Making Ends Meet

Representations of Welfare in MTV’s *Teen Mom*

BY

BAILEY KELLEY
B.A., Columbia College Chicago, 2010

THESIS
Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Chicago, 2014

Chicago, Illinois

Defense Committee:

Andrew Rojecki, Chair
Diem-My Bui, Advisor
Zizi Papacharissi
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Discourse and media</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Media representations of gender</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Representations of motherhood</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Welfare in America</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Reality television</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. METHOD</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Critical discourse analysis</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Data</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. ANALYSIS</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Internalized misconceptions</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Empowerment through independence</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Heteronormativity and selective education</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Teen Mom and the public debate</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CITED LITERATURE</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SUMMARY

A critical discourse analysis was performed on the popular MTV reality show, *Teen Mom*, to determine how the mothers in the series discussed welfare and welfare recipients. All available episodes of the series were closely viewed and newspaper articles, online blog posts, and other written materials that consider welfare within the context of *Teen Mom* were closely read to identify the ways both welfare and its recipients are represented within the show. The analysis embraced a critical feminist perspective in order to identify the subtle ways in which the series both reinforces and undermines the stigmatization of welfare, ultimately contributing to the political debate about welfare in America.

Three of the twelve mothers explicitly shared their feelings toward and exposure to welfare and other public assistance programs. While they often reinforced negative stereotypes about welfare recipients and expressed reservations about utilizing welfare programs, they also presented a radical feminist understanding of the role of welfare in their lives. Although the show stresses heteronormativity and the importance of a two-parent household, these women articulate a desire to use welfare to avoid abusive relationships and achieve autonomy. This message is ultimately counterhegemonic, despite the hegemonic tendencies of the series.

This thesis describes a more nuanced way of analyzing popular media that allows for the recognition of both hegemonic and counterhegemonic messages. In addition, suggestions for future studies, including a more robust political economy analysis and audience analysis, are presented for interested researchers.
I. INTRODUCTION

Kailyn Lowry, a young mother featured in the popular MTV series Teen Mom 2, lacks any material or emotional support from the single mother that raised her and lives with the family of the father of her son, Isaac. As Kailyn’s relationship with Jo deteriorates, however, she must find a different living situation. She does not have enough income from her part-time job to pay rent and enrolls in a housing program administrated by a private, non-profit organization. It is unclear whether public funds subsidize any part of this program, but Kailyn feels this is something that should be avoided if possible, something to be ashamed of, and something to be used sparingly. Kailyn asks her case manager explicitly how quickly she can work her way out of the program and explains to her boyfriend that being on welfare is “embarrassing.”

This contrasts sharply with the narrative of the next season, which shows Kailyn and her boyfriend, Javi, planning to marry quickly so that she and Isaac can be recognized as Javi’s dependents and have access to various military resources including housing and health care. While a few friends and family members comment on how quickly the couple decided to get married, Kailyn dismisses any concerns about receiving Air Force benefits, unlike her vocal reservations toward receiving welfare. This contradiction underlines the belief that respectable young families should avoid welfare and other assistance programs at all costs, while military programs, despite being funded by the state, are immune from such stigmatization (Twiss and Martin, 1999).

Kailyn’s problems run much more deeply than finding a way to pay rent. She fights for independence from her child’s father and his family who have forbidden her from dating while living in their home. Despite the fact that Kailyn and Jo are no longer in a relationship and she
receives little to no emotional or physical support from him, Jo’s parents insist she cannot have any “male friends” and expect to live with them. This theme of paternalism runs throughout the series and is the catalyst for many of these young women to strike out in search of independence and empowerment. While the traditional heteronormative family unit is hailed as the only appropriate response to the “tragedy” that is teen pregnancy, several of the women featured in MTV’s *Teen Mom* undermine this logic by utilizing welfare and public assistance programs to achieve financial, and therefore personal, independence from unsupportive or abusive family members. As we can see from Kailyn’s example, messages that reinforce the myth of the welfare queen find outlets in the series, often from the mouths of the mothers themselves.

Simultaneously, though, the reasons cited for choosing to receive government benefits subvert a hegemonic understanding of welfare.

Despite steadily declining rates of teen pregnancy in the United States (Guttmacher Institute, 2010; Martin, et al., 2012; United Nations Statistics Division, 2010), American media, especially reality television programming, seem obsessed with young mothers. From MTV’s popular *16 & Pregnant* to Discovery Fit & Health’s *High School Moms* and *My Teen is Pregnant and So Am I*, millions of Americans consume various representations of teen pregnancy and parenthood under the guise of ‘reality television.’ Since these programs claim to present the lives of young mothers as they experience them, scholars should consider the specific ways in which the context of MTV, and the genre of reality television in general, inform their narratives. More broadly, public discourse and dominant understandings of welfare also shape the ways in which these women approach and discuss public assistance, as we will see from their own language choices. Because experience is necessarily mediated when translated to a televisual context, an
analysis of this discursive space can shed light on which aspects of the women’s narratives may
be likely to conflict with dominant ideology and subsequently reworked into something more
culturally palatable. A critical discourse analysis can identify the elements of hegemonic
ideology as well as instances of subversion in a cultural text.

Specifically, I consider MTV’s Teen Mom, a popular spin-off of 16 & Pregnant, and look
for the different ways it presents and discusses publicly funded assistance programs and their
recipients. Popular and mass media products are important sites of cultural meaning that require
close readings; they speak to the creation and reproduction of social practices. A reality show
lends itself especially well to a critical consideration of how women’s experiences are encoded
and decoded through communication products (Hall, 1980). While the show’s structure relies
almost exclusively on narrative provided by the teen mothers themselves, they have no control
over how their voices will be edited, organized, and presented; at the same time, neither the
show’s producers nor the young parents can determine precisely how the audience will unpack
and interpret these messages. The agenda set forth by MTV may clash with the way these young
women interpret and re-tell their experiences.

While popular texts often reinforce dominant ideology (Althusser, 1971), the media also
serves as an important site of struggle over meaning (Ono and Sloop, 2002). The issues
surrounding public assistance programs are intricately linked to cultural definitions of
motherhood, citizenship, race, and class, to name only a few. All of these social constructions
perform hegemonic functions, serving to “not only [justify] and [maintain]” the ideology of the
ruling class, “but [managing] to win the active consent of those over whom it rules” (Gramsci,
1971, p. 244). This does not necessarily suggest that the audience are always “cultural dupes”
that blindly gobble up texts that oppress and subjugate them. Communicative practices contain multiple sites of meaning creation; meaning is negotiated and constructed by multiple actors in the “circuit” of message production (Hall, 1980, p. 166). While “producers” actively create meaning within their texts, audiences actively “decode” these messages in a variety of ways. Viewers can decode hegemonic messages in a manner that subverts their power. This active subversion requires work on the part of the consumer, however, rendering dominant messages more easily and readily interpreted.

Media productions also contribute to the creation of “target populations” (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). Public discourse uses these constructs to identify groups targeted by policy and situate them within a social matrix that determines the appropriate amount of burden and benefit to subscribe to each group. This suggests that the frames used in media to describe or explain these populations can have material consequences for individuals, especially those that are dependent on the state, such as teen mothers. Additionally, the target populations use these social constructions to name and understand themselves and their experiences. By constructing the image of ‘teen mother,’ MTV tells young women in similar situations what their experiences will look like and how they will react to them.

The series fosters an apparent dialogue between the mothers and the audience by incorporating viewer questions into season specials; when asked about their reasons for partaking in the series, the overwhelming response is “to share my story with other young women so they don’t make the same mistakes.” The conversation between these young women and their audience is overtly orchestrated, a potentially dangerous effort on MTV’s behalf. Cable networks are in the business of selling as many viewers as possible to advertisers, not enabling collective
activism, but relating experiences and sharing narratives between women is a central tool for raising feminist consciousness. While the intimate interviews, audience questions, and virtual events that foster a close and bidirectional relationship between these young mothers and their audience members are most likely tools to draw in viewers and present consumers to advertisers in a new and dynamic way, these platforms and the dialogues created by them allow for an open and critical analysis of the series. But how much subversion truly exists in these spaces? How is the empowering and critical feminist practice of sharing personal stories altered by its utilization in the sexist, racist, and classist context of reality television?

This project performs a critical discourse analysis of *Teen Mom* to identify the ways in which it reinforces, or subverts, dominant beliefs about public assistance. This analysis will consider discourse on the microscopic level, using semiotics to understand how welfare, motherhood, race, and other constructs are symbolically referenced within the show and in popular texts about the show, such as gossip blogs and news magazines. This project also utilizes a Foucauldian understanding of discourse as much larger than any specific text and the signs it contains. I search for the ways in which the genre of reality television and the political economy of MTV interact with other discursive practices that create and define subjects and their experiences. An understanding of the oppressive power of ideology in a capitalist society together with an appreciation of our ability to confront that power grounds this research.

While uncovering latent messages and hegemonic practices in popular cultural texts is inherently political, the material realities of young parents should not be ignored. This project hopes to partially undermine these dominant narratives through their detailed exposure, but also to bring attention to the fact that millions of struggling families may actively avoid public
assistance that could significantly improve their living conditions because of the stigmatization attached to these programs. By highlighting the messages of empowerment within the series while contrasting them with Teen Mom’s overarching heteronormativity, we can see these women presenting an alternative way of understanding welfare: a vital support system that affords them the independence they crave. Through this unconventional framework, the women of Teen Mom suggest a different way of talking about welfare that doesn’t currently exist in the political debate.

Although the teen pregnancy and parenthood television trend has received some attention by researchers, a thorough analysis of the representation of public assistance programs and their recipients within these shows has yet to be performed. Ultimately, this project seeks to answer multiple interconnected questions concerning representation, heteronormativity, and the ability of reality television to provide a discursive space for marginalized individuals to share their stories.

RQ1: How do the mothers and their partners, friends, and family discuss, reference, or (re)present public assistance programs in Teen Mom?

RQ2: How does Teen Mom reinforce heteronormative, as well as race- and class-based, understandings of welfare?

RQ3: How is Teen Mom a site of cultural resistance and subversion of these hegemonic messages?
II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Extensive research on cultural understandings of welfare and other public assistance programs reveals its gendered, racialized, and class-based definitions (Feldman and Zaller, 1992; Gamson and Lasch, 1983; Gilens, 1999; Hancock, 2004; Nadasen, 2005). Reality television has been receiving scholarly attention for decades (Holmes and Jermyn, 2004; Kilborn, 1994), and a recent collection edited by Letizia Guglielmo (2013) exclusively considers MTV’s 16 & Pregnant and Teen Mom. Missing from these texts, however, is an in-depth analysis of public assistance programs in the series. By first understanding the relationship among discourse, media, and gender, this project seeks to expand upon research on welfare, motherhood, and reality television to understand the role played by Teen Mom in a much larger discourse about public assistance programs.

A. Discourse and media

Teen Mom doesn’t create their treatment of welfare from scratch. The set of connotations, associations, and understandings already exists in American public discourse. This project uses the Foucauldian definition of discourse in its broadest sense: “the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualized group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements” (Foucault, 1972, p. 80). Of particular interest is the “regulated practice” that determines the possible or imaginable within a given discourse. Discourse is imbued with power, but it is not unidirectional. “Discourse transmits and reproduces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (1978, p. 100). Discourse enables individuals to understand their experiences and make connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena.
The “discursive formation” of welfare provides the context for this study. Mills describes these formations as “regular associations and groupings of particular types of statements; these are groupings of statements which are often associated with particular institutions or sites of power and which have effects on individuals and their thinking” (2003, p. 64). The discursive formation of welfare highlights the gendered and racialized aspects of public assistance and focuses on individual responsibility rather than systemic economic inadequacies (Winter, 2006). Despite statistical evidence to the contrary, American public opinion understands welfare recipients to be black, female, promiscuous, and unwilling to work (Lieberman, 1998; Peffley, et al., 1997; Stark, 2009).

This project understands discourse as hegemonically reproduced in ways that utilize a “combination of force and consent” and present force as “based on the consent of the majority” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 80). A “hegemonic viewpoint” not only determines how society defines an issue in relation to other issues, it also “carries with it the stamp of legitimacy – it appears coterminous with what is ‘natural’, ‘inevitable’, ‘taken for granted’ about the social order.” (Hall, 1980, p. 175) Hegemony works by establishing arbitrary hierarchal social structures as common sense, precluding critiques of them as arbitrary or hierarchal. This internal acknowledgement and acceptance of hegemonic ideology “hails,” or interpellates, the individual as a subject (Althusser, 1971, p. 30). Media productions, as part of the “ideological state apparatuses,” serve to reinforce and reproduce dominant ideology (p. 11).

While television programming regularly serves hegemonic functions and reinforces dominant ideology, it also has the ability to subvert these messages and present alternative ways of understanding reality. “Contemporary mainstream media produce information, but they also
provide a specific locale, a space, where social issues collide, where political issues are struggled over and subject positions … are constituted” (Ono and Sloop, 2002, p. 2). Television, because of its timeliness, intimacy with our daily lives, and increasing accessibility and variety, is a medium rife with opportunities for subversion (Kellner, 1995). Television keeps its finger on the pulse of both pop culture and politics; its production practices allow for alternative, at times oppositional, readings of current events, depending on who is writing the script or producing the segment. Subversion occurs when individuals or groups undermine the hegemonic capacity of the production to idealize the nuclear family or frame immigrants as aliens. Research on various sites of media production reveals their hegemonic tendencies and counter-hegemonic possibilities (Faimau, 2011; Kim, 2008; Kumar, 2011; Ryan, 2010). Central to this project are the ways in which media (re)produces gender through the repetition of specific representations.

B. **Media representations of gender**

Individuals carry around “media-generated images of the world, using them to construct meaning about political and social issues” (Gamson, et al., 1992, p. 374). This does not suggest the media create social reality exclusively, an omnipotent creator of meaning; rather, meaning is generated and negotiated through the “mutual constitution” of culture and the self (Markus and Kitayama, 2010). While cultural values, norms, and practices influence the psychology and behaviors of the individual, “as selves engage with their sociocultural contexts, they reinforce and sometimes change the ideas, practices, and institutions of these environments” (p. 420). This relationship is far from egalitarian, though. Not only do media institutions have significantly more access to resources that assist in the distribution and influence of certain messages than individuals (Carragee and Roefs, 2004), but the media also serve hegemonic functions.
Along with other non-violent social institutions such as religion and education, the media aid in the reinforcement of specific ideological myths that normalize, and more importantly reproduce, the existing hierarchal social structure (Althusser, 1971). This social structure, enabled and driven by capitalist economic practices, includes gender oppression in its various forms; the systematic marginalization of women’s experiences and silencing of women’s voices appears continuously throughout Western history (Achina-Loeb, 2006). The mimetic quality of representations of gender is a critical aspect of their discursive power; regular occurrences of familiar images reinforce their legitimacy and availability in the minds of individuals. Because of this oppressive strategy, feminist political goals often include a more diverse, respectful, and non-stereotyped representation of women (and men) in the media (Macdonald, 2003; Rakow, 1992; Sreberny and van Zoonen, 1996).

“Gender hegemony” describes the ways in which masculine and feminine subjects are dyadically opposed and situated so that men dominate women (Connell, 1995). Specifically, hegemonic femininities work alongside hegemonic masculinities to legitimate female subordination through performance of gendered practices, rituals, and characteristics (Schippers, 2007). The intersections of race, class, and other identity constructs require an understanding of hegemonic femininities rather than an all-encompassing, singularly defined femininity. This reproduction of gender hierarchies occurs in multiple cultural sites, including reality television (Marwick, 2010; Sukhan, 2013), sport (Finley, 2010; Grindstaff and West, 2006; Harris and Clayton, 2002), and religion (Arnot, 2011; Doyle, 2007).

Feminist media studies reveal the deeply misogynistic and patriarchal thrust behind media practices than can seem benign, or even sympathetic to feminist causes (D’Acci, 1999;
McRobbie, 2008). The patterns of gender representation in the media identified by scholars reveal the structural nature of oppression. Cultural images “are imbued with a symbolic order of meanings through their reiteration in the media” (Bui, 2012, p. 857). The social construction of ‘motherhood’ as presented in media productions provides an opportunity to understand this “symbolic order.”

C. **Representations of motherhood**

Not only does *Teen Mom* focus almost exclusively on the experiences of young women as mothers, American welfare programs have historically been presented as primarily intended for mothers (Nadasen, 2005). For these reasons, this project requires an understanding of how the media presents motherhood. Cultural definitions of motherhood reflect specific historical, economic, and political contexts; dominant myths about mothering evolve over time, depending on how other aspects of women’s identities are constructed (Thurer, 1994). A central theme of these changing representations, however, focuses on “the mother as she who shoulders the burden of care” (Bassin, Honey, and Kaplan, 1994, p. 4). The work of bearing and nurturing children is ascribed to women because of an essentialist understanding of the female sex as inherently predisposed to these labor acts. By linking nurturing qualities to a biological predisposition, or even need, to care, ‘womanhood’ is (at least partially) defined by ‘motherhood.’ Importantly, “the oppressive aspects of patriarchal maternal representation or the mother’s unwitting acceptance of mythic ideals impossible to achieve on the level of the social formation” require consideration if scholars are to pinpoint the ways in which these myths are reproduced (Kaplan, 1994, p. 3).
The paradox of working towards feminist political goals while performing the culturally-specific labor of mothers provides fodder for various feminist critiques (Hewlett, 2002; Press, 2012; Staal, 2011). Patricia Hill Collins (1994), stresses the importance of recognizing race and class dimensions within definitions of motherhood. “Whereas the significance of race and class in shaping the context in which motherhood occurs is virtually invisible when white, middle-class women’s experiences are the theoretical norm, the effects of race and class stand out in stark relief when women of color are accorded theoretical primacy” (p. 72). While white motherhood enjoys its position as a social ideal, mothers of color have historically been feared, stigmatized, and blamed for social problems from promiscuity to unintelligence (Roberts, 1997). Because of America’s racialized perception of welfare and its recipients, the ways in which race and class interact with notions of motherhood provide the context of this study. For example, public assistance becomes a nonissue in heteronormative families with a reliable male income. By stressing the mothers’ attempts at achieving this “fairy tale” rather than presenting tangible alternatives to relying on a male earner, *Teen Mom* reinforces the belief that adherence to a cultural norm provides relief from a difficult situation, rather than questioning the conditions that led to the situation in the first place.

Rebecca Feasey (2012) argues that while feminist studies of women’s representations in television and the lived experiences of pregnancy and motherhood are robust fields of research, there is a relative dearth of research on “mothering, motherhood and the maternal role in contemporary popular television” (p. 1). Through a variety of case studies, she argues “the ‘good’ mother myth continues to dominate the wider televisual landscape” (p. 11). Aside from Feasey’s seemingly foundational, and very recent, text, research of motherhood in television has been
limited to book chapters and journal articles (Nagy, 2010; Press, 2012; Pugh, 2005; Tropp, 2006). Considering the lack of research devoted to motherhood on television, analysis of young motherhood specifically is especially sparse.

D. Welfare in America

Since the Elizabethan poor laws of the 17th century, “public officials, scholars, and concerned citizens have debated key components of the welfare system” (Gring-Pemble, 2003, p. 17). This project defines welfare as more than “cash benefits paid to the working-age, able-bodied poor” (Gilens, 1999, p.1). Welfare in the context of Teen Mom can be understood as (usually means-tested) assistance funded or subsidized by federal, state, or local governments. This includes cash payments, but also food stamps and subsidized housing programs. Gilens’ caveat that the recipients are of working age and able-bodied separates these programs from other welfare state programs that are not subject to the same stigmatization in American discourse because they benefit specific populations such as the elderly or the disabled (p. 12).

In America, welfare policy is framed in both gendered and racialized terms, as well as the overt class-based arguments for and against public assistance programs. At the inception of the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program in 1935, women were supposed to depend on the wage-earning capacities of their husbands and did not qualify for aid unless they were widows with children. As social insurance programs expanded across gender and class lines, racialized policies systematically left African Americans and other ethnic groups out of these programs (Nadasen, 2005, p. 4).
In the 1950s and ‘60s, a backlash against social insurance programs for the poor (but not for the middle class) occurred. Claims of fraud and abuse within the welfare system were regularly framed in racial contexts and the stereotypical image of the “welfare queen” began to emerge (Nadasen, p. 6). Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* found numerous problems within African American communities, stressing the difference between black and white America rather than considering what social, political, and economic forces may have *caused* those different experiences. President Johnson requested the report and used it in determining policy to fight his “War on Poverty” (Roberts, 1997, p. 16).

While Gilens argues that “poor” and “black” have historically been conflated in American public discourse, Johnson, Duerst-Lahti, and Norton (2007) suggest that debate about welfare policy plays a role in creating gender in the public sphere. Welfare is intricately tied up in issues of race, gender, heterosexuality, and, of course, class. Communication studies reveal striking patterns of racial attitudes, opinions on welfare policy, and broader beliefs about work ethic and social responsibility (Gamson and Lasch, 1983; Peffley, et al., 1997; Winter, 2006). These studies identify “frames” used to understand welfare and its recipients. The work done by these researchers provides crucial support in presenting evidence for a systematic misrepresentation of *who* receives welfare and *why*; it also informs this project by establishing what welfare frames exist and how to look for them.

Ange-Marie Hancock (2004) uses the 1996 Congressional debates around the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Act to reveal how democratic processes utilize racist rhetoric to keep marginalized groups (in this case, African American women) out of positions of
power, sympathy, or even interest. This “politics of disgust” renders the realities of public assistance irrelevant to the conversation, relying on hyperbolic stereotype to make policy decisions that play on emotional appeals rather than rational argument (p. 6).

Communication researchers have identified and elucidated the frames available to Americans for understanding welfare, providing the context for what I will describe as the novel or alternative frame presented by the women of Teen Mom (Feldman and Zaller, 1992; Gamson and Lasch, 1983; Rose and Baumgartner, 2013). Although I will avoid further use of the term “frame” in order to consider critical questions typically omitted from traditional framing research, I am indebted to the scholars who have systematically categorized the available ‘ideological responses’ or ‘interpretive packages’ within the issue of welfare. By determining which characteristics or aspects of an event or phenomenon are made salient in a text, researchers can identify how specific frames “might lead audiences to have different reactions” to the same phenomenon presented in different ways (Entman, 1993, p. 55). “Frames present a central part of how individuals cognitively comprehend and file events” (Papacharissi and Oliveira, 2008, p. 53). Understanding frames aids in understanding how individuals identify causes, attribute responsibility, and select appropriate responses to social issues.

While framing analysis does not preclude the possibility of subversion, “the ultimate impact of framing is proestablishment” (Iyengar, 1991, p. 16). Most communication research on framing, however, lacks a broader political perspective, focusing exclusively on the effects of frames and ignoring how frames are created and, importantly, contested. Again, the political economy of media actors and subsequent availability of material and rhetorical resources needs to be added to any consideration of framing (Carragee and Roefs, 2004). “News stories […]
become a form for framing contests in which political actors compete by sponsoring their definitions of issues” (p. 216). This project sees the frames present in narratives provided by young women as inherently different from frames generated by the corporate production of reality television or news reports precisely because of the imbalance of power in such a relationship.

While scholars like Hancock and Nadasen highlight the ways in which welfare rights activists and recipients fought against these representations, Schneider and Ingram (1993) suggest that “target populations” of public policy internalize dominant definitions of their social positions and come to understand their experiences through frameworks made available through the media. This internalization is central to this critique of Teen Mom – if teenagers in similar situations accept the dominant messaging present in representations of and discussions about welfare, they may be less likely to seek such aid for themselves, should they need it. The fact that Teen Mom features actual adolescents and their experiences, rather than fictionalized characters, places it squarely within the genre of reality television.

**E. Reality television**

Central to the definition of reality television is the programs’ “claim to the real” (Holmes & Jermyn, 2004, p. 5, emphasis in original). While postmodern sitcoms have played with the “mediated” nature of television, reality television attempts to erase any evidence of mediation; production practices are hidden and viewers are supposed to read scenes as unscripted, organic events that would have happened with or without the cameras. Reality television tells its viewers that their productions are more representative of real life than programs with (credited) writers and a studio audience.
Much reality television research considers the differences between how issues are presented in the context of a reality show and how they are experienced in unmediated settings. Kosovski and Smith (2011) concluded, in their study of the reality show Intervention, that “the program’s depictions of addiction and intervention practices reinforce a popular culture, rather than a science based understanding, of the family and of addiction itself” (p. 852). This analysis, that reality television often differs significantly from personal experiences and rigorous scientific inquiry into phenomena, also makes important connections to larger societal trends.

Morris and McInerney (2010) found that medical reality shows such as Birth Day and A Baby Story present “women’s bodies […] as inferior and in need of surveillance and that this inferiority of the female body is solved through technology and a medical approach to birth” (p. 134). Farber (2011) came to a similar conclusion regarding the presence of the “technocratic model of childbirth” (p. 5). Young (2010) synthesizes the work of Morris and McInerney and others and presents possible research questions regarding the influence of reality television on seeking information and education through Internet sources. These directives are of interest to this project as Teen Mom regularly directs viewers to online resources for sex education, dating violence, and substance abuse.

Feminist media scholarship on reality television focuses on the relationships between “the real,” policing one’s identity and behavior, and gender norms. Dubrofsky (2011) makes explicit inquiry into the ways in which “gendered and racialized bodies” are constituted within the context of reality television, as well as the “implications of a call to the real” inherent in the context (p.1). Her work on the “pornography of emotion” in women’s reality television addresses the phenomenon of relishing in the failures of women. While her case study focuses on women
failing at love and romance on *The Bachelor*, women’s failures in motherhood in *Teen Mom* similarly fetishize “intense bodily responses” as representations of women’s emotions (2009, p. 359).

Andrejevic (2004) questions the subversive possibilities of reality television, its “democratizing” potential. While the genre raises ordinary individuals to celebrity status, it simultaneously presents celebrities as ordinary people. New media allows for unprecedented interactions between producers, consumers, and individuals featured in reality television. Nevertheless, these practices simply “intensify” established processes of “[rationalizing] consumption” (p. 8). The inherent contradictions and paradoxes of the production of reality television present myriad opportunities for novel interpretations of how media is constructed by producers and deconstructed by audiences (Holmes and Jermyn, 2004). Pullen (2009) considers the subversive potential of reality television in showing alternative representations of gay identity while remaining critical of the ways in which gay identity is constructed within the context.

Rebecca Stephens’s (2004) critique of TLC’s *A Wedding Story* and *A Baby Story* as reinforcing dominant heteronormative ideology, mirrored by simultaneous, conservative reforms to welfare laws, offers a neat analogy to the goals of this research project. While recent considerations of *16 & Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* touch on issues of class and welfare (see Guglielmo, 2013), none deal explicitly with the ways in which representations of public assistance reinforce dominant beliefs that oppress and marginalize mothers based on gender, race, and class.
From the preceding literature review, this project identifies a lacuna within feminist media studies. While extensive work has considered the role of the media in presenting motherhood, less attention has been paid to the phenomenon of teen motherhood. Meanwhile, studies of reality television have only begun to consider the ways in which dominant beliefs about welfare and public assistance are reinforced in the genre. The goal of this project is to bring critical feminist media studies to bear on both the proliferation and subversion of the welfare myth within the context of teen reality television.

Specifically, I challenge critical scholars to move beyond writing off reality television as a purely capitalist force, recreating and reinforcing hegemonic ideals. While these elements undoubtedly exist, and more often than not overpower subversive efforts, media scholars should move toward finding ways to amplify and support these subversive moments. Despite overarching production processes that work to standardize and sanitize television series and other cultural artifacts, the individuals working to both create and consume those artifacts retain a capacity for agency and independence, for choosing not to be interpellated purely on society’s terms, but at least partially on their own.

Additionally, the political goals of this project address the ways in which feminist consciousness is fostered and how television and other media can play a positive role in engendering feminist political action, including creating critical awareness and starting conversations about the role of welfare, feminism, and other political issues in the lives of teen mothers and young women in general. Finally, my ultimate political goal is to provide more support for teen mothers in the United States, both economically and socially. The young women featured on Teen Mom make explicit references to their hopes of preventing teenagers from
making the same mistakes they did. This project finds glimmers of a much more radical political goal: to de-stigmatize teen mothers and foster a conversation about how to support young parents.
III. METHOD

A. Critical discourse analysis

This project uses Fairclough’s linguistic definition of discourse as “spoken or written language use, … [extended] to include other types of semiotic activity…, such as visual images… and non verbal communication” (1995, p. 309). The actual words spoken, written, or otherwise recorded can constitute discourse, but meanings created through bodily comportment, tone of voice, or rhetorical structure are also valid considerations for a discourse analysis. More specifically, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) considers these semiotic elements in relation to “other social elements” (p. 231). These aspects of discourse interact dialectically, and it is this relational dimension that interests CDA scholars. While a corporation, such as MTV’s parent company Viacom, is a “partly semiotic [object], it would be a mistake to treat [it] as purely semiotic” (p. 231). The research must also consider the very real political positioning and material resources of Viacom and other media institutions that produce texts about teen parenthood. Traditional communication studies of welfare typically rely on content analysis to quantify the proliferation of specific frames. CDA, however, seeks to make explicit the connections between the content of a text and social structures.

I understand CDA as incorporating micro and macro readings of texts. While a political economy analysis reveals how production practices and broader political issues influence meaning creation, semiotic analysis hones in on specific words, phrases, and rhetorical structures that shape meaning. In this case, words such as “need,” “deserve,” and “help” signal subtle yet important distinctions between different types of support. “One important difference [between the semiotic and discursive approaches] is that the semiotic approach is concerned with the how
of representation, with how language produces meaning – what has been called its 'poetics'; whereas the discursive approach is more concerned with the effects and consequences of representation – its 'politics'” (Hall, 1997, p.6). By considering both perspectives, this project makes stronger statements about relations between textual and social phenomena.

Charles Sanders Peirce ([1897]1955) provides a robust method of systematically analyzing signs. His representamen roughly correlates to the semiologist’s signifier and his object to the signified. He then presents a third aspect of the sign, the interpretant. “[The representamen] addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign” (p. 99). The individual reading the representamen constructs a third entity separate from the culturally agreed upon ‘signified’ used by constructionists. By introducing the interpretant, a single representamen can correlate to disparate objects. A sign necessarily means different things to different receivers of the sign. Cobley and Janz (1997) warn readers not to misunderstand the interpretant as the “interpreter,” but as “the sign in the mind that is the result of an encounter with a sign” (p. 23). Peircean semiotics, then, provides tools to not only identify the dominant meanings of a sign, but to account for possible alternative interpretations.

CDA makes strong connections between textual and political contexts through understanding the importance of political economy to the process of making meaning. By studying the political economy of media production, researchers seek to identify the institutional practices, structures, and economic forces such as corporations and markets that shape the media industry. “[P]olitical economy contextualizes the objects and practices under study within the larger industrial systems that originate them” (Meehan, 2007, p. 161).
While I do not intend to undertake an exhaustive political economy analysis of MTV, insights garnered by previous research into the material realities of MTV and reality television provide a foundational understanding of network responsibilities, goals, and relationships with entities such as advertisers, stakeholders, and viewers. Viacom’s media kit to prospective investors boasts of advertisers’ ability “to be there with [the audience], on all levels, in all directions, all at the same time,” a reference to the growing phenomenon of ‘the second screen’ and viewers’ engagement with television programs in online spaces (Rosati, 2007, p. 556). In their ultimate business of delivering viewers to advertisers at minimal cost, MTV and other networks have embraced the economic advantages of reality programming that can be produced quickly and cheaply (Ross, 2009). Finally, the relationship between advertiser and viewer can hardly be viewed as mutually beneficial; Engstrom (2008) illuminates the relationship between the Oxygen cable network and the popular wedding website The Knot to reveal a system that “maintains a status quo reinforcing femininity and consumerism” for women (p. 60). While these hegemonic forces buttress structures that continue to oppress individuals, the presence of a group as marginalized as teen mothers on national television presents opportunities for both gross misrepresentation and critical political engagement.

Political economy analysis can be used effectively in conjunction with other methods and theories. “[S]cholars working in the contextual tradition are keenly aware that research must address not only media corporations and markets but also the people whose collective labor creates media artifacts, the artifacts themselves, and the people who engage with or are exposed to those artifacts” (Wasko and Meehan, 2013, p. 153). This project understands discourse to be created and negotiated through economic structures, individual texts, and active audience
interpretation of those texts. All three sites converse with and inform the others, requiring researchers to combine methods and theories to address as many aspects of meaning creation as possible.

This project relies on an interdisciplinary approach to both theory and method. While traditional communication studies often gloss over the hegemonic role of the media, critical media studies struggle against claims of extreme subjectivity and results that are difficult to replicate. Similar to the intentions of Entman and Rojecki (2000), this project aims to “employ methodologies and insights drawn from both” social science and cultural studies, aspiring to “build fruitfully upon both” (p. 15).

B. Data

To glean a more accurate understanding of the representations of welfare in MTV’s Teen Mom, this project uses every episode of the series as a source of data. Teen Mom, Teen Mom 2, and Teen Mom 3 each follow four young women who were originally featured in an episode of MTV’s 16 & Pregnant. Both programs are one hour long and premiere in prime time with almost immediate syndication on the MTV networks. Teen Mom premiered in 2009 and ended filming in 2012, resulting in 46 episodes over four seasons; Teen Mom 2 first aired in 2011 and is in the midst of its fifth season at the time of writing; Teen Mom 3 has only had one season of 14 episodes that aired in 2013. Newly released episodes of Teen Mom 2 will be incorporated into the analysis as needed. Quotes and scenarios taken from episodes will be referenced by their abbreviated series, season, and episode number. For example, the fourth episode of the second season of Teen Mom 2 would be cited as “TM2 204.”
The show relies exclusively on narrative from the teen mothers and other individuals with whom they interact; except for post-episode interviews and specials, there is no obvious editorial presence or voice. Unlike *16 & Pregnant*, *Teen Mom* rarely uses “confessional” speech acts where the teen mother addresses the camera, and the audience, directly. Instead, conversations between the woman and her friends or family allow for a casual analysis of events that unfold on and off camera.

In addition to the episodes themselves, this project will consider after-show specials produced by MTV as well as blogs, news articles, and other texts that reference public assistance or welfare in the context of *Teen Mom*. After-show specials differ depending on the series. Both *Teen Mom* and *Teen Mom 2* produced multiple hour-long interview specials with Dr. Drew Pinskey (a television personality and addiction specialist who acts as moderator/therapist). In these specials, Dr. Drew asks the young women to respond to specific events from the past season and to speak to their experiences as teen mothers and reality television celebrities. Dr. Drew and audience members also ask the women general questions about teen parenthood, relationships, and sexuality after their responses to their experiences as seen in the show. *Teen Mom 3* continues the tradition, but features the specials throughout the season, typically airing them immediately after the premiere of an episode. These specials are only 30 minutes in length and are hosted by Su Chin Pak, not Dr. Drew, but follow a similar format.

Additional texts that reference *Teen Mom* and public assistance programs will also contribute to the ultimate data set. These texts may come from gossip blogs, television trade magazines, or mainstream news sources. Relevant articles were found using a LexisNexis search of major American newspapers; articles included the phrases “*Teen Mom*” AND “MTV” AND
“welfare” OR “WIC” OR “government assistance” and were published between December 8, 2009 (the date *Teen Mom* premiered) and February 1, 2014. The latter date was selected as an arbitrary date that allowed for enough time for reflection before incorporation into this research while capturing an important *New York Times* article from January 13, 2014 and its subsequent responses. Additionally, Google searches with the same search criteria were performed between December 1, 2013 and February 1, 2014 to capture personal blogs or trade magazines not represented in the LexisNexis database. In utilizing all possible texts that address the issue of public assistance within the context of *Teen Mom*, the project will be able to strongly identify patterns and find as much evidence as possible for instances of both oppressive and subversive meaning creation.

By performing a critical discourse analysis of *Teen Mom*, this project attempts to identify the ways in which it reinforces dominant and detrimental beliefs about public assistance programs and their recipients. At the same time, the contradictions of reality television and of discursive practices in general present opportunities for subversion, as evidenced by young women speaking with their own voices, even in a highly controlled media environment. By highlighting the hegemonic forces at work within an apparently empowering context, this project seeks to provide a nuanced way of interpreting reality television, one that realizes the normative and oppressive structure of capitalist media production while allowing for the possibility of subversion. *Teen Mom* is not just a platform for conservative, racist, sexist rhetoric. Nor is it an open forum where teen mothers can talk freely about the patriarchal forces in their lives and ‘speak truth to power.’ Rather, it is a contested space that provides opportunity for both hegemonic and counterhegemonic messages to be gleansed by the audience.
This project utilizes an interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological approach to identify how welfare narratives within *Teen Mom* serve to reinforce or undermine dominant ideology about gender, race, sexuality, and class. By bringing together the political commitment of radical feminist scholarship and the methodological rigor of communication research, I hope to highlight both the marginalizing tactics and subversive possibilities of reality television. If young women are using the platforms of MTV’s reality shows to discuss their experiences as mothers and citizens, feminists and media scholars alike should listen to their voices while contextualizing the problematic production of those voices.
IV. ANALYSIS

Casual viewing of the series suggested discussions about welfare and public assistance were not necessarily very common, and a close reading of the episodes confirmed that only a few of the mothers discussed these issues at all. The series follows a total of 12 young women, only three of which are considered extensively below. A fourth mother is discussed briefly, but her example does not include a discussion of welfare. As viewers, we don’t know how much support these women receive, whether or not mothers that don’t talk about welfare actually receive welfare, or in which programs they are enrolled (unless they give us that information explicitly). It is clear, though, that all of the young women in the series have to consider how they are going to make ends meet.

The situations these young women find themselves in vary from dealing with unsupportive family members after giving her baby up for adoption (Catelynn), to learning how to handle newborn twins and a new marriage (Leah), to mourning the loss of her baby’s father (Farrah). Even women that seem to worry less about paying rent and buying groceries still have to address the fact that earning a reliable income while learning how to be a new mother is difficult, to say the least. Some of the women, like Farrah and Chelsea, rely on their parents to lend a helping hand, both monetarily and in the form of childcare. Others, like Leah or Katie, are part of a parenting team where the father’s paycheck is (usually) enough to make ends meet. The financial cost of raising a child is an important part of the series’ ‘teen pregnancy as tragedy’ trope; Dr. Drew regularly cites statistics that suggest a large part of the teen mother population (between one quarter and one half) is “on welfare.” While the relevance of these kinds of statistics will be considered below, Dr. Drew’s own numbers suggest that between 3 and 6 of the
teen mothers in the show should be utilizing public assistance. Again, this critical discourse analysis cannot necessarily determine whether or not the women that discuss welfare explicitly actually use it, or whether the women who don’t make a point of talking about it actually receive welfare. We can, however, learn about their conceptions of welfare and welfare recipients by listening closely to the way they talk about it.

A. Internalized misconceptions

As previously suggested, the ways in which public discourse and policy debates define and address specific societal groups, or “target populations,” can be internalized and accepted by members of that group (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). In other words, individuals that see themselves as part of an identified group, i.e. teen mothers, understand their experiences and their situations in the manner they have been discussed by political leaders and other public elites (Schneider and Jacoby, 2005). The proliferation of the myth of the welfare queen obviously influences the Teen Mom mothers’ perceptions and attitudes toward public assistance programs. Levels of resistance vary between the women, but every mother that ultimately utilizes welfare or other assistance programs includes a caveat to explain her decision or to hedge against criticism. These women, to varying degrees, have internalized and accepted the decidedly false notion that welfare abuse is rampant and that reliance on public programs is shameful.

In season one of Teen Mom, Amber works toward her high school diploma while struggling to remain civil with her boyfriend, Gary, and caring for her daughter, Leah. Amber and Gary’s relationship is anything but stable and the cycle of fighting, breaking up, and reuniting seems endless. In an attempt to remove Leah from a hostile environment and regain
some of her own sanity, Amber considers moving out of Gary’s apartment and shares her thoughts with her cousin, Krystal.

TM 107

Krystal: *Would you be able to afford your own apartment?*

Amber: *The thing is, I'm gonna have to be goin' off the government as I'm in school and a single mom.* ...

Amber (Voice Over): *I don’t want to rely on government assistance, but until I get a job, it’s the only way I can get Leah away from all the fighting.*

Amber doesn’t want to “rely” on the government, revealing an underlying belief that welfare is not a fundamental right of American citizens, but a support system for people with no other options. Her statement suggests she will no longer have to “rely on government assistance” once she has a job and the only reason she has to turn to the government is her lack of employment. It is a last ditch effort to keep her daughter safe, the “only way” she can “get Leah away from … the fighting.” This reinforces the notion that welfare should be used only when all other possible solutions have been exhausted, that those in search of welfare funds should have dire rather than mundane needs.

Briana, one of the moms of Teen Mom 3, also expresses unease at enrolling in Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC, a supplemental nutrition program. During a scene in the grocery store, Briana tells viewers in a voice over that she “got approved for a government assistance program.” Back at home, she discusses her enrollment in the plan with her mother, Roxanne.

TM3 101

Roxanne: *We'll be saving a few bucks that could go for gas, could go for diapers, wipes, t-shirts, socks that she's constantly outgrowing…*

Briana: *Honestly, it bothers me that we're in a program, that the government helps us, but we're - we're not rich.*

Roxanne: *It does suck, because if Devoin [Briana’s ex] had put in his part, we wouldn't be where we're at. And that's selfish, and not fair to you, or to me, and most importantly, to Nova [Briana’s daughter].*
Briana: *Once I get a job, I'll be able to help you with all that and it will be so much easier.*

Again, a young woman is “bothered” by receiving government assistance and her mother confirms that it is a less-than-ideal situation. Again, applying for this assistance stems from a lack of employment, not from a fundamental right to be able to feed oneself and one’s child. While Amber and Briana express a general wariness toward government assistance, Kailyn explicitly describes her aversion to welfare programs.

As mentioned in the introduction, Kailyn is the daughter of a distant and unsupportive single mother. Because of her unstable home life, her boyfriend, Jo, invites Kailyn to live with his family before the birth of their son, Isaac. As their partnership deteriorates and they officially end their relationship, Jo’s parents continue to offer Kailyn and Isaac a place to live until she defies their rules by dating another young man, Jordan. When Jo’s parents learn of their relationship, Kailyn is forced to move back in with her mother. As season two begins, Kailyn is trying desperately to get out of her mother’s house, but has little means of achieving that goal with her part-time job. Her boyfriend, Jordan, presses her about her options.

**TM2 202**

Kailyn: … *[E]ven if I'm broke and I'm living in my own apartment, at least I can be comfortable. I just never know when she's gonna lash out or get mad at me for not cleaning my room one day and kick me out. So you got any big plans to move out of your parents' house anytime soon?*

Jordan: *Nope. I’m content.*

Kailyn: *I wish I had things as easy as you do.*

Jordan: *Yeah, but you're a lot more independent, so shouldn't you be proud that you're doing everything mostly on your own?*

Kailyn: *I can't be proud of it when I can barely make ends meet.*
Jordan: *How do you think other teen moms get help? Like what do you think* --?

Kailyn: *Get on welfare.*

Jordan: *Did you ever think of doing that?*

Kailyn: *No.*

Jordan: *Why not?*

Kailyn: *'Cause I think that's embarrassing and people who abuse the system make it look bad for the people who actually need it.*

Jordan: *But you're actually one of the people that actually need it. Have you looked at any options like welfare, or--?*

Kailyn: *Not really. How would you feel if I had to go on welfare?*

Jordan: *I wouldn't think of you any differently. *'Cause you gotta do what you gotta do to make ends meet and everything.*

Kailyn: *But it's also a pride thing.*

Jordan: *Right, well, do you have too much pride to get support for Isaac?*

Kailyn: *No.*

Not only does needing assistance embarrass Kailyn, an emotion many of the young mothers express, but she believes welfare fraud is rampant. Despite the debunking of the welfare queen myth, the prevalence of it continues unabated (Swan et al., 2008). Jordan breaks through Kailyn’s defensive anti-welfare shield only by questioning her ability to adequately provide for her son without assistance. While this tactic shifts Kailyn’s focus from her perception of welfare recipients to her responsibilities as a mother, Jordan’s query suggests that if Kailyn were in a similar situation, but without Isaac, she *would* in fact have too much pride to receive assistance. Yet again, welfare is not a system in which the government guarantees a livable wage to its citizens; rather, it provides for its most vulnerable – children – when their mothers cannot.

Kailyn doesn’t enroll in a welfare program (that the viewers are made aware of, at least). Instead, she reaches out to a non-profit organization, Valley Youth House, and applies for their supportive housing program. In her interview with the counselor, Kailyn stresses her reluctance
to accept assistance and asks detailed questions about the program. After the counselor explains
how Kailyn will receive rent assistance for up to two years, she asks how Kailyn feels about that.
“Yeah, it makes me feel better because it’s not welfare.” When the counselor insists there’s
“nothing wrong with welfare,” Kailyn responds, “No, I know, but I just think that people who
abuse the system make it look bad for the people who actually need it and I don’t want people to
think that I would be somebody who would be abusing it.” She is highly aware of the stigma
surrounding welfare recipients and takes great care to distinguish herself from recipients who
don’t “actually need it.” Through these constant references to welfare fraud and the undeserving
quality of many welfare recipients, Kailyn not only limits her own options for supporting herself
and her son, she also reinforces the stigmatization she is trying so desperately to avoid.

These three young women, despite their obvious need for and fundamental right to
assistance programs, qualify their enrollment by stressing their willingness to work, the
temporary nature of their assistance, and their responsibilities as mothers to provide for their
children, no matter how “embarrassing” it may be. This language and the despondent way in
which the young women speak reinforce the incorrect yet widely accepted belief that welfare
abuse is rampant. It also suggests that governmental assistance should be used as a stopgap, a
temporary solution until full employment can be achieved or a reliable male wage earner can be
found.

When asked in interviews why they chose to be a part of the show, every young mother,
without exception, says she wants other teenagers to learn from her story. The three women
discussed above are teaching their fans to avoid welfare if at all possible, to use it temporarily if
it must be used, and to question the honesty of welfare recipients. On the other hand, the reasons
they cite for seeking out this assistance go beyond good parenting; they stress their desire for independence from their partners and other paternalistic relatives. While many of the mothers reinforce the unbridled heteronormativity of the series in their own ways, Amber, Briana, and Kailyn undermine the ideal of the two-parent family unit in further discussion of their living situations and financial circumstances.

B. **Empowerment through independence**

Despite their rearticulation of myths and damaging stereotypes about welfare recipients, many of the women on *Teen Mom*, and not only the ones who actually receive public assistance, express deep desires for economic independence from their partners and parents. Economic independence translates to a fundamental empowerment that frees them from abusive relationships, paternalistic family members, and unstable living situations. They explicitly describe their attempts at achieving their own financial security as an integral part of their search for autonomy. But it is more than not wanting to rely on an unreliable partner; they express an unwillingness to let anybody else use their dependency to control them and limit their options. More often than not, these desires win out over any misgivings about receiving government aid.

When Amber brings up the cost of finishing high school with Gary in TM 102, she suggests there might be financial aid available. Gary offers, “I could give you an allowance.” Amber’s reaction is swift and definitive: “I don't want an allowance, I want to make my own money. I'm not a kid. No, I want to make my own money, which is why I'm going to go back to school.” In TM 107, she tells viewers in a voice over that she is finally able to move into her own apartment. “I still haven’t heard back from my job interview, but between savings and government assistance, I have enough for a deposit on a new apartment. … I hope finally having
some independence will help me and Gary get along better.” She believes it is her reliance on Gary and the resentment she feels because of it that prevents her and Gary from having a successful relationship. “As long as Gary is supporting me, we’ll never stop fighting.”

Maci, who doesn’t discuss government assistance programs outside of court-sanctioned child support agreements, learns from her mother the importance of financial independence. She has fallen behind in her college courses and her parents question whether she is doing everything she can to stay on track in TM 304. “When it comes to school, what you need to keep in mind is the only way to ever be independent is to be able to afford to be independent, and the only way to be able to afford it, is to get your degree. That has to be, behind Bentley [Maci’s son], your number one priority. Otherwise you'll never be independent, ever.” Maci is in a new, healthy relationship, but her mother doesn’t suggest she should rely on him or Bentley’s father for support. Instead, she explains to her daughter how her material reality is directly related to her self-actualization. Her mother doesn’t focus on the importance of financial security, but on the importance of independence. It’s not enough to be able to provide for her son one way or another; Maci should be able to do it herself.

Katie’s fiancé, Joey, disapproves of her plans to work toward a bachelor’s degree. There are no four-year institutions near their small town in Wyoming so she asks Joey to look into transferring to a job in Salt Lake City. Even though he determines he would be able to get a job there, he vetoes Katie’s plans to move, effectively quashing her dream of getting a social work degree. When discussing the disappointment in TM3 107, Katie tells her mother, “In a way, I think he knows that he has complete control over me when he works.” Katie feels trapped, like she is being forced to rely on Joey for the rest of her life because he refuses to support her
education. Although she isn’t willing to end the relationship over it, her frustration and helplessness is palpable.

Briana feels that her ex-boyfriend, Devoin, comes and goes too frequently in their daughter’s life. After consulting with her mother and sister, she decides in TM3 106 to end the relationship entirely. “I’ve decided to ask Devoin to stay away and let me do the best I can. … We don’t need him.” A few episodes later, Briana reverses her decision and invites Devoin to Nova’s first birthday party. Her mom, while supportive of the decision, tells Briana, “I just don’t want you to feel like you have to eat shit from a man to survive.”

Despite their overt and sometimes hostile resentment toward Devoin for his lack of support, both emotional and financial, Briana’s mother warns her against inviting him back into their lives just to make ends meet. To Roxanne, accepting his support isn’t worth dealing with his chronic absenteeism. Roxanne and Devoin reconcile at the birthday party, where she tells him, “Briana can’t do it all by herself. She says she can, but if I’m out of the picture, what’s gonna happen? Just don’t give up.” It’s unclear whether she is referring to financial or emotional support, but both Briana and her mother struggle to reconcile their desire for Devoin to accept responsibility with their desire for Briana’s independence.

Kailyn, in her typical self-aware fashion, provides the most straightforward expressions of discontent for needing to rely on others. In TM2 103, Jo’s parents let Kailyn know that despite Jo ending things with her, she can’t date and live with them at the same time. In a voice over, she tells viewers, “I know Jo’s family has done a lot for me; I just wish I had the freedom to make my own decisions.” She doesn’t believe accepting support from people entitles them to dictate her life choices. A few episodes later, Jo’s parents find out about her continued relationship with
Jordan and tell Kailyn she has to find a different place to live. While discussing her predicament with her mother, Suzi, the following exchange occurs:

    Kailyn: I’m going to try to look for an apartment by myself.
    Suzi: How are you going to do that?
    Kailyn: I don’t know.
    Suzi: Well, you’ve got to think about the financial aspect of it, too.
    Kailyn (defensively): So, what? I’m just going to be with him to –
    Suzi (interrupting): No, I’m not saying that. I’m not saying that at all. I’m just saying, I want you to really think about it. Look before you leap. Being a single parent is probably one of the toughest things you’ll have to do. I know. I’ve been there. I’ve done it. It’s a hard choice. It’s a scary choice.

Kailyn becomes indignant when she thinks her mother is suggesting she should reconcile with Jo and his family purely for their financial support. Her mother jumps in to insist that wasn’t her intention, but Kailyn’s visceral response to her mother’s non-statement reveals a deep-seated fear of having to do just that. The fact that Suzi doesn’t actually get the words out before Kailyn’s rebuttal illuminates her revulsion toward compromising her integrity by biting her tongue and reaching out to somebody who shows little to no respect for her.

Kailyn and the other young women suggest an alternative way of understanding the role of government assistance in the lives of teen mothers. While they qualify their decisions and express their shame and embarrassment, they ultimately choose to accept whatever assistance is available and necessary to achieve independence. While feminists have suggested that ideal government assistance programs would enable empowerment and independence for women for decades (Gordon, 1990; Sarvasy, 1992), the argument is nonexistent in the public discourse surrounding the issue. The women of Teen Mom are using the platform of a reality show on MTV to present a (relatively) radical feminist idea. This is resistance in the context of Teen Mom.
This is the element of subversion that finds its way out of the sexism and heteronormativity of the series. Instead of framing welfare as a last resort, as support for children but not their mothers, as a necessary evil that prevents hunger and homelessness, the women of Teen Mom are highlighting the independence, autonomy, and ultimate empowerment that comes with welfare. This message breaks through despite the overbearing paternalism and conservatism of the series.

C. **Heteronormativity and selective education**

The Teen Mom series reinforce compulsory heteronormativity, primarily through portraying young, single mothers as incapable of adequately caring for their children without the support of their partners. Where partners are unreliable or entirely absent, family members fill this void, but either the women or the people surrounding them suggest this kind of support is fundamentally different and less desirable than the support of a male partner. Briana continuously vocalizes her discomfort with relying on her mother and sister; Chelsea repeatedly (and wildly unsuccessfully) tries to engage her daughter’s father in a relationship; Leah remarries quickly after her brief marriage to her daughters’ father; and Kailyn weds Javi at least partially in order to receive benefits associated with his military service. I do not mean to suggest young mothers should be discouraged from finding fulfillment and comfort in their partners; rather, Teen Mom reinforces the idea that a heterosexual, monogamous family unit is the only appropriate way to raise a child by highlighting every single mother’s frantic attempts to recreate this heteronormative fantasy.

In the post-season specials, Dr. Drew regularly references these futile efforts at achieving the American dream, typically referring to them as “fairy tales.” This doesn’t mean he finds the traditional family scene to be without merits, only that the statistics he is so fond of citing
suggest it is unlikely that these fathers will “step up to the plate” and “accept responsibility.” It’s important to note that the viewers are never given any source or contextual information about Dr. Drew’s statistics. He scares viewers with low graduation rates for teen mothers, increased chances for abuse and neglect for the children of teen mothers, and the ultimately misleading “one quarter of teen mothers will be on welfare within three years of their child’s birth.” These frightening numbers are meant to impress upon viewers the hopelessness and tragedy of teen motherhood. Both Dr. Drew and the mothers themselves state throughout these specials that the goal of the show is to prevent unintended pregnancies. Lauren Dolgen, creator and developer of *16 & Pregnant* and *Teen Mom*, explicitly outlined her intentions for the series in an editorial for CNN (Dolgen, 2011). Ms. Dolgen wanted to “help give these teenagers a voice” and insists that the shows should serve as “cautionary tales about the consequences of unprotected sex, and the reality of becoming a parent too early.”

Before commercial breaks and during specials, viewers receive directions on how to find information about contraception, sexually transmitted infections, abusive relationships, and drug addiction, either through websites or hotlines. In one special, Dr. Drew provides young mothers with a number they can text to receive health information for their children. The show remains silent, however, on how teenagers can get information about public assistance. In one scene that was cut from the regular season but was aired during a post-season “Unseen Moments” special, Amber receives guidance on how to find childcare assistance along with her FAFSA from a cosmetology school admissions counselor. Except for Kailyn’s interview with the Youth Valley House associate, this is the only time viewers catch any sort of glimpse into the process of researching and applying for assistance. If the goal of *Teen Mom* is to honestly share the
experiences of these young women with viewers and to educate teenagers, then they have failed by obscuring the ways in which young mothers are able to find and receive public assistance. While they present detailed accounts of obtaining a GED, filing for divorce, or mediating custody battles, the critical task of making ends meet is hidden from view, reinforcing the notion that being on welfare is shameful and should be kept in the shadows.

D. **Teen Mom and the public debate**

Popular discussion of *Teen Mom* and how it relates to welfare typically falls into one of two categories: feminist magazines or progressive blogs that critique how the series reinforces the myth of the welfare queen and stigmatizes teen mothers in general; or pieces that criticize MTV for glamorizing teen pregnancy and the use of government assistance to support such a lifestyle, typically found on gossip blogs or conservative websites. Major news organizations, such as *TIME* magazine and *The New York Times*, publish articles that blandly present both sides of the prevention vs. glamorization argument but rarely reference the mothers’ use or discussion of government assistance. For example, a January 13, 2014 article published in *The New York Times* suggested a link between *Teen Mom* viewership and a lower incidence of teen pregnancy, sparking a frenzy of news pieces and blog posts, none of which engaged with the issue of welfare (Lowrey, 2014). (It should also be noted that the study cited in the *Times* article didn’t actually present evidence relating increased viewing of *Teen Mom* with fewer unplanned teen pregnancies; rather, they found an inverse relationship between watching MTV and teen pregnancy rates.)

None of the articles or blog posts, even those from a critical feminist perspective, point to the presence of a subversive element within the series as I have outlined in this project. It seems
that *Teen Mom*’s critics, from both the left and the right, are preoccupied with highlighting the ways MTV represents teen mothers and ignore the ways in which these young women are speaking for themselves and contributing to the public discourse surrounding the issue of welfare. While the concerns raised by popular feminist critics, such as “glossing over the real issues of class and poverty” (Sisson, 2011) are reflected in this thesis, we should provide space in our analysis for the women themselves.

Amber, Kailyn, Briana, and the other nine mothers who have chosen to be involved with the *Teen Mom* series are real women making what they believe to be the best decisions for themselves and their families. They deserve to be treated as more than pawns at the mercy of MTV, as tools in the racist sexist capitalist machine; they deserve to be treated as autonomous individuals with agency and an ability to use their access to the airwaves in a subversive, or at least oppositional, way. This nuanced perspective is decidedly lacking in popular discussion of *Teen Mom*, providing little opportunity to identify and celebrate the subversive potential of the series.

In the current political context, welfare programs remain a favorite target of conservative budget slashing. While the overt racism of the welfare reform debate in the 1990s finds fewer outlets in today’s political sphere, stories of welfare abuse and rampant misappropriation, like the California surfer who bought lobster with his food stamps, continue to obscure the real numbers on who uses welfare and for what. There seems to be a shift, however, away from focusing on the individual’s unworthiness for public assistance toward highlighting budgetary concerns that call for across-the-board belt-tightening. This rhetorical shift changes the question from “Who deserves welfare?” to “How much should America spend on welfare?” This makes
the subversive element within *Teen Mom* even more politically striking by making a case for spending more on welfare and presenting welfare as an empowering entity in the lives of young mothers.

Where a liberal political construction of the welfare issue frames it as a necessary role of the government to provide a minimum standard of living to its citizens and a radical construction views welfare as placating the proletariat, framing research does not reveal a politically salient way of understanding welfare as ultimately beneficial for both the recipient or the society. In the construction revealed through this critical discourse analysis, however, welfare serves to empower individual women while supporting the households of single mothers, a growing segment of the American domestic landscape (Misra, Moller, Strader, and Wemlinger, 2012).

When other social factors such as race and class are considered, the negative impact of having a child as a teenager almost disappears (Hoffman and Maynard, 2012). It is not the case, as Dr. Drew would have us believe, that teen mothers are more likely to be on welfare within a given time span after their birth; compared to other teen girls within their given demographic, teen mothers use welfare services at the same rate as their childless counterparts. While *Teen Mom* reinforces these misconceptions in an attempt to scare teenagers away from the horror of becoming a teen parent, the women featured in the show attempt to problematize this construction by suggesting that at least a few of their problems could be alleviated by appropriate social support.

In addition to public assistance programs like food stamps and housing assistance, subsidized healthcare plays an important yet obscured role in the lives of teen mothers. There is no discussion throughout the series about what kind of health insurance these young women have,
how their insurance status changes after the birth of their child, whether or not they are enrolled in Medicaid, or healthcare costs in general. While the mothers talk constantly about the cost of diapers, formula, rent, school, and other expenses associated with raising a child, they are conspicuously absent about how they pay for healthcare.

Finally, the mere presence of teen mothers, an exceedingly marginalized group, on a primetime television show on a major cable network can be political in and of itself. Women are coming together, albeit in a highly mediated space, to share their experiences. Sharing knowledge and voicing opinion is a critical component of feminist political action. While the ways in which these women’s voices are manipulated and their narratives (p)re-written must be diligently researched before we can determine how these conversations are affected by their location in an MTV reality show, an exploration of the daily lives of teen mothers, as told by the mothers themselves, should be seen as an opportunity for feminist praxis rather than a problem.
V. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The capitalist interests of MTV, the personal goals and initiatives of the featured women, and the interpretation of and engagement with the show by the audience all interact, resulting in many possible readings of these texts and their relation to the American political debate surrounding welfare. This project only speaks to the ways in which the MTV series *Teen Mom* both reinforces and subverts popular notions of welfare through a critical discourse analysis of the series and of relevant popular texts. Race, for example, remains an essential part of the welfare debate and how teen motherhood is constructed in the public sphere, but *Teen Mom*, with its (practically) all-white cast limits an extensive consideration of race in the series.

A comparison between *Teen Mom* and its international reiterations would speak to the peculiarities of the American political environment as well as the process of globalization within the television industry. Are the subversive potentials within reality television and television in general unique to the American political economy? How is subversion in television controlled or minimized in other geopolitical contexts? How are American series altered for consumption in different cultural contexts, and by whom? Different configurations of and approaches to the welfare state would necessarily affect the narratives surrounding teen motherhood and welfare use. What might these narratives look like in a northern European nation with a robust and politically accepted welfare state, or in a political context where government support is nonexistent?

In addition, interviews with producers and the mothers themselves can shed light on relevant questions about how the experience of being on *Teen Mom* affects the daily experiences of the mothers and where narratives come from in the series. This CDA has considered the words
spoken by the mothers in the series, but not who wrote those words. Reality television presents a complicated relationship between producers and featured individuals. Where traditional, scripted television series employ writers who receive credit for their work, the labor of constructing a narrative in the context of a reality show remains hidden from the audience in order to preserve the ‘realness’ of the events. While interviews with those involved with the production can shed light on these specific production processes, they do not answer the question of whether or not it is relevant that these ideas were written for the mothers. On the one hand, the idea is still subversive and the message is still being delivered by a young mother; on the other, this practice would undermine the autonomy of these young mothers and suggest they are incapable of generating these subversive ideas themselves. The answer to that question lies beyond the scope of this project. While I attempted to take into consideration the political economy of MTV, a more thorough investigation of the production practices and corporate obligations could shed light on specific ways narratives are supported or suppressed.

The third piece of the puzzle, the audience, remains elusive in the context of discourse analysis. Examination of online spaces, such as forums or social media platforms, could reveal surprising ways in which fans of Teen Mom and the teens being targeted by Teen Mom, which are not necessarily the same group, engage with the series. Indeed, an analysis of the actual viewers that tune in for episodes could provide meaningful insights into how audiences consume reality programming. By utilizing the voices of participants in Teen Mom, from producers, to the mothers, to viewers, media scholars can engage with multiple facets of the communication process. Incorporating interviews, focus groups, and other methods focused on gathering insights from individuals into critical media studies research broadens the cultural studies scholar’s
understanding of how production, content, and consumption are related and how each site of meaning production is filtered through subjective experiences (Banks, 2014; Kellner, 1995; Messenger Davies, 2013).

Ideally, this project lends itself to a continued exploration of how feminist praxis, such as raising consciousness and presenting radical political ideas, is transformed in mediated contexts. How much influence do the producers of *Teen Mom* have over the narratives presented by the mothers? How much control do the mothers have over how their stories are presented? How open and supportive is the relationship between producer and mother? How is communication between viewers and the mothers affected by the corporate context? How does social media complicate these questions?

This project provides an example of combining rigorous communication methods with a critical perspective on media representation and public policy. While cultural scholars can tend towards the nihilistic when analyzing the subversive possibilities of mass media, orthodox communication research often lacks a forceful answer to the ultimate research question: “So what?” Moving beyond either counting frames or decrying capitalism, this project brings a nuanced and optimistic approach to media studies. In addition, feminist research that considers working mothers, the relationship between motherhood and public assistance programs, or the role of gender in reality television may find these results interesting.
**VI. CONCLUSION**

*Teen Mom* provides an opportunity for media scholars to problematize multiple, interconnected social structures and practices, such as the representation of motherhood, the political possibilities of reality television, and the relationship between popular culture and political discourse. Teen mothers, a highly marginalized population, have an outlet in primetime on a major cable network, fulfilling a feminist goal of achieving more diverse representations of motherhood in media contexts (Rakow, 1992). Simultaneously, however, researchers and viewers alike should remain conscious of the various ways these mothers are demonized and teen parenthood remains stigmatized (Guglielmo, 2013). By portraying teen mothers as unfit, these series perpetuate “the ‘good’ mother myth” (Feasey, 2012, p. 11). While this tactic of undermining any positive effects of featuring subjugated individuals appears throughout media contexts, reality television seems especially adroit at it (Dubrofsky, 2009, 2011).

While this project supports the notion that reality television heightens the normalizing aspects of popular media (Andrejevic, 2004), it goes beyond a pessimistic judgment of *Teen Mom* and finds moments in the series where subversion reigns.

In addition to expanding the ways in which media scholars study meaning in a text, this project presents questions about how the context of reality television affects both the hegemonic and subversive messages apparent in the text. Critical feminist media scholars should explore the promising research areas outlined above to understand the relationship between corporate producers, individuals as reality television subjects, and their audience with more nuance than currently exists in the literature. Foucault’s construction of discourse allows for individuals to directly address power structures and articulate moments of resistance (1978). Furthermore,
critical discourse analysis encourages a nuanced study of a text that considers the possibility of oppositional readings, both on the part of the producer and consumer (Fairclough, 1995; Hall, 1980). By understanding these inherent contradictions, my analysis recognized both hegemonic and counterhegemonic messages within *Teen Mom*.

The role of welfare in American public discourse ranges from a corrupt system that rewards laziness and promiscuity to a fundamental responsibility of government to provide an acceptable standard of living to all of its citizens. To this spectrum, the women of *Teen Mom* have added a new perspective: government assistance programs provide a means of empowerment, a path to independence, which would not otherwise exist. While stereotypes that reinforce the stigmatization of welfare recipient and teen mothers abound and the show’s only response to a breach of abstinence is compulsive heteronormativity, the best efforts of MTV could not prevent this glimmer of subversion from shining through.

Media productions play a central role in generating ways of understanding our social reality. Beyond the reciprocal nature of the relationship between individual and culture (Markus and Kitayana, 2010), the shows we watch, books we read, and links we follow both reflect and reinforce social structures and practices. In turn, these media artifacts are both produced and consumed by individuals with their own subjectivities, exponentially expanding the possibility for new ideas to be added to the discourse and become part of political debate (Hall, 1997).

Political rhetoric translates, quite literally at times, into public policy. President Ronald Reagan successfully used the rhetorical device of the “welfare queen” to promote and ultimately enact conservative welfare reform legislation (Stoesz and Karger, 1993). Not only did President Reagan “[shift] the welfare debate to the right,” resulting in more conservative welfare policy, he
moved the entire political discourse further toward the conservative end of the spectrum (O’Connor, 1998, p. 37). This larger shift changed the parameters of political debate so that later presidents, even those with liberal political tendencies, had to embrace more conservative tenets in order to be viewed as politically viable or competent (Skowronek, 2008). In addition, the way “target populations” are discussed in public discourse affects the way those populations understand themselves and the policies relevant to them (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). *Teen Mom*, then, makes suggestions for how Americans should conceptualize the use of welfare in the lives of young parents. These new conceptualizations may become part of the broader political debate about welfare, considering the ability of media artifacts to contribute to public discourse. Simultaneously, teens, women, mothers, taxpayers, welfare recipients, and other social groups may compare their experiences with what they have seen as viewers or heard about as cultural critics, influencing their political opinions about welfare. A seemingly apolitical popular television show on a youth-oriented cable network can, in fact, have profound social consequences, from discourse to legislation.

The individual, media products, political debate, and public policy interact in myriad ways to affect social change or maintain the status quo. This thesis considered just one moving part in this complex mobile – how these young mothers talked about their understanding of and experience with welfare – which contributes to a more complete understanding of these relationships. My goal in this project was to identify the narratives provided by the women themselves and to tease out their perspectives on teen motherhood and welfare programs through a critical discourse analysis. By carefully listening to their voices and considering their words against the social structures surrounding their experiences as both mothers and reality television
stars, this project illuminates the nuanced ways in which they struggle, not only to make ends meet, but to make meaning in their lives and in the public discourse.
CITED LITERATURE


VITA

NAME: Bailey Sue Kelley

M.A., Communication, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2014

TEACHING: Department of Communication, University of Illinois at Chicago

HONORS: Outstanding Undergraduate Thesis Award, Columbia College, 2010

National Communication Association Graduate Student Award,
University of Illinois at Chicago Department of Communication, 2013

Presidential Graduate Research Fellow, University of Iowa, 2014

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP:
National Communication Association
Cultural Studies Association
National Women’s Studies Association

