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## Masquing Well-Being “Negotiating Space” and the Self-Concept of Poor, Black Women

*Due to recent legislation, poor Black mothers in the United States are required to change personal habits and encouraged to take more responsibility for their personal and family welfare. Although there is a wealth of literature on the impact of this legislation on maternal job placement and education, there is very little data on mothers' psychosocial development, specifically their self-efficacy and self-esteem. The emphasis of this paper is on maternal psychological well-being. Specifically, the paper explores how, in an era of a shift from social to personal responsibility, mothers view themselves and their ability to effect change in their lives. This paper presents the results of a secondary analysis of Self-in-Relationship interviews with twelve Black mothers involved with the child protective and welfare systems. It was found that these twelve mothers are extremely positive about their selves, including the “real me” in their self-descriptors; however, when probed further in the interview, contradictions to those overwhelmingly positive descriptors appear. A theory is offered that suggests that mothers' self-esteem and self-efficacy may be masked because of the varied spaces they must occupy in navigating the welfare systems.*

In 1996, the United States government took major steps to fight the war on poverty in an unprecedented overhaul of the welfare system through the passage of the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* (PRWORA). This bill transformed social services by setting cash assistance limits and requiring poor women to take an active role in securing employment (Jarrett, 1996; Lichter and Jayakody, 2002). Mothers receiving public assistance as well as those involved with child protective programs were encouraged to amend their life situations by changing their working conditions, parenting styles, and personal habits. Additionally, the *Family Preservation and Family Support Act* of 1996 changed strategies for expediting the removal of children

from child protective services by shortening the length of time mothers had to complete the required programming that would allow them to regain custody of their children. The emphasis of both of these policies is on effecting personal change in mothers' lives.

As welfare reform continues to remain the focus of government inquiry, researchers have been prompted to investigate the efficacy of welfare-to-work programs in training women to secure permanent employment. While research reveals that job-training programs have aided thousands in moving away from welfare, research also shows that many women do not retain their jobs and several face problems securing adequate daycare (Danziger, Corcoran, Danziger, Hefflin, 1999). Additionally, this research implies that the issues women face in securing employment impact women's self-perceptions. Unfortunately, the literature investigating poor mothers' self-perception is limited. While we know that policy changes in both welfare programming and child protective services have influenced poor women's perceptions of self, there is a paucity of literature on maternal psychological well-being following the passage of PRWORA, as research efforts have been concentrated on structural program evaluations (e.g., Lichter and Jayakody, 2002). Many in the field choose to concentrate on programmatic elements in an effort to ensure economic viability for poor women and have had less time to focus on psychosocial issues (e.g., Lichter and Jayakody, 2002).

To understand the challenges that poor, Black mothers involved with child protective and other social services encounter as they attempt to navigate systems of public assistance and child welfare, it is essential to understand these mothers' psychological well-being. This study of poor mothers self-esteem and self-efficacy will shed light on their psychological health. The psychological literature largely ignores the impact of self-esteem and self-efficacy on maternal decision-making and future goals. Considering that both policy changes described above require women to make fundamental changes in life, it is critical to understand whether poor women perceive themselves as capable of making change in their lives.

In an effort to address the psychological well-being of poor, Black women involved with social services (e.g., Temporary Assistance to Needy Families [TANF]) and contribute to the literature on self-concept, this paper explores how twelve mothers involved with the Massachusetts child welfare system experience their self-esteem and self-efficacy. Through this exploration, it was found that poor, Black mothers appear to express positive self-esteem, but masquerade or disguise feelings of helplessness. However, the demonstration of those feelings appear to be mediated by the "space" they occupy.

### **Poor, Black women and psychological well-being**

The literature on poor mothers' psychological well-being demonstrates the relationship between poverty, depression, self-esteem, and agency (e.g., Jackson, 2000; Lee and Curran, 2003). For example, in a longitudinal study

of 163 Black mothers, Beeghly and colleagues found that poor mothers possessed higher levels of maternal depression than middle and upper class mothers (Beeghly, Olson, Weinberg, Pierre, Downey, and Tronick, 2003). Additionally, they found that poor mothers were more concerned about their ability to provide for their children than mothers with higher family incomes. In a nationwide study, Sheila R. Zedlewski (1999) used various diagnostic scales to determine that 35 percent of welfare recipients have poor mental health. Mary Clare Lennon, Juliana Blome, and Kevin English (2001) name depression as a barrier to job attainment in their review of studies on poor women's mental health.

As a result of this depression, poor mothers often maintain lower self-esteem than mothers in middle and upper classes. The focus on self-esteem is related to mothers' perceptions of themselves and the impact of that self-assessment on their ability to make changes in their lives (Jackson, 2000). Jean East (1999) considers low self-esteem to be one of the "hidden barriers" to economic and social success for poor women (295). James Kunz and Ariel Kalil (1999) found, in their survey study of 2,620 urban women, that women on welfare possessed lower self-esteem than women who were impoverished but did not receive public assistance. Work by Elizabeth Gowdy and Sue Perlmutter (1994) suggests that the broader population often stigmatizes female welfare recipients and that shame can lead to lowered self-esteem. The focus on self-esteem has been strongly related to mothers' perceptions of themselves and the impact of that self-assessment on their ability to make change in their lives (Graham-Bermann et al., 1996).

Some researchers suggest alternative factors that impact mothers' understanding of their ability to make changes in their lives. They propose that mothers who rely on the welfare and child protective systems are sometimes victims of a larger social system that forces them into a dependency on social services (Popkins 1990; Parker, 1994; Jackson 2000). Researchers find that mothers involved with social services are not encouraged to participate in self-improvement activities that would foster improved self-esteem and self-efficacy (Jarrett, 1996). Mothers become involved in a system that has few venues by which mothers can boost their feelings about themselves and their opportunities, and serves to erode rather than build self-esteem. William Julius Wilson's (1996) work on disadvantaged populations suggests that poor women face single-parenthood, unemployment, and shattered social networks that drive women into dependency on the broader social system. The social service system serves to disempower rather than empower. Mothers who rely on welfare and child protective systems are victims of a larger social system that forces them into dependency on social services (Popkins 1990; Parker, 1994; Jackson 2000). These broader social forces (e.g. cultural expectations, community, employment status, gender, race, and class) directly influence mothers' self-perceptions (Berlin, Brooks-Gunn and Aber, 2001; Kunz and Kalil, 1999; Nandi and Harris, 1999).

As a result of the many social forces impacting poor mothers, they must negotiate several spaces within the welfare and child protective systems. They are expected to deliver rapid behavioral change. And, while early analyses showed significant economic gains for those in welfare-to-work programs, further analysis of welfare reform and mothers' psychological well-being shows that these efforts have led to increased psychological maladjustment amongst poor women (Lichter and Jayakody, 2002). Researchers suggest that moving mothers from public assistance involves more than just giving them jobs; it means building and developing women's self-confidence, their sense of efficacy that they might be able to overcome personal stress (Lichter and Jayakody, 2002; Newman, 2002; Wilson, 1996). It means helping them negotiate social workers, probation officers, policies, child protective services and others who seek to move them through the system.

In reviewing the literature on poor Black mothers navigating changing systems of social service, the question that remains is *how* are these mothers adjusting? Studies on poor mothers, both quantitative and qualitative, suggest that these mothers are depressed and possess negative self-esteem. However, a close look at these studies reveals that the emphasis is placed on monetary income, employment, and the social service system at large. For example, William Julius Wilson's interviews with poor mothers do not specifically ask mothers about their perceptions of their lives and themselves (1996). The emphasis in his work is on the Black male and the impact of their social oppression on women's lives. Wilson questions mothers about the treatment of Black men in their communities as well as their relationships with those men, but he never asks mothers' about their own personal struggles. There are few studies that seek to give voice to poor, Black women.

Another critical issue in the literature on poor mothers involved with child protective services is that there are few studies that directly look at the psychosocial development of mothers who have children in protective custody *and* receive services under TANF—those navigating varied social service spaces. The studies described above focus on mothers receiving welfare services or mothers involved with child protective services (e.g., Zedlewski, 1999; Wilson, 1996). And, while researchers acknowledge the need for more research on poor mothers' psychological well-being, most researchers continue to focus on programmatic challenges in serving mothers within both the child protective and welfare systems (Jayakody and Stauffer, 2000; Lee and Curran, 2003; Lennon, Blome, English, 2001).

In an effort to understand poor mothers' self-perceptions, and contribute to the body of literature on poor mothers' psychosocial development, an analysis of the interviews of 12 Black mothers living below the poverty line and involved with child protective services was conducted. The following question serves as the base for this study: What themes emerge as mothers involved with social services describe themselves in their close relationships, and, if at all, their self-esteem and self-efficacy?

## Methods

As discussed above, a major criticism of work on poor mothers of color is the lack of qualitative studies that allow poor mothers' voices to be heard. As such, the focus of this study is on secondary analysis of qualitative data obtained from the *Self-In-Relationship* interviews of 12 Black mothers who completed the scale (Calverley, Fischer, and Ayoub, 1994). Using this scale, mothers provided up to twenty self-descriptors and listed them as positive, negative, or neutral. In addition to labeling themselves, they also placed the descriptors on a map that located the descriptors as "most important," "less important," and "least important." To establish a sense of *who* was interviewed and gain a broader understanding of the selected sample, demographic data (e.g., age, ethnicity, marital status) on the mothers was also collected. Following the demographic data collection, *Self-In-Relationship* interviews were openly coded, profiled, and analyzed for themes using the constant comparative method (Drago-Severson, 2000; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Data on mothers' socio-emotional status (e.g., Parenting Stress Index (Abdin, 1995), Family Environment Scale (Moos and Moos, 1981) were also collected and analyzed to investigate alternative influences on maternal self-perception.

## Results

In reviewing the interviews of the twelve mothers, it was found that the mothers described themselves in primarily positive terms, which according to Morris Rosenberg (1989) is an indication of positive self-esteem. For example, several mothers described themselves as a "good person." They talked used words and phrases like "being loving" and feeling "loved." If the analysis of the *Self-in-Relationship* interviews were halted with just a reading of the self-descriptors, one might conclude that poor, Black mothers involved with child protective services maintain a positive sense of self. However, this finding is inconsistent with the general literature on poor women's psychological well-being.

Curious about these contradictory findings, I set about reviewing the full narratives. The words of the narratives revealed the negative sentiments about the mothers' sense of self and circumstance. In fact, the narratives revealed contradictory self-statements. For example, one mother wrote that she was "happy" with herself, but when probed further, she stated that she was "just beginning to like herself." It appeared as though the outward presentation of self (to the stranger, or the social work intern) was that of a confident, good person. However, the internal feelings seemed to be that of frustration with self and situation. Eleven of the twelve mothers demonstrated that their well-being was not positive (as indicated by the descriptors), but rather negative (as indicated by the self-narrative). They held positive fronts (or masques) and privately held feelings of frustration with self and circumstance. What does this contradiction mean for overall psychological well-being? If mothers' underlying belief is self-doubt and they are striving to suppress negative feelings, then can they envision themselves as people capable of effecting change in their lives?

### **Black women, masquing, and “negotiating space”**

In the attempt to gain insight on poor, Black mothers’ contradictory self-descriptions, it is important to consider the concept of “negotiating space.” It is important to provide you with my personal biases that guide the direction of my discussion. In my original attempt at understanding the perspectives of these women, I donned the “masque” of a researcher. I tallied the mothers’ words and statements, and saw the contradictions that existed. When I looked through my masque as a mother, I again saw the mothers’ words and statements, and their contradictions. Upon donning another masque, that of a Black woman, I saw their statements, and once again, the many contradictions that exist in their statements. Each masque (or perspective) brought new revelation into these supposed contradictions of statements. However, my sister helped me bring all the pieces together.

In a conversation about Black Americans, my sister and I talked about the necessity of “code-switching,” and of putting on “masques” (hooks, 2003) in order for members of the minority to maintain a healthy sense of self. My sister stated that we are merely “negotiating spaces” (personal communication, H. Foster, 2005). Simply put, she suggested that as a minority group in America, Blacks have a tendency to adapt to the space in which they are placed by changing their language, appearance, or demeanor in order to succeed in that setting. Those who chose to contradict that setting often find themselves in opposition to the majority culture and may feel angry, shamed, or saddened by their inability to maintain their identities within the majority setting.<sup>1</sup>

“Negotiating space” means understanding the environment and behaving in a manner that supports personal success in that environment. The premise behind this negotiation is that one always seeks personal success, rather than opposing it. One may conceal true feelings about self and others, but for the purpose of personal or economic gain, one navigates the environment as best as possible. Using masques to move forward is a necessary tool for successful negotiation of space. However, in doing so, poor Black mothers may also miss out on critical psychological help needed to maintain balanced lives because their struggles are never revealed to those set in place to help them with their psychological conflict. If self-esteem is indeed a barrier to success, then professionals will need to be cognizant of the potential of poor, Black women to masque negative feelings about self.

Analysis of the mothers’ narratives revealed this masking of self to negotiate space. It seemed that for many, the *Self-in-Relationship* interview process was the first time to take of their masques and reflect on feelings of self. For example, a mother states, “You have helped me find out a few things about myself and look into me. Can I have this chart?” Initial words spoken about self were later transformed for some as they came realized their “true” selves were not necessarily the “good” moms they thought they had to demonstrate to probation officers and social workers, but “stressed” mothers trying to do their best for their children.

These masques are also held to aid in their ability to have some control over their lives. These masques have been molded from historical oppression and the dominant narrative of Black motherhood in the United States. But, it is this history that helps us understand the self-contradictions of poor Black women's self-concept.

### **Conflicting selves: The good mother masque**

In first looking at negotiating space and poor, Black mothers' self-concept, I believe what is happening for these mothers is that they are trying to successfully negotiate the spaces in which they dwell. As an interviewer coming into their space, some are defending their positions as good mothers, providers, and women. Their focus is often on caring for the needs of others or self-betterment, so that they can prove to others that they are good mothers. If we look just at the initial overwhelming positivism of their responses, just one mother had fewer than 50 percent positive descriptors. Even this mother, when asked to describe herself, stated that, "I'm mostly happy." Just a few moments later, the mother states:

*I'm just the type of person that can [get] an attitude real quick about any little thing, but I don't show my attitude. I don't show my feelings; I just keep it to myself. Well, I used to [show my feelings] before I had kids, but not no more.*

This mother says that she "can get an attitude real quick," but says that she does not show those feelings or any feelings. She changes or masques her true feelings. Why does she do this? She states that since she has had children, she has had to make changes in the attitude she projects towards others. I believe that she may be admitting that she has some negative feelings about self or even negative attitudes, but that, because she wants to be perceived as a good mother, she chooses not to demonstrate those emotions. For her, it would not be advantageous to show her anger or her "attitude" because she is her children's "role model." She even states that she is "happy all the time" around her children because they are dependent on her. Interestingly, in the very same sentence, she says that she is also "sometimes depressed" around her children. But, she quickly returns to discussing how she is always positive around her children.

This mother has to negotiate the space of her home, her children's therapeutic daycare center, and varied social service offices. She is "happy all the time" with her children so that they see that their mother is happy. She may be putting on a front to shield them from their circumstances (e.g. poverty and foster care). But, she must also worry about the social workers who prod and ask questions about her ability to care for her children. At this point in the interview, she had regained custody of her children, but as she was still involved in parenting classes and social services, she could lose her children

at any point. Why would she encourage anyone to perceive her as less than a good mother? Given the dominant narrative of the “good mother,” mothers who are “bad mothers” or lose their children to state custody may seek to reinvent themselves as the image desired by broader culture. However, this masque does not in any way negate the negativity, pain, and struggles that this mother faces daily. What this masque may do is keep her from receiving the psychological help that would move her into a less conflicted state where she can freely express her total range of feelings in an appropriate manner.

Other mothers in the study appear to reveal similar sentiments in their quest to be good parents or good people. Mothers appear to feel a certain way about themselves based on the type of relationship. They hold both positive and negative feelings about self, but want to demonstrate to others the positive self. One mother states that she is, “sad a lot too.” She then states that, “with different relationships the feelings are different.” Interestingly, 61 percent of this mother’s written self-descriptors were positive. According to the descriptors, she has a positive self-esteem. Yet, she mentions her sadness 13 times throughout the course of the interview. Unknowingly, and maybe subconsciously, other emotions like her sadness are revealed as she begins to discuss her various relationships. She emphasizes, like the mother described above, that she desires to be a good mother to her children. As a result she demonstrates her positive emotion in her relationship with her children. She states, “in order to make my children happy, I have to feel happy.” This mother is recovering from a substance addiction. As such, she asserts her desire to control her emotions so that she does not slip back into that addiction, as well as her desire to maintain a positive sense of self for her children. So, she may also don a masque of happiness for the betterment of her life and her children’s life. She has looked at the spaces she is in, and the relationships, and realizes that for good negotiation, she needs to be positive for her children and for herself.

### **Negotiating control and independence: Exploring esteem and efficacy**

In the previous section, we discussed the notion that mothers don masques to negotiate the spaces in which they live and the relationships in which they dwell. This section is dedicated to exploring why they do so. This probe is partially answered above, as it was discussed that mothers may have a desire to present themselves as good mothers for the benefit of their children. Something else may be present as we look at the masques that the mothers may wear. The positive masque may be donned in an effort to control their surroundings. I believe that these mothers feel that they have control over their emotions and relationships with their children. For these twelve Black mothers, in order to give the appearance of control they must present themselves positively.

The mothers in this study all had their children placed in protective custody at some point. At least one of the mothers in this study lost her parental rights permanently. Yet, eleven out of the twelve mothers rated themselves more



positively than negatively. And, all of the women stated that they are good mothers. As such, most of the mothers present positive self-esteem.

But, self-esteem is only one aspect of self-perception. The other element is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy relates to one's sense of agency, or one's ability to make changes in one's life. It was my bias that these mothers would not have a good sense of self-efficacy. In reading the literature on the cycle of poverty and dependence upon social welfare systems, it seemed as though the women in this study would feel that they do not have control over their lives, and as such, that they would not have the ability to make changes in their lives. Richard DeCharms (1977) writes that people either see themselves as empowered to make change or disempowered—pawns in a greater system. He suggests that people with a greater sense of self-worth and a better self-image are more likely to see themselves as empowered while those with low self-esteem see themselves as pawns.

Borrowing from DeCharms, it can be argued that poor women who are involved with social services may see themselves as pawns if they present low self-esteem and self-image. Because they are dependent on social services for food, housing, and basic life needs, poor women of color may feel as though they have no control over their lives or circumstances. Mothers were assessed for their feelings of independence, control, and achievement orientation through subscales of the *Family Environment Scale* (Moos and Moos, 1981). In keeping with the literature on disempowerment, it was found that the mothers scored below average ( $M=42$ ) on their sense of independence. So, while self-esteem appears to be high, self-efficacy may be low for poor, Black mothers. Mothers may place an emphasis on controlling their emotion (for social service workers), but they feel that they lack freedom and most of the mothers did not see themselves as being able to change their circumstances.

### **Explaining self: History, poor black women, and self-esteem**

In prior sections, the need to negotiate space and the appearance of control seemed to be critical to poor, Black women's perception of self. A masque of the true self appears in an effort to preserve this order and to be recognized as a good mother. I would remiss to end this exploration without a discussion of some cultural and historical perspectives on Black women. The various theories may help explain why these poor, Black mothers create and maintain masques.

Self-esteem is often related to self-image. In order to understand how poor women perceive themselves, we can look to the work of Black feminists and their interpretations of Black women's understanding of self. If we look at the history of Black women in the United States, we must revisit the early images of African slaves. There are two contrasting images that predominate the writings on Black women in the Antebellum South. These contrasting images point to a view of Black women that deprived them of any feminine characteristics. Black women were largely defeminized (Giddings, 1984).

White males writing about slave women wrote of them as inhuman, animal-like creatures (Schiebinger, 1993). The forcing of slave women to work in fields alongside African male slaves helped to perpetuate the idea that Black women were not feminine. bell hooks (2003) argues that African slave women were stripped of their femininity through slavery.

Ironically, the other image of antebellum Black women was that of a hypersexual being. Again, women are not seen as human, but as animalistic. They were to produce babies for repopulating the plantation or they were to be the concubines of their masters. The fascination with Hottentot women from southern Africa in the nineteenth century exemplifies this hypersexualization of Black women.<sup>2</sup> These women were brought to the halls of Harvard University for viewing, and scientific artists portrayed Black women as having enlarged sexual organs and insatiable sexual appetites. Like the Hottentot women of South Africa, Black women in the South were dehumanized and viewed as objects of affection or objects for labor. In no way were Black women perceived as nurturing, good mothers.

It is interesting to note that these images are those that the dominant culture gave to Black women in the United States. These early images are not far from the images we see today, and the images that have been emblazoned upon the eyes of the American public. Bonnie Leadbeater and Niobe Way (1996) argue that America has condemned the urban girl to one who is uneducated, pregnant, and poor. They speak to the negative images these girls see of themselves daily. One cannot forget that Black girls grow up in a society where a positive image of self rarely exists. In Elaine Bell Kaplan's (1995) work on teenage mothers, she also writes of the negative image that America has placed on women of color; especially poor women of color. Again, the image that America has of poor, teenage women of color is one of deviant women with different sexual practices than their white counterparts.

It is easy to explain how these images have come to be saturated into the American view of poor, Black women. Black women are different and have always been. The stance is one that some would argue enhances Black women's self-esteem (Patterson, 2004). Others argue that the emphasis on difference and comparison is one that inhibits Black women and their perceptions of self (hooks, 2003). If we look at census data, Black women make consistently less money than their white counterparts, both male and female (available at <http://www.census.gov>). Additionally, Black women head almost seventy percent of the households in the Black community. Since the *Welfare Reform Act* of 1996, more Black women use welfare money than any other racial group (Lichter and Jayakody, 2002). The facts point to a group of government-dependent women who live in persistent poverty.

Given these negative representations in the greater society, it is not surprising that the mothers in this study maintain a conflicted sense of self. Patricia Hill Collins offers a way to understand this phenomenon. She states that Black women "have been neither passive victims nor willing accomplices

to their own domination” (1995: 27). Collins argues that Black women have a perspective of their selves and their lives that is linked to their social status and roles in society. However, their understanding of self is not defined by the dominant culture. Black women define who they are and build strength from their own communities. Collins suggests that the power of the dominant culture—their control of educational institutions, terminology, and knowledge distribution—stifles the voices of the minority. Borrowing from this theory, Black mothers’ positive descriptors may be a way of co-opting a system that paints them in such a negative light.

Borrowing from Collins (1995), it must also be noted that Black women could possibly also show stress differently. Their understanding of self-esteem could vary from that of white women, so while Black women may seem confident in their outward interactions, they may be dissatisfied with their circumstances and their ability to effect change. They may be actively resisting the stereotypes presented by the dominant culture, but how do they come to understand themselves? Historically, Black women have been also portrayed as strong—having a masculine strength to overcome obstacles and burdens (hooks, 2003). They have held male roles in American society longer than their white female counterparts as slaves in the fields, heads of households, and primary breadwinners.

However, if we adhere to the definition provided by *Webster* that self-esteem is one’s confidence and satisfaction with self, it can be argued (and is) that Black women are confident in who they are, but may not be satisfied with their selves. Few of the mothers in this study discussed confidence in their abilities. As discussed above, the mothers may hold up a masque of self-contentment, but their dissatisfaction is often with their lack of independence from social services, and maybe with their strengths as mothers. Confidence was not a theme present in the words of the mothers. I would argue that because of the many negative images that have so permeated society, for some poor Black women, self-esteem is a barrier—a true barrier to economic and social progress. It is not a problem of necessarily buying into the image of white culture. It is a problem of being overwhelmed by structural oppression, which makes poor women, in general, a pawn within social service systems since they cannot see the potential to change their situations. Those mothers who have overcome addiction or regained custody of children use these successes as building blocks for their future. Their feelings of independence are tied to those successes. They control their feelings to support others—mainly their own children. Collins and others are busy (re)constructing the image of the Black woman as strong in opposition to the white woman, but fail to allow for the possibility of the Black woman as being weak underneath society’s mask of strength. In their push to obtain jobs, regain custody of their children, or successfully navigate a rehabilitation program, have these mothers chosen to focus on positive selves as it relates to those they have to care for (e.g., their children) while choosing to masquerade their “real me”? Have we as researchers done Black women a

disservice in getting the necessary psychological help that would help them master the negative feelings and create a less conflicted nature? Do we push women towards the continual construction of masques of strength when they are in need of strategies for self-empowerment? The conflicted nature of the mothers in this study demonstrate a need to assert positivity to the outsider as mothers hide feelings of depression, desperation, and insecurity.

Mothers take pride in their ability to help others—their children, their romantic partners, their friends, and even their parents. Additionally, poor mothers involved with child protective services must prove to professionals that they are capable of taking care of their children in order to regain custody of their children. In doing so, poor, Black mothers may be compromising feelings of inadequacy (or may be less reluctant to share them) in order to retain their custody.

### **In summary: Poor Black mothers' self-perception**

Poor mothers involved in child protective systems face a number of stressors including gaining custody of their children by proving themselves competent parents who are capable of providing for their children financially and emotionally. Understanding how mothers perceive their ability to do so is critical in this age of shrinking monies for public assistance, so that we can truly empower mothers to care for their families in light of the social stressors they face. Starting with their perspectives and understanding their fears and hopes can enable us to tailor programs that serve to make mothers more efficacious.

What looks like good coping may be a masque. Psychologists and social workers may need to ask different questions to their clientele as signs of maladjustment may lie well below surface presentations and talk of self. For those working with these mothers, this work may help in providing a different perspective on maternal needs as they struggle to move from dependence on social services to independence. For the study mothers, program development that is specific to their needs may help facilitate this independence.

W.E.B. Dubois' (1903) summarizes the feeling of Black culture, and in particular, the Black male as a constant double-mindedness. Using this notion of multiple selves, it is important to note that for these poor, Black women, they may too be experiencing this double consciousness as they seek to perform for those working with them in order to maintain a sense of self-preservation. In many cases, they have lost their children to the state because of situations where they had no control (e.g., domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness). To survive social services may entail working within the varied states of consciousness and varied spaces. Synchrony in adapting conscious behavior to the space leads to the presentation of a self that maintains a sense of control and positivity. In turn, the poor, Black mother can be ensured that she can retain

custody of her children or make strides in regaining her full parental rights.

<sup>2</sup>For more on Hottentot women's experience and portrayal in the United States, see Schiebinger (1993).

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