

**Community Cultural Wealth: The Care and Resilience of Mothers in Poverty**

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## Introduction

In 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA, AKA welfare reform) placed a 60-month lifetime limit on welfare receipt (Bloom et al. 2002). Researchers have used the term “timing out” to categorize families who have reached their lifetime limit on welfare (Bloom et al. 2002). In 2001, the first wave of approximately 231,000 families nationwide reached their lifetime limit on welfare, leaving them with little to no financial safety net (Bloom et al. 2002). Despite research showing that self-sufficiency is rarely achieved in even double that time frame, this policy persists today, with many states implementing time limits of less duration (Farrell et al. 2008).

Welfare reform has been largely ineffective because it was built on the American myth that hard work and effort always pay off (Rank et al. 2021). Myths regarding the poor, including beliefs that they are lazy, immoral, and defective, have endured for centuries (Brush 1997, Handler & Hasenfeld 1991, & Neubeck & Cazenave 2001). Moral ideologies about poverty, the family structure, gender roles, work ethic, culture, and white dominance have been used to control the labor market and as a form of racial control (Handler & Hasenfeld 1991 & Neubeck & Cazenave 2001). In particular, the “welfare mother” has been constructed in dominant society in a highly racialized context, pointing to African American unmarried mothers as a gendered symbol of deviant female sexuality (Collins 2000). These women are seen as “bad mothers” who is not only unable to provide for her children, but also “...incapable of nurturing, protecting, or training their children” (Brush 1997:729). Poor mothers are also seen as problematic because they cannot both satisfy the needs of the formal labor market and fulfill the traditional family structure which is idealized in the US (Neubeck & Cazenave 2001). The result of this stereotype is a harmful stigma that welfare mothers must contend with by navigating in the margins of

market labor and carework to provide for their children. Poor women who have been forced off welfare attempt to participate in the formal labor market as much as possible, however the lack of high-paying, full-time jobs and flexibility that allow them to also care for their children, leads them to rely on family, packaging resources, and sometimes a low-wage job and/or informal labor (Weigt 2023). These deficit ideations cause more harm and deviate from solving the problem of poverty.

Through my research, I will expand and apply the Community Cultural Wealth framework to a new context by exploring the lived experiences of women who have timed-out of welfare. Though they are often seen from a deficit perspective, I examine the lived experiences of timed-out women and show how they care for their children from a strengths-based approach. The guiding question for this research is, how do timed out mothers develop and display CCW? Specifically, I focus on the ways they give their children aspirational and navigational capital through their carework and resilience.

## **Literature**

Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework recognizes the existence and value of other types of cultural knowledge such as: aspirational capital, familial capital, resistance capital, navigational capital, social capital, and linguistic capital (2005). CCW is heavily influenced by Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and Critical Race Theory (2005). Bourdieu's cultural capital theory has been employed in contemporary research to underscore deficits in low-income and marginalized communities (Yosso 2005). CCW seeks to include the "communal funds of knowledge" that marginalized communities possess as legitimate forms of capital (Yosso 2005:76; Yosso and Garcia 2006). Navigational capital is obtained by learning to maneuver through the constraints and inequality of institutions (Yosso 2005). I apply

navigational capital to the new context of timed-out welfare mothers to explain how they navigate(d) through the welfare system and continue to use their institutional knowledge to provide a subsistence for their family. Yosso (2005) defines aspirational capital as the resiliency expressed through hopes and dreams of the future despite the barriers of one's circumstances.

Applying Yosso's framework are researchers such as Turner (2021) and Yrigollen-Robbins (2022). Turner (2021) utilized Yosso's community cultural wealth to examine how Latinos drew from the expressions of their mother's aspirational, familial, and emotional capital as motivation and persistence to attend a university. Turner (2021) found that the respondent's perseverance to achieve a postsecondary education was inspired by the sacrifice, love, resilience, and protection they received from their mothers. Significant to their work was the finding that maternal influence is crucial to the educational trajectories of Latinos, despite mothers having few economic resources and little if any postsecondary educational experience (Turner 2021). Yrigollen-Robbins (2022) found evidence of CCW in a Latinx immigrant community in Georgia as they interviewed mothers about how they overcame socioeconomic barriers to raise and educate their children. In each of the interviews, the researchers found that the women showed evidence of "...resistant and navigational capital as they asserted themselves as strong mothers..." and maneuvered through their children's schools despite facing a system not made with them in mind (Yrigollen-Robbins 2022:1557).

#### Redefining Resilience:

In addition to CCW, my work is theoretically guided by the concepts of resilience and carework. Resilience is redefined to include a systemic interconnectedness of individual, family, and community survival strategies as optimal responses and expressions of resilience (Stanton-Salazar & Spina 2000 and Seccombe 2002). This model includes the inner resources and cultural

competencies that allow one to view obstacles as surmountable, create strategies to recover and bounce back from adversity, and involvement in activities that can strengthen identity (extracurricular activities/religious groups) (Yosso 2006, Seccombe 2002 & Stanton-Salazar & Spina 2000). Resilience is the building block for the expression and transmission of aspirational and navigational capital.

### Carework

Carework is underrepresented labor, especially the invisible emotional and love labors that women pour into their children. Emotional labor includes the listening, planning, organizing, empathizing, comforting, and managing mother's do to maintain emotional attachments with their children. The effort mothers put into loving and caring for their children takes energy and time out of their own internal resources and goals (O'Brien 2009). Carework is a vehicle by which the mothers in my sample demonstrate CCW.

### **Methods**

I analyzed 52 interviews of 33 families who have timed-out of welfare. Respondents were randomly solicited through the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency based on their records of timed-out families and convenience sampling from local agencies. The interviews were conducted in two rounds (one in 2011 and one in 2012) and transcribed by Dr. Jill Weigt of Cal State San Marcos. A snapshot of the demographics are as follows:

# Women/Men	32/1
# Black	13
# White	12
# Latino	8
Average age	37
Average # of Children	3.21

After inductively coding the interview transcripts and noting many instances of resiliency and cultural wealth, I returned to the data with a more deductive eye and analyzed it using a Community Cultural Wealth framework (CCW) (Yosso 2005). Using the coding software, Atlas.ti I grouped characteristics of CCW, resilience, and carework under Yosso's (2005) various forms of cultural wealth. The two forms of capital that appeared most frequently in the data were navigational and aspirational capital.

## **Findings**

### Aspirational Capital

Aspirational capital is seen in the everyday survival and sacrificial acts of timed-out mothers. The mothers report how their model of sacrifice builds resilience in children. During the interview, Sherry an African American mother of 3 and grandmother of 1 shared how proud she was of her 16-year-old son's success in school (he was on the honor roll 2 years running). When the interviewer asked what she thought accounted for his success she explained,

"Just a lot of hard work...just seeing me struggle... basically the job I have, just struggling, struggling to make ends meet and trying to keep my... family together and, you know, trying to keep a roof over our head, make sure we've got food, hang pictures up, clothes, evictions..."

Bouncing back from the evictions, homelessness, and the subsequent splitting up and reuniting of her family has modeled to her son that obstacles are not unsurmountable. Despite all that poverty has thrown at her, Sherry chooses to highlight how her family has persevered and thrived. It has been through her care work of striving for a home where she can "put pictures up," and working hard at her job to give him food and clothes that she demonstrates her persistence towards being a "good mother." Ultimately, Sherry provides an example of how resilience is a building block towards transmitting aspirational capital.

Resilience is demonstrated in the daily personal sacrifices each of these women make to care for their children. Sofia, a White mother of 3 children is one example of a mother who readily prioritizes her children's well-being over her own physical needs,

“...what is essential to me is making sure my kids have a roof over their heads, and food in their stomach, and clothes on their back... I'll do without before they will. You know there's times when it gets bad to where I just have enough to feed my kids and I can't eat, ...but I'm making sure that they're going to eat...I'll go without before I'll have my kids go without.”

Poverty puts timed-out mothers into a position where their professed dedication to their children turns into daily concrete sacrifices. Mothers from any socioeconomic background may express such a level of commitment to their children, but poor mothers truly embody it in a way that surpasses the ordinary. Through these costly sacrifices, poor mothers use their inner resources to demonstrate the power of their love and care for their children.

Aspirational capital is evident in the women's pursuit of their own goals, which they believe will offer their children a better future and inspire them to pursue their own aspirations. Teresa, a Latina mother of 4 was homeless by the age of 14 and forced to survive on the streets. Earlier in the interview, Teresa described how she built resilience by working through her struggles so “her kids have it easy now.” By overcoming her circumstances, she models aspirational capital to her children,

“I’m making sure they finish high school. I’ve showed them (her children) when I was going to work, I was going to school. I graduated [from] medical terminology...this year when I go back to school, I’m going to get into [a] medical assistant [program].”

When asked what she hopes for her children’s future she said, “I’ve [told] them... ‘you guys are the future.’ You gotta start thinking about making this world a better place...”

Teresa demonstrates resilience in how she balanced work and school while also caring for her children. She specifically highlights how she “showed them (her kids)” that through

perseverance, she was able to complete her medical terminology program. Her future goal to finish her medical assistant training shows that she continues to strive to be that example for her children. Teresa's aspirations for her children to "make this world a better place" display that she has high expectations for her children and recognizes that education is an important part of accomplishing them ("I'm making sure they finish high school").

The mothers described how they provided support for their children which they never had. Clarissa, a White mother of 3 explains that her college educated parents set up college funds for she and her sister which they never took advantage of because they lacked the encouragement to pursue it,

"...they (her parents) just naturally assumed we'd go to college. I never had them encouraging me, telling me, '...college is great. You need to do this. You have the whole world in your hands.' I never had anybody telling me that. Because they thought with tradition, you just do it – that's what you do. I'm telling my kids how important it is. And that they could be anything they want to be."

According to Clarissa, her parents never passed on the importance and motivation needed to get to college, despite having the cultural and economic capital that is supposed to be a major determinate of children achieving social mobility. Clarissa's example posits that aspirational capital is just as important as economic capital and traditional cultural capital; She recognizes the importance of aspirations and motivation, so she passes those on to her children despite not having pursued them herself. Because of her dedication to her children's success, they are encouraged to not only beat poverty but push the boundaries of their goals.

Clarissa's daughter Maura joins the conversation and echoes a family mantra they've evidently recited on numerous occasions,

"Clarissa: Because we're gonna do what? We're gonna ... reach for the stars.

Maura: Reach for the stars."

This interaction suggests a tangible transfer of aspirational capital complementing Clarissa's earlier discussion. Furthermore, her love labor and carework is also evident through this exchange.

### Navigational Capital

During the interviews, women explained how they navigate the welfare system by leveraging between the margins of cash assistance and the low-wage and informal labor market. Yessica, a Latina mother of 2 explains her rationale behind staying at her low-wage job as a parking booth attendant,

"...I work an extra day, it throws me off....I always tell my boss, "Don't ask me to work extra days on certain months, because then it's going to throw off my Welfare."

Through her experiences on welfare, Yessica has built a deep understanding of the rules and requirements to receive the benefits she needs. She knows just how much she can work to pay her bills but not make too much so that her benefits get taken away or reduced. Any advancement at all has immediate consequences that could endanger her children's health (lost Medi-Cal benefits) or put them deeper into poverty. While getting a higher wage job or more hours may pay off in the long run, she doesn't have the economic support to get her through that transition. Therefore, this is the most strategic path she can take towards providing for and being available to her family. These are strategies and skills many women used to ensure they could care for their children in the ways they deemed necessary.

The mothers in this study display navigational capital through their resilience in navigating educational institutions. Danise, a White mother of 3 was able to secure her daughter, who is biracial, a spot in a well-regarded charter high school, which she says has a 100%

acceptance rate to prestigious universities which will decrease her daughter's chances of living in poverty and having to deal with the inequitable treatment she has experienced,

"It's right here for her. I'm like, 'Oh man, you'll never have to live like this.' That's it. You'll never have to worry about whoever president comes in and says, 'Okay, that's it, that's all forever, nothing for anybody anymore,' not just, 'Okay, here's your time clock...'"

The mothers report working hard to provide their children with opportunities that will prevent them from experiencing the same dehumanization and work expectations they were subject to through the welfare system. They work hard to navigate these systems in the hopes their children will not have to. Danise's comparison of her welfare experience to being at the whim of "whichever president comes in," vividly illustrates the powerlessness felt by poor mothers confronting imposed time limits on their ability to provide necessary carework for their children.

Navigational capital also appears as the passing on cautionary wisdom and knowledge of the system(s) that have contributed to their struggles. One white mother of 3 mixed race children reported that she told her son,

"Don't go cop a felony. Don't go get yourself a felony, 'cause you'll be ruined.' And I always tell them, 'Don't you want to make it out of this neighborhood?' Me and him always talked about that. 'Do you really want to live here, in this neighborhood? Don't you want to make it out of the neighborhood?'"

Clarissa's personal experience navigating the legal system almost cost her the job she has as a home health aide which requires a clean criminal record. Clarissa coaches her son on the importance of staying out of the legal system because she recognizes that the justice system leaves little room for the poor to escape poverty if they find themselves involved in it.

## **Discussion**

Contrary to societal representations of poor mothers, my analysis shows that timed-out mothers navigate poverty and inequitable systems with resilience, care, resourcefulness, and

skill. Despite significant challenges, they leverage their emotional labor to transmit aspirational and navigational capital to their children, aiming to enhance future social mobility. Such investments are often overlooked in everyday discourse about poor mothers. As O'Brien (2009) argues, marginally positioned mothers invest greater levels of emotional capital into their children compared to middle-class mothers. This investment is evident in the extreme sacrifices made by the mothers in this study, drawing from their own emotional and physical resources to support their children ("I will go without"). Disconnected and timed-out mothers exemplify hard work and sacrifice, imparting cultural wealth to their children through their resilience and wisdom gleaned from personal experiences.

This study also underscores the value of different forms of cultural wealth. These mothers' cultural wealth is imbued within their carework and the displays of aspirational capital they impart on their children to "reach for the stars" which we see in Clarissa's encouragement of her daughter to pursue a postsecondary education. They draw upon specialized knowledge and skills gained from navigating an unjust welfare system to subsist and protect their children, such as through Yessica's strategic navigation between formal work, carework, and public assistance to provide her children. Rather than perpetuating the cycle of poverty and low-wage labor, these mothers actively strive to mitigate its effects through displays of navigational and aspirational capitals. Their efforts represent a powerful response to the systemic inequalities they face, highlighting the resilience and wealth they possess despite the barriers imposed by policies and institutions.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

This research applies a new context to Yosso's CCW framework to highlight cultural wealth in welfare disconnected and timed-out mothers. Through the lens of community cultural

wealth, these women demonstrate not only resilience but also valuable knowledge and skills that contribute to mitigating their children's circumstances. More research should be done to examine the effects of navigational and aspirational capital on children's social mobility and their perceptions to further substantiate on the value of this wealth. While this research adds a strengths-based approach to cultural capital theories and resiliency, we must not forget the structural inequalities that placed these women in their current circumstance. Income inequality, traditional gender roles, racism, and a lack of equitable welfare policy are just a few structural causes that have forced families in the US into poverty (Seccombe 2002).

It is essential to recognize that resilience alone cannot mitigate poverty; rather, it is a response to the systemic inequalities faced by timed-out mothers. Therefore, I suggest we not only shift dominant culture's view of the poor, but also develop policies that reflect their needs and desires. The primary desire of these women is to provide their children with good care to give them better opportunities; Policymakers must come alongside them and provide the economic resources they need to do so. This not only improves the lives of individuals and their communities, but also contains the promise of a better future for the US as a whole.

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