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Mapping Communities of Mothering: Where Race, Class, Gender, and Space Intersect

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Mapping Communities of Mothering: Where Race, Class, Gender, and Space Intersect

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript explores the unique construction of community that young, low-income, women create, based on the embodied internal and external spaces they occupy as lone mothers. Issues related to diverse women’s representation, voice, and power, within these socially constructed communities are examined. Attention is paid to how young low-income mothers experience and actively create their own supportive community within both geographic and social boundaries, in active resistance to dominant and oppressive assumptions. To explore these concepts in-depth, results are presented from an ethnographic study that examined the community participation of eleven young, low-income, racially diverse single mothers living in a small U.S. Midwestern city. Findings focus on the multiple ways that women’s lives embodied the idea of community through the prism of motherhood, race, class, and geographic/physical space. The use of qualitative participatory mapping techniques is also emphasized to examine these physically and socially constructed boundaries. Implications are discussed for ways that social workers can best advocate for social justice by using an intersectional lens to locate and partner with the organic communities of mothering that these women created.

KEYWORDS

community; lone mothers; intersectionality; participatory mapping; social construction

In many human service organizations, there is an assumption that regardless of the services provided to a client, the community also has an impact on client outcomes. Progressive social workers have historically emphasized community organizing as one way to mobilize low-income communities toward social justice goals. But what do social workers mean when they refer to community? Does this mean only the physical community? Does it also refer to the client’s membership in a specific identity group? More importantly, who gets to define community? These questions are connected to issues of power and control within the field of social work and are not typically answered through the lived experience of the populations targeted. Much of Social Work’s broad policy assumptions regarding poverty is informed through what Belcher and Tice (2013) refer to as the elite model. Definitions of poverty and proposed policy solutions typically come from those with little or no real lived experience being
poor. The subsequent explanations about the factors that contribute to poverty tend to focus on unemployment, education, or training, and often do not address root causes or systemic inequalities in our current economic and political systems (Belcher & Tice, 2013). To use a more empowering and radical approach to questions of how the community impacts client outcomes, and to determine more empowering solutions to the problem of poverty, the community members themselves must be the producers of this knowledge. This article presents findings from an ethnographic study conducted with young, low-income single mothers, to provide insight into how these women defined community, illustrating how it acts in both supportive and non-supportive ways for mothers living at or below the poverty line. The evidence provided here from the lived experiences of these women, can help guide social work activists in their efforts to make changes at the macro community level, mobilizing small organic groups of young mothers into larger networks for structural change.

The conceptual framework for this study was informed by intersectionality (Weber, 2001) and border thinking (Hudson, 2012). Intersectionality is a framework that assumes that categories of race/class/gender converge and impact one another so that they are unable to be separated and examined individually or additively (Andersen & Collins, 2001). Intersectional approaches consider race as shaping gender, which also affects how class status is experienced. It aims to interpret the impact of race/class/gender through a prism, rather than as separate categories (Baca Zinn et al., 2015). This approach was used to frame the study questions and analysis, to learn how low-income mothers experience and interpret their community through such social locations as woman, Black or White, and poor. When used with an intersectional approach, the concept of border thinking (Hudson, 2012) is helpful in analyzing both the physical and cultural aspects of community. This concept was developed to avoid a dichotomous interpretation of community, as being either geographical or population based. Hudson (2012) developed the term to indicate a sense of community that is bound by some geographic outline, but that also considers the cultural aspects of the members who live in that location. Border thinking is a consciously political act, one in which power, and the views of those who have been oppressed, is centered (Hudson, 2012). It requires privileging the voices and experiences of the marginalized. This study of low-income single mothers was informed by an intersectional approach to race/class/gender and the use of border thinking, to examine power and identity within physical and cultural aspects of marginalized communities (Hudson, 2012). The purpose is to center the views, experience, and knowledge constructed by low-income Black and White women mothering alone, so that social workers can more effectively work for social change, with, rather than for these women.
Poor single mothers and power

The history of mothering in U.S. society, and societal views of what constitutes a good mother is deeply influenced by power and connections to race, class, and gender (Gordon, 2002). Historian Linda Gordon’s (2002) work on the history of birth control, and changes to welfare policy illustrates how social policy decisions and access to resources for women are imbedded within a network of race, class, and gender-based biases. As Schneider and Ingram (1993) have argued in their theory of social constructions of target populations, conceptions such as the myth of the welfare queen, with its racist and classist stereotypes, have negatively influenced public perception of poor single mothers, and subsequently made it more difficult to expand resources for this population. Nadasen (2006) builds on this theory in her research on single mothers receiving public assistance and their community activism. As the work of feminist historians and researchers have demonstrated, access to resources means access to power, and collective organizing within communities is one way to achieve this access (Collins, 1991; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Gordon, 2002; Nadasen, 2006).

Single mothers living in poverty not only contend with a lack of material resources, but they do so while fighting negative stereotypes about their mothering. Poverty-class mothers who receive public assistance must submit to forms of surveillance that middle-class mothers do not encounter (Nadasen, 2006). Applications for critical programs such as food, cash, housing, or child-care assistance, require regular proof of income and examination of personal financial documents. These programs also require frequent visits to social service offices where caseworkers hold decision-making power (Elliot et al., 2015). Low-income single mothers’ access to necessities for their children is reliant on the power of these social institutions.

Poverty-class women, and Black women, have experienced a historical legacy of attempts at power over their own child-bearing decisions. The U.S. has a sordid history of racism and discrimination in reproductive programs, with forced sterilizations, and denial of services based on race and gender not uncommon (Collins, 1994; Roberts, 1997). Low-income mothers of color continually struggle against antagonistic social institutions, requiring them to fight for access to material resources for themselves and their children (Elliot et al., 2015). These mothers feel protective of their children, and hold dreams for their children’s’ future, just as middle-class mothers do, but must achieve this on far less money, while simultaneously navigating systems rife with institutional racism and classism (Elliot et al., 2015; Liegghio & Caragata, 2016).

If social workers intend to provide services as well as work toward social/systems change for low-income single mothers, then understanding how power affects these women’s experience of motherhood, as well as their identity is important. Creating services and policy solutions that are anti-
oppressive and empowering, vs disempowering and controlling, can only be accomplished when social workers first understand the lived experiences of low-income single mothers.

**Poor single mothers and identity**

The community shapes an individual’s experiences, and individuals help structure the community they belong to. Hudson (2012) writes about the need to embrace ambiguity in common assumptions about marginalized communities. Rather than viewing a specific community as homogenous in terms of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation, Hudson (2012) claims that these “borders” should be disrupted to embrace the ambiguous spaces where members’ lived experiences inform an embodied, knowing community. By crossing borders and embracing ambiguous spaces, we can find unique epistemic approaches to social justice that have the potential to aid marginalized populations (Hudson, 2012). Social workers who work with this population must leave behind their own assumptions about the community’s needs, and instead learn from the women themselves who have lived experience and knowledge of what is truly necessary to create social change. If we purposely cross the bordered category of single mother and leave behind our own assumptions about what it means to be a poverty-class lone mother, we can enter this ambiguous space where there is potential for knowledge construction leading to more radical structural level change. Within these disrupted borders is where the potential for social justice and mobilization lives. By embracing the ambiguous spaces that poor, single, African American, and white mothers occupy, social workers can partner with these women for empowering, lasting change. These ambiguous spaces are also where the definition of community must include both a woman’s perception of the physical space that surrounds her as well as her own identity as a mother, or her maternal thinking.

Ruddick (2004) used the term maternal thinking to describe the value of women’s caring labor, and how this can contribute to a feminist standpoint. Ruddick (2004) imagined that through the mothering work that women have historically engaged in, a specific value of peace, as opposed to violence, war, and power over, might be gained. This vision is not automatic by virtue of a woman’s motherhood status, but rather it must be achieved through the daily struggles and caring work in which mothers engage (Ruddick, 2004). This caring work is not conducted in a vacuum but is grounded within a specific community, influenced by the social location (in terms of race and class) of the mother. The lived experiences of motherhood and the maternal work that women engage in, shape their maternal standpoint. While identifying as a mother is part of this thinking, it is not simply a personal identity. Ruddick (2004) was clear that a maternal standpoint is also shaped by experiences of struggle and oppression and should therefore be contextualized by
social locations along a privilege/oppression continuum in U.S. society. All women who are mothers may share some perspectives about caring for children, but the lived experiences of those from marginalized populations (poor, women of color) provide unique insight into mothering within a context of inequality.

Race, class, gender, and community provide a complex interaction within all maternalist strategies, images of motherhood, and what scholars of marginalized mothers refer to as motherwork (Collins, 1991, 1994; Naples, 1998a, 1998b). This type of mothering, historically undertaken by Black women, emphasizes community work, community activism, and a feeling of responsibility for all children in a community. This certainly does not assume that all poverty-class African American women are involved in activism, but scholars have identified a historical view of mothering in the Black community that emphasizes a commitment and responsibility to the larger society. Collins (1994, 1991) and Naples (1998a, 1998b) have written about motherwork in terms of community building by Black and poverty level women. Motherwork conducted by marginalized women involves not only resistance to oppressive policies that affect their everyday lives, but also the creation of a community where women’s representation, voice, and power are centered. This community building is viewed as an extension of their responsibility to mother other marginalized children and members of their own community, by caretaking and working toward social justice goals. Motherwork is considered good mothering in these communities, whether individual women practice it or not. Women who do engage in motherwork form an identity that emphasizes tending to the larger social justice issues relevant within their historic and local community, rather than only providing for their individual family’s needs (Naples, 1998b). This perspective on mothering, and mother identity is contrasted by a larger societal view that continues to emphasize the individual, nuclear family, and the material and emotional needs of one’s own children, rather than a responsibility for the broader community.

The modern idea of a good mother is based in part on middle class assumptions, to not simply provide for children financially but also offer enrichment opportunities (Urek, 2005). In recent years intensive mothering has been considered an ideal form, producing guilt and resistance among women unable to employ this model (Liegghio & Caragata, 2016). Due in part to the need for substantial resources, intensive mothering is a concept most often only accessible to White, middle-class women. If being a good mother means spending large swaths of time with your child, and providing numerous enrichment opportunities (sports, after school activities, lessons), then poor single mothers are disadvantaged, regardless of best intentions. Aside from financial strain, poverty-level single mothers also fight to shield their children from discrimination.
Elliot et al. (2015) studied how low-income Black single mothers navigated the demands and societal expectations of intensive mothering within the constraints of racism and classism. They found that women of color and those living below the poverty line develop mothering approaches that are focused on protecting their children from the effects of discrimination connected to structural level inequality (Elliot et al., 2015). These mothers act as advocates for their children in schools and other institutions, monitoring how their children are treated, and documenting incidents of discrimination (Elliot et al., 2015). This hypervigilance and focus on protecting their children from real harm (school suspensions and expulsions, threats by police) means that they have little time for their own needs. These mothers sacrifice their own personal and economic advancement, giving up educational or work-related opportunities, avoiding taking time off work for their mental health needs, to try and protect their children from the impact of racism and classism (Elliot et al., 2015). The substantial obstacles that these mothers face is not acknowledged, especially in a society that still holds fast to the myth of the welfare queen. However, they are creating a unique identity around mothering that when viewed in terms of resiliency, is a strength.

A motherhood identity can be connected to a woman’s sense of self. In a study of low-income mothers receiving public assistance, a mother identity was integral in their fight to move themselves and their children out of poverty (Ali et al., 2013). Women living in poverty face specific challenges connected to the day-to-day struggles of finding employment, access to affordable housing, transportation, enough food for survival, and various other difficulties. When they become mothers, these struggles are magnified, but the experience of mothering itself can also produce identity changes which lead to increased self-worth and resiliency (Ali et al., 2013).

The study presented in this article examines the definition of community for poverty-level single mothers, and how power, identity, and physical space contribute to their definition.

**Study methods**

This study was conducted using focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005) to examine how race/class/gender intersected in the definition and experience of community for eleven young, low-income, racially diverse single mothers living in a small U.S. Midwestern city. A focused ethnography is an ethnography completed in a shorter span of time, with a more narrow or focused research question (Knoblauch, 2005). The main, overarching research question was how low-income single mothers defined community. The study was conducted during the summer when their children were all out of school. Semi-structured interviews with the mothers, weekly participant observations of the mothers’ interactions with their children and community, and
participatory mapping of locations important to the study participants were all used to collect data.

**The sample**

Participants were recruited through the regional Head Start Pre-school program. Colorful flyers advertising the study were placed in the children’s backpacks by school personnel and sent home. Participation criteria for the research included, participants must be between 18–29 years old, have at least one child living with them full time, at or below the federal poverty line, and be unmarried or unpartnered and currently living alone with their children. Participants received a $25 gift card after completion of the interview, and a $80 gift card after completion of the four weekly participant observations and the participatory mapping session. The cell phone number was printed on the flyers, participants made initial contact, and a brief phone screening was done to determine study eligibility, then an interview time was scheduled. The recruitment period lasted between 2–4 weeks, and all interviews were conducted within a two-month time frame. Table one, below, describes participants in this study.

**Table 1**: Description of Study Participants \((N = 11)\).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th># Children</th>
<th>Working/Volunteering?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Janelle</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Child’s school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Retail job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Church- counseling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Food Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Child’s school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joan</td>
<td>Biracial</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Food Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sales/Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marilyn</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Retail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tinker</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Child’s School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Food Service</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The interviews**

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were done in the participant’s home. These lasted between 1.5–2.5 hours and were digitally recorded. The author conducted all the recruitment, phone screenings, and interviews. A semi-structured interview guide was developed, using the conceptual framework for the study to develop original questions. All questions other than basic descriptors were open-ended and included prompts. Questions (within the following categories; how would you describe your community, who do you consider part of your community, what kinds of activities are you involved in with and without your children, what kinds of activities would you like to get
involved in, tell me about your neighborhood, if someone asked you to describe who you are what would you say, tell me what being a mother means to you, what things in your life and community would you like to see change if any, what do you need in order to make changes in your life or community if you’d like to, how does being a mother affect your daily life, how does who you are [explained as race/class/gender/motherhood status/geography] affect your ability to make changes in your community? were focused on how the participants viewed their community, how they saw themselves as mothers, what types of activities they engaged in with and without their children, who they identified as part of their community, how they viewed power within their community, and what aspects of their community they would like to change.

The participant observations

Each participant was assigned a research assistant who then conducted four weekly participant observation sessions with them, and their children, throughout the summer. Each session lasted a minimum of 2 hours. Research assistants were all graduate level social work students who were trained in participant observation techniques by the author. They used an observation guide with prompts that was developed from the research questions and the conceptual framework for the study. The categories in the participant observation guide included the following: activities engaged in with and without their children, organizations they were involved with, people they interacted with such as friends, family, neighbors, and social service professionals, obstacles they mention that are preventing them from involvement in their community, activities related to and discussions about motherhood, discussions about how their social location (race/class/gender) affects their daily lives, ideas they have and activities they participate in for making changes in their community, what resources do they need? The field notes from participant observers were then organized using Miles and Huberman’s (1994) Conceptually Clustered Matrix model, which is intended to initially organize all the participants’ responses to specific questions or categories of interest into clusters within a larger matrix. Within case categories from participant observations were first clustered in individual tables, and then across case analysis was conducted within larger conceptually clustered matrices. These findings were then compared with the matrices created from the interview data. Research assistants were instructed not to take field notes during the participant observations, but immediately afterward. Their time was spent helping the mothers complete household tasks, playing with the children and talking to the mothers, visiting parks together, grocery shopping, running errands together, and hanging out.
The participatory mapping

Mapping can provide important data through imageability, which focuses on how individual’s respond to and make sense of their physical environment (Lynch, 1960). Qualitative participatory mapping strategies (Cope & Elwood, 2009; Kim, 2015) were used to identify and map out the physical space of social and recreational services and explore how they connected to participants’ ideas of community. The process of participatory mapping can evoke emotions, narratives, and relational responses about specific geographic spaces, and visual aspects of mapping can provide a prompt for the memory, meaning making, and ultimately a shared construction of lived experiences (Powell, 2010). During their last participant observation session, the women were asked to map out the social, recreational, and other services they used in their community, and to indicate whether these were a positive or negative resource (or both), and why.

Analysis of data

Analysis of the data was guided by the conceptual framework, using intersectional strategies to examine how race/class/gender shaped participants’ experiences of mothering and community (Weber, 2001) and using border thinking (Hudson, 2012) to examine how participants socially constructed the physical and cultural spaces of their community.

Analysis of interview data

Digital recordings of interviews were transcribed in Word format. Transcripts were then cleaned (looking for portions of the recordings that were missed) by the author and one research assistant who also conducted separate coding with the author to increase inter-rater reliability. In Vivo coding (Saldena, 2012) was used for first pass coding of transcripts, looking for meaningful phrases or key words. Descriptive coding was used in second pass coding as topics began to emerge (Saldena, 2012). Each participants’ coded interview data were then analyzed using the Conceptually Clustered Matrix approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994), where clusters of themes discovered are organized within a matrix that allows the researcher to examine the links between clusters, eventually creating broader categories. This was first completed using within case matrices, and then a larger, across case matrix was created from the analysis of individual interviews, and clusters were compared across participants, creating broader concepts. This Conceptually Clustered Matrix method was used to determine larger patterns and relationships. Miles et al. (2014) explain that these types of matrices can be used during later stages of
qualitative data analysis, to organize and display patterns in the data, based on the study’s conceptual framework and first and second pass coding.

**Analysis of participant observation data**

Field notes from each weekly participant observation were typed up by the assigned research assistant and organized according to the participant observation guide categories. The organized field notes were then cleaned by the study author, and any inconsistencies were checked by clarifying with the research assistant who conducted the participant observations. Next, the coding of each study participant’s weekly participant observation data was conducted by both the author and the same research assistant who assisted in coding the interview data, and inter-rater agreement was achieved over several passes of the data. Descriptive coding only was used to code field notes, and the subsequent themes that emerged for each study participant were placed in another Conceptually Clustered Matrix (Miles et al., 2014) representing the within-case analysis for the four observation sessions for that study participant. After matrices were created for each individual participant (representing the themes across their four observation periods), a larger matrix was developed for across-case analysis looking for patterns and differences across all of the study participants.

**Analysis of mapping data**

Research assistants worked with participants to create a table of mapped locations in their community, organized by categories of Recreation, Social Services, or Other. Participants identified things like parks, swimming pools, or children’s museums in the *recreation* category, and organizations such as human services agencies, food banks, or the local public housing authority, in the *social services* category, with nail salons, rent-to-own stores, and grocery stores in the *other* category. After participants identified the places in their physical community that were important, they discussed positive or negative feelings about them. A portion of their quotes about the location was then attached to the item in the table. Once a table was created for each participant, a larger table of locations (with addresses) was created to represent everyone in the study. This table was analyzed for recurring themes or cases that were unique. This data was used to create an online interactive map of all spaces, which included some hyperlinked quotes from the women. No personally identifying information for any of the women was used, but polygons that represented their larger neighborhoods were created. This was done to examine the proximity of identified resources to where they lived.
What do the results tell us about the social construction of power, identity, physical space, and community for low-income single mothers?

The results of this study indicate how race/class/gender intersected within three major constructs- power, mother identity, and physical space- to form a unique community of mothering that included specific people, locations, and resources important to the women.

Power, as the women understood it within the community context, was an important component in the women’s lived experiences, and it related to race and class. Caseworkers were more likely to be included in their definition of community if the mother was White, and neighbors more likely if the mother was Black. Mothering was connected to both power and identity, since the women sometimes claimed an expert status within their neighborhood due to their mothering experience. They felt that having mothered through difficult circumstances (solo parenting, poverty, substance abuse, racism, and domestic violence) gave them unique knowledge, and they were eager to mentor young girls and women in their community. Becoming a mother was most often described as an identity that changed their lives for the better, shifting their focus away from abusive pasts, or problems of substance abuse, and toward providing the best possible life for their children. Physical space also intersected with the mothers’ social locations in important ways connected to race and class. The women were all living in some type of low-income housing, but their neighborhoods were heavily segregated. Most of the African American mothers lived in public housing, most of the White mothers lived in income-based apartments or mobile home parks. Parks, playgrounds, public transportation, and social services were also mapped by the women and examined for their physical as well as socially constructed properties.

How power was manifested in mothering

Marilyn: “If I wanted to make changes in my community, I think I would need my mom friends behind me, definitely. Because usually if you want to make a change you have to have enough people behind you who want to make the same change for it to be heard.”

Motherhood was a critical component of how the women in this study claimed their concept of power within their community. While racism and classism kept these women from having the same access to positions of power as White middle-class mothers, they felt that they had unique skills and talents that needed to be utilized. When they spoke about power, they often referred to ways they wanted to make a difference in their own neighborhood or community, especially to help other young women and girls.

As the history of motherwork in the Black community has demonstrated, the African American mothers in this study were more likely to see their
community work as a responsibility to mother within the broader community. They engaged in far more community building and mentoring other young women and children in the neighborhood than did the White participants. While the White mothers also found power by engaging in some community motherwork, they were less likely to work on broader societal issues. Amy, a White mother of two, spoke about her deep sadness at the loss of her brother to a drug overdose, describing how she might someday build a community treatment program, or advocate for more access to treatment (her brother died waiting for an opening to a free treatment program). However, she also indicated that this was a long time in the future,

Amy: “So, maybe at some point when I’m not so caught up in my own survival. I could get out there and start working on other people.”

While all of the mothers in this study understood and spoke of the various ways they were denied access to power on a larger scale, the Black mothers were more likely to speak of the intersection of race and class, and to define motherhood as spurring them to engage in more community action. Jasmine identified environmental racism and classism when she spoke about the fact that the low-income housing community where she lived was purposely built near a noisy, smelly industrial area because they knew mostly poor African Americans would live there, Nicole talked about the school questioning whether her lighter skinned child was really hers, while a white woman with an African American child would not have been questioned. Although their lived experience was embedded within these larger, structural power domains, they considered the smaller avenues where they could make changes within their local communities as a version of power. Jenelle had dreams of opening a training center and community housing program for young mothers who were struggling. She wanted to provide work skills training and emotional support to these young women to help them become successful. She was adamant that this should be led by someone like her, who had experienced similar struggles, and that it would be a place where women could form a group to work together for social change.

Janelle: “Now I am a good leader; I will admit that. And I will get something done. The thing is, if so many of them said that things needed to be changed, it could happen . . . if we put our mind to it . . . . and if we stood up and worked out a plan, it could happen. There’s a need for that kind of thing. As far as resources [I would need] it would just be people to back me up in what I want to do in this community. And [to] have a following of people who are on the same page and agree with me on things that need to be changed. We can do it . . . it can be done.”

Although her dream was not yet realized, Janelle was informally acting as a mentor to many of the young girls in her community. Because of a lack of institutional power, the women often created their own informal positions based on the power they claimed as mothers in their community. Janelle’s
children were attending a school in her neighborhood where they were among only a handful of African American children. She spoke about the poor treatment she received when she came to the school to pick up her children and said that this just made her more determined to make a difference in this unequal institutional system.

**Janelle:** “It’s usually just me and my mom that are the only Black people there. So, I’m going to try to get on that PTA. They need some diversity and there is none in their PTA...at all! [and] I don’t think they have an option but to be open to that [laughing]. Because I’m going to be on that PTA! Its a lot of things like that I’ve noticed here, that I am kind of upset about. Because [in this time period] you would think they would be more open... but, not even the Principal is... instead, you get people that just stare at you.”

Although many of them spoke about their experiences of discrimination as poor mothers, or African Americans, they also defined power as having the tools to make changes in their local neighborhood or community, especially in terms of creating new structures to help other young mothers and girls. The women all indicated that being a mother was the main reason for getting involved in their community in the first place (doing things like organizing neighborhood girls into a Girl Scout troop, cleaning up the local park, organizing soccer games to keep neighborhood kids out of trouble, passing out candy to neighborhood kids as an incentive to do well in school, mentoring teen girls about unwanted pregnancies, etc.) and that motherhood influenced all aspects of their lives. While these activities seem focused on micro level change, the women spoke of them as connected to their duties, responsibilities, and a sense of power they felt at being a mother, in charge of leading other children, especially young girls, and how this would ultimately affect future generations. Motherhood was defined by participants as giving them a different status in their community, one which carried more responsibility and more power to make changes at the local level and ultimately the future of their community.

**Jannelle:** “Being a mom made me aware of my community. Before I was a mom, I could care less about what was going on in my community!”

The African American mothers described how others in the neighborhood saw them as (in Jenelle’s words) someone who was now “gonna shake that apple tree,” meaning shake things up that were discriminatory or unfair. Mothering to them meant *motherwork*, a dedication to community change, and an expertise granted to them that they socially constructed as powerful. Lisa, an African American mother of two, enjoyed the expertise that came from her experience as a mother. Lisa was very active in her church and used that involvement to start a single mother’s support group. This gave her a feeling of being able to help other mothers in similar situations, give advice, and work toward improving the lived experiences of the young women in her neighborhood. Other
participants like Tinker, an African American mother of three, were known as the community problem solver. Because she had lived in two other states before moving to her current neighborhood, and had survived living out of her car, escaping an abusive ex-spouse, and witnessing a police drug raid at her ex-boyfriend’s home, young women in the community often came to her for advice about how to leave an abusive relationship and become independent.

Mothers also felt a loss of power in situations where they knew they were being taken advantage of due to their status as poor single mothers. Janelle, mapped the local “rent to own” store as being very important to her community. Although she knew that she was being charged far more for her leased computer than it was worth over time, she used this computer to job search and fill out applications to try to advance herself and improve the lives of her children. Other mothers in the study felt the same way about these “rent to own” facilities. They were necessary for providing the consumer goods and technology that the women hoped would make them upwardly mobile, but they also felt powerless in the face of high interest rates and fees charged to them because of their status as poor women. They understood that if they had access to middle class assets like low-interest credit, they would pay a lower price.

There was also a pervasive sense of anxiety felt by the mothers even when they were able to successfully negotiate access to middle class resources for their children. Amy, a White mother of two, mapped several summer camp programs, children’s museums, and community pools as important to her community. However, she stated how difficult it was to search for free vouchers and apply for grants so that these activities were cost-free. She worried that next time she applied she would be turned down due to looming funding cuts. This left her feeling powerless to provide consistency in these activities and enrichment opportunities for her children.

How an Identity as Mother Shaped the Experience of Community

Marilyn: “I’m incredibly lucky, I would say that [other] people would say I’m lucky too, I have an amazing kid. Had I not had him I definitely would have been bitter about everything, because [of] everything bad that has happened to me. [But] I can use that as a what-not – to-do. He has the benefit of me being a better mom because of it.”

Family members, particularly their own mothers, were often part of their community. Their own mothers were important not only for emotional support, but for crucial needs such as transportation and caregiving. Because of participants’ status as poor women, many of them struggled with access to transportation and child-care. This placed a strain on mother-daughter relationships because they called on their own mothers for help so often. In only one case this help was not possible, because of a history of abuse from the participant’s mother. It is important to note that in many instances the participants’ own mothers were also struggling financially, so this made it difficult for them to provide a consistent level of support, although
participants still included them in their construction of community. The inclusion of their own mothers as key members of their community, echoes research on African American families and the importance of kinship ties to social support (Taylor et al., 2008; Wood & Woody, 2007). Not only immediate family, but other extended family and community members have historically served as important support for single mothers.

Mothering identity also served to provide a positive example for their children and other young people in the community, as Nicole indicates below,

Nicole: “I try to be the A+ mom. I try to get involved and stay involved in my kids’ lives, so they don’t have to get attracted to the negativity as they’re growing up. So I don’t have to worry about outside influences. You know the drugs. Because living in a neighborhood like this, drugs are very common – they’re here. And I feel being involved with my kids, getting out doing stuff with them, will kind of show them that there are other options available. And I try to set a good example not only for my kids but for other people’s girls at the same time.”

Nicole experienced her neighborhood through her lens as a poor African American single mother. Her concern about safety and the dangers of her neighborhood were a result of living in a space limited and segregated by institutionalized racism and classism. Yet her identity as a mother gave her a sense of pride and resiliency, empowering her to want to set an example for others by changing some of the poor conditions in her neighborhood. Nicole also regularly held girl scout meetings in her kitchen, always had a basket of candy and stickers near her back door to hand out to neighbor children as rewards for good behavior and good grades in school.

A mother identity could also intersect with social service providers in interesting ways. Most of the services that the mothers mapped as part of their community, provided very basic resources such as housing assistance, food, transportation, or healthcare. These could provoke positive or negative feelings from the mothers. While the services were essential, the resources were often delivered in complex or stigmatizing ways. Caseworkers or social service providers were rarely considered part of their community, and most often considered outsiders. A caseworker employed by a small community action agency was considered a positive influence by Anna, a White mother of one child. The caseworker helped Anna get into transitional housing and consistently told her that she was a good mother. This was important to Anna since she had temporarily lost custody of her son due to her substance abuse. Having someone assist her in such a concrete way, by providing housing, was important, but it was the caseworker’s belief in her ability to be a good mother that caused Anna to include her as part of her community. Anna’s Whiteness may have been a factor in the development of a connection to her White caseworker. This is important to note, not all the mothers had this opportunity for connection. Most of the caseworkers they encountered were White, so the emotional
connection that Anna received from her worker was not necessarily available to the Black mothers in the same way.

**How physical space shaped mothering and a sense of community**

_Tinker:_ “When I first came to the neighborhood, I was the new mom in the neighborhood and I would have kids lined up at my door eating all the popsicles, eating all the snacks. I love having barbeques, I have the biggest patio, I love it! I do something like once a month when its nice [out], we’ll buy drinks and food and we will invite whoever wants to come.”

Their social construction of community also included their relation to the physical spaces they occupied. All the women in the study felt that their current neighborhoods could be improved, but that this was difficult. While most of the women felt that motherhood had empowered them to make positive changes in their individual lives, they did not feel that they could change the physical condition of their community. Various aspects of their neighborhoods were viewed as problematic (noisy and smelly factories nearby, violence, location far away from services, and a lack of connection to and trust with immediate neighbors). Those living in public housing spoke about the deteriorating physical conditions of their neighborhood.

_Nicole:_ “But a negative about the local playground is that the equipment is crappy, its old, there is always garbage out there, people in the neighborhood don’t take care of it, and I do not let my kids play on it unless I’m outside with them – there are too many kids out here that run around unsupervised.”

_Tinker:_ “I clean up outside, I do as much as I can in the immediate area. I got a van cause my car was not big enough. I literally would have 12-13 kids piled up in my little Buick Skylark because when it’s hot in the summer who wants to be running around in the projects?”

The physical condition of many of the public spaces in the participants’ neighborhoods were run-down and even dangerous. This was seen by many of the mothers as related to the marginalized social locations they occupied as poor, female, and Black. The women often made efforts to protect themselves and their children from community violence by socially constructing a safer community of other mothers within their neighborhoods. Their children’s schooling activities offered a key space where they met and connected with other mothers in similar situations. One mother even created a community of mothers in recovery, who planned outings and events together to help each other maintain sobriety and form a sense of safety when going on outings.

The mothers mapped out public spaces such as libraries, community pools, and parks as being important to their sense of community. However, sometimes these public spaces were fraught with danger or threats. Janelle, Lynn, and Amy all used the more urban branch of the library and enjoyed the physical location and layout of the space. They spoke of the opportunities
for their children to engage in summer reading programs and play activities, as well as the availability of computers that the women themselves could use for their own advancement. The urban library branch was in a racially diverse location, and on the bus route. Janelle, also gave an example of the negative experiences and racism that she and her children experienced when they tried to check books out at the more rural library branch. Both she and her two small children were routinely ignored, and on more than one occasion when she attempted to get services, they were called a racial epithet or asked to leave by staff, claiming that Janelle was getting “loud.” Although for Janelle this location was within walking distance, she subsequently avoided this public space out of fear that she or her children would continue to be targeted. This created a transportation problem, as she attempted to provide educational enrichment opportunities for her children. This also illustrates the importance of understanding women’s lives from women’s perspectives. There are many assumptions about single mothers and their lack of interest in community participation or volunteerism, however, with Janelle’s experience, overt and covert racism were very real barriers to her community participation.

The mothers’ own neighborhoods could be viewed as positive and simultaneously negative. Two of the mothers lived in Urbandale Homes, a public housing community located in a more industrial part of town. Tinker, an African American mother of three, had a positive view of her community, which included the neighbors. She enjoyed the close-knit feel of the community and the comradery. She spoke of cookouts and soccer games with the local children and her own children, and how the parents would watch out for each other’s kids. She noted that the shared space behind the apartments was perfect for communal get-togethers. In contrast, Jasmine, an African American mother of two who lived nearby in the same public housing community, had nothing positive to say about the physical space of her neighborhood. She spoke only of the noisy factory located across the street and having to close her windows in the summertime because the smell was unbearable. She also said that she was suspicious of the neighbors and rarely interacted with them. This illustrates an important point, the physical space of one’s immediate neighborhood may not necessarily be included in the social construction of community. Therefore, it is important to look at the ways that women actively construct a community for themselves, without making broad assumptions about the geographic space they exist within.

As Elliot et al. (2015) indicate, low-income mothers have much less access to resources, yet still exist within the societally framed ideal of the good mother, one who is able to provide enrichment opportunities and material goods for their children. While the mothers in this study struggled to provide for the basic needs of their children, they were also keenly intent on being the best possible mother. For these women, that meant utilizing services that were sometimes situated within biased systems, making do with few resources, and
existing within neighborhoods where violence and poverty were common.
Even within these constraints, all of the mothers in this study had a desire
to work for community change in some way, but they did not feel that local social
workers or social service organizations were supportive of this goal.

**Socially constructing a community of mothering**

Power, mother identity, and physical space were all components of what I refer
to as a *community of mothering* that the women in this study socially con-
structed for themselves, based on their own perspective of community. This
*community of mothering* is specific to these marginalized mothers and is
comprised of the people, organizations, activities, and physical spaces they
claimed as important to their mothering. It is shaped by lack of structural
power or access to power, their own feelings of agency and the power to
engage in their community in small ways, identity as mother, and the physical
space surrounding them. It was the participants’ embodied experiences of
mothering while low-income, woman, Black or White, that shaped their
definition of community. While the struggles of single motherhood may
have limited their opportunities for individual advancement (being focused
on providing basic material needs for their children first and foremost), they
constructed meaning from this and developed an epistemic community
focused on larger community goals.

Helpful to these women, was the support they created through socially
constructing a community that included other women, other single mothers,
as well as communally constructed knowledge of local resources, services,
places to go for help, and physical spaces to avoid. This *community of
mothering* can be understood within the context of Hudson’s (2012) des cription
of the ambiguous borders of community that can shift and reconfigure
based on relational and power-driven aspects. Power and oppression are
central to the *community of mothering* that the women in this study con-
structed. The intersectional ways they experienced the physical space of their
community, and the organizations providing needed services, were steeped
within dynamic micro and macro power relations. They formed organic net-
works of other mothers, other community members, and insider knowledge of
ways to survive and subtly fight against unequal, discriminatory systems.
These informal networks, or *communities of mothering*, can offer grassroots
sites for social workers to partner with women in intersectionally informed
social mobilization efforts. If social workers can help support and build on
these already existing organically created networks, a larger movement for
change is possible.
Study limitations

One major limitation of this study is the small sample size, and the lack of participation by Latina, Asian Pacific Islander, or Native American identified mothers. All study participants identified themselves as either African American, white, or Bi-racial. Inclusion of a more diverse sample in future studies of how communities of mothering develop would inform social work practice and contribute even more valuable information. Another limitation is the lack of member checking with both the qualitative interview data and the participant observation data. Member checking has typically been viewed as a useful tool for increasing validity or trustworthiness of the data, but it can also be used as an important process of reflection and self-discovery for the participants (Ortiz, 2001). This is also more in keeping with feminist research methods and the iterative processes and centering of the subject that are hallmarks of that approach (Fonow & Cook, 1991).

How can these findings inform progressive social work practice with low-income mothers?

Most social work understanding of poverty and proposed policy solutions comes from the elite model, which examines the problem of poverty from the perspective of political elites, and therefore only provides solutions that tend to protect the status quo (Belcher & Tice, 2013). Alternatively, the findings presented here, offer a perspective that is deeply grounded in the everyday lives of poor women themselves. By using an intersectional approach that privileges border thinking (Hudson, 2012), we can gain insight into the unique intersectional knowledge about poverty and community engagement, that these racially diverse, young, low-income mothers constructed. Thus, leading to policy solutions that more accurately reflect the causes of poverty, and offer more radical solutions. The National Welfare Rights Movement (NWRO) of the 1960s and early 1970s provides as example of a large-scale anti-poverty movement that, at least in its early days, was primarily led by poor, African American single mothers (Nadasen, 2006). As historians and scholars of this social movement have indicated, although the movement contained white middle-class activists, many coming from the recent civil rights movement, at the time of the establishment of the official NWRO there had already been numerous grassroots “mothers” groups forming across the country, working toward the same goals (Edmonds-Cady, 2009; Nadasen, 2006; West, 1981). These grassroots mother’s groups were formed and led by poverty-class mothers receiving welfare benefits, and they were the sites from which local and ultimately national level social mobilization eventually occurred (Nadasen, 2006; West, 1981). Although the NWRO was officially formed and led by a middle class African American man (George Wiley), he leveraged
the numerous mother’s groups across the country, their clout within localized communities, and their Black women leaders, to build a larger movement for welfare rights (Edmonds-Cady, 2009; Nadason, 2006).

This current study of poverty-class mothers has shown us the ways that they conducted motherwork not only by caring for their own children, but also by socially constructing a community of mothering to access resources for themselves and for other women. This community was constructed through the positive and negative experiences they had with individual community members, traditional social service organizations, recreational places, and physical spaces. The women knew they held unique knowledge and skills, gained through their lived experiences, of the way power domains within the community operated under unequal systems of access. Their unique knowledge born of their lived experience, formed a kind of collective mothering, but with differences based on racial status. Although all the low-income mothers shared knowledge about being poor and mothering alone, the White women in the study did not experience the effects of racism as did the Black women.

By locating and listening to the intersectional communities of mothering that low-income young mothers organically create, progressive social workers can begin to dismantle current systems of oppression. Social workers can do this by linking these groups of women together, partnering with them, and then connecting them to the material resources necessary to fight for larger-scale change. As the findings from this study indicate, many young low-income young mothers want to create social change in their community and feel they have unique knowledge and skills, but do not have access to concrete resources and supports. Social workers can provide both leadership opportunities and resources to low-income single mothers, to assist them in implementing positive changes within their communities.

Through an understanding of how communities of mothering organically develop, social workers may be more attuned to the signs of their existence in their own community organizing and social movement work, working within these organic spaces to build larger more formalized movements for change. Just as the motherwork and activist mothering that Collins (1994) and Naples (1998b) identify Black mothers as historically engaging in produced real social change, there is potential for social workers to partner with existing communities of mothering to create better conditions for poor women. These communities of mothering can serve as organic and intersectional pathways for connecting women to much needed social supports as well as sites for mobilizing a larger movement to demand equality. When working with low-income single mothers, social workers should look for the threads of these naturally occurring communities of mothering as places to help build collective action. The models are there for us to follow from our own history. Nancy Naples (1998b) research on the poverty class women who began working as paid community organizers during the Johnson administration’s creation of localized Community Action Programs (CAPs),
which were part of the War on Poverty, illustrates just how successful *motherwork* was for collective action. When poverty class mothers were given leadership roles and resources (a paycheck for their skilled work), they were highly successful in their community work (Naples, 1998b). As Reisch and Andrews (2001) write about in their exploration of the radical branches of Social Work’s history, there are certainly examples from our past where Social Workers and social welfare organizations were part of more progressive, radical, approaches to community organizing and social movement work, alongside marginalized communities.

The findings presented here encourage us to consider the unique intersectional knowledge construction of poverty-class mothers, and to advocate for partnering with them to build on existing communities of *mothering* for grassroots change, rather than relying on an elite model for anti-poverty policy solutions that ultimately maintains the status quo. We would then be better equipped to provide the immediate resources and supports that these existing communities most need, while simultaneously partnering with them to demand anti-oppressive structural level policy remedies that address the unequal and unjust conditions of poverty, racism, and sexism affecting all poor women’s lives.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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**Data availability statement**

Due to the nature of this research, the IRB protocols utilized, and the signed participant confidentiality agreements, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

**References**


