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Walking a Fine Line: The Struggle for Parent Advocacy in the NYC Child Welfare System ☆

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Abstract

This article investigates parent advocacy in the child welfare system amongst families living in low-income and racialized urban areas, those most impacted by this system. Drawing from my fieldwork experience at the community-based organization Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP) in East Harlem, New York, I interrogate the political trajectory of the organization, its practices, and its purpose. I analyze how the decision parents make to advocate is tied to the injustice, stigma, and surveillance they—and especially mothers—experience in the child welfare system. While exploring how parenting and its political dimension are reshaped for disfranchised mothers through advocacy, I describe the "fine line" between compliance and resistance that CWOP has walked throughout its history to preserve its existence. This article illustrates how this form of activism takes place within a fragmented and increasingly privatized welfare regime, in which community-based organizations struggle for their right to remain political actors and not be overtaken by the logic of service provision. Through my analysis, I aim to contribute to anthropological understandings of the forms of political agency taken up by stigmatized subjects in their interactions with the state, and the limits the state demonstrates in "hearing" their claims and requests for change.
[Advocacy; Welfare; Marginalization; Neoliberalism; Parenthood]

Introduction[1]

I n autumn 2019, while scrolling through my Facebook feed, I saw a link to a *New York Times* article[2] posted by a community-based organization that I had worked with during my Ph.D. fieldwork in the NYC child welfare system. A mysterious emoji of a padlock appeared at the top of the post. Intrigued, I opened the article and discovered that the padlock meant that the small but pioneering Community Based Organization (CBO), called the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), was closing. The CBO was aimed at parents who had, past or present, a personal experience dealing with the Administration of Children Services (ACS), and was created to provide an organized voice for child welfare clients and to push for the reform of the child welfare system (Tobis 2013).

As the first parent advocacy organization of its kind in the United States, CWOP was founded in 1996 on the notion that parents, rather than being a "problem" or a barrier, are a fundamental resource in a child welfare case as well as potentially powerful advocates for other parents involved in the child social services system. Parent advocates empower other parents, for example, by informing them about their rights, by helping them figure out the complex bureaucracy of the child welfare system, and by supporting their voices in meetings between families and caseworkers in which decisions about cases are made. In the last two decades, parent advocacy organizations have become an integral part of the US child welfare system, forming nationwide coalitions like the Birth Parent National Network (BPNN), particularly because they have been deemed beneficial for the path toward family reunification (Tobis 2013; Choen and Canan 2006; Gerber et al. 2019).

Families with a case in this system are overwhelmingly poor, female-headed families of color (Drake and Panday 1996; Drake and Zuravin 1998; Putnam-Hornstein and Needell 2011; Brooks 2015; Roberts 2009; Swift 1995), and experience widespread disempowerment in their dealings with case administrators, attorneys, and judges (Fong 2017). Parent advocacy organizations go against the grain, so to speak, and take a reformist approach to the role of parents by positioning them as knowledgeable subjects not only in terms of their families' well-being but also in terms of exposing the struggles they face and the injustices, dysfunctions, and blind spots of the child welfare system.

Throughout my fieldwork, I found that parents described their choice to become advocates in relation to the inequalities and forms of oppression they themselves had endured through the child welfare system and, more broadly, in their interaction with state institutions. In exploring the political dimension of advocacy for mothers who are deemed unfit by the state, I resort to feminist scholarship that has shown that women—and especially women of color—are historically committed to improving their collective well-being in low-income communities through self-help and mutual assistance in the face of structural inequalities (Bookman and Morgen 1988; Gilkes 1988; Mullings 1995; Naples 1992; Stack 1975; Susser 1988).

At the same time, I demonstrate how the story of CWOP highlights the ambiguities, short circuits, and conundrums of "the will to empower" (Cruikshank 1999), and the actual political space this project leaves for racialized subjects who are systematically stereotyped, stigmatized, surveilled, and positioned as targets of state-sanctioned violence (Smith 2017; Gilmore 2017; Kohl-Arenas, 2015). In so doing, I analyze the tensions inherent in the work of these organizations as parents, in their role as advocates, collaborate with state-funded agencies to work toward family preservation while at the same time asserting institutional critique. By examining the intentions and practices of CWOP funders and initiators, parent advocates, and ACS community partners, I show how there is a fundamental contradiction between pursuing the empowerment of subjects victimized by

institutional action and the inclusion of those empowered subjects as legitimate and authoritative voices in shaping institutional practices and policies. For in the child welfare system in particular, parents' empowerment depends on removing the label of "unfit," which sets in motion an ACS case and therefore constitutes a radical questioning of the function, modus operandi, and teleology of the child welfare system itself. Drawing on my fieldwork with CWOP, I argue how, since the function of the child welfare system is mainly to regulate and police certain kinds of families—primarily female-led, impoverished, and racialized—parents cannot fully voice their critique while working as advocates in the same corrective apparatus.

Parents' empowerment depends on removing the label of "unfit," and therefore constitutes a radical questioning of the child welfare system itself

Through analysis of the different approaches to advocacy enacted by the organization and its directors, I treat CWOP as a case study that reveals the limits posed by state institutions on the political mobilization and participation of disadvantaged communities in governance administration (Cruikshank 1999; Rose 2006; Clarke and Newman 2009; Clarke 2012; Fairbanks 2009; Carr 2010). I discuss how, when CWOP adopted a more radical position toward institutions, it started to struggle financially because of the agency's capacity to co-opt advocacy through funding and severely curtail advocacy organizations' power to contest child welfare institutions.

My analysis of CWOP provides a broader understanding of the political dimensions of parenting and, more precisely, how disfranchised mothers engage advocacy as a basis from which to interact with the state, elaborating bottom-up demands for institutional change. In so doing, I illustrate which demands are then "heard" by the state, and which kinds of political actors are generated by this symbolic, practical, and economic negotiation process between families, non-profits, and the state (Von Schnitzler 2014). The story of CWOP demonstrates the struggle community-based organizations face in remaining independent from governmental institutions and agencies in order to maintain their freedom in mobilizing a critique of state policies. This struggle is intimately connected to resisting the privatization of welfare, which drafts community members to perform governmental tasks, such as directing families to the right services and explaining state bureaucratic processes to them. The article shows how community organizations walk a fine line between compliance, empowerment, and dissent.

In CWOP's case, this fine line, which characterizes grassroots projects under neoliberal governance because of their dependency on external funding (Gilmore 2017), was further complicated by an additional and crucial element. Indeed, the hyper-stigmatization of the abusive parent and the moral panic that exists around children's protection in the public sphere made the tightrope walked by CWOP much more challenging than similar projects in other areas of governance.

I begin by discussing my methodology before diving into the structural inequalities shaping parenthood for the women I met during my fieldwork, and how these inequalities expose them to the surveilling and punitive actions of the child welfare system. I describe why

parents have decided to engage in advocacy with the desire of changing the oppressive dynamics of the child welfare system, and how they continue to educate themselves on its action and policies, and help other parents cope with the system out of solidarity. I then analyze how CWOP's advocacy was conceptualized by its members, participants, and partners as constantly pivoting between supporting and empowering parents on the one hand and encouraging compliance with the rules and structures of the child welfare system on the other. In the third section, I discuss the different organizational politics of CWOP and its various leaderships, investigating its shifting relationship with state and funding agencies, and how they shaped different visions of advocacy. In the conclusion, I summarize the challenges the organization faced, its achievements, and the limits to creating a space for institutional change within the non-profit archipelago for subjects who are deemed unfit by the state.

Methodology

This article is based on a series of interviews (forty interviews with fifteen different interlocutors) and the participant observation I conducted during support groups and other activities led by CWOP staff. The interviews took place between 2011 and 2013 in the context of my Ph.D. research on the reproduction of inequalities in the child welfare system. In addition, former director SK was interviewed both in 2012 and 2020, while former director JM was interviewed in 2020 to gather insights on the period between 2013 and 2019. During my research period, the director of the organization was MA, whom I interviewed longitudinally several times. Other interviewees include CWOP parent advocates, other activists, social workers, and mothers attending the weekly support group organized by CWOP or involved in its network. I participated routinely in the weekly support group between November 2011 and October 2012, meeting many parents and taking part in other activities including meetings, forums, conferences, and a reading group on Michelle Alexander´s book *The New Jim Crow,* organized by CWOP and the Association of Radical Social Workers.

My research revolved around questions of how different actors in the complex child welfare system network considered, represented, and acted upon the structural inequalities found within government programs. These inequalities traversed the whole institutional apparatus and were demonstrated by statistical data on population groups in the child welfare pool of recipients (Dettlaff et al. 2011; Harris and Hackett 2008), showing the overrepresentation of children and families of color in each of the stages of a child welfare case (Summers and Darnell 2015).

In structuring my fieldwork, I relied on the activist and professional network working to address issues of racial disproportionality and other inequalities through different strategies—a network built within and

outside of the child welfare system, and which included family court committees, child welfare professional workgroups, CBOs, NGOs, and activist collectives. These groups considered the child welfare system as an institutional arena in which structural inequalities, racial and class biases, and community distrust collided, shaping the demographic makeup of its pool of recipients and the phenomenon of racial disproportionality. Through this network, I explored processes of racialization and the peculiar form of "welfare racism" (Neubeck and Cazenave 2002) that the child welfare system produces.

The majority of people that I met during fieldwork and especially at CWOP were mothers,[3] as mothers and grandmothers were often the only parental figures for their children[4] and were interacting with state institutions by virtue of such a social identity. The organization was established in 1996 on the initiative of Terry Mizrahi, director of the Education for Community Organizing school at CUNY Hunter College, and David Tobis, a policymaker who, with help from an anonymous donor, created the Child Welfare Fund.[5] While the organization's first director was a Latina woman from Harlem, CWOP was led by MA, a white social worker, for most of its history. After he left in 2013, MA was replaced by two Black parent advocates, SK and JM, who acted as directors from 2013 to 2016 (SK) and 2016 to 2019 (JM, who shared management tasks with AH). While CWOP's activities in the early years were focused on putting pressure on local and state administrations, to make child welfare policies family-centered and to include parents in ACS decision-making, in time the organization built stronger forms of partnership with child welfare agencies. The Parent Leadership Curriculum, for those desiring to become a parent advocate and aimed at ACS-affected parents, was designed and implemented in 2001. As such, CWOP parent advocates became a regular presence in meetings between families and ACS in the East Harlem district. At the time of my fieldwork, CWOP recruited future parent advocates mainly through its weekly support groups for parents affected by ACS, which were led by other parent advocates. After the closure or partial resolution of their cases, some parents enrolled in the CWOP leadership curriculum and became advocates. In recent years, CWOP began to withdraw from its collaboration with ACS, devoting more of its efforts toward community organizing for systemic change. This shift created administrative and financial issues, and internal conflicts leading the New York City Council to cease funding the nonprofit in 2019 and the CWOP Board to decide to close the organization.

Struggling in the System: How Parents Experience "Having a Case" with ACS

As the statistics show,[6] the vast majority (74.9 percent in 2017) of cases lodged with Child Protective Services are for neglect rather than abuse, a point that has been discussed for many

years by scholars who note that neglect is a broad and blurry category strongly correlated with poverty (Alexander 2010; Bernstein 2011; Bourgois 1998; Derezotes, Testa, & Poertner 2005; Lee 2016; Roberts 2002, 2009). The issues that involved the people I met during fieldwork with ACS always stemmed from a condition of existential, social, and material precariousness in which the detected case of neglect was generated as a consequence of another form of neglect these families suffered—disinvestment in public services in poor communities, the transition from welfare to workfare, and housing re-segregation (Lyon-Callo and Hyatt 2003), just to name a few. They were overwhelmingly women of color, living in low-income districts, very often juggling multiple jobs and the demands of single parenthood, and struggling with difficult teenagers and, in some cases, violent partners. Even in cases of mental health or substance abuse, families had to wait until they had a case with the child welfare system before getting any form of assistance from the state, but at the cost of their custodial rights—something that usually worsened both parental addiction and mental health.

Scholars have shown how poverty is interconnected with social suffering and racialization in shaping the child welfare pool of recipients (Brooks 2015; Roberts 2009; Swift 1995). The intersection of gender, class, and racial oppression shapes the material conditions of existence for these women, and in turn this oppression produces and reinforces the stereotypes of the "welfare queen" and the unfit mother (Davis 2012; Goode and Maskowsky 2001; Kingfisher 1996; Susser 1996; Wacquant 2011). Child welfare services expect mothers to conform to a white and middle-class model of motherhood, but impoverished women of color have historically been excluded from this model of "good mothers" (Davis 2016; Gordon 1995). For women of color have long been conceptualized as belonging to the workforce while white women are linked to an ideology of domesticity (Davis 2004).

The women I met in the field lived in precarious economic situations, had to face everyday forms of racism and discrimination, and had to attend to their duties and commitments as mothers without a social and institutional safety net. Their efforts in maintaining their families amid these kinds of acute challenges went unacknowledged by institutions and in the public sphere, and simultaneously made them subject to a kind of social invisibility and hyper-exposed to the punitive surveillance of state apparatuses. The lack of support they suffered is expressed by what I was told by TB, a Puerto Rican parent advocate at CWOP who struggled with financial security and had multiple interactions with ACS: "One has to ask: why does neglect happen? Does it happen when she is alone, does it happen when bills are too piled up? People are doing this by themselves" (TB, 26/10/12).

Despite these disadvantaged conditions for parenting, once ACS enters the life of a family, the standards through which the agency assesses whether parents can meet their children's best interests are very

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high, exercising a form of scrutiny unimaginable for those whose parenting standards are never questioned by child protective services (Gottlieb 2009).

Indeed, the critical literature on the child welfare system emphasizes its function to police, surveil, and punish specific population groups and kinds of families, creating a parallel of the penal state (Wacquant 2011; Roberts 2008, 2015). As part of such an apparatus, the child welfare system intersects and resonates with the phenomenon of mass incarceration and police discrimination (Lee 2016), and indeed children are separated from their families and placed into foster care far more frequently in states with extensive and punitive criminal justice systems than in those with broad and generous welfare programs—a feature that plays a crucial role in the "school from prison pipeline" (Edwards 2016). It is true that the child welfare system provides families with the potential to access certain services, but only through coercive means and at the cost of custody removal and life-long stigmatization (Gilbert 2012).

The need to stay "out of the system" is not just preventive; it becomes even more important after families have had an ACS case. The fact is, being "known to the system" because of a case with ACS enhances the likelihood that the child welfare system will be a recurrent presence in the lives of families seen as culpable and dysfunctional, and therefore more likely to be reported and investigated repeatedly. The feeling that the system is a "revolving door"—a common definition that circulates among parents—is rooted in the grounded perception that even when one's case with ACS is over or settled, the presence of child protective services continues to haunt the family's life through persistent surveillance, embedded in other public institutions such as hospitals, schools, the criminal and juvenile justice system, and welfare offices.

An example of this "revolving door" at work could be seen when schoolteachers called ACS on JM, because she complained about her daughter being suspended from school for minor infractions (such as cursing or bringing candies to school)—treatment, she remarked to the school dean, that was different from what applied to her white classmates, who were punished simply with after-school detention. JM claimed that the system "was weaponized" against her by schoolteachers because they knew she had a previous ACS case and was, therefore, more vulnerable. The "system" is indeed often experienced by parents as a widespread, multifaceted, and pervasive controlling apparatus, distributed in institutional settings, especially in neighborhoods where racializing forms of policing are pervasive. It is also used as a means for personal retaliation by abusive and/or former partners, neighbors, and relatives who anonymously report to ACS a parent with whom they have a conflict.

Different degrees of surveillance, depending on the district and its demographic features, were described by many child welfare practitioners

The ACS exercises a form of scrutiny unimaginable for those whose parenting standards are never questioned by child protective services

during my fieldwork. They related how (white) families living in wealthier neighborhoods and using private schools and hospitals are much less likely to encounter "mandated reporters" (state agents such as teachers, doctors, and nurses who have a deontological duty to report any suspicion of abuse/neglect toward a child to ACS) or be seen as potentially abusive or neglectful toward their children because of their socioeconomic status and racial identity, while also possessing the means to "lawyer up" in their relationship with ACS.

On the contrary, poor women's mothering is constantly delegitimized as both an activity and a social identity by contemporary welfare systems, which, as Kingfisher (2013) has noted, attempt to erase them through stigmatizing and punitive attitudes while perpetuating the neoliberal response that caregiving is a matter of individual parents' private resources and decisions (Roberts 2015). This individualizing focus shifts the attention away from the question of public support for families struggling with precarious economic situations and single motherhood, as in the case of Teresa, situations which are often complicated for example by institutionally neglected mental health issues or simply by poor housing conditions, as in the case of many of the parents I encountered.

The individualizing and depoliticized approach child welfare professionals have toward the socially and economically disadvantaged enacts families' stigmatization, as described in the excerpt below by SR, a Puerto Rican mother of two in her mid-thirtiess and a parent advocate at CWOP:

> Caseworkers come with their own bias . . . em . . . that a certain community, you know, is this way, that they are impoverished, that they are poor, that all of them live on welfare, or that they are drug addicts. I am not going to lie to you, I come from that mentality, that was [what] a parent with an ACS case looks like to me. A parent that left her children on the street or whose house is dirty, or was using drugs, you know what I mean? That's for me what fits the bill. (SR, 04/04/12)

SR arrived in New York from Puerto Rico with her family when she was six years old. They lived in the South Bronx, and she told me that hers was the only working-class family on the block—the rest of the inhabitants were much poorer and disconnected from the labor market, and because of this, she always felt morally and financially superior to them, perceiving them as the "undeserving poor" (Katz 1989). For Samantha, the shock came when she had to face the possibility of being judged as her neighbors were, because she became a mother with an ACS case, and in her self-perception, she "didn't fit in any of that." The experience made her aware of her biased perception of child welfare clients, and helped her develop a form of solidarity toward them.

Why Advocate, and How? Support, Empowerment, and Compliance in CWOP's Advocacy

At this point, one might wonder: Why did parents want to continue to engage with an institutional system that had revoked their parental rights? In my experience, the reason parents chose to become advocates is precisely tied to having experienced firsthand ACS actions. By becoming advocates, they want to engage with the struggle to change the system and help other parents cope with the same punitive and unjust mechanisms.

Samantha found in advocacy a way to re-signify their experience of child welfare, escaping from the feeling of "being ashamed" and finding purpose by becoming a "tool" to help other parents in her situation:

> I decided once they closed my case that I was going to turn that negative into a positive, you know, that [there] has to be some kind of advocacy group out there. I want to work in a preventive agency, I want to work somewhere where the parents are affected . . . And I came, and I got the interview, and I went into the curriculum and I graduated last year. . . . it was a journey and when I was in it I didn't understand, but now I understand that my purpose was to be doing this, and sometimes I think that God uses you as a tool to bring you where you need to be, so you can help, and say "I came from that experience, and I do this and this with my experience to help other people."(SR, 04/04/12)

The will to use one's expertise with the system as a way to help other parents included the intention to use advocacy as a means to engage with broader issues of social justice, as in the case of JM. After her son was removed from her care, she started to navigate the ACS website, finding the statistical data published on the number of removals by city district. She found that the majority of removals came from low-income districts where the majority of residents were Black or Latinx. She requested a meeting with the child welfare commissioner but ended up meeting his deputy instead:

> "Most parents come here to discuss their case, not data," he said. And I said, "I don't want to discuss my case—this is not about me, this is about how your agency operates," and at that moment, he said, "You know, if you want to do advocacy maybe you should talk with this organization," and he gave me the name of CWOP. (06/10/2020)

Through advocacy, TB learned "how to navigate the system better" and "how to be involved in the community, so that you have some back up." She stressed the importance of educating yourself, otherwise "they will eat you alive". For example, newly arrived migrants, she said, are more

likely to have their children removed due to their lack of knowledge of the system.

The women I met at CWOP engaged with a broad political spectrum through their advocacy, collaborating with groups focused on reproductive rights, mass incarceration, and police brutality, enacting a form of "activist mothering" (Naples 1992) or "Black radical mothering" (Davis 2016). Many who had been unjustly deprived of the right to motherhood and stigmatized for their inability to take care of their children turned to self-help, mutual assistance, advocacy, and activism as the only possible means to cope with structural inequalities and challenge a form of governance that questions their moral legitimacy to have children in the first place (Bookman and Morgen 1988; Gilkes 1988; Mullings 1995; Naples 1992; Pulkingham, Fuller, and Kershaw 2010).

Lastly, in addition to being an avenue for political commitment and a tool of self-defense from institutional violence, advocacy has also provided job opportunities in foster care agencies or other CBOs, constituting an important source of employment for many parents who struggle to keep their jobs while meeting ACS mandatory commitments and/or lose their TANF[7] benefits (Lee 2016).

Thus, several inter-related factors pushed parents, in particular mothers, to begin their path into advocacy through CWOP: a form of resilience and resistance to the process of labeling and intersectional oppression that the system reproduces; a tool to make the best of their experience and to help others and themselves avoid interacting with the system in the future; and a way to re-legitimize their denied parenthood and improve their social, political, and economic conditions.

But how was this form of advocacy and support carried out in the everyday practices of CWOP? They worked both with parents to support and empower them in exercising their rights, and with the broader public sphere, including awareness-raising activities and policy-oriented action. During the weekly support group, attended by parents with an ongoing case with ACS, individual cases were collectively discussed and everyone would contribute to facilitating problem-solving for parents, and to concoct strategies for how to navigate the process. The expertise of parent advocates and veteran parents served as a tool to disentangle the layered, often contradictory and opaque journey that parents needed to follow, and on which they were usually poorly informed by caseworkers. Phone numbers of psychotherapists and lawyers were exchanged, and advice on associations providing various kinds of parenting classes was shared. This collective discussion and comparison of personal experiences helped participants to exit, even if temporarily, their exceptional status as unfit and problematic parents, providing them with space where they could re-appropriate the ordinariness of their parenthood, exchanging impressions, opinions, and lessons with the other parents.

Parents needed to explain what had happened to them for advocates to activate their know-how, and the self-narration initiated in the support group was sometimes developed further through participation in the *Rise Magazine* writing group. The magazine, distributed mainly in child welfare agencies and community-based organizations, published parents' stories about their ACS cases. These stories enabled parent advocates to fight against "the monstrous parent" stereotype when communicating with child welfare professionals and the general public. The support group and the writing class allowed parents to change the narrative, as it were, re-instating them as worthy moral subjects within the context of the child welfare system.

However, despite its advocacy aims, the operational mode of the support group and parent advocates more generally held a basic ambivalence, which sometimes emerged in my conversations with some parents and activists. This ambivalence is well expressed by what I learned from NG (a young army veteran mother with a history of homelessness and war-induced PTSD), who was asked several times to enroll in the curriculum but always refused: "I can't ask people to be compliant" (NG, 09/08/2012). In her opinion, CWOP did not help to address and channel parents' anger into a social or political force to challenge an oppressive system within an oppressive societal structure; it only provided a valve to vent it.

A social worker at an NGO that provides free legal assistance to parents expressed a similar opinion about the role of advocacy associations. She argued that her organization and CWOP both worked to "normalize the feeling of injustice and unfairness that our clients have" (Brooklyn Family Defense Project, Brooklyn, 11/01/12).

From her side, SK experienced her role as parent advocate in a foster agency as generally positive but limited to assisting parents only after their children had been removed. JM thought CWOP and *Rise* storytelling were ineffective advocacy tools incapable of radically challenging the dynamics at play, both collectively and individually—an observation which resonates with Fernandes' (2017) claim that when individualized, based in liberal tropes, and divorced from a larger grassroots and autonomous movement, storytelling doesn't challenge broader global patterns of inequality.

On the one hand then, CWOP confirmed families' experiences of child welfare as an oppressive system, but on the other hand it "normalized" such a feeling and made it acceptable since, after all, it was unavoidable. The function of the support group, in particular, constituted a safe space where parents could express their frustration in ways that would be completely out of place in a courtroom or during a visit to the foster care agency. In short, the support group enabled women to cope. While support groups are usually designed to perform this function, in this specific case they could be also seen as creating a path toward "compliance" (Lee 2016), especially if not complemented by other forms of collective engagement aimed not only at surviving

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the system[8] but also at claiming a different one. But as TC, a CWOP parent advocate and board member told me, it was also important to say, in some cases, that "You know they[ACS] are not here to hurt you, they are here to help you," because "the main focus of both CWOP and ACS was [children and families'] safety as the first thing." (TC, 23/07/2012). TC's vision of the system was at odds with many of the parents I met. Natalie, for instance, said, "the system doesn't give help, it gives you blame, it's very punitive." I also heard the child welfare system described by both parents and activists as a way to exploit poor families of color, who fed a service industry going from foster care placement to rehabilitative services.

Nevertheless, in shaping one's own life experience as a tale of redemption and resilience, or as a "promise for a reversal of misfortune" (Davis 2013, 109), interlocking forms of oppression may also become visible and acknowledged. Despite the emphasis that advocates placed on "working on yourself" in the support group, political and social issues were also given space. Institutional racism was sometimes evoked by participants, with expressions such as "if I had been white, at this point, my children would have been at home for years." Possible solutions to counterbalance its effects were offered, such as providing contacts for ethnically diverse services and therapists, which could be more attuned to the parent in question. These experiences were also mobilized effectively with institutional audiences—for instance, during the Policy Forum organized by the Children's Aid Society and the Community Service Society on December 1st, 2011, entitled "Strategies for preventing and addressing youth disconnection." After a series of panelists who spoke technically as administrators and policymakers about the issue of youth aging out of foster care, SK spoke about her experience in the system as a birth parent, describing the many institutional blind spots her family faced and the scars this left on their lives, radically switching the discussion to an embodied dimension of institutional action.

The Internal and External Conflicts Faced by CWOP's Various Leaderships

Tensions between empowerment, dissent, and compliance did not only appear in the support group and the *Rise* project; they also marked CWOP's genealogy, trajectory, and relationship with the institutional apparatus of the child welfare system. To make its structural ambivalence clear, I will discuss the leadership approaches of CWOP's different directors as they exemplify what it means to "walk the fine line" between cooptation and contestation, and how advocacy is transformed according to the "mode" of walking on it (or refusing to). I analyze the positions from which CWOP's directors negotiated with the child welfare

system as they reveal what conditions needed to be fulfilled for the latter to hear from and work with stigmatized parents, and the politics of funding beyond no-profit advocacy organizations.

CWOP's advocacy model during MA's directorship leaned toward collaboration with institutions—he wanted to avoid CWOP being seen as excessively critical toward ACS and only focused in transmitting to parents a negative image of the system. And ACS saw MA's approach as an opportunity to work with CWOP to reduce the level of conflict with families and to facilitate their and community compliance. In so doing, ACS showed its willingness to address the system's asymmetries and inequalities, which were questioned by associations and the media. This negotiation was facilitated by a change of ACS commissioner and of the city administration as a whole, both leaning toward more progressive policies, and by the presence of MA as director, which functioned as a bridging figure between child welfare professionals and grassroots advocacy.

MA's long professional history in the child welfare system allowed CWOP to mobilize his vast network and construct these alliances, although his social, gender, racial, and class identity differed radically from that of CWOP's parent advocates. When I asked him how he felt as a white, middle-class man being the director of an organization created by and addressed to low-income women of color, MA explained that his presence in the organization was not "ideal," and was thought of by the board as only temporary, to stabilize the financial situation of the organization.

MA saw his skill set as different from that of the parent advocates—he described his and former Executive Director MP's expertise as complementary. While Paulino, as a Latina woman from East Harlem who was investigated by ACS, "made very emotional connections with people," she was not able to "give funders a sense of confidence." In contrast to Paulino, MA was able to provide not just a sense of accountability to institutional and financial partners but also "some insight and some credibility, and also some connections with people who are making policies and who are influential in the field." The idea, he concluded, was for parent advocates to use him as a "mailman" to access the table where decisions were taken on a policy level (MA, 21/03/2012).

At the time, parent advocates told me that MA's presence in the organization was so discreet that they did not mind that his identity did not reflect their core mission. MA had his office at CWOP, leaving the parent advocates to work with parents directly, at the reception, during the support group, and in other activities. He explained this decision to remain in the background by saying he helped raise the money for the parent advocates' salaries and wanted to let them do all the face-to face work, as he "would never be good at it as they were, and also it would have sent the wrong message" (MA, 6/5/2012).

Tensions between empowerment, dissent, and compliance marked CWOP's genealogy, trajectory, and relationship with the institutional apparatus of the child welfare system

The overall structure of the organization was then made visible: at the forefront were the parent advocates who best reflected the racial, gendered, and class makeup of its users, while administrative and managerial functions were performed by MA, who represented the organization to interlocutors, including funders and institutions, mimicking the division of labor within ACS itself—between Black women as caseworkers and white men in the highest administrative positions.

However, the problems and ambiguities of representation embedded in CWOP's structure were not limited to internal dynamics. An example of how CWOP's role was never completely accepted by ACS is illustrated by the following event. In 2013, the Community Partnership Initiative (CPI), the ACS branch partnered with CBOs in the most-affected communities, was in charge of choosing an appropriate provider of community representatives to support parents, and CWOP was one of the candidate organizations, having already provided parent advocates as community representatives for the East Harlem district.

The chosen community representatives from the other districts were often themselves former social workers, or were "exemplary" community members (e.g., pastors, teachers), while CWOP insisted on using ex-ACS clients. In a way, community partnership programs were then designed by ACS to evoke practices and discursive orders connected to the concept of community, but the conditions and modalities in which they operate structure it "in dominance" (Clarke and Newman 2009)—claiming to want to pursue "system change" through figures "invested in the status quo to maintain the status quo," as MA put it.

Several scholars have discussed how current forms of the professionalization of advocacy and community-based orientation in services tie CBOs to government funding, locating them in a less-contentious relationship with the state (Marwell 2004). This phenomenon has been defined as the Non-Profit Industrial Complex, which manages and controls dissent, incorporating it into state apparatus and constituting a "shadow state" of non-profit organizations that complement government agencies in social services while allowing the government to expand punishment and proliferate market economies through private/public partnership (Smith 2017; Gilmore 2017). Together, they enforce individual responsibility in the face of material conditions of deprivation, and promote a market-driven model for public services that encourages consumer "choice" (Bookman and Morgen 1988; Cruikshank 1999; Henman and Dean 2004; Hyatt 2001; Mizrahi et al. 2009; Rose and Miller 2010; Savas 2005; Susser 1996), an intent somehow present in Mizrahi's plan to use CWOP as an organized voice for child welfare clients.

As Miranda Joseph notes, capitalizing on the idea of community raises questions "of belonging and of power," making it difficult to know in advance "where the practice of community might offer effective resistance and where it might be an unredeemable site of cooptation,

hegemony, and oppressive reiteration of norms" (Joseph 2002, 4). In the case of CWOP, it's important to highlight the different understandings and uses of the polysemic notion of community that's at stake and how ideas of legitimacy and credibility are redistributed among them. If, for ACS, the community referred loosely to the urban neighborhood where families with an ACS case were located, for CWOP advocates the community that needed to be heard and empowered was that of stigmatized parents. The organization wanted to contrast ACS's vision of "legitimate" partners as figures who are closer to the existencial experience of parents but who represent an "improved" version of them, leaving their stigmatization as unfit parents untouched and even potentially worsened by comparison with virtuous community members.

MA reported that the CPI office resisted the adoption of the CWOP curriculum in all NY districts, imposing the condition that parent advocates must become mandated reporters and that the curriculum be redesigned. To be contracted city-wide as "community reps" would have allowed CWOP to turn parent advocacy into a fully institutionalized profession. As MA asked during one of our interviews, "Why do we have community partnership if we are not interested in having relationships with the people in the community that is mostly affected by ACS?". The Community Partnership Initiative could not or would not acknowledge how widespread the concern was that one might lose children to foster care in low-income communities (Mullings 1997), and how the termination of parental rights is a "gendered and political act with community-wide ramification" (Kennedy 2011, 167).

Even if CWOP had been contracted, MA was worried that ACS would use parent advocates as a cosmetic element for child safety conferences, giving them the possibility of "check[ing] off that box on the form":

> without allowing them to leave us away from the table like, "oh, these crazy birth parents, they don't know how to talk with people, they are disrespectful, they are too emotional, they don't know how to relate to professionals." Like it is their job to learn how to relate to you, anyway, but that's what we hear a lot. (MA, 17/09/2012)

Here we see MA's role within CWOP—he is the one mediating for the "crazy birth parents" who are considered by state agents to be too emotional and disrespectful to deserve a real voice and relevant presence in the decision-making process.

In 2013, the same year in which CWOP was not chosen as the main NYC provider of community representatives, MA handed in his resignation, moving to a new job as Director of the Office for Advocacy at ACS, a decision that left many parent advocates puzzled. The Office serves as a portal for complaints and questions for parents, and the director works as an ombudsman, but the decision to use the word "advocacy" seemed to want to incorporate (parent) advocacy among the service offerings of the agency, an intention that is paradoxical given the need for ACS to antagonize parents to intervene and remove their children.

When SK became executive director, ACS's attitude changed. The first friction she had with the CWOP Board and ACS took place when an encounter with the NYC commissioner was organized and she attended with a group of parents who "were knowledgeable, know about the money and the policies," and demanded policy change, something that "ACS didn't like, nor the board."

SK had a very negative personal experience with ACS, which convinced her that the system needed to be radically restructured. SK described her shock in ending up with an ACS case and the removal of her child when she had been the one to seek help from preventive services in the first place.

In her opinion, CWOP needed more community organizing:

> to bring the knowledge to those who were affected by what this system was doing to their community, destroying them, tearing them down, whether or not it was directly or indirectly . . . [and that] . . . they had control over the community and the family they shouldn't have at all, and children and families were afraid of this organization and saying to the system they were not going to obey the thing the system was telling them they had to obey. (SK,11/10/202)

As a further step, SK consciously decided that CWOP should no longer be funded by ACS, as in her opinion advocates were doing bureaucratic work and they were allowed as a mere presence in meetings. She then changed the structure of CWOP according to her vision and the consequent need for a financial re-adjustment, reducing advocates' working hours and closing an office in the Bronx. Instead, she kept the organization open on weekends and in the evenings, to allow working parents to attend its initiatives, networking with other activist and advocacy organizations, and involving families through outreach organizing. As she tells it, these changes were resisted by the board, who fired her in 2016; however, when JM was hired, she kept SK's approach to advocacy. The relationship with the board and her colleague Ayo Haines degenerated over a financial and administrative issue, to the point that JM was locked out of her office and resigned from her position. "[The CWOP Board] used to tell me that I was radical, but the system is radical, they tear families apart," JM told me.

The events which took place after MA left and the organization's direction returned to the hands of Black parent advocates led the CBO to lose its (institutional) credibility—it was deemed too uncooperative with institutions and excessively parent-oriented, and its financial balance had not held. One could wonder then if MA's excellent connections with stakeholders and his expertise as a fundraiser were the only elements that played out during his management, or whether his gender, class, professional, and racial identity, as well as his softer approach to institutions, also played a role in making him "reassuring" for funders and policymakers.

The blame ideology (Gillingham and Bromfield 2008) guiding actions in the child welfare system is so overwhelming as to have

lifelong consequences—parents are included in the State Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment for several years, a mark that affects people's lives in myriad ways.[9] The stigma, which scars parents and families, is reiterated and amplified with every subsequent interaction with the state, and reverberates in media representations of abusive and neglectful families (Williams 1994). The problem encountered by parent advocates at CWOP when they decided to step over the fences that ACS put in place reflects this context. Caught in this role, CWOP "walked the fine line," as MA once said, between institutions and communities, and between compliance, empowerment, and dissent. Their most "compliant" part, its role as mediator between child welfare institutions and families implemented through the practice of "empathetic listening," was incorporated as another service provided by the Administration for Children Services, through the Advocacy Office and the agencies contracted to provide community representatives. And CWOP's potential in empowering subjects to express their dissent and claim systemic change was deconstructed through defunding and the marginalization of the role of parent advocates as legitimate experts on the oppressive dynamics and bureaucratic obstruction of the child welfare system.

The institutional apparatus, therefore, swung between the need to consider parent advocates as knowledge producers regarding the consequences of child welfare policy (Davis 2013), and rejecting them as witnesses and products of their disruptive consequences. I argue that this limit is tied to the overall goal of the child welfare system, as an apparatus charged with policing certain kinds of families differently from others and which, to do so, must antagonize parents and label them as unfit. For the system to function as it is now, and for parents to comply, they need to accept that ACS is right and they are wrong. Radically questioning its *operatus* subverts the relationship constructed by the child welfare system itself. To negotiate and collaborate with ACS toward institutional reform then has structural limitations: even as experts on the system, parents cannot overcome their negative characterization by the system, which makes it impossible to challenge the process of subjectification.

For the system to function, and for parents to comply, they need to accept that ACS is right and they are wrong

Conclusion

Maskovsky and Piven (2020) have written about the humiliation regime that dominates in the current context, a form of politics that maltreats those classified popularly and politically as "the poor" by treating them as undeserving of citizenship, rights, public goods or resources, and, importantly, delegitimizes them as political actors.

For the women I met in my research, this humiliation regime was not only determined by anti-poverty but also by the moral panic

surrounding child abuse and neglect, a zero-sum game in public discourse that relies on the abstract categories of the abused child versus the monstrous parent. This fear weakens the political visibility of movements questioning inequalities in the child welfare system as opposed, for instance, to community and welfare rights movements, or political initiatives fighting police brutality and mass incarceration (Abramovitz 1996; Kornbluh 2007; Alexander 2010). To establish a legitimate moral ground from which to evoke political change in such a disfranchised position becomes an extremely difficult task, especially when "questions of citizenship are increasingly discussed in the register of moral virtue, foregrounding the disciplining aspect of citizenship as a privilege" (Erel 2011, 34). In the eyes of the state, these parents represent the "residual" that cannot be independent or empowered, and who require control and restraint (Clarke 2008). The history of CWOP shows the marginal space this residual was allowed to occupy in the power geography of the child welfare system, and the consequences of crossing its borders in terms of the organization's political and financial sustainability.

As a final remark in the NYT article on CWOP, Tobis remarked that "parents are not administrators": despite the will to involve parents at the forefront of the organization, they could not manage it and this brought challenges toward "proving" the value of the organization. But CWOP was also created to fight the stigmatization suffered by impoverished women of color, who are more likely to be seen as unfit and dysfunctional parents by the child welfare system. In this, it is crucial to highlight how CWOP was financially solvent and recognized by the child welfare system when a white male social worker was its director, and when its degree of criticism of ACS was at its lowest. Thus, not only was the grassroots, parent-led model disavowed because it was too different from the organizational and bureaucratic culture of the child welfare system but also the gendered, racialized, and classed structure of such organizational culture shaped the possibility for CWOP to be recognized as a legitimate actor.

Despite its complex status, CWOP's existence and activities contributed to the substantial decrease in children in foster care from its creation in the 1990s (when ACS had around 50,000 children in its care) to the current situation (with fewer than 9,000), demonstrating its ability to be an agent of change and not just a community-friendly catalyzer for the normative action of a punitive institution. SK and JM also recognized that having another parent who has been affected by the system to support, connect, and amplify parents' voices was revolutionary, especially at the time of CWOP's founding. However, for JM the main issue was CWOP's origin as an initiative of white professionals, while SK problematized the economic dependency of parent advocates on "the system."

In my analysis of CWOP's structural limits as well as its capacity for grassroots institutional critique and dissent, I have discussed how being

subjected to institutional oppression and injustices triggers the will to advocate and change said institutions. This oppression shows how in their interaction with state institutions, people are "simultaneously racialized, gendered, sexualized and classed" (Creese and Kambere 2003, 566), and how this fact, together with the effects of moral citizenship and neoliberal governance, heavily limits the space for legitimacy its subjects claim through their advocacy and empowerment projects. The role of CWOP was accepted by its institutional interlocutors only if it limited itself at "explaining" the demands of the system and encouraging self-help through listening (Fassin 2005). Parent advocates, however, were more than just "empathetic listeners" because of their lived experience, and because of their potential to transform their marginalized position into an epistemic advantage.

What might we learn from CWOP's trajectory?

From an advocacy and policy perspective, the CWOP case is useful for thinking through how social movements might be forged in and through institutional settings. In recent years, following widespread waves of protests for social justice in the US and around the world, calls for the abolition of oppressive and racializing governmental apparatus have multiplied. The discourse of abolition has extended as well to the child welfare system (Dettlaff et al. 2020) and been endorsed, for example, by *Rise*. An abolitionist approach claims that more than reforming the child welfare system or continuing to walk that fine line, its basic functions need to be completely reimagined. An analysis of CWOP's political trajectory, practices, and purposes highlights some of the challenges of this work of reimagining by advocacy groups who contest the status of "unfit citizens" given to the poor by state institutions.

On a more theoretical level, my analysis of CWOP provides insights into the political dimensions of parenting by focusing on how disenfranchised mothers use advocacy as a platform for interacting with the state and turn an individualizing and stigmatizing experience into a form of public and critical knowledge. Although such knowledge is used to elaborate demands for institutional change, CWOP's trajectory shows the limits the state demonstrates in hearing these demands and valuing this form of knowledge, revealing the ambivalent relationship between empowerment, compliance, and dissent in the politics of non-profit and professionalized advocacy, and in a fragmented and increasingly privatized welfare regime.

The CWOP case is useful for thinking through how social movements might be forged in and through institutional settings

Notes

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[2] *A Fiji Junket, a Padlocked Office and a Pioneering Nonprofit's Collapse* by Nikita Stewart, The New York Times, September 10th, 2019.

[3] In this regard it is important to remind the reader that according to New York State Law, unmarried fathers who cannot pay child support are not permitted to take custody of a child if the mother has been accused of neglect or abuse. More generally, it has been noted that child welfare agencies are not required or encouraged to inquire about fathers or to involve fathers in a child's case (Campbell et al. 2015).

[4] On the social and historical roots of the prevalence of female-headed families in African American communities, see Mullings, Leith 1995.

[5] The Child Welfare Fund was established to improve the condition of families and children in New York City, implementing a bottom-up approach to the child welfare system through the involvement of its recipients, while now is more focused on providing services for families' immediate needs and for developing parent-infant attachment.

[6] U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2019). Child Maltreatment 2017. Available from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/statistics -research/child-maltreatment.

[7] Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, one of the main US welfare programs. In the moment in which children are removed from families, TANF benefit are withdrawn as without children, the household is not considered a family anymore.

[8] CWOP members and curriculum graduates wrote a manual, called "The survival guide to the NYC child welfare system: A workbook for parents by parents" in 2007, which was intended to help parents cope with the system, explaining requirements and procedures, educating parents on their rights and on the controversial sides of the child welfare system, especially regarding class and racial inequalities.

[9] Indicated or substantiated reports are kept at the SCR until the youngest child named in the report is 28 years old. Childcare employers, foster care and adoption agencies may be notified of indicated reports, affect your ability to get a job in childcare or to work with children, to become a foster parent, or to adopt a child.

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