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Barriers to Higher Education Among CalWORKs Recipients

Esther Ramirez
005378369@coyote.csusb.edu

Melissa M. Rodriguez
005365967@coyote.csusb.edu

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BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION AMONG CALWORKS RECIPIENTS

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Esther A. Ramirez
Melissa M. Rodriguez

June 2019

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Approved by:

Rigaud Joseph, Ph.D., Faculty Supervisor, Social Work

Janet Chang, Ph.D., M.S.W. Research Coordinator

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ABSTRACT

Individuals and families in poverty face an abundance of barriers to self-sufficiency with the lack of higher education being the most prominent of them. The California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program has been the primary intervention to aid poverty following the welfare reform of 1996. Through their work first approach the CalWORKs program intends to set recipients on the path to self-sufficiency. Although education is the biggest weapon against poverty, CalWORKs recipients face a plethora of barriers while pursuing a college degree, as CalWORKs regulations are rigid and unsupportive toward higher education. Due to the minimal research focusing particularly on CALWORKs recipients, there was a need to further examine the barriers these recipients face while pursuing higher education. This qualitative study explored the barriers hindering CalWORKs recipient's progression toward college completion. This study administered 11 face to face interviews with active and former CalWORKs recipients in Riverside County, California. The data gathered were transcribed and analyzed to identify recurrent themes regarding barriers toward college completion among CalWORKs recipients. The major themes identified by the study were: lack of knowledge, conflicting roles, lack of self-confidence, and unrealistic requirements by the CalWORKs program. The implications of these findings for CalWORKs stakeholders were discussed.

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Finally, we would like to give a special thank you to Terrie Hawthorne Moreno Valley College CalWORKs Department Counselor for supporting us this study.

The price of success is hard work, dedication to the job at hand, and the determination that whether we win or lose, we have applied the best of ourselves to the task at hand. Keep your dreams alive!

- Vince Lombardi

DEDICATION

Edgar, thank you for your unconditional love, patience, and support! Thank you for taking care of the house and kids while I pursued my dreams. You are my rock and without you, none of this would have been possible. To my kiddos, Andre and Melanie, thank you for being so understanding of mommy. I know I had to be away for many long days and nights, but I hope all of this has inspired you to dream big, work hard, and never give up! I love you.

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To my mentor, James Banks, thank you for planting the seeds of knowledge! Without your words of encouragement, I would have never come this far! You are truly the definition of a social worker!

Esther Ramirez

I would like to dedicate this paper to my family and friends; for you guys made it possible to overcome the many challenges encountered during my educational journey. I would also like to dedicate this valuable piece of work to my two children for their support, understanding, and patience through this bittersweet accomplishment. Lastly, I would like to dedicate this paper to my beloved mother for raising me to be the strong, intelligent, and loving woman that I am today.

Melissa Rodriguez

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

In 1996, President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) (P. L. 104-193). Consistent with its purpose, PRWORA ends welfare as an entitlement program by drastically reforming the welfare system. PRWORA replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the longest running government assistance program, with the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program (TANF). In response to (TANF) California rolled out the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids program CalWORKs in 1998. Currently CalWORKs provides eligible recipients with food and cash and medical benefits but imposes a five- year time limit on aid and aggressively emphasizes employment through its welfare to work attitude (Solorio, 2003). For the past 20 years, CalWORKs has been the primary intervention to aid poverty (California Department of Social Services Administration Division, 2017).

Education has been considered a key element in the fight against poverty (Bilenkisi, Gungor, & Tapsin, 2015; De Silva & Sumarto, 2015; Janjua & Kamal, 2011; Rolleston, 2011). In 2014, poverty rates by educational attainment illustrated that 29% of individuals living in poverty did not possess a high school diploma, while, only 5% of individuals living in poverty possessed a bachelor's degree or higher. The probability of living in poverty decreases as one attains a

higher education (Center for Poverty Research University of California, Davis, 2015). Therefore, the ultimate benefit of educational attainment is self-sufficiency.

In 2017, 35% of newly approved CalWORKs recipients attained a high school diploma and or higher degree while the other 65% of welfare recipients had no high school diploma or equivalent (Mayes, 2017). In 2015, the overall average college completion in the United States was 33% (Rayan & Bauman, 2016). As found by the United States Census Bureau, there is an identifiable disparity amongst racial groups and socioeconomic status (SES) in college completion. The following is a racial breakdown of individuals who have completed a bachelor's degree or higher: 54% of Asians, 36% of Whites, 22% of Blacks, and 15% of Latinos.

Despite education being the most effective way out of poverty, Riverside County's CalWORKs program work first approach sets to quickly move recipients onto the workforce (Reed & Karpilow, 2010). This "work first" approach is implemented through the Welfare to Work contract. This contract requires recipients to engage in weekly work-related activities including subsidized or unsubsidized employment, job search and job readiness, work experience, on-the-job training (OJT), work-study, self-employment, community service, grant-based OJT, vocational education and training (no more than 12 months), mental health and substance abuse services (California Department of Social Services

Administration Division, 2017). The “work first” approach consequently complicates social work practice at the macro and micro level.

The ramifications that this “work first” approach has on social work practice are multifold. On a macro level, the regulations of CalWORKs impact case workers by creating bureaucratic issues within the workplace. Due to the ambiguity surrounding what activities qualify as welfare to work activities, case workers are often faced conflicting rules regarding eligible activities. These bureaucratic consequences often have the potential to impact the delivery and quality of services, as organizational structures set constraints on the worker’s ability to effectively assist their clients. Consequently, this may potentially damage the worker-client relationship at the micro level. CalWORKs approach is counterproductive as its policies potentially perpetuate the cycle of poverty.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to assess the barriers hindering CalWORKs recipients’ progress towards college completion in Riverside County, California. Although, college attainment among low-income populations has been vastly researched, few studies actually focus on CalWORKs recipients. Due to the historically low rates of college degree attainment among this population, it was of paramount importance to explore the barriers faced by welfare recipients towards college completion. In other words, this study sought to answer the following address: What barriers do CalWORKs recipients in Riverside County face in their quest for higher education?

Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice

The findings from the study will bring awareness of the major barriers that welfare recipient's face while attempting to complete higher education. Bringing awareness of these barriers provides a deeper understanding on what CalWORKs recipients perceive as barriers towards higher education. The information obtained from this study will better equip case workers with insightful information on how to better advocate and serve their clients. By focusing on CalWORKs recipients this study makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on college attainment among low-income people. In addition, this research is more diverse than previous research by the inclusion of men and transgender among the participants in the sample.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This section provides an overview on the existing literature pertaining to CalWORKs recipients and higher education. This chapter is divided into five main sections, one of which includes three subsections. The main sections are: Income Affecting College Completion, Challenges Attaining College Completion (which includes informational, situational and psychological challenges), Lack of Education & Lifestyle, Gaps in Current Literature, and Theories Guiding Conceptualization.

Income Affecting College Completion

Compelling differences were found in the literature between socioeconomic status and college attainment. 60% of individuals with a high socioeconomic status reported having a bachelor's degree or higher whereas only 14% of individuals with a low socioeconomic status reported having a bachelor's degree or higher, thus indicating a correlation between low SES rates and low college attainment rates. Conversely, as illustrated by the longitudinal study conducted by Conley (2001), socioeconomic status impacts an individual's ability to obtain a college degree. Individuals from low-income families are more likely to opt out or drop out of college when compared to their affluent counterparts. The primary reason is that low-income families are consumed by

their economic hardships and are therefore unable to invest time in their child's education. Low-income parents also lack the experience and knowledge to successfully help navigate their child's college completion (Sandefur, Meier, & Campbell, 2005).

According to Letkiewicz et al. (2014), web-based survey individuals with low income are found to either drop out or decrease the number of units enrolled in college due to spikes in college tuition and the ongoing high cost of living. For these reasons, about two-thirds of college students often face financial burdens brought on by student loan debt. In addition to accumulating debt, those who pursue a college education often juggle employment and schooling simultaneously. Consequently, this extends the duration in school and ultimately exacerbates the total cost of their college education and affecting their academic outcomes.

Challenges Attaining College Completion

Goto and Martin (2009) characterized challenges towards college completion as informational, situational, or psychological. Informational barriers are defined as lacking sufficient information towards an educational plan. This may include a lack of human capital or a lack of an adequate mentor to guide individuals with their educational processes. Situational barriers elude to barriers that are circumstantial for example, parental roles and lack of resources. Psychological barriers are based on personal perceptions on ability.

Informational Challenges

Cerda-Lizarraga et. al (2015) identified being a first-generation college student as a challenge towards college attainment. For minorities, being a first-generation college student means being a trailblazer for themselves and their following generations. This, of course, comes with great effort as first-generation students often lack family support in their educational endeavors and must learn to navigate the college system on their own. Hence, an additional barrier towards college completion. Furthermore, when placed in a university setting, low-income minority students come across cultural differences. These students often find that their own personal values are incompatible to those found in the average university setting. For example, low-income minority students may struggle to adapt to American values which are rooted in “independence, competition, and self-importance,” all of which contradict their cultural values, interdependence, collaboration, and humility hence, creating an additional stressor (Cerda-Lizarraga et. Al., 2015, p. 317). Further studies report that more than a third of first-generation and low-income college students are parents (Eyster, Callan, & Adams, 2014; Engle, 2007; Toutkoushian, May-Trifiletti, & Clayton, 2019).

Situational Challenges

Contemporary literature indicates family responsibilities as a barrier towards college completion. Nelson, Froehner, and Gault (2013) found that an estimated four million students are parents to children under the age of 18. The researchers from this proposed study identify parenthood as a contributing factor

that is most likely to decrease the probability of completing college as they found that about half of students who are parents drop out due to their family responsibilities. Similarly, Speiglmán and Li (2008), found that CalWORKs recipients pursuing higher education play multiple roles and were often conflicted between their parental role and their student role. Participants reported feeling overwhelmed by time constraints due to the daunting task of balancing school and caregiving responsibilities which then created psychological stressors.

Psychological Challenges

Goto and Martin (2009) argued that an individual's self-perception determines his/her decision making and behavioral outcomes with respect to education. The study examined a group of adults who are on the verge of initiating a college education. This study utilized goals, motivation, and self-efficacy as measures to evaluate college attainment outcomes. The researchers discovered that subjects who are tenacious and have clear attainable educational goals are more likely to reach those educational goals.

Moreover, Goto and Martin (2009) reported that the participant's past challenges and or successes had a high correlation with their level of motivation. Participants who reported facing challenges in past educational experiences often had low levels of motivation and were less likely to initiate and or complete their college education. The participants in the study who cited positive past educational experiences reported high levels of motivation to initiate and or complete higher education. Those who reported low confidence in their ability to

pursue higher education were less likely to reach educational goals. Self-efficacy is driven by the individual's perception of self in their ability to complete educational goals. Not addressing psychological challenges towards education can influence how individuals cope with informational and situational challenges that arise when attempting to complete college. Consequently, a lack of education can produce unfavorable lifestyle outcomes.

Lack of Education and Lifestyle

Research has identified a lack of education as the underlying cause of poverty (Van der Berg, 2008). Individuals who are impoverished are more likely to work low paying jobs, have limited housing choices, and poor health outcomes, limiting their opportunity for upward mobility. As reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018), individuals with less than a high school diploma earn roughly \$520 per week. In the State of California, more than 50% or (\$1,240) of an individual's income goes towards monthly housing expenses. The high cost of living forces families to cohabitate with other families (double-up) in efforts to maximize their budget (Mykyta & Macartney, 2011).

Moreover, Mykyta & Macartney found that the pressures of high cost living often relocated families, living on the verge of poverty, to communities that are environmentally hazardous and or communities with high crime and violence rates ultimately, affecting their overall health. Additionally, the ramifications of not having an education can impede access to healthcare for individuals living in

poverty, due to the high cost of insurance and lack of knowledge regarding available services (Dixon-Woods et al, 2006).

Gaps in Current Literature

Although there is an abundance of literature focusing on barriers to college attainment for low-income populations (Cerda-Lizarraga et al., 2015; Conley, 2001; Dixon-Woods et al., 2006; Letkiewicz et al., 2014; Mykyta & Macartney, 2011; Nelson et al., 2013; Sandefur et al., 2005), there is limited research that specifically focuses on college attainment among CalWORKs recipients. Additionally, there is insufficient literature that examines psychological barriers towards college attainment. The unique work of Goto & Martin (2009) brought to light psychological barriers toward college completion; however, their study did not reflect the views of welfare recipients in Southern California. The current study extends the literature by exploring the educational challenges faced by welfare recipients in Riverside County, California.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

The major theory utilized to conceptualize this study was Systems Theory. This framework views the individual through a holistic lens within an environment. Systems Theory suggests that family, peers, education, and community are the various subsystems that individual are interconnected with. Systems theory suggests in order to maintain equilibrium, each system must contribute to its

essential function and argues that anything affecting one system will impact the other systems (Hutchinson, 2013).

Given our problem area, Systems Theory was utilized to comprehend how the interactions of various systems impact CalWORKs recipients' ability to achieve self-sufficiency. For example, recipients who are interested in furthering their education may be impacted by systemic factors within their community, such as the bureaucratic policies of the "welfare to work" contract.

Another theory to consider when conceptualizing this study is Empowerment Theory. As defined by Turner (2011), "empowerment theory deals with empowering individuals, families, and communities to develop potential and assets to change environments and make them more just" (p. 157). Education works as an asset for recipients by setting them on the path to self-sufficiency through access to higher paying jobs. This promotes, economic security, better life outcomes, and decreases the chances of poverty recycling. Empowerment is also a perfect theoretical template for policymakers who wish to help their constituent's transition from poverty to self-sufficiency. Many scholars have used empowerment in relation to poverty and social welfare (Alfieri, 1987; Francis-East & Roll, 2015; Friedmann, 1996; Garcia-Ramirez et al., 2005; Joseph, in press; Messias, De Jong, & McLoughlin, 2005).

The aforementioned theories were critically analyzed using Joseph and Macgowan's (2019) Theory Evaluation Scale. This scale assesses the quality of theories based on nine different criteria: coherence, conceptual clarity,

philosophical assumptions, connection with previous research, testability, empiricism, boundaries, usefulness for social work practice (client context), and human agency (Joseph & Macgowan, 2019). The evaluation generated a score of 38 for Systems Theories and 42 for Empowerment Theory. According to Joseph and Macgowan (2019), these scores indicate that the overall quality of both of these theories is excellent.

Summary

This study examined barriers hindering welfare recipients' progression toward college completion. This chapter analyzed college completion in the United States, income affecting college completion, challenges attaining college completion (a section which includes informational, situational and psychological challenges), and lack of education & lifestyle as major contributing factors toward college completion. The existing literature identified many challenges individuals face while attempting to further their education. These challenges were classified as informational, situational, and psychological. An example of an informational challenge was identified as lacking family support, a situational challenge included family responsibilities, and, lastly, a psychological challenge that was identified was the individual's self-perception in their ability to pursue higher education. This chapter concludes with a thorough analysis of two theoretical perspectives: Systems Theory and Empowerment Theory.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

The study explored the barriers welfare recipients face while completing a college education. This chapter described the research methods utilized in this study. The main topics addressed in this section are: the design of the study, sampling methods, data collection, procedures, protection of human subjects, and procedures for data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of the study was to identify and describe the barriers hindering welfare recipients progress towards college completion. The study design that was utilized throughout the study was exploratory. The reason for utilizing this exploratory approach is because there was limited research on this problem area. This design was utilized to understand in great detail the challenges welfare recipients face toward college completion. The comprehensive research method that was utilized in this research study took on a qualitative approach. The research design was selected due to the limited time-frame and its ability to capture expressive information that will not otherwise be available through other research methods. This study was administered through semi-structured face-to-face interviews consisting in a series of open-ended

questions with individualized follow up questions as needed. Participants were gathered through a snowball approach. Demographics of the populations that were included in this study are single parent households, families, and minorities living below the poverty threshold.

A strength of utilizing a qualitative approach is that participants will be allowed to elaborate on their responses rather than providing brief responses as one would with a quantitative survey. This approach allows for creativity and flexibility as well as the opportunity to add individualized follow-up questions to the interview guide. Utilizing this approach allows the researchers to not only receive verbal insight but also observe the participants body language.

A limitation of utilizing a qualitative approach through face-to-face interviews is the consumption of time, as conducting a thorough study requires hours of preparation and organization. Tasks related to data collection, interview transcription, and analysis were time consuming. . Additionally, schedule and interview location conflicts arose between the researchers and the participants. Furthermore, another possible limitation to utilizing a qualitative approach is the participants' subjectivity in answering interview questions. Indeed, participants may be influenced by their personal biases.

Sampling

This study utilized a nonprobability sample, through a convenience and snowball approach. The sample size was comprised of 11 individuals who have

attempted, are currently attempting, and or have successfully completed a college education while on CalWORKs. This sample was obtained through the researchers' professional and personal networks. The participants were selected based on their ability to provide their own lived experiences and perceptions of barriers to college completion.

Data Collection and Instruments

The data was gathered through face-to face audio-recorded interviews. Each interview session commenced with an introduction, a brief overview of the study, the researcher's role, and their affiliation with the California State University of San Bernardino. During the interview sessions demographic information was obtained which consist of age, gender, ethnicity, level of education, marital status, household size and income.

The researchers utilized their developed data collection instrument which consistent of open-ended questions that guide the interview process, as well as probing questions that furthered participants' responses. The questions in the instrument were classified under three categories; informational challenges, situational challenges, and psychological challenges. The researchers provided the participants with examples of challenges in each domain. Some of the questions were formulated as follows: What has your educational experience been while on the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program? What types of barriers (informational, situational, or

psychological) have you encountered in your educational journey while on the CalWORKs program? In what ways are the policies set in place by the Welfare to Work contract feasible and supportive of your educational journey? How could the Welfare to Work program be more accommodating towards the higher education experience of welfare recipients? Appendix A provides a complete description of the interview questions. Participants were asked to identify and discuss, if any, their experiences within those challenges. Information gathered throughout the interview session was transcribed while recurrent themes were recorded in a notepad.

Procedures

Researchers contacted the potential participants via e-mail. The researchers provided the participants with a brief overview of the purpose of the study. Both researchers and participants collaborated in scheduling a date to meet for the interview. Participants were given the option of meeting at three locations; the participant's home/ safeplace, Moreno Valley Community College CalWORKs conference room, and or California State University San Bernardino's John M. Pfau's library conference room.

Upon their arrival for the interview, were greeted and seated by the researchers. The researchers then thanked the participants for arriving to the interview session and once again provided an overview of the study. Participants were provided with an informed consent form and a demographics form; the

researchers asked the participants to please review and sign the forms. Each interview took approximately one hour. At the end of the interview session participants were thanked and given an incentive as an appreciation of their contribution to the study.

Protection of Human Subjects

In efforts to maintain the participants' information confidential, the researchers ensured that the interview site was in a private location (please see Procedures section above). The student researchers took measures to ensure the confidentiality of the data. First, all forms containing personal information and encrypted audio files were safely secured in a locked file cabinet in order to maintain confidentiality. After the study was completed; all forms containing demographic information were shredded, digital audio recorded encrypted files were transferred onto a transcribed software and were then deleted.

Data Analysis

This study deployed a qualitative approach through conducting 11 interview sessions. After the completion of the interview sessions, the data collected was analyzed through thematic analysis. digital audio recorded encrypted files were transferred onto a transcribed software in written form and coded. The researchers analyzed the transcribed data three times in order to conceptualize the major findings. Recurrent themes and non-verbal responses

were recorded on a notepad. The gathered data was categorized in numerical form to highlight distinct themes that arose throughout the interview process. The researchers assigned different colors to participants as a way to distinguish them. Information that was not relevant to the study was not recorded; however, relevant non-verbal responses were recorded due to their potential implications.

Obtained data was compartmentalized into three distinct domains: informational, situational, and psychological. Significant themes and subthemes were recognized under each classification and color-coded then documented onto a master code list. The researchers read and reread transcripts in order to confirm the accuracy of themes assigned. Individual statements were assigned under their given category and entered into an excel document under their assigned color code.

Summary

This study explored the barriers welfare recipients face while attempting to complete a college education. This section overviewed many methodological mechanisms, including the research paradigm, design, sampling, instrument development, and data collection procedures. This section also covered the protection of human subject as well as the data analysis technique employed in this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

This chapter illustrates the results from the analyzed data that were gathered through eleven semi-structured qualitative interviews. The authors utilized a standard thematic content analysis to examine the data. The study aims to explore barriers to higher education among CalWORKs recipients.

This chapter discusses the demographic characteristics of the sample and the recurrent themes that emerged throughout this exploratory study. This chapter commences with a review of the sample and provides a statistical description of the participants involved in the study. Additionally, the chapter provides an in-depth description of the results discovered through this research and concludes with a summary of the findings.

Demographics

Table 1 below presents the demographic characteristics of the study participants pertaining to age, gender, dependence, race/ethnicity, education, marital status, work status, and income level. The sample population consisted of 11 CalWORKs recipients who have attempted, are currently attempting, and/ or have successfully completed a college education.

As exposed in Table 1, the vast majority of participants were over 30 years of age. Similarly, most of them were female and all of the participants had dependent children under the age of 18. Almost half of the participants were

African American and over one third were Hispanic, while less than 10% were White and Asian. In terms of education level, approximately 80% of the participants obtained an Associate’s and/or Bachelor’s degree, while less than 20% obtained a Master’s degree. Marital status varied among participants, the approximate percentage breakdown is as follows; 36% reported being single, 36% reported being married or living with a partner, and 27% reported being separated or divorced. From an employment perspective, almost half of the participants work full-time, over one third work part-time, and less than 20% were in school. For income level, less than one third of the participants reported earning \$20,000 or under, almost half of the participants reported earning within \$20,000-29,000 bracket, and approximately one third of them reported earnings of \$30,000 or more.

Table 1.
Participant Demographic Characteristics
(N = 11)

Variable	N	%
Age	11	100
Under 30	4	36.4
30 and over	7	63.6
Gender	11	100
Female	9	81.8
Male	1	9.1
Transgender	1	9.1
Dependence	11	100
Yes	11	100.0
No	0	100.0
Race/Ethnicity	11	100
White	1	9.1

African American	5	45.4
Hispanic	4	36.4
Asian	1	9.1
Education	11	100
Associate degree	4	36.4
Bachelors' degree	5	45.4
Masters' degree	2	18.2
Marital status	11	100.0
Single	4	36.4
Married/living with partners	4	36.4
Separated/divorced	3	27.2
Employment status	11	100.0
Full time	5	45.4
Part-time	4	36.4
In school	2	18.2
Income level	11	100.0
Under 20,000/year	3	27.2
20,000-29,000	5	45.4
30,000-39,000/year	1	9.1
40,000-49,000 year	1	9.1
50,000 and over	1	9.1

Presentation of the Findings

Overall, there was a consensus among most of the participants regarding the benefit of a CalWORKs department on college campus. In effect, participants reported that it is a good thing to have a CalWORKs department at their local community college that assists with school attendance verification forms, redeeming book vouchers provided by case workers, educational plans, priority registration, and referrals to work study. Participants who benefited from these services reported that the onsite-service allows them to meet their welfare-to-work requirements more smoothly. However, the participants identified four major

roadblocks that are associated with the program: lack of knowledge, conflicting roles, lack of self-confidence, and unrealistic requirements. These themes emerged from the data to constitute the main findings in this research. The researchers described each of them below.

Informational Barriers-Lack of Knowledge

To assess for informational barriers, the participants were asked the following question: what types of informational barriers they have encountered in their educational journey while on the CalWORKs program? There was a consensus with 10 out of the 11 participants that lack of knowledge was a barrier to higher education. Participants facing the lack of knowledge barrier reported:

I would say that I experienced informational barriers because nobody told me nothing about college and how to do anything. So, a lot of things that I came across was because of the counselors at the college. Like for instance, I didn't know that financial aid wears off. Like when I graduated in 2009, I mean, 1999, I didn't know that if I started going to college, then it just adds up. So, I went to Compton college, I went to Bryman College, I went to Chaffey and then I went to Chaffey again. So, when I finally decided exactly what I wanted to do it was too late because I ran out of money. So now I can't even go get my bachelor's now because I got to go pay for it and I can't afford it. So, a lot that I found out was not until I went to Moreno Valley College and by then it was too late (Participant 1, February 2019).

Well I'm the first person to pursue college in my family so I had no help. I started school at 26 years old. And like my parents didn't know, you know. My mom is from somewhere where they don't go to school. So, when she came here, you know, she met my dad, my dad's older, but he didn't get past high school and so they just didn't know. I wasn't really exposed to it. Like people in my environment, rarely pursue higher education. I kind of had that misconception that once you graduate high school, college is not an option (Participant 9, February 2019).

Yeah. So, I am a first-generation college student. So, I come from a family of low income and who didn't attend college at that level. And so, they couldn't understand the commitment that was required of me, and they weren't able to be a resource the way I would have liked as far as going through the educational process. So, I had a lack of support in that area. My dad's deceased and my mom, who's a single mom trying to help me with my child, did not really understand how much time is needed to be dedicated to school to be successful (Participant 11, February 2019).

Situational Barriers-Conflicting Roles

Participants were asked about the types of situational barriers they have encountered in their educational journey while on the CalWORKs program. All participants reported conflicting roles as a situational barrier towards higher education. This theme was expressed by the study participants as follows:

Well once I graduated, I wanted to keep going. But I also was pregnant. I had a new baby then another baby, then I had another baby, so it was too much to depend on my mom. I wondered who would watch my babies. I couldn't have anyone else watch them, so I was stuck for a while (Participant 1, February 2019).

On top of being a single parent, and then dealing with responsibilities at home, my dad hurt himself at work so, he was on disability I had the responsibility of taking care of the household duties, my parents, and my child (Participant 3, February 2019).

I'm a single father of five. So that was very difficult. And at that particular time, I was coming back to school after about maybe 30 years of being out of school. And so, I started back at 46 years old and moving from out of state and coming into the situation where I had really no support here because I'm from Texas. So being on the system, that was the first time I ever had to do that (Participant 8, February 2019).

Psychological Barriers-Lack of Self-Confidence

With regard to informational and situational barriers participants were asked to describe the psychological barriers they have encountered in their educational journey while on the CalWORKs program. Nine out of 11 participants reported having a lack of self-confidence as a barrier to higher education. The participants stated:

Yeah, I would say that I never found myself as being a strong writer. So, every time I had to write a paper, I would only want certain people to proofread it. So, like my sister, or maybe a close friend, because I wouldn't have wanted others to judge me if, you know, it didn't sound as up to par as other people. So, I felt like that was something that I always I put on myself. And I think the main reason why is because not to compare. But my sister is like an amazing writer. So, when she would edit my paper, I'm just asking her to, like, you know, do punctuation and change a word here and there (Participant 2, February 2019).

My situation barriers made it difficult, because that automatically puts a psychological barrier within your mind. Because, you know, never being on any kind of government assistance, and then waiting till you're 46 to go back to college, having kids, and you know being a single parent is tough (Participant 8, February 2019).

My self-esteem was probably one of the biggest barriers because I have had to convince myself so much that I wasn't qualified for this type of education. Given my background, you know, what I knew, I felt like a lot of self-doubt. So, there was a lot of things that I would tell myself internally, that would kind of sabotage my ability to do well. So, I had to fight those thoughts to continue to stay encouraged to stay confident to finish my work. So, I did a lot of comparing myself to other students, because I felt they had an upper hand (Participant 11, February 2019).

Unrealistic Requirements

Finally, participants were asked: In your experience, are the policies set in place by the Welfare to Work contract feasible and supportive of your educational journey? Six of the 11 participants shared the same sentiment regarding unrealistic requirements as a barrier encountered while pursuing higher education. Participants elucidated this theme as follows:

They want you to meet so many hours as a single parent or you know it's like so many hours for single parents so many hours for two parent households. I feel like it is a little bit too much you know, because there's only so much you could do. If you don't meet the hours required per week by just going to school and working part time, what else are we supposed to do? and then those forms that they want you to complete to verify school attendance, they are just ridiculous to me. Also, the job search requirement was not feasible. I felt like it was just more work to complete the job search contact sheet (Participant 2, February 2019)

I think they are good and bad. For a while I was working on campus, I think there was one semester where I thought it was kind of crazy because I was going to school full time, I was working on campus, and they still wanted me to look for a job to fulfill the 32-hour job search requirement. So, in my opinion that was not feasible (Participant 3, February 2019).

Um, I think that like, the policies could be changed. Like, if, for example, like if my son didn't have a disability, like I would be screwed because I wouldn't be exempt from job searching, like I said before, so I feel like for those families that don't have a kid with a disability, they shouldn't have to look for work full-time on top of going to school, I feel like school should be enough to meet the Welfare to Work weekly hours (Participant 6, February 2019).

Summary

This chapter illustrated the primary themes, as identified by CalWORKs recipients, on the barriers they faced while pursuing higher education. The researchers utilized a qualitative approach to understand in great detail the challenges welfare recipients face toward college completion. By applying thematic analysis, the researchers were able to obtain information on the barriers CalWORKs recipients encountered while pursuing higher education.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Overview

This study explored educational completion among welfare recipients in Southern California. In particular, this study sought to answer a qualitative question about barriers that prevent CalWORKs recipients from completing higher education. It is important to understand how CalWORKs recipients perform at the college level because education is the greatest weapon against poverty (Center for Poverty Research University of California, Davis, 2015). The analysis of the interview responses generated four leading themes—lack of knowledge, conflicting roles, lack of self-confidence, and unrealistic requirements—as barriers to college completion among CalWORKs recipients.

These findings reflect previous research on barriers to educational attainment among low-income individuals (Cerda-Lizarraga et al., 2015; Goto & Martin, 2009; Nelson et al., 2013; Speiglmán & Li, 2008). In fact, participants reported not being able to navigate the college system. These first-generation college students faced informational barrier pertaining to meeting financial aid requirements. This finding is consistent with the work of Cerda-Lizarraga et al. (2015) on barriers towards college completion among a first-generation student.

Pertaining to situational barriers, participants faced conflicting roles as some were taken in sandwich between school and family. Such inter-role conflict

prolonged their college attainment. This particular result mirrors the work of Nelson et al. (2013) and Speigman & Li (2008) who found that multiple roles often conflict with pursuing higher education.

From a psychological perspective participant disclosed that lack of self-confidence as a major barrier to their educational journey. This was characterized as feelings of inadequacy, stress, and negative self-talk. These findings are supported by Goto and Martin's (2009) findings which indicated that an individual's self-perception influences their educational outcomes.

Finally, the participants reported that the CalWORKs program imposes unrealistic expectations. That is, the requirements of the program somewhat are inconsistent with its goals. The work-first requirement hampers participants' chance to complete college on time. This is a significant finding which fits into the gap pattern between welfare and self-sufficiency (Breitkreuz & Williamson, 2012; Joseph, 2018). The unrealistic expectations of the CalWORKs program can be explained by what Joseph (2019) called legislative malpractice. This concept implies the eagerness of lawmakers to pass broad welfare policies that are unproven and counterproductive.

Implications for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

Social Work Practice Implications

This study's findings hold major implications for social work. Social work students, professors, and researchers have an ethical obligation to advocate for

the better treatment of CalWORKs recipients as the current system lacks an understanding of the unique challenges recipients face while pursuing a college degree. Empowerment can be utilized to understand the need to address the barriers identified by the participants as individuals should have the right to self-determination. The state's current welfare system employs individuals who lack the knowledge, education, and skills needed to effectively support and empower recipients' educational goals. Empowering recipients to make the choice between employment and education will grant them the ability to take control of their situation.

Policy Implications

These findings also have implications for policy. In order to truly promote self-sufficiency among welfare recipients, social workers must lobby to influence policy to secure title protection. By doing so, social service positions such as CalWORKs case workers will be filled with competent social workers who empower and foster warmth, empathy, and genuineness with their clients. Moreover, at the macro level, there should be a push for policy to reexamine the Welfare to Work contract, as participants noted unrealistic requirements as a significant barrier hindering college completion. Finally, a CalWORKs department should be incorporated at all California public universities in order to support and facilitate the college experience for students who are welfare recipients.

Research Implications

These results can also be understood within the context of implications for research. By focusing on a diverse population of CalWORKs recipients in Southern California, this study makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on college attainment among low-income people. In addition, the “unrealistic expectations” theme is significant and constitutes a fundamental contribution to the poverty and social welfare literature. Indeed, it is always beneficial to capture the perceptions of people vis-a-vis welfare receipt.

Limitations

As all human work, this study’s findings contain several shortcomings. First and foremost, while a sample size of 11 seems to be appropriate for a qualitative research on a hard-to-reach population, a greater number of participants would have added more weight to the findings. Furthermore, although in line with previous research, the findings do not reflect the views of all welfare recipients in the state of California. Lastly, because of the qualitative nature of the study, it would be presumptuous to claim that the findings are bias free.

Recommendations

Future research can build on these findings to explore barriers to educational attainment among welfare recipients in other geographical locations. Researchers who wish to replicate this study would be wise to increase the

sample size of their study participants. Future research can also benefit from the utilization of administrative data. The use of more rigorous methodologies can also help researchers dissect the plight of welfare recipients enrolled in higher education.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

The following interview guide was created by the researchers, Esther A. Ramirez and Melissa M. Rodriguez.

1. What has your educational experience been while on the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program?

2. What types of barriers (informational, situational, or psychological) have you encountered in your educational journey while on the CalWORKs program?

3. How would you describe your level of self-efficacy throughout your college experience?

4. What factors motivated you to complete high school?

5. What goals did you set in place towards furthering your education?

6. What factors contributed to your success in college while on CalWORKs?

7. How long have you been or how long were you a CalWORKs recipient? How supportive was your caseworker of you furthering your education?

8. In what ways are the policies set in place by the Welfare to Work contract feasible and supportive of your educational journey?

9. What resources provided by the CalWORKs program (book vouchers, parking permit, and /or bus vouchers) were most helpful in assisting you in your educational journey?

10. In your opinion, how could the Welfare to Work program be more accommodating towards the higher education experience of welfare recipients?

Final Thoughts

Do you have any final thought you would like to share before we conclude?

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to identify and describe the barriers hindering welfare recipients progress toward college completion. The study is being conducted by Esther Ramirez & Melissa Rodriguez, graduate students, under the supervision of Dr. Rigaud Joseph, Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-committee at CSUSB.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to identify and describe the barriers hindering welfare recipients progress toward college completion.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be asked questions regarding informational, situational, and psychological barriers they may have faced while completing college and some demographics

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your responses will remain confidential and data will be reported in group form only.

DURATION: It will take 1 hour to complete the interview.

RISKS: Although not anticipated, there may be some discomfort in answering some of the questions. You are not required to answer and can skip the question or end your participation.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Joseph at (909) 537-5507.

RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2019.

I agree to be audio recorded: ____ YES ____ NO

This is to certify that I read the above and I am 18 years or older.

Place an X mark here

Date

APPENDIX C
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD LETTER

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee

Researcher(s) Esther Ramirez & Melissa Rodriguez
Proposal Title Barriers to Higher Education Faced by CalWORKS Recipients
SW1917

Your proposal has been reviewed by the School of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board. The decisions and advice of those faculty are given below.

Proposal is:

- approved
- to be resubmitted with revisions listed below
- to be forwarded to the campus IRB for review

Revisions that must be made before proposal can be approved:

- faculty signature missing
- missing informed consent debriefing statement
- revisions needed in informed consent debriefing
- data collection instruments missing
- agency approval letter missing
- CITI missing
- revisions in design needed (specified below)

Javier Ch...
Committee Chair Signature

1/18/2019
Date

Distribution: White-Coordinator; Yellow-Supervisor; Pink-Student

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

This was a two-person project where authors collaborated throughout the study.

Esther A. Ramirez and Melissa M. Rodriguez collaborated on the following sections:

- Introduction
- Literature Review
- Methods
- Results
- Conclusion

Both Esther A. Ramirez and Melissa M. Rodriguez contributed to the formatting, editing and revisions process throughout the preparation of this research paper for submission.