Introduction

I see this pattern and it took me years to connect the pieces. Working jobs and dealing with child care issues, paying 50% of my check for child care and then havin’ to be asked to leave my place because I chose between child care and payin’ my full rent. Or feedin’ my kids or gettin’ diapers and then forced into situations because I chose not to be a punching bag. And so these are systematic choices that have been mapped out and we need to understand that.

—Grace, California

Well, the strengths of the group, is, first of all—it’s a bunch of people that are poor people. And some of the people can get strength from other people. And it goes on like that. We’re something like a big family and we, and when one go through something, we all have a little input and try to go through it with them—we don’t let ‘em go through it alone. . . . Togetherness. Yes.

—Shauna, Texas

On a cold November morning, women huddled around a podium came together to speak. Two months after the levees broke and Congress was considering drastic cuts to the already shredded safety net, it was the time to be heard. The purpose of their gathering on the Capitol steps was to call media attention to the deteriorating state of the already tattered safety net. Yet their message alternated between the searing anger, betrayal, and despair of New Orleans and the stilted jargon of budget cuts. The Katrina speeches were not part of the planned script, yet they were the most urgent and meaningful. Those speeches had to be made. Why did some of the women not understand this need? Why did they not understand the connection between Katrina and further welfare cuts? This book is the story of these women and their struggles with one another to make change. It is the story of welfare
parent activists—women of color and White women—confronting their common yet divergent experiences in their multiplicity of identities. It is the story of how some of these women understandably wish away the racist specter of the “welfare queen” through the language of colorblindness, and how others learn or are forced to confront this queen head-on. It is, in short, the narrative of a movement grappling with the contradictions and complications of organizing for social change along the multiple axes of race, class, and gender marginalization.

This book examines the dynamics of movements situated at the crossroads of marginalized axes of race, gender, and class. By definition, these movements are confronted with cross-cutting issues and images that “disproportionately and directly affect only certain segments of a marginal group.” Welfare rights is an exemplar of a movement that must grapple with such issues, embodied in the convergence of marginalized identities in the infamous trope of the welfare queen. Welfare rights activists face an increasingly difficult task: How do they fight public policies based on damaging images of race, class, and gender identities in an era of “colorblind” racism? How do they navigate these intersectional politics in their own movements for change? While it is clear that the welfare rights movement has been unsuccessful in reframing the image of its members, we know little about why and how these strategic decisions were made at the ground level. As welfare continues to be the central public image of poverty programs, and, perhaps the most despised social policy in the United States, exploring the antecedents and current realities of shifting discourses along the lines of race, gender, and class provides insight into how other movements come to terms with frames that target the most vulnerable among them. In essence, this movement is analogous to Guinier and Torres’s allegory of the racially marginalized as the “canary in the coal mine”: “Their distress is the first sign of a danger that threatens us all. . . . Others ignore problems that converge around racial minorities at their own peril, for these problems are symptoms warning us that we are all at risk.” If any social movement is predisposed to attend to the importance of intersecting marginalized identities, it is the welfare rights movement. As it represents both the real and symbolic consequences of at least three intersecting marginalized identities, with race at its core, the inability or unwillingness to engage with these intersectional dynamics has serious implications for more mainstream social movements.

What mechanisms shape the decisions of such social movement organizations (SMOs) to respond to these cross-cutting issue frames that target
the most marginalized among them? Inquiry into the political ramifications of how race, gender, and class interact as “intersectional” identities has only recently emerged as a research area in political science. These analyses, along with their critical race feminist legal scholarship precursors, are crucial in laying the groundwork for understanding the practical realities of social movements. But scholars have left empirical questions about how activists struggle with stereotyped portrayals of their movements and movement members largely unexplored. “Intersectionality” describes oppression as more than simply the compound effects of racism and sexism; instead, it locates this oppression as a unique convergence of differing facets of identity along the axes of race, gender, and class. This book examines these empirical questions through the historical and contemporary lens of a movement that represents this convergence. I examine how the overarching politics of colorblind racism, along with race, gender, and class intersectionality—operational between and within social movements—affect the ability of social movements to address critical issues of welfare politics.

I first examine whether the historical development of discourse by the women’s movement about women and work, in terms of race, gender, and class intersectionality, shaped the way contemporary welfare rights activists respond to the cross-cutting issues embodied in welfare politics. Through an explication of the weak alliance of two major social movement organizations in the 1960s and 1970s, I posit that the response of welfare rights groups to the stereotyping of welfare parents stems from the historical realities of race, gender, and class intersections of framing “work,” responsibility, and independence of women.

Second, I explore how contemporary realities of colorblind racism and intersectionality influence activists’ willingness to engage with issues of race and class embedded at the core of welfare politics. I investigate these dynamics through an analysis of forty-nine in-depth interviews (conducted between 2003 and 2006) with welfare rights activists in eight organizations across the United States. I argue that women-of-color activists, particularly in organizations in which women of color are in positions of power, confront the intersectional implications of the welfare queen and, by extension, the racial ideology of colorblind racism, while White women activists tend to avoid direct discussions of these issues. Instead, these activists deploy colorblindness frames as a way to avoid confronting the realities of racism. When ignored, race, class, and gender intersectionality limits the ability of social movements to address these cross-cutting issues. Given the fundamental insight of critical race theory that racism, sexism, and classism are
interlocking systems of oppression, I argue that any movement that seeks to only address one of these forms of marginalization not only risks fracturing the movement, but also undercuts the central goals of the movement itself.

Racial Representations

Over the past fifteen years, the welfare debate and the subsequent elimination of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) as a federal entitlement have been thoroughly dissected from the perspective of historical institutional development, race and gender politics, as well as state development and global changes in capitalism. I investigate the particular significance of the welfare queen trope in U.S. politics as a useful shared point of departure for much of this scholarship. While she is not the focus of this book, this characterization does embody the intersectional dilemmas confronted by all movements for social change based on multiple marginalized identities.

Media, Public Opinion, and Race

This book builds on an extensive body of scholarship dedicated to explicating both the existence of the racialized frame of welfare in terms of news media coverage as well as its effect on public opinion. A number of studies in political science have established that media portrayals of poverty, and more specifically welfare, are racialized. In his analysis of news media stories about poverty over a forty-year period, political scientist Martin Gilens finds that coverage became decidedly racialized as African American in the mid-1960s. Despite changes over time, he finds that as “the differences across different subgroups of the poor both attest, it is the ‘undeserving poor’ who have become most black.” Similarly, Clawson and Trice’s analysis of newsmagazine photos reveals that “Blacks were especially overrepresented in negative stories on poverty and in those instances when the poor were presented with stereotypical traits.” Employing a race and gender intersectional analysis of the welfare reform debates of the mid-1990s, political scientist Ange-Marie Hancock finds that these images were not only racialized, but also gendered in their convergence around the trope of the welfare queen.

The proliferation of these images has had consequences not only for the terms of policy debates over welfare, but also public opinion and racial attitudes in general. Experimental studies, such as political scientists James M. Avery and Mark Peffley’s regarding images of welfare parents, found that opinions of this group became more negative among White respondents.
when presented with photographs of African American parents. Survey analyses suggest that Americans believe most welfare parents are Black. Political scientist Franklin D. Gilliam found in his experimental study of perceptions of the welfare queen that this raced and gendered image had indeed reached the “status of common knowledge” among participants. Not only did the White and Black welfare queen news stories increase anti-Black prejudice among participants, but they also “encourage[d] viewers to perceive welfare as being caused by individual shortcoming, to oppose federal spending on welfare programs, and to prefer that women play traditional gender roles.” Gilliam’s results are significant not only with regard to the increasing of anti-Black prejudice, but also for the links between this trope and broader perceptions of poverty and gender roles. This web of race, class, and gender perceptions and politics is the central puzzle of this book.

This convergence of stereotypes in the image of the welfare queen is a constitutive part of broader structures of racism and sexism. Hancock connects individual stereotypes, theoretical analyses of the political function of such an image, and broader trends in public policy. She suggests that a more accurate description of the welfare queen image is that of a “public identity”; that is, one that contains both stereotypes and moral judgments. This public identity functions on both a macro- and micro-level in political discourse, which makes attempts at challenging it a daunting task. She explains that the two driving themes of this identity are economic individualism (beliefs about laziness) and fertility (beliefs about hyperfertility) that reside at the intersection of race, class, and gender. This concept of public identity is particularly useful given that it explains the power of such a trope beyond a single stereotype, to the institutional and individual levels of discourse about individualism, work ethic, responsibility, and fertility.

Intersecting Social Movements

The study of intersectionality in terms of race, gender, and class in the welfare rights movement has largely been focused on either the history of the movement, or more general analyses of the current era of welfare politics. Political scientist Sanford F. Schram’s work on the dilemma faced by the welfare rights movement, in terms of framing race in their campaigns, reveals the perils of ignoring the racial dimensions of welfare discourse, although he does not explore the connection between this and the actual practices or strategies of the movement. This book focuses on capturing how the realities of intersectionality affect this movement in a contemporary micro-level...
setting, while also considering how broader discursive trends may have shaped movement responses to the complicated race, gender, and class politics of welfare.

From a social movement perspective, this book re-centers “power” as a central problem of any movement. Scholars have paid increasing attention to the key role of identity in movements, identity construction and framing, as well as intra-movement disputes, but the linkage between identities as markers of privilege and power within movements appears largely absent from this area of research. Kevin M. Carragee and Wim Roefs assert that social movement and communication scholars who study framing have omitted serious considerations of power imbalances between media and social movements, as well as intra-movement constructions of collective action frames. Carragee and Roefs’s claim is particularly relevant in the area of identity and framing. Framing theory portrays identity categories as essentially empty vessels; identities are viewed as relatively interchangeable variables. While a level of generalization across identity categories is certainly fruitful in understanding movement dynamics, this generalization risks glossing over real power imbalances within movements that are a result of specific identities imbued with privilege and power. I argue that race, gender, and class are identities that demand a historically contingent and multilevel analysis of power. One of the best ways to explore this complicated politics of welfare, with race at its core, is through the voices of activists themselves.

Framing Colorblindness

Disciplinary boundaries in the social sciences often impinge on coherent definitions of the concepts of “frame” and “framing,” especially between the media and social movement scholarship discussed in the preceding sections. While I delineate the specific parameters of a frame later in this chapter, I rely here on the definition provided by a sociologist of race politics, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva: “[Frames] are rooted in the group-based conditions and experiences of the races and are, at the symbolic level, the representations developed by these groups to explain how the world is or ought to be.” Frames are the building blocks of racial ideologies, of which colorblindness is currently dominant in the United States. Colorblindness, as a racial ideology, circumscribes all political discourse about race in the United States, regardless of whether this discourse supports or seeks to challenge the racial status quo. Colorblindness differs from its predecessor, Jim Crow racism, in
that it “explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics.” Colorblindness provides the ideological backdrop for this book, as it both reflects and recreates racial hierarchies in the United States, even among those who work for social change.

Activists resort to multiple frames in describing their own and their organization’s views of welfare rights organizing. Frequently, these frames feature elements of gender and class politics as they relate to the question of race and welfare. Importantly, the frames used often incorporate intersecting identities based on the categories of race, class, and gender. They differ, however, in critical yet subtle ways. Understanding how these three categories are perceived in welfare rights organizing allows us to move beyond simple unitary, binary, or double conceptualizations of each. It also reflects the lived experiences of these women as well as the complex array of political options open to these organizations. Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* and Ruth Frankenberg’s *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* are both exemplary analyses of how frames around race and gender identities are embedded and negotiated by individuals. In this vein, I examine the types of frames used by welfare rights activists in their attempts to construct messages that not only resonate with the media, elites, and the public, but also reflect their daily lives lived in the intersections of marginalized identities. I depart from these two scholars’ works by first examining the particular role of frames in constructing political messages for change, as well as the consequences of these frames for communication between and within movements. I also examine the often muddled ways race, class, and gender are talked about by activists for social change—not just ordinary individuals—in a movement based on perhaps the most despised social policy in the United States: welfare.

**Theoretical Argument**

I employ an intersectional framework to examine the realities of activists struggling with the complexities of colorblindness and welfare politics. This framework—explored at length in chapters 2 and 5—as articulated by critical race feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, emphasizes the unique experiences and concerns that arise from the multiplicative effects of identities along the axes of race, class, and gender. Multiplicative effects describes oppression as more than the additive effects of racism and sexism; instead, it locates this oppression in a unique convergence of differing facets.
of identity along multiple axes. Crenshaw’s conceptualization of political intersectionality highlights the problems many women of color face in social movement groups: “Women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas.” While critical race feminist scholars have developed an insightful approach for understanding the dynamics of social movement groups, research on the empirical effects of intersectionality has only recently emerged in political science.

Two works in this emergent field are of particular theoretical importance for this research. The first is Cathy J. Cohen’s study of marginalization and cross-cutting issues in the African American community. Cohen terms the process of subdividing within a marginalized group “secondary marginalization.” Those who fall within this less privileged category are typically the most vulnerable of the marginalized group and are subject to a symbolic “policing” by the group’s more privileged members. This policing occurs as the more privileged members attempt to satisfy the norms and practices of dominant society. This secondary marginalization is most often manifest in the response of marginalized groups to issues that cut across multiple marginalized identities. These issues “disproportionately and directly affect only certain segments of a marginal group,” which is most often due to the multiple marginalized identities of this subpopulation. For example, the racialized welfare queen qualifies as a cross-cutting issue in the welfare rights movement: it targets a group marginalized along the lines of race, gender, and class, even though the umbrella “identity” of welfare receipt may be conceptualized as an identity itself.

Political scientist Dara Z. Strolovitch’s recent work on the politics and dilemmas of large, single-identity interest groups (which also ostensibly represent a range of subgroups identified in Cohen’s book) demonstrates the systematic tendency of such groups to privilege the concerns of their least marginalized subgroups in their policy advocacy agendas. Strolovitch deftly handles the question of strategic motivations of these interest groups, arguing that an intersectional perspective necessitates a deconstruction of a “zero-sum” perspective on their advocacy choices: “The problem is that all of these organizations are traditionally organized around single axes of discrimination and are sectoral in their analyses of social problems. As a result, these organizations fail to recognize that subgroups of their constituents are caught at the crossroad of multiple forms of disadvantage.”

These concepts of intersectionality and secondary marginalization provide the framework for the primary argument of this book. I argue that the response to cross-cutting images in the case of the welfare rights movement is rooted in
both the intersectional implications of macro-level discourse of women and work, as well as the more micro-level implications of intersectionality for specific organizations. In other words, political intersectionality, as operational between and within social movements, when ignored, limits the ability of social movements to address these critical issues and confront the hegemonic ideology of colorblindness. As my argument attends to both historical macro-level development of discourse along with contemporary micro-level settings of social movement groups, I divide the explication of this into two parts.

First, I inquire whether the initial development of macro-level discourse about women and work in terms of race, class, and gender intersectionality is crucial to understanding the current response of welfare rights groups to cross-cutting issues. Clearly, the initial framing of issues by the welfare rights movement did not occur in a political vacuum. While it is tempting to immediately look to those who were the most immediate adversaries of such a movement, I argue that the impact of an allied movement, the women’s movement, limited the development of political discourse available to the welfare rights movement. This is an example of the problematic empirical effects of intersectionality within the category of “women’s groups.” The welfare rights movement’s capacity for self-definition might have been curtailed by the process of frame construction by the women’s movement, given the interplay of race, gender, and class between and within these two movements. The discursive meaning of the workplace as a site of liberation was at odds with the historical and lived experiences of many African American women in the welfare rights movement.

The construction of the meaning of “work” for women by the women’s movement entailed a closure of alternative views of labor by virtue of the privileged positioning of the movement members by race and class. This not only put the welfare rights movement at a disadvantage in advancing alternative discourses about labor, but also helped to shape a public identity of welfare parents as inextricably linked to this conceptualization of women and work. In other words, the development of the women’s movement effectively limited the construction of identity in relation to work in the welfare rights movement. This process of self-definition has had a lasting impact, or partially path-dependent relationship, on the allied movement’s capability to challenge prevailing discourse about particular issues shared by both movements—such as the relationship between women’s “independence” and the capitalist workplace. This discourse—which is shaped, in part, by the intersections of race, gender, and class at the inception of these movements—constrains the contemporary (or imagined) options for responding to cross-cutting issue frames.
Second, this prevailing discursive framework converges with two other mechanisms that influence the responses of contemporary welfare rights activists to the politics of race and welfare: the realities of intersectionality in these organizations in terms of leadership and secondary marginalization. I posit that as group identities help to shape views of the political world, those organizations with women of color in positions of power are more likely to respond to this cross-cutting issue frame, as this frame signals marginalization along the axes of race, class, and gender. Conversely, those groups that are controlled by White women do not directly challenge or engage this cross-cutting issue not only because these women have different intersectional experiences, but also because of the process of secondary marginalization within the movement as a whole. The key point of connection between this argument and the previous discussion of the development of the welfare rights movement is that macro-level discourse constraints are mitigated on the micro-level, in part, by the presence of women of color in leadership positions in individual groups. Given their triple-marginalized identities, I argue that women of color activists will tend to reject the use of frames that obscure the importance of racial cleavages, and thus challenge the politics of colorblind racism.

Intersecting Movements

Bridging the historical development of discourse around women, welfare, work, and subsequent responses to a racialized frame presented a particular challenge for the design of this book. Therefore, I separated these two elements analytically by time period. Below I outline my approach to the initial development of the welfare rights movement and women’s movement, and then move to the focus of this book, colorblindness and the contemporary welfare rights movement.

Between Movements

In addressing the problem of initial framing dynamics in the development of macro-level discourse about welfare, I trace the relationship between the second-wave women’s movement and the welfare rights movement. In chapter 2 I examine the relationship between women and work in the initial stages of movement development between 1968 and 1977. I selected the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) as representative organizations of the women’s and
welfare rights movements, respectively. These two groups are ideal for comparison purposes as they were founded on the same date in 1966 and were also allies, working (to varying degrees) with one another over the course of ten years. As chapter 2 focuses on how NOW framed its claims about work, independence, and welfare, I analyze documentation produced by NOW to reach its membership: its monthly newsletters. Using the eight platform demands of NOW’s 1968 “Bill of Rights,” I create eight categories of agenda items for a content analysis of newspapers to determine the level of attention to each issue. These categories function as an issue index to NOW’s priorities directed toward local chapters and membership. In addition to coding each newsletter for the eight agenda items, I also include subcategories for welfare or AFDC. In addition, I code all newsletters for any reference to race, and also its connection to poverty. Finally, I include a parallel qualitative analysis of frames contained in select newsletter articles on welfare, work, and independence, which represent the range of NOW’s responses to these issues.

Within the Movement

After probing the implications of race, class, and gender intersectionality between two movements, the majority of this book is devoted to the implications of such intersectionality within the contemporary welfare rights movement. This movement is particularly well suited for an intersectional analysis as it is a multiracial, low-income, women-led movement. Indeed, given all that these activists sacrifice as a movement of marginalized women, one would expect that they would be the most sensitive to the organizing challenges presented by multiple marginalized identities. Moreover, one would expect that they, perhaps more than any other progressive or radical social movement in the United States, would recognize the imperative to be intentional about confronting the racist or sexist images of their own movement members.

The contemporary welfare rights movement (2006) consists of small, grassroots, low-budget organizations in approximately eighteen U.S. states. Nine of these organizations are in the South, three in the West, five in the Midwest, and five in the Northeast (some states have more than one organization). These groups range from all volunteer to paid staff and comprise a combination of welfare parent/activists, allies, and some professional organizers. These organizations are designed to be welfare parent-led affairs, and all the ones included in this study have statewide advocacy goals.
organization was selected at the state level rather than by individual organization or metropolitan area. I selected eight geographically diverse organizations to be a part of the study: California, Minnesota, Montana, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington State, and West Virginia. Five of these organizations are located primarily in urban environments, while three are located in largely rural areas.

While each organization’s environment and membership is often markedly different from the others’, they share challenges nationally in terms of the racial demographics of the TANF program and the accompanying racial stereotypes. National racial demographics of TANF are changing. Welfare rights groups can no longer make claims nationally about White women composing the majority of the TANF caseload. Organizations in states with primarily White caseloads were previously able to utilize this statistic to dispel myths about welfare. Whites were the largest group of welfare families in the early 1990s, but no longer. It is unsurprising that as states face increasing pressure to lower their caseloads, White women are finding it easier to find employment and leave TANF for a variety of reasons. Despite these trends in national caseload demographics, individual statewide organizations must also contend with how race and inequality shape their state and local political contexts. The perceptions of how race and inequality function at the state level, however, are often quite different. This tension in national coalition building is explored at length in chapter 7. I observe how these individual organizational contexts and perspectives translate to the national level through participant-observation at the 2005 annual conference of the only national umbrella coalition of welfare rights groups in existence at that time.

In addition to the primary data source of interviews discussed below, I also include poverty rates, racial demographics, state-level partisanship factors, and TANF caseload demographics and analyses of internal organizational documentation as contextual factors in exploring the use of particular frames by organization. Finally, I completed a content analysis of several newspapers’ attention to race and poverty in the areas where some of these organizations are located. These data provide a broader picture of the political environment in which these groups operate, beyond the words of the activists themselves. As the analytical focus of this book is frames, however, not organizations, I include these data as useful contextual indicators in understanding broad patterns of frame usage by activists between and within organizations.
Studying Colorblindness

Frames, not organizations, are the central focus of this book. I made this analytical choice for two reasons. First, comparing small grassroots organizations, with varying degrees of financial resources, volunteer resources, and membership size is a risky proposition in crafting a coherent study. This is especially true because the organizations I studied ranged an annual budget size from $250 to $337,178. Obtaining comparable documentation across organizations of this size, given their organizational capacities and often radically different leadership structures, is simply impossible. But these data from different organizations are included in the analysis as contextual variables in order to understand specific patterns of frame usage by organization.

It is important to note that while I compare organizations in this book, my primary focus is on the discursive, or “meaning-making,” elements of movement activity rather than on presenting a comprehensive representation of all elements of movement dynamics. In other words, while I acknowledge that I am unable to claim that these interviews are an exhaustive sample of all activists in the movement, I am more interested in the discursive patterns displayed in the movement, which do have concrete effects on internal movement dynamics: “[Discursive politics’] premise is that conceptual changes directly bear on material ones.”

Second, and more important, frames, as an analytical tool, are uniquely compatible with the reality of identity and race politics. As described earlier, the definition of a frame utilized in this project is as follows: “Frames are set paths for interpreting information.” Frames operate as filters through which individuals “explain racial phenomenon following a predictable route.” I diverge from Bonilla-Silva’s view that frames necessarily distort the world in favor of the dominant racial ideology; I use “frame” to connote a lens or filter through which dominant racial ideologies and challenges to these ideologies operate.

Frames are the building blocks of racial ideologies; as such, they both reflect and reinforce (or challenge) racial hierarchies. The dominant racial ideology in the contemporary United States is colorblindness. The challenge of studying race in a context of colorblindness is that race is ever present yet rarely discussed in the open. Frames allow for a deconstruction of this avoidance of race, through silences, key phrases, and stories. More specifically, frames serve four purposes in this book. First, they provide insight into how activists think about race, class, and gender in welfare politics. Second,
frames, in turn, provide clues about how their organizations actually behave. Third, they are devices to understand the way in which social movement members do or do not communicate across organizations. Fourth, as noted above, they both reflect and reinforce processes of marginalization pervasive in society at large, which have the ability to undermine the movement’s social change goals. Most important, however, they measure the evasion of issues of power and its intersection with identity. 

Interviews

Frames are the central narrative in this book; semi-structured, in-depth interviews compose the majority of the data collected for these frame analyses. Interviews and frames complement one another, as both are particularly well suited for investigations of race and identity politics. Andrea Y. Simpson explains why extensive interviews offer incomparable insight in her work on racial group identity and politics: “There is . . . suppleness to this method that is useful for uncovering aspects of a phenomenon that may remain hidden because of the necessary constraints imposed by other methods. The trust that can be established between the researcher and subject in an in-person interview is invaluable when encouraging subjects to define issues for themselves.” My status as a welfare rights activist also allows for both a shared understanding of the myriad issues confronting welfare parents as well as a familiarity with the often-contentious dynamic of personalities and politics (colloquially known as “drama”) in small grassroots organizations. The interviewees themselves include the following five categories: (1) directors, (2) board members, (3) staff, (4) volunteer welfare parents involved with the organization, and (5) volunteer allies involved with the organization. Based on previous experience in interviewing members in Washington State, the most fruitful method for teasing out these sensitive issues around race is to begin with more structured questions about the functioning of the organization, and then allow for more divergence from the questions as we moved toward issues of race internal and external to the group.

Plan of the Book

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the initial development of social movement frames around women, work, and independence. This chapter investigates the intersectional tensions between allied movements. Rather than probe established institutional structures of power, I examine how the
“women’s movement” in the 1960s may have inadvertently and unintentionally narrowed the strategic choices available to welfare rights activists in the 1990s. While the women’s movement and the welfare rights movement were allied initially on the basis of a shared collective identity of gender, the intersectional realities of race and class oppression helped to inhibit any genuine coalition building between the two. The results of this analysis reveal that there was minimal attention to issues of poverty, welfare, and race in the messages relayed to NOW chapter groups, membership, and supporters. Instead, a prioritization of issues such as employment discrimination indicates the importance this group placed on employment as a tool of empowering, or even, perhaps, liberating women. The particular framing of welfare issues, such as economic (in)dependence and child support, revealed a different perspective of welfare priorities than welfare rights activists. I posit that this was a particular perspective born out of the experiences related to the race, gender, and class identities of the majority of NOW’s membership. Regardless of intentions, much of this framing served to reinforce boundaries of welfare parents as the “other.” Moreover, the focus on employment as a positive, liberating force spoke to the needs and experiences of a particular stratum of women, and was largely foreign to the priorities of the fledgling welfare rights movement.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 outline the intersecting marginality frames that activists in the contemporary welfare rights movement employ when discussing the politics of race and welfare. Chapter 3 investigates how the dominant racial ideology of colorblindness conforms to particular frames used by welfare rights activists to describe the way in which their organizations grapple with the politics of race and welfare. These types of frames are separated into two broad categories: traditional and “cosmetic” colorblindness. On the surface, these two frames appear quite different: traditional colorblindness avoids discussion of race (and more important, racism), while cosmetic colorblindness engages directly with a description of racial demographics. Ultimately, however, these two categories share the same underlying evasion of power dynamics inherent in any discussion of race, whether it is external or internal to the welfare rights organization. Both frames are overwhelmingly favored by White women activists rather than women of color activists, although there are important class differences between the usage of traditional and cosmetic colorblindness. This division within colorblindness, I argue, foreshadows the transformation of the dominant racial ideology of traditional colorblindness to its new form, embodied in cosmetic colorblindness.
Chapter 4 investigates the implications of activists using intersections of gender and class marginalization still within the framework of colorblindness. I term these frame categories “gendered colorblindness” and “class colorblindness.” Like more general expressions of colorblindness, these frames minimize or avoid discussions of race when used to describe the significance of race for welfare politics. But they accomplish this in a somewhat different manner than colorblindness; these frames operate on the basis of a hierarchy of oppression, where either gender or class oppression is of paramount concern. This type of frame is antithetical to an intersectional analysis that views race, class, and gender as interlocking identities and systems of oppression. Thus, in the erasure of race and racism as a critical centerpiece of all welfare politics, they inadvertently support the reigning racial status quo.

In contrast to chapters 3 and 4, chapter 5 explores “race and class consciousness” frames that challenge the dominant racial ideology of colorblindness. These frames transform intersectionality from a theoretical approach to a practical organizing and political strategy. Race and class consciousness frames articulate an understanding of welfare politics in which identity is multiplicative and complex. I categorize the subsets of these frames as structural, political, representational, and experiential. Unlike the frames explored in previous chapters, race and class consciousness frames are used most often by women of color activists. These frames are the foundation of a challenge to colorblind racism.

The few White women who do employ these race and class consciousness frames belong to an organization led by both women of color and White women in Minnesota. I probe the dynamics of this group in chapter 6, as well as political and racial-geographic factors in Minnesota that may contribute to this anomaly among organizations. I conclude that organizational structure and racial composition of leadership may influence the use of these types of frames by White women, thus reinforcing not only the shared sense of mission among group members, but also a similar perspective on the interlocking nature of oppression based on race, class, and gender. The broader questions raised by these findings lead to a revisiting of the social movement scholarship of Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward with regard to movement goals and the definitions of success. I argue for a more expansive view of movement success not only as a way to fully capture the diversity of movement activities and goals, but also in recognition of the interconnectedness of issues of social justice that necessitate an intersectional alternative to the racial ideology of colorblindness.
Chapter 7 examines the translation of the frames outlined in chapters 3, 4, and 5 to national coalition-building processes. National coalitions offer unique organizing opportunities and perils inaccessible at the state and local level. Utilizing formal and informal conversations, email, and participant-observer data from the annual conference of the only umbrella organization of welfare rights organizations in the United States as of 2005, I outline how a collision between colorblindness and race and class consciousness frames both reflected and recreated debilitating cleavages among women of color and White activists at the national level. I argue that these different perspectives need not enervate this coalition; different experiential perspectives are invaluable to the development of a social movement. But when these perspectives reflect the privilege and power of distinct groups along the axes of race, class, and gender within movements (in the case of the welfare rights movement) and between movements (as is the case between the welfare rights movement and second-wave women's movement), they must be acknowledged, openly discussed, and evaluated in terms of impact on the leadership of the movement. If this is not accomplished, the movement will splinter into competing factions and subvert its own goals. Movements premised on multiple marginalized identities that fail to develop consciousness frames that reflect the reality of these intersecting identities ultimately reproduce the very societal dynamics they seek to change.