

Mentoring to Change Self-Concept: A Phenomenological Study

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## ***Dedication***

For my mom, Tamara Patzer, who used her education as a way to escape poverty and to build the life of her dreams. For my dad, Randolph Patzer, who wanted seven words or less on what my research is all about and for always forcing me to see things from the opposing side. For my grandfather, Curtis Wiese Sr., for kite flying, bike riding and crab fishing because you really can make a difference just by loving and spending time with a kid. For Jerrold Carnes, because you picked me up every time I stopped believing I was ever going to finish my Ph.D and for loving me for my real self. For Dawn Throener, for marathon conversations, getting me unstuck and impromptu calls to come and chase my kids.

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To the women of my study, through your stories you touched my heart and you taught me by your example more than you can ever know. Simple words to express my thanks and gratitude for sharing yourself with me can never express how I feel. You taught me about resilience, perseverance, thankfulness and gratitude, strength, how to give back and why you should, faith, hope and the power found in having the support and camaraderie of other women. You showed me how to dig deep and find belief in myself, because I saw you do it. You taught me by example how being happy for others can help me keep going even when things were falling apart in my own life.

In your stories I got to see this amazing journey of self-transformation that takes place as women move from barely surviving on welfare, from feeling tired and hopeless and beat down to finding work and a place like the Professional Women’s Group, Going Places or Twin Cities Rise! to go for support and help from other women who understand your feelings and your struggles. Then I watched so many of you go from finally having a “j-o-b” to finding an authentic passion, recovering self-confidence and beginning to live instead of just survive.

I know some of you are still struggling on this path of self-transformation, but I know you will keep going and you will make it! You taught me how to make a difference in the world that matters, how to face failure and get back up, how to put myself out there, even when I don't have the confidence to believe in my abilities, you showed me how not to give up on me or on my kids or on other people, why we can never assume by looking at someone we know who they are or how they are doing, that there is still room to see new and different life experiences and to grow from meeting and learning about other women and most of all, you showed me by your example how to create an authentic life of service.

## Mentoring to Change Self-Concept: A Phenomenological Study

### Abstract

This qualitative research study uses a multi-disciplinary research framework to explore mentoring as an intervention to change self-concept for adults. It applies a phenomenological approach and suggests that it is important to explore mentoring as an intervention to assist in the positive self-concept formation of women. It investigates whether or not mentoring may be a viable alternative or a valuable addition to traditional “work now” welfare-to-work programs which suffer from an inability to keep up with changing economic needs. Furthermore, it suggests that alternative welfare-to-work programs that promote positive work-related identity changes for women on welfare that can assist them with making the transition from welfare to work are needed.

The researcher interviewed 12 women participating in a voluntary welfare to work mentoring program hosted by a non-profit, Dress for Success, about their experiences transitioning from welfare to work with the help of mentoring. The researcher explored stories about their work experiences and sense of work identity to better understand this time of transition in their lives.

Findings show the importance of understanding the lived experience of women transitioning off of welfare and providing an outlet to give a “voice” to the traditionally underrepresented group that can get their stories in front of policymakers. Lastly, it discusses how mentoring programs designed for low income women transitioning from welfare-to-work may increase the positive “possible selves” of low income women and mothers and it seeks to understand the lived experience of self-concept transformation that is required for them to successfully transition off of welfare.

*Keywords: work-related identity change in adults, mentoring-based welfare-to-work programs, transformative mentoring, phenomenology*

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## **Chapter One: Mentoring for Change**

### **Introduction**

This chapter provides an introduction to the study; it discusses mentoring, self-concept formation and work-related identity change in women. The study investigates the use of mentoring within welfare programs in order to change the self-concept and work-related identities of women within welfare-to-work programs. It explores the concept of “possible selves” from the field of social psychology and how mentoring programs designed for low income women transitioning from welfare to work can increase the positive possible selves of these women.

### **The Background of the Problem**

In the 1990’s former President Clinton introduced and passed welfare reform laws limiting the benefit amounts and the length of time a family could remain on welfare in the United States. As part of these laws, new programs were created and welfare recipients were strongly encouraged to join “welfare-to-work” programs to obtain the education and training necessary to join the workforce. Since then, these programs have struggled with needing to provide education and training as quickly as possible and in finding suitable employment for a population that often has many other barriers to employment such as lack of money, transportation or even appropriate attire for an interview (Steensland 2007, Acs & Loprest 2004 and Kuttner 2002).

### **Research Problem**

Individuals on welfare are not able to obtain employment that pays a living wage (Acs & Loprest, 2004; Gueron, 1987; Gueron, Pauly & Lougy, 1991; Kuttner, 2002;

Steensland, 2007). Reasons can include lack of education, experience, training or resources. Factors can also include negative work or personal history and lack of identification with a job or as a working person (Bierema, 1996; Bierema, 2002; Rossiter, 2007; Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel, 2010). Without help these individuals and their families are consigned to a low quality of life including poor housing and high-risk communities. Their children are then brought into this cycle, perpetuating poverty (Acs & Loprest, 2004; Lee, 2005; Steensland, 2007).

### **The Need for the Study**

The need for further study on mentoring to change self-identity is seen in the scholarly research uncovered during the literature review on the topic. This study answers the call for more research from other scholars in three areas: a need to solve a problem within the world, a need to fill gaps in the literature and a need to extend scholarly knowledge and learn more about the topic. Specifically, there is a need to come up with solutions to alleviate poverty within the world and there is evidence that women are especially affected by poverty. Gaps have also been identified in the scholarly research in the areas of adult identity formation and transformation, relating life experiences to adult identity and exploring the possible selves of low income mothers. While some research has been done on possible selves and identity for youth and adolescents, there is a need to extend the knowledge about possible selves and their effect on identity and career choices for adults.

#### **Need to Solve a Problem in the World**

**Poverty.** The feminization of poverty suggests that it is important to focus research on programs that seek to help women who are transitioning off welfare

(Bjorklund & Bee, p. 204) since they have both caregiving responsibilities and the need to support the family as a breadwinner. Bjorklund & Bee (2008) theorized that the “feminization of poverty” (p. 227) is due to persisting pay differences between men and women with women making approximately 77% of every dollar paid to men in the comparable positions, fewer women working full time, and women leaving the workforce and re-entering at various stages of their career due having the primary caregiving responsibility for raising children.

### **Gaps in Existing Scholarly Research**

**Adult identity formation and transformation.** Erikson (1968) felt that adolescence was the period of life where identity was formed; however, this doesn’t take into account when adults need to change their self-identity due to life changes. My study seeks to understand how adult women revisit this stage of identity formation to process the needed identity changes.

**Relating life experiences and adult identity.** LaVoie (1994) recommended that scholars shift away from “global rating analysis” and identity questionnaire instruments to the use of interviews—in part to capture the synthesis and integration of previous life experiences and how they affect the deep structure of identity (p. 27). Cramer (2004) noted that there are few empirical studies (either experimental or observational) relating life experiences and adult identity and no studies relating experience to identity change (p. 5). My qualitative work helps to bridge this gap in the scholarly knowledge relating life experiences and the self-identity of women. It also adds to our understanding of how women process identity changes and create new work-related identities while undergoing life transitions.

**Possible Selves of Low Income Mothers.** Lee & Oyserman (2009) did not find any research examining the possible selves of low income mothers before conducting their study in 2009. This indicates a current gap in the existing scholarly research on the possible selves of low income mothers. My study begins to address this gap by interviewing low income women on welfare, many of whom are also mothers.

**To Extend Knowledge and Learn More**

**Possible Selves and Identity.** Ibarra (1999) called for further research looking at how identity-construction strategies might affect the creation of possible selves within work roles. My research answers this call to extend the knowledge in this area of scholarship by looking at self-identity and possible selves within a career and work-identity formation context.

**Possible Selves and Career.** Robinson, Davis & Meara (2003) recommended that future research “investigate in greater depth the role of feared occupational possible selves and their impact on such things as career beliefs, planning, and satisfaction” (p. 163). My research answers this call for further research by looking at the lived experience of women transitioning from welfare to work and how mentoring can help them to change their possible selves to reflect broader career aspirations and to provide greater satisfaction with their work.

This study explores the transformational process of mentoring on the work-related identities of women on welfare. It reflects on the real life experiences of these individuals during the process of trying to transition from welfare to work.

## **The Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research study is to increase our knowledge and understanding of when and how mentoring can be successfully used to increase the chances of women making the transition from relying on welfare to becoming a successful worker. It adds knowledge that may improve the long-term prospects for a better quality of life for women and their families, it assists in adding to our information about what kinds of programs might help to relieve the social pressures caused by supporting individuals throughout their life through the welfare system and how to stimulate the economy by creating workers who can be educated and trained for fields with emerging job needs thereby allowing companies to more quickly adjust to economic changes in a fast paced global economy.

### **Research Audience**

My personal tenets for assessing the value of research as meaningful are: research that tells a human story; that looks at real problems and looks for applications for research knowledge to solve real-world issues in a realistic way for real people.

I have given a lot of thought to my audience for this study and for my scholarly research in general. At one time, I considered my audience to be lawmakers (or at least lobbyists working on behalf of those on welfare) who could use the narrative stories about the lives of women on welfare to help make the human side of the argument, in conjunction with the quantitative work of other scholars, that welfare programs need to address the underlying psychological needs and barriers to work for low income women instead of offering job placement, retraining and other surface assistance. I would argue also, that programs that address these barriers would be more cost effective in the long

run and better serve our social responsibility to society than the welfare-to-work programs currently available. While I certainly hope that my work will be able to serve in such a way, this is not my primary audience.

Instead, my primary audience is scholars, but also a broader audience of people who are concerned with the future of our families and our communities, it is important for me to write in a way that makes this knowledge accessible to everyone and not to cloak it in big words and complicated concepts inaccessible to many.

In whatever way my story, or the stories of the women I interview has to create that shared experience, which will be the place where we start to form a connection, to build trust, and for you to be able to come on a journey of self-discovery with me and with the women who are undergoing the process of self-transformation. If you can come along and begin to understand what this process of transformation is, and relate it to times of personal self-transformation in your own life, and if you bring with you a reflective self-understanding of how you once defined yourself as *something* according to a role within your life (such as mother, daughter, sister, wife, student, etc...) and later came to add to or change your definition of *self* into something new and previously unknown...(boss, manager, college graduate, etc...) then you will not only understand *intellectually*, but you will know *experientially* what kind of mentoring programs are needed for women to successfully transition off of welfare. Beyond *a job* lies a need for personal transformation and a new sense of self that can allow low income women to see themselves as something more than *on welfare*.

Some of you will be lucky enough to find yourself in a position where you can leverage power on behalf of those in need. If you believe (like I do) that we have a social and personal responsibility to help people in need (in other words to help those less fortunate than ourselves) and you also know experientially the power of personal transformation, then it becomes necessary to become an advocate and offer of voice to those women in order to get them the life changing programs that they need.

### **Mentoring to Change Self-Concept Research Questions**

Understanding the unique life experiences of individuals transitioning off of welfare will help the researcher reflect on the specific study questions, which are:

- 1) *What does the life experience of being on welfare while transitioning into work look like?*
- 2) *What are the roles within the context of an individual's life experience that mentoring plays in creating personal transformations? Is this reflected in how individuals discuss a successful transition from welfare to work?*
- 3) *Does mentoring help facilitate the creation of positive work-related identities for women on welfare? How is this reflected in their sense of identity and how they process and talk about their life experiences?*

Uncovering the life story and the rich detail of individual experiences shared by women on welfare helps the researcher to uncover and understand the themes and connections between this group of women. The researcher considers these life experiences and how the stories can inform knowledge about women and what their experience of transformation looks like as they go through the process of transitioning off

of welfare and attempting to become economically self-sufficient. The researcher uses the fabric of these stories to reflect on questions such as, *What is the life situation of the woman on welfare before joining the mentoring program? What about during the program as they transition and after they've completed the program? Are there certain characteristics and experiences that have shaped their beliefs about themselves as workers? Are these characteristics shared by the group or are they unique to each individual? Looking at the stories that women tell about themselves and their lives, is there a vision for their future? What do they envision for themselves as workers, what kind of jobs do they see themselves supporting their families with? Do they have career aspirations?*

After reflecting on these types of questions, an attempt is made to identify common themes in the life experiences of those on welfare. In providing a venue to carry the voice and the needs of women seeking to transition off of welfare, I hope to carry their words and their needs to those with the power to create meaningful change in the current welfare-to-work programs. I also wish to provide support, in the form of creating understanding of how mentoring can facilitate positive transformative changes in the self-identity of these women, in order to keep them achieve success and stability for themselves and their family within the workforce and within society as a whole. I also hope to allow others to use this knowledge to support the creation of more welfare transition programs that offer a long term mentoring component.

### **The Methodology**

This study uses a phenomenological methodology to gain understanding about the lived experience of women transitioning off of welfare and who this process changes

their self-concept. It employs “bracketing” in the style suggested by Husserl to both separate and acknowledge the role of researcher in the formation and analysis of the study and its materials. Special attention is given to the words and unique “voice” of each woman and her story. Participants reviewed written interview transcripts and gave feedback to researcher concerning whether or not they felt their voice was accurately represented to increase validity of the study and to provide a means for participants to “strike from the record” anything they were no longer comfortable sharing. After the interview was transcribed, the researcher returned the transcript to the participant for review via e-mail or in a plain manila envelope given in private after the monthly PWG meeting. Participants also spoke with the researcher in person during the second interview regarding any changes they wished to make to the first interview’s transcript. The second interview was used to confirm the information from the first interview and to add additional information as requested by the participant. Final versions of interviews were provided via e-mail in cases where changes or additions were made.

This type of phenomenology is both interpretive and heuristic, represented by the use of bracketing and by the concept of “to wonder” which frames the way in which the researcher looks at the issue and decides to discover more by asking questions created by “wondering” or thinking about the problem with an open mind. In practice, during the interview process this was created by having three interview questions that were covered in all 12 interviews, with additional questions arising according to the content of the participant’s unique experiences. This study used qualitative and phenomenological research parameters set out by Heidegger (1962), Moustakas (1994), Husserl (1917), Van Manen (1992) and Van de Ven (2007).

### **The Significance of the Study**

Mentoring offers a promising, but often overlooked alternative to traditional welfare-to-work interventions that seek to help women on welfare. Right now, mentoring programs targeting low income women in the United States are mostly found in the non-profit sector. These programs have shown that low income women are more likely to be successful when transitioning off of welfare when they are able to change their self-concept in order to overcome internal barriers that may prevent them from transitioning from welfare to work.

Non-profit programs are often local or regional; they are often dependent on outside funding and many do not survive in times of economic downturn and good programs are then lost. If we add to our understanding of the “lived experience” of women transitioning off of welfare and combine this knowledge with research into what characteristics are shared by successful mentoring programs for women on welfare then we have the ingredients to create successful mentoring programs for low income women on a much larger scale, outside of the non-profit arena.

### **The Qualifications of the Researcher**

I believe that as a society we each have a responsibility to provide for those people who may not be able to support themselves and those who unexpectedly find themselves in trouble, yet I recognize that welfare was meant to be a temporary measure rather than a permanent solution. Many of those on welfare find themselves part of a larger cycle of poverty that is hard to escape. Gueron, Pauly and Lougy (1991) found that the programs in place currently across the United States have been studied since the first attempts at welfare reform in the 1960s. Their research highlights a series of long-term

quantitative studies that have consistently shown that the best training and education programs targeted to those on welfare, even when considered successful, are not leading to long-term benefits for the individuals (such as a better quality of life with higher paying jobs) or for society (many of the individuals return to welfare within one year). This idea of why training and education isn't enough led me to want to explore more about what may be missing in these programs, some elusive piece, that something extra that is contributing to the process of transition from welfare to work that makes it ultimately unsuccessful in its present form.

In my own life, I have also recognized a process that happens when identity starts to transform due to work roles. For example, when I was just out of college and working at my first "real" job as a trainer in the financial field, parts of myself that others would label "creative" or "artistic" were forced by the nature of the work environment to give way to other traits such as "logical" and "mathematical." Or more recently, as I am teaching freshman in a college class traits such as "caring" and "organized" take precedence over other traits like "fun-loving" or "spontaneous." All are parts of me and my concept of myself but there is an unwritten, unspoken set of rules that one learns while at work that govern which traits must be dominant according to the expectations of the work role. At some point, we begin to identify with our jobs and the roles required by our jobs become another part of ourselves. At this point our words change, it is no longer, "I work at...the bank...the store...I do landscapes...I call people," but rather, "I'm a teacher...trainer...banker...veterinarian...manager". We become part of our work and our work becomes part of ourselves and our language reflects our ownership of our work.

As I thought about what element could be missing in creating successful welfare to work programs I kept coming back to my own experiences, turning points in my own life that led me down unexpected paths and into unknown callings. As an undergraduate in college I had a different major every semester and took whatever classes looked interesting to me rather than following any master plan, but I was bored and I couldn't imagine myself "doing" anything with the information offered in the future. During my sophomore year I almost didn't go back to school after the summer, so much so that I was three weeks into the semester and had to go begging to professors I didn't know to see if I could put together some kind of schedule with my late start. I'd decided to go back when my mom told me I'd better go back to school, or I'd probably get stuck making \$7.00 an hour forever. It was then that I met Dr. Catherine Griggs who would later become my mentor and our meeting ended up changing everything. I'd gone to see her about an American Studies class. I started her class and discovered what I'd been missing for my entire first year, interesting classes that matched my ideas of what college was supposed to be about.

We read great books, discussed them, debated them and even threw in technology and current events. I started taking a lot of American Studies and Women's Studies and stuck with them. Every time I met with my mentor she encouraged me to keep going, to get what I wanted out of my college experience, to think about what kinds of talents I had that I could use to make money when I left school. She played many roles— boss, friend, teacher, shoulder to cry on, mother figure to kick me into gear when I needed to get things done, she was the essence of all the things a mentor can do to help an individual transform into the new person that they already have the potential to become, only with

support and help that transition could be made faster with a smoother process and ultimately, more successfully.

As I was transitioning from college student to first time worker out in the world I worked for my mentor, first helping at workshops and then teaching those workshops myself, then I started training professors and older students to use technology. I learned not only about skills and talents others saw in me that I had not recognized, but also about what it is like to work in an office with professionals, how much I enjoy helping people and what it means to find work that you love and make it a part of your identity.

### **Overview**

In the next chapter, a review of the literature surrounding mentoring, self-concept formation in adults and the psychology of identity formation and the theory of “possible selves” is discussed. Chapter three discusses the use of phenomenology as the methodology for this study and the use and purpose of “bracketing” within the study. Chapter four outlines the findings from the thematic analysis of the 12 interviews. Chapter five discusses the findings of the study and relates the findings back to the original study questions and the information uncovered in the literature review previously discussed in chapter two. Chapter six offers the conclusion to the study and includes the author’s thoughts on the importance of the findings within the context of understanding the lived experience of women on welfare as they seek to transition off of welfare and into new employment. It includes the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research and reflections on the research process from the author’s experiences during the study.

## Definition of Terms

Learning about welfare requires a whole new vocabulary for participants, caseworkers, lawmakers and the interested public to understand what is being discussed in the context of women transitioning from welfare to work. With this in mind I have provided an informal definition of terms in a glossary style. This glossary is meant to give a basic definition of terms often used when discussing welfare and public assistance.

**Benefits.** Benefits refer informally to a range of public assistance. This might include cash assistance, food benefits through the federal SNAP program, medical benefits, or childcare assistance grants.

**Case Worker.** A case worker, in the context of public assistance and welfare programs, refers informally to the case worker or social worker who is assigned to help the family.

**Childcare Assistance Grant.** A childcare assistance grant refers to programs which provide funds to help families pay for childcare while they work, search for work or go to school.

**Childcare Assistance Worker.** A childcare assistance worker, in the context of public assistance and welfare programs, refers informally to the case worker or social worker who is assigned to help the family specifically with the childcare assistance grant.

**Community Action.** Community Action is the name of a non-profit group that helps low income families.

**Dress for Success - Twin Cities.** Dress for Success - Twin Cities is a local chapter of an international non-profit that assists women with interview clothes and accessories, as well

as job and interview coaching. Dress for Success also offers job transition and mentoring programs for women. Two programs they offer are: The Going Places Network and the Professional Women's Group (PWG). (Described in detail in Chapter Three, p. 77).

**EBT Card.** The Electronic Benefits Card, or EBT, is a plastic card, similar to a credit card where Cash and/or Food support benefits can be electronically deposited automatically each month. The card can be swiped like a credit or debit card to pay for purchases or used at ATM to access card benefits.

**Emerge.** Emerge is the name of a non-profit group that helps low income families.

**Finance Worker.** A finance worker, in the context of public assistance and welfare programs, refers informally to the case worker or social worker who is assigned to help the family specifically with qualifying for public assistance and processing "proofs" used to determine the amount and type of assistance a family is eligible for - this might include documents such as job offer letters, birth certificates or utility bills.

**Food Benefits.** Food Benefits refer to public assistance programs that offer support to families in the form of food money. The federal food assistance program is called SNAP. Informally, many people still refer to food benefits and to the SNAP program as "food stamps". Before food benefits were issued using the plastic EBT card, they used to be given as coupons with the monetary value printed on them.

**Food Stamps.** Food stamps refer to public assistance programs that offer support to families in the form of food money. The federal food assistance program is now called SNAP. Informally, many people still refer to food benefits and to the SNAP program as

"food stamps". Before food benefits were issued using the plastic EBT card, they used to be given as coupons with the monetary value printed on them.

**Food Support.** Food support refers to public assistance programs that offer support to families in the form of food money. The federal food assistance program is called SNAP. Informally, many people still refer to food benefits and to the SNAP program as "food stamps". Before food benefits were issued using the plastic EBT card, they used to be given as coupons with the monetary value printed on them.

**General Education Degree (GED).** The General Education Degree (GED) is a test-based high school diploma equivalency that is issued by the state of residence of the person sitting for the exam. The GED is accepted by jobs and for higher education when a traditional high school diploma was not earned.

**Going Places.** The Going Places Network, or Going Places is a job transition program offered by a non-profit called Dress for Success. Dress for Success - Twin Cities is a local chapter of an international non-profit that assists women with interview clothes and accessories, as well as job and interview coaching. Dress for Success also offers job transition and mentoring programs for women. Two programs they offer are: The Going Places Network and the Professional Women's Group (PWG).

**Job Club.** A job club is an informal name for the job search education classes required for some participants in public assistance programs to be eligible for benefits.

**Medical Assistance (MA).** Medical assistance is also known as MA. It is a program to provide medical care to the most needy individuals and families. There is usually no co-pay.

**Mentor.** A mentor can be a teacher, a friend, a boss, a family member, a clergy person, a coworker, or anyone else who cares about a person and helps them to achieve the goals that they set for themselves. Searby and Tripses (2006) offered a broad definition of mentoring as a personal learning partnership between a more experienced person who can act as a role model, guide, teacher, coach, and/or sponsor to a less experienced person. Daloz (1999) defined a mentor as the person who “embodies hopes, casts light on the way ahead, interprets obscure signs, warns of impending dangers, and points out unexpected insights.” Anderson and Shannon (1988) identified five functions of mentoring that include teaching, sponsoring, encouraging, counseling and befriending. These five functions incorporate both the career and the psychosocial elements of the mentoring process.

**Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP).** The Minnesota Family Investment Program is also known as MFIP. This is the state "welfare" program providing monthly benefits to qualifying families.

**Minnesota Care.** Minnesota Care is a subsidized program for low income health insurance coverage in the state of Minnesota. On this program there is usually a small co-pay for services and also a monthly charge for remaining on the insurance plan that is calculated on a sliding income scale.

**Professional Women's Group (PWG).** The Professional Women's Group (PWG) is a job transition program offered by a non-profit called Dress for Success. The group meets monthly and also for special events. Once an individual graduates from the program they are eligible to be assigned a personal mentor. Dress for Success - Twin Cities is a local chapter of an international non-profit that assists women with interview clothes and accessories, as well as job and interview coaching. Dress for Success also offers job transition and mentoring programs for women. Two programs they offer are: The Going Places Network and the Professional Women's Group (PWG). (Described in detail in Chapter Three, p. 78).

**Project for Pride in Living (PPL).** Project for Pride in Living (PPL) is the name of a non-profit group that helps low income families.

**Proofs.** Proofs refer to the documentation required by caseworkers in order to "prove" that the individual or family qualifies for welfare benefits. "Proofs" are used to determine the amount and type of assistance a family is eligible for - this might include documents such as job offer letters, birth certificates or utility bills.

**Ready for Success.** Ready for Success is the name of a non-profit group that helps low income families with interview clothing. As of February 2012, Ready for Success is no longer operating.

**Sanction.** A "sanction" is a disciplinary action that a case worker or social worker can put into place when the applicant for public assistance has not provided the requested information, it also can be applied when a program participant is not cooperating with the

program's requirements or otherwise becomes ineligible for services for reasons other than not qualifying.

**SNAP benefits.** SNAP Benefits refer to public assistance programs that offer support to families in the form of food money. The federal food assistance program is called SNAP. Informally, many people still refer to food benefits and to the SNAP program as "food stamps". Before food benefits were issued using the plastic EBT card, they used to be given as coupons with the monetary value printed on them.

**Supplemental Security Income (SSI).** The Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is a federal cash assistance program for workers over 65 years old, blind or disabled.

**System, The.** The "System" is an informal way of referring to a broad range of public assistance and welfare programs.

**Twin Cities Rise!** Twin Cities Rise! is the name of a non-profit program that helps low-income families in Minnesota.

**Welfare.** Welfare, in a broad sense, refers to any state or federally funded program to help qualifying individuals and/or their families with material assistance. This could be financial, training, job related, health related, education, etc.

**Welfare-to-Work Programs.** Welfare-to-work programs are designed to help families return to the workforce.

**Welfare Rights Committee (WRC).** The Welfare Rights Committee (WRC) is a group of citizens who work together to rally their community to contact their state representatives.

**Women, Infants and Children (WIC).** The Women, Infants and Children program, also known as WIC, is a program focused on improving health and nutrition with nutritional foods for moms and children under 5 and in teaching nutrition skills. This program provides monthly food "checks" that can be used at participating locations to buy the healthy foods listed. Some states offer this program using a debit style card or as part of the EBT system, however, in Minnesota, they use "checks" to administer the program.

**Worker.** A worker, in the context of public assistance and welfare programs, refers informally to the case worker or social worker who is assigned to help the individual or family.

**Workforce Center.** The Workforce center is where participants in public assistance, welfare-to-work and job transition programs can go for help job searching.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the background of the research problem, explained the need and the purpose for the mentoring to change self-concept research study and introduced the research questions and the study methodology. A glossary-style definition of terms common to discussions surrounding mentoring programs and welfare was provided to acclimate the reader to the topic. An overview outlined the contents of each chapter within the dissertation. In chapter two, a review of the recent literature and case studies of successful and unsuccessful mentoring programs has been provided.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This chapter reviews the recent literature in mentoring to change self-concept and evaluates the limited scholarly research currently available on the use of mentoring as an intervention within welfare programs in order to change the self-concept and work-related identities of adults within welfare-to-work programs. It explores the concept of “possible selves” from the field of Social Psychology as a mechanism for understanding the inner changes that promote transformation and success for women transitioning off of welfare. Lastly, it discusses how mentoring programs designed for low income women transitioning from welfare-to-work can increase the positive “possible selves” of low income women and mothers.

### **Literature Review Criteria**

The primary criterion for inclusion in this literature review was: scholarly contributions fitting within the fields of psychology, sociology and adult education. The articles chosen focus on the themes that this study seeks to investigate with regard to the lived experiences of women transitioning off of welfare. While attention was given to the relative age of the scholarly contributions, the emphasis remained on finding exemplary content, rather than limiting the literature review to studies published only within the last five years (as is commonly suggested). Specific themes investigated within the scope of this literature review include: the ideas and theory surrounding concepts of self-identity and self-concept formation, self-transformation and possible and potential selves from the field of social psychology. Within the contributions from scholars working within the field of sociology, case studies of typical welfare-to-work programs, background

information on the history and current state of welfare in the United States and alternative programs that utilize mentoring to assist women in transitioning from welfare to work are explored. Within the framework of adult education, adult development theory and the theory of transformative learning and its implications for mentoring programs that serve women transiting off of welfare are discussed.

### **Thematic and Interdisciplinary Treatment of Literature Sources**

This literature review encompasses several fields and seeks to integrate ideas from them in an interdisciplinary fashion, creating a new combination of ideas and themes from the separate scholarly inquiry in each. The literature was chosen specifically to inform the reader of the main definition of terms that will be used within the larger work and to provide a background for the ideas that inform the literature on the topic of using mentoring to facilitate the transformation of self-identity of women transitioning off of welfare. As such, it is important to have a good understanding of the law that informs current welfare programs in the United States and an understanding of some of the common mentoring and welfare-to-work programs that are currently available in the United States. It is also important to explore the psychological concepts of self-identity and possible selves to understand how mentoring can bring about a self-transformation that changes the internalized identity of a woman on welfare from that of “welfare recipient” to a more positive association with a work-related identity. Transformative learning and transformative adult development are also areas that are thought to contribute to how and why mentoring works to help women off of welfare whereas more traditional education and training programs do not address the barriers to success and

underlying psychological problems concerning self-identity that are faced by those seeking to leave welfare.

### **Literature Search Method**

The method used to conduct the scholarly literature search was first, to conduct an electronic search of multiple library and internet databases such as PsychInfo, Academic Search Premier, Google Scholar and ERIC. Next, a book search was conducted using the University of Minnesota's MN-CAT library database online. After reading the articles discovered in the first round search, I consulted the references cited in selected articles and obtained and read those articles and books whenever possible. In this fashion, I was able to greatly expand my literature research into areas that I had not at first considered. After constructing an article summary database, I sorted the literature findings by theme in order to look for gaps in my research and to identify areas of saturation (where further sources were not needed). Several gaps were uncovered, prompting a second round of searching additional online databases within specific keywords of interest and within specialized academic journals. Second round articles were then added to the summary database and coded by theme.

### **Literature Review Construction**

This literature review was constructed using Ogawa and Malen's (1991) qualitative literature review strategy, which was broken down into a series of eight steps by Randolph (2009). The eight steps have been articulated as: 1) Create an audit trail, 2) Define the focus of the review, 3) Search for relevant literature, 4) Classify the documents, 5) Create summary databases, 6) Identify constructs and hypothesized causal

linkages, 7) Search for contrary findings and rival interpretations and 8) Use colleagues or informants to corroborate findings.

### **Literature Review Results**

Despite promising quantitative studies that indicate that it is important to support the formation of positive work-related identities for women who are seeking to transition off of welfare (e.g. Kohler, 1999; Lee, 2005; Robinson, Davis & Meara, 2003), there is limited qualitative research on identity formation and identity changes in adulthood or how work-related identities may be transformed in low income adults (Cramer, 2004; Ibarra, 1999; Lee & Oyserman, 2009). Current welfare law in the United States allows for a lifetime maximum of five years of welfare support and in order for low income women to receive welfare they must work a minimum of 20 hours a week, while in an approved education program and 30 hours a week, if not in a school or training program (Acs & Loprest, 2004; Lee, 2005). The jobs that can be obtained by these women tend to be entry-level and the women struggle with barriers to work (such as lack of affordable childcare) and remain at or below the poverty-level even while working (Lee, 2005). Jobs are often temporary in nature and turnover is high (Lee, 2005). It is important that we fund programs that will work to break the cycle of poverty and help women transition off of welfare and into career-based positions that pay a living wage.

Mentoring programs can facilitate transformative changes in women's work-related identities (as seen by the success of programs such as Dress for Success, Project Break-Through and Reclaimed For Purpose [*see Case Studies, p.52*]). These mentoring programs can assist women to become successful workers by helping them prepare to enter the workforce on a career path, rather than accepting a low-wage job. In spite of

promising results, there are few mentoring-based welfare-to-work programs in the United States and most welfare-to-work programs are built on the work now premise and concentrate their efforts on helping low income women enter the workforce quickly and helping them attain basic adult education (Acs & Loprest, 2004; Lee, 2005).

Acs & Loprest (2004) noted that in order for welfare-to-work programs with a work now approach to be successful, there needs to be a robust economy in place with a large number of entry-level jobs available. In the face of the economic downturn, it is clear that the curriculum and agenda of traditional welfare-to-work programs have not kept up with the reality of the current job market and the scarcity of entry-level jobs available for low income women who are seeking to transition off of the welfare system. Even with a lack of entry-level jobs available for low income women, the clock remains ticking on the five year lifetime maximum for the welfare benefits that these women may receive placing them in a no-win situation.

Lips (1999) explained that it is very important that we work to keep people from closing off various personal identities [possible selves] before they have explored these identities. She noted that minorities are often encouraged or even forced to discount potential identities due to their race, class, gender, nationality, appearance or other personal characteristics. Lips (1999) concluded that taking away barriers to success is not enough to empower women and minorities whose self-identities have been affected by them. This may be a contributing factor to the reason why welfare-to-work programs that utilize mentoring and go beyond removing traditional barriers to work such as lack of childcare, lack of proper work attire, or lack of reliable transportation to work (Lee,

2005) are more successful at breaking the cycle of poverty and helping women transition off of welfare permanently than more traditional welfare-to-work programs that focus on a work now approach and obtaining adult basic education credentials such as the General Education Diploma (GED). (For a discussion of the work now approach to traditional welfare-to-work programs see and Acs & Loprest, 2004; Steensland, 2007).

The primary literature that I have included in this literature review is from three areas: mentoring, welfare-to-work programs and the psychology of identity. The literature used to inform this study is grounded in theory from adult education, specifically research concerning the use of mentoring within adult programs as a form of transformative learning to support the formation of positive beliefs about oneself as a worker and support the creation of work-related identity for low income women. The second area that informs this research lies in the realm of sociology; social welfare, welfare programs in the United States and welfare-to-work programs that are successful in getting individuals off welfare all fall within this area. The third area that influences this study is that of psychology. The psychology of identity formation, work-related social identity and identity transformation in adults make up this area.

### **Welfare Law and Welfare-to-Work Programs**

In the 1990s former President William J. Clinton introduced and passed welfare reform laws limiting the benefit amounts and the length of time a family could remain on welfare in the United States. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) introduced the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. (Acs & Loprest, 2004). As part of these laws, new programs were created and welfare recipients were strongly encouraged to join welfare-to-work

programs to obtain the education and training necessary to join the workforce. These programs are often colloquially called work now programs due to their focus on minimizing the welfare case load of social workers and moving families from welfare to work quickly without regard for whether or not a job is appropriate in individual situations or whether or not it pays the worker enough to survive without welfare benefits.

Since then, welfare-to-work programs have struggled with needing to provide education and training as quickly as possible and in finding suitable employment for a population that often has many other barriers to employment such as lack of money, transportation or even appropriate attire for an interview (Acs & Loprest, 2004; Christopher, Dunnagan, Duncan & Paul (2001); Kuttner, 2002; Steensland, 2007). Acs and Loprest (2004) described the TANF program as putting the power into the state's hands to design their own cash assistance, training and education programs (p. 1) which had the effect of decentralizing the welfare system. In practice, this means that each state has its own unique welfare system and welfare-to-work programs and there are no national welfare-to-work programs in the United States. Because of this decentralized system, it is even more important that scholars and practitioners conduct research and share knowledge so that the quality and effectiveness of the welfare-to-work programs in each state can be continuously improved.

### **Scholarly Framework**

LaVoie (1994) offered transformative learning as an explanation for identity change during adulthood (p. 18) while Lee (2005) noted that the possible selves theory could be a useful framework for short-term interventions designed to augment the

possible selves of low income women (p. 31). Rossiter (2007) brought the two ideas together and postulated that the theory of “possible selves” could provide a framework for how adult learning could be the “medium through which change, growth and goal achievement can occur throughout the life course” (p. 5). Ibarra (1999) offered a conceptual model for understanding the construction of potential selves within the context of the work environment (for Model, see Ibarra, 1999, fig. 1, p. 787).

Super’s theory (1957) of career development (the life span/life space theory) and Erikson’s theory of adolescent identity formation (1968), in addition to the social cognitive theory of possible selves (Marcus & Nurius, 1986) and the theory of adult experiential learning (Dewey, 1938) inform the scholarship surrounding mentoring to change self-concept. The education-based theory of transformative learning is thought to provide the mechanism to create transformative identity change for adults (Freire, 1993; Mezirow, 1991). Recently, Moore (2005) has explored the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) to describe the process individuals undergo while experiencing identity changes and Bachkirova (2004) offered five different models to be used by mentors in practice, in order to facilitate teaching mentees how to explore issues surrounding making changes to their self-concept. In order to understand the scholarship in this area of study, it is helpful to define the common terms seen in the literature surrounding mentoring for change of self-identity.

### **Defining Self, Self-identity, Self-concept, Self-schema and Social Identity**

Triandis (1989) defined self as consisting of “all statements by a person, overtly or covertly, that include the words I, me, mine, and myself” (p. 506). Triandis (1989) added that culture effects the ways that individuals think about their self and it controls social

behavior since it provides “designs for living that have proven effective in the past” (p. 511). Similarly, Dunkel (2000) described identity as one's self-theory and added that “from this viewpoint an individual actively constructs their identity” (p. 521).

Markus & Nurius (1986) described self-concept as it relates to possible selves. “Most self-concept inventories ask, in effect, who you are now, but they do not inquire who you want to be, or who you are afraid of becoming. The self-concept is a more expansive phenomenon than is reflected by the typical descriptions of it. It extends its reach deeper in time. The self-concept reflects the potential for growth and change, and all the values that are attached to these possible future states” (p. 957). Rossiter (2007) explained that possible selves hold the view that the self-concept is dynamic, evolving and complex. Rossiter (2007) classified self-concept as based on past experiences, life context and current life situations.

Cross & Markus (1994) offered a related definition for self-schema. They said that a self-schema consists of the structures of self-knowledge that represent an individual's attributes (p. 423). Their work supported the idea that individuals that don't have positive schema (belief in their abilities) have a hard time adapting and are not confident. Individuals with positive self-schema use their self-schemas to “make quick and confident judgments, to adapt flexibly to different information-processing goals, and to accurately retrieve information relevant to that domain [of knowledge]” (p. 423). In 1972, Tajfel (2010) introduced the term social identity to move from social group perceptions to how the self is a system of social categorizations. These categorizations are then used to define an individual's identity to others within society.

**Defining Possible and Provisional Selves**

The term possible selves was coined by Markus and Nurius in 1986. Markus & Nurius (1986) defined possible selves as a person's ideas of what they think they might become in the future, what they would like to become in the future, and what they are afraid of becoming in the future. Possible selves reflect mental constructs of hopes, fears, goals, and threats. Possible selves function as motivators and demotivators for future behavior (p. 954). Markus & Nurius (1986) described possible selves as hoped for (e.g. the successful self, the rich self) or feared (e.g. the incompetent self, the unemployed self).

Ibarra (1999) offered a related definition for provisional selves as “temporary solutions people use to bridge the gap between their current capacities” (p. 765). Ibarra (1999) described these provisional selves as “trials for possible but not yet fully elaborated professional identities” (p.764).

**Defining Personal efficacy and Self-efficacy**

Bandura (1977) defined self-efficacy as “a theory of human behavior” (p. 203) that is “derived from four principle sources of information: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states” (p. 195) and added that “an efficacy expectation is the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes” (p. 193). Maldonado et al. (2008) offered a similar definition for self-efficacy, as the “belief that an individual's judgments regarding personal capabilities to organize and implement required plans of action will produce desired outcomes” (p. 224). Research has shown that low income levels are related to low levels of self-efficacy (Lee, 2005).

### **Known Factors that Effect Self-concept, Self-identity and Personal Efficacy**

Robinson and Davis (2001) identified two important resiliency factors for low income women: self-concept and personal efficacy. Bandura (2000) wrote, “People’s shared beliefs in their collective efficacy influence the types of futures they seek to achieve” (p. 76). This is important because low income women on welfare may not have had opportunities to achieve high levels of personal efficacy, which may account for negative views of their possible selves. Bandura (2000) found that collective and individual efficacies were moderately correlated and predictive of group performance; this could potentially apply to families in the welfare system because their sense of “collective” efficacy may be lower than families not using the welfare system. Markus & Nurius (1986) describe how the now self can activate negative possible selves due to an individuals’ past experience and lead to low self-esteem and low self-efficacy.

#### **Characteristics of the Possible Selves of Low Income Women**

When looking at the situation of low income adults, Clark & Dirx (2008) captured the plight of the low income worker when they wrote, “Caught in and surrounded by life conditions that seem to often spiral out of control, learners in adult basic education programs seem further victimized by governmental policies and agencies that are interpreting these contexts [welfare law] from an increasingly functionalist perspective” (p. 92). From the few quantitative studies that have been done with low income women looking at their possible selves, we know some basic characteristics of this population. One overarching characteristic of the possible selves of low income women is fear that they will be unable to navigate within the welfare system to get their material needs met (Lee, 2005).

Robinson, Davis & Meara (2003) found that low income women believed it less likely that they would avoid a most feared self than achieve a most hoped-for one (p. 163). They found that many low income women have experienced negative occupational situations. The women in the study could provide vivid descriptions of what they feared. Robinson, Davis & Meara (2003) also found in their study that many of the low income women feared never moving beyond “fast food” jobs or becoming prostitute or “stripper” (p. 163).

### **How Adults Undergo Identity Transformation**

An individual's states of being while going through the process of identity change as an adult are an important aspect to explore with the population of low income women transitioning off of welfare. We know that people adapt to new roles by experimenting with provisional selves. Ibarra (1999) identified three essential tasks that people use to adapt to new roles within their life. First, people observe role models to identify potential identities to emulate. Next, people experiment with provisional selves, and last, people decide which elements of their provisional selves to fully incorporate into their identity based on peer feedback.

Moore's take on the transformation process for adults (2005) was quite different. Moore subscribed to Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (1991), which says that transformative learning occurs in 10 distinct phases. Each phase is usually triggered by a life event or crisis that requires the adult to apply new problem-solving skills. Dunkel (2000) borrowed from LaVoie (1994) who suggested that possible mechanisms to trigger identity change are equilibration, a readiness for change, individuation and conflict while Cramer (2004) used Erikson's model of Identity Diffusion, Identity Foreclosure, Identity

Moratorium and Identity Achieved status. There was no unifying model of identity transformation for adults found in the literature search.

### **Defining *Culture* and How Work-related Identity is Formed**

Schein (1997) saw culture as a phenomenon that surrounds us all. Culture can be created, embedded, developed, manipulated, managed, and changed. Culture defines leadership. One must understand the culture to understand an organization. Schein (1997) defined culture as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way you perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” and added that culture encompasses the norms, values, behavior patterns, rituals and traditions found within groups. Culture implies structural stability, patterning and integration. Culture is the accumulated shared learning from shared history of a group of people.

Schein (1997) noted that each organization has its own way and an outsider brings his/her baggage as an observer of the culture. These observers must understand new environment and culture before change or observation can be made. They must observe the local behaviors including the local language, customs and traditions which form the group's norms (the standards and values of the group).

Van Knippenburg (2000) explained that “individuals define themselves in terms of their group membership and ascribe characteristics that are typical of the group to the self” (p. 357), this is important to understand since the self-identity of women on welfare will likely be in line with characteristics typical to their group membership. This is one

reason why building programs that help low-income women reimagine their possible selves in light of a different set of social norms (for example, that of a middle class worker) is important in order to facilitate these women in successfully transitioning from welfare to work.

Ibarra (1999) added that, “Repertoires are augmented and elaborated as people observe role models and supply the elements needed to construct provisional selves. Early constructions are based on naive, sometimes discordant perceptions of role requirements and possible selves in the new role. With direct experience, people clarify what images are desirable and increase their understanding of what elements they can use to create those images. They evaluate identities against...external standards...and modify repertoires accordingly, adding, discarding, or revising the bits and pieces of their possible selves” (pp.773-774).

## **Mentoring**

### **Moving Towards a Definition of Mentoring and Transformative Mentoring**

Searby and Tripses (2006) offered a broad definition of mentoring as a personal learning partnership between a more experienced person who can act as a role model, guide, teacher, coach, and/or sponsor to a less experienced person. Within their definition of mentoring, a mentor provides their protégé with knowledge, advice, support, good counsel and personal coaching to support the protégé’s personal and professional goals. In addition to protégé, those being mentored are also referred to as mentees. Searby and Tripses (2006) also borrowed from the definition of mentoring suggested by Daloz (1999), seeing a mentor as the person who “embodies hopes, casts light on the way

ahead, interprets obscure signs, warns of impending dangers, and points out unexpected insights” (Daloz, 1999).

Anderson and Shannon (1988) identified five functions of mentoring that include teaching, sponsoring, encouraging, counseling and befriending. These five functions incorporate both the career and the psychosocial elements of the mentoring process. Kram (1983) discovered that a mentor fulfills both psychosocial and career functions in the life of the protégé. Cawyer, Simonds and Davis (2002) identified career mentoring functions that included coaching, sponsoring and protecting the protégé as he/she develops professionally and added that from the psychosocial perspective, mentors act as role models who provide counseling, acceptance and friendship (p. 226).

Searby and Tripses (2006) added that mentors transmit wisdom during important stages of transition in their protégé’s lives. Southern (2007) defined a mentor as a person who can make a difference in the life of another, while Rossiter (2007) defined mentoring as an “educational helping relationship” (p. 5). Johnson (2003) took a different tack and agreed with Dewey (1938) that “every experience is a moving force” (p. 38) and found that mentoring could cause self-transformation through a series of critical and reflective moments of personal growth. The process of transformative mentoring is when the relationship between the mentor and the protégé serves to trigger positive self-growth and identity change in the protégé’s life.

### **Mentoring to Change Self-Identity**

**Mentoring Effectiveness.** Rossiter (2007) noticed that individuals often identify themselves with a particular role such as student, receptionist, or information analyst.

Many welfare recipients have negative self-identifications such as unemployed, in the projects, welfare bum, or Section 8. Clutterbuck & Lane (2004) and Cohen (1995) explained that mentoring programs seek to not only provide education and training, but also to create positive experiences and to build up the confidence of workers and to encourage positive self-identification with work roles (*see also*, Bierema, 1996; Ibarra, 1999). Mentoring is a tool that has been successfully used in the education field and the corporate world in order to help mentees adjust to school or work and to become more successful and productive citizens (e.g. Allen & Eby, 2007; Allen, Eby & Lentz, 2006, Johnston, 2003; Searby & Tripses, 2006 and Worthy, 2005). Maldonado et al. (2008) found that when strong mentoring relationships were formed, mentoring had a transformative effect on identity, self-efficacy and possible selves of at-risk adolescent girls. This finding suggests that mentoring programs would also be able to create a transformative effect on identity for adults as well, but further research is needed to determine how to tailor such programs for adults using the principles of andragogy rather than pedagogy.

**Mentoring as an Intervention.** Mentoring programs can be used as an intervention to assist women in transitioning off welfare and to “promote women's ability to sustain commitment to work and family and gain self-efficacy” so that they are able to persevere despite personal challenges and obstacles (Lee, 2005, p. 18). Lee (2005) noted that the possible selves theory is a useful framework for this type of short-term intervention so that participants can create positive possible selves in specific areas where they feel they might benefit from improvement (p. 31). Robinson & Davis (2001) suggested that the mentoring of women, by women who have made the transition from

poverty to self-support, could be a powerful intervention (p. 14). Robinson & Davis (2001) also called for scholars to produce qualitative studies to help us understand more about the possible and feared selves of low income women.

Lee (2005) called for programs designed to reduce work-family conflict and integrate work and family roles. She felt that the creation of a positive work identity would help low income women transition from welfare to work. Lee (2005) also recommended that interventions be adapted for low-income mothers and that they include soft skills to promote work readiness. Soft skills programs may include role-playing how to effectively communicate with employers and fellow workers, discussing workplace norms and could benefit from activities such as strategizing solutions to common workplace issues such as resolving conflicts with coworkers or calling out sick before these skills are needed. She added that, interventions could also include problem solving and brainstorming around childcare arrangements, and felt that it was important for workers to anticipate and plan for unexpected circumstances, such as a sick babysitter or a sick child. She suggested that an intervention to increase women's sense of identity as a worker and to augment work-related possible selves could promote work and feelings of wellbeing in low income women on welfare. (Lee, 2005, p. 32). Lee (2005) suggested that these types of interventions would be likely to increase low income women's self-efficacy in managing work (p. 30).

**Mentoring Programs as an Alternative Welfare-to-Work Program.** Mentoring programs can be used as an alternative path to workforce entry (or re-entry). In Bjorklund & Bee (2008), researchers discussed Super's theory of career development. Super's

theory, also known as the “life span/life space theory” (p. 202) articulated the stages of career development as: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and disengagement. According to Super (1957) each stage has specific developmental tasks associated with it and particular career-related “issues” common to the stage that must be overcome in order for a person to move from one stage of their career to the next stage. The stages begin in early adolescence when youth first begin to contemplate their life work and continue throughout their life until post-retirement.

Super’s theory raises important questions that must be considered when looking at the work-related identities of women seeking to transition off of welfare and into the workforce. For example: *What happens when women are caught in the cycle of poverty and welfare and do not follow the “traditional” paths to joining the workforce during their formative years?* Maldonado et al. (2008) found a lack of literature exploring mentoring relationships and the development of self-efficacy, career aspirations and possible selves. The findings of their study substantiated the value of mentoring programs to create and build the social constructs that allow mentees to become successful workers in the future (p. 233) lending further support for mentoring programs as an alternative to welfare to work programs.

### **The Role of Mentoring Programs in Creating Self-Identity Changes**

Mentoring programs seek to provide an alternative path to work for low income women and to provide the means for adults to resolve the developmental tasks and issues that Erikson (1968) noted would usually have been tackled by the mentees during earlier, missed stages of career development that usually take place during adolescence.

Maldonado et al. (2008) noted that mentoring programs can foster the development of a positive sense of self and effect areas such as self-efficacy, attitudes, aspirations and hope for the future for participants. Walsh (2008) found that successful mentoring programs have a role to provide participants with opportunities to experience intimately their hoped-for and feared-selves, to learn about themselves and to reflect on their sense of self in order to grow. Johnson (2003) focused on the dual role of growth that is experienced by both the mentee and the mentor as an additional crucial role of mentoring programs.

### **The Role of Mentors in Self-Identity Transformation**

The role of a mentor, as seen in the scholarly literature on mentoring, is to introduce the mentee to new possibilities, to facilitate exploration, to model behavior and to be a role model for mentees to emulate. Moore (2005), like Mezirow (1991) and Mezirow & Associates (2000), describes the mentor's role as being a helper. Moore (2005) wrote, "[The helper] can help the individual identify and examine her or his assumptions—epistemological, social, and psychological—that underlie beliefs, feelings, and actions; assess the consequences of these assumptions; and test the validity of assumptions through effective participation in reflective dialogue. Helping the learner advance developmentally, to become more critically reflective, and to integrate meaningful perspectives that are more integrative of experience, is a main goal of adult education as well as a central responsibility of an adult educator" (p. 408).

**Mentors Should Introduce the Mentee to New Possibilities.** Rossiter (2007) found that adult learners are in the process of "exploring new possibilities for themselves" and that mentors, advisors and teachers can serve in a pivotal role in order to

facilitate the exploration of these possibilities (p. 3). Southern (2007) explained this view well, “Mentors are advocates and supporters of people. They are passionate about their work, willing to take risks, and willing to challenge us and our thinking. They help us grow as people, discover aspects of ourselves that were previously unknown, imagine new possibilities, and realize our dreams. Mentoring requires that we know the whole person—that is, who he is in the context of his life. We then have a greater opportunity to help others create relevancy and meaning from our teaching and their learning experiences and to hold the tension that opens the possibility for transformative learning” (p. 330).

**Mentors Should Facilitate Exploration.** Rossiter (2007) believed that mentors can help their mentee to explore their identity and to detail and expand on their possible selves. By expanding the mentees view of their identity, mentors can facilitate exploration while strengthening self-confidence and feelings of self-efficacy for the mentee. Southern (2007) explained how the exploration of possible selves within a mentoring context can facilitate transformative changes in the mentee. “Adult students come back to school because they have dreams of a different life. Many of the students I teach are accomplished professionals whose careers may have not taken them in the direction they had hoped, or they want to expand their horizons and do work that better serves the greater good. Most do not come expecting transformation; yet in working with them as a teacher/mentor, I hope that is what they experience” (Southern, 2007, p. 330).

**Mentors Should Model Behavior.** Bandura (1977) found that human behavior is developed through modeling. He believed that we form new behavior patterns by

observing others. Bandura's findings suggest that mentors need to model positive behavior for low income women on welfare. Mentors are often older and more experienced than the mentee. Within the context of mentoring low income women, this suggests that mentor-mentee relationships should be paired within the career field that the mentee seeks to enter and that it may be helpful to have aspects of job shadowing and modeling of unspoken workplace norms for particular career paths within work-related mentoring programs so that the low income woman transitioning from welfare to work not only get a job, but keep the job. In this way, mentoring programs can assist women in obtaining and maintaining jobs that are gateways to a career instead of continuing in low-wage menial jobs that only serve to perpetuate poverty.

Bandura (1977) explained that "not only can perceived self-efficacy have directive influence on choice of activities and settings, but, through expectations of eventual success, it can affect coping effects once they are initiated" (p. 194). He wrote that, "Efficacy expectations determine how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences" (p. 194). In this way, people can be led through verbal persuasion (suggestion) to believe that they can "cope successfully with what has overwhelmed them in the past" (p. 198). Through the use of verbal persuasion, mentors can use suggestion to help mentees increase their sense of personal efficacy and therefore, their belief in the likelihood that they can achieve their best, hoped-for possible selves.

Bandura (1977, 1982) felt that true changes in self-efficacy could be achieved by first developing capabilities, then removing external aids and finally generalizing

expectations of personal efficacy by promoting self-directed action (p. 202). Mentors can achieve this effect through modeling the behavior, then letting the mentee try the new behavior with mentor support and guidance and, finally, the mentee can achieve mastery (and therefore increased feelings of personal efficacy) by performing the behavior without the mentor's assistance.

Robinson & Davis (2001) looked for the "presence of a role model for their most hoped for self" and "self-initiated actions taken to achieve their most hoped-for self and avoid their most feared self" (p. 2) within their quantitative study and found that without role models, the low income women in their study were less likely to believe that they could achieve a hoped for self. This lends support for why mentors should role model behavior for their mentees.

**Mentors Should be Role Models for Mentees to Emulate.** Southern (2007) described mentors as ordinary people who are able to touch lives because of their passion for their work and their ability to care about others. She described the need for mentors to be a role model for their mentees to emulate when she wrote, "By sharing openly the challenges we have encountered and what we have learned about ourselves through our own journey of teaching and learning, we create a relationship of truthfulness and trust. Teachers who are mentors have the ability to connect their own life-worlds with the life-worlds of their students, creating opportunities to reinterpret life experience through an expanded horizon" (Southern, 2007, p. 330).

### **Characteristics Needed for Successful Mentoring Programs**

From the scholarly literature on successful mentoring programs it was possible to glean 12 characteristics of good mentoring programs. It is clear that successful mentoring programs focus on building strong relationships, creating a transformative learning environment, teaching strategies to help mentees attain their best possible selves, ensuring that there are caring and committed mentors, providing a good quality program curriculum, creating times for participant reflection, utilizing visualization and goal-setting strategies, providing career options education, offering career counseling and planning services, ensuring that both mentors and mentees have input into matching decisions, providing methods for resolving conflicts and setting mentoring and relationship expectations.

**Building Strong Relationships.** Maldonado et al. (2008), in their research on programs serving at-risk girls, emphasized the importance of the commitment to spend quality time together over a long period of time with regular contact in order to build nurturing relationships that are strong enough to foster academic, social, and emotional skill development.

**Creating a Transformative Environment.** In their quantitative study, Kroger & Green (1996) discovered the strong role that internal change processes play in identity transitions. Specifically, the authors found that changes in perspective or new awareness's accounted for one-half to two-thirds of adult identity changes. This is a key finding in support of the role that mentoring programs may play in helping women transition from welfare-to-work and by creating an environment that both causes

“changes in perspective” and creates new awareness for the women in order to support the process of transformational identity change.

**Teaching Strategies to Attain Possible Selves.** Lee & Oyserman (2009)

examined both the possible selves and strategies of low-income women to attain their possible selves. Markus & Nurius (1986) suggested that to effectively motivate behavior changes, the desire for change must be translated into “a vision of the self as healthy, active, and strong and must be accompanied by specific plans and strategies for becoming these possible selves” (p. 961).

**Ensuring Caring and Committed Mentors.** Worthy (2005) offered a case study of

a first year teacher’s poor experience with his school mentoring program where the assigned mentor didn’t really care about him and didn’t help him adjust to his first year of teaching. In the end, he created his own mentoring “team” of teachers with like-minded teaching styles in order to successfully navigate within his school and classroom as a new teacher. This case study serves as a reminder that mentors must be both caring and committed to helping their mentee achieve their personal and career-related goals.

**Providing Good Program Quality and Curriculum.** In their quantitative research

study, Allen, Eby & Lentz (2006) indicated that a mentee’s “perceived” input into the mentoring process and the mentee indicating that they perceived that their training was of a high quality were consistently related to the outcome of their mentoring program experiences (p. 567). This may seem obvious, but the research is basically indicating that a mentoring program’s curriculum needs to be of high quality for mentoring to be effective.

**Creating Time for Participant Reflection.** Johnson (2003) identified what she termed as, “critical” moments in her qualitative research. These were moments that, on reflection, represented change and growth for her as a mentor and a teacher. During the course of her time as a mentor of a first year teacher in training, she kept a journal to reflect on her experiences that helped her to process and reflect upon moments of transformative change in her teaching practices and her internalized identity as a teacher. In the case of low income women who are transitioning off of welfare, a journal may provide a powerful narrative for understanding their own life story and reflecting on the process of work-related identity change.

**Utilizing Visualization Strategies.** Fletcher (2000) offered exercises for visualization and imagery within the context of mentoring as a strategy for individuals to activate their imagination and create visions of their possible selves. Cross & Markus (1994) suggested that visualization can provide a link between creating imagery and a vision of a possible self that overcomes the previous experience of a negative self.

**Creating Goal-setting Strategies.** Oyserman et al. (2004) supported that idea that, an individual’s best possible self, when matched with a specific strategy for how to accomplish making that self a reality, is more likely to come true. This suggests that successful mentoring programs that seek to help low income women will promote both envisioning the best possible self of the women as well as encouraging and guiding the women to create concrete goals and steps in order to make this vision as reality in the future. Fletcher (2000) also suggested that imagery and visualization can be mentoring

strategies (as in taught by a mentor to the mentee) in order to connect possible selves with specific goals and to create a mental path to achieving goals.

**Providing Career Options Education.** Robinson, Davis & Meara (2003) noted that “participants experience concrete occupational role models (physician, judge, and airline pilot)...expressed greater interest in these jobs (i.e. they hoped for or expected them more” (p.156).

**Offering Career Counseling and Planning Services.** Meara et al. (1995) believed that individuals should be exposed to more opportunities and occupations to open up their beliefs about their potential career options. Meara et al. (1995) recommended that women and minorities receive specific instruction on how to plan for a career and felt that a career counselor could help clients to overcome racial, gender-oriented and minority specific barriers to entering specific types of careers (such as women entering science and math-related occupations).

**Ensuring Mentor/Mentee Matching Input.** Allen, Eby & Lentz (2006) found that input into the matching process appears to be critical for both mentors and protégé’s. In a study on the effect of mentor/mentee rank, Allen, Eby & Lentz (2006) did not find a relationship between differences in rank and career mentoring outcomes though differences in rank did relate to role modeling. They found that protégé ’s were more likely to role model mentors when they were closer to their own rank. Specifically, they found that protégé ’s are likely to role model mentors who are in the next higher position for their career path.

**Providing Methods for Resolving Conflict and Setting Expectations.** Searby & Tripses (2006) found that concerns about the mentoring relationship and expectations should be addressed for both the mentor and the protégé in order to establish boundaries and set relationship expectations for both parties. It is important for mentoring programs to provide guidelines to their participants to resolve potential conflicts and to maintain the quality of the program.

### **Case Studies**

Traditional welfare-to-work programs that are focused primarily on assisting low income adults in obtaining educational credentials and on-the-job training through work experience are not successful at helping those on welfare obtain work that pays a living wage and provides health benefits so that they can transition off of welfare permanently. There are, however, private and non-profit programs that attempt to address the underlying barriers to success and provide support and knowledge to individuals and families seeking to leave the welfare system. Project Learn, a traditional job training program offered through the University of Alabama at Birmingham, is representative of both the strengths and weaknesses of work now and education-based welfare-to-work programs that are common in the United States today. Dress for Success Twin Cities, Project Break-Through and Reclaimed For Purpose are all successful mentoring programs designed to help underserved and at-risk populations. These mentoring programs have had a transformative effect on participant's lives and offer many lessons that can be used to help more underserved and at-risk youth, adults and families in the future.

**Project Learn (University of Alabama at Birmingham)**

In a typical work now-based welfare-to-work program Kohler (1999) described a year-long program offered through a partnership between the Jefferson County, Alabama, Department of Human Resources and the University of Alabama at Birmingham which focused on providing adult education services, job placement, on-the-job training and on teaching life skills to participants who were referred to the program. During the course of a 14-week study on the program, 67 welfare recipients moved through the program and 38 completed the program. Project Learn participants were divided into two groups according to the results of a workplace literacy test. One group focused primarily on General Education Degree (GED) preparation throughout the 14-week study. This group worked up to 25 hours a week in temporary positions for on-the-job training, spent 15 hours in GED preparation and spent 3 hours a week learning about employability, workplace and life skills. The second group focused primarily on working (up to 37 hours a week) and attended class 3 hours a week to learn about employability, workplace and life skills.

Kohler (1999) noted that there were numerous barriers to success for the program participants including both the common barriers to success experienced by low income families such as lack of transportation and affordable childcare, as well as personal and psychological problems that hindered the efforts of the participants to transition off of welfare and into the workforce. Kohler (1999) also found that participants chose short-term financial gain (temporary work) over the long-term employment gains that could be found in finishing their General Education Degree (GED). At the close of the 14-week study, only two participants had obtained full-time work with health benefits through the

University of Alabama at Birmingham. The remainder of the program graduates (36) were working on a temporary-basis with no benefits and would probably soon return to welfare.

Mentoring was a tangential element of the Project Learn program. Mentors were assigned at the beginning of the program and the program provided brown bag lunches and activities for mentors and mentees to spend time together. Despite its informal nature, mentoring was seen as lending “direct emotional support” to the participants, and was identified by the participants as being an important element to their success (Kohler, 1999, p.7).

#### **Project Break-Through (Salvation Army)**

Miskowiec (2003) discussed a case study of the Minnesota (Twin Cities and Roseville) chapters of the Salvation Army mentoring program, Project Break-Through, which started in 1990. The program seeks to promote the self-sufficiency of families by providing mentoring and support services. Project Break-Through matches families with mentoring teams consisting of two to four volunteers who serve as mentors. It also offers a monthly support group for families with similar goals to meet and discuss topics such as self-esteem, money management, positive parenting, building healthy relationships, eating on a budget and home buying. In addition to the Minnesota-based Salvation Army Project Break-Through programs, there are additional Salvation Army Project-Breakthrough programs in Indiana, Maine, Michigan, New York, Virginia and Wisconsin (Miskowiec, 2003).

The goal of the Project Break-Through is to empower its participants by utilizing both mentoring and social services to help families create a plan for achieving their goals. Project Break-Through also seeks to provide opportunities for families to connect with the community and to reduce isolation. Mentors can help families by serving as resources and advocates for the family and assisting the family navigate within the social services and welfare system.

Mentors are required to complete a six hour training program which includes: communication skills, diversity training, socioeconomic class issues and focused listening skills. Both the mentors and families are required to make a one year minimum commitment to the program and meet at least once per month. Project Break-Through also collaborates with and receives referrals from local community agencies such as the Lutheran Social Services (LSS) Housing Services program and the Saint Paul Public Housing Agency's Family Self Sufficiency program (Miskowiec, 2003).

#### **Reclaimed For Purpose (MATFA)**

Ukleja, Lorber, & McBride (2009) noted a highly successful mentoring program called Reclaimed For Purpose (RFP) which was created by a mentoring-based organization called Mentoring: A Touch from Above (MATFA). Reclaimed For Purpose (RFP) is a mentoring program first administered to young men while they are in prison and it continues once they are released from prison. It is offered through the California Youth Authority in an effort to help young men break the cycle of returning to prison and becoming a repeat offender. This California-based prison mentoring program has seen positive results with this special needs population. In 14 years, of the 1200 young men to complete the MATFA program, only 4 have returned to prison (p. 24) compared to an

average recidivism rate of 70% in California for young men without mentors (MATFA, 2011).

The MATFA program (2011) provides a variety of services within the community including: job training, job placement, resume writing, tutoring, college application preparation, gang awareness classes, retreats and community services for youth, family planning and family planning counseling, specialized youth mentoring programs within the school system, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, housing placement and case work for youth. MATFA (2011) also runs two preventative, intervention-based youth mentoring programs (Save Our Children At Risk (SOCAR) and Youth Mentoring) for children 11-18 years old who need mentoring and guidance in the areas of peer pressure, gang awareness, drug and alcohol abuse and improving grades.

### **Exploring Recent Research**

Individuals on welfare are not able to obtain employment that pays a living wage. Employment for low income workers is often temporary or transitional and does not provide health benefits or job security and in the 1996 the United States passed welfare reform laws that limited the lifetime welfare eligibility for families to five years (Acs & Loprest, 2004; Gueron, 1987; Gueron, Pauly & Lougy, 1991; Kuttner, 2002; Steensland, 2007). The changing economy in more recent years has made even entry-level jobs harder to obtain and families on welfare are put in an ever more precarious and unstable situation which ultimately harms children and perpetuates the cycle of poverty from one generation to the next.

Research has shown that the population of those relying on the welfare system for long term support is disproportionately made up of women and children residing in single parent households (Lee & Vinokur, 2007). Clearly, there is a need for change, but to break the cycle of poverty requires that the barriers to success experienced by women and mothers on welfare be overcome. Mentoring offers a promising alternative to traditional welfare-to-work interventions that seek to help women on welfare. Mentoring programs can help low income women to change their self-concept in order to overcome internal barriers that may prevent them from transitioning from welfare to work successfully.

#### **Need for Study of Mentoring to Change Self-Concept**

Research uncovered during the thematic literature review of mentoring to change self-concept shows that there is a need for further study on mentoring as an intervention for low income women. This study answers the call from several scholars for additional research in three specific research areas: a need to solve a problem, a need to fill gaps in the literature and a need to extend scholarly knowledge. Specifically, there is a need to come up with solutions to alleviate poverty and there is evidence that women and children are especially harmed by living in poverty and that poverty passes from generation to generation in a destructive cycle. Gaps have also been identified in the scholarly research in the areas of adult identity formation and transformation, relating life experiences to adult identity and exploring the possible selves of low income women and low income mothers. While some research from the fields of Education and Psychology has been done on the formation of possible selves and identity for youth and adolescents, there is a need to extend the knowledge about possible selves and their effect on identity and career choices for adults.

There have been very few studies within the last five years looking at the possible selves of low income women and only one within the context of adult identity formation and self-concept maintenance and changes for adults transitioning off of welfare. Within the context of a broader set of scholarly research drawn from multiple disciplines, studies have been done within the last five years looking at mentoring as an intervention for at-risk adolescent populations and investigating whether or not mentoring was an effective pedagogical intervention when used within educational settings. These studies indicated that it is important to support the formation of positive self-concept in children and adolescents and to support the formation of positive work-related identities for women who are seeking to transition off of welfare.

The research on mentoring as an intervention designed to assist adults in changing their self-concept is limited and only one qualitative research study on identity formation and identity changes in adulthood or how work-related identities may be transformed in low income adults was found (Lee & Oyserman, 2009). Wiklund (1993) appears to be the last qualitative study looking specifically at the “lived experiences” of women on welfare in an effort to provide a “voice” for this population. While quantitative research can provide the data required by policymakers and grant-making organizations in order to fund mentoring programs that serve as interventions for women seeking to transition off of welfare, qualitative research has the power to add the voice of women on welfare to these policy discussions and to authentically articulate their experiences and needs to those in power.

### **Criteria for Inclusion in the Review of Recent Research**

To conduct the review of recent research in the area of mentoring to change self-concept, I looked for scholarly research studies that were published within the last five years (2007-2011). I also included two additional studies from 1993 and 2005 since I am building on the work of these scholars (Lee, 2005; Wikelund, 1993). Despite their age, these studies inform or directly apply to my study of mentoring as an intervention to change self-concept in adults.

The most recent research in the area of mentoring to change self-concept is focused largely on adolescent interventions. Studies being conducted within in the fields of Youth-and-Adolescent Psychology and Education are yielding some interesting results (e.g. Diehl & Hay, 2010; Maldonadoa, Quarlesb, Lacey, & Thompsonc, 2008; Walsh, 2008). If similar studies were conducted with an adult population, these results may serve as the basis to inform us about how mentoring interventions with low income women on welfare might work to transform the self-concept of women which can help mitigate traditional barriers to work-related success.

There were only three scholarly articles identified within my initial thematic literature review that were describing the results of research studies and were also looking specifically at self-concept formation, possible selves, work-related identity formation or mentoring (e.g. Lee & Oyserman, 2009; Maldonadoa, Quarlesb, Lacey, & Thompsonc, 2008; Walsh, 2008). Since there were so few directly related studies to discuss when delimiting my review of recent research to studies published within the last five years, I decided to conduct a third round of searching for scholarly articles using the

University of Minnesota MN-CAT system and the online library of article databases such as Academic Search Premier and PsycInfo to look for additional studies across multiple disciplines. For this round of searching, I focused on looking for additional scholarly research studies concerning self-concept, work-related identity formation and mentoring which were also published within the last five years.

In this manner, five additional scholarly studies were identified and included in the review of recent research (e.g. Herrera, Baldwin Grossman, Kauh & McMaken, 2011; Langer, 2009; Lee & Vinokur, 2007; Philip, 2008 and Wikelund, 1993).

### **Recent Studies on Welfare and Possible Selves**

I found one recent study directly related to mentoring to change the self-concept of women who hope to transition off of welfare that was conducted by Lee & Oyserman in 2009. This study used quantitative methods and looked at the possible selves of low income mothers on welfare, the potential pathways to work open to these women and the effect their fear of experiencing negative possible selves had on their perceptions of self-efficacy in dealing with work-family conflict. Women were recruited from the welfare office and from job-training programs to participate in the study. Participants in the Lee & Oyserman (2009) quantitative study were assessed with an “open-measure” survey which included stems of questions with space after for an open response. The open stems used within the survey to identify both positive and negative hoped-for and feared possible selves were: “Next year, I expect to be...” and “Next year, I want to avoid being...” (p. 1340) responses were then coded according to the type of possible selves that were identified which included job-focused, caregiving, making ends meet, education-focused and mental health related possible selves. The researchers also

investigated the balance between the positive and negative possible selves identified by the women and asked about the types of strategies the women planned to apply within the next year in order to achieve or avoid their possible selves.

The purpose of the study was to discover the extent that breadwinning and caregiving were salient possible selves for women on welfare. The authors postulated that when “breadwinning” possible selves were salient, low-income women would persevere at job search activities and maintaining their jobs, in contrast, when “caregiving” was the salient role played by low income mothers these women would be less likely to persevere in their job search over overcome work-family conflicts that interfered with their jobs (p. 1336).

Though the study is asking what seem to be qualitative questions, the method for handling the data generated is wholly quantitative. First the author’s present Pearson correlation analyses, then regression results, followed by ANOVAs with Bonferroni post hoc contrasts (p. 1342). The study results suggested that low income mothers saw themselves as both breadwinners (workers) and caregivers (mothers) and had to balance the well-being of their children with the needs of providing for their family. It also found that these roles often come into conflict with the mother’s personal strategy to achieve hoped for selves.

This is significant because researchers believe that cultivating positive possible selves can help low income women to sustain goal-directed motivation and self-regulation. Lee & Oyserman (2009) also felt that for the possible selves of low income women to impact work-related outcomes, they need to be linked to relevant life contexts,

supported with goal setting strategies, and balanced between positive selves to work toward in the future and feared selves to strive to get away from (e.g. being homeless) (p. 1336).

### **Recent Studies on Identity Change in Adults, Adolescents and Children**

There were no directly applicable studies found in the literature search within the last five years when looking for research focused on understanding how adult identity changes over time, however, there were three interesting studies, two in 2008 and one in 2010, that focused on understanding how adolescent identity changes into an adult's initial sense of identity and self-concept.

Maldonadoa, Quarlesb, Lacey, & Thompsonc (2008) conducted a qualitative study of at-risk adolescent girls being formally mentored by adult women for a minimum of three years. Findings suggested that “a long-term, nurturing mentoring relationship had a positive impact on the self-efficacy, aspirations, and possible selves of the at-risk adolescent girls” (p. 223). Maldonado et al (2008) noted that mentoring created positive relationships for mentees and assisted in the development of a positive self-concept that included positive associations with feelings about personal self-efficacy, attitudes and feelings about themselves, personal aspirations and hopes for the future (p. 226).

Maldonado et al (2008) also noted that emphasis should be placed on the commitment of mentors and mentees to spending quality time together regularly over a long period of time in order to support nurturing partnerships that foster academic emotional and social skill development for the mentees. At the conclusion of the study, mentees' shared a new sense of self confidence (p. 232) and Maldonado et al (2008) added that, “In light of the lack of literature exploring mentoring relationships and the development of self-efficacy,

aspirations, and possible selves in high-risk adolescent female mentees, this study may provide information for the field of Sociology and for training and development in mentoring programs” (p. 233). The results of the study supported the idea that mentoring programs can be used successfully as an intervention to help youth and adolescents increase their self-efficacy and their positive self-concept as well as providing support for positive future possible selves.

Walsh (2008) conducted a study looking at the role of mentoring as an intervention in the self-concept development of children and adolescents as they experience identity changes and seek to discover their path to work-related possible selves. The “Career Club” mentoring intervention program is a qualitative case study of seventh- and eighth-graders which applies the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model from the field of Education to mentoring for and by underserved youth. This program may offer insight into a method for creating changes in the self-concept of youth and adolescents that might be altered in order to help adults envision possible futures and create work-related identities by changing their internal self-concept. The author noted that his was the first study combining the use of the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model with the creation of possible selves.

The instructor-student relationship provided an environment where each student’s physical, emotional and social well-being could be fostered by a supportive peer or adult mentor, this made the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model an ideal foundation of helping youth develop their concept of self-identity. In this study,

students took part in a “Career Club” which was designed to be empowerment-based, giving participants in the club a leadership role where they were asked to coach younger students in an educational setting. The purpose of the program was to encourage participants to become self-aware, to teach them to set goals and to offer work and leadership-related experiences that would support the development of positive work or education-related possible futures (e.g. going to college, following a career path). The “Career Club” met weekly for nine sessions that were 90 minutes each, participants in the study were 12 African American seventh- and eighth-grade students with at least one previous year of experience in a “Coaching Club” where they had been taught coaching skills during the previous school year (p. 211). Participants were paired with younger fourth-grade students and asked to coach them with homework, during physical education activities and about ongoing social issues at school and within the community. Career Club discussions focused on sharing participants coaching experiences with the group and encouraged the youth to consider the implications for their own hoped-for-selves, feared-selves and possible work and education-related futures (p. 211). Study results indicated that the Career Club was effective in providing the participants a meaningful career exploration in coaching.

Walsh (2008) noted that four “convictions” define the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model for applications within the area of youth development:

1. Teaching life skills and values are integrated with the physical activity rather than taught separately.

2. Life skills and values learned in the physical activity setting must be transferred to other parts of the youths' lives, including school, home, and the streets.
3. Responsibility gradually shifts from teacher to students; eventually, students are empowered to become responsible for planning and directing the programs.
4. Teachers must develop and maintain relationships from a strength-based approach by respecting student individuality, regardless of age, gender, and racial stereotypes, including respect for their struggles, voices, and capacity for decision making (p. 211).

This study offers evidence that the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model may hold elements that can be used to promote self-identity formation and create self-concept changes in youth and adolescents. Despite its roots in pedagogy, the experiences of the Career Club participants may provide important lessons that we can test by using the principles of andragogy to transform the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) theory into a form more suitable for adult needs. This study holds a great deal of potential for providing the basis for a model that could be used to help support and create changes in self-concept for adults using a mentoring-based intervention.

Precepts within the TPSR model follow the recommendations offered by other scholars (e.g. Allen & Eby, 2007) that, in order to help people increase their sense of self-efficacy, new skills should be scaffolded. The steps for skill scaffolding begin with modeling a new behavior, then moving on to asking the person to do the new behavior with help, and last, moving to a level of mastery by doing the new behavior without assistance. The scaffolding design to support the process of skill transference and to create an increased sense of self-efficacy for those learning new skills is a useful concept

to explore further in the context of mentoring programs and working with women on welfare.

Walsh (2008) and Lee & Oyserman (2009) agreed that a balance between possible hoped-for and feared possible selves leads to the greatest motivation for change. Walsh (2008) explained, “A given hoped-for-self will have maximal motivational effectiveness when balanced by a possible feared-self within the same domain...Heightened motivation is fostered by the ability to counter future failure worries or fears with detailed images of attaining desired outcomes (p. 210).

Diehl & Hay (2010) studied identity changes in adults looking at the role that daily stress has in effecting the resilience of adults during different stages of their life. They noted that daily stress creates a negative effect on adult’s self-concept. This is an important finding since women on welfare, especially single mothers, have been shown to experience significant work-family conflict (Lee, 2005; Lee & Oyserman, 2007) as well as carrying the added burden of the daily stress caused by a lack of money and resources to overcome barriers to work while still juggling multiple roles as both a breadwinner and a caregiver.

### **Recent Studies on Mentoring to Change Self-Concept in Adults, Adolescents and Children**

Langer (2009) conducted a study looking at the use of mentoring to influence the self-concept of adults from the inner city to promote professional success in the workplace. The methodology used was a qualitative case study of the success experienced by a student from the inner city who went through the program and gained

work experience in the Information Technology field and later transitioned to full time work in the field of Information Technology at a large company. The study looked at the use of “reflective learning” and focused on mentoring and reflective writing (e.g. personal journaling), to assess levels of self-esteem before, during and after participating in a workforce certification training program.

In this qualitative case study, Langer (2009) analyzed the influence of self-esteem on inner-city adults and their workplace success. Langer measured the belief that they could succeed both personally and professionally by plotting the participant’s reflective journals using the Inner-City Workplace Literacy Arc (p. 46). The Arc was designed to measure development in six sectors of workplace literacy moving from unprepared for work success (Level One: Concept recognition/self-esteem) to completely prepared for work success (Level Six: Professional Independence). The evidence for an increased belief in personal self-efficacy included increased value placed on learning and self-improvement, evidence of self-evaluation to increase personal growth within the context of the workplace or a career path and resilience in the face of personal and/or professional challenges to achieving workplace success.

Herrera, Baldwin Grossman, Kauh & McMaken (2011) conducted a quantitative “impact study” of the Big Brothers Big Sisters school-based mentoring programs operating in ten cities across the United States. The participants were 1,139 9- to 16-year-old students (p. 346) who were randomly assigned to either a treatment group (receiving mentoring) or a control group (receiving no mentoring) and were followed for one and a half school years. The “impact” measures consisted of three general categories:

school-related performance and attitudes, problem behaviors and social and personal wellbeing.

Both students and teachers were surveyed about these categories before the study, at nine months into the study and after the completion of the study. The data was then evaluated by comparing regression-adjusted means on all outcome variables. The findings suggested that the school-based program created modest academic benefits for the participants within a few months; however these benefits diminished soon after leaving the program.

This study is interesting because it may mean that for mentoring to be an effective intervention it may take longer for the participants to permanently change their self-concept and to develop positive work roles. The addition of a leadership component (e.g., returning to the program as a mentor to help others once you have successfully completed the program), such as the one used in the “Career Club” (Walsh, 2008) might help women on welfare complete the scaffolding cycle all the way to mastery, rather than suffering the results found in the Herrera et al (2011) study where some modeling and performing the new behavior with assistance and support are completed, but mastery is never reached. This is shown in the rubber-band effect seen when the benefits from participating in the mentoring program disappear once the program is complete or the mentee drops out.

Philip (2008), in a study based in the United Kingdom, felt that mentoring interventions do not work consistently with at risk adolescents, especially when mentoring relationships become transient or unstable. This qualitative study hoped to

capture the processes of mentoring at risk youth to increase their positive social capital in order to stabilize their participation within society and to help troubled youth repair broken relationships in their family and their community. Despite “weak” empirical evidence, the mentees did report positive changes to their self-concept when the match and relationship with their supporting mentor was strong. This study further highlights the importance of having steadfast mentors who will be committed to forming a long-term genuine relationships with their mentees (similar to friendships), rather than having mentors that are distant, overly busy, or uncommitted.

### **Gaps Within Current Scholarly Research**

A review of the recent scholarly literature looking at studies on mentoring to change self-concept has identified gaps within the current scholarly research for several interrelated areas of study. Specifically, we need to understand more about identity formation in adults and adult identity transformation mechanisms. There is also little research on building our understanding of how life experiences relate to how adults experience their own sense of personal and work-related identity and self-concept, especially in the context of exploring the possible selves of low income mothers. Low income mothers are an especially important demographic since low income mothers and single parent households make up the majority of the current welfare recipients (Lee & Vinokur, 2007).

While there is a current body of scholarly research exploring self-concept, adolescent identity formation and the creation of possible selves for youth and adolescents (Maldonadoa, Quarlesb, Lacey and Thompsonc, 2008; Walsh, 2008), there is a need to extend the knowledge about possible selves and their effect on personal and

work-related identity changes and career choices during adulthood. The evidence provided from studies showing the successful application of transformative mentoring as an intervention for risk at-youth, at-risk and underserved adolescents provide a promising launching point to apply the lessons learned from pedagogy to an andragogical setting. Despite being older studies, Lee (2005) and Wikelund (1993) have been included in the research because they are both closely related to the focus on my study of mentoring to change self-concept.

Lee (2005) used a quantitative methodology to survey low income women at welfare offices and looked at the effect their sense of identity and possible selves had on their beliefs about the likelihood of experiencing workplace success. Lee (2005) also explored the role of barriers to workplace success and sought to quantify the ways in which work-home conflicts interfered with women and mothers on welfare successfully transitioning to the workforce. Wikelund (1993) sought to understand the experiences of women on welfare during and after new welfare reform laws were passed and implemented within her qualitative study of welfare reform. Specifically, Wikelund (1993) sought to gain a greater understanding of why women on welfare were reluctant to go back to school from the contexts of literacy and motivation by asking the women themselves about their life experiences with education.

This study by Wikelund is now 18 years old and it appears that no one else has attempted to ask women for their stories or sought to understand what it means to transition off of welfare. In the same vein as Wikelund's study, I'm interested in understanding the lived experience of women transitioning off of welfare within the

context of potentially using mentoring as an alternative intervention to traditional welfare-to-work programs in the future. Thus, I am building on her work, both in providing an update to the voices and lived experiences of women on welfare and transitioning off of welfare today and in looking at another aspect of the lived experience of these women.

In order to add to the scholarship in the field and to begin to address the gaps that have been identified in the recent scholarly literature I asked women attempting to leave welfare who are currently participating in a year-long mentoring-based intervention to share their life experiences surrounding the process of trying to transition from welfare to work in an attempt to capture their lived experiences and to come to a better understanding of how the process of transformative change takes place. I hope this information in order to provides an outlet for the voice and stories of these women which can then be communicated to those in power who should be informed of the needs of this underserved population as they seek to create and fund new welfare-to-work programs and interventions at the state level. What does it really take to permanently leave welfare and how can mentoring programs designed as interventions help more women successfully leave the welfare system and become self-sufficient?

If we can even begin to answer this question and both add to and apply this knowledge to creating successful interventions for women on welfare then this research will have served as a powerful force to drive positive change within the world, it will have helped to add a small piece of the solution to the ongoing challenge of breaking the

cycle of poverty and to help women on welfare have hope for possible selves that reflect possibilities and dreams that are real and achievable for themselves and their families.

The Wikelund (1993) study is 18 years old, and she appears to be the last person to truly conduct any kind of a study trying to capture the life story and actual voices of the women affected by the welfare reform laws enacted in the early 1990s. In my review of the literature, most studies of women on welfare were focused on gathering quantitative data (e.g. income, education level, type of training) or used a pre-determined set of survey questions. Of course, the context for Wikelund's study is within the field of Literacy and looking at what motivates adults to return to school or resume their education, but the need to capture the voice and experience of this unique population of women on welfare and to gain understanding for how to help them change their lives and that of their families for the better is still the same as the need to provide a voice to illuminate the actual experience and process that women on welfare who are seeking to transition successfully to the workforce have to go through today.

It was in the early 1990s when the United States passed welfare reform laws limiting the lifetime benefits from welfare programs for individuals and families to five years of eligibility. Welfare reform also added requirements for women (even single parents) to work or be in school at least part-time in order to qualify for benefits at the same time. It makes sense why Wikelund would have conducted this type of study at that time, but there have been new welfare reform laws and changes in welfare-to-work programs and the welfare policies set by each state since then—Why have so few

researchers asked the SOURCE what works and what doesn't and what they need to be able to work and become self-sufficient?

In the Wikeland (1993) article, she noted that several women talked about the “trap” of the welfare system and how they couldn't get “off the system”, even though they wanted to—many stayed due to the medical benefits which would stop if they were working at jobs that made too much money, but those same jobs didn't provide affordable medical benefits. Lack of access to affordable childcare was also often cited as a factor that “trapped” the women on the welfare system since their wages were too low to pay for childcare without the help from welfare benefits.

As I was reading one of the new articles today that I had uncovered in my third round literature search, I felt as if I had an epiphany—connected the mental blocks in a new and interesting way, so to speak— and suddenly reached a new level of understanding concerning the state of today's welfare-to-work programs. I was re-reading Wikeland (1993) and I suddenly realized that there were serious implications when I stopped to consider that this study was 18 years old and looked at it in the context of today's welfare-to-work programs. I looked at the details given within the article about what kinds of specific services welfare-to-work programs provided for women on welfare (such as job search assistance, GED preparation, ESL classes, et cetera) 18 years ago and realized that they were exactly the same now as they were then. Also, it struck me that the demographic of women on the welfare system was exactly the same now as it was 18 years ago as well.

There is a piece of the puzzle to be seen here that would help me to better illuminate the big picture, if only I could capture the elusive underlying meaning behind that complete and utter lack of change within the welfare-to-work system across two decades. It makes me think of the saying, “failure to progress” or when we say someone is “stuck in the past” or “overcome by the forces of inertia.” Our economy, our traditional family unit, our country, standard work roles—everything has changed tremendously in the past 18 years and yet—it seems as if there has been a profound inability for the policymakers and creators of welfare-to-work programs to stop and recognize this distinct disconnection and to make crucial changes to correct for this total lack of progress across a system that is so broad and disjointed.

If welfare-to-work programs were truly successful, one might think that the demographic for women on the welfare system—average age 32, female, white, two children at home under the age of five—would have changed over such a long time, that there would be fewer people needing the welfare system and that they would leave welfare rolls due to successful transition instead of running out of lifetime benefits which are now capped at five years (Statistics qtd. in Lee & Vinokur, 2007).

Since they have been funded by federal block grants to each state and implemented differently from state-to-state and even county by county, welfare-to-work programs have failed to respond to the changing needs of their clients (in this case, women on welfare) and lost their underlying purpose to serve as a safety net for people in need. Due to the outdated offerings and refusal to change along with the changing needs of the population they serve, welfare-to-work programs, with their potentially

inappropriate focus on the worknow approach, can now cause more harm than good with outdated welfare-to-work programs offered simply as a panacea while ignoring the underlying causes for the continuation of poverty and the realities of limited entry-level jobs, and jobs in general, in a poor economic environment which may persist for years.

### **Summary**

This chapter comprised a review of recent literature and scholarship in the multi-disciplinary research area surrounding mentoring to change self-concept for adults, adolescents and children. It describes the use of mentoring as an intervention to assist in the positive self-concept formation of adults and suggested ways that mentoring is a viable alternative to traditional *worknow* welfare-to-work programs which are failing due to an inability to keep up with the changing economic needs within the world of work and an inability to serve the needs of welfare recipients effectively. Furthermore, it suggested that more research is needed into alternative welfare-to-work programs that promote positive work-related identity changes for women on welfare that can assist them with making the transition from welfare to work.

## Chapter Three: Research Methodology

### Introduction

This chapter describes the methodology of the qualitative research study answering the question: *What is the lived experience of women transitioning off of welfare with the assistance of a year-long mentoring program?* The study uses a multi-disciplinary research framework to explore mentoring as an intervention to change self-concept for women. It applies a phenomenological approach and suggests that it is important to explore mentoring as an intervention to assist in the positive self-concept formation of women. The researcher interviewed 12 women participating in a voluntary welfare to work mentoring program hosted by a non-profit, Dress for Success, about their experiences transitioning from welfare to work with the help of mentoring. The researcher explored stories about their work experiences and sense of work identity to better understand their lived experience of transitioning off of welfare.

### Phenomenology

This research applies a phenomenological methodology, using “bracketing” in the style suggested by Husserl to both separate and acknowledge the role of researcher in the formation and analysis of the study and its materials. It seeks to understand the meaning of the experience of being on welfare and of being mentored as a method of successfully transitioning to work. It seeks to capture the unique “voice” of each individual, using their own words. Participants reviewed written interview transcripts and gave feedback to researcher to increase validity of the study.

The type of phenomenology applied is both interpretive and heuristic as represented by the use of bracketing and by the concept of “to wonder” which frames the

way in which the researcher looks at the issue and decides to discover more by asking questions created by “wondering” or thinking about the problem with an open mind. This study draws its methodology from qualitative and phenomenological research parameters set out by Heidegger (1962), Moustakas (1994), Husserl (1917), Van Manen (1992) and Van de Ven (2007) to define the level of understanding and the quality of the data analysis that constitutes a good contribution to both the knowledge and that will help practitioners understand the needs of those on welfare who are attempting to transition to work.

### **Research Design and Data Collection**

Phenomenology seeks to understand the essence of human experience. This study seeks to understand all the facets of how being on welfare affects an individual’s sense of self within the larger world of work and hopes to capture the transformation of these individual’s perceptions of themselves as workers by using the setting of a mentoring program designed to help individuals on welfare transition into the working world. It is designed as a time series study with some individuals being interviewed while they are receiving welfare benefits at the point where they enter a voluntary year-long mentoring program (before mentoring intervention), others interviewed as they are being mentored through the program (during mentoring intervention) and some being interviewed at the completion of the mentoring program (after mentoring intervention).

Interviews were conducted at local restaurants and in participant’s homes; the location was the participant’s choice. Each interview consisted of three open-ended questions and additional questions within the context of the discussion that were decided during the interview. The three interview questions that were consistent across all 12

interviews were: *Can you tell me about how you became connected with the Dress for Success Professional Women's Group? Would you talk to me about your experiences with work so far?* and *What are your plans for the future?* These questions were offered as part of an informal conversation and interwoven into the discussion.

Interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes to two and a half hours. Interviews were audio recorded and supplemented with the researcher's field notes and/or voice reflections recorded by the researcher directly after the interview. During subsequent interviews, the researcher offered additional open-ended questions, following up on individual experiences, especially when data analysis indicated a need for more information, clarification, or potential themes.

This study consisted of 12 low income women with a variety in the age and ethnicity of the individuals participating to create a diverse field in which to explore these issues. In order to qualify to participate, individuals were currently receiving a broad range of welfare benefits, or had received benefits within the past year. "Welfare" in this case, includes both federally-funded TANF welfare benefits and/or state-based welfare-to-work programs such as being enrolled in the Diversionary Work Program, the Minnesota Family Investment Program, or be receiving food support/medical support from the state of Minnesota. All participants were currently enrolled in a mentoring-based welfare-to-work program based in Minnesota.

### **Research Program/Setting**

Traditional welfare-to-work programs that are focused primarily on assisting low income adults in obtaining educational credentials and on-the-job training through work

experience are often successful as a short-term emergency help, but not in the long term purpose of helping those on welfare obtain work that pays a living wage and provides health benefits so that they can transition off of welfare permanently. There are, however, private and non-profit programs that attempt to address the underlying barriers to success and provide support and knowledge to individuals and families seeking to leave the welfare system. Dress for Success Twin Cities, is a successful mentoring program designed to help underserved and at-risk populations. This mentoring program has had a transformative effect on participant's lives and offers many lessons that can be used to help more underserved low income women and mothers as they transition off of welfare in the future. The Dress for Success Twin Cities branch has agreed to be the site for this study.

#### **Dress for Success Twin Cities**

Dress for Success is an international non-profit organization started in 1997 which operates a welfare-to-work affiliate program called Dress for Success Twin Cities in the Minneapolis, Minnesota area. The Dress for Success organization runs programs in more than 110 cities. Dress for Success programs can be found in the United States, Australia, Canada, Ireland, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, the United Kingdom and the West Indies. A non-profit Dress for Success Twin Cities affiliate opened in the Minneapolis, Minnesota area in January 2010.

**Dress for Success Program Overview.** Dress for Success Twin Cities (2011) provides appropriate interview clothes for women who are looking for work. Participants are unemployed, living under the poverty level and often receiving welfare benefits. Participants must be referred to the Dress for Success Twin Cities program by local

agencies including: Como Community, Merrick Community Services, the American Indian Opportunities Industrialization Center, Hennepin County Employment Program, HIRED, the Jeremiah Program, Minneapolis Community & Technical College, People Serving People and Twin Cities RISE!.

**Dress for Success Image Coaches.** Dress for Success Twin Cities utilizes image coaches to teach low income women how to dress for an interview. The image coaches also assist women with their resume, discuss interview etiquette and practice basic interview skills with participants before their interview. Once the women obtain a job, they can return to Dress for Success Twin Cities and receive one week's worth of work-appropriate business clothing, shoes and accessories to assist them with their transition to the workplace.

In order to support women in successfully making the transition to work, Dress for Success Twin Cities invites participants who obtain work to join their Professional Women's Group (PWG) which meets monthly.

**Professional Women's Group Coaches (Mentors).** The monthly Professional Women's Group meetings also serve a group mentoring function whereby the professional mentors and the members serve as career mentors and sources of knowledge, experience and emotional support. Each meeting allows for networking, an expert speaker and discussion and role modeling of current or potential work-related issues. Members of the Professional Women's Group who graduate from the year-long program are then eligible to be assigned personal coaches who mentor the women individually once they have graduated from the year-long program.

**Dress for Success Professional Women's Group Mentoring Program.** The Professional Women's Group requires a minimum of a one year commitment for both mentors and mentees. Mentors are also required to have at least five years of professional work experience before they can serve within the Professional Women's Group mentoring program. The Professional Women's Group also provides opportunities for members to attend networking events and career fairs and to receive additional one-on-one mentoring (Dress for Success Twin Cities, 2011).

**Researcher Program Preparation.** In the context of this study, the Professional Women's Group, as a voluntary year-long mentoring intervention, was the focus of the research and the source of the participants for the interviews. The researcher underwent the standard volunteer orientation seminar for the Dress for Success Twin Cities organization in September 2011 as well as participating in the day-long volunteer training for Image Coaches and Personal Mentors as a requirement set by the organization in order to host the researcher and the research study at their site. The researcher observed the monthly group meetings of the Professional Women's Group until the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Minnesota and was approved for the study and interview process to commence. The researcher did not, however, volunteer as an Image Coach or as a Personal Mentor before or during the study period due to a potential conflict of interest.

**Recruiting for the Study.** The researcher presented a ten minute introduction to the study to the monthly group meeting of the Professional Women's Group at Dress for Success Twin Cities just before commencement of the study. After the presentation,

interested and potentially qualified individuals self-selected into the study. An invitation to participate letter outlining the study and offering small remuneration of a \$25 Visa gift card upon the completion of the first interview and an additional \$25 Visa gift card upon completion of the study was offered to potential participants. The program site manager directed interested participants to the researcher through a private meeting and through e-mail in one case. The site manager notified the researcher by e-mail regarding potential participant's interest in the study and assisted with scheduling a pre-interview phone calls and in-person meetings during the normal monthly group meeting time for the program to discuss the details of the study with the interested potential participants after the meeting was complete. The setting for these discussions was in a private office with only the potential participant and the researcher present.

### **Bracketing**

An important part of a phenomenological study is in how the researcher thinks about the problem, the reasons why they may be interested in studying a problem and in recognizing the beliefs, experiences and assumptions that the researcher themselves may hold about the problem. In trying to frame my research proposal, I spent the most time identifying the areas in the literature that I wanted to further explore to frame the problem and in trying to “bracket” my own views of mentoring, welfare, and identity formation. Van de Van (2007) suggests that cognitive mapping can be a useful tool to help the researcher uncover not only personal beliefs and assumptions that inform their knowledge of a research issue, but also to explore knowledge that comes from harder to pin down beliefs, things we've “heard” someone say or beliefs that someone else holds.

We know they aren't our own beliefs, but in recognizing them as the opposite view or as a different view from our own, we have formed an opinion against these ideas, therefore adding to our own concepts surrounding the research problem that we plan to explore.

Although cognitive mapping was useful for me to visually map my ideas and uncover my assumptions about welfare, mentoring and work-related identity transformation in a general sense, there are also personal reasons why I've chosen to study what it means for individuals to successfully transition off welfare and into jobs that pay a living wage.

Some of these reasons have to do with my own core values and personal beliefs.

### **Bracketing Journal (2011)— Thoughts from before the study began**

I first conceived of the idea to research mentoring programs that help women transition off of welfare in 2008. In retrospect, in 2008 the economy was growing, there were several different welfare-to-work programs operating in the Minneapolis area near the University of Minnesota where I am a graduate student and the job outlook was good if people were able to get some initial training in a new field in order to “get their foot in the door.” In contrast, today all but a few of those welfare-to-work programs have disappeared, presumably due to funding cuts.

There are some private non-profit programs operating in the local Twin Cities area such as Dress for Success Twin Cities, which provides interview clothes for women and personal coaches who work with the women on their appearance and basic interview skills and Project Break-Through, which provides mentors to help families become self-sufficient. I have contacted the program manager for Dress for Success Twin Cities and they are happy to have me join them for their monthly mentoring program and

Professional Women's Group (PWG) meetings as well as go through all of the training for volunteer mentors. I plan to check it out in May when they have the next meetings.

In addition, there is a mentoring program through the University of Alabama that has been running since the late 1990s that I was watching back in 2008 as a potential research site that looked at helping people transition off of welfare into employment at the University of Alabama by providing GED classes to those without a high school diploma, on-the-job training and work experience, in addition to job skills training and mentoring. However, I was extremely disappointed to find that researchers found that the program was not successful. Only two people transitioned to full-time employment with the University of Alabama with health benefits and left welfare completely at the conclusion of the 14-week study. Only 38 people completed the program within the 14 weeks. There hasn't been further published research on the program, so if I want to know if they are still running the program, or if they've made changes in order to make it more successful, I'll have to make those calls myself.

A lot has happened in my personal life since 2008 that affects who I am and how I view the purpose, need and even the audience for my research. Since my research uses phenomenological precepts, my perspective as a person and as a scholarly researcher is going to be inexplicably linked to how I talk with the women I interview. It will be the lens through which I will see and understand their life stories. It will affect how I write and present their stories of personal transformation through the mentoring process.

In 2008, I was working for the University of Minnesota as a graduate instructor 30 hours a week in two different graduate assistantships, going to school full-time,

raising my son with ADHD and struggling to keep my family life going when I was always driving up and down the freeway in terrible construction and rush-hour Minneapolis traffic. Over the course of the year, my stress kept increasing and my health was failing. Eventually, I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia and my doctor recommended that I go into a full-time physical therapy program and get tested for MS since I was having severe neurological symptoms.

In the middle of this health crisis I got pregnant with my daughter. I finished out the term and left the University of Minnesota in order to take care of my newborn and work on my health. A year went by quickly and I knew I needed to return to finish my Ph.D before it was too late. While I was gone, my department underwent many changes and several professors who I'd worked with previously left the University or retired.

One big change during the time that I spent out of school happened with in the larger world. The economy had taken a turn for the worse and despite good recommendations from my previous bosses, I wasn't able to obtain another graduate assistantship to pay for my schooling. My full-time job at a private University had originally promised to pay for my dissertation credits, but once I applied for the reimbursement, they had changed their policy and refused to pay for my credits.

I was running out of time to return to my program without having to take additional classes under new program requirements. It didn't help that I'd taken Incompletes in my last classes and didn't finish them as soon as I'd returned from the hospital and having my daughter. I had a lot of work to do to finish those classes, get my program planned filed and approved, get approval for my dissertation committee and find

a new out-of-department member as well as writing my preliminary exams (when I'd been out of school and out of the habit of writing) and now I was also working and taking care of two children as a single mom. My health has improved tremendously since 2008, but I have to be careful.

When I left the private University I was working for to return full time to my Ph.D studies, I lost my healthcare. Since I wasn't able to obtain a graduate assistantship that year, I don't have healthcare for myself or my children through the University of Minnesota either. My son requires medication that costs \$696 a month without insurance (just for one medicine) and another medicine that costs over \$100 a month, not to mention doctor's appointments and psychologist appointments in order to control his ADHD symptoms. I had to get insurance from the State of Minnesota, which means that I had to go through the same welfare process that many of the women who I will interview in the context of mentoring programs had to go through in order to get state benefits and get referred to their mentoring program for job purposes.

Getting insurance from the state was not easy. It was not as simple as filling out an application and providing documentation. The process took me months. Once my children were finally approved, it took another two months for them to be assigned to an insurance program. Once they finally were assigned to a program, the very next month, the insurance company denied my son's medicine claim (for the same prescription he has done well on that was covered when he was first approved).

The pediatrician wrote and explained why his prescription needed to be given in a particular dosage, the claim was denied. As of now we are in the process of appealing,

which can take months. I was told it would probably be easier to just start over and try a whole new medication.

Having gone through this process has changed my understanding of the obstacles these women face in working, raising a family and being able to completely leave welfare. The difference is the difference between understanding something *intellectually* and understanding something *experientially*. There is a vast sea of difference between the two. I think one of the keys to phenomenology lies in empathy. I don't think that the researcher has to share all of the experiences of the people that they are learning about, but shared experience builds trust and empathy colors the writing of someone's life story in a way that creates a more powerful vignette.

While quantitative research in this area is funded because it can show program results and it can be used to calculate return on investment, especially over time (showing that the higher upfront costs of providing training, mentoring or other welfare-to-work programs actually save the state and the federal government money in the long run) they fail colossally at showing why a program is successful or why it isn't working. For this, it seems to make the most sense to ask the welfare recipients themselves about their struggles and what is and isn't working at helping them transition off of welfare. With this population, however, trust is a huge issue. You can't just have anyone go and ask them why they aren't working, they might be afraid to tell anyone what is going on for fear of losing their welfare benefits or health insurance.

I could encounter the common cultural, religious and language barriers. But, most of all, there could be class barriers between the researcher and the women on welfare. By

class barriers, I mean that a researcher [in this case, me], might be *seen* as someone who is well educated, from a middle class or even upper middle class background and as someone who doesn't have the basis for a shared experience. If that were true, it might not be possible to build rapport and trust with the women.

Trust is required to capture the lived experience (phenomenology) and use it to highlight different aspects of a person's life. (How women see themselves as changing into a worker and beyond that, how a "job" turns into a career and how, a career then breaks the cycle of welfare and can break the cycle of poverty). This is powerful stuff and if you want to recreate it, to create more programs that work, then we need to understand how and why transformational change works.

The more common job skills training, interview training, work clothes, and temporary welfare (even in the form of cash assistance) act more as a Band-Aid, but don't touch the underlying problems and internal barriers within the person themselves. They don't address what has been missing from their life experiences that perpetuates this cycle of welfare-to-temporary work, back to welfare again. Mentoring as both a form of teaching and as a form of support are key to creating this type of transformative environment for women on welfare to transition to work.

### **Data Analysis**

The study used multiple methods for data analysis of phenomenological and qualitative research as recommended by Ryan & Bernard (2003), Van de Ven (2007) and Thorne (2000). Specifically, it used the Heidegger/Husserl style phenomenology which includes "exhaustive, systematic, and reflective study of experiences as they are lived"

(Thorne, 2000, para. 10). The study used multiple coders to increase reliability and validity of themes (Van Manen, 1992) and multiple techniques to discover themes within the data (Ryan & Bernard 2003, Thorne, 2000). Using these suggestions for conducting good phenomenological data analysis allowed the researcher to thoroughly analyze the data and create a complete set of themes and their underlying sub-themes.

### **Researcher's Data Analysis Process**

First, I created code books and scanned to find obvious themes, which consists of thoroughly reading and highlighting sections of the transcriptions of the interviews. Next, I printed individual transcripts and used the pile sort and coder comparison method to establish initial themes. Then I conducted computer software analysis using Nvivo qualitative research software to identify further themes and possible sub-themes. Last, I used “memoing” within the theme discovery process to try to capture how themes emerged as the data was analyzed and how they changed over time and as more data was added in subsequent interviews.

### **Ethical Issues**

This study utilized the Social and Behavioral Sciences application for Institutional Review Board (IRB) review through the University of Minnesota. This study did not qualify for expedited review due to working with a vulnerable research population which consists of low income women and mothers on welfare. The study included an informed consent process beginning with an introductory letter informing the potential participant of an opportunity to join the study. Upon an indication of interest to participate, a pre-interview was conducted to discuss the purpose, risks, benefits and time commitments of

participating. A verbal commitment to participating was obtained followed by a written consent, signed at the beginning of the actual first interview meeting. Field work research guidelines for phenomenology and ethnography provided by the University of Minnesota were used.

Due to the vulnerable nature of this research population this study underwent the Internal Review Board review process for studies that work with vulnerable populations at the University of Minnesota and utilized additional measures to protect the privacy of the participants including changing the names of the participants in the final write up.

### **Summary**

Chapter three described the use and process for a phenomenological study methodology and included an excerpt from the researcher's early bracketing, written before the study started, to set the stage for why the researcher originally conceived of the idea and decided that it was an important topic to study in greater detail. In chapter four, the results from the research study are given and the themes uncovered from the interviews with women transitioning off of welfare while in a year-long mentoring program are outlined.

## **Chapter Four: The Interviews Analyzed**

### **Introduction**

This chapter describes and explores the responses of the women interviewed for this study. It emphasizes the importance of understanding the lived experience of women transitioning off of welfare and providing an outlet to give a “voice” to the traditionally underrepresented group that can get their stories in front of policymakers. The researcher interviewed 12 women participating in a voluntary welfare to work mentoring program hosted by a non-profit, Dress for Success, about their experiences transitioning from welfare to work with the help of mentoring.

This study uses a multi-disciplinary perspective to explore mentoring as an intervention to change the self-concept of women transitioning from welfare to work. It uses a phenomenological approach. It seeks to explore mentoring as an intervention to assist in the positive self-concept formation of women and investigate whether or not mentoring may be a viable alternative or a valuable addition to traditional worknow welfare-to-work programs, which suffer from an inability to keep up with changing economic needs. It emphasizes the importance of understanding the lived experience of women transitioning off of welfare and providing an outlet to give a “voice” to the traditionally under-represented group.

### **The Background of the Women**

There are 12 women in my study; all of them attend a year-long Professional Women’s Group run by a non-profit for mentoring, support and education to help them through their job transition. Many of the group’s members are on welfare. For some women, this is the first time they’ve ever been in a situation where they needed welfare

or any kind of public assistance, for others, they are in the middle of transitioning from welfare to work and fighting hard to get off welfare, for a few, they've successfully made the transition to full time work and they are finding stable employment and getting off "the system" as it's often referred to. Some of the women in the Professional Women's Group are African American, some are Caucasian, one woman has a mixed American Indian and African American heritage. The mix of women reflects the mix of ethnicities within the Professional Women's Group and in the local geographic area. Despite the oft-heard stereotypical view that "women on welfare" are all African American—being on welfare sees no skin color.

Some of the participants were born in Minnesota; others moved from other states, one emigrated from another country. All have been living in the local area for several years. I created a visual representation of the states that the study participants identified within the context of their stories as being where they were from, or a state where they had lived. In addition to the United States, one study participant was originally from Russia. The states identified were: California, Texas, Minnesota, Florida, Wisconsin, New Jersey, South Dakota, New York, Washington D.C. (Maryland), South Carolina, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Missouri and Arizona.



**Fig. 4-1 States where women participating in this study were born or lived**

Within the 15 states specifically mentioned in the interviews, the women came from rural, suburban and urban settings. Two women expressed a desire to leave Minnesota, though both doubted whether or not this is financially feasible for their family. One simply sought to “escape” the situation into a better life somewhere else, while the other hoped to find a better job out-of-state once she finished her Bachelor’s degree. A few women were born here, but the majority were “transplants” who had moved here from a different state. All of the women had been living in this area for several years.

I also looked at the level of education that the participants had completed and the education that they were in progress of completing to get a better idea of the educational attainment and educational goals of the group as a whole.

### Highest Level of Education Completed



### Level of Education Currently In Progress



These women are all different, but really there are so many points where each of their life stories intersect, the many roads that led them all to a place of struggle, of transition and change, a place to make a new beginning and to journey toward both self-sufficiency and living authentically that these 12 women can help you understand the real lives of so many women on welfare today. Sadly, the number of women and children on welfare is growing and people are suffering. Something has to change. Creating understanding is only the first step.

### Getting to Know the 12 Women

#### Joy

Joy became unemployed when she was fired from her job of more than 13 years after the job became automated and required data entry and technological skills that she

did not have. She was not able to gain sufficient skills in the new computer-based systems fast enough for her employer and she suffered from a work-related injury that eventually led to her and the employer parting ways in 2008. Joy is not married. She has one son who is an adult. Her son recently moved back in with her into a one bedroom apartment when he got divorced, he is currently staying in the living room and sleeping on the couch. Her grandson is four years old and visits each week with his dad and his grandma. Joy also helps her family members care for a woman who was like her mother who has second-stage Alzheimer's disease.

Joy is lucky because she has transportation to and from work so that she is not depending on others or waiting for the bus. When Joy was looking for work, she was a client of Dress for Success and she was helped with interview clothes and job coaching. Joy wanted to give back to the organization that helped her find employment so she has gone on to volunteer at Dress for Success as an Image Coach. She now works full time in a new job which she loves; however, she is still underpaid despite having a Bachelor's degree.

She is a graduate of two job transition programs offered through a non-profit called Dress for Success: Going Places and the Professional Women's Group. She still attends monthly Professional Women's Group meetings, even after graduating, for the support that this group offers and to continue learning new skills that she can apply at her new job. She is a woman of faith and she has surrounded herself with positive messages to remind her that she is "a strong and beautiful woman" while she tries to help herself and her family to become more financially stable.

**Desiree**

Desiree was a career woman until four years ago when her middle son, who suffered from asthma, suffered from an asthma attack, died and was revived, but is now completely disabled. Desiree has had several long-term careers from postal worker, postal supervisor, postal union representative, real estate agent, to metro bus driver. She is a mother of six, with four grown children and two teenagers at home. She recently got divorced for the second time in her life. It was very traumatic, her marriage failed due to her husband using drugs and becoming abusive. She also recently found out her daughter had been sexually abused when she was younger and her family life is in turmoil at home as they work to get her into counseling.

Desiree has survived two heart attacks, the first in 1994 while she still worked as a postal worker. She was not allowed to work due to her health, this eventually left Desiree and her family homeless. They moved out-of-state and away from friends and family when her husband found work. Three years later, they divorced – leaving her a single mom for the next ten years. In 2007, she suffered from a second heart attack and underwent heart surgery. At the time, she was employed full time as a metro bus driver. She was fired due to health reasons as the company now found her “not qualified” to drive. They did not offer her alternative employment.

Despite her personal and professional struggles, Desiree still helps others and gives back to her community by volunteering and through her commitment to mentoring homeless teenage girls. Desiree is a graduate of the program Going Places and a member of the Professional Women’s Group at Dress for Success. She currently goes to school

full time online at a technical University and will graduate with her Bachelor's in Health Science in June 2012. She plans to work in a hospital or a clinical setting as a family counselor or patient advocate for asthma and respiratory patients and their families.

Desiree is also an aspiring writer and a poet. She hopes to collaborate with one of her daughter's to write and illustrate a children's book to help children improve their self-esteem.

### **Shandra**

Shandra worked in the medical field as a Trained Medical Assistant (TMA) for 15 years. She was at her last job with a group home for five years, but she was fired for breaking a company policy and she lost her housing shortly after. Shandra has held various jobs, first as a full time mom, then as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and as a Parent-Child Advocate. She tried at one point to go back to school to earn her Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) license, but she dropped out after becoming pregnant with two of her children back-to-back. She still regrets not finishing, even to this day. Shandra was recently diagnosed with cancer. She underwent surgery to remove a mass from her head and spent a month in the hospital recovering from complications.

When she lost her job, Shandra went through re-training and educational programs offered by a non-profit called Project for Pride in Living (PPL). She is also a graduate of the job transition program, Going Places, and she is a member of the Professional Women's Group at another non-profit, Dress for Success. Shandra currently volunteers at Dress for Success and plans to take the training this month to become an

Image Coach for Dress for Success as well. She has a car, but she can't afford gas or insurance so her daughter's drive her places until she can become more financially stable.

Shandra is a mom to 11 children (six boys, five girls), nine of which still live nearby. Shandra did not marry, but she was with her long-time partner and father to all of her children for 25 years before he died from cancer. At the time, her oldest child, of 11 children, was 18 years old and her youngest was only five years old. That was 17 years ago now. Until recently Shandra was caring for her teenaged grandson as a parent as well.

Shandra gives back to her community by working with the Welfare Rights Committee (WRC) to testify before the State Legislature and to the Senate Health and Human Services committees concerning welfare reform and other legislative issues that may affect poor families. She helps the Welfare Rights Committee (WRC) to organize "call in" days where people from the community band together to contact their Representatives in the House and their Senators in the state Senate about welfare reform.

One of Shandra's daughter's, Loila, is also part of this study; they are one of two mother-daughter pairs who took part.

### **Loila**

Loila is one of Shandra's daughters; they are one of two mother-daughter pairs who took part in this study. Loila and Shandra do not live together. Loila has a small apartment in the city. Loila is not married; she lives with the father of her 20 month old daughter.

Loila was a high school dropout; later on she got into trouble with the law and spent some time in prison. While in prison, she got her GED and earned a certificate in Personal Training. When she got out, she had trouble finding work due to her criminal record. She went through a non-profit program called Emerge which helped her find temporary employment, and later on she worked as a Team Leader with Emerge. Loila had been working full time, but when she became pregnant she was put on bed rest and by the time she was able to work again – her old job was no longer hiring due to the downturn in the economy.

Right now, Loila is not working and is on welfare. She just started school two months ago. Since she doesn't have a car; she takes her daughter on the bus to childcare while she attends classes at the local community college full time working on her Associates degree in Business Administration. In the summer she had a job working for a landscaper where they would pick her up and take her to the worksite every day. When winter came, the job ended. Loila has held jobs in restaurants, retail stores, factories, warehouses and in landscaping, in addition to her job as a Team Leader with Emerge. Her dream is to own her own business, she'd like to operate a hair salon and spa someday.

Loila has been a client at a non-profit called Dress for Success, which provided job coaching and interview clothing. Currently, she is waiting for the next "Going Places" job transition class to begin and she plans to attend the Professional Women's Group meetings with her mom at Dress for Success.

**Mary**

Mary is married; her husband is originally from Jamaica. They don't have any children. Over the years, Mary and her husband worked many jobs together. They both worked in catering, but they also took additional jobs in security and cleaning. Mary did elderly health care, waitressed and in the early days, she grew up on a farm where her family grew their own food and raised animals to supplement their income.

Mary had a career as a professional caterer for more than twenty-five years until the owner of the company she worked for died and the new owner replaced the long-time workers with cheaper workers who were being temporarily subsidized by the government as part of a welfare-to-work program. At the time, the government was running a program that paid the worker's wages for 18 months and the company only had to contribute minimum wage so the new owner fired all of the existing employees and hired the welfare workers instead because they were cheaper. Until then, Mary felt like she would stay at that company "forever," she'd worked her way up from "employee four or five thousand...to number five."

When Mary first lost her job, she knew she needed to find a program that offered re-training and education that could help her find work in a new field. She took many classes and completed several programs through a local non-profit called Community Action. She also took classes through a non-profit called Project for Pride in Living (PPL). When she began to interview for positions, she needed interview clothes so she made contact with a non-profit run by a church group called Ready for Success and later on, with another non-profit called Dress for Success. Mary went on to graduate from the Dress for Success job transition program called "Going Places" and she is currently a

member of the Professional Women's Group through Dress for Success. Mary can't wait to graduate with her "year" at the Professional Women's Group and be assigned a personal mentor.

Mary has not had regular, full time work since 2004 when her career in catering ended. Now Mary and her husband have exhausted their savings and retirement funds and they have had to adjust their lifestyle to living on her husband's income of \$800 a month.

Happily, Mary recently created her own work. Mary currently works as an on-call nanny, she is piecing together more clients in order to turn nannying into a full time position, however, due to her age, she knows that being a Nanny may not be the best long-term plan. She hopes to improve her technology skills and learn spreadsheet and bookkeeping software so that she can do bookkeeping professionally in the future.

### **Valerie**

Valerie is a single mother of two grown children, a daughter that she had when she was only 15 years old and a son. When she was younger, Valerie was a high school dropout, but she returned to school and earned her General Education Degree (GED), then she started attending college working on her Associates degree. Valerie is currently on the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program related to a disability and trying to transition back to work and self-sufficiency and get off the SSI program. She is a woman of faith and volunteers her time at a local church. Valerie is a graduate of the Going Places program offered by Dress for Success and she is a member of the Professional Women's Group.

Earlier this year Valerie had a car, but now she takes the bus. Valerie lives in the inner city in low income housing. She volunteers as a speaker with a non-profit organization called Catholic Charities to talk to young people to encourage them to turn away from a life of violence and crime. She hopes to work with people in the community to help them get off drugs and alcohol in the future. In the meantime, she's interviewing for positions in customer service, warehouse and as a Program Specialist.

### **Jessica**

Jessica is a mother of four grown children; she is also a grandparent. Three years ago she took over parenting two of her grandchildren. They are 4 and 11 years old. Jessica has been divorced, widowed and she is currently re-married. She says, "I was a single mom before being a single mom was cool." Jessica volunteers her time with a fraternal organization and with a church working as a funding and volunteer coordinator. She hopes to turn this type of work into paying work in the future. She also took over her previous husband's radiant heat business for many years until her grandchildren came to live with her. Since 2010, she has been working part-time on a temporary basis helping people to file their income taxes.

Jessica is a graduate of the Going Places program and a member of the Professional Women's Group at a non-profit called Dress for Success. She has been involved with Dress for Success since 2007 when she was a client who received interview clothes and job coaching services. She is very excited to soon be assigned a mentor who can assist her in reaching her goals. When Jessica realized that she would need to find a new career after taking over as parent for her grandchildren, she completed

a re-training program in banking and finance through a non-profit called Project for Pride in Living (PPL).

### **Naomi**

Naomi is a divorced mom of two boys who are grown, but have recently moved back home again. She also recently had to move back into her mother's home along with her grown children. Her boys are currently taking time off of college, one with a good job and one still looking for what type of work he'd like to do. Naomi was a nurse for 15 years until her career was ended by a domestic violence charge. Once she had a criminal record, her job options were limited. She worked temporary jobs, daily-work, daily-pay jobs and often couldn't find any work at all. Luckily, Naomi went through a job re-training program through Twin Cities Rise! and now Naomi currently works as the Executive Assistant to the President of a computer consulting firm. She will be graduating from the Twin Cities Rise! program this May. Naomi is also a graduate of the Going Places program at Dress for Success and a member of the Professional Women's Group. Naomi gives back to the community by speaking to job seekers about her experiences looking for work with a felony and how to overcome obstacles to getting a job. She is currently working with a job coach and mentor provided through Twin Cities Rise!

### **Hattie**

Hattie is a graduate of Twin Cities Rise!, she is also a graduate of Going Places and the Professional Women's Group at Dress for Success. Hattie refers many women to the services offered by Dress for Success and to the Professional Women's Group. She is the mother of one grown daughter, Mandi, who is also a part of this study. Hattie has enjoyed

a long and varied career, working first as an airline stewardess, and then as a model, a dancer and choreographer. She also directed and produced the Miss Black Minnesota pageant. Over the years, Hattie has also worked as school support staff and as a Crime Prevention Specialist for a major metropolitan city. She is a Certified Fundraiser, an Election Judge and she was also a Census worker.

Hattie recently lost her home to foreclosure and when housing was not ready as expected she and her daughter found themselves staying with friends and then in a shelter. It took almost three months, but now they have housing again. Hattie works full time as an Engagement Specialist Coordinator in a position where she helps families find and access assistance programs in the community where they live. Hattie is not married, but she has a long time partner. She doesn't have a car and is currently working with a local non-profit to get a car. She is currently working with a job coach and mentor provided through Twin Cities Rise! and plans to return to the University in the Fall with her daughter to finish her Bachelor's degree.

### **Mandi**

Mandi is Hattie's daughter, she is 21. Mandi lives at home with her mom and this Fall she started a full time, one year position with AmeriCorps working with families dealing with foreclosure as a Housing Counselor with Habitat for Humanity. She started attending the local college, but took a year off when her friend was killed in a shooting. She plans to use the educational money provided by AmeriCorps to pay for returning to school next Fall. Mandi dreams of becoming a lawyer. She is currently saving to get a reliable used car and for her education. Mandi is a graduate of the Going Places program

and a member of the Professional Women's Group. Mandi is very involved with her community, like her mom, she is a certified election judge. Mandi spent the summer working as a Foreclosure Prediction Specialist and she is still volunteering her time with the same organization. She is currently working with a job coach and mentor provided through Twin Cities Rise!

### **Marta**

Marta immigrated to the United States from Russia when her husband found a job here. In Russia she was a fashion designer and she supervised a house with eight seamstresses. She is now divorced from her husband. She lost her housing when she was laid off from her job working as a fashion designer for a fashion house here in the United States that outsourced the jobs to Canada, Japan and Malaysia. Marta has since moved in with a boyfriend. She has two teenage daughters who are attending the University as Post-Secondary Education Opportunity (PSEO) students this year, earning college credits while still high school students.

Marta is a graduate of the Going Places job transition program and a member of the Professional Women's group. She recently went back to school to earn her Bachelor's degree in Business Administration and she is working to get her own line of clothing off the ground. Marta gives back to the community by working as a volunteer with an event that educates people about fashion through history. This event puts on fashion shows for local groups.

### **Joyce**

Joyce is a product designer and a graphic designer with 12 years of experience in the fashion industry. She was laid off 32 months ago and has been making ends meet with several part time “survival” jobs and unemployment. She recently got offered a full time job as a product designer so she’s excited to go back to having just one job - though the job pays less than what she used to make, she was able to use skills that she learned from job transition programs to negotiate for a higher salary than was originally offered and to get additional vacation time. Joyce is a graduate of the Going Places program, a graduate of the Professional Women’s group and she also volunteers for Dress for Success as an Image Coach. Joyce has a car and is looking forward to being able to move out of her “crappy apartment” and to move closer to her new job. While she’s been looking for jobs in her career field, Joyce has taken temporary jobs such as working retail at the State Fair, modeling, working security and being a census worker. She holds a Bachelor’s in Clothing Design and hopes to eventually become a Creative Designer in the fashion industry.

### **Stories from the Women**

These are women who know how to work and work hard, they have held many jobs over the years, jobs to pay the bills, but also jobs leading to what should have been a good “career,” but it never quite worked out for one reason or another. Women like Shandra, who was fired from her job of five years in the medical field nine months ago now. At first she was living off of her savings, then her retirement. She didn’t apply for unemployment due to being fired. She admits she made a mistake at her last job; she admitted her mistake to her boss and was disciplined with a three-day suspension, but then fired upon her return. She was afraid to go through the appeals process offered

through unemployment because she didn't want to risk her medical license which was "very important" to her.

Her money is gone; she lost her house and is currently renting a room from her daughter. She had recently graduated from Going Places, a job transition program, and was actively interviewing for medical positions when she was diagnosed with cancer, she went into surgery and recovered in the hospital for a month due to complications. While she was in the hospital, her teenaged grandson who had been living with her was arrested and sentenced to a boy's home.

I met Shandra on a bad day. She was frustrated after speaking with her caseworker who needed yet another piece of paper from her doctor stating she was not able to work during cancer treatment, "I KNOW how to work, I've been working my whole life!" she cried. She clearly heard and felt the judgment of her caseworker that she was asking for more time to get her health stable and finish chemotherapy without filling out weekly job search forms and looking for work 30 hours per week in order to maintain her qualifications to receive welfare benefits.

Or Mary, Mary said to me, "I started working before I was old enough to work—legally— I always believed if I worked hard and worked all the time I would be financially secure...I had this idea that I'd just work, work, work - work my brains out and then I'd be financially stable." Mary has worked more jobs and more hours than most people ever will, working two or three jobs at a time and in some ways she's luckier than most women on welfare, she has a small house that is paid off and a car without a payment, but she's getting older and she can't do the types of physically demanding

jobs—or keep the unending work hours that she used to. She’s feeling her age and getting tired. She’s married and her husband is working as an auto mechanic, but his hours got cut to part time and she’s been out of work as a professional caterer for about two years now. She picks up whatever work she can, since September she’s been working as an on-call nanny for a family with two kids down the street from her house where the mom works odd hours as an ER nurse.

These women are hard workers, but they’ve spent years, if not decades with low pay and no benefits, with little security stretching every dollar a little further until the ends refuse to meet anymore. Mary, Shandra and several of the other participants are under-employed when they are working and if they aren’t working there is a real reason. That reason might look like the stereotypical ones of caring for young children at home, but it’s just as likely that they are caring for aging parents, a disabled spouse, a family member, or they’ve become ill themselves from doing too much for too long with little or no support or help.

Desiree told me about how much her life had changed a few years ago when her oldest son became totally disabled. Previously, Desiree held long tenures as a postal worker, a postal worker union representative, a real estate broker and a metro bus driver. Now she is unemployed and caring full-time for her son while also raising two teenagers still at home and often caring for a granddaughter as well.

My son died from Asthma, but he was revived four times. He’s brain damaged now. He’ll never work again. He’ll never be the same. But they weren’t expecting for him to live and I cried and prayed and cried and prayed and he’s here. He was on life support for almost three months, so he had to learn how to walk and talk

and everything else. He's 29 now, he was 26.... he dropped dead after football practice. He was a semi-pro football player. He was calling me telling me he didn't feel well. He couldn't breathe and he went over to the emergency and he dropped dead in the doorway. And they know him over there, so... It was devastating for me. It really was. I was at the hospital 24/7 and left my other kids. A friend came up here, because I don't have any family here. I just have me and my kids.

(Desiree)

Joy has recently had to take over more caretaking duties caring for a family member who was like a mom to her, though not her biological mom. Joy recently found full-time employment which she loves after being unemployed for two years, but her adult son has also recently moved back into her one bedroom apartment after a divorce and brought his four year old son to stay part time as well.

I met Joy at her home on a hectic day where though she had the day off for a holiday, she was getting her car repaired from unexpected tire damage done by the potholes on the poorly maintained roads in her neighborhood. She'd gotten a call during the weekend from a family member who said that she needed to pick up her "mom" who suffers from second stage Alzheimer's disease and care for her – until further notice. Her mom's husband was in the hospital, at first they thought he would recover, but later she got a call that he was not expected to live. He died shortly after this interview.

I spent several hours with Joy and her mom. During my visit, Joy's mom tried to leave the apartment several times, sometimes though the bathroom, bedroom or closet

door. She would wander and refuse to sit, agitated by the unfamiliar surroundings. She was lost without her husband and didn't always understand where he was.

Jessica talked with me about her life changed a few years ago when she started caring for her granddaughter and later got custody of her and went from grandparent to full time mom. During this time she also began caring for her infant grandson who is now four years old.

In September of 2007, I was a PCA [Personal Care Assistant] and I was self-employed and my husband was employed. We had a new grandson come in and she had a babysitter figured out. In her eighth month the babysitter said 'I'm not going to baby sit anymore.' So when this little guy is like a month old he knows me, he actually knows. It was like okay, you're too little to go to a stranger. I will take a leave and stay home with you until December. Well, fast forward, four years old and he's still with us.

In the meantime we got custody of a granddaughter, so that takes away all my work. I stopped my self-employment and didn't have an outside job. In the meantime he got laid off. So there were no jobs in the house and no income.

(Jessica)

Desiree told me about how her health had deteriorated, especially from the stress in her life and about how her jobs unfairly fired her due to her heart attacks.

Originally I'm from Chicago, but I came here from the East Coast. I moved to the East Coast for a while and I got real sick. I had a heart attack when I was 40. The East Coast is below sea level and I never really thought about that, but if you have respiratory problems sometimes it can be pretty bad. I used to be a bus driver and I had a heart attack again. I had surgery and everything. I had pulmonary embolism from sitting on those buses so long all the time. We didn't get proper

breaks...So I had pulmonary embolism. I had my son. I had a heart attack, had to have surgery. So they called - just taking my job from me. Total discrimination, you can't do that. So right now, I'm in a lawsuit with them.

She reflected on her health and her lack of work—

In the meantime, I don't have a job. But I did go to real estate school, so I do have some credentials. You know I did go to real estate school, but I went to real estate school 15 years ago. I still have my license, they are still good, but with the market- I mean what was I going to do. [It's] too much money. I mean it costs a lot to keep up with your license up to date. It costs to be a board of the realty board member. It costs money, so that's why I didn't get back into it.

(Desiree)

These women will do whatever they need to do to support their family. When welfare is denied and women feel like they have no options for supporting their family they will do anything and everything from the most medial job, to selling drugs or prostituting.

Shandra explained to me how she really felt about welfare and the welfare system, both for herself and for all the women she sees on welfare in her community.

...what they give you on welfare is not enough to live on, it's not. You know like right now they only give you \$432 for one child and the welfare grant has not been raised in 23 years...Could you imagine that, 23 years. Research it. It hasn't been raised in 23 years and everything has gone up, gone up.

She expressed that she didn't feel like the system was fair—

But the politicians' grants have gone up 100% in 22-23 years. Ask them what their income was 10 years ago and what their income is now and people who live

on welfare the grant hasn't been raised at all. You know what I'm saying? So how are people getting over on welfare? You can't. There's no way. You can't even get an apartment for \$400 bucks on nothing like that so you have to have some other income.

Her frustration was clear—

Then they penalize a woman for not working. Sometimes you want to stay home with your children, but you have to have an option in doing something. There's not enough money out there, there's just not. The money that they give you is not enough to make it on. It's not even survival. That's not survival. I mean somebody with one kid only gets \$432 and you have to give it all to the landlord. Then you've got borrow money or people do other things to succumb. That's what happens and they know that. They know that when you're poor and you know you've got that and that's it you're going to other things and that's just it. That's why there's crime and drugs, people sell drugs and stuff like that and they do things. Women might have to do stuff when they don't want to do stuff. You know what I'm talking about, prostitution and all this kind of crap.

(Shandra)

Naomi talked with me about a dark time in her life. She'd been in an abusive relationship with her husband and she got a felony assault charge for slamming his hand in a door during a fight and she immediately lost her long time job as a nurse. She had two young boys at home during this time. She struggled with employment and eventually gave up on finding work in the medical field. She survived with temporary jobs and when those ran out she started daily work - daily pay jobs. She led a double life of volunteering and keeping her kids in a private school while in the background things got worse. Eventually she moved in with a boyfriend who was selling drugs. Her family didn't

know. Her children didn't know. When her children were grown she left him, staying with friends, then in shelters, piecing together work where she could.

“One day, I was sitting on the couch and I said to myself, ‘This is not me. I can do better than this.’ Really, I was saved by Twin Cities Rise! I saw an ad on the bus and it said, ‘We accept felons; we will train you and help you find a job.’ I went because they said they would take me there.”

Naomi will graduate from Twin Cities Rise! in May this year. She completed training in a new field, computers, and got a job for a computer networking company. She started out as the receptionist, but within a few months was promoted to Executive Personal Assistant. With Twin Cities Rise! and the support she found through the Professional Women's Group and Going Places Network she regained her self-confidence and got the second chance and new life she was looking for.

These women are not un-experienced or un-educated. Though they didn't always get there by traditional means, they did get there. They've gone back for the GED, started college, dropped out, went back to college in night school, they have a vocational education, their AA, their BA, whether or not they had a traditional education, they are all smart knowledgeable women. Joy talked with me one afternoon about going back to school and getting her degrees at National American University.

I graduated in 2009, but I had to finish the last class so in 2010 I completed. Then last year I finally got both my degrees. It was kind of held up...but finally I got them so I was glad to get both of them...Oh, believe me [I'm proud]. It was so funny because my friend said ‘How many times are we going to celebrate?’ They don't know what I went through, but I know. Well, God knows and I know so

that's why when I finally got them... Then when I got them they had my name spelled wrong. They put the wrong name on them. So then I said people don't really know what I've been through, but God knows.

(Joy)

She got her Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and her Associate of Applied Science.

These women give back, regardless of whether or not they are receiving welfare. They volunteer, they give back to their community, they participate in civic life, they seek to learn and find places that will help them to succeed. Women who get the help they need to become stable and to transition off of welfare then share those skills with their children.

Take Mary for instance, another woman in the Professional Women's group referred to her as the "walking dictionary" of resources and places to go to get help. They love her; she's a natural information connector for her community. After years spent as a caterer Mary has a lot of local connections and can get food into the hands of those who need it, especially where it would otherwise go to waste. She makes the rounds and delivers to the elderly, the shut ins, women in bad situations-- she helps where she sees the need in a real and tangible way and while she's there she collects and passes on knowledge about programs and where to go to get different types of help - from interview clothes to free dentistry. She has a car when many don't so she picks up food for several families and delivers it from the local food pantry.

Several of the women who have been clients at Dress for Success who have transitioned to the Professional Women's Group also volunteer there to give back. They help according to their skills and interests, whether it is folding and hanging clothes for a clothing sale, answering phones, vacuuming or image coaching for other women just coming in to get fitted for an interview suit.

Joy lit up as she told me of her first time serving as a volunteer image coach for another woman at Dress for Success,

I was the Image Coach. So I liked that. That was one thing I told them at the Professional Women's group, I said I really like doing that. Well, see, I used to love clothes. I used to want to be a model, so I already had the idea for the clothes. So that was just kind of like, "yes!" Then to be able to put outfits together for somebody else and just to show them the things that I had been shown. I know when I worked downtown at Avenue A they used to have a little thing that shows you like you could have one outfit and then just add pieces. I always remember that and so now I'm able to take that experience and show other women.

She shared a story about how image coaching helped her—

That's one thing I think I showed the first or second lady I image coached. I said, 'You can use this sweater. I said you could have this at work and then you can just take it off and put your little scarf on and then add this piece'. She was like, 'We can do that?' I was like, 'Yeah.' I was showing her and she was so surprised. She said, 'Now tell me again what I can wear with that'. I said, 'When you come off work just take that off and put that on and put a scarf on'.

She felt supported by the group and the non-profit workers—

It was just so nice to see how I really helped her. I knew that was God just helping me pull everything [off the racks]. Then when she was walking up there she told

the volunteer coordinator, 'Oh, she's just so good'. The coordinator said, 'Yeah, she's one of our best Image Coaches'. That was my first time, so that made me really feel good.

(Joy)

Desiree gives back by mentoring homeless teenage girls, we sat down together and she told me about it.

I mentor young teenage girls over at Battle Creek...on Thursdays. Some of them are kind of hard for me to get through to. They're homeless. Most of them don't have two parents or they're homeless in shelters and stuff like that. By me being there, been there done that, I decided that I would mentor.

Sometimes mentoring is hard—

I only have one that I'm really having a hard time getting through to, but I know she's hurt so I kind of use a different approach with her. But I have what, eight girls. And they seem to enjoy me. They laugh and talk with me. They kind of get loose and that's what I'm trying to do, take some things off of their minds.

Mentoring reminds her of her past—

A lot of them have to get up at like 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning, because they've got to be out of the shelter in the morning, just to go to school. It bothers me, it really does. I said we shouldn't have to be going through that being Americans. I just don't get it. That's how I think. But that's what I do on Thursdays. I enjoy it though.

(Desiree)

Even as she's going through her own hard times, another Professional Women's group member, Valerie, said to me, "Sometimes when I find myself in life's circumstances, I tend to try to reach out to help someone else. For example, one

lady...she was crying. She had been locked up in work house. I had some things going on. The other woman looked up at me and I started praying for her. I encouraged her that we were all praying for her and she could do it.”

Desiree also gives back by helping others who find themselves in poor working conditions, “I have a passion for what is right and just because I used to defend so many people for their jobs that were being wrongfully disciplined and I just could not stand it. I learned how people were when I became a union rep because I had both sides. So I could really see that and I would see how supervisors have this power. You know they want this authoritative power and it gives them adrenaline.”

Many want to escape welfare and living in conditions of poverty, but stay by choice to help others; they've changed, they are living as somehow "different" from their family, from their community, but they stay to serve and support those that are still trapped and struggling, to offer a hand and serve as a light and an example to others who want to escape, but, it tears them apart to stay and watch so many who don't escape. They see the lives torn apart by drugs and alcohol, the suffering from families that live in poverty generation after generation, the young people sucked into gangs living a life of violence, the babies and the children who can't live free and die too young.

Valerie talked with me about going back to school to finish her degree so she can help others. “I did some counseling [for others]. If God shines His word for me and I can help someone believe that they can get the strength to leave crack or liquor. There are a lot of former alcoholics and pill users as an addiction in my family.”

I sat down one morning and talked with Valerie about her experiences living in low income housing in the inner city.

It is hard in the neighborhood. I live over in the Northside of the city where kids are shooting. We march and pray in the neighborhoods; we cook and clean and feed. It seems like the work is never done. The harvest is plenty and the laborers are few. However, we must stay focused. At the same time that you are trying to reach your goals and your dreams, your neighbors and your community are pulling you down because they do not understand it is not about drugs, prostitution, crack or pills. It is about getting to the end of the race and coming back from that race saying, 'You, too, can make it.'

She talked feeling isolated—

It is about staying straight. I want to say that it is so hard in isolation and your dwelling means staying sober. You cannot just fall down. If you cannot stay sober, how are you going to be something? If you cannot be honest with yourself, how can you help others? How can you clean up the community if you are drinking, doing drugs, or shooting?

She struggles with her low income neighborhood and dealing with crime—

Sometimes it gets very scary. I bought a car this summer. Unfortunately, someone put sugar in the tank and it blew up. A couple of months ago I was on the 22 [bus] about 12:00 or 11:45 at night with a girlfriend. Someone on 26th or 25th was shooting at the bus.

She tries to escape, but doesn't have the resources she needs—

My car was much needed and now I have no money. God has a better plan for me. It hurts, but instead of hurting and drowning in my sorrow at what is around me, I am out this morning meeting you and doing something positive. I am reading a positive book.

She believes in thinking positive and hoping for change—

Look, here are some young preachers who are setting a plan to clean up Northside. See her, her three-year-old son just got shot. These young men are getting a plan together to go with a committee and deal with Northside and how to clean it up and rebuild it. It was demolished because of the storm [a tornado] and because of the shooting. You cannot even raise a child in your own home.

(Valerie)

Valerie sat and told me how scary her everyday life had become, living in the inner city in low income housing with no car.

God knows I needed that car. I had five surgeries from April to August 28th on my body. He knows that I am afraid at night to stand at the bus stop. I would march a million miles before that 22 comes. Even on New Year's at 5:45 in the morning, I decided, 'Okay, the store has been closed all night. I am going to go get some juice'. I headed out. The bus wasn't coming, so I walked. As soon as I got a block away from my high-rise, a cop pulled over beside me and he said, 'Have you heard shooting?' I said, 'No, I just got out and I only walked a bit.' In the middle of the street came a young man and he said, 'Hey! Hey! I called. There is shooting all over!' The cop got out, searched the young man, put him in the back seat. The minute the cop got in the car, shut the door, and turned the corner, 'Bang! Bang! Bang!' For a second I didn't know which way to turn. I couldn't tell the direction it was coming from. I just plead the blood of Jesus and I kept walking. It got louder as I walked, so I took it. Great is Thy faithfulness! And I made it. Two blocks away from that I saw the cops. They immediately asked me to go. I said, 'I'm not going back there,' but I told them the street it was on and I made it through that. How grateful I am to have faith and to know I can. At 5:45 in the morning there was still shooting, but it wasn't just one house. The cop took the young man to a laundry-mat because he was afraid to walk. The shooting went on and on all night.

She believes that her faith is the only thing that has saved her from harm—

Here I was out there singing praises to God and every which way I was turning I could not tell which one. It was more than one house. It was two houses. I did see a neighbor and when I arrived by car I said, ‘Thank you, Lord, for sending a neighbor to give me a ride home.’ It was very important to me. When I got home, the only thing I could think of was to get on my knees and praise him. Praise You! Thank you, Lord! I bought this book. I am not a fanatic for Christ. I believe that I asked Him for righteousness and maybe what I am going through is just Him trying to purge me into it.

She can’t fix the situation here, so she hopes to start over elsewhere—

I am moving. Sometimes life deals you things that are horrible and you can force yourself to forget them. You recall and recapture all the good that was done before the bad came. Then there comes a point inside your inner self that says, ‘I’m at peace.’ It is freedom, growth, a new beginning, and I am there.

### **The New Normal - First Time Women on Welfare**

In the United States, we’ve been in a recession on and off the entire time I’ve been of working age—18 years—more and more we’re seeing a new face for women on welfare. She used to be employed, she used to be middle class, she didn’t grow up on welfare and now she has no choice. These women have no support, their community ostracizes them, they have no help in understanding or navigating what help might be available to them and worst of all—so many of them always assumed that the welfare programs were there to help people if they got into trouble, that “those” people were being helped, that the programs would help them get back on their feet. When the “worst” happened and they had exhausted all resources and needed to swallow their pride and give up all community support and ask for help they had their naiveté torn away from

them as first, they had to deal with being one of “those” people, they suddenly saw firsthand how “those” people were treated and at the same time, had the belief that “those” people were being helped torn away when they realized how little the amount of help offered really is and how you can’t survive on welfare alone.

Jessica told me about when her husband first got sick; he later died, leaving her a widow with small children at home. She has since remarried, but now she struggles as she has taken over custody of her 12 year old granddaughter and also cares for her four year old grandson. Her current husband was laid off last year.

So being this single mom back when people thought when I was working that I was like the male and that I had a wife at home taking care of my kids. You know that’s the way that things were looked at and it was back when there weren’t many women in the workforce. Then I got married and had my two other children and at a very young age their dad passed, so I was a single mom again, but a different situation. He had been self-employed so I took over his business. While he was sick we got nothing. I mean we actually went down to get some medical stuff and get some assistance. We had two cars and they said, ‘Well, you sell your cars we can give you some money.’ It’s like we don’t plan to be hard up forever and when we’re better off we need to have a car to go someplace, maybe go to work or whatever. So why would we sell our cars so we can get money when we won’t be able to go anywhere? I mean that was so far out there. So it was just like - whatever. We went through that stage, which felt like we were in the gutters.

(Jessica)

Each woman’s story is different, but even with so many different personal situations and a variety of life experiences there were still common themes within the group of women who attend the Professional Women’s Group program.

The next section describes the themes. There were 16 broad themes found within the individual interviews. The themes identified were:

1. Work to Survive: Icky, scary and sometimes illegal
2. Getting HIRED...it's complicated
3. Support vs. Isolation: What I need from my partner, my family and my friends to keep going
4. Dream Jobs: Visions for future work
5. The Power of Community: Shine your light, set an example and lift others up
6. Welfare and the Terrible Loss of Personhood
7. Springboard to Success or Financial Devastation? The power of education
8. A Mentor by any Other Name: Mentors and mentoring
9. The Clothes. How fashion controls job access and career options
10. Current Work: It's not the dream job, but it's where I'm at...
11. Mothers and Daughters: Breaking the cycle of generational poverty
12. Welfare for First Timers: Yeah, it's bad
13. Being a Worker and a Mom: at the intersection of work and parenting
14. Keeping the Hope: What to do to repair self-worth and heal
15. Like Crabs in a Boiling Pot: No one escapes
16. It's a Merry-Go-Round: Grandparents parenting, grown kids who move back home and multi-generational households

### **Connecting the Dots Between People: Exploring the Themes**

#### **Work to Survive: Icky, scary and sometimes illegal**

The most prominent theme was, "Work to Survive: Icky, scary and sometimes illegal." This is the largest theme of all. Many of the women who took part in the study

have had multiple career-level jobs over the course of several decades working. A few of the younger women are just beginning their “career” and have only held a few part time jobs while they attended school full time. Many held multiple jobs at one time, piecing together various part time “survival” jobs to get by.

For many, temporary services provided a path back into the working world in the form of temporary jobs that eventually turned into permanent jobs. Some are still working long term “temporary” jobs with a temporary agency as they continue to interview for regular, full time positions with benefits. Sometimes there was no work and welfare was not enough to pay for their most basic needs. In those cases, some women admit to turning to illegal jobs, including selling drugs. Most jobs however, simply qualified as “menial” labor including daily work, daily pay type jobs, cooking, cleaning, babysitting, waitressing, landscaping crew and office work. Periods of unemployment were extended, often lasting for years, long after unemployment had run out, if they had even qualified for unemployment in the first place. One strategy used by mother-daughter pair, Hattie and Mandi, is to take part in job programs such as AmeriCorps to gain skills, earn money to pay for higher education and to network in a positive manner with those who could provide job references in the future.

Naomi shared with me what her life was like once she could no longer get positions as a nurse due to a felony domestic violence charge.

I was just home. I was home doing nothing: shopping, cooking dinner, watching court shows. One day I said, ‘What the hell am I doing? This is not my life. I’ve got to do something’. So now I said, ‘Okay, I’m going to start looking for a job’. Well, that’s not working because I hadn’t worked: ‘What were you doing a year

ago? How come you weren't working?' So, then I started trying to go to these day temps. I'm sitting there, totally crazy, sitting there with people at 5:00 in the morning, waiting to get called to go out, and never go out. Day temps. At one point, I would do anything. I was cutting Ziplock bags and putting them in boxes to be shipped out. That was me every day. If I could go out every day, I would leave like...I always got up early in the morning anyway. Then when nursing, I worked 6:00 to 2:00, so I'm up anyway. That was like, 'This is not working'. I knew I needed to work, number one. Some temps do have a background check. The ones I went to, you could go with a 'disorderly conduct,' but not with a felony. So, I did that, and now I was like, 'This ain't working. I can't live like this'.

(Naomi)

Joyce is a good example of a woman taking any kind of work just to get some money coming in; even what it was far outside of her work experience as a Graphic and Product Designer in the fashion industry.

Joyce realizes she has to take what she can get—

I was like, 'Alright, fine, I need a job. Unemployment has run out'. Account temps is not my thing. That's like data entry. They have a sister corporation, a creative group. That's my thing. Instead of my thing, I'll do this because I know it's readily available and I need money now. \$200 of food stamps does not cover rent, phone, gas, or anything. I could eat.

She ended up doing things that she did not want—

Account temps sent me to Wells Fargo for three weeks in October. I did a modeling job where I got \$125 to cut my hair. I used to have shoulder length brown hair, about like yours. I agreed to a blond bob. Somebody

else showed up with blond hair, which was better for them, so they did this to me. I didn't want it but I needed the money so I did it.

But it was not easy, there were barriers—

It works for my industry. Then after the Account Temps, Wells Fargo thing, I was actually applying as a job as a teller at my local Wells Fargo. I saw that they were looking for people. I was not selected for that but part of the application process was to go in and get fingerprinted. I go to get fingerprinted at this company. They have a sign up saying, 'Now accepting applications'. I'm like, 'Wow, what on earth would you be hiring for? I'm not exactly the bodyguard type'. They're like, 'Oh, we just need people to sit out at corporate headquarters and scan security badges' so that was one of my three 'survival' jobs.

(Joyce)

### **Getting HIRED...it's complicated**

The theme, "Getting HIRED...it's complicated" was shared by all. Some women, such as Valerie, Loila and Shandra share characteristics that indicate they are in the beginning of transitioning off of welfare; all three are currently on welfare or Social Security Insurance (SSI) programs. All three are also beginning to pursue additional higher education including job training programs and taking classes towards completing a 2-year Associates degree. Another set of women within the group are in what I would call in the middle, they are not yet financially stable or in full time employment with benefits, but they are further along in the process than those that are just beginning to make this transition since they are working full time, though sometimes in temporary jobs. Mary, Desiree, Jessica, Marta, Naomi and Mandi share these characteristics. A few women within the Professional Women's Group (PWG) have nearly completed the process of

transition from welfare to work, they are not using assistance, they have completed or are very near to completing their education, including getting their Bachelor's degree, they hold full time positions with benefits and they have clear plans for their future career. Hattie, Joy and Jill share these characteristics.

### **Beginning the transition off of welfare**

Valerie is a good example of what the beginning of the process of trying to transition off of welfare and public assistance looks like in practice.

I am hoping to be off SSI with a standard, good benefit job and in a good place. It is very hard to stay focused and positive around a falling system. Sometimes you are judged because you are trying to stay focused on the prize ahead of you or trying to achieve the goal that you set for yourself. That can cause some isolation. I am staying with church groups, the library, and little community resources. I think it is important just to remember what your goal is and that *you* set that goal.

(Valerie)

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Loila talked about how much a non-profit program called Emerge had helped her in the last few years as she transitioned back to work after being in prison.

They help felons; they help people on welfare; they help people who have not had jobs in a long time. They have a lot of training programs for people. They also have a temp agency. I was with Emerge from 2007 until 2009 or 2010. I used to go up there because they have computers and stuff like that. I would do job searches. Your job counselor would give you leads. If they have something to interview for, they call you first and things like that.

I can say that my last job training class that I took at HIRE was very helpful. It opened my eyes to a lot of things I was doing wrong as far as filling out applications, the interview process. It made me say, “Oh, okay. This is what I’m doing wrong.” It made me see things I would definitely change when it comes to interviewing or filling out applications. It was a four-week course.

(Loila)

Shandra shared a little bit of what her thought process for herself was when she was deciding how to deal with getting fired from her job of five years unexpectedly nine months ago.

I got referred to Dress for Success because I went through PPL [Project for Pride in Living] after I got...fired. I had to find something to do. I said, ‘Let me go back to school because I’m not so good with computers and stuff like that’. So I went to Dress for Success and they had this program. I can’t remember what it is now [Going Places Network]. So I went through that for a two-week program and they wanted us to get some clothes for interviewing. So we was referred there, each of us, everybody in the class. The men went to somewhere else and we went to Dress for Success for our interview clothing. Then they called me and asked if I wanted to sign up for Going Places. So I did that, you know make sure I get my resume and all this kind of stuff and that was a real good thing to do. So now I’m trying to get some things going and stuff and stop feeling sorry for myself and see what I want to do.

(Shandra)

**In the middle of transitioning off of welfare**

Mary is a good example of what “being in the middle” of transitioning off of welfare and finding stable work looks like. When I asked what she thought were her barriers to success in finding a stable job she had a lot of ideas for what it might be.

Age and weight have a lot to do with it. I've got the skills. I've got 20 careers behind me. I've got 35 years' worth of experiences, references, skills, what have you. The thing of it is, some of it's getting really hard to do. I always liked challenging mental jobs, but I liked really hard physical jobs too. I felt like I was being paid to work out. Well, my body's wearing out.

She felt her weight was an impediment—

Well, after we got married, we both gained about a hundred pounds. Mine a little more than that. It just stayed there. Some of it had to do with the hours we were working. Some of it had to do with being married.

For Mary, it was also education—

Because I had no computer skills. That was one of the things they said. I thought, ‘Okay, I'm off. I need to get up to speed’. And I'm really still not. I know the basics. But I don't have Internet. I don't have the toys. I've got a laptop. I haven't even touched the thing for...

Mary talked about joining first the Going Places Network which is a job skills and job transition program and then being invited to join the Professional Women's Group (PWG).

It was life skills, I guess. A huge rounded out thing. They had a required finance class, which was like four weeks long, one day a week and a lot of it didn't apply to me. But a lot of it did. And I do a lot of volunteer work. I learned a lot to help other people. I thought I knew a lot of it, but there were a lot of things I didn't know. Some of the laws where credit cards are concerned or debts are concerned, foreclosures, stuff like that. Things that I didn't need to learn, because I didn't use those.

Non-profits helped the transition for some—

Banking laws, credit card laws. And it was helpful, identity theft protection, credit scores. And then resumes and cover letters. Then I also went to PPL [Project for Pride in Living], so I was trying to round out, since I was off of work, I was trying to take advantage of whatever I could to keep our heads up, plus we were going through two years of foster parenting class. So Dress for Success invited me, so I went to the four, five classes that they had at the end of that, and much to my surprise they let me graduate because I fulfilled the minimum requirements that they asked me to. Then I was going to go to the next class to catch up on all the ones, the classes that I missed and skip the ones I had already done. Well, it turns out it was a whole new class, a whole new teacher, a whole new setup. So I went through that completely and they let me graduate again. And they had a lot of perks at that one. That put me into the Professional Women's Group after that.

(Mary)

The majority of women in the Professional Women's Group (PWG) fall into the “middle” of the overall transition from welfare to work. Mary's personal story and her efforts to keep moving forward in a changing work world are characteristic of many of the women undergoing this process of personal and professional transformation. Here is an excerpt from my journal reflecting on the interviewing during the data collection process. I'm thinking about Mary and how her stories tie into where she is now and where she is trying to get to in the world of work. I'm wondering to myself: *How did she get here? Where is she now in the process? What are the next steps for her to continue down this path to stability?*

Mary talked about how she grew up in a very rural area and everybody she knew was poor. She talked about how if you were surviving there; there were four choices, unemployment, Social Security, SSI or welfare. There was not any work for the people, so if she saw work she worked hard. Maybe not as much of a lack of work, there was a

lack of opportunity. She didn't feel like she had education as a choice because her family was sick. She was taking care of elderly parents and brothers that had health issues. She said a lot of people had passed away in her family, but she needed the money and so it was work, work, work, sleep and then go right back to work. It was a combination of, 'I have a lot of people depending on me to bring home the money from the city' then, also, this idea of, 'If I could just work, work, work for a couple of years, for however many years it takes, pay off my car, pay off my house, we could be financially stable'.

In some ways, she is better off in the situation that she is in because she has her house paid off, so they are not facing foreclosure. They bought their cars with cash so they do not have to worry about them being repossessed. After she lost her job, she said several times they have been living for several years now on \$200 a week. So you can do the math and see that they are making about \$800 a month, so she really does a lot to stretch her money. She talked very honestly about they do not have any extras in their life unless she got out getting help. So they are not doing a lot of the things that maybe middleclass people do at all. You know, they are not going to the movies. They are not going to fast food. They are not going out to eat. She talks about those things and I think that is really key.

I would say she has natural talent with money and financial savvy, but it is obviously going on past her skills to stretch the money. Now she is in a position of taking any job – right now she is doing childcare. She has been doing that since the very end of September and she really likes it a lot. She is helping that baby's family save a lot of money. She already has job skills and talent. She has worked as a bookkeeper before.

She talks a lot about how in the early years, when she was really too young to be working legally per se back then, she always lying about her age so she would be able to work. One of her stories about work was that she literally ‘ran away with the carnival’ and she worked the booth where you would put the nickel into a glass or a plate for a couple of weeks and then she did the books for a carnival. She talked about how at the carnival, instead of paying them regularly, they were all supposed to get paid at the end, but they would give them a draw each week of \$10 or so and a little bit more every so often for something special or if you needed to buy something and then they were supposed to pay you your wages at the end. She did all the bookkeeping. She helped set up and take down the carnival as well. She was around a lot of interesting characters, but that she really just tried to do her job and worked very hard. She did her job and everything and at the end of the carnival she did end up getting her money that was owed, but she noticed that she was one of the few people that had tracked how much money was owed her. So she knew that she was owed this money. She said that there was always a lot of scheming going on and that she tried to not be part of that scheming with the money when she worked her carnival.

Mary has a really, really strong need to help people and I cannot emphasize that enough. If she thinks you have a need she wants to connect you with the resources, get you somewhere where they can help. For her it is about people helping people. It is not really about income or programs. It is just about whatever your need might be and how to connect you with the other people in your community who have what it is that you need and how to make the connection when you have things that they might need.

So a good example of that would be that she has taken some classes at the Senior Center even though she is not quite a senior. She is a couple of years away from being a senior, but they went ahead and let her into the classes because she wanted to learn more about computers and technology. She readily admitted that she really needs to keep up with the job market today. She has been catering for many, many years. She is doing childcare right now, but one of the reasons why she does not go into some of the other careers where she might have a challenge is because of her lack of computer skills. She says she knows some very, very basics. She does have an email account and she checks it once every two weeks. And so that is holding her back. So she said that she went to the Senior Center and that is how she learned how to use an email account and got that set up, but she is not real comfortable with just the very general everyday way that we use technology in the workplace today.

For example, she does have a cell phone, but she does not text. It is like it would have been five or 10 years ago if you had a house phone, the kind that was not even the walk-around variety and was still plugged into the wall. So in comparison to what has become very common technology today, you have someone who is not able to use maybe what is now common.

To me, she was asking about how she can learn more about computers, where to find free resources, like free classes. I suggested that she start with the very basic free classes at the library because they will have basic computer 123 or spreadsheets, things like that, that could turn into a job for her. Because, obviously, she was very good at math, numbers, she likes spreadsheets, programs like that. If she could get into an Excel

class and then be able to use the software on the computer and be able to get very good at Excel then she could turn that into her next career.

She has bookkeeping experience, but old-fashioned bookkeeping experience, so if she could somehow learn QuickBooks or something that was marketable today that would help her be successful. She already knows the money part of it, she just needs to know how to do the technology part of it and then she will have a marketable career beyond childcare. She admitted that she just ‘loves, loves, loves’ the kids, but that she is getting older and that might not be maybe a feasible way for her to keep earning money.

Mary finished Going Places, which is the program for people that are still seeking employment offered by a non-profit called Dress for Success. She has employment now so she has transitioned to the Professional Women’s Group (PWG) along with one of the other women. They are both back in the working world, but they are still transitioning because they might have been out of work for a long time before then and the job market and working is different than it was three, four or five years ago. So you can see this clear theme of a passion for helping people, a passion for giving back and not focusing on what she may be worried about because it is more important to her to help people.

I had the same reaction after talking with her as I did after talking with many of the other women in the study, they are just amazing women, filled with amazing joy; the things that they have overcome are shocking. Some of the things that have happened in their lives are horrific. Despite all of their struggles and hardships—dealing with abusive relationships, drugs, alcohol, poverty, child abuse, and they are still positive, extremely positive, they are out there helping other people and I am just honored that they choose to

share that with me because they are trying to help me in my own life. That is kind of what this process is about, women helping themselves, helping other people, bringing everybody up with them as they get off welfare and find the stable life they have been searching for...

### **Completing the transition off of welfare**

Joy offers a good example of what life looks like after completing the job transition programs, getting off of welfare and finding stable employment after being unemployed for a long time. Joy talks about the process of learning what wasn't working for her during job interviews where she wasn't offered the job and what she started doing differently in order to finally land the position.

My coach called and said that I didn't get the job where I'd been volunteering for a while, so then when I went over there I asked her. I was like, 'Well, I don't understand'. She said that she didn't really want to tell me and I was like, 'Well, I want to know if there was something I could have done different'. She said that they felt because I knew them and that I'd been working there as a volunteer that I felt that I had the job. I was like, 'What about the interview?' and they said, 'Well, you didn't interview well'. I was like, 'What do you mean I didn't interview well?' She said, 'They asked you a question and you didn't answer it'. I was like, 'I didn't answer it?' She was like, 'Yeah and then when you did answer the question she said that you didn't complete it – so they gave it to somebody else'. That really hurt so then it was just like, 'Well, there went Dress for Success'. I was telling them about it there. I was just really crushed. I mean it was like somebody could just scrape me off the pavement because I really needed the money and I needed the job and then for them to say that. To me it felt like they just beat me down.

(Joy)

She felt the world was against her—

Well, she didn't say it, but they had talked and then when she had talked to me she was saying they looked at your resume and they felt that you felt just because you were here and that your resume says one thing, but you didn't relate that and the lady says you need to practice. Because I'd never had an interview with three people, you know usually you have a one-on-one interview.

The interview practice helped—

Yeah, so then I started practicing. They gave us the little interview thing with Going Places so I started practicing at home. I had some other questions from another place so I was going between the two questions and I was writing them down so I would be more efficient. Then we started going to the mock interviews set up by Dress for Success, in a hotel in the city, I think. It was a place in city. They would do interviews with us, so I'd ask questions after. I said, 'Well, how do you think I did?' They were like, 'Okay; you need to work on this more'. So that really helped me because they said, 'You're so polished'. People were saying that, but I was like, 'Okay, what do people see that I don't see?'

She found the rules of the workplace had changed—

But they were saying that. I told her I came from that era where you had to sit up straight. You had to wear a suit. You just couldn't go to an interview any kind of way. I said I was taught that you had to wait for them to ask you the questions. You just didn't throw stuff out there, but now things are different. That I found out. You have to really sell yourself and I wasn't good at selling myself. I didn't come through the era where you sold yourself, but she was like you've got to toot your own horn. She said when you look at your resume you have awesome stuff here, but you have to be able to tell them that you have this stuff. Yes, it's on paper. So then I started writing it down. She said you have supervisor skills, because over at church I have a staff of six. She said you've got to build this in, but don't do the churchy thing. So I had to learn how to say it without saying...

But she survived—

I said, 'I'm a supervisor. I have a staff of this'. Then the church was on there anyway.

**Support vs. Isolation: What I need from my partner, my family and my friends to keep going**

The third most prominent theme, "Support vs. Isolation: What I need from my partner, my family and my friends to keep going" was a common theme among the women who are all members of the Professional Women's Group (PWG) at Dress for Success. Some women shared stories of finally making friends and getting support from other women through their experiences with the group, others had tremendous support from their family and friends while some felt as if they had no support system at all.

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Of course, I do everything to make my boyfriend happy. I am in a situation where I am dependent upon his love. It is hard sometimes when you feel like you have no security. I never tell people about it. We have a really good relationship and I really love my man. I respect him; he is a nice man. I never will regret it, even if it doesn't work for us. When you are in a great relationship, you keep your suitcase ready all the time in case of some trouble. I am strong enough.

She knows she must rely on herself—

I would like to be secure. I rely on myself always. I am looking for a job and right now I want to make my skills wider. This will make it easier to find a job in different places.

(Marta)

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For Jessica it was similar—

But for different phases of my life it was just like I needed the support, if you could just be there, you know? Or I even thought it would be really nice if you could give people cell phones so if they just needed somebody to talk to for a short period of time there's a number they could call or if they had a jam they have this number they could call.

I think something about that is when you see what other people are doing you don't necessarily feel that you are in the worse situation. It's like oh, you know, maybe my situation isn't that bad or there is hope for me or I'm going to make it or something like that. So it gives you that feeling too that you're not alone in struggles.

(Jessica)

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Valerie has found ways to cope—

No, I will show you [drawing on a napkin]. I went to Phoenix. You see, we have these spiritual weapons and I am using them. It is not a matter of running; it is a matter of being. There are these caves in Phoenix, Arizona. There are rivers and caves. The Indians live in there. I am part Cherokee Indian. I don't know why the world doesn't want me to be, but I am who I am. That's my father and this is my mother, okay.

Valerie drew a map of the connections between her spirit and her life—

Here is the thing. Minnesota is controlling me, God is calling me; my children are waiting for me; my family is laughing at me. The guy I trust isn't good to me. I thought I would never pray to God for a man, but I did. He's has beaten the shit out of me and causing all kinds of things.

She explained how the state played a role—

Then you have the state. The state is telling me to take pills. Then you have my high-rise and my neighbors and there are plenty of things going on, home invasion. You have this home invasion going on and you have all these people you served in the community that want help. Now they are joining here and here.

She connected the pieces together with lines—

Then you have His grace and you have mercy. Then you have that one little voice. Really, when you get done with all that, all of this is making me want to run to that mountain so that I can be with Him.

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Naomi shared her need for support and her sense of isolation—

Number one, if there is that program, how long does it take for you to get into that program? How many programs are out there? How much counseling is out there? I had been in three shelters. They stole my stuff. It was crazy stuff. I went to the jazz festival downtown one day, and there's my grandfather at the children's theatre. I was in the theatre for years. He said, 'What are you doing down here?' I said, 'I'm in the shelter down around the corner'. He said, 'No, you're not girl. You are coming to live with me'. That night. Then I started crying right there. There I am wussing again. [Naomi crying]. He said, 'No, you don't have to be embarrassed. You're coming with me'. So, that's why I moved in with him. I supposed if I would have spoken up...But I didn't because I've always been independent. I've always been like that.

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Oh, I was beat down. I was tired of going on interviews. Do you know how many interviews I went on trying to just get a basic job? I wasn't able to do that because of my record. But I had somebody willing to take a chance on me, and that's what

helped me. Twin Cities Rise took a chance. They took a chance, and so did my boss.

(Naomi)

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In answer to the question about what makes them come back to the Professional Women's Group (PWG) each month, Hattie says:

I think first and foremost it's the camaraderie, the support, also hearing the other stories that sometimes are far worse than what I've gone through. One of the things that I've never been a subject of is domestic abuse and so when I hear some of those stories it's like, 'Oh, my gosh'. Because, see, I'd do a 'Bobbit' on him, honey. He'd be not dead as a doornail, but he'd be minus his penis and I wouldn't tell him where I threw it. So it's all of that and so much more. All of them are just like...I mean it's a whole other family.

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Group support and praise is important—

I was totally surprised the night of the graduation. You know you don't do stuff because you want the kudos and accolades and you don't do stuff for the, 'Oh, 'at a girl, good job, g-o-o-d j-o-b,' but it's sure nice. That was like, 'Oh, my gosh'. Yes. Yes and it's just me. When I'm involved I tell you, I'm involved, but I left there just skinnin' and grinnin' and then, of course, the entourage. For them it seemingly means more than it does to me because as you get to know me you see how much I give and sometimes they take it more personally than me. It's not recognized or people take me for granted or take my kindness for weakness. So when we left that night they were just whooping and hollering.

(Hattie)

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For Desiree help had been non-existent—

I've never had anybody to help me do anything. My mother was very illiterate, she did not have education. She didn't know how to read or write. So as I was coming up as a kid I had to learn to do everything on my own and help her. She used to always come to me 'What does this say? What does that say?' So for my family I was the go-to person.

However, now things have improved—

Yeah. I don't even have a job, but I tell you I'm a lot better than I was when I first came. Spiritually, physically, I was a total wreck and since I've been going to Going Places it really did something for me, it really, really did. And, I tell my kids this all the time, I say, 'I never had anybody to tell me 'you can do it' ever in my life. I never had anybody to say 'you're okay'. You can do this. I had to self-teach myself'. I had to believe in myself and I had to teach myself how to feel good about me. It didn't come from anybody else.

(Desiree)

### **Dream Jobs: Visions for future work**

"Dream Jobs: Visions for future work." Often, a vision of a future self or a "dream" job coincided with either being a graduate of a work transition program (such as Twin Cities Rise! or the Dress for Success Professional Women's Group) that directly addressed the participant's hopes for themselves in the future with career or interview coaching. Occasionally this theme was seen when the woman herself was far enough along in the process of transformation that leads to successfully transitioning off of welfare that she had a vision for her future work even if she was not yet a "graduate" of a work transition program.

“Dreamselves,” or possible selves, are important because having a vision of a “dream” job or a future self as a worker is an indication of self-concept that is positive. If a woman can see herself in a job, she is more likely to take actions and to set goals that lead to this type of work in the future. In exploring the text of the interviews I noticed that some “dream” jobs were associated with a particular job title while others were still vague and unformed. There were twenty specific “dream” jobs uncovered in the text analysis, some interviewees held more than one “dream” job or possible self that was associated with work.

Specifically, the careers and job titles mentioned were: Non-Profit Coordinator, Self-Help Author, Spa and Salon Owner, Personal Care Assistant (PCA) in a group home setting, Patient Advocate, Respiratory Consultant, Children’s Author, Novelist, Poet, Attorney, Lawyer, Non-Profit Founder, Certified Fundraiser, Election Judge, Creative Designer, Fashion Designer, Bookkeeper, Office Manager, “person who helps people get and stay healthy” and “as close to the top as I can”.

It was Hattie who wanted to get “as close to the top as I can,” she elaborated on the reasons why she saw her future jobs “at the top” during her interview.

Okay, so I have Twin Cities Rise goal, but I left the census making \$20 an hour, so I had said that my next real job was going to be at least \$25 an hour. So I’m still most Tuesdays down at Twin Cities Rise, because I cut that in the deal when I signed the contract with my coach. I absolutely love what I’m doing at Twin Cities Rise, but at this point in my life having given most of my life away, ‘Show me the money, honey’.

(Hattie)

A job coach helped Jessica to discover her passion when she said, “Hmm, you seem to light up when we talk about volunteering and helping others. Why don’t we take a look at that?” Jessica explained, “I was like wow, I can do that. That makes sense. That would be the job, my ideal job is dealing with my passion of helping people go through just different things. Walking along, not physically, but kind of emotionally walking along with them. So I said, ‘Yes, that’s what I want to do’. So that’s what I’m trying to go for now is doing a nonprofit.”

Mandi talked about how her mom’s comment about her personality and unique talents had helped her to realize her dream job, becoming an Attorney, at a young age.

I am a storyteller. I was a storyteller when I was younger. I am a poet. I am a spoken-word artist. I love speaking in front of people, so there is this theatrical background which I have. I think this is a huge part of law. You have to get up and be able to speak comfortably and plead your case.

Mandi was very animated as she shared a story from her childhood—

When I was younger, every time my little cousins would get into trouble, I would say, “Oh, no, she didn’t do that,” and I would always plead their case. My mom said, “One day you are going to make a hell of a lawyer.” Yes, a defense lawyer. This is what kind of opened that book for me and I have been running with it ever since.

(Mandi)

**The Power of Community: Shine your light, set an example and lift others up**

The theme, “The Power of Community: Shine your light, set an example and lift others up” was seen in a number of women in the study. In some ways, I found the amount of giving and volunteering and the willingness to help others surprising in a

group of women with so many struggles in their own lives. Hattie explained this perspective when she said, “I’ve always been committed to what I was doing, even as a volunteer. I’ve always thought of things from a professional perspective.” There were 14 different types of volunteer work that were specifically mentioned by the women in this study including: volunteering in positions supporting other women, volunteering in various capacities at church, working with community non-profits, working with kids in the community, tutoring, mentoring teen girls, counseling women on welfare, Meals on Wheels, school volunteer, Goodwill, EasterSeals, Dress for Success, as a missionary in Haiti and with Habitat for Humanity.

### **Welfare and the terrible loss of personhood**

Seventy-five percent of the women interviewed in the study expressed frustration with the theme identified as, “Welfare and the terrible loss of personhood.” This theme elicited many heart wrenching stories and tears as women relived memories of the situations in their lives that had first led them to needing to use welfare programs and how the “system” and the process to qualify and access those programs destroyed their sense of self-worth and their concept of themselves as workers and as women because of how they were treated.

Though several women expressed thankfulness that the programs existed to help them in their time of need, they also resented that they were often stripped of their humanity and their personhood and they become trapped in a cycle of poverty by the rules and requirements of the system and also by the welfare system’s focus on low wage

(work now) jobs with support being taken away as soon as any income was available to the family, but long before the family had achieved any modicum of stability and financial recovery.

More disturbing was the *commonality* of what were perceived as personal attacks on their self and their character, and a profound deafness to their personal stories and unique situations on the part of busy or seemingly power-hungry and authoritarian social and case workers. This theme engendered so many powerful stories and it grew quite large, but I feel that it is important for you to hear their stories in their own words since clearly, these women have long felt as if their voice, along with their personal power, has been taken away.

Shandra was frustrated with being offered volunteer work instead of a real job—

All people really want is give me a working-wage job. Why are they letting people work for free to get a welfare check? Why can't you give me that job? If you have to use a [welfare] recipient to do volunteer, you can put them on the payroll so they can get busy, have an income, a check, because at the end of the day you still have no money for something that you might need, toilet paper or whatever you may need, something extra on your bill or something like that.

(Shandra)

Joy explained, “When you have unemployment there are a lot of places that will help you with rent, but if they don't have an income then they won't help you. They don't want to pay that month and then they figure that you'll be in the same situation the next month. So if you don't have income or money coming in they won't help you.” Many of the women expressed frustration as they got overwhelmed with the task of trying to

stretch their welfare money and any income they had coming in and finding it impossible to pay even the most basic bills.

We struggle with other bills. This year was really difficult, because we were getting \$1200 a year in fuel assistance, which is something I always paid in for and never qualified for. I finally qualified for and they cut it. I only got \$177 this year. And I was expecting \$1200. Now they've cut Homestead Credit. And that's about \$1000-\$1500. Where am I going to pull that rabbit out of my hat? Plus, they redid the roads around us and they tripled assessed our tax. That's a special assessment, there's no credit back. The hardest thing has been gas in the car, because where's that money going to come from? So I've gotten a lot of gas gift cards from like PPL [People for Pride in Living], a little bit from here and there. But, the gas in the car is an expense. And I used to really freak out thinking about it, but I don't anymore. I just spend it, figure it's going to come out one way or the other.

(Mary)

Marta also shared this same sense of becoming overwhelmed when her finances changed drastically as she was in the process of getting a divorce.

When you open your mailbox and see a notice from your lawyer that you owe him \$500 and it is \$500 again the next time you open the mailbox. I will tell you a story. There came a time when I could not open the mailbox and I still do not like to open the mailbox. I was shaking, wondering how I would pay everything. It was very hard for me, especially when I was laid off from my job. It was a shock for me.

(Marta)

Mary talked about how her husband had changed their lifestyle in order to stretch an income of \$800 a month in order to survive; they no longer buy luxuries like fast food,

cable television or go out to events that cost money. Mary saves as much money as possible through extreme couponing.

But there's things that we don't do that...I don't know why people don't have more self-control. We don't do fast food. I do more than he does...he doesn't do any. Unless we're in a situation where we have to, like we're with somebody and we have to, or we're traveling and we have to. We don't do fast food. And we don't do takeout and we don't do order in at home. Maybe twice a year. About once a year I'll get pizza and most of the time we go get it. That's a treat, when it's on sale. We don't buy things at convenience stores. I buy things when they're on sale and I buy things that I know, if it's something that we constantly use, I'll be looking. Looking for a sale. How do I explain this? We don't go to movies. We don't buy movies. Our friends have movies. We don't have much time to watch anyway. Our friends have movies. The library has free movies. There's other sources that have stuff like that. We don't do any of that. Like, I still have two free movie tickets that I've had in my purse for like, two years for AMC. I finally used one the other day. Saw a good movie. Cried a lot.

(Mary)

Shandra elaborated on how she often gets frustrated and hurt by the way she is treated by her caseworker and by the rules of the welfare system.

I feel like they cause people to be stressed over this money that they think that they're giving so much for it that they can't even live on. You know? People don't need that in their lives. People know how to work. They know how to take care of their children. And then people got that craziness too, you know, because people come from different walks of life. You're not better. You still treat people the way that you want to be treated. Because that make money they are haughty. They sniff their nose at people who they think are in the system. They do, I've been around it. You know what I'm saying?

(Shandra)

For many of the women being on welfare has taken a toll on their physical and mental health. Four women talked very openly about how welfare has affected them in this way.

Valerie said, “I could lock myself up and cry, feel guilty and depressed, and take a bunch of pills like the world says you can. But I know it is in the mind. Anybody can plant a seed in the mind, but this works in the heart”.

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Mary explained—

We have six households worth of stuff in our house that needs to be gotten rid of or gone through or whatever. And I didn't realize what the problem was, until about a year ago, I just can't deal with it, I can't deal with the emotions of going through stuff. Then I was overwhelmed with being busy and sick and tired and stressed. Never been out of work before. I've been working since I was seven. I worked full time. Went to school full time. Or full time and part time since I was thirteen. I drove my own car when I was twelve. A hundred miles a day – school, work, farm, home.

(Mary)

Desiree shared that while she was still waiting to hear back about medical insurance for her kids two months later, she didn't even apply for herself – even though she is supposed to be taking lifesaving medication for her heart – she is disgusted with the system in this state for low income health insurance and for medical assistance.

I'll be on medication for the rest of my life. I don't have any insurance, because when I got my divorce I don't have any insurance. I applied for insurance from the state. It takes so long.

She applies for help for her kids—but it is demeaning—

For my kids. I didn't even apply for myself yet, because I'm like you know what? I have never been on welfare in my life. I don't like the state. I don't like what they send people through. Because my son, the one that's disabled, they have the nerve to charge him \$90 a month for premiums on insurance coverage. He is totally disabled. It's been like two months. It takes a while. It is sad, it is. I don't even take my medication anymore, I really don't.

She expresses so much frustration—

Aha. I don't have it, so I just pray on it and keep going. You know because I'm like this. Because I say, 'You know what?' I just forget about it. I haven't taken my medicine in months because I can't afford it and I don't have insurance and I know the state is going to send me through a lot of changes like they do my son. I cannot afford it every month, so I know I'm not going to be able to pay for it. If they're charging my son who is totally disabled, what do you think they're going to do for me?

(Desiree)

### **Springboard to Success or Financial Devastation? The power of education**

“Springboard to Success or Financial Devastation? The power of education” was found in nine out of the twelve interviews. These nine women expressed the belief that education would be key to their future success and transition off of welfare, but for one woman seeking an education without understanding the process for accreditation and federal student loans was a personal financial disaster.

Loila talked about her experiences with high school and then getting her GED. She currently holds her GED and a certificate as a personal trainer. She started massage school, but dropped out a few years ago. In January 2012 she started working on a Business Administration Associates degree at the local community college. "I did the GED program. Actually, I went to prison and when I was in prison I got my GED. I was 21." She added, "I got out in 2005 and I worked and ended up going to the school for the massage therapy class," but then she dropped out.

I went on and off in high school. With the GED it was like, 'Okay, take the test. You know you're going to pass'. The last grade I completed was the tenth, but in 11th and 12th I just went to school a few months here and there and I missed a few months here and there. I was not an eighth grade drop-out or something like that. The GED thing was easy for me to do, so I did it instead of the high school diploma where I would have to go back and do two more years. (Loila)

Hattie shared that she is a strong advocate for education and that she has mentored many other women who were going back to school, but now it is her turn. "I tell people our darkest hour as slaves, we knew if could learn how to read and write. Old master couldn't take that from us. So I'm a strong proponent of education and will catch up, because I've been responsible for PhDs and Masters. I have a couple of young women, former Miss Black Minnesota's, with Juris Doctorates, thriving attorneys and so my seeds out there all over the place." She doesn't know what her Bachelor's degree will be in yet since it's been many years since she took college classes. "I'm not sure, but based on my reality it would have something to do with teaching and early childhood."

Based on my need and desire for money, there will be a business component.

That's as far as I've gotten. Initially, it was going to be dance and English of all

things. I had a double major with a minor in Political Science, because at one point I too had thought about law school. That's as far as I've gotten in the thought process, so time will tell.

(Hattie)

Like her mom, Hattie's daughter, Mandi has clear goals for her education. They are both returning to college in the Fall of 2012. "I was getting my Associates at a local community college. I really want to do to Johnson C. Smith in North Carolina, in Charlotte, North Carolina. It is an historic black college and they have a pre-law program there which is excellent. I want to go there and then do three years at law school for an undergrad."

Of the nine women who shared their dreams of earning degrees in the future and with those, their underlying belief that education can be the ticket to a better future, one woman, Loila, shared her story with how pursuing her education led to a personal financial disaster that she is only now recovering from.

It was in 2006. I went to a tech institute for Massage Therapy. When you come in for your orientation with any private college, they tell you what they are accredited for. A lot of people were asking me, 'Why did you go in there? They are not even accredited? You will not find jobs when you leave that school. They are very expensive and they take all the money from you which is why you have to take out loans'. I did a little investigation on my own and I found out that they were not accredited. The school was not accredited, so I just quit; I just stopped. In addition to stopping, I had a school loan to pay for that little time. I was wondering where that money went because I was not getting any money for going there. The most I got was \$500 one time when they sent me a check in the mail after I quit. It must have been the leftover money they could not keep. I was wondering why I owed that money. I called them once I got a letter in the mail

and the lady explained that my state grant only covered a little bit of the schooling so, therefore, I had to take out a loan.

She learned a lesson about money from her experience—

I knew I was never going to do that again. It took me a while to get back on track.  
At the community college, the tuition is reasonable. (Loila)

### **A Mentor by any Other Name: Mentors and Mentoring**

“A Mentor by any Other Name: Mentors and Mentoring” was somewhat expected in a series of interviews with women participating in a group-based mentoring program. Most women referred to what I would call “mentoring” relationships by other names depending on the nature of the connection between the woman herself and the person acting as her mentor to help her to achieve the goals she has set out for herself in her life. There were women mentoring women, such as the personal mentoring relationships between women who are all members and teachers within the Professional Women’s Group (PWG) at Dress for Success, there were examples of non-profit organizations operating as mentors through the programs that they offered designed for women on welfare (Twin Cities Rise!, Dress for Success), there were many educational programs standing in as mentors through the teaching of new skills that could be used in finding work. Within this theme there were also traditional mentors, people who individually, through their caring and their relationships, had made a difference in the women’s lives. Grandmothers, mothers, church clergy, friends and professionals in the same field all served as personal mentors for the women.

There were also stories about formal mentoring groups, women as mentors for young girls, career and job coaches, interview coaches and bosses serving as mentors.

Even when no one else was involved, there was a sense of “self” as mentor when women made an internal commitment to changing their life, to lifelong learning and to believing in themselves and taking new actions within the world to achieve their goals. For example, Valerie said, “At Twin Cities Rise!, they had a summer class which was very positive education, upbeat, for women and focused on the strength of a woman and it was very nice to have that support and to find all that all the other women were seeking the same thing that I was - to get out of the system, to make more meaning of life.” This was one of her first experiences with mentoring.

Naomi also found her first mentors at a program called Twin Cities Rise!, they came to her at a period in her life where she really needed the extra support to get back on her feet and overcome obstacles to employment. “I still keep in touch with my coaches. The coach that was my first coach – the one that went to court with me all the time – I’d call her all hours of the night crying: ‘I can’t believe he’s still calling me. He’s stalking me. He’s at the window. I just saw him at the bus stop’. ‘Was he at school today?’ she’d ask. ‘Yeah. He called 100 times at school’. She was just really supportive. Right now, I go to her Toastmaster’s group. So, I still have that relationship with her.”

Mandi told me about her mentor and how she benefited from her mentor’s support and advice, even when she wasn’t present.

I got on the wrong bus and the bus-driver told me it was the right bus. I ended up in downtown and I don’t know anything about downtown. I don’t even know anything about downtown at all. It was a lot. I had to do a lot to get here and I felt like it was almost like a failure. As I was about to just totally lose it, I caught myself. Right when we were sitting in that session you were probably thinking,

‘She looks upset’. I caught myself, but I imagined my mentor coming up to me and rubbing my back and saying, ‘It is going to be okay’. I imagined everyone being concerned and having something to say about it, saying, ‘At least you got here anyway’.

I imagined that. If I had broken down like that, half the people in that room probably would have said things like that. You know, that is far better than any of the knowledge or any of the education you gain from it. Just knowing there are people there with whom you have formed relationships. You network. One of the girls who lives on the North side gave us a ride back home. That is awesome; it is bonding; it is that camaraderie. I love stuff like that; I really do.

### **The Clothes. How fashion controls job access and career options**

The theme, “The Clothes. How fashion controls job access and career options,” while certainly a valid theme, should be considered in its importance within the context that this group of women are all former clients of a non-profit called Dress for Success that specializes in first providing women with interview clothing and accessories, then offering job coaching and work transition programs, followed by membership in a Professional Women’s Group and later assigning individual mentors to help the graduates of the program achieve their goals. Jessica sums it up when she said, “Well, not being in the work world for years, I had jeans.” Loila, who is at the beginning of her career was happy to get a variety of work appropriate outfits. She explained, “The volunteer who worked with me told me how to switch things around. They want you to pick out things in a way that you can wear a certain top with a certain pair of pants or you can wear the top and the pants with a blazer. They did not want you to pick out only a few outfits, but things you could switch around to actually make your outfits go longer.” Her mom,

Shandra, shared with me that her suit from Dress for Success was the first suit she ever owned, she's 51 years old.

She says—

So when I went out for my interview that I had a suit. Actually, I had clothes and stuff like that, but it was nice to get a nice suit. I said well, I look pretty good in this suit. You know what I'm saying? So, yeah, that was my first suit. I can go to the interview with a nice suit.

(Shandra)

Hattie shared with me how much the clothing, the accessories, the make-up, even the hosiery provided have made a difference in her life as she transitions to work, but also in how she feels about herself as a woman.

We had one session where the folks came in and did make-up with each one of us. Which, again, if you're going to do it you might as well do it at the best level that you can and, as you know, that in itself can break the bank in terms of the better makeup. Now, once you get the first supply it will last you a little, but it's getting that first bit of stuff and then, of course, you have to do the stuff to prime the palette. You have to get the skin care too, which sometimes is even more than the actual makeup and color.

The other good thing is that from time to time we get the free salon services. People have a tendency to think that those are for white money women, but it does a whole lot for the psyche and if you get into the massage there are health benefits. That we only think that you have this luxury because you have this money, well they are smart enough to do those kinds of things. Then the latest piece that they added on was we're eligible for two pieces of dry cleaning every month. People don't realize that when you do have the good stuff that it also

continues to cost you because you have to maintain it and that means a dry cleaning. They do the hosiery as well and they have color for me.

(Hattie)

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But Desiree reminded me that, “It’s not about the clothes, it’s about the support” and I’m sure all 12 of the women in the Professional Women’s Group who took part in the study would agree.

**Current Work: It’s not the dream job, but it’s where I’m at...**

“Current Work: It’s not the dream job, but it’s where I’m at...” was found in all the interviews where the woman was currently working, even if the work was informal or part time. The only interviews where current work was not discussed were interviews where the woman is currently a full time student or unemployed. Many different types of “current” work were identified in the interviews. Sometimes a specific job title was given, other times “work” was conceived as what the person did with their time which might elicit responses that included common “roles” such as mom or grandmother. There were 24 unique jobs or “roles” mentioned; some participants mentioned multiple jobs or a combination of jobs and roles. Unemployed (2), Nanny, Tax Preparer, Security Officer, Freelance Artist, Mom, Grandma (2), Wife, Volunteer (2), AmeriCorps (2), Trainer (2), Office Administration, Executive Assistant to the President, Engagement Specialist Connector, College Student (3), Product/Graphic Designer and Fashion Designer.

Hattie told me a lot about her job with a local community-based program located in a part of the city that has been struggling with high crime and violence, but that is also trying hard to reinvent and rejuvenate itself.

In answer to a question about her work, Hattie says—

Well, I am an Engagement Specialist Connector. So what I do is what I've done most of my life and that is work with the families talking about increasing the culture of achievement using education as the strategy to do that so that you're the household point. We talk about okay, children are the prize. We work with folks with children zero to 18 and we literally mean zero. So when they're in the womb, hey, we're starting. Then if you have housing issues our primary housing person is right on this other corner, Urban Homeworks. They're faith-based. They truly believe in affordable quality housing. If you have legal issues, we work with volunteer attorneys down town in Government Center, legal aid, etc.

(Hattie)

Hattie explains how her work has given her more confidence—

Yes and help them navigate them and help them have the wherewithal to truly sit at the table of my child has an IEP, 'So there sits Doctor so and so, there sits school district so and so, there sits all these folks with all the letters behind their names, soon of which will be you.

She adds how the confidence from her work has helped her be a better parent—

But to be able to have the wherewithal to know that even with all of this, you still supplement me because I am my child's primary and first teacher. Let's be clear, but we aren't because we walk in and we're intimidated. So that's what we do. One of my families we just got their first home, but now they need furniture. So I'm in the process of referring them and connecting them to our resources and

then also finding the money they will need to then pick it up and deliver it to the house.

However, the best can be made of a poor situation—

Correct. To fund things that are *opportunities* and *options*, for example, I took a group of them, and it was a last minute thing, to the big Lion King that happened a couple of weeks ago where Heart of the Beast came in. We were downtown at a hotel and we made masks. Now, I didn't quite pull it off so that we could then get some free tickets to go to see the production, but next time I will. So it's those kinds of things, because I think that if you can see, feel and touch it you're more apt to think that perhaps that could be reality.

(Hattie)

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Joyce was excited to shared that she'd just been offered a new job as a product developer in the graphic design realm.

Basically, what I do in fashion design is I do graphics for fashion. It's for a company that makes the promotional products for schools, all the way from kindergarten through high school. For kindergarteners, they might make little bracelets. It might say on it, 'Bus #2'. That way, you put your kid on the bus, and the bus driver checks all their bracelets and knows, 'Oh, yep, you're on the right bus. Oh honey, I'm sorry, yours says bus number three. You can't get on the bus with your buddies. You have to get on the other bus. This bus doesn't take you where you go'. They do notebooks, rulers, backpacks, anything with the school logo on it, picture frames, and all the way up to high school, prom, graduation, homecoming themes.

(Joyce)

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Naomi is also enjoying her current work and working toward her goals—

I started there as a receptionist. On my 90-day review, the President of the company came in and said, 'You know what? We're just going to stop this right now'. I'm thinking, 'Oh my God. They're going to fire me now. They know everything, so how can they fire me? I haven't screwed up'. He said, 'I want you to be my Executive Assistant, so you're getting bumped up'. So, now I'm the Executive Assistant to the President of the company. So, on June 6, it will mark my year, and all that stuff that Twin Cities Rise! did for me will be forgiven.

(Naomi)

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Mandi explained how her life experiences help her to help others—

People probably have different opinions about this, but when I first initially meet with the families at Habitat, I tell them that I was in the same situation. I tell them that so that they will know. I have seen it and I'll say it. I know there are some people in that field and in fields like it where they are serving families. It is about numbers and about money. People are not doing it for their health. However, I really care and I know a lot of that has to do with going through that situation.

(Mandi)

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Mary has empathy for her fellow community members and the families she works for—

I love them like they're mine. I treat them and teach them like they are mine. And I hope I have relationship with them later and I hope they don't forget me. Because I've raised seven children and they've forgotten me. I hope I can maintain relationship, without encroaching or interfering.

(Mary)

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Joy talks about trying to go from temporary to regular employment at her work—

At first I wasn't going to take it because they offered me the part-time one or the temporary one and then the money. I wanted to at least get what I left off with at the other company. So when she called me I asked her why did they only pick me for the temporary one and she said that, basically, I didn't sell myself enough I guess. So I was like okay. I said well, I'll think about it, because she told me the money and that was only \$11.66. I said well, can I call you back on it? She said yeah. So then I called up and talked with somebody and then they were like at least it's better to have a job then not to have one.

(Joy)

#### **Welfare for First Timers: Yeah, it's bad**

Eight of the twelve women shared experiences surrounding the theme, "Welfare for First Timers: Yeah, it's bad." Loila and Shandra, one of two mother-daughter pairs who took part in the study, both shared stories from their first time on welfare. Loila and Shandra are an example of how poverty can effect multiple generations within one family. Loila is lucky that her mom can help her navigate within the welfare system, but her mom spends a lot of time encouraging Loila to go back and finish school. Shandra didn't finish her Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) degree due to having 11 children at home and often being pregnant "back-to-back".

This is my first time being on welfare. I do not have any other kids; I never had medical or food stamps or anything like that before my daughter. This being my first time, I see it is very strict, but I can definitely understand why things are very strict. I know women who have been on welfare for a long time and still have done nothing to change their lives. For the programs to get strict with people and to start sanctioning people in order for them to do what they need to do, then so be it. I do not have plans to be on welfare my whole five-year time. I am just doing

what I have to do to get off of it as soon as possible and leave it for the next person.

She feels alright about needing help, but does not plan to use it forever—

I do need help right now and I really do appreciate the system. It is definitely not for me because there are too many unnecessary rules. Well, the rules are necessary in some ways and unnecessary in others.

She did know what she could get, even though she was new to it—

I knew what was available. I could not receive help from the state until after I had my daughter because I was collecting unemployment. I had to get off of unemployment before I could actually receive help.

(Loila)

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First timers find ways to cope—

I ended up living with my grandmother [at 15 years old] and I had my baby and stuff like that. I had to go back to school. Me and my mom we didn't get along, so she said that she was going to send me to my father. He lived in Illinois where my aunt was. When I was small I remember living in a project, but they were different than the ones that I went to when I was 16. It was just terrible for me, but I took my baby with me. My uncle took me down there.

It was extremely hard for her—

I was supposed to be going to school. I wasn't going to school, so my aunt called my mom and told her what I was doing and my mom came up there right away. I didn't even know she was coming. Came right away, took my baby from me and told me I had to go to school and when I get myself together then she will get my place and everything and she would give him back. That's just how she was.

Her mom took her children for a while so she could get her life together—

It was good, because I was young and he was six months. So she took him until he was like two and a half. I had started going to school, didn't go, met my boyfriend, got pregnant and I was 18 when I had my second girl. Of course, I was on the system at that point and stuff. Then my boyfriend was going to school. He lived with his mom and stuff like that.

Her family and her partner tried to help her with the children and getting a better life—

So I had my aunt and my mom came down to see where I was staying, because I had gotten me a place and I had beds in there and stuff and people would help me out and stuff like that so she let me have my son back. So then I had another girl. I would always be trying to do something, you know? Then I had a daughter again. My boyfriend, he was still going to school and still living at home with his mom, but then he ended up... You know when you go to college you get that money? What is that called? Like a Pell Grant and stuff. So he would be helping me out a little bit like that, but I was on aid. It wouldn't do nothing but pay the bills, you know, the money.

(Shandra)

Loila also shared how the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program helped her when her daughter was a baby.

Groceries are getting more expensive and you only get a certain amount for your grocery expense. With milk and cheese being on WIC and cereal, it is very helpful for a person like me who only has a set amount of income. She had the really expensive formula. Her milk was close to \$40 a can because it was prescription-based. You could not buy it over the counter; you had to go to the pharmacy. It was very expensive and without WIC I don't think I could have afforded milk for my baby. It was really expensive. Just for so many cans it would be like \$300.

(Loila)

Mary shared her experiences growing up poor on a farm in a rural area of Wisconsin. Mary was drawn to the city for the work opportunities and money it offered that could help support her family.

Well, if you can hold it up there, you're either on welfare, unemployment, Social Security or SSI. Those are your four choices. There's no work. And you grow things and you make things and you sell things. Cut your own wood. Grow your own vegetables and animals. Trade, sell, buy, barter. My dad worked full time. He was a state grain inspector so he got to bring in grain to feed the animals. Then he worked full time on the farm. Plus he was a full time alcoholic. There's a lot of drugs and alcohol. You're surrounded by it. Guess I never knew we were really poor, because we always had food to eat. People always gave to us. My dad also had a tire business in the barn, or in the garage. And we hunted and fished. So we always had enough to eat and we always had enough to share.

(Mary)

### **Mothers and Daughters: Breaking the cycle of generational poverty**

“Mothers and Daughters: Breaking the cycle of generational poverty” was created when I discovered during the process of interviewing the participants that two of the participants were mother and daughter. Later on, another mother expressed interest in my also interviewing her daughter who was on welfare. Her daughter is also a member of the Professional Women’s Group, though she has not been in attendance recently due to childcare issues. At that point, my study was full, but since generational poverty is so common in groups of women on welfare I saw this as an important opportunity to look at two very different sets of mother’s and daughter’s and to find out how they were helping each other transition off of welfare so I applied to the Institutional Review Board to add another woman to my study. Throughout the other themes I have shared the mother-

daughter stories so I won't repeat them here, but I still felt they warranted their own, separate theme in the study because the relationship between mothers and daughters is such that mothers who can successfully leave welfare can then mentor and lead their daughters off of or away from being on welfare and into a better life.

In this study, one commonality between both sets of mother-daughter pairs was that "mom" leads. Mom tries the new program, finds the job notice, seeks out the mentor or the career coach for herself and then passes on what is successful or valuable for her to her daughters so that they too can benefit from the training, education or experience. Though "mom" might have brought her children up in a situation of poverty, which might start them out when they are young and first leaving home on welfare because that is what is known within the family structure, if "mom" can transition off of welfare, she will become a tireless advocate for any and all programs and experiences that will then help her daughter to follow in her footsteps because she will then value the quality of life she experiences outside of living on welfare and she will also have the skills and resources to help her daughter get off welfare. Even when the relationship between mom and daughter is not perfect, the mom is still the guide, the role model and the catalyst for change. Daughters, almost instinctually listen to their mother.

### **Being a Worker and a Mom: at the intersection of work and parenting**

Half of the study participants talked about the theme called, "Being a Worker and a Mom: at the intersection of work and parenting." Nine of the twelve women were parents, but those that were married or in a long-term relationship didn't express the same types of conflicts within their parenting and work roles that women who were single mothers when their children were at home or are single mothers now expressed.

Desiree was married for many years, but now she is a single mom with both grown children and two teenagers still living at home, so she's been a parent in a two parent household as well as a single mom.

These millennium kids are the hardest kids to raise I've ever seen in my life. And that's what everybody tells me. They say, 'Well, Desiree, they're the millennium age'. I'm like, 'You know what? That's what's wrong with them'. Everybody gives that excuse because they don't want to discipline these kids and then the legislative laws are so wrong to me. I mean I can see them having laws for people who really abuse their children, but some disciplines you should be able to give your children. This is why these kids are like that now. Because the first thing they do is say 'Oh, I'm gonna' call the police because you can't touch me'.

She is frustrated with how society does not support what she sees as good parenting—

I get that a lot. Well, I used to get that from my oldest daughter. She's 39 now, but when they first came out with the child protection law she was a teenager. She was, 'I'm calling the police. You can't touch me'. She was totally out of control. I believe in spanking a child. I believe in that. I don't believe in this 'Well, you know, you've got to talk to them'. Do you see all these kids killing their parents? That's why. Are you kidding me? And the parents are afraid to touch their children because they have fear of going to jail.

(Desiree)

Naomi shared her story of fighting to keep her children in a stable home and school environment while the rest of her life was crashing around her due to losing her career as a nurse when she got a felony domestic violence charge and being unable to deal with her abusive marriage and her inability to find stable work with a criminal record.

I was trying to keep them stable. I thank God I was able to do that. How I did it, I don't know. By the grace of God it happened. I just think that the system should have been more...I know there's funding out there, but I know a lot of people screw the system. That was my biggest...I was angry about that. My gosh, I'm working my ass off, trying to go to these temp jobs. I need day care, even after-school day care. My mom couldn't take them every day. So they were able to stay at school through the little daycare program that they had, but I was still behind that. To this day, I still owe money. It's crazy. I'll never get a refund. It may be two years before I can get a refund. So, back to getting to Twin Cities Rise. I knew I had this felony, and it snowballed on me.

Her jobs were destroyed –

It did. It destroyed my jobs, plus I continued to get in trouble. I'd get domestics or cussing out a police officer and that type of thing. (Naomi)

### **Keeping the Hope: What to do to repair self-worth and heal**

“Keeping the Hope: What to do to repair self-worth and heal” was most often expressed by women who also shared the next theme, “Like Crabs in a Boiling Pot: No one escapes” – almost as if this theme was created as a defense mechanism to protect the lack of support found for their goal to transition off of welfare and to “escape” into a better quality of life. This theme, though small in this group of women, is likely to be a key indicator that a woman has successfully made changes to her internal view of herself, her self-concept, that allow her to not only deal with her past, but to use the lessons learned from her past in a healthy and constructive manner to grow and to create the authentic life of happiness and stability for herself and her family that she has envisioned—off of the welfare system. Naomi summed it up when she said, “And I wouldn't be the person that I am today if I hadn't gone through all this. Do you know what I mean? I really wouldn't.”

**Strategies for Self-Healing to Change your Life.** Fifty strategies for self-healing and lessons on how to change your life were taken directly from the text of the 12 interviews within the theme, “Keeping the Hope: What to do to repair self-worth and heal”. They reflect the beliefs, stories and successes of some of the women who have successfully left welfare behind. I have compiled the strategies that the women in the study mentioned within the context of their interviews as helping them to keep their hope and to believe that change was possible into a 50 item list. A hallmark of this theme is that the lessons learned by women that are successfully creating a new life, leaving the welfare system and not going back—are the most important lessons that can be shared with the other women on welfare who are still struggling to transition to stable jobs with benefits and leave the welfare system. The “lessons” and truths uncovered by these women are not ones that you can just read about and benefit from them without applying them to your life; they involve changing how you live your daily life and in the practice, comes the transformative change. The emphasis for real success is on consistent, daily actions, done on a daily basis as the catalyst for a lasting change. These recommendations come directly from the women who are seeking to transition off of welfare and speak to what has worked for them in their experiences.

### **Strategies to Heal Yourself and Change Your Life**

- |  |                                    |  |
|--|------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Escape the situation to begin healing                                 | 3. Eat better & take vitamins      | 8. Take time out for you                   |
| 2. Take a “Staycation” & find free things to do to enjoy your local area | 4. Exercise more                   | 9. Have faith                              |
|  | 5. Cultivate less stress           | 10. Surround yourself with positive people |
|  | 6. Focus on enjoying yourself more | 11. Read a good book                       |
|  | 7. Help others                     |  |

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|--|--|--|
| 12. See a good movie                     | 27. Write poetry about your feelings                     | 38. Fight back against injustice           |
| 13. Go back to school                    | 28. Write poetry about your life                         | 39. Try new things                         |
| 14. Eat tasty food                       | 29. Write short stories                                  | 40. Network with people                    |
| 15. Get a massage                        | 30. Write fiction  | 41. Make new friends                       |
| 16. Wear make-up                         | 31. Write your autobiography                             | 42. Take a class and learn something new   |
| 17. Do your hair and get your nails done | 32. Get out of your abusive relationship                 | 43. Connect with others                    |
| 18. Wear nice clothes                    | 33. Get a divorce if you need to                         | 44. Surround yourself with positive quotes |
| 19. Wear jewelry                         | 34. Stand up for yourself!                               | 45. Build yourself up                      |
| 20. Travel and see the world             | 35. Tell yourself you are worth it!                      | 46. Treat yourself to something nice       |
| 21. Visit family                         | 36. Get creative   | 47. Believe in a higher power              |
| 22. Look to the future                   | 37. Focus on you and what you need first instead of last | 48. Meditate                               |
| 23. Use positive self-talk               |  | 49. Read the daily word                    |
| 24. Say affirmations                     |  | 50. Better yourself                        |
| 25. Prayer                               |  |  |
| 26. Talk with friends                    |  |  |

The main purpose of the small, daily actions that these women have successfully applied to change their lives in a meaningful way all are centered around creating true inner healing and building up a positive sense of self – from this internal foundation of strength comes their amazing transformation out in the world. These strategies are very simple, but in the small changes that strengthen and nurture the person, true inner healing can begin.

### **Like Crabs in a Boiling Pot: No one escapes**

“Like Crabs in a Boiling Pot: No one escapes” was shared by women who were further along in the process of transitioning off of welfare than some of the other women interviewed who are still on welfare and who have not yet found work. As these women

came to be more self-sufficient, this theme, that of family and friends becoming unsupportive in light of the new set of values or the new life that the woman was in the process of creating, started to appear as a theme in the interviews. Friends and family, previously supportive of her attempts to escape welfare, began to act in a manner to try and pull her back into a lifestyle more similar theirs or encouraged her to return to the previous life on welfare.

Valerie talked to me about her family and how in the last two years, even as she sought classes and joined the Professional Women's Group and worked with Twin Cities Rise! and a career coach trying to build a new life for herself now that her children are grown, had stopped supporting her efforts and they've even attacked what they see as her "getting above herself". She relies instead on her belief in herself and in her belief in God.

I would like to say something that you just said. I have been struggling in my heart right now with my family. I call my mom every day and I try to reach out to my sisters. I raised their kids. I raised foster kids whom I love. I'm still in contact with my ex-boss. I'm sore for not having the love and support of a family, but I remind them. Last night I called my sister and I said, 'Well, you know I love you'. She is older than me. She said, 'Well, if anything happens to you I will be right there'. I said, 'I'm fine. I just want you to know that I love you'.

Her family has not been supportive of the changes she is making in her life—

'I didn't have the number,' she said. You know, I said, 'I gave it three or four times. It's okay, I love you'. That was a great thing to do rather than being negative and say, 'You're supposed to'. Rather than waiting for someone to reach out, just plant a seed.

She often feels like her family tries to bring her down—

My mother in Missouri has breast cancer. I called her and I was told that one of my brothers got out of prison and he joined a gang. You live in poverty, but poverty does not have to be who you are. He just told me, 'You're aiming too high; you're aiming too high'. My response to him is, 'Thank you, Lord! I'm almost there!' I encourage you, even right now at this point in my life where things are crumbling all around, I am still here.

She tries to be positive in the face of events—

He went to jail for a year, one of eight boys. He winded up with 17 years in prison. He got out, no probation, no chains, and all he can do is sit. I have tried to be the most positive person and he says I am aiming too high. I told him, 'You got to get busy living or you get busy dying'.

She finds herself relying on her faith and on herself—

If you fall down, get back up. If you throw up, eat it; regurgitate it. But you still cannot just look at what is around. I know there are emotions, but do you see why those emotions are coming out? Every tear was held in a bottle and if He can hold every tear in a bottle, He is already working on it. He's not just looking at them; He is already working on the solution to how to get across the street to where you are supposed to be going.

She feels isolated from her family and her community—

Just claim it and receive it. 'Oh, yes, Lord, I'm really listening now'. There are scars all over. By His stripes I am healed. No weapon formed against me shall prevail. Greater are You who lives in me. What is important to me is not to hate. He says, 'Okay, so you are so stupid'. I tell you, it's just sad, it is.

(Valerie)

Valerie wasn't the only woman to feel like she no longer fit into her old life. Mary and Desiree both shared stories of changing themselves and then

needing to change their surroundings to keep going down the new path they'd chosen in life. Mary said, "I used to find somebody who was worse off than me and have them pay half the rent. Now we've got a duplex and my husband and I can't tolerate anybody in the house because people would come in and take advantage. You know, you try to help somebody and you can't".

For Desiree, the changes were even bigger. "My ex-husband, he was very abusive, very abusive. He uses drugs, but he is an undercover drug user. You would never know it. Plus, he goes to church every Sunday, everything. He has a street life of prostitution and stuff like that. So I divorced him, I couldn't deal with it. So that's how I ended up where I am now, because when I married him I was going through a transition with my job." She went on to explain how she didn't leave her abusive marriage because her family didn't support her leaving when she had young children to support and he had a job and was contributing to the family as the "breadwinner".

Right, because nobody ever taught me. I mean even when I first being abused, my mother used to say things to me like, 'Well, you need to stay with him. He's got a good job'. Oh, really? The man just broke my nose. I need to stay with him because he's got a job?

Her hopes for herself are different than the way she was raised—

My mother's philosophy was like, 'He's got a job, he married you, stick it out'. Oh, no.

She feels like her family doesn't offer her support—

I didn't. I didn't have any family support, especially my mom.

Her mom, especially has not supported the changes she has made in her life—

‘Oh, you’re just mean. You don’t know how to treat a man’. That’s what I got from her. I said so you want me to be like you, right? I was so mad. Because she took abuse...She took abuse and dealt with it. I’m not doing it. I’m sorry. You know what? I give you two years.

Desiree expresses a lot of sadness and frustration that her family can’t understand why she has made changes in her life that lead to her getting a divorce.

That’s too long. When I married my husband I said I’m going to give this marriage a couple of years, if it’s not working I’m gone. Third year I was getting a lawyer because I’m not going to stay in here like this. I’m not doing it, because nobody is promising me tomorrow. I’m getting older, couple more years I’ll be 60 and I’m going to sit there and stay in an abusive relationship. (Desiree)

**It’s a Merry-Go-Round: Grandparents parenting, grown kids who move back home and multi-generational households**

Four of the twelve study participants were or had recently been acting in a parenting capacity for one or more of their grandchildren. Also, some women discussed the ramifications of their grown children moving back into their home and the reality that several of the women were now living in multi-generational households with three generations living under the same roof due to their economic situation. Due to this pattern, I called this theme, “It’s a Merry-Go-Round: Grandparents parenting, grown kids who move back home and multi-generational households.”

Debra explained, “Yeah, so I’m on welfare with my grandson. They just give me money for him after all this happened and stuff, so I get the \$432. So I pay my daughter here and we get food stamps. It doesn’t leave anything, nothing. Out of the \$432 I give her \$300 a month rent plus I help out with food.”

Jessica took over, first as a babysitter, but now as a parent for two of her grandchildren. This changing role has affected her work life and the types of jobs that she can take since now she needs to act as a parent to her grandchildren.

You can't be a grandparent. That's the saddest thing is that you cannot be a grandparent. She is more of a daughter because of everything. I always catch myself saying, 'Well, grandma used to...' She says, 'You mean great-grandma'. I said, 'No, grandma. Oh, yeah, first great-grandma...', because I forget.

(Jessica)

Joy's son came to live with her in her small apartment when he got divorced; he's been staying on the living room couch for a few months now. She explained, "It was a couch bed, but my son has been sleeping on it. So I'm like do I throw it away and then I thought I'd sleep on it. When I pulled out the couch bed he's like, 'Mom, this is not good to sleep on' and I found that out. The little mattress, after two weeks, it's like NO joke."

Even as she is caring full-time for her disabled son and raising two teenagers who are still living at home, Desiree also has been taking care of a granddaughter since she was three years old, she's nine years old now.

Then I have to see about my disabled son. I have to see about him. It's a lot. See, I used to take in my granddaughter. Do you remember her? She came to the graduation with me when we did Dress for Success. She's nine. They were so crazy about her. She's a sweetheart. I've been taking care of her since she was three. That was a lot on me. She's only nine, but I had to look out for her. I was taking her to dance lessons. My day was filled. But you know what? It helped me because it took my mind off the negativity. It took my mind away.

(Desiree)

### Summary

This chapter discussed the findings of the study. Sixteen themes were uncovered including: Work to Survive: Icky, scary and sometimes illegal; Getting HIRED...it's complicated; Support vs. Isolation: What I need from my partner, my family and my friends to keep going; Dream Jobs: Visions for future work; The Power of Community: Shine your light, set an example and lift others up; Welfare and the Terrible Loss of Personhood; Springboard to Success or Financial Devastation? The power of education; A Mentor by any Other Name: Mentors and mentoring; The Clothes. How fashion controls job access and career options; Current Work: It's not the dream job, but it's where I'm at...; Mothers and Daughters: Breaking the cycle of generational poverty; Welfare for First Timers: Yeah, it's bad; Being a Worker and a Mom: at the intersection of work and parenting; Keeping the Hope: What to do to repair self-worth and heal; Like Crabs in a Boiling Pot: No one escapes and It's a Merry-Go-Round: Grandparents parenting, grown kids who move back home and multi-generational households. Chapter five will discuss the implications of the study findings, how this study extends scholarly knowledge about mentoring programs and the lived experience of women transitioning off of welfare and will outline the limitations of the study.

## Chapter Five: Phenomenological Study Implications

### Introduction

This chapter considers the implications of the study on mentoring as an intervention to change self-concept for women. It discusses how each theme supports or does not support what is currently known about low income women who are transitioning off of welfare and looks at the interaction between the themes found and what is known about successful mentoring programs from previously conducted research. It suggests that it is important to explore mentoring as an intervention to assist in the positive self-concept formation of low income women. It investigates whether or not mentoring may be a viable alternative or a valuable addition to traditional “work now” welfare-to-work programs which suffer from an inability to keep up with changing economic needs. Finally, it discusses where this research extends scholarly knowledge the limitations of the study results.

### Discussion – Answering the Research Questions

The central research questions for this phenomenological study were:

- 1) *What does the life experience of being on welfare while transitioning into work look like?*
- 2) *What are the roles within the context of an individual’s life experience that mentoring plays in creating personal transformations? Is this reflected in how individuals discuss a successful transition from welfare to work?*

*3) Does mentoring help facilitate the creation of positive work-related identities for women on welfare? How is this reflected in their sense of identity and how they process and talk about their life experiences?*

I was able, through interviewing each woman and employing a technique I would term “deep listening,” to uncover parts of the life story of 12 women who were in the process of transitioning of welfare while preserving the “rich detail” of individual experiences. I identified 16 unique themes and connections between this group of women. I used the textual fabric of these stories, representing the “voice” of these women to reflect on questions designed to help me think about the “lived experience” of each woman. To do this, I employed a phenomenological technique called, “to wonder” in asking myself internal questions such as:

*What is the life situation of the woman on welfare before joining the mentoring program? What about during the program as they transition and after they’ve completed the program? Are there certain characteristics and experiences that have shaped their beliefs about themselves as workers? Are these characteristics shared by the group or are they unique to each individual? Looking at the stories that women tell about themselves and their lives, is there a vision for their future? What do they envision for themselves as workers, what kind of jobs do they see themselves supporting their families with? Do they have career aspirations?*

I used these types of internal “wonderings” to reflect on their stories and their lived experiences in order to identify common themes in the life experiences of those on welfare. In providing a venue to carry the voice and the needs of women seeking to transition off of welfare, I hope to carry their words and their needs to those with the power to create meaningful change in the current welfare-to-work programs. I also hope

to allow others to use this knowledge to support the creation of more welfare transition programs that offer a long term mentoring component.

## **Connecting the Dots: Discussion of the Findings and Themes**

### **Research Purpose Discussion**

The purpose of this research study was to increase our knowledge and understanding of when and how mentoring can be successfully used to increase the chances of individuals transitioning from welfare to work. It sought to add knowledge that could improve the long-term prospects of these women and their families. It hoped to uncover the framework for creating mentoring programs that can provide a win-win situation whereby women can transition off of welfare and back to work in stable jobs with benefits in order to provide a stable lifestyle for their children and companies can benefit by having workers trained for jobs within emerging markets.

### **Response to Gaps in the Scholarly Literature Discussion**

This study responded directly to gaps found in the scholarly literature in several areas including: understanding adult identity formation and transformation, relating life experiences and adult identity, identifying the possible selves of low income mothers and to extend knowledge and learn more in the areas of possible selves and identity and possible selves and career.

***Adult identity formation and transformation.*** My study sought to understand how adults undergo the process of identity formation in the area of work and of personal transformation in the area of transitioning of welfare.

***Relating life experiences and adult identity.*** My qualitative work begins to bridge a gap in the scholarly knowledge by relating life experiences and adult self-identity. It

also adds to our understanding of how adults process identity changes and create new work-related identities while undergoing life transitions. Within the literature there was little research on adult identity change and on how adults can achieve change and create a work-related identity when they had missed the more traditional opportunities to form a work-based identity as an adolescent. With the monthly speakers, the individual and the group mentors, my study themes surrounding Support vs. Isolation; The Power of Community; Welfare and the Terrible Loss of Personhood; Mentors and mentoring; Keeping the Hope and No one escapes all look more in depth at how these women have handled the challenges in their life and how they gain knowledge and apply it to creating a new work-based self. In 1994, LaVoie recommended that scholars shift away from “global rating analysis” to use of interviews instead of identity questionnaire instruments in order to capture the synthesis and integration of participants previous life experiences and how they affect their deep structures of identity. Cramer (2004) called for studies relating life experiences to adult identity and relating life experience to identity change.

***Possible Selves of Low Income Mothers.*** My study addresses this gap by interviewing low income women on welfare, many of whom were also mothers and grandmothers. Within the context of the study there were two mother-daughter pairs, both transitioning off of welfare at the time with the help of the mentoring program. In both cases, the mother began the program first and encouraged her daughter to join later. In both cases the mothers had completed or nearly completed the transition off of welfare. One daughter was in the middle of the process and living at home. The other daughter was actively on welfare and had recently gone back to school. In the context of the study there were 3 out of 12 women (25%) parenting their grandchildren in the home. While a

smaller theme in the context of the larger study, when this theme was present, it affected the woman's ability to work and her ability to survive without welfare. These women particularly, reported needing and benefiting from the support of the group and from the mentoring program.

This research addresses a current gap identified by Lee & Oyserman (2009) in the existing scholarly research on the possible selves of low income mothers. Lee & Oyserman (2009) did not find any research exploring the possible selves of low income mothers before conducting their quantitative study in 2009.

#### **To Extend Knowledge and Learn More**

*Possible Selves and Identity.* My research looks at self-identity and possible selves within a career and work-identity formation context. The work-based themes uncovered were: Work to Survive: Icky, scary and sometimes illegal; Getting HIRED...it's complicated; Dream Jobs: Visions for future work; The Clothes. How fashion controls job access and career options; Current Work: It's not the dream job, but it's where I'm at...and Being a Worker and a Mom: at the intersection of work and parenting. There were clear differences seen in the words used and the type of descriptions offered by women who were just beginning the process of trying to transition off of welfare and those who were completely off of welfare and working at a career-based job. The possible selves of the women who had transitioned were clearly articulated, they included, job titles, a description and concept of a "dream" job that they were working toward and a detailed knowledge of the specific steps (such as experience and education) needed to achieve the goal. In contrast, the women in earlier stages were focused on temporary and survival work, did not always have a "dream job," they did not

offer job titles, or other stories evidencing that they were aware of the experience and education required to get career-level jobs. My research answers a call from Ibarra (1999) to extend the knowledge in the area of how identity-construction strategies affect the creation of possible selves within work roles.

***Possible Selves and Career.*** I am looking at the lived experience of women transitioning from welfare to work and how mentoring can help them to change their possible selves to reflect broader career aspirations and to provide greater satisfaction with their work. There were several themes discovered surrounding work and career, both current work and past work as well as dreams and aspirations for future work. These “work selves,” whether they included a specific job title or simply a description of a type of work, reflected the part of the transition process that the woman was in (beginning, middle, or end) and their sense of possibilities for themselves as a worker (i.e. “possible selves”). My research answers a call from Robinson, Davis & Meara (2003) to investigate in greater depth the role of feared occupational possible selves and their impact on such things as career beliefs, planning, and satisfaction.

### **Scholarly Contributions**

There is an “unspoken” theme in the scholarly literature that I am seeing across disciplines, it is simply the sense that there is a serious disconnect between scholarship and practice when it comes to applying welfare law to human lives. While scholars working within the context of academia are studying and discovering all kinds of important and helpful information—for example, the characteristics of successful mentoring interventions or characteristics of good mentors—this knowledge is not applied in the context of practice within actual mentoring or welfare-to-work programs. It

seems as if each program is reinventing the wheel and not learning from the mistakes and successes of other programs and interventions. Lee (2005), Lee & Oyserman (2009) and Lee & Vinokur (2007) all surveyed women and mothers on welfare using quantitative methods, but they didn't actually ask these women in person about their life experiences directly or attempt to capture their lived experience on welfare or in attempting to enter the workforce and successfully transition off of welfare.

How many people are simply not on welfare anymore because they have used up their five year lifetime benefits? What happens to them then? Lee & Vinokur (2007) discussed the decrease from 4 million to 2 million people on the welfare rolls (p. 301) after the welfare reform laws passed in the early 1990s; 2 million people didn't just disappear and I highly doubt that in this economy they are all back in the workforce having successfully transitioned off of welfare. What they are doing to survive and support their families now? In asking the women who are voluntarily participating in the year-long mentoring intervention program offered by Dress for Success I believe we have gained a sense of what happened to those 2 million people as well as a new understanding of what kind of internal changes have to happen to help a woman navigate the myriad of barriers to workplace success in order to permanently leave the welfare system.

### **Additional Scholarly Contribution**

The study has also made an additional scholarly contribution in the form of a "mentoring program checklist" based directly on the information uncovered and synthesized from the review of the literature that can be used by non-profits and other organizations that offer mentoring programs designed to assist low income women and their families in order to improve their mentoring programs by adding components

matching the characteristics of programs that are known to be successful at mentoring women.

### **Mentoring Program Checklist**

Research shows that successful mentoring programs share 12 characteristics.

These mentoring programs focus on building strong relationships, creating a transformative learning environment, teaching strategies to help mentees attain their best possible selves, ensuring that there are caring and committed mentors, providing a good quality program curriculum, creating times for participant reflection, utilizing visualization and goal-setting strategies, providing career options education, offering career counseling and planning services, ensuring that both mentors and mentees have input into matching decisions, providing methods for resolving conflicts and setting mentoring and relationship expectations. *Does your program utilize all 12 characteristics of a successful mentoring program? If not, how might you add these elements in order to improve your mentoring program?*

- **Building Strong Relationships.** Successful programs emphasize the importance of the commitment to spend quality time together over a long period of time with regular contact in order to build nurturing relationships that are strong enough to foster academic, social, and emotional skill development on behalf of both the mentors and the mentee's.
- **Creating a Transformative Environment.** Internal change processes play a strong role in identity transitions. Changes in perspective or new awareness's accounts for one-half to two-thirds of adult identity changes. Mentoring programs may play a role in helping women transition from welfare-to-work

and by creating an environment that both causes “changes in perspective” and creates new awareness for the women in order to support the process of transformational identity change.

- **Teaching Strategies to Attain Possible Selves.** Research shows that, to effectively motivate behavior changes, the desire for change must be translated into a vision of the self as healthy, active, and strong. This vision must be accompanied by specific plans and strategies for becoming these possible selves. Successful mentoring programs teach strategies for creating transformative change within the mentee’s life.
- **Ensuring Caring and Committed Mentors.** In order to create a successful mentoring program, mentors must be both caring and committed to helping their mentee achieve their personal and career-related goals.
- **Providing Good Program Quality and Curriculum.** In their quantitative research study, Research indicates that a mentee’s “perceived” input into the mentoring process and the mentee indicating that they perceived that their training was of a high quality were consistently related to the outcome of their mentoring program experiences indicating that a mentoring program’s curriculum needs to be of high quality for mentoring to be effective.
- **Creating Time for Participant Reflection.** Create a space and a place to identify “critical” moments, a place for reflection on these moments that represent change and growth for the mentor and the mentee. This might be a journal kept by the mentee which is used to reflect on experiences that helped her to process and reflect upon moments of transformative change in her life

and her internalized identity as a worker. In the case of low income women who are transitioning off of welfare, a journal may provide a powerful narrative for understanding their own life story and reflecting on the process of work-related identity change.

- **Utilizing Visualization Strategies.** Offered exercises for visualization and imagery (within the context of mentoring) as a strategy for individuals to activate their imagination and create visions of their possible selves. Visualization can provide a link between creating imagery and a vision of a possible self that overcomes the previous experience of a negative self.
- **Creating Goal-Setting Strategies.** Research shows that an individual's best possible self, when matched with a specific strategy for how to accomplish making that self a reality, is more likely to come true. This suggests that successful mentoring programs that seek to help low income women will promote both envisioning the best possible self of the women as well as encouraging and guiding the women to create concrete goals and steps in order to make this vision as reality in the future. Imagery and visualization can be used as mentoring strategies (taught by a mentor to the mentee) in order to connect possible selves with specific goals and to create a mental path to achieving goals.
- **Providing Career Options Education.** Participants that experience concrete occupational role models (e.g. teacher, auto mechanic, doctor) express greater interest in these jobs.

- **Offering Career Counseling and Planning Services.** Individuals should be exposed to more opportunities and occupations to open up their beliefs about their potential career options. Women and minorities should receive specific instruction on how to plan for a career. A career counselor can help clients to overcome racial, gender-oriented and minority specific barriers to entering specific types of careers (e.g. women entering science and math-related occupations).
- **Ensuring Mentor/Mentee Matching Input.** Input into the matching process appears to be critical for both mentors and protégé's. Protégé 's are more likely to role model mentors when they are close to their own rank. Specifically, protégé 's are likely to role model mentors who are in the next higher position for their career path.
- **Providing Methods for Resolving Conflict and Setting Expectations.** Concerns about the mentoring relationship and expectations should be addressed for both the mentor and the protégé in order to establish boundaries and set relationship expectations for both parties. It is important for mentoring programs to provide written guidelines to their participants to resolve potential conflicts and to maintain the quality of the program.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations that must be taken into account when discussing the results of this study. Phenomenology is not replicable, in the traditional sense, since it focuses on the lived experience and the life view of individuals. The small sample size

(N=12) in this type of research means that the findings cannot be generalized outside of other settings to the larger population of women on welfare. That said, that doesn't mean that it doesn't contribute greatly to our understanding of what it is like for women to transition off of welfare, especially in a situation where the economy is in a recession and jobs are scarce even for qualified and experienced professionals with no barriers to personal success in the work world.

This study was conducted within the mentoring program of one non-profit organization; it is also limited in that it cannot be generalized to other mentoring programs, other non-profits, or to even other programs of women in the same program in a different geographical area. Each woman's lived experience is based on the accumulated of life experiences she has had, as well as what part of the process of transitioning off welfare she may be experiencing over time (e.g. beginning, middle, end of the transition process)—as such the individual women cannot be compared to each other or other women “like them” in the world, but we can still learn from their experiences.

### **Possible Uses and Applications for this Research**

The results of this scholarly research hold many possibilities for application in the real world. One of the most troubling trends seen in the review of the literature and in seeking out current case studies of successful and unsuccessful mentoring programs was the obvious disconnection between what is *known* (scholarly research, experiences with successful mentoring programs used as models for new programs) and what is actually *applied* in the field of practice. One of the reasons why research might not be applied is

because the connection and suggestions for application have not been presented in an obvious manner by the researcher.

In the case of my own research on mentoring programs that assist women who are transitioning off welfare, the results of this research can be applied to practice in the real world in many different ways.

Practitioners could:

- Create new mentoring programs designed for low income women on welfare
- Create new job transition programs designed for low income women on welfare
- Create specialized programs for mothers and daughters seeking to transition off welfare
- Update existing state-funded welfare-to-work programs
- Update existing non-profit job transition programs
- Improve existing mentoring programs by using a “checklist” of characteristics that research has shown to be shared by successful mentoring programs
- Provide an outlet and a voice for the experiences of women on welfare
- Train social workers and case workers in deep listening and empathy when dealing with women on welfare
- Gain understanding of how transitioning off of welfare works
- View the transition of women from welfare to work, looking at what works for them, what doesn’t work and how long the process takes
- Educate lawmakers and policymakers so that they make better decisions on behalf of this underrepresented group
- Seek answers to the best practices regarding women transitioning off of welfare and undergoing job transitions directly from the source, from women who have successfully transitioned off of welfare

- Provide a place for women who read the stories of the women to find themselves in the process (beginning middle or end of transition) and to identify with others like them

### **Why this Research Matters**

This research matters. There is a need to come up with solutions to alleviate poverty and there is evidence that women and children are especially harmed by living in poverty. We know that poverty passes from generation to generation in a destructive cycle. Research has shown that the population of those relying on the welfare system for long term support is disproportionately made up of women and children residing in single parent households (Lee & Vinokur, 2007). To break the cycle of poverty requires that the barriers to success experienced by women and mothers on welfare be overcome in order to create real and lasting change in the economic circumstances of their lives. Mentoring offers a promising alternative to traditional welfare-to-work interventions that seek to help women on welfare. Low income women are successful when transitioning off of welfare when they are able to change their self-concept in order to overcome internal barriers that may prevent them from transitioning from welfare to work.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

For the purposes of this study, I had to narrow my focus and choose how to present each theme found concerning mentoring for change and women transitioning off welfare. I chose to focus first, on capturing and sharing the authentic the voice and the lived experience of the women because I believe that many of the solutions to help women transition from welfare to work can be created by the women themselves and then put into a framework using training, education and non-profit organizations. Evidence was seen that mentoring may be helpful for women on welfare when the 12 women who participated in this study were able to articulate a list of 50 suggestions (across the 12

individual interviews) of specific actions that helped them to recover their sense of self after being on welfare and to begin the healing process. Other women who are also in the process of transitioning off of welfare can then know that those suggestions were from women like them who had gone through and succeeded at transitioning off of welfare and rebuilding their life, which gives them more credibility in their suggestions. (See Chapter Four, p. 157 for a detailed list of the 50 items and discussion). I suggest that future research would be helpful with a larger group of women who have successfully transitioned off of welfare asking them specifically about what parts of a program were helpful to them in retrospect and what changes they saw in themselves that led to the successful transition. Mentoring may be especially helpful in breaking the cycle of generational poverty, in this study there were two mother daughter pairs, it was clear that the mother, once she was transitioning off welfare leads her daughter down this path as well due to her new knowledge. Effectively, this could mean that the daughter leaves welfare twenty or more years sooner. I strongly suggest that future researchers look at the role of mothers and daughters in ending generational poverty when the mother successfully transitions off of welfare, this could lead to new programs focused on mothers transitioning off welfare.

Second, I chose to focus on mentoring programs as a vehicle for creating transformational change within the women. I originally looked at a variety of programs that serve women on welfare, some of which are funded by the state. In my case studies, I found that the existing research on those types of programs (e.g. focusing on education through the GED, or on interview/resume creation) were not successful and even though a small number of women in those programs did get off welfare, many returned to

welfare again. Frustrated with finding programs that did not work being funded, I started looking at non-profits and found a few, mostly local or regional programs that have a long history and have also been shown to be more successful than the state-funded programs. These programs were longer term programs, focused on low income women, taking a combination approach to the types of skills they taught, and they used group or one-on-one mentoring. Based on the results from my study, and on the case studies of similar programs in other regions, I suggest future research, one to establish a larger group of women who have used these programs successfully to transition off welfare and two, to evaluate how we can recreate similar mentoring programs under the umbrella of state funding, which may be more stable than keeping these programs within the non-profit arena. I would advocate for mentoring to play a role in all welfare-to-work programs.

While not unhappy with the choices and constraints of my research study, I wish I had more time and space to investigate each theme in its own right and how that theme as a pillar to support success or a barrier against it might be supported or overcome by specific elements within a mentoring or job transition program. That, however, would be a lifetime's worth of work, and it is exactly the type of research I will continue to do as I enter the scholarly field. In the future I would like to add interviews with mentors as well as their mentees to get the additional perspective from the mentors on what their experience showed really helped the women they mentor to successfully transition off of welfare. There is an element of "power" and investigating how to change the balance of power and return power to women on welfare in my work as well. I will also continue to

explore the role of power in keeping women and children on welfare and living in poverty instead of providing programs that lead to real and lasting change.

In looking at the 16 themes uncovered in the context of this study, I noticed that they fall into four areas: themes about work, themes about changing one's self, themes about welfare and themes specific to mentoring. There is a need for more research to understand more about how to facilitate this idea of changing one's self-concept and how mentoring programs actually facilitate this transformational change and then to connect with evidence how that change then leads a woman to be able to transition off of welfare permanently. Furthermore, it suggests that alternative welfare-to-work programs that promote positive work-related identity changes for women on welfare that can assist them with making the transition from welfare to work are needed.

Based on the themes surrounding the need for support, women's sense of isolation, and especially their feelings of a "terrible loss of self" there is a need to look at policy change in the future. To create programs for social workers and non-profits to minimize the damage to a person's sense of self when they are on welfare; to maximize the help, but minimize the damage done to women who are already struggling with difficult life circumstances.

Lastly, I felt that the theme, "Keeping the Hope: What to do to repair self-worth and heal" merits additional research and that the many suggestions provided by the women within the context of their interviews about what helped them to have experiences of inner healing and building up their sense of self-worth were extremely valuable as a blueprint for others who are seeking to understand why some women get off welfare and

are able to successfully transition and others remain within the welfare system. This theme also indicates that women who have this shared experience are now in a position to mentor other women; current programs for women on welfare have greatly under-utilized them as a trusted resource to give back by teaching, supporting and helping other women who are struggling.

### **Summary**

In chapter five, there is a discussion of the study findings and how the themes discovered within the context of the interviews relate to the current scholarly knowledge about women transitioning off of welfare. Chapter five also outlined the study's scholarly contributions, the response to gaps in the literature, study limitations, possible uses and applications for the research results, why the research matters and suggestions for future research. In chapter six, the author offers personal reflections on the process of conducting the study and the conclusions of the study.

## **Chapter Six: Personal Reflection and Study Conclusions**

### **Introduction**

This chapter offers the conclusions of the study and personal reflections from the author on becoming an “accidental mentor” to the women. The researcher interviewed women participating in a voluntary welfare to work mentoring program hosted by a non-profit, Dress for Success, about their experiences transitioning from welfare to work with the help of mentoring.

### **The Accidental Mentor**

I played the unintentional dual role of “mentor” to some of the women. I think this is because I am able to bridge the differences in age, race and life experiences between myself and them and in part because I have shared understanding of what life is like for them as they look for work, raise their children and try to get of the welfare system and become self-sufficient.

While I may have unconsciously mentored women as I talked with them, I’m glad I did because in this way I can show you what mentoring might look like in practice with this specific population, women who are in the process of transitioning off of welfare. At the time I made the decision moment-by-moment and according to the needs of each woman and the situation surrounding the interview whether or not sharing or offering an exchange of my own story during the interview was helpful and appropriate.

I did so because I felt like it was important for our conversations to be an exchange of stories and information whenever possible and for me to give back as much as possible so that I was not “taking” from women who could little afford it by asking them to be in a study talking about their experiences and struggles while on welfare.

While I will share a large selection of stories and examples where I found myself in a mentoring role with the women, it is important to understand that in the larger context of the study, these stories make up a small percentage of the total transcribed material. Even in “accidental” mentoring situations, the focus was on the women and their voice and the purpose of sharing my own stories was to respond with a story or to illustrate information I offered in response to a need I was hearing the women express to me as I sat listening intently to them speaking.

For example, I met with Marta at her home one evening. Marta emigrated from Russia with her two daughters seven years ago. As she spoke with me about her hopes and dreams for launching her own fashion line here in the United States, she also shared with me her isolation from other professional women and her lack of support outside of her family for creating the career she hopes to build. I shared with her some ideas about how she might be able to find a group of people with like interests to connect with and what she might do to think about her career in a broader sense than what she’d previously explored.

I talked with her about how University has a huge, thriving design school where people come in and demonstrate different skills. I have been there before when they were doing an impromptu class and they had volunteers from the rest of the University come in as their models. They did their fashion show and put it up on their class webpage. I suggested that she could start out by helping and volunteering and getting her face in front of them since the people who go to the events are the ones who have the jobs. I also suggested that she look at the University and downtown where they have theater departments. They often have paid design positions as seamstresses for their bigger

shows. The seamstress has to manage all of the volunteer sewers and once she gets to know the people in that community, they can point to the jobs.

While the Professional Women's Group has been a source of support for her, she finds it hard to connect with other women within its formal environment and she worries that the women will judge her accent and that they won't be able to understand her very well. Within the group she has only made a personal connection with one other woman who also works in the fashion design field. She had a lot of trouble understanding how to connect with other women in the group for support since she is not from the United States. I mentioned that she could find little things, some of them may like to cook or they like to craft –to build wherever you can to connect with each other.

While I was able to be of help to Marta by passing on useful knowledge and encouraging her, with others I played a mentoring role by listening and offering support. With Naomi, another member of the Professional Women's Group, the act of remembering hard times stirred up painful memories and emotions. I was able to offer support and reassurance that while she has struggled in the past; she is now on the path to a better future and to remember that her experiences have enabled her to better appreciate what she has and to have compassion for the struggles experienced by others in similar situations.

When talking with one of the youngest members of the Professional Women's Group, 21 year-old Mandi, we spent a lot of time talking about education and the process of starting a career for the first time and how to deal with setbacks. Mandi recently started a position where she counsels families dealing with housing issues though an

AmeriCorps job. She expressed to me that it is important for her to navigate her own feelings when working with clients and to decide how to present her own experiences dealing with foreclosure and staying in shelters before she got back on her feet with her family. I fell into a mentoring role with her to reassure her as she questioned her stance on sharing her experiences with these families in need.

Later, she shared her dreams to return to and continue her higher education by first completing a two year degree and later transferring to a pre-law program offered at a 4-year school and then on to law school for three more years. Saving money and paying for her college education was one of the reasons why she is currently taking a year off from college to serve in the AmeriCorps job program. I talked with her about a way that she could save money on her college classes by taking CLEP exams for college credits.

Clearly age is no barrier to my accidental mentoring ways as I fell into just a little bit of mentoring with Mandi's mom in her interview as well. Hattie and her daughter are both planning on returning to college in the Fall. Hattie is only a few classes away from earning her Bachelor's degree, however, it has been many years since she attended college and she knows that she will need to take additional courses due to the new requirements, enacted after she left school, in order for her to graduate. I talked with her about taking study skills classes, which I used to teach.

On the day I met with Desiree at a restaurant for lunch she came in stressed out, sad and upset. She was struggling that week with her 15 year-old daughter and worried about medical insurance and how she was going to help her daughter who was threatening to commit suicide. It had recently come out that her daughter been molested

when she was younger and she was very angry and unstable as she dealt with the emotional aftermath. Desiree doesn't have family nearby and she needed the listening ear and friendship of other women to support her emotionally as she focused on helping her daughter through this tough time. The last thing she needed to be dealing with was paperwork and 3 month waiting times to hear whether or not her request for health insurance was going to be granted. I was able to pass on some information to her about what she needed to do to get her insurance approved within 7 days due to the emergency situation.

The mentor in me snuck out again later on with Desiree who is an aspiring writer and a poet. Little did she know she'd just met a fellow writer and poet. At first glance you'd think that we would have nothing in common, but in reality we discovered that we shared many life experiences as mothers of children with disabilities and also on a personal level in some of our creative dreams and aspirations. When she sat down with me for the first time, the very first thing she said to me is, "I want to write a book... a story about my life," when she added that she is also a poet and that she writes to deal with the stress and emotions she is dealing with in her life right now I knew that we had a lot more than transitioning off of welfare in common.

During the course of our conversation, Desiree shared a dream with me that she and her daughter had of creating a children's book to help kids with low self-esteem. I couldn't resist sharing the information with her on how to publish her book for free. Though I don't usually share such personal information in an interview, I followed my instinct to share my own poetry collections and some of my experience publishing my short stories and fiction with her.

When there is a good connection between people there are many times when mentoring happens through exchanging stories and information. For example, when Desiree explained the type of job she dreams about getting once she graduates with her Bachelor's degree this May, but that she really wasn't finding any positions listed for the type of work she'd like to do, I offered her a few ideas, what she does with those ideas is, of course, up to her, but what it did do was get her to broaden her thinking into new and different ways to find or make the job of her dreams.

### **Conclusions**

I asked myself, how do you conclude research when the work is never done and there is still a very real need, a problem out there in the world that needs to be solved? You conclude by making a commitment to continue and to find ways to use your research in the real world to help others overcome their struggles. With this in mind, I'll share a few of the venues where I will act as a liaison for this group of women on welfare—I've been invited to testify before the State Legislative Committee on Health and Family welfare this month as they continue to debate welfare reform. I've also been invited to speak to a group of non-profits as they plan how to spend federal grant money to relieve poverty in the inner city, I've been asked to offer a final summary for the non-profit that hosted by study so that they can share it with their international network of offices, I've been invited to speak at a county provider's meeting in my area which hosts all of the different non-profit and other authorized education programs serving this area and I've been asked to present to a group of local extension educators – clearly there is a need for this work out in the world!

I am committed to carrying the voice of women on welfare with me and to bringing their life experiences and their spoken needs out into the world into places where they have not been granted access to tell their stories. Where they were once voiceless and powerless, I hope to bring their words and their story to those in the position to help and to thereby restore their power.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Personal Reflections: Bracketing Journals**

The process of using a phenomenological methodology asks the researcher to “bracket” or separate their own personal views from the research (making personal viewpoints plain) and to capture the researcher’s thinking as the process of research unfolds. To this end, I journaled as a form of “bracketing” my thoughts, viewpoints and opinions and as capturing the changing experience of going through the experience of conducting the research throughout the process of the research study beginning with the initial idea for the study and continuing throughout the project completion.

#### **September 2011 Bracketing**

It is time for more bracketing, I’m noticing that my thoughts and my thinking are starting to broaden as I read more and think more in depth about doing my study and I’m lucky enough that this year I’ve accepted a research assistantship (20 hours a week) with the University of Minnesota Extension in the Family Services division. I’m going to be working with them on online courses that are designed for Minnesotans and several of the courses will be created specifically for Minnesota’s (Minnesota Family Investment Programs) MFIP programs. Right now, they have existing courses on Stress Management, especially for Farming families and for Strengthening Families though Family Meal time and a course on Parenting together for Divorced Families on the basics of renting. On my first day I got to go with my new boss to the Ramsey county Providers Meeting where all the different programs that help people on welfare in the county were represented! I got to hear first-hand what kind of educational programs they feel are needed and also tell them a little bit about my research. I left with an open invitation to

come back and present my research results to them!

One unexpected result of attending this meeting and of having Dr. Catherine Twohig (who has a social work background) on my committee is that I realized that I need to go back through my first three chapters and look at how I have talked about and referred to existing welfare programs. I could see, in action, how one of the audiences for my research (especially social workers and family welfare program and community educators) who could actually use it and put it into practice might be upset or insulted by the way I sort of glossily refer to the existing programs as not working and not keeping up with the times. I need to go back and write more and put this into better perspective. The reality is, those programs are doing something! They pay the rent, or the electric or provide the bus pass, they have a real purpose. Yes, they are not able to do enough and the effect of the program has not been able to produce a lasting change in the situation of these families living in poverty, but it isn't correct, or fair to broadly say, they don't work! I don't want to alienate an important group that I'm addressing while I'm suggesting new ideas for positive change.

I was so happy to get my whole committee in one room together for my oral exams! Mostly, I was happy to get some feedback on the first three chapters of my dissertation and my proposal that I wrote as part of my written exams, since they were part of the written exams, it was just me thinking and writing all by myself, but I really missed the feedback and bouncing ideas and refining my thinking by talking to others during the exam process. The feedback just from going through the process of the oral exam was invaluable.

Dr. Karen Miksch, who has a law background was instrumental in reminding me that I need to write out what I know (from all the reading and researching I've done) in a form that someone who hasn't read everything will understand, and that I need to remember to put my research and my host program into context within the state of Minnesota and within the State-by-state welfare programs in general.

### **October 2011 Bracketing**

It was very exciting to finally get to go to the Dress for Success volunteer training and image coach training. The training was all day on Saturday and it covered both general volunteering at Dress for Success as well as specialized training for Image Coaching.

Dress for Success is located in a fairly run down area. As part of the training they addressed that their location is on a bus line, in a lower rent building (since they are a non-profit) and in a well-known area convenient to their clientele. The building as a whole looks a bit run down, but you can see that they have really done what they could to make it clean and nice without attracting the kind of attention you wouldn't want due to the location. The area is heavily under construction due to the light rail going in, but since clients are referred and they aren't open to street traffic this hasn't hurt their business.

The Professional Women's Group meetings are at night, so this is somewhat of an issue. They keep a staff member manning the phone on meeting nights for people who get lost or need help navigating the construction or finding the designated parking lot in the back. For night meetings, they have someone stand at the back door and lead people

in directly from the parking lot for safety (versus walking around the building to the front), also, the group exits together rather than anyone leaving alone.

I'm very impressed with the program and how much they are paying attention to respecting and protecting the women that are their clients. There were many details that are given as part of the training such as turning clipboards over so that client names will not be visible to others who are being fitted for interview suits, making sure to greet clients by name at the door and introduce yourself and talk about the whole agenda for the appointment before starting the actual process, or not assuming anything about the client (such as that they are on welfare or jobless or uneducated).

I met the President of the Twin Cities chapter at the Professional Women's Group meeting a week before training. I've been working with the volunteer coordinator until now, she is happy to host my study, but very protective of her ladies. She seemed satisfied that it would be run as a proper study with the IRB review, the study presentation with me leaving after and then the ladies indicating interest through the volunteer coordinator so they wouldn't feel pressured to participate. She especially appreciated that I plan to give the participants a gift card as a "Thank you" for participating- mostly because I got the impression she wants to make sure they get something out of it and aren't being "used" just for research. (There is probably something more here that I should explore at some point, thinking about how there is always this tension of giving/granting access to the research subjects).

The President of Dress for Success came to the meeting to report the results from a fundraiser where women had hosted parties all over the city with donations of both

money and clothing going to Dress for Success. I could see that she is clearly the force behind getting this chapter of Dress for Success up and running in the Twin Cities and she is very passionate about it and very money and fundraising-oriented. In contrast, the volunteer coordinator comes across as much more grass roots movement to help people and client oriented. It is clearly a good partnership with very different skills.

One of the concerns raised during my oral exams was that my study might not work as proposed if the women who are referred to Dress for Success aren't from the United States, due to cultural differences. Once I got to attend the volunteer training and the Professional Women's group meetings I listened to introductions from many of the ladies who may eventually be a part of my study. So far, everyone who is a part of the Professional Women's Group at this time appears to be from the United States. Of course, once my study is approved and presented I will find out for sure where everyone is from and consider this when choosing the final group to interview. There appeared to be Caucasian, Latina and African American women present at the meeting I attended.

Worth saying here - I noticed that I need not worry about Dress for Success trying to influence my study or interfere in anyway. They have a general attitude of hands off helpfulness- kind of like- let me know whatever documentation or records you might need and I'll get it for you...

It isn't awkward for me to sit in on Professional Women's Group meetings until my study is approved because the meetings are conducted very formally. For introductions you just offer your name and where you work if you are employed. There

are many participants, mentors, volunteers, coordinators and various speakers present at each meeting.

The President confirmed that they would be happy to host me with office space for recording interviews, but she did suggest that more than likely it would be easier for the ladies if I came to them either at their home or somewhere nearby that was convenient to them-some of them take three different buses in order to get to St. Paul to go to the Professional Women's Group meetings.

### **November 2011 Bracketing**

As part of my graduate research assistantship with the University of Minnesota Extension, I recently interviewed a social services case worker by phone who works with the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP). In the context of our interview we were talking about the importance of financial education for low income families. I found myself-very uncomfortable on this interview-to say the least- because of course, she is talking to me like a professional business person who is interviewing her as part of her job, but at the same time, she is unaware that I've been one of the people on the other side of the table, filling out the forms for financial assistance for healthcare for my family. That wouldn't be a problem, except, I was personally insulted and offended both for myself and for the families she works with by her attitude and lack of understanding of what it is like to be poor and for being poor and unable to meet your families basic living expenses to be something long term and not just something where you have to save up and cut back a little here and there...for someone who works with families in need every day, I found her attitude shocking.

For example, she expressed the feeling that she “didn’t understand” why these people come in and when they run into financial difficulty they stop paying car insurance as one of the first things they let go. To her, it was important that they pay attention to and follow “the law” that says everyone must have car insurance, but these families regularly come in with none, even while they still keep a cell phone or even cable TV. She didn’t understand when they would explain to her that their cell phone was very important to them, or especially that cable TV was more important to them than car insurance. She expressed that she couldn’t understand why they would give money to help their family members even when they couldn’t support themselves.

It wasn’t my place to interrupt the interview with my own thoughts, but maybe I really should have...how do you begin to explain to someone who doesn’t get it, basic realities of being poor? Take the car insurance, okay, so, if the person wants to get car insurance, they call for a quote right, more than likely they are going to have bad credit meaning their rates will be sky high, their car probably isn’t the newest so there won’t be discounts for extra safety features and driving a new vehicle, then the insurance company will want to safety inspect the vehicle and it probably won’t pass, they probably won’t qualify for multiline discounts for having other types of insurance, they can’t use auto pay due to the risk of overdraft fees at the bank and the insurance company will probably want 6 months of insurance at a time paid up front...I could go on and on...so, see, it makes sense to me why if your funds are limited and there are many needs you would choose to keep the cell phone over car insurance-regardless of the law. I’m not saying it is right to break the law, only that when people don’t have the resources to meet their family’s needs they are forced to make decisions between two bad choices every day.

Even the cable TV example makes sense to me, it wouldn't be my choice but it makes sense. It is about keeping some shred of normalcy for the family and especially the kids. It's like saying, "see we're just going through a rough patch" versus giving up the cable television and admitting through the action to the family that "now, we're really poor"...of course this is in the perspective of poor by middle class, American, white standards versus "poor" anywhere else in the world. Also, if there is no money for shopping, going out to eat, going out to movies, going to any kind of event or festival with any cost, even if just for food or parking or gas to get there- then TV is the family entertainment. I wouldn't be surprised if some of those moms are also figuring that having cable will help keep their kids at home where they can keep an eye on them versus hanging out in the neighborhood unsupervised and getting into trouble.

### **December 2011 Bracketing**

I've been preparing for my Institutional Review Board (IRB) review this month. Originally I planned on presenting my study at the Professional Women's Group this month, but I called and spoke with Stephanie, the Dress for Success Volunteer Coordinator, and found out that this month's regular meeting has been cancelled. Instead, the group is meeting for a Professional Women's Group celebration and graduation with the women and their friends and family. I was invited since I've been attending the group's monthly meetings so I went.

The event took place in a hotel in downtown Minneapolis. I walked in and immediately noticed the care that went into the graduation planning. The hotel staff were friendly and helpful in locating the room for the event, the tables were set with beautiful white cloth, with lit candles and flowers on each table. There were hors d'oeuvres and non-

alcoholic drinks and water waiting. I sat with a woman who I'd spoken with at a previous meeting who didn't have family and friends with her. The atmosphere was light and happy, a celebration.

Little did I know that the woman I sat with had recently graduated from the year-long Professional Women's Group and continued attending for the support each month and she also won an award for never missing a Professional Women's Group meeting in a year and she was invited to attend a New Year's Eve Ball and speak about her experiences to the attendees along with one other Professional Women's Group member who had been with the group since the beginning more than a year ago. Both women were offered the award of attending the event, speaking and having professional dress with a new outfit chosen with the assistance of a Macy's personal shopper, hair and makeup done for the event.

Many women received awards and roses for attending a certain number of meetings and some women received gas or bus cards as a reward and thank you from the group. Jeri Quest, the Executive Director of Dress for Success (who usually doesn't work directly with the PWG members or the clients, as she is busy working with fundraising and events to support the non-profit), came to speak and became very emotional to see the women who had graduated from the program and who had also found steady work and were much more stable in their lives than they were when they were first referred to Dress for Success.

There were also some members who brought large families as support and others who were all alone. Some women brought their grown daughters, as support, but also to

introduce them to the group and encourage them to join. Women brought their friends, people they knew needed a group like this one, unemployed, under-employed, looking for a career change, struggling friends. You could see how much they wanted their friends to see how the group had helped them and to see their friends and family seek and utilize that help for themselves, but, as often as friends were interested in learning more and talked with the volunteer coordinator about the program during the event, just as often they weren't ready to accept help, or didn't feel like the group could help them in any way.

For myself, I will say there is definitely a feeling of acceptance from the group, that the women, both the participants and the mentors and the people associated with the non-profit itself all truly want everyone to succeed and to realize their dreams. I think from the participants it is clear that hearing the failures and successes of the other women makes them keep trying, keeps the hope and belief in themselves strong.

### **February 2012 Bracketing**

I think that once you have experienced the role of being a "mentor" for someone, mentoring as a skill becomes an integrated part of your "self" and forms an unconscious part of your personal and professional identity. Rather than planning to "mentor" someone, this becomes a natural and spontaneous way of *being* when interacting with others. A mentor can be a teacher, a coach, a boss, a friend, a family member - anyone really - who applies an authentic caring for the mentee and listens carefully to what is needed and then uses that information to act as a guide for the mentee to achieve their personal and professional goals.

As I analyzed the data collected as part of my study I realized that not only am I a mentor, but that I unconsciously mentor others. Even though I had already “bracketed” by own experiences with welfare, my beliefs, feelings and interest in conducting a study on welfare to work as part of my phenomenological methodology and I’d been focusing on the voice and the stories of the 12 women in my study, I truly am part of the study. At first, I cut as much of my interactions and stories from the transcripts and even during the interviews with the participants I tried to strike a balance between encouraging women to keep sharing and talking and sharing in kind with them because I feel like it is important for women to share with one another and to talk about their personal stories and experiences as a form of healing.

I realized that women get to know each other and become friends and later, a source of personal, professional and emotional support for each other by exchanging stories and experiences. As time went on, I understood that in writing academically about my experiences in my bracketing journal my natural stories and voice, while true, were often sanitized to fit a “professional” version of myself rather than reflecting my authentic self and my “stories” about my own life. I noticed as I reviewed transcripts that the spontaneous storytelling, the exchange of information and experience between women, regardless of age, race or differences in life experience was extremely important.

I needed to be more respectful of my own voice and my own stories, even as I elicited stories and experiences from others. I needed to remain separate, while still respecting and including my own stories and experiences - especially where they intersected or surrounded the varying experiences of this group of women as they taught me through their stories about their process of self-transformation and transitioning off of

welfare. I wondered many times: *How much should I share? How do I let her talk, but still let her know I understand?*

I stumbled upon the answer as I went through the process of coding my interview transcripts for themes. After I had read each transcript and made a few initial notes about possible themes, I'd then start cutting the interview printout into pieces according to topic, possible theme and by stories on a topic or related to a theme. Many times, I'd find myself cutting away my brief responses or questions asked to confirm my understanding of what had been said in a quest to recombine the text to reflect only the woman's voice, without my interference.

Invariably, there would be a point in the process where I set aside several pages largely untouched, moments in the interview where I told a personal story, where I shared a piece of information or a resource spontaneously in response to a goal or a need expressed by the woman I was interviewing - a goal I had direct personal or professional expertise in - or a need I had the exact answer to in the moment - these moments were almost irresistible for me. *To share or not to share*, that is the question I'd ask myself, but where I felt a strong need to offer information or to share something of my experience I almost always did.

At first I saw this as wasted time or perhaps a negative reflection on my interviewing skills or at best, time spent in relationship and trust building, but later on, when I was thinking about how and where my voice and my stories have a role in this research I realized that those stories, my stories about myself and my life experiences were elicited and told *in context* with the sharing of information and life experiences with

other women transitioning off of welfare. In this way, they reflected the stories I share with others about my life experiences and these stories, when shared, reflect how I see myself and how I share my authentic self with others. I also played a unique and dual role of an “accidental” mentor to the other women in the group - much as they are for each other. In building authentic relationships and getting to know so many of the women in the Professional Women’s Group, I’d become one of them - albeit, unintentionally. Finally, I created a separate theme to account for my “accidental mentoring.”

## Appendix B

### Consent Form

#### *Mentoring to Change Self-Concept: A Phenomenological Study*

You are invited to be in a research study exploring the life experiences of low income women who are transitioning off of welfare and their experiences with work. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a participant in the Dress for Success Twin Cities Professional Women's Group. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Kristina Blasen, M.Ed. Kristina is a doctoral candidate at the University of Minnesota working on her Ph.D in Adult Education.

#### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to explore the life experiences of low income women who are transitioning off of welfare and their experiences with work and with mentoring programs that assist in this transition to work. The study also seeks to give a "voice" to women on welfare and to take these experiences and stories to the policy makers that create welfare to work programs in order to encourage funding for more programs that help women transition off of welfare and into living wage jobs with benefits that can support their families.

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

- 1) Meet with the interviewer at Dress for Success to discuss the study details.
- 2) Sign an informed consent form indicating the intent to join the research study.
- 3) Meet with the researcher for approximately 1-2 hours and answer interview questions on audiotape about your personal experiences with transitioning off of welfare and your personal experiences about work and working.

- 4) Meet with the researcher approximately 3 weeks later for a follow up audio interview for 1 hour expanding on the questions and stories given during the first interview session (optional).

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**

The study has minimal risks: **First**, the interviewer will be asking for personal or sensitive information about your experiences with welfare, mentoring and work during the interviews; **Second**, since we will be discussing welfare, mentoring and work experiences there could be a possible invasion of your privacy or that of your family.

It is important to assess your personal comfort level with offering personal or sensitive information during the interview process you should decide what you are comfortable sharing and what you are not before deciding whether or not to join this study. Every effort will be made to be respectful of your life experience and your name and identifying characteristics will be changed in the written report to protect your identity.

**Compensation:**

You will receive payment: At the completion of the first interview, you will receive a payment of a \$25.00 gift card. If you complete a second interview (which is optional) you will receive an additional \$25.00 gift card at the close of the second interview.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Study data will be encrypted according to current University policy for protection of confidentiality. The audio recording of the interviews will be kept in a password protected electronic file for three years from the completion of the study in May 2012 and will be destroyed after 3 years.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota or with Dress for Success Twin Cities. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Kristina Blasen. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact Kristina Blasen at 612-735-6932, blas0082@umn.edu. You may also contact her academic advisor, Dr. Rosemarie Park at 612-625-6267 or parkx002@umn.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Dress for Success 2011 Data on Women Served (Minneapolis, MN)

<u>Category</u>	<u>Tallies</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
<b>AGE</b>		
Under 18	3	0.76%
18-24	107	27.09%
25-30	82	20.76%
31-40	95	24.05%
41-50	55	13.92%
50 plus	45	11.39%
Prefer not to disclose	8	2.03%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>395</b>	
<b>MARITAL STATUS</b>		
single	289	73.16%
separated	26	6.58%
widowed	4	1.01%
divorced	38	9.62%
married	32	8.10%
prefer not to disclose	6	1.52%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>395</b>	
<b># OF CHILDREN IN CARE</b>		
none	97	24.56%
1 to 2	207	52.41%
3 to 4	62	15.70%
5+	19	4.81%
prefer not to disclose	10	2.53%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>395</b>	

<b><u>Category</u></b>	<b><u>Tallies</u></b>	<b><u>Percentage</u></b>
<b>RACE/ETHNICITY</b>		
Alaska Native		0.00%
African	16	4.05%
African American or Black	177	44.81%
American Indian	20	5.06%
White or Caucasian	117	29.62%
Multi-Racial	35	8.86%
Asian	12	3.04%
Hispanic or Latino	12	3.04%
Pacific Islander		0.00%
Other	1	0.25%
Prefer not to disclose	5	1.27%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>395</b>	
<b>COUNTY OF CURRENT RESIDENCE</b>		
Hennepin	212	53.67%
Ramsey	156	39.49%
Other	21	5.32%
Prefer not to disclose	6	1.52%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>395</b>	
<b>HIGHEST ED. COMPLETED</b>		
8th grade or below		0.00%
Between 9th - 12th grade	39	9.87%
High School Diploma/GED	106	26.84%
Some College	180	45.57%
College (2 year)	39	9.87%
College (4 year)	27	6.84%
Prefer not to disclose	4	1.01%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>395</b>	

<b>Currently Using Public Assistance</b>			
Yes	320	81.01%	
No	62	15.70%	
Prefer not to disclose	13	3.29%	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>395</b>		
<b>Housing</b>			
House	37		
Apartment	102		
Shelter	28		
Other	26		
Prefer not to disclose	8		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>156</b>		
<b>Military Membership</b>			
Yes	5		
No	187		
Prefer not to disclose	4		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>192</b>		

## Appendix D

### Themes Found - Summary Data

