that welfare clients are routinely abused and humiliated, “would-be” applicants may conclude that no amount of assistance is adequate compensation for joining their ranks. Critics have routinely charged that “out of frustration, fear, or discouragement, some applicants fall by the wayside at each point in the bureaucratic obstacle course” (Piven & Cloward, 1971, p. 150).

According to Soss (1999) applicants use their first encounter to draw inferences about the three major welfare actors, the client, the agency, and the administrator, and how they relate to one another. Overall, these inferences have major implications for how clients behave, shaping their beliefs about whether it is wise or effective to express needs, pursue due process rights, or engage in disputes (Soss, 1999). Many times applicants can leave their first encounter feeling degraded and subordinated or open for abuse by their need for agency services.

Researchers have discovered that the actual waiting room environment is viewed by the clients as evidence of their status (Jones, 1990; Soss, 1999). Waiting rooms in government agencies tend to vary systematically according to their functions, the clientele they serve, and their funding. These rooms include physical symbols that
convey orientations of authority or service to clients (Goodsell, 1984). Decorating the walls are posters with topics such as foster care, the need to avoid pregnancy, child support, elder abuse, and drug abuse (Rank, 1994). The welfare office waiting area was labeled as the “dog kennel” design because it is authoritative and maze-like. The following is a sample description of such a waiting area:

“Presumably for their own protection, workers stood behind high counters and spoke through thick glass that stretched to the ceiling. Slots cut into the glass allowed clients to slide forms back and forth, and lines drawn on the floor indicated where to stand. Clients sat in rows of plastic and metal chairs that were bolted to the floor. Sheriffs circulated throughout the room and a television monitor showed a picture of the U.S. flag” (Goodsell, 1984, p. 470).

Many women that come to apply for welfare have to bring their children with them, however, few offices provide any form of child care facilities, books, toys, or places to warm up bottles or change diapers. These difficulties and inconveniences demonstrate another sign that the agency is not responsive to the client’s needs. Overburdened receptionists have little time to offer advice as they sit in front of long lines of impatient people. Clients typically wait for their names to be called, gather their belongings and children, and move quickly to wherever they are directed. Soss (1999) described a client that felt confused by the process and feared she would be passed over if she could not keep up. “When your number is called, if you’re not up there in a second,
they just go on to somebody else... They tell you to go to window A, B, or C.... You
don't know why you're going where you're going” (p. 61).

The waiting room experience allows recipients to make their first impression
about the agency. The uncomfortable setting, the length of the waiting, the emphasis on
authority or security all indicate their level of unimportance or portrayal of danger.
Rather than being involved in the process, they tended to feel “herded” or directed. Those
who stayed on to successfully advance welfare claims left the waiting room anticipating
that, as clients, they would be expected to follow their lines.

The challenge of the application process continues concerning the gathering of
information. For many applicants the questioning process can prove to be embarrassing,
frightening, or offensive (Marziali, 1988, p.23). The questioning process will allow the
client to speculate how much privacy they can expect in the future. Moreover, they may
view questioning procedures as a form of interrogation demonstrating the power workers
hold over clients. This inequality can translate into feelings of “powerlessness and loss of
control if applicants feel compelled to offer information they would prefer to keep
private” (Brodkin, 1992, p. 63). Information gathering is usually broad and touches on
issues that clients deem private, however, the challenge is to assess untapped assets or
sources of income which can only lead to questions of a personal nature. As a result,
welfare applicants are asked to answer the following type questions: Do you have access
to a car? Do you have a bank account? What are the names and incomes of all the people
living in your home? Do you have a boyfriend? Does he stay with you? How much are
your rent and bill payments? Where do your children attend school? Do you buy your own food?

According to Soss (1999) these questions are designed to yield information needed however, when overburdened workers do not have time to explain the function of each question, applicants are left to draw their own conclusions. In most cases, clients interpret these questions as simply an invasion of privacy and an attempt to monitor their sexual behavior and competence as mothers. This type of interpretation is primarily impacted by the context of welfare stigma and stereotypes.

The questions that make the most profound impression are those associated with child support enforcement which is a program that clients are required to cooperate with in order to be eligible for benefits. Although child support agencies can serve as crucial tools for achieving gender equity, recent analyses have emphasized that AFDC participants see more costs than benefits from enforcement as it is currently practiced (Josephson, 1997). With the exception of a monthly $50 pass through, child support collections go entirely to the state as a “reimbursement” for AFDC payments. Moreover, because this $50 is counted as income, it simultaneously lowers recipients’ food stamp payments (Roberts, 1991). In essence, child support enforcement may not benefit the mother and perhaps increase danger if the father was abusive and now has to appear in court which could expose the mother’s residence.

Information gathering procedures leave the client feeling powerless. As clients answer questions that they consider objectionable and unnecessary, they are brought face-to-face with their own inability to resist (Soss, 1999). As poor individuals they are not in
a position to simply walk away. The standardization of numerous forms to be completed often serve as either a buffer or powerful tool of control to explain why particular questions have to be asked. The caseworker's inevitable response is "It's on every form". Applicants tend to come away feeling exposed and, in some cases, degraded. The questioning requirements forged a link between the application experience and expectations of client status. This process lays the foundation of how vulnerable they will be of continual scrutiny until they are able to leave the system.

The challenge of leaving the system, temporarily or permanently, encompasses a multitude of tasks. There are several barriers to seeking employment and understanding future work expectations. For example, lacking work experience or receiving low wages, however, the two primary barriers are the lack of transportation and dependable and affordable child-care programs. Research has shown that low-wage work does not pay a living or family wage and there is growing evidence that these jobs provide little or no access to better future jobs (Edin & Lein, 1997). Edin and Lein (1997) stated that "unless the typical unskilled or semiskilled single mother finds an unusually well paying job or has medical benefits, a child care subsidy, and very low housing costs, she cannot work her way from dependency to self-sufficiency" (p. 72). Despite this challenging reality, many single mothers remain committed to the work ethic and try to continually leave the welfare system. This often times results in a sporadic employment history that is not viewed positively by future employers and its explanation is often not understood. Potential employers assume this depicts a lack of commitment, professionalism, and accountability.
In actuality most mothers have moved from one job to another, always looking for some slight advantage -- more hours, a better shift, a lower co-payment on a health plan, more convenient transportation, or better child care facilities -- without substantially improving their earnings over the long term (Edin & Lein, 1997). Trying to live a "normal" life under the conditions of poverty is extremely difficult. Since the most common exit to welfare is through employment, public policy should focus on getting welfare mothers into the workforce and keeping them in jobs that provide more than substandard poverty wages.

Welfare System Recipients: Myths and Facts

The perception of poverty unfortunately has a tendency to be viewed as the result of personal failures and deficiencies. These views rest on several myths but the most prevalent is that poverty results from a lack of responsibility and/or desire to work. In the area of welfare, there are several myths relating to its recipients, and the most common are; African American women make up the largest group on welfare; welfare leads to chronic dependency; welfare promotes single parenthood and out-of-wedlock births; it creates a "culture of poverty" because recipients share and hand down to their children a set of defective behaviors, values and personality traits; and welfare funds extravagant spending by its recipients (Ehrenreich, 1987; Katz 1989). These myths fuel powerful stereotypical racial and gender messages. For example, single mothers are viewed as undeserving and are thought to have the choice of marriage which they simply refused. These women do not receive any form of sympathy for their situation especially since they "decided to be a lose women" or "just couldn't say no". These negative myths and
stereotypes aid in reinforcing the government’s agenda to decrease funding to welfare programs. True welfare reform that is directed towards the benefit of the recipient can only occur when the myths are separated from the facts. Poverty is seen as an individual problem or a social issue rather than an economic issue (Gallup, 1992). Therefore, solutions are geared toward fixing or punishing those individuals with the “problem” and little attention is given to the societal factors that perpetuate it (e.g., lack of childcare, unemployment, lack of transportation, and low minimum wage earnings).

The myth that poverty results from a lack of responsibility is countered by the fact that poverty results from low wages. Jared Bernstein (1996) of the Economic Policy Institute identifies wage decline as the crucial economic factor that has had the largest impact on poverty rates in the 1980's and 1990's. According to Bernstein (1996) the largest losses have been for the lowest paid workers however the hardest hit was the female worker. The low-wage female worker’s hourly rate gained slightly since 1989, but by 1995, her rate was $4.84, down from $5.82 in 1979.

Another myth is that a large amount of the tax payer’s monies is utilized to support welfare recipients. According to McLaughlin (1997), the actual cost of welfare programs to the federal budget is 1 percent and 2 percent of the state budgets. During the 104th Congress, more than 93 percent of the budget reductions in welfare entitlements came from programs for low-income people (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 1996). Ironically, according to Goodgame (1993), middle-class and wealthy Americans also receive a type of “welfare” in the form of tax deductions, farm subsidies, social security, and Medicare, however these forms of assistance carry no stigma and are not considered
"welfare". This type of double standard regarding who should be eligible for assistance can only direct our attention to issues of socialization and racism. There are other factors and attitudes to consider (e.g. social class, ethnicity, and gender).

Harris's (1997) research is pivotal particularly because it discredits stereotypic representations of teenage mothers. The results of a longitudinal study of 288 women living in Baltimore between 1966 and 1987 dispel many myths about teenage motherhood and welfare dependence. Harris illustrated that although welfare receipt is common among teenage mothers and occurs quickly (usually within the first two years of a birth), the average time spent on welfare is relatively short, lasting for two years or less. In fact, after two years, about 50 percent of teen mothers and single mothers generally had ended their welfare receipt. According to Roschelle (1998) this finding is especially significant because many conservative analysts argue that during the past 20 years welfare dependence skyrocketed because of increased benefits and relaxed eligibility requirements. Although Harris (1997) acknowledges that teenage mothers are more vulnerable than older single mothers, the findings combat the widespread and persistent negative image of African American teenage mothers as unwilling to work and remaining on the system for several years. The underlying assumption that welfare mothers refuse to work is fallacious. Harris (1997) argues that the public debate on welfare should reflect the obvious work efforts that are demonstrated by a majority of welfare recipients.

Another myth is that most welfare recipients are African American women. The fact is that most welfare recipients are children, not women. According to the 1995 U.S. Bureau of Census, less than 5 million of the 14 million public assistance recipients are
adults, and 90 percent of those adults are women. The majority of the recipients are White (38 %), followed by 37 % African American, and 25 % other minority groups (Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans.). However, African Americans are disproportionately represented on public assistance because they are only 12 % of the population (O’Hare, Pollard, Mann, & Kent, 1991).

The final myth to be discussed is that welfare families use their benefits to fund extravagances. The fact is that welfare families live far below the poverty line. This misconception has been the stimulus for such terms as “Cadillac queens” and “free riders”. The average family benefit, measured in 1995 dollars, fell from $713 in 1970 to $377 in 1995, a 47% drop. In 26 states, AFDC benefits alone fell 64 % short of the 1996 poverty guidelines, and the addition of food stamps only reduced this gap to 35 % (Staff of House Committee on Ways and Means, 1996).

Overall, the myths regarding welfare recipients and the public support for it will impact the current welfare reform decisions. Therefore welfare reform will fail to improve the lot of poor women because it ignores the enormous impact of gender and race discrimination and the gender wage gap in the workforce. Unfortunately, because of policymakers’ unwillingness to commit to a long-term human capital approach, and because individually we all consciously and unconsciously distance ourselves from “the poor” and are unwilling to see them as us, the poor remain the poor-separate, apart, and the other (Schorr & Schorr, 1988).
Welfare Leavers

Foster (1999) conducted a study on 600 Georgia welfare leavers and reported that most leavers are single, the majority of them have finished high school, they are working full-time, the level of economic resources is fairly low, and half of all leavers reported wanting to leave welfare. Foster and Rickman’s study also stated that many recipients were confused about some program characteristics regarding TANF and Medicaid and the level of food inadequacy is lower among Georgia leavers.

What about family income? According to Foster (1999) 70% of respondents have incomes below $1,000 per month. Given the sizes of their families, this means that virtually all of these families are poor. Fewer than 5% of the families have incomes above $18,000 per year ($1,500 per month). Home ownership is relatively rare among leavers – only one in six (16%) single-parent leavers own their own home. As a final measure, Foster and Rickman examined how often leavers lacked food of the type or amount they desired. Only 23% of respondents reported they had enough food of the type and amount they desired and 44% indicated that “we have enough to eat but not always the kind of food we want” (p. 22).

Although employment is the most common reason for leaving, studies indicate that leavers are not earning enough to raise their income far above the poverty level. In 1997, the poverty threshold for a three-person family with two dependent children was $12,931 working at $7.39 an hour. If one adult works an average of 34 hours per week at minimum wage ($5.15/hr.), the family’s yearly earnings would be one $8,755. In
addition, working can entail expenses that may not be incurred while on welfare, primarily rent and child care costs (Brauner, S., & Loprest, 1999, p. 6).

How are the children affected, is also an important question to consider regarding the welfare leavers’ families. The possible issues of consideration are the frequencies of moves, the loss of health insurance, the changes in father involvement, and changes of school systems. According to Edin and Lein (1997) full-time working mothers worry about placing their children in jeopardy because they can not provide adequate supervision. This is especially detrimental in bad neighborhoods, since they feared that their older children would make friends with those who are influential in the area of drugs, crime, and early sexual activity. One mother was quoted to say...

I am ashamed to say it, but I have a latchkey child. When he comes home from school, he locks himself in the house and waits for me to come home. In the summertime, he can go outside, but only if he calls me to check in every hour. I had to get him a little watch with a timer so that he would remember to check in with me. If I don’t get that call, I leave work to go find him. (Edin, & Lein, 1997, p. 134).

Working single parent mothers experience acute tension between their roles as mothers and breadwinners. There are issues of guilt for not being available and for requiring the children to stay “locked” up while they are not home. Mothers of sick children that are not allowed in the day care centers, must make decisions between caring for their children and maintaining their employment. Working mothers worry about how their absence affects their children’s school performances. Often times behaviors of
truancy and classroom disruption would begin as a working mother increases her hours or took on another job to meet the financial demands of the family (Harris, 1991).

Edin and Lein’s (1997) research revealed that women working low-paying jobs expressed the desire to pursue some form of continuing education. Many women realized that short-term training programs would not provide them with the skills they needed to obtain the level of employment that would allow them to become homeowners and live above the poverty level. Most women realized that they needed to pursue two or four year degrees, however, this made it a much more difficult proposition as it meant adding the responsibilities of long-term schooling to the already overwhelming tasks of single parenting and full-time work. In addition, working mothers faced financial challenges in regards to no longer qualifying for financial aid or grants which then leaves the options of paying out-of-pocket or loans. Because of these obstacles, perhaps the option of continuing ones education is simply not, an option. However, many women realized that “working did not necessarily leave them better off financially, but it made them feel better about themselves and their ability to be good role models for their children” (p. 140).

Resilience

Defining Resilience

An emphasis on such topics as resilience rather than continual investigations of pathology is gaining momentum in numerous areas of research. Even Seligman who introduced the theory of learned helplessness has begun to investigate a theory of learned optimism. According to Collins (1998), Seligman believes that everyone has an
explanatory style, a way of explaining adverse events to him or herself. Some people have an optimistic explanatory style and others a pessimistic style. Those demonstrating an optimistic style see a setback as temporary rather than permanent and refuse to personalize a problem by blaming oneself (Collins, 1998).

The term resilient is not clearly defined and is often used interchangeably with others such as “strong”, “invincible”, and “stress-resistant”. As stated by Liem (1997) resiliency is generally conceived as a relatively stable characteristic equated with managing reasonably well in the face of known risk factors. It is also defined as the capacity “to prevail, grow, be strong, and even thrive despite hardship” (Walloon, 1991, p.3). Murphy (1987) defined resiliency as “the capacity for recovery from a disturbed state” (p. 101).

According to Block and Kremen (1996) the term resiliency, without the prefixing term ego, has come into other, less formal simply descriptive use. It is further stated that "the term resilience, as now used so broadly by so many, is often nothing more than contemporary jargon for what was labeled ego strength" (Block & Kremen, 1996, p.351). Ego strength refers to “the degree to which individuals express their impulses. Ego resiliency describes the internal personality structures that function to modulate these impulses adaptively” (Block & Kremen, 1996, p. 351).

Garmezy (1993) is most eloquent in describing the resilient person:

The central element in the study of resilience lies in the power of recovery and in the ability to return once again to those patterns of adaptation and competence that characterized the individual prior to the pre-stress period...
‘to spring back’ does not suggest that one is incapable of being wounded or injured. Metaphorically, it is descriptively appropriate to consider that under adversity, a resilient individual can bend...yet subsequently recover. (p. 129)

For others (Masten, Best, & Garmezy; Rutter, 1990) the idea of resiliency refers to invulnerable individuals or the observed phenomenon of survivorship. Block and Kremen (1996) state that individuals characterized by “seemingly successful adaptation, despite seemingly significant challenges or threats to adaptation, are said to be resilient” (p. 351).

Rutter (1987) defines resiliency as being concerned with variations in response to risk. Some people succumb to stress and adversity whereas others overcome life hazards. Rutter (1987) further states that...

“resilience cannot be seen as a fixed attribute of the individual. Those people who cope successfully with difficulties at one point in their life may react adversely to other stressors when their situation is different. If circumstances change, resilience alters” (p. 317)

Dynamics and Characteristics of Resilience

There is a challenge in defining the characteristics and usage of resiliency. It is important to note that some researchers use the terms “invulnerability”, and “stress resistance” interchangeable with resiliency (Murphy, 1987; Pennewell, 1996).

Garmezy (1981) emphasized that research on resiliency has focused on the identification of stable characteristics of resilient children. He found that three broad
factors 1) dispositional characteristics, 2) family support and 3) outside external support are all factors in determining one’s vulnerability.

Some researchers prefer the term stress resistant or resilient because it refers to the defenses, coping, mastery, and competence of the individual (Anthony 1987a, Garmezy, 1981). However resilience seems to be the preferred term; it can refer to the “unusual or marked capacity to recover or cope successfully with significant stresses of both an internal and external origin” (O’Grady & Metz, 1987, p.5). Other researchers suggest that resiliency is a function of individual variations and individual response to risk (Rutter, 1987). Anthony (1987a) suggested that resiliency is a function of age and that resiliency and vulnerability are interchangeable depending on the levels of stress.

Anthony (1987b) proposed that there is a vulnerability -- invulnerability spectrum in which there are four types of individuals: First, hypervulnerables are defined as those individuals who succumb to even the ordinary and expected life stresses. Second, pseudoinvulnerables are defined as those individuals who are vulnerable or extremely vulnerable who have been “blessed with an over-protective environment and a relatively unchallenged non-thriving life until the environment fails and they fail along with it” (p. 27). Third, there are invulnerables who acquired resiliency who were exposed to cumulative traumas but “bounced back; after each stress they experienced with a successful rebound. They become increasingly resilient” (p. 27). Finally, non-vulnerables are defined as those individuals who were so well prepared from birth onward that they continued to thrive and prosper within any average environment.
Some researchers have examined resiliency in its relationship to age of the child. This has led researchers to examine the construct of resiliency and its relation to stress and vulnerability. It was suggested that there are factors in the developmental phase which affect resiliency.

Rutter (1985) argued that children who develop resiliency do so as a result of an operation of protective factors and interactive processes. Protective factors refer to those influences that “modify, ameliorate or alter a person’s response to some environmental hazard that predisposes to a maladaptive outcome” (Rutter, 1985, p. 600).

These protective factors need not be equated with positive experiences but are thought to be associated with adaptive outcome. Protective factors do not operate in the absence of stressors. It is their function to modify the response in the face of a stressor. Protective factors may not be experiences at all but a characteristics or quality of the individual. Interactive processes refer to the relationship between the developmental time at which a particular stressful situation occurs in one’s life and to the existing protective factors. The timing of an event can increase or decrease the stress effect (Rutter, 1985, 1987). There are many factors that affect one’s resiliency. These could be classified under five headings: 1) multiplicity of stresses, 2) changed circumstances, 3) factors in the child, 4) factors in the home and 5) factors outside the home (Rutter, 1979).

Limitations and Problematic Aspects of Resiliency

A number of researchers identify characteristics that distinguish individuals who seem resilient with those who are not, however, it has been discovered that individuals
are not resilient across contexts (Freitas & Downey, 1998). Resilience may not be stable over time, but adjusts according to changing stress situations and development of personalities and resources (Taylor, 1998).

Unfortunately, much of the research and/or theories on the concept of resiliency do not acknowledge the limitations or problems. According to Taylor (1998) there is a tendency to valorize resilient individuals, portray the resilient as saints therefore overlooking their shortcomings and damages.

Rutter (1987) suggests that the mechanisms of resilience must be measured longitudinally. Resilience needs to be examined as a process and not an individual variable. These processes, by definition, involve interaction of one sort or another. Rutter (1987) further states that particular attention needs to be paid to the “mechanisms operating at key turning points in people’s lives when a risk trajectory may be redirected onto a more adaptive path” (p. 329).

Werner (1989) conducted a longitudinal study of 698 infants born in 1965 on the island of Kauai, Hawaii regarding the roots of resiliency in vulnerable children. Werner followed these people from birth to 32 years of age. She discovered that the impact of risk and protective factors changed at various life phases, with males displaying greater vulnerability then females in their first decade and less during their second.

Resilient men demonstrated a greater reluctance toward commitments is sustaining intimate relationships (e.g. marriage, or re-marriage if previously divorced). The greatest source of worry among the resilient men and women appeared to be problems of family members, especially health of parents or in-laws, and siblings. At age 30, the proportion of self-reported health problems is significantly higher among high-
risk resilient individuals. Men reported stress-related health problems (e.g. back
problems, ulcers, overweight, and dizziness). Resilient women experienced difficulties
with pregnancy and childbirth (e.g. c-sections, miscarriages, and premenstrual migraine
headaches).

Werner (1989) concluded that at each developmental stage there was a shifting
balance between stressful life events and protective factors that enhanced resilience. This
balance changed not only with "the stages of the life cycle, but also with the gender of the
individual" (p. 80). It will be the continuation of these longitudinal studies that will
reveal the potential "downside of resilience".

There are also political ramifications related to labeling individuals or groups of
people as resilient. For example, governmental support programs, assistance, or
resources may be denied because the expectation of resilient behavior has been adopted.
There is potential for social political structures to "deny, minimize or diminish the
struggle and accomplishment of the individuals who adapt well to multiple stress"
(Taylor, 1998 p. 46). Resiliency research, particularly in the area of adult behavior, may
support those fiscal agendas that seek to deny funds for badly needed social programs.
Specific to this research, there is a danger in perpetuating the myth of the "invincible
strong black women" by denying them valuable resources, particularly related to entering
the workforce.

Often times when people speak about the 'strength' of black women they are
referring to the way in which they perceive black women coping with oppression. Hooks
(1981) states...

They ignore the reality that to be strong in the face of oppression is not the
same as overcoming oppression, that endurance is not to be confused with
transformation. Frequently observers of the black female experience confuse
these issues. The stereotypical image of the ‘strong’ black woman was no
longer seen as dehumanizing, it became the new badge of black female glory
(p. 6).

Finally, as stated earlier, the definition of resilience is not consistent throughout
the literature. Jacelon (1997) introduced the challenge of categorizing resilience as a
process or a trait. Resilience has been identified as both a “constellation of traits” and “a
process by which individuals respond to environmental stimuli” (p. 128). The literature
regarding the process of resiliency is less developed with a lack of clarity regarding steps
in the process.

*Resiliency As a Process and Not a Trait*

Many studies investing individual responses to adverse circumstances have been
conducted. Although there is general agreement as to the outcome to resilient behavior,
controversy exists as to the mechanism of resilience (Flach, 1988; Jacelon, 1997).

Resilience as a trait was defined by Wagnild and Young (1993): “...a personality
characteristics that moderates the negative effects of stress and promotes
adaptation...”(p. 165). Miller (1988) suggests a combination of body chemistry and
personality factors that predispose individuals to resilience. According to Jacelon (1997)
studies of this thought “focus on identifying the physical and psychological
characteristics that allow subjects to rise above adversity” (p.124).

Many of the studies regarding children in poverty, those of divorce parents, or
parents with problems with alcoholism, suggest a constellation of characteristics that
constitute resilience (Garmezy, 1993; Mulholland, Watt, Philport, & Sarlin, 1991).

However, in Garmezy's (1993) study, it was discovered that almost all the subjects in the study had external support through established close supportive relationships with friends, adults outside the family or siblings.

Although Rutter (1987, 1990) and Garmezy (1991, 1993) both described protective factors in relation to the individual's response to adversity and change, Garmezy focused on identification of the factors, whereas Rutter sought to describe the process by which the protective factors worked. He illustrated that resilience could not be thought of as an attribute born into children or even acquired during development. It is the indication of a process which characterizes a complex social system at a moment in time (Fonagy, Steele, M., Steele, H., Higgit, & Target, 1993).

Jacelon (1997) suggests that one solution to the confusion can perhaps be to differentiate between the term “resilience” and “resilition”. Resilience is the ability to “rebound or spring back” (p. 123). “Resilition” is the process of resilience (p. 123). The clarification of these definitions will allow the focus of research to become more clear and the implications for practice can more readily be ascertained (Jacelon, 1997).

Flach (1988) described the dynamic process of resilience as a system which can be learned at any point in life. Fonagy, et. al (1993) best describes an applicable definition of resilience as a process.

Resilience is the indication of a process which characterizes a complex social system at a moment in time... resilience cannot be seen as anything other than a set of social and intrapsychic processes which take place across time given felicitous combinations of child attributes, family, social, and
cultural environments. (Fonagy et al. 1993, p. 233)

Resilience is evident in a willingness to seek community support and positive social interactions with family, friends, and others. These characteristic patterns of an individual's relationships contribute to an overall composite pattern of resilience. Resilience is a process that allows an individual the "essential threads necessary to weave cumulative life experiences into an enduring fabric of self" (Palmer, 1991, p. 63). Pennewell (1996) discovered that participants in a study on human resiliency described their experiences as an "ongoing process occurring within an inter-relational context characterized by concerns with self, relationships to others, the world, and time" (p. 24). The participants further described this experience as being two "inter-related processes whereby one surrenders to the desire to fall apart and then recovers, resulting in an experience of profound change" (p.25). Change was then described as a shift in attitude which happens only after one is able to make sense of the suffering. It is this change and the opportunity for continued growth that separate the experience of resiliency from mere coping.

This author suggests that resiliency is a process comprised of a constellation of personal, family, social, economic, and community characteristics. This study will increase the understanding of the process used by African American women to transform a situation, build on it, and grow from it. This will impact the developing programs and interventions designed to assist in their progression toward financial independence.

More research need be developed in identifying the process of resiliency, as well as, an understanding of the differences among populations. It is also crucial to examine the effects of social and political oppression. Overall, resilience is part of the life cycle.
Resilient people have personal, social, and familial resources that allow not only for survival but also options toward success.

Chapter Three

Overview of Method

Why Qualitative Research?

Many studies and evaluations tell us the outcomes only after things have gone wrong. In complex issues, like the welfare system, I believe that we need information to help understand the problem, identify areas we can influence, and see the consequences of policy intervention in real life. I agree with Marshall and Rossman (1999) who state that we “need information that will enable us to see beyond simple dependent variables” (p. 11). Too often, policy or program studies present analysis of outcomes that provide little sense of how and why processes created those outcomes.

Enns (1992) stated that feminist standpoint research seeks to place women at the “center of inquiry” and “erase the boundaries” between researchers and the persons studied, the qualitative, in-depth study of women’s lives is viewed as particularly useful for clarifying women’s strengths, perspectives, and realities.

However, I needed to also introduce a perspective of feminist postmodernism that rejects the search for a universal female standpoint because the identities of women are influenced by a variety of standpoints (e.g. race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation). This postmodern view proposes that “reality is embedded within social relationships and historical contexts and is socially constructed or invented” (Enns, 1992, p.456) This view further states that rather than search for “a” truth, the inquirer focuses on “how meaning
is negotiated”, and “how persons in authority maintain control” over these meanings. (p. 457).

It is these tenets of investigating how the “social relationships” and “historical contexts” are constructed and understanding “how meaning is negotiated” that I felt a qualitative research design was most applicable and revealing. According to Bower, Abolafia, and Carr, (2000) qualitative research trades “simplicity of presentation for richness of explanation” (p. 317).

Qualitative methods help find the “natural” solutions to problems – the solutions that people devise without policy intervention. Qualitative researchers assume the presence of multiple realities, constructed by various participants as they engage their own local, everyday experiences (Bower, et.al., 2000). These multiple realities were explored in the in-depth interviews with the participants.

This author believes that qualitative research has yielded valuable explorations and explanations of processes. For example, the in-depth interviews have revealed the thinking patterns and problem solving skills of the participants as it relates to their life experiences. This research process has allowed the investigator’s inquiry to be led by what the participant deems important in her explanations of daily living.

Once the overall research questions were identified, the choice of qualitative methods was best suited because the questions required the exploration of a process not yet identified and not yet encompassed in theory. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999) the research has to build in openness to the unexpected, to new findings, and it has to retain a “flexible design that fostered the exploration of nuances of meaning in a complex, tacit process” (p. 30).
Finally, the topic of objectivity and subjectivity has been disputed when comparing quantitative and qualitative research approaches (Berg; 2001, Bower, et.al., 2000, Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Quantitative research assumes reality can be depicted objectively as abstractions that correspond to real life, but as stated earlier, qualitative researchers assume the presence of multiple realities as viewed by the participants. Bower and associates (2000) stated that qualitative researchers believe that “subjectivity is unavoidable in social science; indeed, phenomena worth studying are those seen as meaningful because onlookers attach value to them” (p. 364). This author can not deny subjectivity in the choice of the research topic and population. It is my experience in working with African American women on welfare, not only as a counselor but also advisor, teacher, and “sistah”, that has influenced my interest in discovering how these women continually overcome tremendous obstacles.

Introduction to the Methodology

Ethnocentrism is defined as the feeling that a group’s mode of living, values, and patterns of adaptation are superior to those of other groups. It may manifest itself in attitudes of superiority or hostility toward members of other groups and is sometimes expressed in discrimination, proselytizing, or violence.

Researchers’ historical use of ethnocentrism presents a challenge when it attempts to transfer standards for knowledge claims from one culture to another culture. Ethnocentric research can diminish and devalue the culture and knowledge of “others”. In order to gain insight and understanding of African American cultural meanings, research must be conducted in a way that seeks to learn African American women’s cultural meanings, perception of reality, and frameworks. Collins (1998) noted that
researchers cannot claim full authority about the experiences of "Others". Only the individual can speak with authority about their experiences and culture.

Researchers have to "learn to center in another experience, validate it, and judge it by its own standards without need of comparison or need to adopt the framework as their own" (Brown, 1989, p.922). Therefore, this author suggests that the Eurocentric idea of white, middle class, Western women and men be challenged as the normative experience. It has been the impact and recognition of culturally diverse researchers that have forced us to explore new perspectives and experiences of ethnically diverse populations (Collins, 2000; Hooks 1981; Morton, 1991; West, 1993).

It is the impact of my work with African American women, especially those receiving welfare, and it is the standpoint to which my interpretations and understanding continually develop, that I selected a Black feminist methodology -- a Black feminist ethnography to understand African American women's experiences of resilience. The shared experience of being an African American woman will provide some valuable insights; however, my views and interpretations will not be my sole guide of understanding the participant's experiences. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999) it is the participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest that should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it. It was also most important that I approached individual concerns with an attitude of acceptance and respect for the information shared. As a researcher, I recognized the need to adopt an egalitarian position between myself and the participants since each brought knowledge and expertise to the research process.
**Black Feminist Methodology**

Black feminist thought reflects the interests and standpoint of its creators. According to Collins (2000) because elite white men control Western structures of knowledge validation, their interests impact the themes and paradigms of traditional scholarship. As a result, “U.S. Black women’s experiences as well as women of African descent transnationally have been routinely distorted within or excluded from what counts as knowledge” (p. 250).

For example various descendents of Sally Hemmings, a black women owned by Thomas Jefferson, claimed on numerous occasions that Jefferson fathered her children. These accounts forwarded by Jefferson's African American descendents were ignored in favor of accounts advanced by his white progeny. Hemmings descendents were routinely disbelieved until their knowledge claims were validated by DNA testing. (Collins, 2000)

Another distortion and exclusion of African American women takes place in the area of physical attractiveness. As stated earlier, white men created the structure of knowledge validation and white women create the structure of beauty. According to Greene (1994) African American women are encouraged to “imitate and are rewarded for approaching and embracing the white female ideal as the ultimate criterion for physical attractiveness” (p. 301). It is the acceptance of this standard of beauty, particularly as being the only standard of beauty, that is most dangerous to African American women’s self image. Those who are preoccupied with their perceived inadequacy and perceived dissatisfaction will eventually transform into a sense of inferiority.
Race, class and gender influence the lives of African American women; however, middle class white feminists initially focused on gender/sexism and failed to consider the complexity of African American women’s lives (Taylor, 1998, p. 61). For example, African American women have the task of developing coping mechanisms in response to racism and negotiating the discriminatory barriers that result from institutional racism in addition to the normal range of developmental life stressors (Greene, 1994).

Sojourner Truth, in the need to confirm her femininity, was able to challenge the very concept of a women as being culturally constructed in her famous speech entitled “ain’t I a women” presented at the 1851 women’s convention in Akron, Ohio.

That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman? (Loewenberg & Bogin, 1976, p. 235).

Sojourner Truth reveals the contradictions in the term “woman”. Rather than trying to prove that she fit a definition that never had her qualities in mind, her actions demonstrated the process of “deconstruction – namely, exposing a concept as
ideological or culturally constructed rather than as natural or a simple reflection of reality” (Collins, 2000, p. 15). Sojourner Truth not only proved her femininity, but also her intellectual capacity to dissect a concept of women even though she was a former slave who had never learned to read or write.

Black feminist and white feminist methodologies are conceptually similar in several ways. Both methodologies place women and the social construction of gender at the center of inquiry, analysis and critique (Reinharz, 1992; Stewart, 1994). Feminist researchers explore the reciprocal influence between gender and power relationships. Feminist theory is used to examine the multiple ways in which women’s behavior is constrained, yet simultaneously seeks to affirm women’s personal efficacy or control within social limitations (Collins, 2000; Hooks, 1981; Taylor, 1998).

“For many feminists, research is obligated to contribute to social change through consciousness raising or specific policy recommendations” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 251). Research is conducted for the improvement of social, political, and economic conditions of women. The purpose of this research was to discover the strategies needed and the resources utilized to successfully leave the welfare system. Future policies regarding welfare reform need to be evaluated by the participants who have experienced the system first hand as well as evaluated from a feminist perspective.

There is however, a prominent area of diverse perspectives between a Black feminist perspective and feminist methodologies. Collins (1991) best describes the difference as follows:

At the core of Black feminist thought lie theories created by African American
women which clarify a Black women’s standpoint – in essence, an interpretation of Black women’s experiences and ideas by those who participate in them. (p. 15)

Collins’ criteria does not limit the race or ethnicity of the researcher to be only African American when studying African American women. However, according to Taylor (1998) Collins maintained that Black women intellectuals are central to Black feminist thought and the generations of knowledge about African American women’s experiences. Collins (2000) stated that Black feminism “requires a process of self-conscious struggle on behalf of Black women” (p.15). The primary demand of Black feminist is the recognition that race/ethnicity, class and gender constitute a special status in American society. Secondly, Black women are empowered with the right to interpret their reality and define their objectives (Taylor, 1998).

Collins further posits that the role of empowerment for African American women will never occur in a context characterized solely by oppression and social injustice. It is also not the goal to utilize the role of empowerment to dominant another group, but instead it is possible to be “centered in one’s own experiences and engaged in coalitions with others” (p. 8). In this sense, Black feminist thought works on behalf of Black women, but does so in association with other similar social justice concerns.

Collins (2000) describes a Black feminist epistemology for the generation of knowledge about African American women’s social world. There are four defining dimensions. The first dimension encompasses an understanding of the difference between knowledge and wisdom and the use of life experience.
“Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate” (Collins, 2000, p. 257) According to Collins (2000) African American women need wisdom to know how to deal with the “educated fools”. We cannot afford to be fools of any type, for our recognition as the “Other” does not allow us the protection that being a rich, white, male will provide. Concrete experience is the criterion for true meaning. It is the lived experiences that can claim knowledge and credibility.

Second is the importance of dialogue. For Black women new knowledge claims are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community (Collins, 2000). This belief in connectedness and use of dialogue has African roots. The use of dialogue has deep roots in African-based oral traditions and in African American culture (Kochman, 1981). The historical use of the call-and-response mode among African Americans demonstrates the importance placed on dialogue. According to Collins (2000) African American women’s centrality in families, churches, and community provides them with a high degree of support for invoking dialogue as a “dimension of Black feminist epistemology” (p. 262).

Third is the ethics of caring which suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process. The ethics of caring consist of three interrelated components -- individual uniqueness, the appropriateness of emotions in dialogue, and the capacity for empathy. A person’s style of presentation and uniqueness are part of the assessment and validation of knowledge claims. Asante (1990) adds that thoughts are no more superior to emotions than emotions are to thoughts. Unlike the dichotomous logic characteristic of European American
culture, the Afrocentric paradigm relies more on a holistic or diunital (union of opposites) way of making sense of the world.

Fourth is the ethics of personal accountability. Individuals are presumed to have positions on issues and they must take responsibility for persuasively arguing their validity. Collins (2000) concludes that when these four dimensions become “politicized and attached to a social justice project, they can form a framework for Black feminist thought and practice” (p.266).

These principles support the exploration of African American women’s experiences and knowledge claims. The defining principles of knowledge generation combined with feminist ethnography have serve as the theoretical foundation for this study (Anderson & Jack, 1991; Collins, 2000; Enns, 1992; Lather, 1991). The goals of contemporary feminist ethnography are to document women’s lives and activities, to understand the experience of women through their lens, and to re/conceptualize women’s behavior within the social context (Reinharz, 1992). These principles support the exploration (e.g. criticism and analysis) of African American women’s experiences and knowledge claims.

Research Design and Method

Traditionally, a problem-oriented or pathological focus has been applied to the research of lower income communities of African American people (Nobles & Goddard, 1984). The central concern of this research inquiry was to investigate the process of resiliency among African American women who have transcended from public assistance to economic self-sufficiency. According to Taylor (1998) to conceptualize African
American women’s experiences of resilience, means to “go beyond the surface and not just ‘describe’ or ‘summarize’; but, form a concept that reflects the complexity of African American women’s lives” (p. 68).

Kretzman and Mcknight (1993) described a positive research focus as an asset model which begins by recognizing capacities and strengths within populations and encourages the researcher to look beyond maintenance and survival of individuals and communities. This paradigm supports the feminist perspective of looking at ways in which women exercise self-awareness and control within social limitations. Using a Black feminist ethnography methodology I was able to hear the various ways that individuals utilized resources to promote economic self-sufficiency and resilience.

Ethnography is the “science of cultural description” (Wolcott, 1973). Berg (2001) stated that ethnography is primarily “a process that attempts to describe and interpret social expressions between people and groups” (p. 134). Ethnography searches for themes and patterns of a particular culture as they relate in parts, and as those parts, relate to a culture whole. A Black feminist ethnographic approach examines the same conventional components as ethnography; however, there is an additional task “embedded within the reflective process” (Taylor, 1998, p. 68). Thomas (1993) stated that the Black feminist ethnographic approach examines the hidden agendas, power imbalances, power centers and assumptions that inhibit, repress and constrain African American individuals, families and communities.

The goal of Black feminist ethnographic research is to discover the “cultural knowledge people use to organize their behavior and interpret their experience and to promote emancipation” (Taylor, 1998, p. 68). Black feminist ethnographic interviews
have provided valuable understanding and insight about the phenomenon of resilience as viewed by African American women. This Black feminist methodology combined with ethnography was useful for research with African American women regarding their experiences while receiving public assistance and understanding their ability to be resilient as they moved toward financial self-sufficiency. The remainder of this chapter will address issues relating to the study’s settings, sample selection, the data collection, establishing and building trustworthiness and the method for data analysis.

Setting

The study’s setting focused on middle to lower class urban communities located in the counties of Essex, Union, and Passiac, of Northern New Jersey. There is a diverse population of families living in these communities that include African American, Haitian, Caucasian, and Hispanic, employed, unemployed, renters and homeowners. There is a high concentration of welfare recipients, welfare-to-work programs, and graduates of these programs in the counties listed. This researcher has previously worked in several of these areas in such roles as counselor, consultant, instructor, and program director, which has allowed for familiarity and access to a variety of resources that provided participants.

Purposeful Sampling

Qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples selected purposefully. According to Quinn (1980) the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Quinn defines information-rich cases as those from which “one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling” (p. 169).
For example, if the purpose of this study is to increase our understanding of how African American woman successfully leave the welfare system, one can learn a tremendous amount by examining the behaviors, resources, and decision making skills of a few carefully selected African American women who meet this criteria. This process is considered purposeful sampling instead of gathering standardized information from a large, statistically representative sample of all African American women.

There are several different strategies for purposefully selecting information-rich cases and the one I have selected for my research is called snowball or chain sampling. As the name implies, the snowball or chain sampling occurs when a number of people are asked about the topic of inquiry and who they could recommend as another resource. Quinn (1980) stated that by asking a number of people who else to talk with, the snowball gets bigger and bigger which allows you to accumulate new information rich cases. The process begins by asking well-situated people: “Who knows a lot about _____? Who should I talk to?” In most instances a few key names are mentioned repeatedly and it is those individuals who become valuable to the gathering of a rich sampling base. The chain of recommended informants was initially diverse and large, however, it “converged into a few key names that got mentioned over and over” (Quinn, 1980, p. 176).

It was those key resources that assisted me in gathering the participants for this study. There were a number of initial informants contacted at the local welfare offices in Essex, Union, and Passiac Counties in the State of New Jersey. In addition, I approached the welfare-to-work coordinators at the local community colleges. These individuals had updated information regarding job placement of those women who have successfully
completed the program and are now employed. It was the continual pursuit of key individuals that guided me to potential participants that met the desired criteria and provided information rich cases. And finally, the participants themselves served as a referral resource for contacts they knew had successfully left the welfare system.

Research was conducted according to the ethical principles involving human participants as stated by the American Psychological Association. Participants completed a form indicating their consent to participate in audio taped interviews that were transcribed. They were further informed that other professionals would read the interview transcripts and that excerpts would appear anonymously in published form.

*Characteristics of the Sample*

Selection of the sample begins when a researcher determines whom to interview, how to find them and when to change course after the initial interviews (Taylor, 1998). A sample of African American women was recruited who were identified as individuals that have successfully left the welfare system and are presently employed for at least one year. Additional criteria included (a) age 18 and older, (b) mother of at least one child, (c) perceives self as African American, (d) ability to speak and read English, (e) perceives self as providing for self and/or family, and (f) residents of Essex, Union, and Passaic Counties in the state of New Jersey.

One of the first challenges to consider in qualitative research is estimating the number of participants required in the study to reach saturation. Morse (1994) stated that in doing a qualitative study that utilizes in-depth interviewing, it involves each participant to be interviewed several times. This produces a large amount of data from each participant and therefore demands fewer participants in the study.
A range of six to ten informant interviews was recommended as the range in which saturation (e.g. recurring themes and patterns) of the data occurs (Morse, 1994). Sandelowski (1995) emphasized that “while the sample is statistically nonrepresentative, it is informationally representative in that data will be obtained from persons who can stand for other persons with similar characteristics” (p. 18).

There is also the use of “shadowed data” when estimating participant size. In addition to talking about their own experiences, participants may discuss the experience of others, how their own experience resembles or differs from others, and why (Morse, 2000). The use of shadowed data provided the investigator with some idea of the range of experiences and “the domain of the phenomenon beyond the single participant’s personal experience, and it provides some explanation of the rationale for these differences” (Morse, 2000, p. 4).

Nine participants were utilized who were obtained through individual contacts with key people from local welfare offices, community organizations, community colleges, and churches. Once identified, the participants received descriptive literature outlining the purpose of the study and the type of participants sought. A monetary incentive for participation in this study was given and/or mailed to each participant at the conclusion of the interviews in the amount of $20.00. Each participant was offered an opportunity to receive a copy of the interview transcripts as well as a final copy of the dissertation.

Making Contact with the Respondents

The importance of building and maintaining trust and rapport between interviewer and subject has been emphasized by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Much of the success of
the focused in-depth interview is dependent on a participant’s comfort in revealing personal life details. It is the skill of maintaining a professional perspective yet allowing a sufficient closeness that will permit internal disclosure by the participant.

There were nine women interviewed with an age range from twenty-seven to forty-eight. The participants were interviewed at various locations; four interviewed at the researcher’s office, three at the participant’s homes, one at the participant’s place of employment, and one by telephone. The participants were recruited through various means including referrals by professional colleagues, responses to recruitment flyers, and referrals.

The participants were selected based on the following criteria: (a) identified self as African American, (b) mother of at least one child, (c) presently employed for at least one year, and (e) had a history of financial dependence on their local county welfare system. Each participant that expressed an initial interest in the study was contacted by telephone in order to ascertain level of commitment and availability. If the participant’s interest was confirmed, they were sent an explanatory letter concerning the purpose and details of the study as well as a demographic information sheet and consent form. These two forms were to be completed before the first interview and a follow-up call was made to arrange the meeting time and place. After the initial interview took place and a review and analysis of the audio-tapes were completed, a telephone call was made to arrange for a follow-up interview in order to correct, amend or extend the information collected in the initial interview. Finally, a thank you letter and stipend for ($20) was sent to each participant after the second interview.
This researcher is aware of the importance of developing trust throughout the interview process which begins with the initial contact. It is this sense of trust that will allow for optimum disclosure during the interview and will allow the researcher the opportunity to challenge misinformation if necessary (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher was flexible in the choice of settings and locations for the interviews (e.g. participant’s homes or workplace, researcher’s office, and by telephone). The decision of location was based on what was most convenient for the participants.

Each session was audio-taped with the participant’s permission. After the interview, each participant received a thank you letter and reminder that a second interview will be requested within the next few weeks. It is the second interview that allowed the participants the opportunity to provide clarification or supplemental information.

At the conclusion of these interviews and the reviewing of all the data collected, it was determined that enough information had been gathered and that saturation had taken place. Therefore, no other interviews were scheduled.

Data Collection Techniques

Within the realm of naturalistic inquiry two methods of data collection were used in order to gather relevant information and data. One method is completion of the demographic information form, and the other method is called ethnographic interviewing. Each of these methods was utilized in this research.

Ethnographic Interview:

According to Marshall and Rossman (1999) the value of the ethnographic interview lies in its focus on culture through the participant’s perspective and through a
firsthand encounter. It also is a flexible method that avoids “oversimplification in
description and analysis because of its rich narrative descriptions” (p. 112). Spradley
(1979) described a type of interview -- the ethnographic interview -- as “a friendly
conversation” (p. 58). It is the interviewer that sets the initial tone of the interview,
therefore, the friendly manner to which this is done will impact the sharing of the desired
information. It is important to remember that ethnography it not simply studying people
but more so learning from people. It is the valuable opportunity to be taught (Spradley,
1979).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) encourage global questions to initiate the interview. It is
the “warm-up” inquiries that provide the respondents opportunities to begin to be
comfortable with the interview format and helps build rapport between the participant
and the researcher. The goal of these general “ice breaking” questions is to put the
participant at ease and allow the researcher permission to probe the inquiry at a more in-
depth level.

In this study, interviews are considered personal narratives or stories about the
self that are brief looks into chapters of the individual’s past history. Oral interviews with
African American women are crucial to generating insight about how these women
experience their lives. The research interview process was the method through which I
 collaborated with individuals to produce text for analysis.

Anderson and Jack (1991) asserted the art of interviewing was learning to listen
and hear not just the “male” dominant perspective, that is, concepts and values shaped by
men and frequently used by women. Instead, we should also strive to hear the true
woman's perspective which is based in her immediate reality and/or personal experiences.

According to Taylor (1998) we must apply the same approach and listen for dominant racialized themes in the discourse. This is particularly the case when listening and analyzing interviews of African American women when we consider Etter-Lewis' (1993) claim that "...African American women's participation in autobiography is shaped almost entirely by issues of race and gender". (p. 114). In other words, the importance of understanding social, cultural, historical and political events must be examined when considering what impacts a woman's life. It is these influences that will no doubt shape oral history narratives as well.

The interviews were scheduled for a time and place that was convenient for each woman. There were a total of nine interviews and each participant signed an agreement regarding their participation in this study and was witnessed by the researcher (Appendix A – Explanatory Letter and Consent Form). The ethnographic interview included exploratory questions that were used to obtain information describing the experiences of women who have successfully left the welfare system and are presently employed (Appendix B – Exploratory Questions). The use of semi-structured in-depth questions provided the participants an opportunity to reveal rich descriptive information about the topic of resiliency and self-sufficiency.

Each woman had the opportunity to be interviewed over two sessions. The first interview was to gather information about their experiences on welfare, coming off the system, the challenges experienced, their becoming employed, and views of resiliency. The second interview provided an opportunity for the women to clarify and validate the
researcher’s transcribed information. Field notes were recorded immediately after the interview and each session was audio taped, transcribed verbatim onto computer diskettes. The security of the audio tapes were maintained via a locked file cabinet. In addition, the researcher kept a reflective journal about the data collection and analysis as it proceeded.

Demographic Information Form:

An instrument for the collection of demographic data was developed by the researcher. It contains descriptive information about age, current relational status (married/partnered), number of children (biological, adopted, and/or kinship related), level of education, welfare history, material hardship, employment history, present occupation, and religious orientation (Appendix C – Demographic Information Form).

Probing

Interviews can be an effective method of probing “inner perspectives” (Patton, 1990, p. 278). During the interview, a researcher needs to follow up on topics that have been raised by asking specific questions, asking for clarification, and encouraging a participant to describe, in detail, particular experiences. This requires the use of probes, which are directed cues, for more or extended information (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

It is the role of the qualitative researcher to constantly ask participants for clarification and elaboration on shared information. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that it is essential to maintain flexibility, so that an interviewer can follow up on promising leads or return to earlier points that require additional exploration. While this researcher utilized probing techniques it is important not to apply any undue pressure on the participant that could be construed negatively. For example, if the participant’s body
language as well as verbal response has made it clear that further probing would be uncomfortable or even threatening, than the researcher should respect those cues. Although not guaranteed, the opportunity may present itself at another time in which the participant will be willing to share that information.

Finally, it is not only the content of the probing question that is important to consider but also the tone in which the question is presented. This researcher was conscious of not eliciting judgmental tones when responding to comments or gathering information during the interview. Any of these behaviors can negatively impact the trust relationship needed for a productive interviewing experience.

*Supplemental Data Recording*

To supplement data collection the following methods were used; (a) an audio-taped interview, (b) a typewritten transcript of the interviews which were reviewed by the participants for purposes of clarification, (c) field notes were recorded, and (d) a reflexive research journal was maintained throughout the process.

As mentioned earlier, the participant received information about the interview, a consent form to be signed, and the demographic information form. Each participant was reminded of the fact that they have consented to be audio-taped. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) audio-taped recordings provide an excellent data source, which assures completeness, the opportunity to review as often as necessary, and the ability to review for nonverbal cues such as significant pauses, raised voices or emotional outbursts.

However, the concept of fidelity, in relationship to the benefits of audio taping, is what Lincoln and Guba (1985) described as the ultimate advantage of this form of data recording. Fidelity is the “ability of the investigator to later reproduce exactly the data”
that was shared during the investigation (p. 240). Audio-tape recordings were the first means of data collection. The audiotape recordings were then transcribed for study and review.

The second form of data collection involved typewritten transcripts of the audiotaped recorded interviews. The transcripts were then coded and reviewed. The third method of data collection involved keeping a log book of my field experiences. Spradley (1979) referred to this as a “field notes log” that would contain the researcher’s experiences, fears, mistakes, confusions, break-throughs and challenges. This log book was maintained throughout the investigation process including the initial contacts, the interviews and the analysis of data.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated a number of advantages for using field notes. First, they are less threatening to a respondent; second, the process of taking notes keeps the researcher alert and responsive; third, field notes are not subject to technical difficulties, and finally; they provide ready access to the researcher who may wish to probe a certain comment made earlier. Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont (1999) maintain that field notes are to be reflected upon throughout the investigative process. They are not to be considered a “closed, completed, final text”; rather, they are “indeterminate, subject to reading, rereading, coding, recoding, interpreting, and reinterpreting” (p. 462).

The fourth method of data collection was centered on what Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to as a reflexive journal. This is a type of diary in which the researcher records a variety of information about self and method on a daily basis or as needed. It was in this journal that the researcher recorded reflections about methodological decisions made and the reasons for making them. The content of this journal reflected the
researcher’s growing insights and speculations as well as evaluations of one’s own values and how they impacted the research experience. Finally, the reflexive journal was useful in recognizing emerging themes and was utilized in the auditing process to assure trustworthiness. The auditing process will be discussed in more detail in a later section of this chapter.

*Establishing and Building Trustworthiness*

A study loses its impact and meaning if its trustworthiness is questionable. Lincoln and Guba (1985) believed that activities such as maintaining reflexive journals, triangulation of data, doing debriefings, peer reviews, and developing an audit trail will increase the probability that trustworthiness will be prevalent throughout and after the research experience.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that establishing the trustworthiness of a research project must focus on issues conventionally discussed as validity and reliability so that four areas of concern must be asked of researcher; truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. Truth value asks the question, “Can one establish with confidence the truth of the finding of a particular inquiry?” Truth value, though, assumes a “single tangible reality that an investigation is intended to unearth and display” (p. 294), whereas the naturalistic researcher makes “the assumption of multiple constructed realities” (p. 295).

Applicability asks, “Can one determine the extent to which the findings can be applied to other contexts?” According to Seale (1999) applicability depends on generalizing from a sample to a population, on the untested assumption that the “receiving” population is similar to that of the “sending” sample. However Seale (1999)
further contends that the naturalistic inquirer would claim the potential “uniqueness of every local context, requiring empirical study of both sending and receiving contexts for applicability to be established” (p.467).

Consistency asks, “Can one determine whether the findings of an inquiry can be repeated if the inquiry were replicated with the same or similar participants? And finally, neutrality asks, “Can one establish the degree to which the findings of an inquiry are determined by the participants and not by the biases, motivations, or interests of the researcher? In qualitative research the perspectives of validity, reliability, and objectivity, as it relates to criteria for trustworthiness, take on new dimensions. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) credibility implies internal validity, transferability implies external validity, dependability implies reliability and conformability implies objectivity. The following sections will discuss credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility

In order to achieve maximal credibility and interpretation it is essential to establish confidence in the truth of the findings of a particular inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this purpose, the following techniques were implemented: (1) prolonged engagement, and triangulation of data; (2) peer debriefing, which provides an external check on the inquiry process; (3) negative case analysis which is an activity focused on refining the working hypotheses as more information becomes available; (4) member checking which provides direct testing of the findings and interpretations with the human sources from which they have come.
Activities Increasing the Probability of Credible Findings

Prolonged Engagement

Prolonged engagement alludes to the importance of taking time to learn the “culture” to which the research is focused. It is the investment of sufficient time that will allow the researcher to test for misinformation introduced by distortions either of self or the participants, as well as, utilizing the time to build trust which is a development process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized that the researcher must deal with personal distortions and the mere fact of being a “stranger in a strange land” must be evaluated. My extensive history of working with African American women on welfare has allowed me “entry” into the culture to which I was researching. However, I did not assume immediate acceptance, nor belittle the importance of building trust as is necessary in any new relationship.

Prolonged engagement was accomplished through the initial telephone contact, the explanatory letter, the follow up call arranging the interview, the “warm-up” discussion before the interview in order to build rapport, the interview itself, a review of the recordings to check for clarity, the transcription process, the follow up call to schedule the second interview, the second interview itself, and finally, the thank-you letter sent after the second interview.

Prolonged engagement was met both directly through contact with the participant and indirectly through the process of reviewing and processing the data. This researcher reviewed the interviewed information several times to establish accuracy, clarity, and consistency. Although the engagement process itself did not appear prolonged, the researcher’s experience with this population and the fact that she considers herself a part
of this culture as an African American woman, compensated for this shorter physical
time spent with the participants.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation is the use of multiple and different sources to verify the same
information. In this research, triangulation was accomplished by the use of different
modes of data collection, (e.g. first interview, second interview, demographic
questionnaire, and peer review). The overall goal was to improve the probability that
findings and interpretations will be found credible.

**Peer Debriefing**

Peer debriefing is the process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer for
purposes of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain hidden from
their view. First and foremost this process helps to keep the researcher “honest” by
having to answer to questions placed by a “devil’s advocate”. The peer’s role was to
probe biases, explore meanings, and clarify interpretations. This was an opportunity to
test the hypotheses emerging from the researcher’s thinking, and at the same time, clear
the mind of emotions and feelings that could have interfered with good judgment.

In this study the researcher used one peer debriefer who is an Assistant Professor
and Counselor at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey- School of
Health Related Professions. This debriefer has a graduate degree in psychology and
extensive work with African American women in academic and community service.
Throughout the process of data collection and analysis a series of meetings were utilized
to discuss this researcher’s views, biases, concerns, and conclusions.
Negative Case Analysis

Negative case Analysis is seen as “a process of revising hypothesis with hindsight” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 309). This is a useful means to make data more credible by reducing the number of exceptional cases. The object of the analysis is to continuously refine a hypothesis until it accounts for all known cases without exception. Kidder (1981, p. 244) suggests that negative case analysis is to qualitative research as statistical analysis is to quantitative: both are means to handle error variance. Qualitative research uses “errors” to revise the hypothesis and to demonstrate how large the treatment effects are compared to the error variance.

This researcher utilized negative case analysis through testing all working hypothesis against all accumulated data until the descriptive outcomes account for every respondent without exception.

Member Checking

Member checking is viewed as the most crucial step utilized in establishing credibility. It is here that the researcher presented to the participants a summary of the interview(s) in order to determine if the participants agreed with the researcher’s recording of their responses. The researcher’s goal was to present the obtained information in an adequate representation of the participant’s realities and allow an opportunity to react to them. This allowed the participants to make verbal corrections, therefore establishing the credibility of the hypotheses.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) member checking is both informal and formal, and it occurs continuously throughout the investigation. The use of member checking serves a variety of purposes such as allowing the respondent to confirm their
intentions, allowing respondents to correct errors, allowing the respondent to volunteer additional information, and provides an opportunity to summarize data. There were several opportunities to conduct member checking throughout the course of the investigation. Member checking took place during the first interview, in the format of a brief summation of that information at the close of the interview, during the second interview and its interpretation and summation. In four instances member checking took place in order to elicit feedback for final data analysis.

Transferability

Transferability is the ability to generalize findings gathered from the viewed reality of the participant within a specific context and time. However the establishment of transferability is very different for a conventional researcher then is it for a qualitative researcher. For while the quantitative researcher expects to make statements about external validity, the qualitative researcher can only set out working hypotheses together with a description of the time and context in which they were found to hold.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that within the naturalistic approach to inquiry it is not a researcher’s task to provide an index of transferability, but more so to make the data available in order that transferability may take place in the form of application in future studies. Transferability is to external validity as credibility is to internal validity. The researcher is responsible for providing the “widest possible range of information for inclusion in a “thick” description of the study; for that reason he or she will wish to engage in purposeful sampling” (p. 316).

Qualitative research can provide a means to access the thoughts and feelings of individuals that may not be able to be addressed in quantitative studies. It is the review
and credibility of this study that allows other professionals to be able to determine the feasibility of studying this topic with the goal of transferability.

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Consistency is an importance concept of any type research. It is essential to determine whether the conclusions of the study would be replicated if the study were repeated with the same or similar participants in the same context. In qualitative research the researcher can determine reliability by coding the raw data in such a way that it would allow another person to understand the themes and arrive at the same conclusions if the study was repeated. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that, in the naturalistic paradigm dependability is analogous to reliability.

It is further stated that dependability is parallel to reliability and confirmability is comparable to objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Objectivity occurs when findings are able to be presented from the characteristics of the participants and contexts of the inquiry and not from biases, motivations, or perspectives of the interviewer. Validity of observations involves the researcher’s ability to call what is being measured by the right name and reliability involves checking the strength of the data. Overall it is the extent to which a measurement procedure yields the same answer whenever and however it is implemented. This required a need for meticulous documentation of the collection and analysis of the data that was be obtained. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested the use of an inquiry audit as a means of assessing dependability and confirmability.

**The Inquiry Audit**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) an inquiry audit is conducted by examining a residue of records stemming from the inquiry. The purpose of the inquiry
audit is to guard against an interviewer’s imposition of biases and subjective interpretations. The auditor is to examine the process of the inquiry and its products from tape-recorded to written transcripts in order to determine accuracy.

In order to ensure dependability and confirmability, the auditor will examine the data utilizing the following five categories known as an audit trail: (1) raw data such as audio tapes of the interviews and written field notes; (2) data reduction and analysis products which include summary of the notes, working hypotheses and ideas; (3) data reconstruction and synthesis products which will include structure of themes, interpretations, definitions and relationships; (4) process notes which include trustworthiness notes, procedures, and rationale; (5) materials relating to intentions and dispositions including personal notes, reflexive journal entries and expectations. The auditor must become thoroughly familiar with the study (e.g. the problem investigated, the methodological approaches taken, the findings and conclusions.). For this study an audit trail was maintained, and an independent auditor was utilized. The auditor also checked for the presence of any biases or conflicts with regard to questions, decisions regarding subject selection or data analysis.

Reflexive Journal

The reflexive journal is the final technique utilized to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The reflexive journal is described as a type of diary in which the investigator on a daily basis, or as needed, records a variety of information about self and method. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The journal will provide information about methodological decisions made and the reasons for making them which is also of great importance to the auditor.
The reflexive journal included: (1) a daily schedule and logistics of the study; (2) a personal diary for reflection in terms of one’s own values and interests; and (3) a methodological log in which decisions and rationales are recorded.

Data Collection Analysis

The ethnographic research methodology model of Spradley (1979) was utilized to analyze the data which includes four levels of analysis; domain, taxonomic, componential, and immersion. For purposes of this study I will briefly describe each level of analysis. This analysis begins with what is called the domain level. A domain is a symbolic category which includes other smaller categories. The initial search attempts to yield tentative domains which can be expanded and tested with the participants. Domain analysis was designed to uncover relational patterns which help the researcher to formulate structural and additional questions in the next phase of data gathering (Taylor, 1998). As Spradley (1979) notes, there are different cultural domains, or ways of looking at data. It is important to go beyond what appears obvious and seek to connect and discover the conceptual themes that have emerged. The data was searched for repeated phrases, ideas, or experiences, grouped into domains, and labeled with a cover term.

Taxonomic analysis is the second level. It is directed toward revealing the internal organization of the domain. The goal is to capture a “holistic perspective of the whole culture” (Spradley, 1979, p. 134). The taxonomic analysis involves categorizing the items in a domain to identify subsets of cultural knowledge. A cultural theme is a cognitive principle, assumed or explicit, that recurs in more than one domain and connects different subsystems of a culture (Spradley, 1979).
The third level called componential looks at the ‘components of meaning’ which are the attributes that surface in relation to differences among the categories of each domain. In making a componential analysis, you will focus on multiple relationships between cultural terms and other symbols. Spradley (1979) stated that a componential analysis will lead to specific ways to represent all the extra information one will receive throughout the interview. The final level is theme analysis which occurs through the process known as immersion (Spradley, 1979). According to Taylor (1998) it is during the immersion process that the researcher maintains intensive contact with the data and subsequent verification with the informants. As anticipated, cultural themes were constructed which connected domains and provided a holistic view of the researched culture.

Themes and sub-themes were carefully extracted through the process of logical analysis of content from all data sources. This analysis began with a domain level which uncovered relational patterns that allowed me to formulate and structure additional questions of inquiry. The data was searched for repeated phrases, ideas or experiences, grouped into domains, and labeled with a cover term.

The second step, referred to as taxonomic analysis, categorized the items in a domain to identify subsets or sub-themes. It was at this step that I was particularly looking for cultural themes that recur in more than one domain and connected the different subsystems of a culture (Spradley, 1979). For example, cultural themes emphasizing the importance of relational supportiveness was threaded throughout the interviews regardless of the circumstances. Finally, immersion or more commonly known
as theme analysis was conducted which involved my intense contact with the data and participants when necessary.

Participants

Human rights were protected by submitting the research proposal for review and approval to the Human Subjects Review Committee at Seton Hall University who insured compliance with federal Institutional Review Board regulations.

Participation is this study was voluntary. The informant’s rights regarding research were explained and they were notified that they may withdraw from the project at any time. The purpose of the study was explained to potential informants both verbally and in writing.

Field notes were recorded during and immediately following the interviews and each session was audio taped. In addition, a self-reflective diary about the data collection and analysis was maintained. At subsequent follow-up validation interviews, the participants were reminded of their rights to withdraw from the study. The interviewer was responsible for conducting this procedure.

A Demographic Portrait of Participants

The following demographic portrait is intended to facilitate the reader’s comprehension of the women who participated in the research process. This information provides a view of the women from yet another angle. The descriptive data for the sample was obtained for the demographic information form (see Appendix C).

A total of nine (n=9) women participated in the study. The women were living in Essex County and all agreed to meet with the investigator in their residence,
incomes ranging from $6,000 - $50,000. The women were employed as social caseworkers, secretaries, administrative assistants, paralegal assistants, system navigators, computer assistant operators, and community outreach representatives.

All women were mothers of at least one child and currently the primary caretaker of the child or children. Child care resources included: family members, day care centers, paid baby sitters, and after school programs. Overall, the women were extremely busy working, taking care of their families, looking for ways to better their lives, but were willing and excited about participating in the research process.

The identifying characteristics of the women have been altered to ensure confidentiality. In addition, partner’s names as well as the names of geographical locations have been altered.

Table 4

Demographic Portrait of the Women (N=9)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Numeric Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean age (years)</td>
<td>36.1 (27-48)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Education

<p>| High School Diploma     | 11.1% (n=1)    |
| Some College            | 22.2% (n=2)    |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>(n=2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
<td>(n=6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living together</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>(n=1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Welfare History**

- **Range of years (4 months – 10 years)**: mean = 5.1 yrs.

**Attempts to Leave**

- **Range (1-4)**: mean (2.3)

**Material Hardship**

- **Yes**: 5
- **No**: 4

**Need of food**

- 4
- 5

**Need of rent monies**

- 4
- 5

**Evicted from dwelling**

- 3
- 6

**Telephone disconnected**

- 4
- 5

**Loss of electricity**

- 2
- 7

**Employment (length at present job)**

- **Range (7.5 months – 6 years)**: 66.7% - 2 yrs. or less
- 33.3% - more than 2 yrs.

**Support Resources**

- **Parents**: 55.5%
Chapter Four

Data Interpretation: Harmonizing The Voices

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight resilience in the transitional process of African American women from welfare to work. These women have achieved emotional and financial "release" from the welfare system. Specifically, this chapter will (a) explore African American women's views and experiences within the welfare system; (b) explore their stories of how they remain resilient during their struggle to break the cycle of dependency on public assistance; and (c) recognize means of economic self-sufficiency and autonomy.

A range of six to ten informant interviews was recommended as a range in which saturation (e.g. recurring themes and patterns) of the data occurs (Morse, 1994). Sandelowski (1995) emphasized that "while the sample is statistically non-representative, it is informationally representative in that data will be obtained from persons who can stand for other persons with similar characteristics" (p. 18). Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997) suggest the use between 8 to 15 participants, and derived from their
shared, and repeated themes as narrated by the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The participants were interviewed at various locations; four interviewed at the researcher’s office, three at the participant’s homes, one at the participant’s place of employment, and one by telephone. The participants were recruited through various means including referrals by professional colleagues, responses to recruitment flyers, and referrals.

One to two hour semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Each interview was transcribed and checked for accuracy. In accordance with the method of analysis in qualitative research, the researcher implemented the process of member checking which is viewed as the most crucial step utilized in establishing credibility. It is here that the researcher presented to the participants a copy of the transcribed interview in order to determine if the participants agree with the researchers recording of their responses. A second interview was then conducted to assess any verbal corrections or needs of clarification.

Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997) state that qualitative researchers do not begin with preconceived hypotheses but seek to “discover them in the course of data collection and analysis” (p. 525). My focus was to represent reality through the eyes of the participants and identify the emergence of concepts from the data. As a qualitative
experiences.

The data analysis led to the identification of three primary themes with several sub-themes as follows:

(1) The welfare system was a ‘mixed blessing’

a) “The First Step Is The Hardest”

b) “I Never Thought I’d Have to Apply”

c) “I Had No Other Choice”

d) “I’m Not Like Them”

e) “The Pressure Is On”

f) “Making Ends Meet”

(2) Support systems that made the participants’ process successful,

a) “What Would I’ve Done Without Them?”

b) “Mom’s Motivator”

c) “Always On Time”

(3) Specific transitional experiences impacting the participants’ level of motivation and self-confidence,

a) “It’s Time For Change”

b) “All I need Is A Chance”
“mixed blessing” phenomenon included a dual impact of the welfare system that often provided and denied assistance at the same time.

The fact that the word welfare can also be referred to as “the system” implies the existence of complex multiple levels of service, and often times tangled bureaucracy. Potential welfare recipients are faced with a desperate situation in that they know first hand, and often not the policy makers, that neither welfare nor low-wage work will provide enough income to cover their basic needs. The welfare system denies any supplemental income that could possibly curtail that family from experiencing severe hardships but that rule is not to be broken.

Therefore the decision to enter into a system that was both “help and horror” was usually that of last resort. This decision was not only based on need but also the ability to recognize the fact that one’s self-worth and dignity would be questioned. For many, the immediate challenge became one of battling thoughts of shame, disgrace and a sense of failure. This was often seen as a high price to pay for such a low economic return.

Simply put, one woman stated, “The system itself takes you through so much to get so little.”

Prior to discussing the profound impact of making the final decision to apply for welfare, several women described their views of the system itself. The system was
Participants viewed the welfare system as a stepping-stone. This perception of how they chose to relate to this system, made the experience acceptable for several participants. This mindset of welfare being a stepping-stone implies action and forward movement. Therefore, participants approached their involvement as temporary. Their first goal was to free themselves from the system. One woman expressed her view this way:

Well, for myself when I was receiving assistance I used it as a stepping stone. I was going to school at the time and it provided childcare and I was able to put my children in day care and complete my classes. So I see that as a benefit because women who have children need childcare to go out here and try to get job training.

It’s alright to need assistance. There is nothing wrong with that but use it just for what it’s for. It is to assist you in bettering yourself and if you go in there with that focus you will be alright.

Another woman shared a similar opinion when she stated:

I would say welfare is a means to help you financially with your bills or whatever on a temporary basis. I do believe that the system is set up that way, but there are people that kinda let it drag out but for me it was pretty much a temporary based thing. I did not want to stay there.
will disappear, so welfare is a help for the woman. It helps her get
on her feet. That’s how I took it as a vehicle or step to go forward.

Being on welfare as a child myself...my mother was epileptic
and it wasn’t really necessary for her to go out and work because she
had it so frequently. She didn’t really step out and try to do better
but as I grew up and came into my teen years I tried to go to a county
college but that’s when I became pregnant and I used the welfare system
as a vehicle of support.

However two women viewed the “stepping stone’s” role more as a weight placed
upon them rather then an object to step on. This view was utilized as a stimulus to move
forward as quick as possible. The release of this uncomfortable weight placed upon them
could only result in self-improvement and empowerment.

One woman stated:

For me...welfare, well, when I first went to get on welfare I was depressed.
To have to admit that I couldn’t take care of myself and I couldn’t take
care of my child. So, that was depressing. But after being there it made
me stronger because it made me feel that if I could do this, going through
all the interviews and everything else, then I could do just about anything.
simply stated:

I went on welfare assistance (the 2nd time) because the unemployment ran out but I wasn’t going to be on public assistance for long. I was only on it for about a month. This is where I see the difference in the system. They didn’t make it comfortable for you to just sit back and get money every month. They gave you choices. The same month I got on they gave you a choice, either you could volunteer your service working, not getting paid, which I don’t see me volunteering for nobody, or go to school. I went to school.

The welfare system revealed its complicated characteristics through the different women’s experiences which demonstrated a mixed view of the system itself. Although gratitude was expressed regarding the system’s ability to provide for basic needs (e.g. food and shelter), frustration was equally verbalized when women would discuss their attempts at self-improvement. For example, if a woman became employed the immediacy to which childcare services would be discontinued would often times impact the financial demands of the family and result in a need to stop working. The vicious cycle would continue throughout the welfare recipient’s experience.
dramatic because their names and their children's names were simply added to a list of members receiving welfare in that same household.

However for those that described a distinct emotional response it began with the application process. The process of applying was admitting not only to oneself but to complete strangers that you could not take care of yourself or children. Succumbing to the decision to apply for welfare would also imply that one's level of faith was not strong enough to believe that "God will supply all your needs".

However, the participants justified their decision by embracing the idea that their involvement on welfare would be on a temporary basis. This mindset allowed the women to sustain a level of self-esteem and confidence. Their continual re-visiting of the thought that this "too shall pass" served as a motivator to emotionally sustain these women within the system. This supports the fact that the welfare system was viewed as a mixed blessing and will be further investigated by examining the initial impact of recognizing the need to apply for public assistance.

"I Never Thought I Would Have To Apply"

Although the system could be viewed as a stepping-stone, it was viewed with mixed emotions. The welfare experience was often associated with feelings of shame and degradation in addition to being a hindrance to self-improvement. These contradictory
type of assistance. One woman described her view of welfare as having a negative impact on her self-esteem. She states her view as follows:

Another negative aspect I believe was that welfare contributed to people having a lack of self-esteem. I thought back at the time my mother was on it and I remember going to the food market and standing in line and the cashier looking at me and people behind me looking funny. I used to not go to any food markets outside of (hometown), you know, in the suburbs. They really stared and looked at you funny. I felt uncomfortable. I felt low and ashamed to pull out the food stamps. Even when they came out with the debit card I still felt ashamed using that.

Another woman had to emotionally struggle with the challenge of being the first in her family to go on welfare. She viewed receiving welfare as “having fallen to a lower level”.

I don’t know anyone that I can recall in my family that had to go on public assistance or welfare or anything like that. We are pretty much a strong background of women in my family, predominately women and we’re ‘go getters’. No one has to fall to the level of public assistance, per se, so I didn’t want to. It was a little frustrating on my part. I felt that
conscious attempts to focus on the need of her child and not the way she was treated at the welfare office. This mechanism proved itself quite valuable in that it allowed the woman to not focus on the negative interaction at hand but to focus on the well being of her child which, more importantly, demonstrated qualities of a good mother. This was crucial to clarify in her own mind that just because she was not able to financially care for her child it did not mean that she lacked any level of caring or commitment to their well being. In speaking about her experience, she stated:

The whole system is a mess. They talk down to you even if you request to see a supervisor the treatment is not better everyone treats you the same.

It’s like you’re an animal. I remember telling myself, “you have to hold on, this is not for you but for this little person that is depending on you.”

My main thing was that I wanted to get a job. I heard that the system is now designed to help you and they get first preference. So that’s what I wanted to do.

Along with being a “mixed blessing”, the welfare system itself is contradictory in nature. Although its implications regarding usage are to be temporary, it has components woven in its process that simply make it difficult to leave and successfully sustain a functioning household. The welfare problem has been defined as “an issue of labor force
At times the system is referred to as the “welfare trap”. The central component of this “trap” is that low-wage jobs usually make single mothers even worse off than they were on welfare and not that these women become pathologically dependent (Edin, 1997). The participant’s experiences on welfare were viewed as a hindrance to their attempts to move forward. Often times their interaction with the system’s tangled bureaucracy resulted in delayed progress. One of the women expressed this best when she said:

I had to fight to get childcare. I had to fight to get just about everything.
I was doing everything these people want me to do. I’m going to all these classes, which did nothing for you because welfare would send you to the most...(pause) I don’t even have a word for it. It’s nothing pertaining to getting prepared to get a job. Fortunately I had a little previous work experience and knew a little about interviewing, things like that but it’s just that the classes they send you to are useless. Then when you find something that you want to do you get a hassle about it.

Life on welfare included continual demands of documentation and economic updates, while sometimes cutting off payments with little warning. Another woman expressed her challenge with the system in regards to her attempts to meet basic needs:
dollars over what they allowed, therefore, I didn’t get the assistance for my gas and electric. So, you know, I scrounged around trying to get what I needed. You know, it’s situations like that, that made it so rough, it was really hard.

One woman was challenged by her caseworker with the question of why she did not attempt to save money. This discussion took place during a time when she was about to become homeless along with her two children.

My caseworker said, “If you knew your apartment was going to be condemned then you should have saved up your money”, dah, dah, dah…she really gave me the run around. What part of $322 a month was I going to save? I have pampers, clothes, just the basics -- toilet tissues, soap, those things. So how am I going to save anything? She then said, “Well, you should of thought about that before you got pregnant” and uh…I mean my caseworker gave me such a hard time, it was just like she was saying you shouldn’t have had the child.

Six of the nine women interviewed talked about having heard “horror type” stories regarding unsupportive caseworkers and negative association with the welfare system before they themselves had to apply. It was this negative image that made the
The decision to enter into the system of welfare is complex and results in mixed emotions. It is questioned if the difficulty in making the decision to apply for welfare is truly understood.

Some women commented that they doubted if few, or any, of the governmental officials who voted for welfare reform have ever met a person on welfare, and even fewer have ever attempted to find out exactly what they did with their government checks. One woman described feelings of sadness when she met a young girl who decided to have an abortion because the only other option she viewed was to apply for welfare.

One girl said, “I don’t want the baby because I would have to go on welfare.” That was sad, that was really sad. She didn’t want her child because she knew she would have to go on welfare. (pause) Welfare is not the end. Yeah, you may have to go on welfare for a while but if it’s not what you want then you will find a way to get off. I told her this and she said, “My mother’s on welfare and she had all of us on welfare and we are still on welfare. I don’t want to have my child on welfare.” She just couldn’t see anything else because that’s what she was raised on. She saw mom going through welfare and she just didn’t want her child to go
I know the way society views you as a welfare recipient. You know, “OK your pregnant, you’re not good for anything, you’re used goods, you’re not married and you have not one but two(twins) babies to take care of.” The taxpayers are probably looking at you with the mindset that “I’m paying for all of this stuff that you’re getting.”

When one is continually made aware of public discontent and belief that giving money to these people will only perpetuate laziness and promiscuity, it can not help but impact the decision to make that first visit. The term welfare recipient, unfortunately, can also be a racially coded word in that it has a tendency to conjure the image of ethnic minority women who have babies and don’t want to work – even though most beneficiaries are actually white. The power of these stereotypes can only lead to scapegoating poor, minority women and children.

Seven of the nine women interviewed, commented that applying for welfare was one of the hardest thing they ever had to do and they knew that their lives were about to undergo profound changes. These women recognized that they had to become a part of a subculture of destitute women, abandoned by their men and left to fend for themselves and their children, with welfare and food stamps their only dependable source of income. Although it was seen as a resource needed for survival purposes, there was nothing
I went by myself. I didn’t know what to do or how to do. The way you are treated basically it’s like dogs and you’re talked to like dogs. You’re forced to say your name, your address everything aloud there is no respect for privacy. It wasn’t a good experience for me and I remember crying a lot of times while I was there. I had headaches a lot. It just wasn’t good (pause) nothing about it was good.

I remember my first interview with a lady and she said to me, “I’m not going to approve your request because I think you have this man hiding some place”. I remember that I have a little cousin with me, she was young, and I didn’t have anywhere to leave her I had to take her with me. In that cubicle she forced me to say where I had sex, where did you conceive, where did you get pregnant? I said at my apartment and she said, “so where is he now?” All these embarrassing questions and I remember starting to cry because here I was in front of my little cousin. I didn’t want her to know the humiliation I was going through. I was trying to hold on to some kind of dignity.

Another woman’s description of her “well remembered” first visit experience was as follows:
I got there about 8:15 a.m. I went up to the window. I said, “Good morning, I would like to apply for welfare.” She just said OK, here, and pushed the application to me. I was like, my God, did I say something wrong to her, am I alien or something, did I not say good morning to you. Anyway, I sat down and completed the application at this “table”. They have this table in the lobby area where they come out and interview you, right there, everybody can hear you, I mean, hear everything. To me, that was the most humiliating thing. They had those little petition booths that they could have used to interview people with some form of privacy but they had to interview everybody right in the open.

Well, the first thing they told me was that I had to wait for child support. I said fine. So, the child support representative comes out and they ask you your life history. How many people have you had sexual relationships with? How long did you know the guy before you got pregnant? Where did you meet him? How long did you date? It was just unbelievable!

Another woman describes her feelings of humiliation in having to apply for welfare when she shared the following statement:

I will never forget that feeling. It was humiliating. It’s emotional because you feel you have no other options. You are just out of resources and there is nothing else you could do but go there and I think that if you have a good self-image it will be profound and that
will help you a lot to get off. Because that initial feeling of humiliation, you don’t want to feel that, especially on a continual basis. You don’t want to feel that you have to depend on the system to support me and my kids. That is definitely a feeling you never forget.

Still another woman relayed her feelings of embarrassment in addition to discovering that she was not alone in being subject to the often times belittling interrogation of the caseworker:

My aim was to just get over it. I had cried too many times in that building, going through embarrassing questions asking about “when did he do it” and “why did you do it there” and “why didn’t you do it at his place”, I mean, I had had enough. That was some embarrassing stuff and I thought I was the only one going through that but when you got together with other people you hear some of the other things they went through with welfare. I don’t know if these caseworkers are entitled to do what they do I just know they do it.

The painful emotion of shame and embarrassment were talked about by several of the women. The decision to apply for welfare was left as a last resort and primarily carried out to meet the needs of their children. The decision was not one of immediacy and often made only with the potential precedent, whether realistic or wishful, that the choice would be temporary. Another woman voiced her concerns this way:

The first day I went to the welfare office, I woke up that morning, I had just had my son, I didn’t have any insurance and before I had him
I was a bar maid. That deals with no taxes, you know, you get cash money but my thing was how am I going to get this kid his shots, medication, doctors visits, because I wanted to do all the right things that a mother is suppose to do. So, I was like, well, I guess..(pause) and a caseworker at the hospital suggested that I go to welfare.

I had my son that Saturday, so all day Sunday I was looking at him thinking, I have to put my baby on welfare. I didn’t want to be on welfare. I just kept trying to think of places I could work, I could just go back to the bar but where could I put him? So, I knew I had to go to welfare. So, I got up that Monday morning and I cried, because I did not, I mean, I just didn’t want to do this. I don’t want to be on welfare! Don’t!

Another woman voiced her emotions this way:

Well, I will say when I had to go down to the actual building (welfare) I didn’t want to walk in there because people on the outside would know what I had to go in there for. Whether people said something or not I just felt like they were saying something about me. I didn’t like that. And the other thing was when I went to the store and had to use my family first card I would hate taking it out because everybody knows what I’m getting. So what, it’s not like it wasn’t a hundred other people in the store doing the same thing, it’s just that I didn’t want anybody to know.

I don’t want to really say ashamed because it’s not like I stayed on
it for life. I’ll just say a little embarrassed. I just didn’t want anyone to know.

I use to wait for people to leave the store and then go up to check out my food. So, I guess I was a little embarrassed.

The negative impact regarding self-worth, image, and identifying issues of control were three prevalent sub-themes illustrated in the stories previously shared by the participants. The challenge of questioning one’s self-worth began not only with having to apply for welfare but the process was simultaneously admitting that you failed as a provider. It also identified your level of intelligence and employability as minimal or next to nothing. The decision of applying for welfare was emotionally draining and the application process confirmed fears, frustration, and questioning of self-worth. Feelings of self-doubt and shame were confirmed by the end of many first visit experiences which were described as belittling, embarrassing, and demeaning.

The theme of control is interwoven in the overall design of the welfare system. The impact of control has its greatest influence by providing housing, healthcare, transportation, and food once you become a welfare recipient. Edin and Lein (1997) state that federal welfare rules present welfare-reliant mothers with a stark choice: follow the rules – which disallow supplemental income – and subject their families to severe hardship, or break the rules and suffer the consequences.

The women receiving welfare discovered early on that they were part of a sub-culture, not positively accepted by society, caseworkers, and even some of their own family members. The “welfare mother”, later to be referred to as “welfare queen” is portrayed as being “content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work and passing on her bad values to her children” (Collins, 2000, p.79). Collins (2000) further posits
that the image of the welfare mother provides “ideological justifications for intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class” (p. 79). African-Americans could be racially stereotyped as being lazy by blaming welfare mothers for failing to pass on the work ethic. Moreover, typically portrayed as an unwed mother, “she violates one cardinal tenet of White, male-dominated ideology: She is a woman alone” (p. 79). This reinforces the ideology that a woman’s true worth, sense of wholeness, and financial security can only occur through marriage.

Welfare state policies (e.g. government) were able to create and control the image of welfare mothers as well as deter the angle of vision away from the structural sources of poverty and blame the victim themselves (Davis, 1981). To mask the “effects of cuts in government spending on social welfare programs, media images increasingly identified and blamed Black women for the deterioration of U.S. interests” (p. 80).

However, an acceptance of the image portrayed as “welfare queens” was directly challenge by the participants interviewed. Ironically, a desire to want to eagerly apply for welfare and “make a life of it” was not expressed by the participants. Many women were emotionally torn with the final decision to have to apply for welfare verses the desire to work. There were even times when the participants had to disassociate themselves with other recipients if for no other reason but to maintain a sense of self-worth. This issue of disassociation will be discussed later on in this chapter. Overall, the challenge of being able to leave welfare will not only include finding a job but it will encompass a re-building of self-worth, image, and autonomy.
"I Had No Other Choice"

These participants now faced with the final option of receiving welfare were primarily motivated by their need to provide for their children, not only regarding basic needs (e.g. food, housing) but also prenatal and pediatric health care. The majority of the participants interviewed became pregnant at a young age and received no financial support from the biological father. Pregnant and parenting teens are often considered an “at risk” group and are associated with negative outcomes including unemployment, low education and welfare dependency. These participants, at a young age, were faced with the task of adjusting not only to the new identity of motherhood but also being a welfare recipient. In addition to this challenge they were continually striving to gain independence while simultaneously coping with the stress of the transition to parenthood. One woman explained it this way:

I was pregnant as a teenager. I had just turned 18. I was at home with my mother, I had a place to stay home with her but I didn’t want to stay there. I wanted to have my own place. I was just finishing my last year in high school. I went on welfare because I wasn’t able to get money from my son’s father; I wasn’t able to get any help from him. Actually, I was already on because my mother was receiving welfare before us, so I spoke with her caseworker and she told me that once I had the baby she would switch everything over. She explained also that I could apply for housing that way and be able to get an apartment. This illustrates that the welfare system could be an avenue for becoming somewhat independent. This participant’s entry onto the system was not as emotionally draining as
those that were the first in their family. She was familiar with the environmental setting of the welfare office, the caseworker, and the paperwork process.

Another woman discussed this transition as follows:

Well, when I graduated from high school I was three months pregnant and I wasn’t really doing anything. When I was six months pregnant I moved to Alabama to my father’s place and I was going to go to Alabama State but I didn’t like Alabama. I cried everyday because I wanted to come back home but he (father) didn’t want me to work and I was just bored. He didn’t want me to work because I was pregnant.

I came back to Jersey in December. I took the bus. It was twenty-four hours travel time. I arrived back to Jersey that Saturday night and I went into labor that Monday. I had my son and after that I had to get on public assistance. I was on it for five years but while I was on it I went to a county college.

All the participants were actively involved in making a better life for themselves and their children, hoping to attain better housing, more education and training, and a better job. However, as stated earlier, options were exhausted and the last resort was welfare. For example, one woman described it this way:

I was laid off my job; I pursued getting a certificate at a business school dealing with computer skills to better myself to go out into the market.

After that sixteen or eighteen week program was over, the unemployment ran out and it was time to do something else. I didn’t have a job and no
unemployment. I had to do something. Therefore I sought the welfare system and it was almost an all day experience down there, getting signed up and all. You had to go from one place to the next and it was a lot of paper work, a lot of time spent, it was very draining to be there in a crowded room with other women in the same position. It was just frustrating and very tiring, very tiring.

Another woman was challenged to seek welfare because of her need of housing.
In one situation I was homeless. The building I was living in was condemned by the State because of rodents. So, I went to welfare and told them I would do all the legwork and all I need from them is to help me with the TRA (temporary rental assistance). I went to the supervisor and she said, “there must have been a reason your caseworker is telling you she couldn’t help you”...I was like, what reason. I have papers in front of me from the State saying my apartment is condemned. I have thirty days to get out of that apartment. If I’m not out of that apartment in thirty days then I will be out on the street with my children. She said, “Well we’ll see what we can do”. It took them three weeks. And then they decided, well, we’ll put you in a shelter.

Still another woman relayed:
I was 21 yrs. old, we (children’s father) started dating and as you know it only takes one night. We made a mistake. I found out later that I was pregnant and I was talking to him and saying what are we going to do. So he said, “I’m going to get a job” so he got a job as a car washer but it didn’t last long. I really wanted to move out and start having a family
away from my parents. He went back and forth to different jobs and you
know, not really being responsible. Knowing that he was unreliable
as far as supporting us, I knew I had no other choice but to go to
welfare.

As discussed earlier, the decision to go on welfare was often considered a last
resort and pursued because of the hope of it being temporary. These women were faced
with a reality that raising children, paying rent, providing food and health care was not an
easy task and certainly not cost free. However the price to be paid included more than
money, it often challenged their sense of self-worth and created a conflict with their
societal gender roles of a patriarchal system. The black female is often portrayed as the
“man of the house” however, Hooks, (1981) stated that single-parent mothers may go so
far as to delegate the responsibility of being the “man” to male children. In some homes
where no male is present, “it is acceptable for a visiting male friend or lover to assume a
decision-making role” (p.73).

However, six of the women interviewed identified challenges they experienced in
attempting to establish and maintain relationships with either the children’s father or
other males. Financial and emotional pressures were often prevalent and resulted in
break-ups or minimal expectation of the men providing any assistance. The absences of
committed love relationships increased the reliance on motherhood to serve as a quality
of self-worth.

Of the remaining three women, two were married and one lived with the
biological father of one of her children. The quality of these relationships ranged from
weak to strong with an emphasis on the male’s ability to provide, consistently. Although
a male presence was in the household, the issue of independence was often emphasized. One woman stated...

If they (men) gave support, it was fine, if they didn’t it was fine. I’m not saying it was easy but I wasn’t really counting on their support because, basically, I had to learn how to do it on my own.

Five of the six participants that commented on the relationship of the biological father with the child emphasized that the fathers were not only unsupportive financially but were not involved in the children’s lives at any level. Many of the women allowed their maternal instincts of survival and protection of their children to be the motivating factor to move forward “anyhow”. There were a number of repeated sayings that confirmed the decision to continue forward no matter what the circumstances. For instance, it was not unusual to hear such phrases as “hallelujah anyhow”, “weeping may endure for a night but joy cometh in the morning”, “I’ve got to just keep keeping on” or “one brother don’t stop the show”. The men were often associated with the term “vacation 24/7” which simply means that they are not there twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The actual circumstances regarding the men in their lives included such issues as incarceration, drug dealing, alcoholism, physical abuse and unemployment.

For example, one woman described it in the following manner:

Oh, well my oldest son’s father is “always on vacation without him”, that’s what I call being locked up. (laughter) He was always on vacation without the family. My youngest son’s father I don’t know. So technically I had to do this with the support of my parents. They (children’s father) were playing ‘peek-a-boo’ and I didn’t have time for that because whatever
my child needed I still had to do. So if you’re not there am I to wait for you to come. It didn’t work like that for me.

Another woman commented about the challenges she had in trying to hold the father accountable. She stated:

Uh...there was no support from the father and it got to the point where I decided that I was not going to keep going to court and humiliating myself in trying to force the father to be supportive. So, I decided to go get assistance until I could go and get a job or until I became employed. A lot of time the father didn’t show up, most of the time he never showed up. When he did show up the judge ordered $20 a week. You know, like that’s going to do a whole lot for a baby. Milk at that time was almost $10 for a case...where were we going with $20 a week and he never made the first payment.

In one case the mother described her children’s reaction to their biological father.

My daughter can’t stand her real father. She’ll be thirty-one in November. She’ll say things like, “Oh, you mean that man”. She won’t say her father’s name. My younger son (Michael) told me that one-day he was sitting outside with his friends and his father had the nerve to come around and ask people did they know Michael. He even asked him did he know where Michael was.

Michael just said, “I can’t stand that man” he doesn’t even know his own son.

Another woman blamed herself as having a sense naïveté as the reason why she could not recognize her male companion as “bad news” from the very beginning. This relationship was described as having “changed overnight” and resulted in emotional and physical abuse. A flood of emotions surfaced as she described the following:
Well, like they say, "you fall in love". We grew up together. And so, I agreed to move to Philly with him. And two months after we got there, he changed like this (clicked finger). This is where I got my introduction to the drug scene, from buying, to packing, to selling, to using. I was no naïve. I had no idea what was going on and then it went from knowing what he was doing to almost not knowing him at all. He started to be abusive. For no reason he would come home and beat me up. And then he started being abusive and obsessive. He would lock me in the room. So, when he would leave the room and go downstairs for fifteen minutes, he would come back up and be out of it, he beats me up and then goes out drinking, comes back and sleep for about eighteen to twenty hours. I went through that for almost two years.

The act of physical abuse is never without the invisible scars of emotional abuse. According to Collins (2000) many African American women have had to exhibit independence and self-reliance to ensure their own survival and that of their loved ones.

One woman suffered from a history of physical abuse from her husband who was involved in drugs and alcohol in a dual role as dealer and user. She shared her attempts of trying to rationalize the abuser’s actions (e.g. dinner wasn’t made quick enough, or he must have had a bad day at work) but when abused while sleeping or watching television, it was the beginning realization that her life was in danger. This woman began to not only realize that her life was in danger but that the lives of her children were at risk. She later discovered the feelings her children had for their father like anger, disappointment, and even hatred and regret for not having left sooner.

He was the alcoholic and I was the abused wife. There use to be times
when I would be in the bed sleeping and he would just come home and grab me and start beating on me. We had moved maybe ten times, you know, being kicked out of apartments for not paying rent because when I got paid he use to meet me at work and force me to turn over my paycheck. He would go over to New York, sometimes with me against my will, and he would go to these drug houses and I would be sitting there scared to death.

There was a time when my oldest son who had asthma had a real back attack at this birthday party. I told my husband that he needed to go to the hospital, even his friends were saying you should go but he would say “he’s alright, he’s tough”. I remember four or five times in the middle of the night I would carry my son in the rain to the hospital. These are all the things my kids now remember. I don’t know why my son didn’t think about these things before but he remembers now. You know what…my son’s last asthma attack he had was the week I left my husband. He hasn’t had one since then.

The basic challenge of being a provider and “good” mother was overridden with constant survival strategies. Often times for these women, good mothering means, at best, keeping their children off drugs, out of gangs, not pregnant, off the streets, a roof over their heads, and not hungry. We all would endorse these goals, but few realize just how difficult this can be for a single-parent who must do this on welfare or low-wage employment. The sub-theme of “having no other choice” in regards to applying for welfare was shared by the challenges just described however the decision to apply was accompanied by a sense of dissociation with the existing welfare population.
"I'm Not Like Them"

Six of the nine participants displayed a need to dissociate themselves from other recipients of welfare assistance. It was as if the only way these women could accept themselves as welfare recipients was to emotionally and intellectually separate themselves from others who were receiving assistance.

Dissociation itself is often associated with the concepts of depersonalization, repression and perhaps a sense of "emotional numbing". Is perhaps dissociation a type of psychological defense used by these women to cope with the overwhelming anxiety and emotional pain associated with having to go on welfare? I am not suggesting that a pathological dissociation is relevant to these women however a strong sense of wanting to be recognized as "different" was a relevant and consistent theme. The comments made by some women were often degrading and stereotypic and it was made clear that they were not to be associated with "these" people. This was noted in the following section of an interview with a participant who wanted to present her view of welfare recipients.

People get on (welfare) and they use it and they don't get off. It's like they say, "I don't want to do any better for myself". I just want to ride it to get that check every month, go down and harass their caseworkers just because they didn't get what they wanted or try to get another check. It's kind of negative. This just says that it's OK to go ahead and get pregnant and not have a man instead of people taking responsibility for their actions. They always say, "well, I just made a mistake" and "I'll just go on and do welfare"
instead of taking responsibility. Everything is out there, the IUD, the
diaphragm, the pill, condoms, which is more protection. I think a lot of people
just use welfare as a crutch. I’m just going to help myself and not going to be
anything.

Everything in life is stressful and people think that if they go to work for
eight hours a day they’re not going to make it or be able to watch their
soaps. It’s always an excuse. But I never really thought that way because
I always wanted to do better because of my mom. Seeing her struggle
without my father always made me just want to do better.

Another women echoed this message when she offered:

Um… the welfare system. I think the welfare system was designed initially
to help people stand or get on their feet but to some families it has been a
way of life, that’s it for them. Some people have perfected the “art” of being
on welfare. They know what to do, how to do, and when to do, you know, my
experience was not like that I knew nothing about the welfare system.

Most people are on the system because they need it but there are
those that just keep having babies and don’t want anything better. But some
people are really there because they can’t do better, like myself, but as soon as
they get an opportunity to get off, they get off. It’s a way of life for some. I
really think they have grown up on the system, I think, and it’s like they saw their
parents on the system and their parents so they don’t think it’s the idea thing to
get up in the morning, take a shower, drop your baby off at the day care, drive to
work, put in a full day, run to get the baby after work, come home and cook…
Instead they stay home and watch the television and you know what, if you don’t know better you’re not going to do any better. That’s what they say that’s how they lived and they are just doing what they know and their kids will do it until somebody stands in the gap and say, “I don’t want to live like this, this is not the ultimate thing to do I can do better”. But until some generation stops it, it will go on and on.

How are you going to ask the government for some money and you have the man sitting right beside you? Isn’t he strong? Can’t he get a job? Can’t you take that cellular phone money and buy something for your kids, at least a pack of diapers. But they don’t look at it that way. They have to stay in touch with Leroy and RayRay and all of them. I’m sitting in there and saying to myself, “what is wrong with these people?” But this is their way of life.

One woman described her interpretation of attitudes and demeanor regarding other women on the system, although she viewed herself as having been a professional in the workforce, she described the others as having “professional skills” only in the area of scheming and manipulation. This woman’s uncomfortable feelings were primarily impacted by her experiences in the waiting room of the welfare office more so than the idea of being on welfare itself. She described her feelings:

Welfare gives me the impression of the women that “milk the system”. Uh...that’s just some place they want to be. There’s no drive to get out and do better. The system is doing OK and this is where I’m going to stay. They have a “public assistance will pay my bills and why should
I have to work” attitude. I’m a worker. I want to get out and earn a decent paycheck. You can do so much better.

It was a little degrading sitting there and seeing other women who seem to have the attitude that welfare was it for them, they just didn’t care. This was their norm, their everyday thing. To come down there and wait and wait. You’re a number. I didn’t like that. Babies all over the place. People not taking care of their babies, you know, it was just not somewhere I wanted to be, I didn’t want to stay with that. Seeing the moms and their attitudes and their demeanor, I just didn’t want to be there. I always felt that I was a professional person and that’s what I wanted to be back in, the workforce.

There maybe some women there (welfare office) that are in the same situation that I was but that feeling in that room...I could go back and picture being in that room. There were women that just didn’t dress, you know, for two cents, it was just an uncomfortable feeling being in a room with a bunch of women like that, that just didn’t care how they looked, how the kids looked, how the kids acted...it just didn’t feel right to me.

Another participant felt the need to clarify that she was not attempting to place herself above others however she wanted to emphasize a difference in attitude and perception.

Now, I’m not trying to say I’m above anyone but I look at things a little differently. I would go down there (welfare) and I was not loud. I kept to myself. My children weren’t running all over the place but it was like a zoo in there. That is what frustrated me. To me it was a different mentality. The amount you get for the month is not a lot but some people
expect that you’re going to live a life of luxury on welfare, it’s not for that.

It’s just to better yourself and you’ve got to do what you’ve got to do.

The stigmatization associated with being on welfare and the fear of being labeled a “welfare queen” was a demoralizing and dehumanizing experience. This level of dependency (e.g. food, shelter, transportation, and healthcare) was emotionally and financially difficult for women and although autonomy and independence were highly valued they were often tested throughout these women’s experiences on the welfare system.

These women have demonstrated a type of psychological resiliency in the form of a mild dissociation which served as a valid coping mechanism. This dissociation, when utilized as a coping mechanism, allowed the participants to alter their identity and perception of the welfare environment. These participants continually expressed a need to separate themselves from others even though they are receiving the same assistance. The descriptions are not only expressed as “separate from” but imply a “better than” mentality. The three other women, who made no direct comments or inferences regarding their need to dissociate themselves with other women on welfare, may not have been emotionally impacted by the stereotypic image of welfare mothers or were unable to articulate this concern.

However, for some the need to be viewed differently was fueled by never wanting to be associated with the media portrayal of the “welfare mother”. This coping mechanism allowed the participants to focus their energies on more positive aspects of their lives, primarily self-improvement and professional development.
“The Pressure is On!”

There are a variety of stressors; emotional, financial and physical experienced by women due to sexist oppression however issues are compounded when that woman is under severe financial strain and forced to depend on the welfare system. Those interviewed often shared their times of frustration as being directly related to financial pressure. It was evident that those receiving welfare experienced a wide gap between what they could get and what they needed to support their families. These women described the routine of prioritizing their expenses, usually paying for housing and food before attempting to pay their other bills. However there is a continual monthly reminder that their income was “just not enough”. The pressure of this financial shortage often resulted in physical ailments. For example, headaches, increased blood pressure, or severe stomach pain as well as the emotional reactions of anxiety, fear, and anger. The descriptions of the physical impact of the stresses were described in the following scenarios. For example, one woman described it this way:

I took care of everything the best way I could. I was stressed out. My hair was falling out. I mean my hair in the middle of my head fell out and I didn’t know why but I know now that stress can do that. I just use to sit there and think how are we going to pay this bill, how are we going to pay that one but I was able to pull it through. It was the coming through that time that brought me to way I am today.

Another participant described her physical exhaustion this way:

I was a unit clerk with horrible hours. I worked from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. It took a toll on me because I was missing time with my children. When I
was coming in they were going to school. I was so tired and still had to help with homework and do dinner and it just took a big toll on me. After two years as the unit clerk I went to work at another place and I had normal hours. I could go to bed together the same as the kids. I didn’t realize how drained I really was in trying to do those 11 to 7 hours until I just couldn’t even play with the children by the time I got home. I was just too tired.

Another stimulus that created stress was the financial strain of making ends meet. Innovation and persistency were the skills often mastered to meet the daily financial strain on the families. There were several women who learned to “work” the system which meant acquiring other means of income in any capacity without the knowledge of the caseworker. However these means were usually unstable, low paying, and created a challenge regarding childcare (e.g. additional cost and receiving quality care). These additional jobs did not necessarily make for any great improvement in the family’s standard of living, however; they simply assured the family’s survival. One woman described this encounter:

I’m working, I’m not receiving any assistance for childcare, which I’m suppose to get, but they (welfare) say you make $71 too much and you don’t qualify for childcare assistance. You know, to me, I have no problem with giving food stamps, welfare checks to those that need it but childcare is something I was asking for because I pay $100 every week for the one baby. Now this week, everybody’s going to childcare because there is no school. So, I’m looking at $240 just for one week of childcare. I don’t know, I guess you just keep pushing.
Another woman felt a financial strain when her significant other had to stop working for the summer. She not only experienced the pressure of trying to make ends meet but she was disturbed by the anger she began to feel towards him. Although she recognized his assistance with the children as well as contributing to basic household duties it was the financial demands that took control. It is the mother’s need for a steady income that is most important and cannot be interrupted by a boyfriend’s erratic earnings.

The guy I was with was doing substitute teaching and once school was out that was it. I depended on my mother a lot, I was frustrated, I was upset and that was one time that I didn’t mind having a family first card but they told me I was making too much. That got me down. The bills started coming in and I was saying to myself, “How was I going to make it?” You know, you need one check just to go for rent but you still got to buy food, pay the bills, I don’t know, we did it, no, I did it, he didn’t do anything.

Another woman echoed this message when she offered:

I was living with my fiancée at the time. I wasn’t making a lot of money maybe about $10/hour which had to pay for rent and food and that’s when I began to really understand when the struggle came. But the real struggle came when I was the only one in the household that had an income. This is when reality hit my head and knocked me down. I think I was bringing home maybe $600 every two weeks and our rent was $600.

Another reaction to stress impacted the emotional well-being of the women interviewed. For some women their emotional stresses were related to their living
arrangements. There are several challenges related to inner city housing, doubling up with family members, or living in shelters. It often goes without saying that the shelter situations are usually unstable and unsafe. And although there were not many women that I interviewed living in high-rise projects, the quality of their public housing was questionable. Often times there were stories of broken elevators, no proper heating, unresponsive landlords, and lack of running water. Furthermore, staying with relatives and friends can often start off supportive but depending on the number of children in the house and your ability to contribute to the household expenses it can become uncomfortable and even cause dissention.

One participant described the tension she felt when her living arrangement resulted in her having to live with her mother. The primary challenge was that her mother demonstrated different approaches to child rearing that were unacceptable to her. She commented as follows:

There was a conflict with my mom because she wasn’t taking care of them (twins) the way I wanted them to be taken care of. I liked them to be spotless. I’d come back home and they would be all sloppy and stuff and I’d say, “Mom what are you doing?” She would just say, “Well they’re children”, “they are going to look like that” but I would think that she could at least wash their faces. So, I had to go to work, take care of twin daughters, take care of my mom also because my mom just flat out didn’t want to do anything.

So I had to come home and cook, go to the store after I came home, I had to wash and clean up the kids, the house, their room, make sure the
garbage was taken out because of the diapers which by the way we lived on the eighth floor and sometimes the elevator didn’t work. I was going through all that and at a point I had gotten tired. I had asked her (mother) to potty train them but she wouldn’t do it. Our personalities were in conflict especially around how we would care for the children. I wanted them to be potty trained so that they could go to day care but she wouldn’t help me so I had no other choice but to quit my job and stay home and make sure they were potty trained. That just hurt me to my heart.

For some the location of their living arrangements were stress producing primarily due to lack of a safe environment. One woman described feelings of anxiousness when arriving at her apartment because of the dangerous neighborhood in which she lived. She described her feelings:

Even though I was in my own place I didn’t have a good place to study. The area was bad. It was always noisy. People would be shooting, loud music as always playing, it was just bad.

I was really afraid. I wanted to move but I couldn’t afford the rent at other places. The place I was at was public housing, based on my income. I allowed my child to go out but I would just hope and pray that nothing would happen to us. I just believe that my grandmother’s prayers and other people’s made it safe.
One woman expressed feelings of panic when she discovered that her housing was about to be condemned. The threat of being homeless, again, was simply overwhelming.

A flood of emotions surfaced and were expressed this way:

Panic! Definitely panic. I just had my middle son. So I have an older son and I have a baby and I’m about to be homeless. What am I going to do with the kids? I had thought of everything. I had been homeless myself before I even had children. I went through a battered women shelter. so I had been through that and I know what it was like to not have a roof over your head. Not to have food, not to have clothes, not to have money and I refused to let my children go through that and I had gotten to the point to where I said if they don’t help me get a place then God forbid, I do what I’ll have to do.

For one woman there was a level of emotional stress primarily focusing on feelings of fear. She experienced a long history of being in an abusive relationship without any support from family members. However the lack of support was not because her family chose not to respond but because she was unable to talk about her circumstances (e.g. shame, fear, feeling trapped). This woman, like several, was about to experience an intensity of stresses compounded, (e.g. physical, financial and emotional). This was described in the following section of interview when she had just come home from the hospital after having just been diagnosed with Hepatitis.

It (Hepatitis contracted from husband who was involved in drugs) was really scary. I left him for a while. The only thing grandma knew was that things weren’t working out but then he came back around the
house; being friendly to the kids, taking them places but in the mean
time I was in my glory because I knew I was away from him. But I
kind of still cared for him and by him being good with the kids my mom
kept saying things like the children need their father, maybe he’s changed.
But on the one hand I could see the headlines now; “Estranged husband
kills wife”, these are the types of things I was saying to myself.

I ended up back with him and we stayed together for about three years.
I said well, maybe after the issue with the hepatitis he’ll try to change and
he sees I’m pregnant again, I’m always thinking he was going to change.
But he was just hiding things more from me. I was on maternity leave
for five or six months I didn’t have any income coming in and we got
kicked out of our apartment. He still wasn’t bringing money home.

And to make a long story short; we had to move back into the house with
his mother which by this time had all of his fourteen sisters and brothers
there as adults, on drugs, with their kids, all dependent on their mother.

There were repeated examples of the physical, emotional, and financial stresses
experienced by the participants. The circumstances were often out of their control
primarily impacted by financial limitations. Although there are a variety of stresses that
are common to people across the board, stressful incidences will always be compounded
when there are issues of violence, physical ailments, and serious material hardship.

The participants interviewed shared their challenges that encompassed physical
and emotional reactions. The next sub-theme entitled “making ends meet” will
demonstrated the participant's resourcefulness, persistency, and resilience "against all odds" as they continually found ways to "make ends meet".

"Making Ends Meet"

The phrase "making ends meet" is well known among the African American culture. It means a continual discovery of how to stretch existing resources to new lengths. Mastering the skill of "making ends meet" takes practice and innovative strategies that have been passed down from generations to generation. For example, these women shopped at discount stores, bought used clothing at thrift shops, and wore hand-me-downs from sisters and friends. Often times there was a minimum amount of food available at the end of the month however meals were created out of beans and rice, grits, hot dogs and baked beans or simply peanut butter and jelly. One woman described her daily routine as follows:

At 6:00 a.m. the family run begins. I run take my food stamps, finish my shopping in time to get the family transportation to get a ride home, go back to the dollar store to get the packs of pampers for the month, washcloths, soaps, everything. On the 3rd you have to plan everything you have to do for the month in hopes that you have money left over in case your child wants a toy or you may have a birthday coming up, you have to hope you have enough money to get a cake. Perhaps, you can get a $5 little truck or some blocks or a birthday card.

I was to take care of the bills. Especially the telephone bill, I had to have that because of my asthmatic child. After paying that I had about $65 left. So I would go to Goodwill and I'd get the little packs of socks, the little t-shirts,
you know, you get things that you know they need and if you’re lucky you’d have a couple of bucks leftover to get either a truck or car. A lot of times I didn’t go to the laundry mat because I didn’t have money. I would buy the detergent and I would wash the clothes out of the tub and hang them up to dry. I remember my mother doing that (pause) but, it makes you stronger if you want it to.

This participant demonstrates what Walsh (1998) refers to as “family resilience”. The term family resilience means “coping and adaptational processes in the family as a functional unit” (p. 14). This process enables the family to mediate stress, overcome crisis situations, and endure hardships over a long period of time. Each month, the participant described above, pursued a wide range of strategies aimed at filling the gap and providing for her family. The participants demonstrated skills of resilience not only in their mastery of financial planning, with minimal resources, but also in managing time. All had to invest at least some time in maintaining their welfare eligibility, which involved endless paperwork, keeping appointments with caseworkers, dealing with an inefficient Medicaid system, and keeping track of bills, pay stubs, and other proofs of eligibility. This required a constant accountability of each waking hour and spending dollar that they planned to utilize.

However despite their efforts, many welfare-reliant families experienced periods of considerable financial difficulty and regular episodes of material hardship (Edin & Lein, 1997). One woman shared the impact of financial problems that forced her to end school and challenged some basic needs regarding food. She described it this way:

I left college because of financial problems. When I say financial, I mean
just not have any money. I remember getting off the bus because I didn’t have enough money to get the transfer that would have allowed me to get off in front of the school, I just had to walk. There were times when I didn’t have money enough to buy lunches, you know, things were expensive in the school’s cafeteria. I remember picking up several bags of chips for twenty-five cents at the bus stop and that would be my lunch. Sometimes my walk home was quite a distance, I was just so tired.

Again, this demonstrates the use of survival strategies regardless of the physical or financial demands of this participant’s situation. Still another participant relayed:

There would be times that I would be doing double shifts just to make sure ends could meet. It was rough. It was rough and I don’t ever want to do that again. That struggle was not what you want to go through trying to make this last until the next check comes.

Many single-mother families are more resourceful than has been understood. All the woman interviewed confirmed that the welfare amount received was only able to cover a little over half their monthly budgetary demands. This caused a continual reliance on survival strategies that could generate additional money they need to bridge the gap between their income and expenditures. These strategies often included the “under the table” jobs and network-based contacts (e.g. family, friends, and boyfriends). The next section will address the importance of identifying and utilizing a support system that not only will provide financial assistance but also provide encouragement, spiritual growth, and role models of success. This type of network resourcefulness demonstrates family resilience.
The second identified theme describes the participant’s recognition of a variety of support systems that made their survival on welfare and transition off productive and successful. The following three sub-themes arose to describe this process; family support, parental responsibility, and spirituality.

“What Would I’ve Done Without Them?”

Survival on the system could only happen with outside support and assistance from immediate and extended family, friends, as well as spiritual connections with personal belief systems, organized groups (e.g. churches, neighborhood centers) and the motivation of parental responsibility. In addition, the women described the importance of utilizing diverse support systems because they knew that over-reliance on any one family member would often lead to issues of resentment and dissention.

However the participants were not naïve to know that often times the support given would involve obligations of return which would primarily include an investment of time and energy (e.g. babysitting, cleaning, cooking, etc.). In other words, contributions were given in love but not generally free. For example, one woman described it this way:

I had my first child when I was sixteen and I’ve never been ashamed because my mother was my strength and she was behind my 100%. But she also let me know that nobody was going to stay in her house without doing something. So I decided to go to school and I obviously couldn’t have done everything alone. My mother and father were very supportive and maybe I don’t know what a true struggle is, well, until I got out on my own. But at home I was well taken care of and I thank them. They were my backbone.
Family was continually cited as a support system and source of inspiration that emphasized a need to "keep moving forward". The family systems often adapted the ideology that each generation was to make it further than the present generation. Although this is not exclusive to the African American experience, it has been a historically significant motivator that has continually raised the standards of what is considered successful, particularly by the majority population. For instance, there often is a dual pressure, whether intentionally placed or not, on African American children who may be the first college graduate in that family. They are not only expected to make the family proud but they will embrace the need to represent their "people" in every academic accomplishment made. One participant responded the following way when asked about family support.

It was some years that we as a family were on welfare and I’d hear my mom always saying you don’t want to be like me. You don’t want to be in a position that you have to rely on this (welfare). You’ve got the brains and the ability to get out here and fend for yourself. So, it was just hearing that and believing that, and knowing that it must be true regardless of how dim it may have looked...she kept moving. She was always impressing upon up that we could do it. She constantly told me how good I am and that I don’t have to settle for less and life shouldn’t have to be that way because I had opportunities she did not.

Another woman commented about the impact of knowing her grandparent’s struggles that inspired her to move forward. She looked back in the family history to gain perspective and examples of resilience in the face of life challenges. Walsh (1998) stated
that “reconnecting with the strengths of our ancestors can be empowering as we realize the heroism, perseverance, and inventiveness that enabled them to endure and surmount adversity” (p. 284). This participant stated:

Overall, my grandparents have been the source that has kept me going. They didn’t have running water in the house. I remember going outside to use the bathroom. It was just amazing to me what they survived and if I could survive that as a child, there’s nothing that I can’t do. It’s really nothing that I can’t do. I tell my kids that there is nothing that you can’t do.

One woman simply stated, “Mother refused to let me not be determined.”

For six of the nine women interviewed, their grandmothers were the most prominent supporter and primary caretaker. The remaining three women briefly mentioned the presence of a grandmother, primarily a maternal grandmother; however she was not recognized as the primary caretaker.

African American grandmothers are often portrayed in literature as matriarchs, central stabilizing figures that hold a family together (Collins, 2000, Franklin, 1997, Hooks 1981). According to the 1997 Census Bureau’s report 5,435,000 children in the United States live with grandparents. One third of these children (1,811,667) do so without their own parents living with them. There are numerous reasons as to why grandparents are raising their grandchildren. For example, their own children are young and unmarried, they have returned back to the nest following failed marriages or relationships, they are in alcohol and/or drug treatment facilities, they are incarcerated, they have abandoned their children, or they have died suddenly in an accident or following a long illness.
Of the reasons listed above, abandonment, death of parent, substance abuse, and incarceration were the primary issues involved in the lives of the women interviewed resulting in their being raised by grandmother. These grandmothers not only provided parental guidance but played the role of advisory, comforter, and "prayer warrior", a term used within the African American church. For example, one woman described it this way:

I was raised by my grandmother down south. She had 12 kids of her own, she raised 6 grandchildren, and 4 great grands. My grandfather died when I was 5. First of all, she had me since I was 3 days old. I was left in the hospital when my mother had me. I don't know, maybe she decided she couldn't take care of me or she didn't want to take care of me, whatever, she left me in the hospital. Thank God my aunt worked in the hospital and she called my father, who was working up here at the time, and told him that they couldn't find his wife and the baby is left in the hospital. So my dad comes down to Virginia, and tells his mother and she was, like fine, give me my child and she's had me since I was three days old.

To see her get up every morning, and me getting up right along with her because I was the oldest grandchild, to make the fire in the stove, get the wood first, start up the fire so it would be warm by the time we all got up. To see her go into the kitchen and make biscuits, cook eggs, every morning, rain, shine, it didn't matter. This was her routine that she did for everybody. She raised her twelve and then the six grand kids and the four great grands, that's twenty-two kids that she clothed, fed, and raised. I say to myself, if she can do, I damn sure can do it!

Another participant echoed this message when she offered:
Family values were instilled at a young age. My mother died when I was ten years old and I was raised by my grandmother and aunts. They were very supportive. My grandmother was “thee” backbone of the family and she raised us in a Godly fashion in a Christian home and we dare not stray away. (laughed). I mean, grandmother understood that kids will be kids but grandma’s hand was always there.

Still another woman relayed:

She (grandmother) was trying to teach me about life when I was a kid. She taught me how to work. At a very young age she made a little thing for me to stand on so that I could watch her wash the dishes and watch her cook. I learned how to clean the house and take care of business. I use to go with her to the bank to pay bills and watch the transactions and she definitely made me go to church! I didn’t want that at a young age but now I look back and know it was for my own good. She always told me that I could have whatever I wanted as long as I was willing to work hard for it.

For one woman, grandma’s interventions were what allowed for her and her children’s basic survival.

My grandmother’s the type that brought the kids clothes maybe three times a year. She didn’t believe in toys on Christmas or birthdays, that’s how my children got their clothes. A lot of times the kids would not have anything to eat and I use to go down to grandma’s house on Sunday and eat dinner and she would always cook enough food for me to take home.
African Americans have always had diverse family forms (e.g. marriage, single-parent, extended family and church family) which have allowed for flexible relationships with the family unit and have provided a supportive social network. African and African American communities have recognized that depending on one person to have full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, other mothers need share mothering responsibilities which has been central to the institution of Black motherhood (Troester, 1984). Grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins act as other mothers by taking on child-care responsibilities for one another’s children. According to Collins (2000), African-American community norms traditionally were such that neighbors cared for one another’s children.

Family, whether kin or fictive kin, has not only been a significant mode of support but it can be viewed as a source of validation. These women have often continually collided with external devaluing messages in their interaction with the welfare system however family rejuvenates their sense of worth and validates their existence. The resiliency of family centered networks and their willingness to take part in the rearing of Black children illustrates how African-influence has continually reworked to help African-Americans cope with and resist oppression.

“Mom’s Motivator”

The demands and strains of parenting, especially as a single parent, have been discussed earlier when identifying stress factors. However, all of the women interviewed expressed the positive impact their role as a parent served in motivating them to move forward and not give up. Despite the obstacles and costs, motherhood remains a symbol of hope and is empowering to many African American women. It is postulated that
children often serve as the stimulus to discover strengths and foster a changed
definition of self. It was the children of these women that validated their self worth and
stimulated persistence to move forward regardless of the circumstances. For example,
one woman described it this way:

The days I said, "I couldn't do it" all I had to do was look at them and see
their faces and look at myself. I would just then say, "we've got to do this,
we can achieve this" because people talk and say, "Oh, you know you have
kids and that just ruins your life" and I say no! Having children doesn't
ruin your life. I don't care what age you have your children, if you're
mind is set to do something you will do it regardless. If you can't do it
nobody else can do it for your children. It was my two boys that kept me going.
There were times when I wouldn't think I could make it and I'd just sit and
look at my two boys and I reflect on them and I'd let them know they
were my strength. Actually without them I don't know if I would have
been so determined to keep moving forward but I want so much for them.

Another woman echoed the positive impact her child had on her especially when she
discovered being pregnant at an older age and that she had just recently been diagnosed
with a serious illness. She stated:

My baby! Probably if it were just me and my illness, I would have just given
up but my baby deserved better. I knew that this little person had nobody else
and I knew I had to do it, that was the bottom line. There were no if's or but's or
maybe's, I had to do it for her. I want to send her to the good schools. I want
to buy her the best things I can and I want her to go further than I did. She
kept me going. Just looking at her little face, she kept me going when I felt like giving up, she is the one that kept me going.

Still another participant relayed:

I just want to be able to provide the best for my children. I don’t want them to want things and that’s why I try to do my best. I want them to have nice things. I want them to be well taken care of.

One woman was particularly stimulated by the belief that each generation was to be better than the previous. She accepted the limitations her own mother faced but used that same stimulus to move forward.

I wanted to give my children something more. It was not that she (mother) didn’t try but she knew we weren’t happy living in the projects but that was all she could offer at the time. But with each generation everybody should do a little better, we had better opportunities than our previous generations.

My son and daughter were an inspiration. If they see me pushing forward and not just sitting on the system but trying to move forward, hopefully, it would encouraged them to move forward.

The role of motherhood among African American women is a respected position and it serves to mutually define self worth for both the parent and child. Ladner (1972) described how there is a link between adult status and motherhood particularly in low-income urban communities: “If there was one common standard for becoming a woman that was accepted by the majority of the people in the community, it was the time when girls gave birth to their first child. This line of demarcation was extremely clear and separated the girls from the women” (1972, p. 212).
Despite the obstacles and costs, motherhood remains a symbol of hope for many of even the poorest Black women (Collins, 2000). Lerner (1972) quotes one anonymous mother as to how she feels about her children:

To me, having a baby inside me is the only time I’m really alive. I know I can make something, do something, no matter what color my skin is, and what names people call me... You can see the little one grow and get larger and start doing things, and you feel there must be some hope, some chance that things will get better; because there it is, right before you, a real, live, growing baby... The baby is a good sign, or at least he’s some sign. If we didn’t have that, what would be the difference from death? (p. 314).

The survival strategies experienced throughout their years of child rearing are what also facilitate the transition from welfare to work. These women utilized a variety of support systems not only throughout their transition but also on a continual basis to provide support as a working woman.

“Always on Time”

The saying “always on time” is well known among the African American culture and is often cited after the phrase, “He may not be there when you want Him... but He’s always on time”. The “He” in this phrase is referring to God. This saying alludes to the idea that one may have to endure adverse circumstances, however, it is important to be patient until the change comes which simultaneously increases one’s level of faith. The underlining belief is that help is coming even if at the “twelfth hour”. This mode of thinking is usually associated within the Black church and often quoted in many sermons.
as a source of encouragement as well as confirmation that God works on His time and in control of every situation.

Religion and spirituality have held a central place in African American women’s coping repertoires. The black church itself was not only a resource providing assistance for basic needs (e.g. foods, clothes, and shelter) but often the source of, inspiration, confirmation and/or redefining of self-worth. The women interviewed recognized the influence of their belief system either presently or during their child rearing experiences. The level of intensity regarding their belief system ranged from a simple recognition of a higher power to a demonstration of daily prayer and weekly involvement in their local church. For example, one woman described it this way:

We have a strong spiritual family; I was raised in the church since a little girl. Not always in the church but church has been planted and there is a scripture that reads “Train up a child in the way that she will go and when they get older they will not depart”. They can stray away but at least the parents and the role of the grandmothers have planted that seed where the child can always reflect back to good times and bad times and how God has brought us through even the good times and the bad times. That has always stayed with me. My success is through prayer and ah…family support and the talents and the gifts that God has given me to make it through.

African American women use formal religious involvement and private devotional practices (e.g. prayer) to cope with diverse adversities and at times, mere survival. One woman explained it this way:
You know, I have God in my life and with Him all things are possible. I could do all things through Christ who strengthens me. I truly believe he played an important role in me sitting here today talking to you. I truly believe that God was there when I had my baby, she has never gone hungry even before I got on the system. I knew I couldn’t depend on my parents so there had to be another way but she has never gone hungry and I have to bless God for that.

Still another relayed:

You have to know that He’s (God) there for you. You have to stand on your faith and know that God brought you through. He’ll walk with you every step of the way. That’s how I see it.

One woman simply said, “The only thing that kept me going was my faith.”

The continuing significance of religion and church involvement is evident in the lives of the participants and constitutes a coping resource for handling stressful live events. Seven of the nine participants recognized prayer as a coping strategy in a variety of situations. Jackson (1991) stated that prayer can be an attempt to gain direct intervention in a problem, or alternatively, it may be used to alter one’s perspective on the situation (e.g. an acceptance of God’s will). One participant stated, “My total success is through prayer”.

There were other areas mentioned by the women interviewed that demonstrated the influence of their spiritual belief system. One woman reflected on her challenges as a single parent and how she sought God’s direction regarding her ability to survive in
addition to her search for a healthy future relationship. Often times there was a sense of “spiritual surrendering” when one was unsure of how to cope or if one was uncertain that their choices were in line with what God would have wanted them to do. This aspect of “surrendering” actually allowed the woman to confront their limitations and/or take ownership to past decision making that did not produce the best results. For example, one woman described it this way:

I remember saying, Lord if it’s meant for me to be single just give me the strength to raise my kids and to remain single. You know, not just get into a relationship for sex or just to be in it. That’s what happen with this one (pointing to the baby). I had been without someone for quite a while and I just think I was vulnerable. I didn’t want to do that anymore. I wanted to stop looking and wait for God to send me someone.

Spirituality itself takes on many forms and belief systems. One particular woman told a story of the impact of her grandfather’s culture and spiritual beliefs as a Cherokee Native American. The woman was suffering from a physically abusive relationship for about two years and had reached a point of realizing that she could no longer take the abuse. The boyfriend had a history of drug addiction, which was often the catalyst to the violent interactions. This woman described her feelings of abandonment by family members because of their disagreement of her ever being involved with this man. She expressed intense feelings of entrapment to the point of seeing no other option but to kill the boyfriend. The woman remembered the last time she allowed him to beat her and she
calmly told him, "don't go to sleep." A flood of emotions surfaced and accompanied her sharing the details of that life changing moment.

I went downstairs and got a butcher knife and came back upstairs. He was out of it. When drug users use, they sleep like dead weight. You could kick them out of the bed and they wouldn't wake up. So, he was lying on his back and I got on top of him and just sat on his chest. I had the knife right at his throat but I say it was the grace of God and my grandfather's memory that keep me from killing him. I looked up and saw my grandfather. I don't know if you believe in spirits that watch over you and protect you but the image of my grandfather was standing there shaking his head back and forth.

My grandfather was Cherokee Indian. He was full Cherokee. He use to tell me that when you pass, your spirit will fly away on an eagle and it will watch over your love ones. I learned a lot about the Indian culture. Anyway, I saw him standing there shaking his head and a tear came out his eye. When that happened, I just got up and went downstairs. I told his (boyfriend) mother that I was leaving. I don't know where, but I'm leaving. I walked out of that house in a pair of shorts and a T-shirt.

Historically, Africans and African Americans have often been described as a spiritual people (Collins, 2000, Hooks, 1981, Pennewell, 1996). The belief and impact of a higher power (e.g. God or Allah), organizational systems (e.g. church or mosque), and
ancestral influences (e.g. generational spirits) was continually recognized throughout
the interviews. Religious beliefs of faith and hope impacted the participant’s perception
of personal control and efficacy. If circumstances were viewed as in their control, the
participants would “take care of business” but if circumstances were out of their control
such as, negative caseworkers or unsafe living environments, the belief that “God was in
control” allowed the participants to mentally and spiritually remain balanced and
functional.

The spiritual beliefs shared often included the use of prayer, which, as one
woman stated, demonstrated a sense of “trust in God’s faithfulness”. Current and
childhood religious affiliation has demonstrated a development of resilient behavior to
cope with crisis and stress producing situations. Jackson (1991) stated that the Black
religion and religious institutions traditionally have “provided an emotional and
psychological haven from a harsh and discriminatory social system “ (p. 121).

Five of the nine participants talked about their active roles within their community
church which complemented a definition of self-worth and importance. Participants had
roles as youth director, ushers, missionary board members, and choir member, which
allowed them to create their own self-definition and clearly reject a socially defined role
as only a “welfare mother”. Congruence between religious and spiritual beliefs and
practices yields a general sense of well-being and wholeness (Walsh, 1998). Overall this
allowed for a sense of hope, resilience, and relief from issues of oppression and
discouragement.

The third identified primary theme will describe the specifics associated with the
transitional processes the women experienced on and off the system that impacted their
level of motivation and self-confidence. The following three sub-themes will describe this process and are entitled: (a) It’s Time For Change, (b) All I Need Is A Chance, and (c) Free At Last.

“It’s Time For Change”

It is not usual for individuals who are faced with the challenge of change and/or transition to be influenced by a defining moment(s). The level of influence can range from merely wanting to provide a better life for you and your children, to needing to stay alive for your children. Six of the nine women talked about “defining moments” in their lives that they distinctly remembered and often displayed emotional reactions when talking about it. The remaining three women’s decision towards change was a combination of events throughout their life experiences that resulted in a catalyst to change personal behaviors, relationships, and/or circumstances. One woman explained it this way:

I must have stayed on welfare for about three years and one day just sitting home I said to myself, “I can’t live like this, I’m tired of this, I have to do something different.” It was than that I decided to get off the system and get a job. I went back to work but I just got tired of coming back to a place where there was no heat, dead wintertime, no lights, and no hot water. The only food was what I would bring home to feed my kids and several grands.

Then my baby, who was only about five months old, got sick and couldn’t breathe. My daughter was watching him during the summer time and she called me and said that little Jim is sick. At that time my husband worked across the airport from me and I called him to say I need you to take
me to the house because Jim is sick and his response was, “I don’t feel like it, take the bus.” These things were a trigger to me to say I’ve got to get away. A friend of mine saw me crying and he took me home and to the hospital. About two months later the same situation almost happened because it was so cold in the house. You know when you can see smoke blowing out of my mouth, that’s what it was like. I got my baby wrapped in several sets of clothes and my daughter is saying “Mommy I’m cold, I’m cold, and I’m hungry. There are no lights, no hot water, and no heat. I just said to myself, “I’m not going to let my kids be raised like this, especially not my baby!”

At this time I’m starting to get bold and what stopped the beatings was that one night he (husband) came home and wanted to start hitting me and something just snapped in me. I took a crystal lead ashtray and hit him with it, I was going crazy with it, and he said, “what’s the matter with you?” I said, “never put your hands on me again.” From that day forth, he never put his hands on me again. He finally respected me.

This participant had reached a point in life that she knew a change had to occur. Both she and her children were in danger of basic survival and she had to come to terms with difficult and painful aspects of a relationship. The participant had to turn to her own efforts and sense of self-worth to make the decision to end the abusive relationship.

Walsh (1998) stated that crisis events usually require a family to reorganize. This participant identified her right to not be abused and used it as a stimulus for change. Her family was “reorganized” beginning with leaving the household and filing for divorce.
Another woman commented on suffering from a history of domestic violence and financial strains that ultimately led to the decision to change her life and attempt to provide a better living environment for her children. She described it as follows:

One day I just came home from work and sat there. I was afraid of him, my husband, because whatever he said do, I did. If he said don’t go this place, I didn’t go. One thing is that he was upset that I was working and I was growing. He was afraid of that. One time when the baby was sick again he asked me what was the matter and I told him I was going to stay over my mommy’s house until we could get something to eat. That day I packed four bags, garbage bags, one of each for my kids and myself, got a cab, went to my mother’s house and never came back again.

One woman’s pivotal moment was directly related to when she became employed. She not only expressed a sense of accomplishment but more so one of release and freedom.

The day I was hired I knew I was not going back. The day I was hired, it closed that door for me. I know there was supposed to be a close out period regarding the transition from off the system, you know, paperwork, etc. but as far as I was concerned, the day I was hired, it (welfare) was over for me.

Despite the financial challenges her entry-level job presented the participant reported a greater sense of self-esteem while working. The participant’s perseverance to pursue employment, in the face of overwhelming circumstances, is a key element in resilience. A level of strong determination and tenacity was a consistent quality of this
participant’s perception of what could be. Endurance and survival was a source of pride for this participant’s family as she continually referred to “not wanting to be an embarrassment”. This participant was the first in her family that required welfare assistance and she utilized that fact to initiate removal from the system as soon as possible.

Another woman expressed a sense of independence when she made the decision to move out on her own and gain control of her life. This decision was particularly difficult because it initiated feelings of guilt and issues of abandonment involving her mother. She described her feelings this way:

We (mother and I) went to apply for an apartment and she thought we were getting an apartment together but I said, “No, I’m getting my own apartment.” She was stunned but it was a breath of fresh air. I guess she thought I was going to be with her for the duration of my life. But I always wanted more. I don’t want to stay in the same situation. I always wanted to keep doing something new. That was one thing that she just couldn’t understand.

African American women may appear insignificant in “society’s pecking order” of importance but we represent a potent power for change. The ability to change comes in identifying modes of oppression that can only be overcome by persistency and resilience. The fight against oppression must not stop at simply obtaining basic human rights but also embrace the right to not only survive but succeed.

One learns that there is always a choice, often stimulated by hope, to push towards change no matter how bleak the situation. One also recognizes the role individual
responsibility plays in bringing about change. Almost all of the women stated that past
decisions and circumstances could not be changed but the lessons learned were
invaluable. However, it was the accumulation of lessons, mastered for the final time that
stimulated the process of change. Successful transitional change involved these women
being empowered with thoughts of freedom and embracing the idea that they have a right
to a better live. Several of these women have taken the initiative to stop the negative
generational cycle by being the change agent in their families and communities. One
primary initiative was to become as well prepared for employment as possible. The next
sub-theme will discuss the variety of training, education, and job placement opportunities
pursued by the women in the study.

“All I Need Is A Chance”

The passage of the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act
(PRWORA) in 1996 has significantly altered the role of welfare in the area of providing
training and educational programs. Welfare reform now limits the time that welfare
recipients can stay on the system, and puts strong pressures on them to find employment.
The primary purpose of the training programs is to assist and accelerate the participant’s
entry into the labor market. Poor women on welfare were often required to take any
available job which usually offered extremely limited options for training, continuing
education, or benefits. Training itself could range from one to several months resulting in
interviews and/or job placement.

All the women interviewed took advantage of some form of training and/or
continual education program while receiving welfare. Most of these programs included
what was called “life skills training” to assist in the transition into the workplace.
Although this was a component of the “welfare-to-work” program, the participants continually expressed their desires to “better themselves” and “their situation” as soon as possible whether welfare provided the means or not. Four of the nine women interviewed had previous work experience before having to apply to welfare, and three of those four, were the first in their families to ever have to apply. The impact of their first time experience was discussed earlier but its overall influence is important enough to briefly mention a second time. These three “first timers” expressed their experiences with such phrases as, “I’ve never felt so ashamed”, “It was the most demeaning thing I’ve ever had to do”, “I felt like I disgraced my family name” and “I was a failure”. These powerful negative thought patterns could have been detrimental to any attempt at self-improvement however all of these women articulated their need to recognize those thoughts as “temporary” and used them instead as a motivating force to improve their situation. The emphasis on welfare assistance being temporary is a coping mechanism. Welfare was viewed as a means to an end and not the actual end itself.

The training and education the women received for job placement and career development ranged from several week job search programs to completed associate and baccalaureate degrees. The placement into specific programs was dependent on a variety of criteria. For example, one participant went to a five-week training program simply because her caseworker was directed that that was the only program to recommend. Regardless of the participant’s interest or background she was referred to a five-week program with the threat of sanctions if she did not cooperate. The participant simply stated, “What are you going to do?” “I have no choice”. One woman briefly described a basic skills job training program as follows:
When I first got on (welfare) they put you in a job training class where they show you how to do a resume. I got a little experience on the computer.

When I went to these kinds of classes they taught you how to dress for an interview. They even gave me a list of questions you could ask and questions they would ask you, with the proper kind of responses to give. Sometimes you have to learn to crawl before you can walk. These were the basics but good.

Unfortunately this participant was only introduced to job placement skills (e.g. interviewing and resume writing) and not the development of employable skills to be hired. The participant was continually referred to several other short-term “job preparation” type programs until finally entering a skills based program with a history of employment of its graduates. The participant was trained in basic computer skills, word processing, and secretarial skills. She stated her relief as follows:

The day I was hired I knew I was not going back. The day I was hired, it closed the door for me. I know that there was a type of “close out period” to go through as a transition of someone getting off the system but as far as I was concerned, the day I was hired, it was over for me!

However, there were five women who received monthly job training, three of which had one-year college experience, and four women ultimately completed college degrees at the Associate and Bachelor levels. The choices of training and education were dependent on a variety of factors; the type of relationship with their caseworkers, helpful or harmful, the academic history and preparation of each participant, the support system of the extended or immediate family, and level of tenacity.
Another woman commented on the type of program she was allowed to pursue and its success. She not only recognized the content of the program as applicable but made reference to the supportive staff that motivated and served as an extended resource even after job placement. She explained it this way:

The program I was enrolled in specialized in computers and you received college credits after you finished. You took computer courses, a course in public speaking, English, it was a great program. The people there pushed you along even when you felt like giving up. They would say that you’ve got to get your skills and get out there and market yourself. They teach you a lot of things. Everything that the job market is looking for was the stuff that they gave you. They had recruiters and employers and people from all over many states. They would come and tell you what they wanted.

The successful completion of this program allowed the participant to experience an internship which resulted in a job offering. The participant is presently an administrative assistant for a psychiatric hospital which she claims to fully enjoy and most importantly, she feels “a mutual respect among the staff”. The support staff of the training program was very helpful and encouraging. The participant described how her self-confidence was able to be “rebuilt” by the continual “push” of the staff.

I remember going through the system and crying every time I was there and being frustrated with the caseworker and being sent to another that frustrated you. My self-esteem got really, really low. It was like I had none.
But, I remember when I started school I began to feel good about myself. As it got near to the end I got my skills back. My verbal skills, my interviewing skills and I was looking forward to going back into the work world. I was so happy.

Another woman commented about the success of her training experiences coupled with the childcare provision and financial assistance. She stated:

The skills that I had and some of the skills I acquired at the business school were something that pushed me. I knew I was marketable but it was difficult having to maintain family and get out to pave the streets looking for a job. So...welfare let me do this by providing my basic needs and paying someone to watch the baby so I could get out to get the job. I was employed after several months but I must admit it would have been next to impossible without the training and childcare.

College brings the same advantages to welfare recipients as it does to anyone else’s financial security, stability and mobility. Despite enormous odds and institutional barriers, four women finished postsecondary education and were able to get jobs providing adequate earnings. The college experience of the mothers not only prepared them for employment but was said to provide an example to their children regarding the importance of advanced education. The goal was to not only be employed but to raise their children’s desires and aspirations for college. For example, one woman described it this way:

That four years, I saw my daughter in the morning when I dropped her off to the babysitter than I picked her up at night and she was sleep. It was a
big step but in the long run it paid off. You want your children to go
to school. You want them to get every possible educational advantage
they can. If you’re working at McDonalds you can’t impress upon them
the importance of education, especially if you’re complacent with
McDonalds.

The women interviewed did not want to convey a sense of normalcy to their
children regarding the acceptance of government handouts. Taking advantage of the
opportunity for improvement and freedom from welfare was consistent with the women
interviewed; however the opportunity for “a successful chance” must include continual
support in order to allow for stability to take place. There must be child care services,
transportation access, and healthcare coverage while assisting individuals to find quality
starting jobs. According to Edin and Lein (1997) former welfare mother’s ability to
continue working consistently overtime is directly linked to the quality of the job and
whether she received such needed assistance as childcare to support her family. For
example, one woman described it this way:

I didn’t want just any job that would allow me to still be struggling.

I wanted something to work for me and I could make a decent living.

I can say that I have a degree and I deserve more. You’re not going to
just pay me $5 an hour. I wanted to make a decent amount so that I
wouldn’t have to go back to welfare.

Employment not only has an impact on helping financial demands but it serves to
re-build self-confidence and stimulates a permission to dream about a future. One woman
stated it best when she said, “After I became employed and learned that there was another
world out here, my confidence level built and I was not going to let anybody take advantage of me. I feel just as equal to anybody else.”

The idea of welfare-to-work has been a central tenet of welfare reform. This structure has influenced a change in the culture of the system which no longer allows for a cyclical dependence but rather an opportunity for personal responsibility and growth.

“Free At Last”

The realization of being “off the system” was often associated with a sense of release or freedom. The release was not easy but quite often the driving force and motivation to do whatever necessary to reach the goal of independence. Ironically, this independence was not necessarily financial because of the low wage jobs available but a sense of independence was obtained that freed one’s ability to make choices and re-established a sense of self-worth. One woman described it best when she said;

When I got a letter saying you are officially off of welfare… I took it home and showed my sister and said look, “I’m off of welfare!” I put it in a paper saver thing just to keep looking at it and reminding me that I’m off of welfare. I actually celebrated. I felt like I had a whole new life, especially when I started working. It was a new beginning.

Once employed there were several adjustments to be made which included meeting the demands of work-related expenses, (e.g. travel costs, day care, rent, health care, and clothing). There were both risks and rewards associated with this new found “freedom” stimulated by employment. Some women were initially employed in low wage positions which were extremely difficult and unstable. Every dollar they earned
meant a decrease in food stamps and housing subsidies; every wage income threatened their Medicaid eligibility. One woman explained it this way:

I remember as soon as I got my paycheck we were to fax a copy to them. Actually you were to fax your first four paychecks, but honey, they didn’t even wait until I faxed that information, I found that they had already cut me off. They said I was making too much. They cut me off and said I could not get help with childcare anymore. They didn’t even ask me if it was a permanent position. They didn’t care, that’s not their priority.

These circumstances did not create any great improvement in their family’s standard of living but more so simply assured the family’s survival. Some women often talked about being “teased” with the “taste” of freedom but on several occasions their efforts to attain self-sufficiency through work resulted in a need to return to welfare due to lay offs and lack of job security. However, three women were able to enjoy some special circumstances that made work affordable for their families: low rent housing, no need for child care services and full family medical benefits.

Overall, despite the trials and challenges of employment all the women reported a greater sense of self-esteem while working. The ideal of being part of the workforce and not a recipient of the workforce’s tax dollars and the ability to receive a paycheck instead of a welfare check, were well worth any sacrifices or lifestyle adjustments. For example, one woman described it this way:

As soon as I got my first paycheck....it felt good. I felt so....I just can’t explain. I hadn’t felt that way in such a long time. That paycheck went such a long way. You don’t have to wait a whole month to receive some
meager little money but I did it then because I couldn’t do any better at the
time. But now I didn’t have to wait a whole month to get that $161. That’s
right $161 with which you had to buy diapers and everything else that had
to last you a month. I just can’t explain it to you. I actually started at this
job before my training courses ended. They were so nice and allowed me
to come in on Saturdays and make up any work I needed because I really
wanted to start work.

The sense of freedom expressed by these women was not only regarding never
having to receive a welfare check but it was a release from an entire oppressive system. It
was a release from the demeaning comments of certain caseworkers, a release from the
title of “welfare queen”, a release from the forced housing locations, a release from the
embarrassment of exhibiting food stamps in the local marking, and a release from a sense
of failure as a woman.

Conclusion

The participants interviewed achieved emotional and financial “release” from the
welfare system at various times, levels of release, and demonstration of personal growth.
These resilient women went about the task of daily survival with minimum assistance,
being able to recover their self-esteem when often challenged, and providing a positive
role model for their children. In many cases these participants had to live with
uncertainty. For example, whether or not rent would be paid on time, which if not, could
lead them to living in shelters, was often a monthly uncertainty. For some, the safety
survival of their children in violent neighborhoods was a daily uncertainty.
Stability, however, was often experienced through the support of extended family members and continual spiritual development. Although there were instances where stability was not strong it allowed the participant to adapt to change, rebound from crisis, and develop resilient behavior.

In addition, all the participants simultaneously confronted a social and governmental environment that frequently was not supportive of them as African American women. The complexity of their lives that included race, class, and gender had to be acknowledged and negotiated within the framework of release from the welfare system. These women have often collided with external devaluing messages in their interaction with the welfare system however family systems rejuvenates their sense of worth and validates their existence. Walsh (1998) stated that “learning from adversity, most resilient families believe that their trials have made them more than what they would have been otherwise” (p. 76).

Chapter Five

Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to enhance understanding of how African American women successfully move beyond welfare to work and maintain resiliency in the face of continual adversity and oppression. This study was designed to explore and tell the stories of African American women’s experiences of resilience in the transition phase and was initially propelled by concerns of the impact of welfare reform. It was discovered that resilient behavior is exhibited and developed not in the avoidance of stress but rather
in encountering and confronting stress in a way that allows for self-confidence, perseverance, and growth to take place.

Chapter three provided a detailed description of the methodology used for collection and analysis of the data. However, I will briefly review some key components of that process. The methodology of research design was directed by an ethnographic approach which searched for themes and patterns of behavior of a particular culture, in this study being African American women. This approach was combined with a Black feminist perspective that allowed for the examination of hidden agendas, power imbalances and assumptions that could inhibit African American women. Taylor (1998) confirms the usage of an ethnographic approach because it allows one to “discover the cultural knowledge that African American women use to organize their behavior, interpret their experience and to promote emancipation” (p. 157).

A range of six to ten informant interviews was recommended as a range in which saturation (e.g. recurring themes and patterns) of the data occurs (Morse, 1994). Sandelowski (1995) emphasized that “while the sample is statistically non-representative, it is informationally representative in that data will be obtained from persons who can stand for other persons with similar characteristics” (p. 18). Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997) suggest the use between eight to fifteen participants, and derived from their assertion that using a larger sample is “unrealistic because of the time involved in examining each case and because additional cases typically add minimal new data” (p. 532).

I proposed the inclusion of nine women interviewed in this study. The participants were interviewed at various locations; four interviewed at the researcher’s office, three at
the participant’s homes, one at the participant’s place of employment, and one by telephone.

Continuing in this chapter are a few key components of dialogue and interpretations of the participant’s stories. These stories are discussed through a process that connects their lives to existing theoretical frameworks on resilience. The women’s voices are carried over to this section to further support the link between theory and their experiences.

The specific themes: (1) Describe the process of resilience in a group of African American women who were on welfare and are now successfully employed; (2) Describe the multiple dynamics of the welfare system; (3) Identify the components and strengths of a diverse support systems; and (4) Describe the process of independence from the welfare system. Recommendations for future research are discussed in addition to implementation of future welfare to work programs.

Resilience

Resilience involves “struggling well”: experiencing both suffering and courage, effectively working through difficulties both internally and interpersonally (Higgins, 1994). Walsh (1998) states that “resilience can be defined as the capacity to rebound from adversity, strengthened and more resourceful” (p. 4). Descriptors of the process of resilience were represented in the interviews and results of this study support previous qualitative research on the process of resilience (Block & Kremen, 1996; Loprest, 1999; Masten, et. al., 1990; Rutter, 1987;). Although the African American participants did not use the language or term “resilient”, they very often described themselves as “determined”, “powerful”, and “strong”. These strong women were creative, flexible,
and resourceful in the face of adversity. These characteristics were needed to overcome life’s challenges. The ability to be, and remain, strong was a recurring quality linked to resilience for African American women (Taylor, 1998).

Although the term “strong” can be used in a pejorative way when describing a stereotypic view of all African American women, several of the participants described themselves and other African American women as “strong”. They envision themselves as strong, independent and a continuing force. Their views were firm in the belief that they could assert themselves from the spiritual powers within. There was also a belief in the intergenerational transmission of “strength”. In speaking about her source of strength, the following participant said:

My grandmother was ‘thee’ backbone of the family and she raised us in a Godly fashion in a Christian home. The family upbringing was very strong. It is made up of mostly women. They are strong women in my family and I know the trend will follow.

The women in the study used a variety of support mechanisms including, family, friends, community services, and church-based organizations. The restoration and promotion of self-esteem was most noticeable in the participant’s efforts to transform the self through returning to school, vocational training, and adopting the view that their involvement with welfare was temporary. For several women, increasing self-esteem was closely linked to the process of redefining themselves and their purpose in life. One woman stated:

After I became employed and learned that there was another world out here, my confidence built and I was not going to let
anybody take advantage of me. I feel just as equal to anybody else.

This also demonstrates a sense of self-empowerment and a successful completion of training resulting in employment. Another woman voiced an understanding that difficult times were mixed with the good times as she worked toward leaving welfare.

I have some ups and downs but I guess I'd always considered myself to have a good self esteem based on how my grandmother brought me up based on how she let me know what I was capable of doing.

I don't believe anything is impossible.

Increasing self-esteem was closely linked to a sense of personal-empowerment. Empowerment was associated with a sense of pride, completion and fulfillment that women felt through individual accomplishments. Becoming personally empowered through self-knowledge, is essential. Women learn to exceed former boundaries as a direct result of knowing where they lie (Collins, 2000). The participants have learned to construct a meaningful life even in the midst of chaos and unknown future, armed with resilience and intellect.

According to Collins (2000) no matter how oppressed an individual woman may be, the power to save the self lies within the self. Collins (2000) continues to state that “other Black women may assist a Black woman in this journey toward personal empowerment, but the ultimate responsibility for self-definitions and self-evaluations lies within the individual woman herself” (p. 119). One participant describes her feelings this way, “I didn’t really look at the negative too much even though it was all around me, I always thought that things were just going to get better. I have my own goals.” Another stated, “the motivation was myself. I kept pushing myself. I didn’t have anyone
motivating me and saying “you can do it”, it was just me. I pushed myself.” Finally, still another participant relayed: “Even if you try to do things you’re going to get rejection in your face but don’t let that disappoint you because you can still always succeed.”

The feelings of empowerment allowed the participants to take action whether on behalf of themselves or others. This stimulated an increase sense of knowledge of self and others resulting in a greater sense of self-worth and validation (Miller, 1988).

Resilience was demonstrated by the women’s ability to achieve positive outcomes in spite of extreme difficulties. The participants have learned to use the hardships they endured to become their source of strength. Resilience is not fostered by simply looking at “the sunny side” without recognizing the painful realities; however relentless hope is maintained regardless of the circumstance.

Strategies of Resilience for the Survival of Oppression

*Slavery or Welfare: Just a Different Master*

Cross (2003) stated that Blacks exited slavery with the “necessary social capital, inclusive of proactive family attitudes and patterns as well as high achievement motivation, for rapid acculturation into mainstream America” (p. 67). There were active, conscious, and organized attempts to revive and sustain selected aspects of their culture regardless of the overwhelming stresses from the oppressive culture. Akbar (1984) stated that the “survival of the fundamental human initiative among African Americans, despite over 300 years of the most inhuman conditions ever experienced by any people in the current historical epoch, is indicative of human resilience” (p. 34)
African survival of customs and traditions suggest a pronounced resiliency in the African institutions which has transcended to the continual survival of African American woman, particularly those who happen to receive welfare assistance. It is possible to make comparisons between the ways African American women coped with oppression during slavery and while in the welfare system.

For example, during slavery, one survival mechanism was the possession of what one might call a dual personality. Some of the slave's actions were superficial for the purpose of misleading the owner regarding the slave's true feelings. This often allowed for an escape of punishment or increased workload. Today, women on welfare quickly learned how to give the caseworker the response she wanted in order to keep her relationships intact or perhaps her "secret" job needed for survival purposes. In addition to a type of dual personality, is the mechanism of a dual consciousness relevant to women during slavery and African-American women, which requires them to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor. Collins (2000) states that Black women not only become familiar with the manners of the oppressor but at times "adopt them for some illusion of protection while hiding a self-defined standpoint from the prying eyes of dominant groups" (p. 97).

Gwaltney (1980) quotes an elderly Black domestic woman as stating, "We have always been the best actors in the world...I think that we are much more clever than they are because we know that we have to play the game. We've always had to live two lives— one for them and one for ourselves" (p. 238).

Silence was also used as a strategic survival mechanism and is not to be interpreted as submission to the oppressor. The African American women's
consciousness, the “inside” ideas allow “Black women to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, gender and sexuality” (Collins, 2000, p. 98). For example, during slavery, timing of any form of verbal response was crucial. On many occasions it was simply wise to remain silent even if there was a well justified rebuttal deserved to be given to a master that was issuing words of degradation or plans for selling your children or yourself (Akbar, 1984). The consequences of any verbal response had to be quickly processed and weighed of its cost.

Similar is the decision of verbal responses between the caseworker and welfare recipients. For example, if a caseworker made inference to a welfare recipient that she was “simply lazy” and “didn’t want to work” it was best not to mention that she had three “under the table” jobs going on in order to make ends meet. Silence, directed by experience and wisdom, becomes a crucial survival mechanism. Simply put, as any oppressed group eventually learns, one must “choose your battles wisely.”

There are several other components of the welfare system that have often been compared to the system of slavery. For example, the decomposing of the family unit, the emotional castration the Black male, and the threats of children being taking away from the family are some of the similarities (Collins, 2000; Fox-Genovese, 1988; Morton, 1991).

Both systems demonstrated the master’s (e.g. white male slave owner or the politicians) obsessive desire to assert his power over women by constantly threatening some form of pain be it emotional or physical. During slavery black women had to live with the constant threat and/or act of rape or sexual assault if they did not comply with the master’s rules. And although women on welfare were not under the threat of being
physically assaulted, there was a very prevalent threat of being hungry and without shelter if they did not “obey the rules”. These rules often included denial of marital status or any form of male companionship, denying additional means of income without which they could not make ends meet, and forced to disclose any aspect of their life, private or public, upon command.

Two women viewed the system of welfare as having several similar characteristics to the system of slavery. The demeaning experiences of slavery began with “stages of indoctrination” to mentally and physically transform African free human beings into slaves. The overall goal in creating a subservient population is to repress their awareness of themselves as being free beings. The process of becoming a welfare recipient often times implemented a type of subservient indoctrination. This began with depleting recipient’s rights to decision making in the areas of housing, food, health care, number of children allowed, romantic relationships, and the ability to sense any form of autonomy. Enslaved black women were de-humanized and oppressed and could not look to any group of men, black or white, to protect them against sexual exploitation. The system of slavery forced black women to “surrender any prior dependence on the male figure and obliged them to struggle for their individual survival” (Hooks, 1981, p.82). Historically, the black woman was penalized in the welfare system if she attempted to maintain a relationship with a man or accept his assistance in any form.

The interaction within the welfare system had a tendency to make some feel less than human. The recipient’s rights, choices, or decisions were not considered important or in some cases, allowed. The welfare system was characterized as ‘massah’ and the recipient was to be grateful for anything they received. Once the decision was made to
apply for welfare it was accompanied by the unspoken rules that your life is no longer your own. One woman described it this way:

To me, welfare makes you feel almost like a slave in the system. You have to do what they say, when they say it, and how they say it. Otherwise you get nothing. To me it was like being a slave to welfare.

Another woman described welfare’s sense of control this way:

It’s (welfare) controlling if you allow it. It assists you because it can make you strong. If you can survive the welfare system you can survive anything. But it’s controlling also because it only lets you go so far and if you take two steps forward, it tries to pull you back one.

Introducing Africans to the New World as slaves and African Americans to the system of welfare as dependent recipients can be viewed as a “pressured” acculturation process with little control. Whether acculturation takes places often depends on the relationship between the culture that is receiving new traits and their culture of origin. However, if one society is dominant in the culture and they perceive their own culture as being superior, it is not likely that there would be a mutual acculturation process. This was the case with the dominant population of the New World. The African population and culture was viewed as not only different but inferior. Upon arriving in America, slaves underwent a period of transition known as seasoning. For many slaves, their first two or three years on North American soil were their last. Disease, malnutrition, homesickness, hard fieldwork, and abuse, often sent many new slaves to their deaths. Slave acculturation, which was the processes slaves used to survive seasoning and
establish a community of their own, included slave music, art, literature, and resistance (Clark & Dittrich, 2003).

The institution of slavery and the system of welfare, as controlling systems, also helped re-define the traditional gender roles of male and female in the family structure. Historically welfare was viewed as attempting to redefine the family structure primarily by replacing itself as the provider and not the fathers (Akbar, 1989; Collins, 2000; Hooks 1981). The emphasis of evaluating familial structure has unfortunately tended to concentrate on the male’s role in the family and not the female’s role that has also been racially oppressed. Some sociologists suggest that black men were the “real” victims of slavery. The most cruel and de-humanizing impact of slavery was the black men stripped of their masculinity, which is then argued to have resulted in the dissolution and overall disruption of any black familial structure (Hooks, 1981). However, enslaved men were stripped of the “patriarchal status that had characterized their social situation in Africa but they were not stripped of their masculinity” (Hooks, 1981, p.21). Ironically it was the “masculinity” of the enslaved male that was exploited by the auctioneer (e.g. his ability to be a good breeder, virility, and vigor).

The enslaved black woman, however, was not only exploited as a laborer in the fields but also as a domestic household worker, a breeder, and as an object of white male sexual assault (Collins, 2000). Black women were often forced to play the dominant role in the slave household. Today, it is argued that the black woman’s role as mother and provider deprives black men of their patriarchal status in the home and the historical design of the welfare system was structured to promote a single parent in the household, primarily the mother. Therefore in order to receive any compensation a woman had to
disown any association with the child’s father. One participant expressed this when she shared the following statement:

I think that they (welfare) are controlling because back in the 60’s the welfare system was a political thing. I think that the objective was to support the family but not keep the family together. Back at that time when welfare was initiated they would support a single parent but the father could not be in the home. They would withdraw the money. That would be the greatest threat to the family.

Today, it’s the same thing but it’s coming from a different point. I think the way they threaten the family now is by taking the medical care from the kids. Force the mother out to work but nine times out of ten they are not going to get any work that’s going to help the family out.

I see it definitely as controlling.

Thornton (1998) posits that “Blacks are typically characterized as overwhelmed by racism or as using it as a cloak for a lack of personal initiative. These characterizations treat the people as impotent objects and they are to be pitied or blamed for their plight, for they are resigned to their fate” (p.61). However, researchers are now beginning to appreciate what many in Black communities have long known: Black families in their day-to-day living have not acquiesced to the oppression around them (Collins, 1991). African Americans as a group have persistently fought oppression, sometimes in over fashion (e.g. civil rights movements), but most often covertly. The bottom line is “Blacks have never been powerless” (Thornton, 1998, p. 63).
African American women have always been aware of the impact of race, class, and gender oppression. The enslaved African woman has too often disappeared from the historical accounts of slavery. Perhaps it was assumed that her experiences of daily humiliation were the same as her male counterparts and therefore need not be emphasized. However, slavery for Africa women was an experience of mental, psychological, emotional, and physical rape (Collins, 2000).

Since slavery, African American women have struggled as a group and individually, to eradicate the multiple injustices that they and their community faced. The enslaved mother had to face the hard fact that if her children were born slaves, they too would be trapped within the same dehumanizing conditions from which she suffered. Similarly, the welfare mother fears that her children would be viewed solely as dependents on a system that simultaneously belittles their very self-worth. There was and always will be, a continual fight for freedom regardless of the “system” serving the role as master, be it slavery or welfare.

Individual and institutional racism have a tremendous impact on the quality of support services and care that African American women receive. Racism itself inhibits women's abilities to access culturally competent social services and resources. Therefore, issues of racial and ethnic identity and racism must be approached by social workers, psychologists, and health care professionals as a discipline and be incorporated in the developmental training of these professionals. Racism constrains the human potential of individuals, communities and whole classes of people. It keeps people from attaining their full potential and contributing positively to the well being of society (Taylor, 1998).
It is the spirit of resistance and struggle that remain a vital force in the survival of African American women. Actions and determination to gain freedom, financially and psychologically, is a combination of self-empowerment and natural pride. Williams (1987) argued that “black women are not defenseless victims but strong-willed resisters” (p. 151).

Multifaceted Support Systems

McAdoo (1998) posits that the common cultural patterns that have contributed to the resiliency of African American families are: “supportive social networks; flexible relationships with the family unit; a strong sense of religiosity; the adoption of fictive kin; and identification with their racial group” (p. 22).

Each participant described a combination of support systems and motivators that made it possible for them to not only survive but develop coping strategies both internal and external. The immediate and extended family, the ‘church’ family, friends, some community organizations, and their role as a mother were the most significant support resources identified. The level of influence and dependability of each supportive resource was specific to each participant; however, all acknowledged the importance or family, friends, church, and motherhood. Overtime, the repertoire of resources available to the family changes in response to the nature of demands. For example, if immediate family members can not provide the resource necessary, extended kin are sought and if necessary, community programs are utilized.

The impact of these support systems help develop individual competencies and abilities to “bounce back” when faced with adverse circumstances. As one woman stated, “I’ve had my ups and downs but I always considered myself to have a good self-
esteem. This was based on how my grandmother brought me up and how she let me know what I was capable of doing. I don’t believe anything is impossible.” This sense of hopefulness is a sign of resilience and a resource for strengthening and building the family support system.

When African Americans have a problem they generally first look within their indigenous support systems; the family, the church, black organizations and businesses (Bagley & Carroll, 1995). It is traditional kin and fictive kin relationships in women-centered networks that are crucial to undermining oppression. In this way black women work as cultural workers, and this experience is empowering (Thornton, 1998). Women of color go on and persist against the odds. The reasons for this are many, but are most often due to the “cultural and experiential repertoire manifest in the nature of family relations (p. 62). It is the support relationships that provide validation, ethnic identity, healing, and a sense of community.

The participants also recognized their female friends, intimately referred to as “sistah’s”, as a source of networking and support. The power of women to support one another in their attempts to leave the system was noticeable in their shared discussions which often took place in the welfare office’s waiting area or in the “welfare to work” programs. Women drew on their collective power, strength, and experiences in order to learn from and teach each other innovative strategies of survival both economically and emotionally.

The connection of resilience to psychological trauma recovery as proposed by Harvey (1996) was supported in this study. Three of the women interviewed described a mode of survival and healing as part of their recovery process after leaving abusive
relationships. Harvey (1996) suggested that recovery from traumatic events may occur outside clinical interventions since a majority of affected individuals do not access clinical care. Recovering occurs outside clinical interventions when individuals use localized support systems and community based resources that are supportive of resilience (Taylor, 1998).

All the participants in this study sought support from a variety of community based groups primarily including their local churches. The church, being the first fully owned and controlled African American institution, has a history of being seen as an organizational structure which serves as a source of inspiration, communication, training, socialization, and healing. Resilience is evident in a willingness to seek community support and positive social interactions with family and friends. There is a relational approach to resiliency which facilitates its strength as well as forming mutual empowerment in family relationships.

Finally, the participant's role as a mother provided a dual stimulus for their level of resiliency. The children were often cited as positively supporting and motivating their mothers to move forward as well as the mothers being personally motivated to provide a better lifestyle for their children. The women often spoke of their children suffering from social repercussions, like teasing, because of their level of material deprivations and being categorized as "a welfare child". This often resulted in mothers sacrificing their basic needs in order to provide their children with better clothing and shoes simply as a means to buffer their children from the stigma of poverty.

Overall, mothers wanted enough income to provide for their children what they considered an "average normal" American lifestyle that every child ought to have the
opportunity to experience. Some hoped to send their children to private or parochial schools where they would be safer and would be “pushed harder”. It was concluded by all participants that welfare would not get them there, but they hoped that work would. Through work, mothers could demonstrate responsible behavior and improve self-confidence for themselves and their children.

Resilience’s Impact on Reclaiming and/or Discovering Independence

DeAngelis (2001) stated that leaving welfare for employment is not an end to a poor single woman’s difficulties. Often times these women now have to juggle the difficulties of work schedules, transportation and child care which may only increase their levels of stress and anxiety. Current welfare reform will fail to improve the lives of poor women if it ignores the enormous impact of gender and race discrimination and the gender wage gap in the workforce. The challenges of providing quality child care, the lack of training opportunities beyond low-wage women’s work, and the effect of domestic violence on a woman’s ability to work, are prevalent factors that need be acknowledged, discussed, and changed. Despite these continual challenges, resilience is the stimulating factor toward change and recovery.

Garmezy (1993) posits that the central element of resilience lies in the power of recovery and in the ability to return once again to those patterns of adaptation and competence that characterized the individual before the stressful period. For others (Masten, et. al., 1990; Rutter, 1990) the idea of resiliency is the observed phenomenon of survivorship.

The women in this study knew that survival was essential but also understood that it was not enough to exist only in a survival mode. The motivating factor of pursing a
"better life" whether solely for their children, or for them, was one factor that stimulated their resilient characteristics. When they talked about improving their financial situation long-term, the central theme voiced was how they would use additional money to make things better for their children.

The women of this study proclaimed an understanding that difficult or "hard times" were inter-mixed with the "good times" as they journeyed toward independence from the welfare system. Perseverance was crucial to these women's ability to survive and thrive through the difficult times they experienced while on welfare as well as in the role of a working women attempting to "make ends meet". However, beyond financial gain, women hoped to gain social and psychological benefits from working. They anticipated gaining a sense of being part of the social mainstream, hopes of increased respect from their children and some family members, as well as increased self-respect and confidence.

Reclaiming self (Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995) and emerging self are important concepts recognized in a women's decision to leave an abusive relationship however they have also emerged in the women’s decision to leave the welfare system. Reclaiming self may occur in the process of leaving, but expands as the women regain balance and security in their lives. This was demonstrated by the women who actively engaged in activities of reclaiming the self as well as acts of self-definition. Elements of the process of redefining self are described in this study in the data interpretation sections entitled: 'It's Time For A Change' and 'Free At Last'.

Participants were often very enthusiastic and animated when talking about being employed. They described work as energizing and motivating them to take on new
challenges and it allowed them the right to dream of a better life. The participants also viewed their employment as a means to model for their children important values of work ethics. This modeling was also relevant for their children’s academic success, future employment, upward mobility, and self-confidence. Mothers often worried about their children possibly making “the same mistakes” they did and focused on the importance of remaining employed in hopes that this would “counteract” the example they had set while on welfare.

Employment was preferred and desired by each participant however, as mothers, the participants did express their concerns about being less available to help their children get ready for school, supervise them with their homework, and be certain that they eat properly. This was further compounded by a sense of “distrust” they had for the quality of professional child care facilities available to them based on their low income. Concerns such as these were at the forefront of the participant’s thinking as they evaluated their entry into the labor market. There was an ever present tension felt between the costs and benefits of their employment however, in general, they acknowledged that this was necessary given the limited resources available.

As single parents, now employed, the participants demonstrated a quality of resilience in being able to maintain a household as well as attempting to spend quality time with their children. Many of the women often described in great detail the time and energy it took to shop, cook, clean, do laundry (which often required visits to laundry mats), helping children with homework, and helping with day-to-day problems. However, it was also made mention that these daily demands allow the mothers an opportunity to
teach their children such values as work ethics, responsibility, appreciating delayed gratification, and helping others.

This demonstrates family resilience that affirms the opportunity for survival and growth while challenging the women to press for creative strategies to balance work and family demands. These women are able to develop and accept flexible family structures and mobilize use of an extended kinship whenever necessary. It is this capacity for change, ability to rebound, and use of collaborative problem solving (often involving extended family and friends) that continues to develop family resilience.

Family resilience is not solely defined as the nuclear family but encompasses the extended family, the church family, and the community. The concept of family resilience is demonstrated in the participant's abilities to master life challenges by utilizing the support of family and community networks. Communities foster a variety of support systems, both formal and informal.

Walsh (1998) posits that it is important to recognize the powerful influence of family belief systems grounded in cultural values. When the origins of family resilience are examined within families of color, the concept of linear cause and effect relationships is not assumed, rather the question is asked, "What are the holistic and complex interrelationships that come into harmony and allow a family to not only survive but also to grow strong?" (Cross, 1995),

Family resilience provides for a variety of approaches on how to face a wide range of life challenges, including family transitions, (e.g. welfare to work), trauma and loss, and difficulties involving multiple crises. The ideal of family resilience has taught me the immeasurable value of human connections. I have observed the power of the
informal kinship connections that fostered resilience even in the midst of severe economic hardship. The participants would continually allude to the fact that they never felt “truly alone” in their life challenges. There was always an extended family member, a girlfriend, a strong church member, or community center worker.

This research experience has kindled my interest to expand my knowledge about family and social processes that foster healthy functioning, creativity, and growth. Too often the focus of research has a tendency to discover issues of pathology, particularly regarding women of color. The media have been saturated with images of dysfunctional families — unstable, failing, damaging their children, and causing social and moral decay (Walsh, 1998). A family resilience lens is what will alter this perspective and allow us to identify strengths, reasons for endurance, internal and external characteristics, and expose us to a multiple view of survival methods.

Preparing the Self as Researcher

As part of a research course, I piloted a survey on resiliency and my open ended questions with three focus groups of African American women who were students at a local community college. The participants were generous with their time, stories and feedback about the topics of resiliency, independence, and the welfare system. I also was a director for several years of a fifteen week preparatory program for women who were on welfare and wanted to return to school to pursue a career in allied health. This experience allowed me to interact with primarily African American women in a variety of roles including, director, instructor, and at times, counselor. It was my continual observance of each student’s strengths, innovative strategies to combat the demands in their lives, as well as their perseverance “against the odds” that stimulated my pursuit of a
study on resiliency. I was indeed intrigued by the levels of persistency, stamina, and commitment these women showed regardless of the impact of both oppression and racism. However I also observed that many of the women did not recognize their characteristics as resilient behavior but simply “what needed to be done to survive.”

In addition to being director of the preparatory program I was also part of the faculty of the allied health school which many of the participants applied for their training. This allowed me to directly observe several successful transitions of African American women who began in the preparatory program and then moved from welfare to work. I also conducted a number of seminars, workshops, and retreats for women focusing on such topics as self-esteem, motivation, relationships, and stress management. These experiences allowed me to be exposed to a number of stories highlighting the phrase “how I got over” regardless of the circumstances.

My racial identity supplemented my credibility and access to some women, yet it did not protect me from thoughts that wondered if I ever knew what welfare was “really” about. Was I just another researcher “trying to get into their business” but this time just happen to look like them? I myself am not ignorant of the fact that traditionally, research, has been used as a tool of domination as well as degradation not only of African Americans but people of color. Therefore, this makes all research and researchers suspect.

As an African American researcher, I participated in the research process at different levels depending on the level of the participant. It was important to remember to meet the participant where they were, intellectually, emotionally, and logistically. This
required respect, compassion, wisdom and emotional energy as I listened to these women’s stories.

Limitations of the Study

The parameters of this study only included African American women in north New Jersey who have previously received public assistance. The welfare system in the United States varies widely from state to state and a comparative study regarding the welfare to work transition could be investigated.

African American women (as well as other groups) are a diverse group of individuals (Collins, 2000; Cross 2003). This distinction is important when considering any attempt at generalizing the research findings among African American women. It is my hope that the women’s stories about resilience provide useful information about the process and transition from welfare to work however it is not attempting to promote widespread generalization. In addition the sample did not include non-African American women.

In retrospective, the data collection particularly relating to questioning, was at times, too directional and not as open ended as preferred. Although a richness of content was made available the direction of some questions were periodically influenced by the interviewer. Participants were asked to recall past and present life events and for those that experienced traumatic episodes, it may have altered what they were able to recall. However it is what they wanted to share during the interview process and it is elicited with the understanding that stories have a subjective perspective which provides valuable insights.
Recommendations for Future Research

This research is a glimpse into the transition and resilience process of African American women. A longitudinal study of African American women who have left the welfare system and have maintained independence may reveal more information about resilience and self-efficacy. The mental, physical, and social consequences of being on welfare require further exploration so that prevention or intervention efforts can be implemented.

Additional studies are needed to evaluate the effectiveness of training and transitional programs designed to prepared women from ‘welfare to work’. There is minimal information related to how possible support groups could be implemented into the training programs to facilitate the transformation. In addition, this would mean that group session leaders must be aware of the dynamics of racism, sexism and classism as well as and how they operate in the women’s live. Caseworkers must consider providing an environment in which African American women who are presently receiving welfare can grow, without having to constantly confront their “welfare and minority status” and the dynamics that can impede their energies away from personal development and abilities to be resilient.

Similar research with a different ethnic group that is underrepresented in research may help clarify or reveal other aspects of resilience. Comparative data should be collected on other women of Color, diverse history of dependence on welfare, and various geographic areas and it is important not to assume normality against white women. Taylor stated (1998) interrogating culture within groups and across ethnic groups
may be more valuable than the well entrenched use of whites as the ‘gold standard’ of comparison. Such studies may highlight how specific women of Color may be able to successfully sustain themselves once off of welfare and discover if any experience in higher quality of life can move them beyond a survival mode.

Included in this recommendation is research on a variety of definitions regarding resilience. A new construct of Cultural Resilience can be investigated that enables individuals to overcome negative situations in their lives. This theory proposes the use of traditional life-ways to overcome the negative influences of oppression, abuse, poverty, and discrimination (Strand & Peacock, 2003). This research will identify the role that tradition and culture play in overcoming such factors in African American families.

The impact of responsive relationships on resilience would be prevalent in future research on African American women. Jordan (1992) posits that although many researchers have focused on identifying individual traits associated with resilience (e.g. temperament, internal locus of control, self-esteem) the identifying of relational dynamics as the source of resilience is equally important. Siegle (1999) states that interpersonal relationships are the central source of experiences that influence how intelligence develops, would it not as well contribute to one’s ability to be resilient.

When I look for the origins of family resilience within families of color I am not looking for linear cause and effect relationships to isolate the causal factors. Rather I am asking, ‘What are the holistic and complex interrelationships that come into harmony and allow a family to not only survive but also to grow strong?’
(Cross, 1995).

The relational and cultural aspects of resilience need be further examined to recognize specific qualities that help African American women overcome overwhelming events. Understanding resiliency in families must be accompanied by a commitment to understand the environment in which these families are called upon to survive. Sparks (1998) described how mothers in her study of African American mothers on welfare, used connection, collaboration, and community action to “foster resilience in the face of paralyzing economic hardships and relentless discrimination”.

Equally important is the investigation of the effects of race and ethnic origin in assessing the needs of African American women who use social services and/or training programs. It will important to understand the barriers that exist whether imposed by society or internally within the women. Studies are needed about how the biases inherent in racism and sexism influence the availability of service organizations; the individual’s process of leaving welfare, and selection of training.

Of equal importance is acting on the resolution presented by the American Psychology Association – Society for the Psychology of Women which emphasizes the importance of studying attitudes toward the poor, which often attribute poverty to personal failings rather than larger socioeconomic barriers. The key aim of the resolution is to dispel stereotypes about poverty’s causes.

The development of practical components regarding welfare reform can not ignore the voices of the African American women who have received or are presently receiving aid. The African American women who happen to be, welfare recipients, will
tell us how to better serve them -- otherwise we re-victimize the population we profess to serve.

Implications for Welfare Caseworker Practice

This study has several implications for welfare caseworker’s practice with African American women in aiding their transition from welfare to work. Most importantly, it has provided a description of the resilience process of African American women. The stories described confirm that the process of resilience is more than a personal attribute or isolated individual effort or use of social support services. It involves a combination of these resources as well as a change in the way the women view themselves and their circumstances. Women shift their perspectives and learned to view the environment through more multiple lenses which allows them to create more options.

Throughout the transition, the women were often challenged with issues of self-esteem, societal acceptance, and an ability to be a positive role model for their children. The welfare caseworker’s intervention should not only include basic job training, housing, and medical services but should include workshops, seminars, individual and group therapy which could rebuild participant’s mental and spiritual selves. Counseling services need be readily available and easily accessible for women who have limited financial resources. In addition, African American women voiced a desire for matching caseworkers, therapist, group facilitators, on ethnicity and gender. The importance of ‘matching’ may apply to other women of Color.

When considering the value of individual and family therapy for women making the transition from welfare to work, it is important to specifically train some caseworkers to facilitate this type of transition. For example, within the structure of family therapy
emphasis can be placed on recognizing “resiliency stories” which will identify how the family had to sacrifice and endure in order for them to be where they are today. This process will allow the women to identify traits of resiliency such as innovation, ability to bounce back, and relational strengths. In addition, the caseworkers, serving as therapist, must be aware of the dynamics of racism, sexism and classism as well as how they operate in the women’s lives. These issues should be addressed as they surface and can advance the therapeutic process.

Welfare-to-work programs can include a mentorship component. African American women who have successfully left the welfare system should work with the caseworkers to be assigned to women regardless of the stages of their transition. The mentors will learn to promote resilient qualities such as autonomy, independence, flexibility, and innovation.

In summary, it is important that specific caseworkers be assigned to implement a therapeutic intervention mode while others are assigned to focus on providing basic needs. It is not unusual to recognize the high level of burn-out among caseworkers who attempt to wear “too many hats” while meeting the demanding needs of their clientele be it physical, emotional, and/or spiritual. African American women making an effort to leave welfare would greatly benefit from interventions and early prevention strategies. Resiliency can be encompassed in any program by providing opportunities for meaningful participation, teaching basic skills, humor, and providing care and support.

Overall, caseworkers should know about factors that enhance any woman’s ability to successfully leave welfare and thrive in the work environment. Those faced with
developing productive interventions can no longer ignore the voices who are telling us how to better serve them -- the time has come to listen.

Conclusion

This study includes descriptive information about the ways in which African American women experience and transcend dependence on welfare. The impetus of this research was to focus on the strengths of African American women who survive diverse challenges and problems instead of only focusing on the problems. This study belies the stereotype of lifetime welfare dependency and underscores women’s resilience in managing extreme economic adversity.

Processes of resilience were identified and linked to research available in the literature. Analysis of the data led to the inference that resilience is not solely an individual trait but an interrelated process. The ability of African American women to move beyond welfare involves using and shaping both internal and external resources to meet their changing needs. The combination of these resources interchanges their strengths in allowing for not only survival but success. Resiliency is not just a protection against adversities but it is seen as a positive behavior. It involves a change in the way women view themselves and the world they live in.

Finally, the element of hope is recognized as a crucial ingredient to resiliency. Walsh (1998) stated that hope is a future-oriented belief; no matter how bleak the present, we can envision a better future. Women often expressed hope for a better life for them and their children. This mindset kept these women who were in poor communities from being defeated by their immediate circumstances. The words of Martin Luther King inspire hope: “We must accept finite disappointment but we must never lose infinite
hope.” Resiliency fosters family empowerment as it brings forth shared hope, develops areas of competence, and builds mutual support.
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APPENDIX A

Explanatory Letter & Consent Form
APPENDIX A

Explanatory Letter & Consent Form

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PURPOSE AND BENEFITS

This is a research study with the purpose of understanding the process of coping in the population of African American women who have successfully left the welfare system to become employed.

This study is expected to benefit the design of culturally appropriate welfare-to-work programs that may foster coping strategies for women and identify culturally appropriate resources that may promote coping strategies in maintaining employment.

PROCEDURE

Information will be obtained from you during two interview sessions. You will be asked questions about your life while receiving welfare and now as an employed person. Examples of questions are: “What was life like on welfare? What effects has welfare had on you as a woman? What would you describe as the most challenging adjustments you had to make when you became employed?” The questions are designed to assist you in telling your story of resilience and successful employability.

The first interview will take approximately 2.0 hrs to complete. The second interview is a clarification interview where the researcher wished to clarify or gain affirmation of themes identified by the researcher. This interview will be to follow up on issues that have been raised by yourself or other women which the researcher would like to gather some more insights or clarification. For example, the researcher may say, “Some women have said...what do you think or feel about this?” The second interview will last approximately one hour. All information from the clarification interviews will be handled in the same confidential manner as in the first interviews.

The researcher will record the interview on a tape recorder. A typist will listen to the tape and transcribe the interview. An information auditor will listen to make sure I have the information correct. Your name will not be used on the tape or the typed/transcribed sheets. Your name and all names that you have shared with me will be changed to a pseudonym. Once the tape is typed the researcher will listen to it, and then the tape will be erased; until the tape is erased it will be kept in a locked file cabinet. You will be
given a free copy of the typed/transcribed interview. Your participation in this research study is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. You may also refuse to answer any questions.

RISK, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT

There will be no physical risk to you during your participation in this study. It is possible that some of the questions in the interview may cause you emotional discomfort. You may or may not experience stress or discomfort as a result of invasion of your privacy and/or reflection on your own life’s journey which may take place during the interview.

OTHER INFORMATION:

The information that you consent to provide will be confidential. Any data that may link you to the information that you provide will be stored on a computer accessed only by the investigator. The only cost to you will be your time. You will be compensated $20.00 for your participation and be reimbursed for travel expenses. Subjects will not bear any monetary costs for participation in the study.

Interview findings will be shared with participants. Information from this project will also be published in professional journals, presented at conferences, and may be shared with the general public. No individuals will be identifiable in any published or reported data. All information you provide will be confidential with exception of incidents of recent or ongoing child abuse, or risks of imminent harm to others or yourself.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research. The IRB believes that the research procedures adequately safeguard the subject’s privacy, welfare, civil liberties, and rights. The Chairperson of the IRB may be reached through the Office of Grants and Research Services. The telephone number of the Office is (973) 275-2974.

Subject’s Statement:

The study described above has been explained to me. I have read the material above, and any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity, realizing that I may withdraw without prejudice at any time.

______________________________  __________________________
Signature of Participant            Date

______________________________  __________________________
Signature of Investigator           Date
APPENDIX B

Exploratory Questions
APPENDIX B

Exploratory Questions

Category One
How do African American women perceive the welfare system?

1. How do you define welfare? And what does welfare reform mean to you?
2. What were the helpful aspects of receiving welfare?
3. What were the harmful aspects of receiving welfare?
4. What effects has welfare had on you as a woman, mother, wife, girlfriend, partner, and friend?
5. Do you see the government as an “assisting” force or a “controlling” one?

Category Two
What community resources do African American women use to break the cycle of dependence on public assistance?

1. What were the circumstances leading to your need to receive welfare?
2. What was life like on welfare?
3. How would you describe your attempts to get off the welfare system?
4. When did you consider yourself, “off the system”?

Category Three
What community resources do African American women use to successfully maintain employment?

1. How does your success of staying off welfare relate to the services you received while on the system?
2. What would you describe as the most challenging adjustments you had to make when you began to work?
3. How do you describe your work environment?
4. How do you describe your ability to keep moving forward?
APPENDIX C

Demographic Information Form
APPENDIX C

Demographic Information Form

1. Your age: ______

2. Your ethnic/racial background: ____________________________

3. Number of children: ________________________________

4. Age(s) of the children: ________________________________

5. Your children are which of the following: (check accordingly)
   ____ biological, ____ adopted, ____ kinship related, ____ foster care

6. Relationship Status: (check one)
   ____ married, ____ single, ____ separated, ____ divorced, ____ living together

7. Highest level of completed education: ____________________

8. Residential Status: (check one)
   ____ house, ____ apartment, ____ family/friends, ____ shelter

9. Would you consider yourself to have been raised on public assistance?
   (circle) yes / no

10. Welfare History:
    ____ total # of years receiving public assistance
    ____ total # of attempts to leave the welfare system
    ____ total # of caseworkers

11. Material Hardship Questions. Please circle Yes or No.

   Has there ever been a time when you needed food, but could not afford to buy
   it?  Yes or No

   Has there been a time when you could not afford a place to stay or when you
   could not pay your rent?  Yes or No
Have you been evicted from your residence for not being able to pay your rent or mortgage? Yes or No

Has your electricity or heat been turned off because you could not afford to pay the bill? Yes or No

Has your telephone been disconnected, or have you gone without a telephone because you could not afford to pay the bill? Yes or No

12. Employment History
   How did you find out about your present job?
   _____ newspaper, ____ flyer, ____ friend/family member, ____ company worker,
   ____ job fair, ____ human resource department ___ other: explain ________________

   How long have you been employed at your present job? ________________

   What is your job title? ____________________________________________

   Approximate income: (before taxes) ________________________________

   Do you receive any type of benefits? ________________________________

13. Child Care Resource(s): Please check the following:

   _____ day care center, ___ family/friend, __ church, __ place of employment
   __ paid baby sitter, _____ other: explain ______________________________

14. Religion: _______________________________________________________

15. Do you consider yourself active in your religious beliefs? ____________

16. List any community resources or agencies you utilized after becoming employed? _______________________________________________________

17. Check the support resource(s) that were helpful to you during your process of leaving the welfare system.

   _____ parent(s), _____ sister, _____ brother, ___ friend(s), ____ caseworker
   ____ clergy, ____ community organization, ___ other: (explain) _______
   __________________
APPENDIX D

Reflexive Journal
First Impression Themes and Perceptions
Meeting the Participants
APPENDIX D

Reflexive Journal

My interest in the topic of resilience is not a new one although I must admit that the term resilience was probably not what I would have called it. I had several years of experience in working with African American women who were receiving public assistance, as well as my professional peers, and women in my family. I have always been amazed at the emotional and physical stamina these women exhibited to keep going regardless of the challenging circumstances often placed in their paths. I use to question what keeps them going and what seems to make the difference that some women could keep moving and others seemed to be stifled.

In actuality, I was going through several personal challenges and was forced to choose between life’s options of quitting or moving forward “anyhow”. I chose to move forward but knew that it was not just because I said, “I’m not going to quit” but there were internal and external strengths that made the difference. However, it seems that these resilient qualities become such a part of your character that their not recognized as strengths but just as a natural response to what has to be done to move forward.

Oftentimes the women I use to work with, in the support program, would often struggle with the interview question that asked about their strengths. As far as they were concern they really could not take ownership to what they considered everyday qualities needed to survive, especially in their challenging circumstances. It was only after I would describe to them the demands of their present living situation and how they still managed to “make ends meet” that they...
would acknowledge that perhaps they did have qualities and strengths worth recognizing.

I remember one student who was a single parent, with two children, living in the projects on the tenth floor, receiving $360/month welfare, with no car, and just had major surgery before starting school. This woman's daily agenda included taking several buses to drop off the children at school and daycare, get to her part-time job, and get to class. There were times that at the end of her exhaustive day she would come home only to find the elevators not working which meant carrying strollers, groceries, and books up ten flights of stairs with two little children. Yet, this young woman did what had to be done, without complaints, and maintained a positive attitude often stating that, "it won't always be this way".

It was the continual interaction with these truly phenomenal women that made me recognize that the character of resilience was worth investigating. What is it that truly allows people to move forward in the midst of crisis, regardless of circumstances, and when the odds appear to be stacked against them? What kept my parents going when, not too long ago, they were unable to sit at certain counters or sit anyway on a public bus or movie theater? What kept my ancestors going when they were considered less than human and sold and beaten as animals? Truly there are strengths that cannot be summarized in one word but as I have reflected on the term resilience, I feel it is a mandatory component on which any lasting foundation must be built. From that point on I was curious to discover my own strengths and identify the strengths in other women that allowed them not only to survive but also succeed.
First Impression Themes and Perceptions

In my reflexive journal I documented what I identified as initial or first impression themes that emerged throughout each individual interview. This allowed me to create a “skeletal structure” of possible themes that would assist in the discovery of the overall themes and coding categories. The first impression themes that emerged were as follows: (1) a strong work ethic, (2) strong female role models, particularly grandmothers, (3) spiritual connections, (4) faith strong family support, (5) motivation by children to improved standard of living, (6) positive self-image, (7) ideation that welfare assistance will be temporary. The recognition of these initial themes helped direct the remaining interview questions as well as define the coding categories and final themes.

As I think about my final reflection, I wonder what these participants will be doing ten years from now. How are they managing? Have their situations improved? Did they ever have to return to welfare? My continued review of each participant’s interview has made them a part of my life learning experience. It has confirmed my thoughts of how women, particularly women of color, can “keep keeping on” under the most challenging of situations. It has increased my respect for these women and confirmed their dependability on family and spirituality.

This research experience has strengthened my personal view of how to handle tough situations. I must maintain a positive view that the future will get better, I am not in this by myself, I have to do whatever needs to get done – no matter what the circumstances, and if “God be for me, who can be against me.”
Meeting the Participants

The first of the nine interviews took place in my office which happens to be the same office area of the participant which allowed for the advantage of familiarity. The participant was on time; we discussed the consent letter, signed the agreement, and asked if there were any questions. I was slightly nervous and could sense the same from her even though we had known each other for several years. The participant shared after the interview that she was “sweating” and anxious because of her concerns to “sound intelligent” and “give good responses” on the tape. The importance of debriefing was immediately confirmed for me and I was very conscious to allow the participants to talk about the actual interview experience. It was interesting to discover that several of the participants expressed concerns about speaking properly and whether or not others would be listening to the tapes. It was confirmed that aside from myself, only my auditor would hear the audio tapes.

I was very conscious of the flow of my first interview. I did not want to miss important cues that could lead to crucial questions of clarity or allow for in-depth interviewing strategies. The interview was about 45 minutes and I wondered if this was considered too short. I also speculated that the participant’s length of time on welfare may be a factor that would influence the time of the interview or will it be the participant’s overall life experiences.

The next interview began a ½ hour early because of the availability of the participant. She was eager to begin and I could tell by her relaxed body language that she was at ease to talk about her experiences. The participant was very vocal and needed minimal prompting to expand on any part of the conversation. It was exciting
to discovery that the direction of her conversation matched my direction of questioning without my having to ask the actual questions. I found myself deeply engrossed in her live story. There were so many obstacles she had overcome such as homelessness, child’s illnesses, domestic violence, and poverty.

The third interview was different in that it was a telephone conference. I had tried on several occasions to meet in-person but it just was too difficult because of the work demands of the participants. Although I was not able to observe body language the speaker phone was clear and I could still recognize vocal inflections, pauses, and tones. I was concerned about the lateness of the hour (8:30 p.m.) and the fact that she had just come in from working a twelve hour day however, the participant insisted on conducting the interview and did not want to reschedule.

The first part of the interview began with short answers and made me worried that I should have pushed the ideal of re-scheduling however as we continued to talk she sounded more relaxed and voluntarily expounded on several areas of her life experiences.

I was particularly interested in how the next interview was going to proceed. The participant was a former student of mine several years ago and I wondered how the dynamics of a faculty/student relationship would impact the interview. I immediately realized that the participant was not able to call me by my first name and expressed that she felt more comfortable calling me Mrs. Eubanks. This was an obvious cue that I would be mindful of throughout the interview however the participant displayed no difficulty in sharing any personal information be it general or intimate.
The next interview was in the participant's home. I took a trial run to find the home before the interview to eliminate any chance of getting lost and being late. This was the only interview which had a young child present. Unfortunately this created a continual challenge of disruption and forced a lack of focus for the mother who apologized for the disruption throughout the interview. I could tell that the participant was extremely embarrassed and uncomfortable. I offered to reschedule several times but I could tell the mother simply wanted to "end" this experience. This was a good lesson for me and in the future I inquired if small children would be present. I did not know if the tape would even be audible due to the crying outbursts of the child however surprisingly there were key themes that still emerged.

The next interview was conducted in my office. The participant spoke quite rapidly and almost summarized her life experiences in five minutes. I utilized a sense of humor to relax the environment and suggested she reduces her speech to at least a "98 speed". I cautiously brought her back to the beginning of the wealth of information she shared, allowed her to become relaxed, and proceeded at a slower pace. This interview resulted in being my best and most informative and this was the first participant that expressed a sincere interest in obtaining a copy of the finished dissertation.

The final interviews were conducted in the participant's home. The physical appearance of the apartments were often commented on (e.g. apologizing for the "mess" or the lack of dusting, etc.) and one participant was so concerned that her hair was not presentable that she had me wait until she could style it to her satisfaction.

The interview experiences were insightful, challenging, and a learning
process. As I listened to the tapes and transcribed the material, it helped me to connect to the participants on different levels. The voice tones, tears, and laughter continually brought the interview alive time and time again. The two data forms, written and auditory, allowed for a flexible review process. The transcripts were easily assessable at any time and the auditory could be reviewed while traveling.

I must admit that reading and coding the transcripts was a lengthy, tedious process but it provided an insight that could not have occurred with quantitative analysis alone. Finally, the emerging themes about these women and the issues contained within the themes, brought them to life resulting in a humbling and insightful experience for me.
APPENDIX E

Coding Categories
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I. The Welfare System was a “Mixed Blessing”
   A. Stepping Stone – “The First Step in the Hardest”
   B. Shameful and Disgraceful – “I Never Thought I’d Have to Apply”

II. Decisions/Circumstances Leading to Welfare – “I Had No Other Choice!”

III. Disassociation – “I’m Not Like Them!”

IV. Stressors – “The Pressure is On!”

V. Survival Within the System – “Making Ends Meet”


VII. Parental Responsibility – “Mom’s Motivator”

VIII. Spirituality – “Always On Time”

IX. Defining Moments – “It’s Time For Change”

X. Preparation for Employability – “All I Need Is A Chance”

XI. Lifestyle Adjustments Off the System – “Free At Last”