

# CRAFTING MY OWN STORY: HOMELESS MOTHERS' STANDPOINTS USING THEMATIC NARRATIVE ANALYSES

*Dr. Thérèse M. Craine Bertsch, LCSW, DSW*

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## Abstract

Single mothers in the U S, especially women of color, face the greatest risk for homelessness in the current housing crisis. Eleven homeless single mothers produced their own findings on their experiences with recurrent episodes of homelessness. Feminist standpoint theory guided this qualitative study using a U. S. third world cultural lens. Thematic narrative analysis structured the women's steps to analyze and create their own narratives. Political and ideological splits suggested homelessness for young single mothers resulted from either their lack of motivation and poor choices, or the lack of affordable housing, poverty, and social capital. Researchers called for process research to identify the risks and protective factors for both individual and structural factors driving unstable housing. These findings suggest rental enhancement although necessary was not sufficient to obtain and maintain stable housing. Poor quality housing, rental hikes, sale of homes, abuse and people entering or leaving rentals were precursors of recurrent episodes of homelessness. Bourgeois social structures excluding poor women need to address the need for affordable housing and public services, and less restrictive shelter and surveillance regulations as barriers to stable housing and jobs. Given their experiences of poverty and trauma, it was a revelation that *dedication to family* (feeling ennobled by motherhood), and the *desire to work* — typical concerns of working mothers — were the predominant themes I uncovered as the social work researcher in my cross case analysis of the women's narratives. These findings challenge stigmatizing beliefs about neglectful mothering, and their lack of motivation for employment.

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**Keywords:** Homelessness, single mothers, jobs, feminist narrative theory, social work

## Introduction

Single mothers in the U S, especially women of color, face the greatest risk for homelessness in the current unprecedented housing crisis. Single mothers represent 84% of homeless families (National Center on Family Homelessness, NCFH, 2010, Families experiencing section, para. 1) and 31.6% of the poor, more than double the number of single men and more than five times that of married couples. (National Poverty Center (NPC), 2011: How does poverty differ section, para. 1–2). Between 1980-1992 birthrates outside of marriage jumped by 54% nationally. Of these 94% were White and only 9% were Black. By 1993 the number of Black single mothers jumped to 57% of the national total of 27% of all children under 19 years of age living with a single mother (Wilson, 1996, p. 87).

As a social work co-researcher, I collaborated with 11 homeless single mothers who created their own narratives. Feminist standpoint theory, FST, (Harding, 2004, 1995, 1991, D. Smith, 2004,1987), suggests that beginning research with women's everyday lives challenges the hegemony of the ruling class, and a more accurate account of women's experiences can be achieved. As co-researchers, the women themselves sought a more personal approach to analyze their own stories. Thematic narrative analysis, TNA, (Riessman, 2008, Polkinghorne,

1988), provided them with a method for their self-analysis and the creation of their narratives. Concepts from the Methodology of the Oppressed (Sandoval, 2000, 2004)—articulating U. S. third world feminist theory, which takes into account both the gender and race stratification of women, i.e. a third space (Sandoval, 2000), provided a cultural lens for my cross case analysis of the women’s narratives to identify commonalities in their experiences.

The United Nations Human Right’s Council (National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, NLCHP, 2011), cited U. S. homelessness as a human rights violation. Despite this, political and ideological splits argue that homelessness for young single mothers results from either their lack of motivation and poor choices, or from the lack of affordable housing, poverty, and social capital. Previous homeless research often focused either on individual characteristics of the homeless, or the outcomes of transitions from shelters to permanent housing. Researchers (Bassuk & Geller, 2006) called for process research to identify the risks and protective factors for both individual and structural factors driving unstable housing. Historical data is revealing.

The federal government spent \$30 billion per year in the 1980s on subsidizing low-cost housing, dropping in 1988 to 7 billion non inflation-adjusted dollars, “so the impact is worse” (Sclar, 1990, p. 1039). Housing searchers by the poor resembled the childhood game of “musical chairs” (Sclar, 1990). Low-income housing units went from a surplus of 300,000 to a loss of 4.4 million between 1970–1995 (Blau, 2007, p. 353). The loss of subsidized housing was compounded by President Nixon’s refusal to reinforce the Fair Housing Act of 1968 (Lamb, 2005), thereby reinforcing segregated housing. Racist housing practices impacted the swelling numbers of the poor homeless population who are disproportionately Black [NCFH, 2011], (Craine-Bertsch, 2013, pp. 1-2).

Annually, more than 3.5 million people experience homelessness in the United States, where it takes two and a half full-time jobs at minimum wage to rent a two-bedroom apartment at fair market rent (National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC), 2010, p. 137). It is estimated that an additional 700,000 persons were made homeless in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (NLCHP, 2010, Hurricane Katrina), and does not include the thousands, in New York alone, who were made homeless in the wake of Hurricane Sandy. Extremely low-income renter households, numbering 10 million, are the only income group in the country with an absolute shortage of affordable housing, leaving more than a third of them with no hope for paying rent within their means (NLIHC, 2011, para. 3). Housing restrictions related to ethno-racial bias, the “massive industrial restructuring and loss of blue collar jobs” (Wilson, 1996, p. 34), the disproportionate incarceration rate of Black men in the mushrooming of the prison industry, and shifts in the market economy destabilized unions and urban communities. These factors have impacted the growing unemployment rate, particularly among Black men in poor urban and suburban communities —the hardest hit workers in our current socioeconomic crisis—and contributed to the rise in homelessness among Black single mothers (Allegretto, 2011; EPI, 2011; Blau & Abramovitz, 2007; DeNavas-Walt, C., Proctor, B.D., & Smith, J.C. (2011). ; El-Bassel, 1998; Shinn, 2007; Wagmiller, 2000; and Wilson, 1996).

## **Empirical Knowledge**

### **Social and structural factors and homelessness.**

Prominent structural factors have been identified in a review of the empirical literature. Young single mothers are now the poorest and have the largest incidence of family homelessness (NCFH, 2011). They have to navigate between the demands of childcare while searching for housing and jobs. Low educational levels, inadequate public transportation, and possible migration histories add to their burdens (Blank, 2007; NCH, 2009, Causes section, para. 2; Rocha, 1997). The structural and social barriers single mothers face when trying to

achieve higher levels of education compounds the problems they encounter to achieve self-sufficiency (V.D. Johnson, 2010; A.K. Johnson, 1999). In addition, the marriage rate of poor women reveals that the existing gap between college graduates and those with high school diplomas who no longer marry is widening from 4% in 1960 to 16% in 2008 (Pew, 2010, The class based decline in marriage, section, para. 2).

One of the root causes of homelessness may simply be the lack of affordable housing, even for those who are mentally ill (Berlin, 2007; Blau, 2007; Bassuk & Geller, 2006; Bogard, McConnell, A. K. Johnson & Richards, 1995). Subsidized housing is identified a protective factor against recurrent homeless episodes in many statewide and regional research projects and is largely attributable to the lack of affordable housing, particularly for low-income renters (Culhane, D. P., Metraux S, Byrne, T. (2011); NLIHC, 2011, p. 4). Quick reintegration into permanent housing contributes to maintaining housing stability (Bogard, McConnell, Gerstel, & Schwartz, 1999) even when compared to housing linked to mandatory substance abuse and mental health treatment (Padgett, Gulcur, & Tsemberis, 2006). Recent initiatives include rapid rehousing programs, which Culhane et al. (2011) noted needs to be further studied. While a clear prevention model does not exist “there is some evidence from the research literature, as well as some policy experiments...to guide this new initiative” (Culhane et al., 2011, p. 296). Section VIII and rent vouchers (Roman, 2007), direct pay to landlords (Baumhol & Shinn, 1998), and assisting tenants in annual housing recertification tasks or income reviews may also help mothers to avoid either losing eligibility or being evicted (N. Smith et al., 2005). While race and ethnicity predict both slower rates of exits and faster rates of readmits to shelters, even when the effects of other variables are taken into account (Wong, Y. I., Culhane, D. P., & Kuhn, R. (1997), one study reports that longer shelter stays were positive experiences for some women, providing them with the time, support, and security needed to get on their feet, or to qualify for housing (Wong et al., 1997; Zlotnick, Bradley, Tam, 2007).

Outcome studies for case management services for improving the retention of housing, for homeless families, is inconclusive as to the efficacy of such services. Studies do suggest a very high retention rate of “90% and more” (Culhane et al., 2010, p. 8) when families are provided with housing subsidies. This was confirmed by Bassuk and Geller’s (2006) analysis of research on homeless families, in which access to housing vouchers increased retention of housing and “decreased the likelihood of shelter readmission” (p. 795). Stable housing does appear to be supported by case management when housing *retention* is targeted (Bassuk & Geller, 2006, p. 795). Hartnett and Postmus (2010) study— found administrative philosophies direct the type of shelter services offered. Many case management services are geared toward individual and behavioral needs, such as counseling and parent classes rather than “socio-structural forces”, which address destabilizing “societal barriers” in housing (Hartnett & Postmus, 2010).

Rapid re-housing may be more valuable than services-enriched housing in reducing homelessness and unstable housing. According to Bassuk & Geller (2006), more studies and “rigorous research” (p. 796) is needed to determine how housing subsidies function together and apart from services, and how they may strengthen stable family housing. In addition, they call for studies to examine which populations of homeless single mothers would benefit from services-enriched housing programs and in what ways. Rocha (1997) noted that homeless mothers are also faced with the inability of their poor partners to pay child support, which is less of a problem for middle-income mothers.

Doubling up has been described as a phase preceding both recurrent and initial episodes of homelessness (Reed Wasson & Hill, 1998; Shinn & Gillespie, 1994; Stojanovic et al., 1999). Homeless families frequently live with family members, doubling-up (Hoback & Anderson, 2006). While doubling up can forestall homelessness, doubling up is often the step

before becoming homeless (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & J. C. Smith, 2011, pp. 21–22; Institute for children, poverty, and homelessness, Institute for Children, Poverty, & Homelessness, ICPH, (2011). The U.S. Census reported that the number of doubled-up households from the spring of 2007 to the spring of 2011 increased from 19.7 million to 21.8 million (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor et al., 2011, p. 21). Recent studies suggest “Eighty-nine percent of the homeless moved in with family or friends in the two years prior to becoming homeless. Among low-income housed families, 55% spent more than 30% of their income on housing and 49% had doubled-up with family or friends in the prior two years” (NCFH, n.d., p. 2).

### **Individual characteristics associated with single homeless mothers**

Culhane, Metraux, Park, Schretzman, and Valente (2007), reported that “Pregnant women and women leaving abusive situations tend to exit shelters more quickly, but are also more likely to return. Other predictors for return to a shelter include exiting without a housing subsidy and lower educational attainment or work history” (pp. 3–4). These findings are associated with poverty and the lack of affordable housing, which puts single mothers at risk for homelessness. One study (N. Smith et al., 2005) identified similar risks for re-entry patterns into shelters. The risks for repeat episodes of homelessness included being a pregnant female member of a household, or a young head of household, or large numbers of children in a family, and poorer families headed by a single fathers, who only represented a small fraction of the sample. In addition to sexual and physical abuse, poor health, posttraumatic stress disorder, trauma exposure and chronic trauma, racism and foster care, and substance abuse are often associated with individual characteristics of homeless single mothers. Studies also identify that the experience of oppression and abuse that women receiving social welfare benefits have experienced is often reproduced in the policy and bureaucratic practices, carried out by workers towards them in their daily life. While research has identified pregnancy and domestic violence as risks for homelessness, little was known about the discrete risks for recurrent episodes of homelessness for single mothers related to these personal characteristics. The disproportionate numbers of homeless single mothers who are Black demonstrates the interlocking nature of class, gender, and race oppression in their daily lives as women. The literature is not so clear on how these differences may account for, and contribute to recurrent episodes of homelessness

### **Conceptual/Theoretical Framework**

#### **Feminist standpoint theory (FST)**

FST grew out of the women’s movement emphasizing consciousness and a Marxian social analysis of the stratification and alienation of the worker and class conflict. Dorothy Smith (2004), a FST pioneer suggested that women experienced gendered alienation, as a by-product of “conceptual imperialism” (p. 24), as women were confined to think their world through the male dominant structures, knowledge, and language, which often conflicted with women’s everyday experiences. FST challenges the presumed value-neutral objectivity claimed by empirical studies, and favors inclusion and transparency of assumptions and values in research constructs to enhance trustworthiness (Harding, 2004). Rather than rendering invisible the researcher’s value-laden and socio-historical political influences in a presumed objectivity as, “the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (Haraway, in Harding, 2004, p. 86), FST transparently includes political ideals, by grounding knowledge construction and public representations in the everyday lives of women. At the same time FST is acknowledged as historically located and contingent and not the best choice for every research project.

Harding (1991) points out, “The socially induced need for women always to consider ‘what’ men (or ‘others’) will think’ leads to a larger gap between their observable behavior

and speech and their thoughts and judgments” (p. 125). The standpoints of women are developed by engaging in daily life with the knowledge of their experiences intersecting with the social systems that structure and regulate their lives which are constructed and maintained from the vantage points of dominant patriarchal ideological forces. This produces a “double consciousness”—a concept initially referring to race stratification (Du Bois, 1903)—suggesting that women simultaneously acknowledge both women’s public faces and their inner realities.

As a research approach, FST can potentially uncover a fuller view of women’s knowledge and enhance an even stronger objectivity by linking “together strong forms of three terms: *reflexivity*, *objectivity*, and *method*. They all develop together; one is not a preamble for the others” (Harding, 1995, p. 17). Women are encouraged to participate in all phases of research and may “redefine the location of the research question” (Swigonski, 1993, p. 177), recommending how the results might be used to benefit other women.

FST asserts that starting off research construction from women’s lives fosters a stronger objectivity with a less partial view of women and their lives by proceeding to construct, explore, and analyze what emerges from that starting place rather than utilizing methods of analysis that are removed from the women’s experiences. This process can potentially demystify the dynamic ways in which knowledge production has privileged “the dominant Western, bourgeois, white-supremacist, androcentric, heteronormative culture”(Harding, 2004, p. 5), which is presumed to be value-neutral. FST, similar to social work’s emphasis on the person-in-the-environment attempts to overcome the de-contextualizing often associated with positivist studies. The ways in which women’s lives are regulated by their social conditions can be observed when the social contexts of daily life are preserved in their day-to-day lives. Feminist empiricists—while attending to equal rights—“leave intact much of scientists’ and philosophers conventional understanding of the principles of adequate scientific research. It appears to challenge mainly the incomplete practice of the scientific method, not the norms of science themselves” (Harding, 1991, p. 113).

Harding (1995) suggests that reflexivity is not simply describing or confessing how the subjective voice and history of the researcher can, even unknowingly, influence the project. The researcher’s reflexivity, their social location, is a resource that strengthens the method when the researcher looks critically at their assumptions, turning the “critical lens” on these assumptions in order to analyze them (p. 19) In acknowledging the existence of hierarchal power arrangements in social life, that often privilege the researcher, the social location of the researcher can become a “local resource that we can use in scientifically and politically progressive ways”(Harding, 1995, p. 19). Early feminist scholars emphasized different and distinct feminist oppositional models, strategies, and analytic methods to combat gender oppression

### **Thematic narrative analysis**

Padget (2008) described qualitative inquiry as being “steeped in choices and decisions—a qualitative study can be seen as a series of critical junctures in which the decision trail is rarely if ever, foreordained” (p. 41). In searching for a method that the women could use for self analysis and construction of their narratives, given their preference for underlining their interviews, I selected *thematic narrative analysis*, TNA. Riessman (2008) distinguished TNA from a wide array of narrative typologies as “the most widely used... interrogates ‘what’ is spoken (or written), rather than ‘how’ (p. 19). It is not so much how the story unfolded or the language used or the interviewer’s role in the process that is relevant in TNA. The interviewer and data that is considered extraneous as well as the influence of the audience on the narration and storyline is often erased according to Riessman (2008):

“Consequently in the written report, it appears that a biographical account emerges ‘full blown’ from the self of the narrator rather than a conversation between a teller and a particular listener/questioner” (p. 58).

The selection of the model depends on the purpose of the study. “The purpose of descriptive research is to present the narrative schemes the storyteller has intended” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 169). TNA supported the women’s work and provided a natural method to help the mothers construct their narratives and to explicate the meanings of their experiences. Moreover, Creswell (2002), noted the affinity that narrative studies have with feminist studies as a secondary theoretical lens in crafting the narratives as feminist studies are designed “to examine power and control issues”(p. 524) .

This process and the resulting narratives revealed the unique ways in which mothers experienced life. Immersion in the women’s stories led to a growing awareness that these predominately Black, resource poor young single mothers were describing an almost total lack of personal safety and societal support throughout their young lives. Working with the women in this study to create their narratives illuminated how in their social space — their day-to-day experiences— the choices open to them and their sense of agency produced different questions, solutions, and goals. FST acknowledges that multiple experiences and the varied social locations in which women are further stratified provide different levels of privilege and oppression. Harding (1995) also reminds us that women are always “reporting individual participation in the collective experiences. The same thing is true about consciousness raising in women’s groups” (p. 42). Postmodernists are also “starting off from different lives—not individual lives, but cultural locations—in order to think about what’s right and what’s wrong about Enlightenment histories” (Harding, 1995, p. 24).

## **Methodology**

### **The interview**

This study was composed of three sessions with each of the 11 women participating as co-researchers. Eight of the women in the study were Black, one was Latina, and two were White. While I am also a single mother who raised five children, the women’s stories aroused my own questions about why the women responded to situations as they did and what influenced their choices. The literature revealed the negative public perceptions of single mothers who receive social welfare entitlements (Abramovitz, 1995, 2006, 2009) and those who are homeless emanating from those who are often unaware of their unearned privileges as members of dominant White society. I was mindful that beginning research in the everyday lives of the marginalized can reveal how their lives are structured and regulated by social factors, which, as Swigonski posits (1993), enable the researcher to ask new questions more relevant to the research participant, for example “What choices do the members of this group make, and why do they believe those are good things to do?” (p. 176). Moreover, Sandoval (2004) suggests rather than viewing problems through one feminist construct or lens, any or all of the constructs can be applied as an analytic lens to identify, understand, and challenge gender marginalization.

**The first session.** I described and explained the goals and ethics of the study to each woman. Sharing my status as a single mother and the fact that I was a senior student strengthened my relationships with the mothers. However, I also recognized that the women’s stories were their stories and my questions were not their questions. I conducted an “informal conversational interview” with four questions that related to the focus of inquiry: 1) Tell me about your life; 2) Were there any turning points in your life? 3. Tell me about the experience of being homeless what you know about this; 4) Is there anything that we haven’t talked about that is important to your story? At the end of the session I reviewed a one-page guide for them to analyze their interview, which I left with the women and I answered their

questions. As the women were co-researchers, I also left a copy of the homeless literature review that I used in preparation for this project.

Posing a non-directive question to Agnes who was not at ease in speaking about how she would explain her pregnancy to the reader, given she did not have a permanent partner and was homeless with another child, yielded very rich data. Asking Agnes how she would explain her choice to the reader was validating for Agnes who included this data in her narrative. One limitation of this study, however, was in not asking a specific question related to race. I attribute this to inexperience more than to uncomfotability of either myself, or the mothers. I did not want to impose meaning or raise questions that they themselves had not raised. I am fairly certain that asking a specific non-directive question about race would have produced interesting findings, similar to the response of Agnes who was given a choice to answer for herself. Despite this omission, given the segregation on Long Island, New York, and in other parts of the nation and the disproportionate poverty of Black single mothers, the negative impact of race is assumed.

**The second session.** I reviewed the instruction for analysis and answered any of the women's questions. The first two women that I interviewed stated they understood the instructions but preferred to begin their analysis by underlining what they considered to be significant in their interviews, which I had transcribed, as this felt more natural. It was clear that they took to heart their role as co-researchers. In consultation with my doctoral adviser, I followed their lead and encouraged the next nine women to underline their texts as well. I searched the literature to provide the women with a method for self-analysis and the construction of their narratives, and decided upon TNA.

**The third session, constructing the narratives.** As the mothers were not trained in computer analyses we used *traditional hand analysis*, which Creswell (2002) described as "cutting and pasting text sentences onto cards" (p.261), to construct their narratives. Prior to this third session I cut and pasted the text they underlined onto cards. The mothers first sorted cards with similar themes into stacks, then arranged each stack chronologically. They created a theme for each stack. Finally they organized the stacks sequentially to form a structure. This method was well suited for the mothers to work fairly independently by sorting and organizing the cards in a process conforming to thematic narrative analysis. We then constructed their narratives on the laptop computer I brought to this session.

My task was to help the women to summarize and avoid duplication of the information on their cards. I restricted my comments, asking them to paraphrase when there were duplications in their accounts. The women were very self-directed from the outset and enjoyed this work. FST found a home in social work ethics which emphasizes beginning where the client is and client self determination (Swigonski, 1993, 1994). Riddled throughout their narratives are admonitions, questions, and suggestions for what homeless single mothers need in order to manage their daily lives. When the stories were completed, the women were proud of their work and hoped that their stories could help other homeless single mothers.

**Cross-case analysis.** Several concepts adapted from the method of group analysis (Krueger & Casey, 2009) guided my analysis of each of the narratives of the women in the group as I compared them. I noted the frequency of themes and I identified that dedication to their families (62) and their desire to work (60) predominated. Not only frequency but also extensiveness – i.e. the themes were present in each women's story– and the passion and emotion with which they described their experiences illuminated the predominant themes that emerged in the analysis. The women analyzed and interpreted their own narratives. I examined their housing moves and the antecedents to these moves. I also noted several subthemes seemed to predominate: childhood and parents (including grief); relationships; violence/bullying; housing history; work history; future goals and resolutions.

**U. S. third world theory, a cultural lens.** To avoid misinterpreting or even worse missing entirely the meaning the women wished to convey I sought a cultural compass to ground my own inquiry. U.S. third world feminists challenged me, as a White researcher, to *illuminate not reinterpret their work* (feminists (hooks, 1989, 2004; Sandoval, 2000, 2004, Smith, Linda, 1999). Sandoval (2000, 2004) posits that this “third space” provides an advantage in unmasking the hidden power dynamics such as those embedded in predominant racialized ideology and describes how ideology becomes the basis for creating, maintaining, and evaluating social structures. Sandoval (2000) was influenced by Barthes’s theories of deconstructing oppressive ideology, and his description of the “punctum” (pp. 141–143) as a powerful, blissful, destabilizing experience like falling in love. This, in turn, enables a person to deconstruct and transcend the continued acceptance of the natural state of things presented under the governing ideology of the social norms and mores and — often expressed as binary constructions— mediating social life. This subject position haunts “all we think we know” (p. 140) and exposes how language, symbols, and structures are loaded with intentions that serve to maintain power and dominant ideology.

The first three technologies of the Methodology of the Oppressed, MTO, (Sandoval, 2000), provided a compass or sensitizing supra-concepts (van den Hoonaard, 1997) grounding my interpretation and illumination of the women’s narratives and enabled me to perceive how the women’s standpoints and actions related to their problems and needs in their everyday lives as they articulated the process and their own growing consciousness. I hoped this would ground me in listening and analyzing their narratives and would enable me to tune in to the mother’s realities and their voices rather than superimposing meaning or reinterpreting their experiences. The MTO described experiences which paralleled the gender, race, and class marginalization of the women in this study who were engaged in daily praxis in their day-to day lives to: 1) recognize that social knowledge and structures do not reflect their realities, which led to; 2) questioning social structures emanating from dominant ideology, and asking questions about who is benefiting from the systems that are created, resulting in; 3) challenging or opposing social structures that don’t serve the women’s everyday reality. This cultural lens helped me to recognize that the women were describing how they had reframed false negative accounts of their experiences and had developed their own standpoint as well as their oppositional consciousness. They depicted themselves in their stories as resisting, questioning, challenging, attempting to gain self-autonomy and meaning, and describing their differences of opinion as human rights issues. These exchanges were frequently interpreted as being noncompliant or problematic.

A feminist perspective is not always adequate when working to interpret the mother’s accounts. Zinn (as cited in Sandoval, 2004) suggests the inadequacy of feminist models to fully account for and represent U.S. third world women’s experiences within the expanding context of feminism as “such work is often tacked on, its significance for feminist knowledge still unrecognized and unregarded” (p. 47). MTO suggests that without interrogating dominant essentialist ideology, you risk seeing through imperial eyes (L. Smith, 1999), and the voice of oppressed women and the meaning they attach to their everyday encounters may or may not be visible or given voice. The themes and the insights of the women in this study resonated with the accounts of *U.S. third world feminists*. The women developed “informal political skills” and resembled “urban guerillas” (Hurtado in Sandoval, 2004, p. 203), as they use tactics for survival each day, while occupying a “third space”.

## Conclusion

Recurring episodes of homelessness were often the result of the lack of affordable safe housing, rent hikes, or sales. At times partner abuse, pregnancies or overcrowding caused the loss of housing. Seven of the women’s mothers abused substances, resulting in the placement

of four of the women in foster care. The mothers of the five Black women were caught up in the crack epidemic that swept over urban and suburban communities in the 80s and 90s. Most of the women in the study avoided the use of alcohol and drugs. Their lack of understanding about substance abuse confounded their choices in their partners. *Dedication to family* and the *desire to work* was the overarching plot of their narratives in my cross-case analysis. It was a revelation that the central concerns of the women were typical of many working mothers, given the immense trauma many of these women experienced as children and as young adults revealed in their candid accounts of the burdens they faced as poor homeless women in their everyday lives (Craine Bertsch, 2012, p. 6). The social structures available to working mothers utterly fail poor homeless mothers seeking employment. At times housing workers did help women to obtain permanent housing and services. Shelter workers could also be provocative as they were often unaware of how past abuse and trauma impacted the women's hyper vigilance in defense of their children, and how for these new young mothers working could be therapeutic, even when they were pregnant.

**Dedication to family.** The women loved their children and were proud to be responsible mothers. The women experienced motherhood as ennobling. The women's description of motherhood paralleled and served as a proxy for Barthes' "falling in love", the "punctum". fostering their ability to analyze and deconstruct the constraints imposed upon them in their social locations when they became mothers. Behaviors that could appear to demonstrate ingratitude or irresponsibility, when conceptualized as strategies for survival (Sandoval, 2000, 2004) illuminated the actions of the women as deconstructing public beliefs and perceptions. The women explained how they interrogated the policy, practices, and stereotypes they encountered and found the courage to leave the irresponsible partners of their children.

Agnes states, "I don't quit because I have two children who need me. That's a mother, willing to go to any length or task to get back on their feet and provide for their family". Ashley described putting her life on hold. "For now it's just my kids and me until I have stability". I love kids. It brings joy to me every day, waking up to their face every morning. Instead of me waking up crying because I'm in this predicament, I look at them and they bring me joy". Kimberly's comment "My son made me who I am today" also resonates in Patience's comment. "I feel like I was homeless my whole life. Where does my sense of place and my strength come from; when I had children, in becoming a mother".

While marriage was desirable it was out of reach but not a reason to put off having a family. Their narratives illuminated how the stereotyping of single mothers as unmotivated and lazy "Welfare Queens" (V. D. Johnson, 2010), related more to capitalist ideology and meritocracy. This stigmatized identity did not reflect the reality of their daily lives, and their personal morals or how social structures deprive them of needed resources. The women disclosed the unrealistic expectations for homeless single mothers to succeed in a social environment not designed with their needs in mind, but rather for those with bourgeois values of the middle class. The women's daily lives revealed how structural impoverishment and unwarranted stigma weighed them down as middle class values are superimposed on them. Single mothers who have had children by multiple partners but are economically self-sufficient do not face the stigmatizing identities of women receiving social welfare. The ideology exposes the stigma relates to capitalism rather than morality.

**Desire to work.** The women's "desire to work" deepened the significance of the women's efforts, motivation, and courage to seek and keep their jobs, and to work for independence. A feminist Marxian social analysis of the sexual division of labor is particularly helpful in uncovering how these single mothers who desired to work, were prevented from working, but ironically blamed for not working. The macro level power arrangements have greatly contributed to their gendered social stratification (Hartsock, 1998,

2004). Despite the seemingly losing battle — the women reveal an unrelenting motivation to work to enable them to provide better opportunities for their children and to escape the surveillance, which holds them and their children hostage. The loss of one service needed by all working parents, particularly permanent housing presented numerous barriers against jobs. How do you interview for a job or make plans without permanent housing, affordable public transportation, and childcare.

In shelters, childcare was unavailable through elder teens or relatives, as teens needed to be supervised by parents, and visitors in shelter apartments were prohibited. Crystal didn't give up despite losing two jobs because of lack of transportation and childcare. "My goal now is to get permanent housing and a job as a home health aide. I enjoy my job and I don't like not working". Kimberly lost her permanent housing, childcare, and her job after being disqualified from services because a \$60 a month performance raise caused her to lose thousands of dollars of rental and childcare support. Kimberly plans "to study for medical billing. I also took the Post Office examination". Despite many years of abuse, and trauma, and a strong work history Michele discussed her recent diagnoses of multiple sclerosis and the difficulty she had in standing for long periods in her last job, adding, "I'm a hard worker.... I always did my best to work because not going to work that was not really an option because I felt that was what was keeping me on top. I feel good about my life". These women wanted to work!

The women negotiated broken public service systems, inadequate public transportation and childcare, and the lack of safe and affordable permanent housing. Despite intimidation, at times, by social welfare and housing workers they pushed back. Women surrendered children to the care of family members, fought back when accused of child neglect, refused to adhere to shelter policy forbidding them to work, attempted to find local jobs—even off the books—rode bikes and paid exorbitant fees to private taxi companies to get to their jobs. Some women felt that shelters offered them safety, others left in response to shelter policies or workers that attempted to regulate their desire to work, which is not evident in the literature. The women also pushed back against these regulatory practices and those who enforced them and over-extended their authority. Their stories reveal how "social locations are fundamentally structured by power relations" (Hartsock, 2004, p. 243) which are often not responsive to their needs.

Without safe and affordable housing, access to adequate public transportation and childcare, and without the opportunity for education in an increasingly complex and technological economy, homeless women cannot be expected to gain independence. The women interrogated the false premises upon which social welfare policy is based. Public institutions can play a vital role in collaborating with policy makers to present a more realistic perception of poor homeless single mothers — to transform public perceptions of the women and respond to their needs for permanent housing. Empowerment models (Lee, 2001) can shape shelter workers and cultures, shifting the emphasis from negative individual and stereotypical characteristics of homeless single mothers as either the cause of their problems, or as a perpetual victims. Homeless single mothers can engage in a process of restoring their emotional well-being while simultaneously challenging the social structural barriers they identified. These include lack of affordable housing, adequate transportation, fair wage jobs, and constant surveillance, and the faulty stigmatizing identities that are influencing policy makers and those with authority over them, standing in the way of their gaining independence and human rights. The women stepped up by exposing themselves, through their narrative accounts, to advocate for themselves and on the behalf of other homeless mothers. The process of homelessness uncovered in the narratives revealed the women's resilience despite histories of abuse, and the surveillance and regulations in shelters and welfare bureaucracies reproducing past experiences of oppression. They acknowledged they were victimized but

they were not victims, their eyes were on the future. These findings can be compared to the women's narratives (Craine-Bertsch, 2013). The narratives also illuminated how the care, support, and instructions of the professionals they encountered such as housing workers, substance abuse counselors, HIV test workers, the principal of a school, and a parole officer and specialized housing programs combining employment training and placement, with coordinated child care and transportation changed the trajectory of their lives. The women learned they could accept support from them without losing their dignity. The women's satisfaction with their narratives give evidence of the trustworthiness of the findings. The reader can compare the cross case analysis with the women's narratives" "to judge the accuracy and credibility of the account" (Creswell, 1998, pp. 202–203).

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