

An Examination of

Poverty and Higher Education

Stepping stones to self sufficiency:

The story of single parent students on welfare



Comparative History of Ideas

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“Poverty is the worst form of violence.”
-Mahatma Gandhi

Introduction

Mothers living in poverty is a sad but very real fact in today’s world. Alarming, there are nearly 227,400 children under the age of seventeen living in poverty in Washington State alone.¹ The parents and caregivers of the nearly quarter million children in our state are the most likely receive or have access to the welfare system. Unfortunately, under the current welfare rules, these adults have difficulty obtaining higher education through the community college and/or university. These are the households that are generally expected to be headed by a single parent or caregiver. As one single mother puts it, “If you want me to pull myself up, give me bootstraps.”² Where are the proverbial bootstraps necessary for social advancement located in American society?

Short of winning the lottery or unexpectedly inheriting money, the most obvious place for social advancement is higher education. It is no surprise that a lack of higher education directly correlates to limited access to higher paying jobs and consequently almost no clear pathway out of poverty. I propose that this lack of access to higher education exists because negative social stereotypes. These stereotypes, or modes of thinking, preclude poor single parents from aspiring to anything but living barely above the poverty line.

This intriguing and loaded thought motivated me to dig deeper into the problem itself. I wanted to locate the historical context from which this idea sprang. In order to identify this, I first had to find a

¹ Statistic according to the 2003 US Census Bureau <http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/saige/saige.cgi> and in the appendix. Poverty is according to the US Department of Health and Human Services found at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/06poverty.shtml> and in the appendix (I A).

² Adair, Vivyan, C. and Sandra L. Dahlberg, Eds. *Reclaiming Class: Women, Poverty, and the Promise of Higher Education in America. If You Want Me to Pull Myself Up, Give Me Bootstraps* by Lisa K. Waldner. (Philadelphia, Temple University Press), 2003.

theoretical framework that would either ground or unsettle my original proposition. It came in the most interesting of guises: an art exhibit.

When the “Missing Stories of Ourselves: Poverty and the Promise of Higher Education” exhibit came to the University of Washington as a traveling exhibit in early 2006, I was determined to see it firsthand. I was told it displayed pictures and stories of people who had been on welfare, such as single mothers, and who had bettered their lives and their children’s through their education. The stories in the exhibit were personal testimonies of the power of education to bring people from their impoverished past to a bright future far from welfare dependence.

As I am a single parent with similar struggles as those featured in the exhibits, I drifted through the showcase feeling officially welcomed into academia. I had been well received in my department, but an absolute sense of belonging had eluded me during my prior five years in higher education until I viewed these photos and stories. They prompted an emotional upwelling as the invisible lines that had separated me from the university community melted away. It was during the third floor of the exhibit when I stopped in my tracks, horrified. I had found a vandalized piece still on display. In shock, I stood before the piece unable to comprehend the enormous weight of rejection I saw staring back at me. Although the vandals clearly meant for the piece to be a joke, I took it very seriously and interpreted their actions to reflect the societal expectations for welfare recipients; that their dreams, hopes, and aspirations were not attainable. But with hard work and access to resources, welfare recipients have proven time and again that they flourish in higher education. I was entranced with this exhibit; pulled into the reality that so many students take for granted: the sense of belonging, a feeling of legitimacy as a student in academia.

This unfortunate discovery of the vandals’ work prompted my attendance at a guest lecture, given by Professor Vivyan C. Adair, who had brought the exhibit to the University of Washington. During Professor Adair’s lecture, I was again moved and felt a strong sense of belonging to my education. After speaking

with her both before and after her lecture, I was absolutely convinced I would examine her ideas and books as reference points from which to center my theoretical analysis of my thesis. It was through these serendipitous catalysts, both the art exhibit viewing and at the lecture that the path the problem my thesis hoped to address became clear. Adair's use of Foucault through a feminist lens was an appealing direction to undertake for my thesis as well.

A Brief Introduction to the Theoretical Foundation of the Thesis:

Dr. Adair's work centers on access to higher education for welfare recipients. She structures her theoretical framework around the theories of Michel Foucault and his ideas on bodies and markings. As I read more of Adair's work, I became intrigued with Foucault's unique perspective on the human body and how she was using it to bolster her arguments. The problem my thesis and Adair's work focuses on is quite similar: lack of access to higher education for the poor. Thus, I dusted off my copies of Foucault and began my research.

First, I plan to discuss Foucault's ideas about markings on bodies. This is to introduce the core Foucaultian concept from which I will make further analysis using his ideas on power and the panopticon in subsequent sections. Foucault has interesting definitions for the body, markings, and power. His ideas on the panopticon are adapted from Jeremy Bentham's thoughts on the matter, as Bentham invented the term for the eighteenth century prison systems. By peppering the presented theoretical framework with narrative, the application of theory will become more immediate and concrete. The conclusion will contain narrative and a reflection of this thesis process as I am a single parent student recording my journey through higher education.

In addition to this theoretical examination of the issue, I have also worked on the practical application of ideas stemming from my thesis process to help break down barriers to higher education for

single parent students. I have created a website, an online discussion board, and have held a workshop for community college students, staff, and faculty interested in this topic. As a single parent student recording my journey through higher education for this project, the conclusion will contain a narrative reflection of my experience.

Theoretical Analysis

According to Foucault and central to analysis in this paper,

“The body is the inscribed surface of events traced by language and dissolved by ideas...”³

In order to challenge the existence of roadblocks which single parents must navigate, examining and analyzing the roots of societal views about single parents are imperative. How do our notions of poverty manifest? In other words, how do we identify poverty stricken people? If we understand Foucault, we can use the body to attempt an answer for these questions. The body, as understood in general terms, is the physical state of being. At its most very basic meaning, the body is a collection of cells grouped together to provide a heartbeat and brain function.

For Foucault, the body “is the site and operation of ideology, as subject and representation, body and text.”⁴ In order to envision the body marked by events, language, and ideas the definition must be expanded to include the psyche as well as the surface that is visually presented. Foucault is broad in his

³ Foucault, Michel. The Foucault Reader, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*. ed. Paul Rabinow. (New York, Pantheon Books), 1984. p 83.

⁴ Adair, Vivyan, C. From Good Ma to Welfare Queen: A Genealogy of the Poor Woman in American Literature, Photography, and Culture. (New York and London, Garland Publishing), 2000. p. xxi.

definitions because different cultures have different modes of marking.⁵ In America, bodies that are ‘marked’ by poverty and can be visually documented can include one or more of the following: the state of one’s dental hygiene, the blood donation scars on one’s forearms, personal hygiene habits, and body adornment. Some of the internal markings on the body include self inscription of a certain societal point of view absorbed by someone who has no alternative or counter script in place. Examples of this are found within the American popular imagination, such as the script of the “Welfare Queen.”

Poor children and mothers are marked with signs that cannot be corrected or undone. The external, visual representation of this marking can hinder one’s aspirations for a job, social interactions, and the ability to have an equal footing in issues of housing, childcare, or once they have found a job, in the workplace. For example, in my early twenties I had braces to correct my crooked teeth. I went without a Christmas present for myself for years during the expensive treatment, but the drive to attain ‘straight teeth’ was unstoppable. I was following a popular social script that makes no room for unsightly, crooked or missing teeth. Growing up in poverty, oral repair during the normally accepted years (adolescence) was not a possibility. I felt stigmatized before and during my orthodontic treatment because of the omnipresent social script written into my own perception of the world. The social message in the image of oral perfection is prevalent every time you watch a television advertisement or program. What is most damaging about this message is its counterpoint: if you do not have perfect teeth, you have less value and preference in society. Relegated to the sidelines of society lurks the woman without her front teeth, the man with the toothless smile. These archetypes live in our common experience, yet we seldom encounter such individuals in our media. This treatment consigns this message to people with oral imperfections: you are essentially invisible.

⁵ For example, until recently Great Britain did not consider crooked, decayed teeth to be indicative of social status whereas Americans have correlated the two since The Great Depression Era.

Another example of the type of marking Foucault references is scars from blood donations. One young man shares his story, “Every two weeks, I was at the blood donation centers so they could collect my blood in exchange for money I use for food. The scars are still on my forearms arms ten years later.”⁶ Of course, this person could cover the marks with clothing, but the marks engrained on his physical body are also a part of his memory and his identity. Still another example of marking comes from Dr. Adair herself. In her book, From Good Ma to Welfare Queen, she talks about how friends of hers would sell their ova to finance their dual roles as parents and students. They had no welfare assistance, as the system does not support higher education as proper ‘job placement’ activity.⁷

Such markings of imperfections are “physically inscribed as ‘other’,” writes Dr. Adair, “and then read as pathological and dangerous.”⁸ Adair recounts her experience as a welfare mother who had to choose between having her rotting teeth fall out or pulled out due to welfare insurance rules limiting treatment options that would have allowed her a tooth replacement procedure. She describes the cyclic problem of the poor welfare mother and children most succinctly:

“Our children need healthy food so that we can continue working, and yet at minimum wage we have no money or time for wholesome food and care. So our children get sick, we lose our jobs to take care of them, we fall deeper into debt before our next unbearable job, and then we really can’t afford any medical care. Starting that next minimum wage job with unpaid bills and sick children puts us further and further behind so that we are even less able to afford good food, adequate childcare, health or emotional healing. (...) We are either fat or we are skinny, and we are always irreparably ill and exhausted.”⁹

For welfare recipients to find an end to the vicious cycle of poverty, education holds the promise of a new life. As most welfare recipients are children and the single parent that heads their

⁶ Informal interview with Mark Weitzencamp, May 25, 2006. Mark speaks about how he paid for his undergraduate education by selling his blood.

⁷ Washington State Department of Social and Human Services, rules for WorkFirst (cash grant program). WAC 388-400-0005.

⁸ *ibid.* . xxi.

⁹ Adair, Vivyan, C. From Good Ma to Welfare Queen: A Genealogy of the Poor Woman in American Literature, Photography, and Culture. (New York and London, Garland Publishing), 2000. p. xii.

household, providing educational opportunities to the adult of the family would certainly be a step forward in self-sufficiency. Instead, welfare programs today assert that getting to work is the most important thing parents can do for their families. However, as Dr. Adair's description of the challenges single parents suggests, it is not that simple. In Foucault's book, Madness and Civilization, he asserts "the prison system of the late seventeenth century viewed the obligation to work as an assumption of both ethical exercise and moral guarantee. It serves as punishment for a certain disposition of the heart [laziness]." ¹⁰ Foucault is reasoning why the poor were treated as prisoners in the past. Resonating with today's experience in the welfare system, we can take the reasoning Foucault outlines from his analysis of the seventeenth century penal system and find parallels to today's welfare system. More specifically, the *reasoning* behind each, the seventeenth century penal system and today's welfare system, are virtually identical.

It is a given that social messages and ways of reasoning such as these are prevalent in today's society. Acknowledging *how* the message is inserted into our lives is the first step to understanding Foucault's writings about the tracing of language and the dissolving of ideas. Then we can be pointed in a direction for further analysis of initially harmless, but ultimately life effecting use of social scripts. Such social scripts mark bodies, leaving their inscription on the psyche and affecting the body's access to upward social movement.

Panopticon

One of the more dated thoughts this paper explores doubles as one of the most prevalent in today's welfare policy. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, public policies clearly stated it was the poor's responsibility to render themselves useful to the public. It was abundantly obvious to those at the time that

¹⁰ Foucault, Michel. The Foucault Reader, *The Great Confinement*. ed. Paul Rabinow. (New York, Pantheon Books), 1984. p 137.

poverty was not caused by unemployment or any other scarcity of commodities, but rather by “the weakening of discipline and the relaxation of morals.”¹¹ As mentioned in the previous section, this view of the poor has not changed much in four centuries despite the advancement in other areas of our society.

Despite the advances American society made with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal and added welfare provisions under Lyndon B. Johnson, the 1980’s dealt a significant blow to America’s poor. Recycling mistruths and painting welfare recipients as society’s blight were commonplace and reinstituted myths into the country’s awareness. One of the most documented and harmful myths of this movement that came from the early 1980’s were speeches made by Ronald Reagan. Reagan’s comments about “Welfare Queens” who drive “Welfare Cadillacs”¹² and turned back the clock to the same attitudes present in the late Renaissance. The reality of single parents who depend on welfare to provide the most basic living allowances morphed into the mirage of single parents as morally bankrupt with no desire to pull themselves out of poverty and remains a popular script in politics today.

Current welfare cash grant assistance programs, called WorkFirst, affirm the most important goal is for a poor person to find work and all subsequent activity must directly support this objective. This solution ignores the possibility that welfare recipients might choose to better their situation through education. It also ignores the temporary nature of finding a job for many families and is more akin to treating the symptoms of poverty, lack of wealth, than treating the actual problems underlying poverty, such as lack of education to find adequate job placement. Thus finding employment is not necessarily the best solution for many of the welfare participants (or recipients). Instead finding viable, long-term employment that sustains families well above the poverty level is a much better alternative. As mentioned previously, such a job

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Over a period of about five years, Reagan told the story of the [Black] “Chicago welfare queen” who had 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards, and collected benefits for “four nonexistent deceased husbands,” bilking the government out of “over \$150,000.” The real welfare recipient to whom Reagan referred was actually convicted for using two different aliases to collect \$8,000. Reagan continued to use his version of the story even after the press pointed out the actual facts of the case to him. According to *Washington Monthly*.

hinges upon the skill and educational level of the recipient. Therefore, providing the choice of education as a goal prior to pushing people into employment seems to be a wiser course of action for welfare programs.

Adair speaks to the welfare myths' dangerous messages stating that, "Cover stories like those focusing on the evils of 'the Welfare Queen' do a double duty stabilizing and naming poor women as the 'other' and covering up or masking operations of power."¹³ Masking the operations of power is of particular interest to this discussion of the welfare system. The operations of power embedded in the welfare system today are in the form of political capital. Efforts made by politicians to 'cut the welfare rolls' earn them votes and masquerade as fiscal responsibility decisions. Unfortunately, pandering to the needs of richer voters leaves the poor quite simply, poorly situated in terms of power. Not only are the poor marked with the common social perception of laziness and lack of self-control, they are ill-equipped to combat pervasive myths that bolster the call to cut welfare recipients from services they need to survive as they are less likely to participate in the voting process.¹⁴

Even further back in history, society's views on socio-economic status conjure parallel views of one's morality. America's past includes a strong Protestant authority and Enlightenment thought. One of the societal scripts that arose from this beginning was the aptly named 'Protestant work ethic' and it directly tied with morality. A common belief is that the Protestant work ethic script is one of the cornerstones of America today. According to this script, hard work became the way for all citizens to support their country and their families and was also tied to religious beliefs. According to Adair, paternalistic beliefs stemming from the Enlightenment concerning the poor as immature citizens also play a part in the formation of current views. Compounding this belief, the immature citizen or poor woman is 'unruly', and has 'ungrateful children' further perpetuating the paternalistic society's "responsibility to shame her and to use her failure to

¹³ Adair, Vivyan. From Good Ma to Welfare Queen: A Genealogy of the Poor Woman in American Literature, Photography, and Culture. (New York, Garland Publishing), 2000. P. 8.

¹⁴ According to a survey done on voters by the U.S. Census, Nov. 2004. Survey results accessed online at <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/voting/cps2004/tab14..>

teach other young women that it is ‘morally wrong for unmarried women to bear children,’ as we ‘cast single motherhood as a selfish and immature act.’”¹⁵ Casting the mother as villain is a technique more commonly known as ‘shaming’. When one is shamed, there is an internal decision to either accept the shaming and ‘reform’ or to not accept the shaming and become even more ostracized. Either choice, there is a space in the margins of society for the shamed, and it is from here that the concept of panopticism becomes a useful tool for further examination, especially in the case of welfare mothers today.

The idea of the panopticon first appears in Jeremy Bentham’s collection of letters discussing prison reform in 1789. Bentham calls for new prison facilities built to minimize the use of law enforcement and maximize the self-punishment of the prisoners. He proposes buildings that are constructed to make a prisoner feel as if he/she cannot escape the ever-watchful eye of the prison guard, who could shoot them at any moment; the prisoner would self-correct their behavior, regardless of whether or not a prison guard was watching. Bentham proposes that the architecture mimics the properties of the observant prison guard. Foucault takes the idea of the Bentham’s panopticon, which was meant to be a way to “seeing without being seen”¹⁶ and applies it to hierarchical institutions. We can use Foucault’s analysis and apply it to the hierarchical institution of state welfare to parse out answers to an interesting conceptual question: is welfare structured to function within the main tenets of panopticism?

To watch without being seen is the hallmark of the American welfare institution. As any welfare recipient will gladly share, the sensation of being watched is omnipresent. For example, recipients are required to submit forms to their employer to verify personal details such as the dates and time of work to the wages and job benefits available to their recipient. This sensitive information includes facts that non-receipt employees do not have to divulge to their superiors, the most obvious of these is the detail the person

¹⁵ IBID. Pp. 16-17. According to Adair, sentiments originally written by William Raspberry in Ms. Smith Goes to Washington. (unk. Date of publication)

¹⁶ Bentham, Jeremy. *The Panopticon Writings*. Ed. Miran Bozovic (London: Verso, [1787]1995), p. 32

receives financial assistance from the government. This may put the worker at a disadvantage if the employer harbors any of the popular scripts concerning welfare recipients.

In recent memory, women on welfare roles were subject to even more violent intrusions in their personal life. Recipients in California tell stories of having their bedrooms and homes searched for unauthorized sexual partners during Ronald Reagan's tenure as governor. These 'flashlight raids' were meant to make sure recipients did not have same sex affairs or sexual partners outside of marriage. In my own experience as a welfare recipient in the late 1990's and early 2000's, people whispered about the Fraud Early Detection (FRED) Unit dispatched to homes at the dinner hour to verify how many occupants were in the home.¹⁷ Whether or not verification of these instances could actually be found, the impact of the mere possibility serves as a form of social control. This social control does not use a direct physical contact as a way of maintaining compliance with welfare regulations but rather a diffuse omnipresent, yet nearly invisible force. Adair discusses the process of "panoptical self-inscription" where "subjects—often paradoxically exercising their free will and agency—form themselves through language that invests their bodies and their presences with meaning...[this] discourse marks, trains, tortures and mutilates the body/subject causing it to carry out tasks, to perform (...), to absorb"¹⁸ the markings assigned to the body.

Omnipresent enforcement of welfare regulations parallels the earlier discussion of the panopticon as both use psychological self-enforcement as a means of maintaining control and compliance with rules. On the surface, the parallels between the two may seem coincidental. I contend they are in fact born of the same paternalistic mode of thinking. In both instances, the moral impetus is derived from the same metathought: the poor are indeed an unfortunate segment of the population, lesser than the middle and upper classes, and need constant reinforcement to remind them of their status in the social hierarchy and of the

¹⁷ In my case, FRED arrived at my house during the dinner hour to perform such an inspection in late 1999. When asked why I was under investigation, the FRED officer stated they had received an anonymous tip that I was lying about my circumstances. I had to comply with the FRED inspection or risk welfare sanctions including stripping my family of our benefits in the program.

¹⁸ Adair, Vivyan. From Good Ma to Welfare Queen: A Genealogy of the Poor Woman in American Literature, Photography, and Culture. (New York, Garland Publishing), 2000. P. 5.

societal rules that come with their place at the bottom. Both methods use shaming to bring about behavior modification, such as correcting perceived ‘laziness’, and to enforce welfare rules and regulations.

The use of shaming through behavior modification,¹⁹ self-regulation, and stigma²⁰ are three other ideas Foucault develops are closely linked with the panopticon, but the difference is in the *enforcer*. For the panopticon, the enforcer originates from outside of the body, but then is internalized leading to the art of punishing one who dares to step outside societal norms with shaming, stigma, and ultimately self-regulation through behavior modification—attempting to bridge the gap between living life as marginalized and aspiring to be accepted as “normal”.²¹ For the welfare system, the enforcer is internal. It is the restriction of benefits, but is internalized through the constant welfare reporting rules leading to the same result as those in the panopticon.²²

Docility, childlike, and easy to manipulate are all characteristics of the prisoners in Foucault’s analysis of discipline and punishment theory, which mandates docility as the goal of those who punish (i.e. the punishers are those who willingly marginalize and stigmatize people—bodies—in their communities/states).²³ Interestingly, from this original theory, feminists have proscribed their own interpretation of this as feminizing the marginalized. Specifically related to welfare recipients, the social stereotype represents the typical recipient as female. The childlike, incapable of functioning in society without a protector status conferred on welfare recipients today echoes the fundamental Western basis for colonization: to protect them from themselves.²⁴

¹⁹ Foucault, Michel. The Foucault Reader, *The Means of Correct Training*. ed. Paul Rabinow. (New York, Pantheon Books), 1984. P. 191.

²⁰ from IBID. *The Body of the Condemned*. P. 172.

²¹ Foucault also speaks about the normalization of collective myths as a means of controlling people—as a means of power. From IBID. *The Great Confinement*. P. 136.

²² In order to accept this analysis, the assumption is that people do not want to feel ostracized and will do what they need to in order to avoid it.

²³ From IBID. *Docile Bodies*. P. 182.

²⁴ Vivyan Adair speaks about this connection between Foucault’s ideas on docility and the feminization of the welfare recipient in her book, From Good Ma to Welfare Queen: A Genealogy of the Poor Woman in American Literature, Photography, and Culture. (New York, Garland Publishing), 2000. P. 16.

According to Adair, this echo of colonization speaks to two different reasonings. She contents the first is the idea that success is only capable “if they discipline, subjugate, and order their lives/bodies with a male presence.” The second reason for the subjugation of poor women is it inherently “positions welfare women as a threat to the male subject and his society; she is a roadblock or dangerous detour on the subject’s voyage of maturity, independence, and freedom.”²⁵ Therefore, casting the welfare woman as a social delinquent serves the ruling class, in this case the male dominated society of America.

Interestingly, the concept of social delinquency is maintained and groomed to meet the needs of the elite also appears in Foucault. The two concepts of delinquency and meeting the needs of the elite were found in both The History of Sexuality, Vol. I and “The Great Confinement” from Madness and Civilization. I discovered the two mentioned in both texts to be in tandem with one another after considering this quote from the former:

“The primary concern was not repression...of the classes exploited, but rather the body, vigor, longevity, progeniture, and descent of the classes that ‘ruled’.”²⁶

This reason behind the purposeful shaming and marking the body of the ‘other’ was particularly disturbing when I first approached this research. Nevertheless, uncovering why social labels around welfare recipients exist remains compelling. Markings in the form of the belief that most (if not all) welfare recipients are societal delinquents deserve further scrutiny to attempt an understanding of *why* they are situated as such in American popular culture—whom does it serve and why. The “who” part was easily discerned—the overclass, the elite. I had trouble formulating the “why” part until I read Foucault’s passage. When first approaching this thesis project, I had a difficult time avoiding moral judgment for people who subjugate others. I struggled with the reality that people commonly mistreated and dehumanized others, but Foucault’s analysis of these problems allowed me an opportunity of understanding, which is the first step in

²⁵ IBID. P. 14.

²⁶ The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction. Translated by Robert Hurley. (New York, Vintage Books, Vintage Books edition, 1990). p. 101.

trying to change social attitudes. Foucault's statement clarifies the intent of the overclass, which is not to dehumanize those of a lesser social status, but actually to bolster and maintain their position in the social hierarchy.

What about those who chose to cover their identity as a poor person—who, in essence, chooses to refuse their assigned social status? One woman writes of her experience in academia, “Many times, I have listened with a grim smile as colleagues and intimates have unknowingly insulted me...[I am] “passing” among them...”²⁷ Foucault would assess this ‘passing’, as the woman named it, would indeed mark her psyche. Foucault would assert this is an instance of a perceived community that “acquired an ethical power of segregation, which permitted it to eject, as into another world, all forms of social uselessness.”²⁸ The ‘passing’ person, once accepted into their chosen social status, is continuously marked in silence as the surrounding folks in the new social tier adhere to another value system—one that subjectifies the lower tier. Applied to the specific problem in this paper, marking the body to hide one's social class, and thus ‘pass’ for another, is not a cure for the ills of being a welfare recipient. The ability to ‘pass’ also centers itself on race. For example, it is easier for poor whites to ‘pass’ than poor nonwhites because of another social script that locates nonwhites as not financially proficient when compared to whites. Paradoxically this racial social script, unlike others mentioned in this paper enables poor whites more of an ability to ‘pass’. The ability to ‘pass’ is not necessarily desirable, because one is cut off from the group of people which they identify and feel most comfortable around. The option to ‘pass’ therefore is merely putting a bandaid on gushing wound.

Naturally, once banishment from one's work and social environment occurs, Foucault suggests it is detrimental for any opportunity for advancement and networking. The choice to cover or pass is a matter of

²⁷ Adair, Vivyan, C. and Sandra L. Dahlberg, Eds. Reclaiming Class: Women, Poverty, and the Promise of Higher Education in America. *Academic Constructions of “White Trash”* by Nell Sullivan. (Philadelphia, Temple University Press), 2003. Pp. 56-57.

²⁸ Foucault, Michel. The Foucault Reader, *The Great Confinement*. ed. Paul Rabinow. (New York, Pantheon Books), 1984. P. 136.

survival for many facing a similar situation as the woman above; it is the choice between being seen and being invisible. However, the fact that a difficult choice exists for her and others like her is not the focus of my thesis. Instead, the similarities between past modes of thinking and current attitudes toward welfare recipients are brought to light in the hopes that we can begin to mold future approaches. Such approaches would mediate the essential problem with today's welfare system: the need for a fresh perspective that does not derive itself from centuries-old penal system ideology. Of course, understanding is but the first step in a long journey toward repairing societal attitudes concerning poor women and their children, but it is but one step. Acknowledging that education for the poor is another step on this path is crucial. Knowledge is power, and without power the path would end at simply 'understanding'. Foucault champions the potential for rebellion inherent in power structures using education as a catalyst. He posits, "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it."²⁹ Education as discourse and then the possibility of rebellion against the status quo, as Foucault asserts, is the primary reason I am writing this thesis.

Personal Narrative

Part of this project was born out of my fascination with the personal as the academic (and vice versa). In order to complete my theoretical framework, I felt compelled to include personal narrative. This was accomplished by recording my own experiences with the welfare system as a student and by interviewing my mother, who was a single parent welfare recipient while she was attempting to complete her education. The original goal was to intersperse the theoretical analysis with narrative, but I chose to

separate the two in order to give the reader an understandable grasp on the theory and then invite the reader into the absorbing personal narratives I gathered for this project.

“I wondered if Bethel, the liaison between the welfare office and my community college, would have helped me if I hadn’t shown so much promise in the first few quarters of the vocational training.

(With Bethel’s assistance, I was able to complete my associate’s degree while remaining ‘coded’ in the welfare database as a vocational student. Without this bending of the rules, I would not have been able to complete my associate’s degree.)

Thoughts swirled around in my head. What if I had gone through a depression, or lost my job, or just decided more time with my children was necessary for their proper development? What if I did not spend a wandering childhood, honing my chameleon-like skills that allowed me to engage Bethel as if I were a trusted confidant, a friend? Would Bethel have helped me if I were of a different ethnic origin? Had English as a second language? Had a disability? While I graciously accepted the help that was given to me, I questioned the ability of those who came after me to advance because of someone’s kindness. Who would be able to escape the bondage of welfare and minimum wage—even with the vocational training—if they did not have someone or some agency to help guide them through the educational process? The vocational training program I was enrolled in was the only education that the welfare system would allow me to access. \

(I questioned the assistance offered to me because I was engrained to be distrustful of anyone who had the authority to mark my future without my consent.)

As I went on as a transfer student at a local university, I continued my quest whittling away at the welfare system’s goals, as I perceived them. It seemed from personal experience, the welfare system was designed to just barely keep a family

living, barely above the federal poverty line³⁰, and to limit their chances of upward succession by dictating what vocational training programs would be accessible. The goals of the welfare agency were to reduce welfare roles, not poverty. Take for example, one of the most coveted vocational education spots that welfare supports is for a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA). The nursing program lasts for 3 months and the average hourly wage for a Nursing Assistant³¹ in 2005 is \$9.98 nationwide, and a mere dollar above the minimum wage in Washington State.³² How could I support two children at this wage?³³ I would forever be at the mercy of my employers, and having been in the job market for a while, there were too many bad apples to have them in control of my life.

(Again, the fear that I had learned from the welfare experience told me that to trade one person with the authority to mark my body and who cared little for my family's personal advancement [i.e. welfare personnel] for an employer who felt similarly would not be bettering my position.)

University was different. There was no more looking over my shoulder and micro analyzing each course by the welfare office to verify that it was acceptable to them. Instead, I had the absolute freedom to choose to learn whatever I wanted to learn. Getting to the University had been a miracle achieved with the help of many people working against stringent welfare policies that disallow higher education.”³⁴

When narrative is understood as history, the relationship between history and the community in which it is situated comes to the forefront. This is my history, marked on my body, recorded in my memory, and situated in the communities in which I interacted. I wanted to examine poor welfare mothers

³⁰ The federal poverty line for a family of three is \$16,090/year per the government's standards. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/05poverty.shtml>, accessed November 21, 2005.

³¹ Certified Nursing Assistant

³² nursingassistants.net, accessed November 21, 2005. Although this wage is nearly \$20,000/year, the high cost of living is not taken into consideration when determining an adequate wage for skilled professions such as this.

³³ For clarification purposes, I was never a CNA, nor did I receive an annual salary higher than \$15,000 ever. However, I was a skilled technician in the medical field.

³⁴ Taken from the author's (Sunshine Eversull) memoirs, written November 2005.

and how marked bodies interface with the rest of the world. According to the essay, *The voice of the past: Oral history*, the relationship between history and community should consist of “a series of exchanges, a dialectic...between classes and generations.”³⁵ Precisely this type of dialogue is one I hope ensues after engaging with the theoretical analysis and the narrative presented in this paper.

My mother, Lucinda Lasater, also experienced the markings of being a poor single parent with aspirations aiming above the poverty line. Her experiences were detailed in a series of interviews I had at her home. She shared much of her life story that I had not heard before. New information about the woman who had raised me was a surprise benefit of this project. I began to understand my mother as I had never thought possible. Our less than harmonious relationship, which had been a staple in the past, gave way to appreciation for one another. First, I had to record my story, and then I had to reach out to others, starting with my own mother, on my thesis journey of understanding the contemporary problems facing single parent mothers.

My mother shares she “barely knew what it meant to have a future let alone all of the responsibilities of adult life. I had no idea there were so many opportunities out here in the world, and that all I had to do to access them was to work at it.”³⁶ She shared her struggles trying to achieve her Registered Nursing degree, an associate’s level degree she started in 1981 and completed in 2005. Throughout the twenty-four years spent achieving this goal, she single handedly raised six children and was a member of the U.S. Army (since 1987). She had no assistance from liaisons at community colleges, as I had the opportunity to access. She was a welfare recipient for nearly ten years in the 1980’s, living through the scrutiny of the “Welfare Queen” identity.

When asked how she maintained the drive to complete her education she responded,

³⁵ Thompson, Paul. *The voice of the past: Oral history*. In Perks, Robert, and Alistair Thomson, Eds. The Oral History Reader. (London and New York, Routledge), 1998. P. 28.

³⁶ Lucinda Lasater, personal communication (interview), May 6, 2006.

“I don’t know what it is. Maybe it’s something in my personality, maybe it’s my heavenly father. I don’t know. Something just always kept tugging at me to get out of my situation [referring to the perpetual physical, psychological, and sexual abuse she experienced as a child]. You know some people they stay in their situation and they just you know, kinda like a chained up dog. They just stay there and they don’t ever try to chew through the chain.”³⁷

Finding the inspiration to go on despite the attitudes that marked her as a young welfare mother and a disposable member of society is one of the most powerful points in her narrative. The most important thing one can do is to remain vocal while going through difficult times. Silence is violence, the slogan of many groups among them Amnesty International’s Stop the Violence campaign, rings true for the voices of the millions of welfare recipients. The marking that society inscribes on our bodies cannot sustain itself in the face of radical social transformation. Such transformation is found by identifying the sources of marking and changing the way it etches and assigns our social function and identity through challenging the authoritarian judgment inherent with the silence of the masses. The purpose of using narrative in tandem with a historical-theoretical approach is to create shared meanings—to make fuller human beings within a community.

³⁷ IBID.

Community Outreach Summary

Introduction

This is a supplemental piece of work meant to enhance the theoretical analysis explored in the thesis. The community outreach portion of my thesis work is just as important as the analysis present in the previous sections. In order to make connections with the segment of the population most affected by discussions surrounding single parent students, I identified ways in which my own experience was lacking. The most pressing issue that I faced was lack of a social network in which to share resources and social connections. My community outreach seeks to amend this obstacle. I created a website, a virtual discussion board in WIKI format,³⁸ and held a workshop at a local community college. I continue my commitment to community outreach through email I have specially acquired for this purpose, linked from my website homepage and through telephone contact with workshop participants and those referred through the original participants.

My website address is <http://www.eversunny.bravehost.com> . This is the main portal for the electronic resources I have compiled. The website counter I installed shows over fifty hits since the May 9, 2006. The WIKI site has yet to have any postings, but I perceive this to be an issue of familiarity rather than unwillingness to participate in the site. The workshop was held on May 16, 2006 at Pierce College, a local community college in Lakewood, Washington where I am an alumna. The workshop, titled “The SuperParent Workshop”, was hosted by the TRIO Department, which specializes in educational support for first generation college students. I have included my workshop proposal and my post-workshop reflection in the sections to follow.

³⁸ The WIKI format allows for people to exchange and edit information. The same technology is used in the popular online encyclopedia, Wikipedia.

Project Proposal

Statement of Goals

I would like to form a discussion group/panel/workshop³⁹ to create interactive dialogue between those who have successfully navigated the welfare system and the higher education system and those who are just starting their journey or want the opportunity to network. Critical engagement, thoughtful responses, and instilling a sense of community and understanding that each participant is a resource for one another are expected outcomes of this interaction.

Means to Complete Goals

I plan to hold a forum meeting in the evening or during the day, depending on availability of the target audience (to be arranged after conferring with April West-Baker or Terry Green in Pierce College TRIO Program).

During the forum,⁴⁰ the theme of the gathering is focused around personal empowerment. The participating members should be interested in the unique challenges that face parents returning to school and also be on some type of social welfare/aid or interested in this subgroup.

After the introduction to this workshop setting, we will create a list of challenges that may include some of the following:

- childcare (both finding quality care and the financial burden of non-subsidized childcare)
- how to balance family and school priorities
- the lack of communities in higher education (especially four year institutions) and internal school supports particular to single parent/students who navigate the social welfare system

³⁹ All three terms to be used throughout this document to mean the same gathering mentioned in this introduction.

⁴⁰ Please refer to Appendix I for a sample time management plan.

Next, we will move into small group work to decipher the problem and suggest possible remedies, with emphasis on the latter. This part of the session is necessary for the intended purpose of finding one another useful as resources for alternative points of view, mainly allowing for this space during the solution part of the discussion. Hopefully, the small groups will consist of a mix of people who are not already close, but are somewhat acquainted with one another. Group dynamics may be something to consider before gathering for the workshop. I suggest a workshop signup sheet made available to participants in advance to allow preconfiguration of small groups in collaboration with TRIO staff for a more productive discussion, if a concern arises.

After the small groups have discussed their problem and their suggested remedies, we will reconvene in a large group setting to open the stream of ideas to all. This should be the largest use of time and will include participation from all members. At this point, a guided, uniform method of diction (such as whiteboard or overhead) should be used to ensure all ideas put forth are encountered with some measure of importance. This technique will model the goal of finding one another useful resources and acknowledging each person's contribution to the group.

The closing of the workshop/discussion group is an emphasis on building personal connections with those around oneself. I will also have a collection of resources that I have gathered during my educational journey and would be willing to share. In addition, I am planning to set up a website (operational date early May) to allow the sharing of information in WIKI format online. The website will also contain links to resources.⁴¹ This forum may be extended to more than one session depending on demand for this type of interaction and interest in any of the issues presented.

⁴¹ I originally planned on making a 'primer' to handout at the end of the discussion section, but decided that the format of a webpage with WIKI (a message board type of hosting) would stay closer to the intention of continuing the dialogue long after the workshop had ended. The website is fully operational at this time. If there are issues surrounding access to the internet for some students, we can reevaluate this plan and also have written handouts that contain some of the information contained on the website.

The goals of creating community, fostering a sense of togetherness, allowing a space for ideas circulation, and cultivating a forum for critical engagement with issues that follow single parent students from the beginning to the end of their higher education experience are supported by this workshop. It would be a great opportunity to hold such a gathering at Pierce College, in association with the TRIO program. Preferably, I would like to have a discussion group (and have the website ready) in the latter half of May.

Workshop Reflection

The process of creating the workshop was very useful to me in the larger scheme of the thesis process. I was able to create a project proposal, which allowed me to thoroughly examine my own motives for the outreach portion of my thesis. I believe the project proposal also helped ‘validate’ my project in the eyes of those involved with the workshop process, for example, the contact person at Pierce College and my fellow writing group members at the University of Washington.

Seeing my plans manifested in action was the most rewarding part of the proposal process. Providing a networking piece to single parents was the original goal. It seems that my intentions and the reality of the situation diverged at the point of accessibility. Surprisingly, it was not accessibility in the form of no internet access that I found the most crippling; it was the choice of time of day for the workshopping process. Unfortunately, the workshop was held in the middle of the day on a Tuesday when the weather was very nice and sunny. There was little participation from the target audience because it was non-existent!

Despite the initial setback, I consider the workshop to be a success. The intent was to create a space where single parent students could learn how to freely network with one another to find resources and

advice that is simply not available through ‘official’ sources.⁴² As my own experiences repeatedly note, I would have missed the opportunities afforded to those ‘in the know’ if I had not learned this crucial skill. The workshop I intended to give was geared toward students, but took an unexpected turn and the end result was a collaborative workshop between the Pierce College staff and me. Attending the workshop were members of the TRIO advising program,⁴³ a Women’s Center representative, and one student/parent in the beginning and one at the end. I brought along a computer and a projector to display the internet resources I developed. TRIO supplied a projector screen. We did not use the projector or the screen, opting to use the computer itself as a gathering point.

The TRIO advising staff members were very interested in my website and WIKI resources and were the first participants to fully engage with my internet resources, as one of the staff members had recently completed his Master’s degree in Technology Education. They were excited about the possibility of referring students to a website link and working on improving their services to the single parent student population. According to one TRIO advisor, the issue of a lack of useful resources available to this student population is a constant problem the advisors face. This comment solidifies my resolve to make sure this resource becomes available to those in the first line of access—the community college counselors.

Another enriching encounter occurred with the Pierce College Women’s Center representative. TRIO had contacted the Women’s Center to set up a resource table at my workshop event to help students know about their own campus resources as well. The Women’s Center representative was very excited about my website and WIKI site. She told me she was compelled to offer my site as a resource to all students and that she would show my website to her supervisor in hopes of creating their own website based

⁴² For example, I had childcare expenses that were paid during my two and half years of community college until I earned my Associate’s Degree. Officially, under state welfare rules, one is not allowed to have childcare assistance longer than twelve consecutive months if not employed full time, which I was not. Unofficially, I knew how that this welfare rule did not apply if the community college computer code used to describe your academic intentions displayed a vocational degree code. Thus, I was coded as pre-dental assistant throughout my community college experience and had childcare expenses somewhat covered (for workstudy time only).

⁴³ The TRIO Program assists first generation, low income college students in academic planning for their four year degree at the community college level. My workshop was hosted by the Pierce College TRIO Department.

on my model. This is exciting news for the project! I exchanged contact information with her so that her supervisor may contact me if needed. She gave me a suggestion to also include medical care resources on the resource page. This is something I plan to add to the website after more research is completed.

The first student I spoke with during the workshop was a parent of five small children. She was not very interested in staying for the workshop because she had to pick up her little ones from daycare. I handed her a card and let her know to contact me at any time. The second student came during the last fifteen minutes of the workshop. Her activities on campus were astounding. She is a single parent of one preschool aged child and is very active at school.

This student told me of her unsuccessful attempts to create a single parent student group at Pierce College and the frustrations surrounding the lack of resources available to students in her situation. I immediately sympathized with her, told her about my thesis project, and gave her my business card with my contact information and personal phone number. She was quite responsive to what I had brought and let me know how much she appreciated me taking the time to come down from Seattle to share my resources.

My mother, who also attended the workshop, was notably disappointed given the small turn out. Ironically, despite the low turn out, I was very pleased with the networking that I was able to accomplish! I am convinced the communication that occurred will help Pierce College's Women's Center and TRIO Department to foster programs that are geared for outreach to these particular student populations. My objective for this workshop was to create a place for single parent students to network and find resources. I consider this workshop a success because there are now two additional places for these discussions to occur on campus, in the TRIO Department and the Women's Center.

The focus for future workshopping events may expand to include departments and any other faculty and staff. I am a bit hesitant to commit to this as a definite change, but perhaps weighing the benefits and drawbacks in the next section, I will be better positioned.

For Future Workshopping Events

The advantages of having a mixed group of participants that includes students, staff, and faculty at a workshop event like mine are that the points of view would contribute to a much richer discussion and possibly more networking opportunities for the participants in general. The disadvantages lay in the students' abilities to obtain information within their own peer group. One of the original concepts developed around the workshop was the ability for single parent students to network among themselves to nurture networking possibilities and find 'unofficial' suggestions to the problems they may face.

If I had to create a new proposal, I would invite both students and college employees to the workshop. Including both in the introduction and at the end of the workshop would create spaces for interaction between the two groups, with the possible benefits mentioned above. In the middle, my proposal called for the separation of the workshopping group which would not change, but would also include a further separation of groups by their student/nonstudent status. Allowing smaller groups of this composition would allow the freedom for students to mingle among their peers, and thus more likely to open up to one another.

Closing Comments

Foucault's theories allow us to challenge the traditional notions of the body and see it as something that is marked by everyday experience. These markings transcend time and can be used to evaluate the context of an individual. Markings of the body persist because society has not changed its ways of thinking across class and gender lines in the case of single parent mothers who seek to achieve a way out of poverty through education. The single most important action taken is raising the awareness level for those who are less fortunate. This awareness of their plight builds self-confidence through the lessening of the silence that holds them in the margins of society. As they regain personal dignity, they demand access to higher

education which, in turn, provides a pathway out of poverty. This work is a life long effort and one that I will continue to carry on in the future as I attend law school. Public service and advocacy for those who are marginalized in society is what I dedicate this thesis and the rest of my life to achieving.

Appendix

Appendix I A

Washington State Poverty Level by County

According to <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/06poverty.shtml>

County Name	Number of people living below poverty level	Standard Deviation	Percentage of people living in poverty	Percentage Standard Deviation
Garfield County	75	52 to 97	16.1	11.2 to 20.9
Wahkiakum County	97	71 to 123	13.7	10.0 to 17.4
Columbia County	163	117 to 209	19.6	14.1 to 25.2
San Juan County	327	237 to 417	12.8	9.3 to 16.3
Skamania County	373	269 to 477	15.2	11.0 to 19.5
Lincoln County	383	281 to 485	17.1	12.6 to 21.7
Ferry County	424	310 to 538	25.0	18.3 to 31.7
Pend Oreille County	663	487 to 839	23.8	17.5 to 30.1
Jefferson County	863	638 to 1,089	18.0	13.3 to 22.7
Pacific County	870	641 to 1,100	21.8	16.1 to 27.6
Kittitas County	1,011	747 to 1,275	15.3	11.3 to 19.3
Klickitat County	1,016	747 to 1,285	21.4	15.7 to 27.1
Whitman County	1,036	764 to 1,308	15.3	11.3 to 19.3
Asotin County	1,103	823 to 1,384	23.1	17.2 to 29.0
Adams County	1,227	901 to 1,554	22.9	16.8 to 29.0
Douglas County	1,544	1,133 to 1,954	16.9	12.4 to 21.4
Island County	1,944	1,440 to 2,448	10.6	7.9 to 13.4
Mason County	2,092	1,548 to 2,635	18.7	13.9 to 23.6
Stevens County	2,195	1,624 to 2,767	21.9	16.2 to 27.6
Clallam County	2,353	1,740 to 2,966	17.9	13.2 to 22.6
Walla Walla County	2,492	1,846 to 3,139	19.4	14.4 to 24.5
Okanogan County	2,690	2,008 to 3,373	27.9	20.8 to 35.0
Chelan County	3,247	2,406 to 4,089	18.5	13.7 to 23.3
Lewis County	3,461	2,598 to 4,323	20.5	15.4 to 25.7
Grays Harbor County	3,469	2,564 to 4,373	22.1	16.3 to 27.8
Franklin County	4,222	3,114 to 5,330	22.1	16.3 to 27.9
Skagit County	4,525	3,357 to 5,693	17.1	12.7 to 21.5
Cowlitz County	4,682	3,505 to 5,858	19.8	14.8 to 24.7
Grant County	5,458	4,033 to 6,883	22.9	16.9 to 28.9
Benton County	6,036	4,475 to 7,597	14.4	10.7 to 18.1
Thurston County	6,349	4,771 to 7,927	12.5	9.4 to 15.6
Whatcom County	6,653	5,009 to 8,298	16.7	12.6 to 20.9
Kitsap County	7,143	5,322 to 8,963	12.1	9.0 to 15.2
Clark County	15,959	12,000 to 19,918	15.3	11.5 to 19.1
Yakima County	18,022	13,407 to 22,638	26.0	19.4 to 32.7
Spokane County	18,456	13,888 to 23,023	17.8	13.4 to 22.2
Snohomish County	20,617	15,568 to 25,666	12.6	9.5 to 15.7
Pierce County	28,024	21,182 to 34,866	14.7	11.1 to 18.3
King County	46,139	35,092 to 57,185	12.1	9.2 to 15.0
Washington Totals	227,403	206,643 to 248,163	15.3	13.9 to 16.7

Appendix II A

Federal Poverty Level according to US Department of Health and Human Services according to <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/06poverty.shtml> :

Persons in Family or Household	48 Contiguous States and D.C.	Alaska	Hawaii
1	\$ 9,800	\$12,250	\$11,270
2	13,200	16,500	15,180
3	16,600	20,750	19,090
4	20,000	25,000	23,000
5	23,400	29,250	26,910
6	26,800	33,500	30,820
7	30,200	37,750	34,730
8	33,600	42,000	38,640
For each additional person, add	3,400	4,250	3,910

SOURCE: *Federal Register*, Vol. 71, No. 15, January 24, 2006, pp. 3848-3849

Appendix III B (For Project Proposal)

5 min	Intro
10 min	Brainstorm Problems Facing Welfare Moms/Students
15 min	Break into small groups to discuss specific problems and their potential remedies.
15 min	workshop small group remedies: Pros? Cons? Alternative ideas? Use board/overhead to workshop ideas in a central location.
5 min	Closing

Total: 50 minutes (one class period), and could easily be extended to one hour.

Appendix IV B (For Workshop Reflection)

Below is a sample itinerary for future workshopping events:

Introduction (personal and to the workshop)

Brainstorm Problems Facing Welfare Moms/Students in Academia

Break into small groups to discuss.

For students: Discuss specific problems and their potential remedies. Focus on creating a positive space for discussion of critical issues. *There may be more than one group of students.*

For nonstudents: Identify strengths and weaknesses for single parent student success in current school policy. Are there programs in place to address the needs of these students? Are there places where improvements can be made? *There may be more than one group of nonstudents, but aim for departmental variance within the group composition.*

- Workshop small group remedies: still remaining in small groups think briefly about the benefits and drawbacks of the solutions discussed. Are there any more alternative ideas?

Use board/overhead/large pieces of easel board paper to workshop ideas in a central location to each group.

Reconvene in a large mixed group and bring the pieces discussed by each small group to the original large group. Have a discussion across small group lines. How effective were the suggestions? Anything else to offer?

Closing

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