



Resignation without relief: democratic governance and the relinquishing of parental rights

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Abstract

Sociologists have long studied the ways people resist oppression but have devoted far less empirical attention to the ways people resign to it. As a result, researchers have neglected the mechanisms of resignation and how people narrate their lived experiences. Drawing on 81 interviews with parents with past child protective services cases, this article provides an empirical account of resignation in an institutional setting, documenting how parents understand relinquishing their rights as a process of personalization, calculation, or socialization. Phenomenologically, parents typically confronted multiple barriers and setbacks simultaneously, the combined weight of which pressured them to “give up,” interpreting structural and institutional pressures as individual choice. This article accordingly identifies resignation as a crucial feature of democratic governance.

Key words Child protective services · Children · Democratic governance · Parents · Resignation · Rights

Resistance & resignation

A considerable amount of sociological research has focused on how disadvantaged people subvert power or exhibit resilience when confronting adversity (e.g., Ewick & Silbey, 2003; Mumby et al., 2017). At least since Scott (1990), social scientists have read resistance into small, everyday practices. Studies have identified resistance to power in normal workplace routines (Prasad & Prasad, 2000), even compliance (Ybema & Horvers, 2017). That Paulsen (2014) took pains to argue that not all “empty labor”—e.g., surfing the Internet at work, gossiping with coworkers—expressed workplace resistance is a telling example of how far researchers have gone to find defiance in quotidian behaviors.

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Research on resistance elevates human agency and has productively complicated theories that emphasized the unidirectional nature of power. But placing too much emphasis on resistance can lead to imbalanced accounts of social reality that have analytical and political liabilities. For one, doing so conflates true resistance (e.g., striking) with interpreted resistance (e.g., slacking off). The former threatens power and is inherently risky; the latter leaves power be and simply reminds us that subordinated workers are not subordinated in total. Additionally, elevating resistance normalizes it, which has the effect of presenting resignation as an aberration. This is not only out of step with people's everyday experiences, but it also has the effect of presenting resignation (and those who resign) as abnormal, even deficient in some ways. Regarding slavery, Smith (2021, p. 64) observes that focusing solely on enslaved workers who revolted implicitly blames those who did not “despite the most brutal circumstances, attain superhuman heights.”

Resignation is neither automatic nor self-evident, and understanding its dynamics in no way denies people the faculty of resisting oppression, either through public protests or smaller, less perceptible moments of “foot dragging, dissimulation, [and] false compliance” (Scott 1985, p. 29). Quite the opposite, in fact: focusing on resignation expands insight into opportunities for resistance. This was Marcuse's mission in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964): to critically expose “false needs” created by industrial society to motivate a “Great Refusal.” It was one of Gramsci's (1971) core projects as well (Lears, 1985, p. 569). Understanding how and why people say okay invites insights into how they can be better empowered to say no.

For these reasons, resignation should be given just as serious and engaged empirical treatment as has been granted resistance. Drawing on 81 interviews with parents with past child protective services (CPS) cases, this study focuses on a particularly painful and permanent kind of resignation: the decision to forfeit parental rights. Nationwide less than half of children discharged from foster care are reunified with parents or primary caregivers (Children's Bureau, 2020). Included among those who lost their parental rights are parents who voluntarily surrendered them. This can be done formally, by going to court and signing paperwork, or informally, by withdrawing from the process and declining to show up at required activities. Signing away one's rights and skipping court dates, for example, lead in most cases to the same end (Baldwin, 2002, pp. 248, 277; Hill, 2017, pp. 65–68).

We begin by synthesizing empirical and theoretical work on resignation, drawing out three perspectives—*personalization*, *calculation*, and *socialization*—that help to explain why we sometimes give up when faced with social adversity or institutional pressure. Organizing our findings around these perspectives, we analyze the accounts of parents with past child protective services cases, documenting how they narrate their experiences of resignation and developing middle-range concepts that can be used in future studies. In the discussion, we explore the phenomenological experience of surrendering parental rights, characterized by the intersection of multiple forces, by considering how parents' experiences of correlated adversity informed their accounts of resignation. Parents' accounts of resignation lead them to take ownership of their decision. At an extreme, they reported choosing to sacrifice parental rights for the sake of their children's emotional well-being, to secure desired placements (e.g., with kin), and even to improve their children's life chances.

To many parents, relinquishing parental rights was a self-actualizing act, especially when they felt that giving up and fighting were likely to yield the same outcome: the loss of their children. Parents' accounts, then, include elements of strategy and resistance, consent and resignation, and reveal rights forfeiture as a crucial feature of democratic governance.

What is resignation?

People can be said to resign when *they consensually act in a way that results in their own disadvantage when a real alternative is available to them*. By emphasizing *consensual action*, we distance ourselves from accounts that characterize disadvantaged people as exhibiting a kind of totalizing psychological acceptance of the status quo. Arendt (1951, pp. 308, 325) asserted that totalitarianism “destroyed the very capacity for experience ... dominating and terrorizing human beings from within.” Bourdieu (1997/2000, pp. 170–71) went as far as to theorize that people consented to domination “below the level of the decisions of the conscious mind.” As we document below, parents who relinquished their rights did not necessarily resign themselves to power in their “heart of hearts.” Their resignation at turns could be *instrumental*, as when it resulted in children being placed in economically advantaged homes; *cathartic*, as when parents released themselves from the weight and shame of their investigations; and even *subversive*, as when parents lashed out at state agents and refused to comply with their demands. In each case, parents acted in ways they did not have to, exercising their will consensually. Consent may be granted willingly or unwillingly, just as it can be given freely or under duress (Gramsci, 1971; Lears, 1985). Consent does not signal agreement; it signals agency. In focusing on consensual action, our definition of resignation breaks with social-psychological concepts, such as symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1997/2000) or self-hate (Fanon, 1952/1967), which stress a kind of complicity that operates at the subconscious level.

By emphasizing action that results in *personal disadvantage*, our definition of resignation trains our attention on measurable outcomes that are objectively injurious. Doing so avoids the fraught exercise of trying to identify when people “act against their own interests.” To paraphrase Manne (2018, p. 13), it may be more productive to study resignation in terms of what it does to people, external ramifications of a course of action, than in terms of dispositions or affects. This also allows us to avoid conflating certain attitudes or actions, such as those that express anger and excoriate a perceived injustice, with resistance. We met some parents who told us they aggressively berated their caseworker—before surrendering their rights. We met others who reported dutifully complying with CPS requirements—before surrendering their rights. It would be misguided to judge behavior resistance or resignation based on the outcome it brought about—several parents actively resisted the forfeiture of their parental rights and lost custody of their children anyway—just as we should not overlook the fact that consent can be offered under many different guises, from docility and spite to exhaustion and coolheadedness.

We also include in our definition of resignation a *real alternative* to that which led to a negative outcome. By “real,” we mean a course of action that was both realistic and could have resulted in a different outcome. By this standard, Socrates did not resign by drinking poison hemlock because refusing to do so would have likely resulted in his death by another manner. An inmate does not resign when he walks calmly to his cell, instead of resisting his chains at every step, because doing so would almost certainly only lead to the same (or worse) outcome. In both examples, there is no real alternative. Accepting a plea bargain, on the other hand, does entail choosing one course of action over a real alternative. That alternative may be much riskier, but it is both realistic (anyone can ask for a trial) and distinct (the trial could result in one’s release) from a plea deal. The fact that refusing to resign can bring about more harm than doing so, as when declining a plea bargain eventually results in a longer sentence, can provide insight into the relationship between coercion and resignation in certain circumstances.

Western societies have long conditioned people to view themselves as individuals capable of self-regulation (Elias, 1939/1978), as the idea that citizens may capably and freely extend or withdraw consent is central to democratic narratives. Yet institutions have always had a stake in defining the terms of such action. Edward Bernays (1947, p. 114), “the father of public relations,” even suggested that “the engineering of consent is the very essence of the democratic process.” Formal democratic procedures teach individuals to claim agency and announce consent,¹ and the veneration of consent has been used to justify coercive and even deadly American policies across time. For example, in his history of Indian Removal, Saunt (2020, pp. 87–89) writes that then-secretary of war, John Eaton, “delighted in the paradox of forcing indigenous Americans to leave of their own free will. ... It was a ‘great injustice’ to the administration to assert that it intended to use force, he insisted, for its policy was ‘calculated to induce ... a voluntary departure.’” When Native Americans mounted forceful resistance to such bad faith policies, state agents used the gloss of treaties against them. In another context, Roberts (1997/2017) has challenged conventional understandings of American women’s reproductive liberties by focusing attention on the long history of controlling Black women’s reproduction and family life. By tracing the constriction of reproductive freedoms from slavery to birth control, Roberts articulated how the American construction of reproductive liberty served racial oppression. More recently, policymakers have incentivized low-income women, especially those who receive government assistance or have criminal records, to consent to long-term methods of birth control. These considerations shift our focus from viewing resignation as an individual expression of freedom to an institutional project necessary to maintaining democratic legitimacy.

¹ For instance, in criminal court plea colloquies, judges will not accept guilty pleas without hearing persons affirm they are willingly forfeiting their right to a trial.

Resigning to inequality

Several scholars have developed accounts of self-negation or “selling oneself short” (Emirbayer, 2021, pp. 1–2). Without minimizing the relevance of dominating structures—nor the presence of resistance in the face of oppression—this research attends to how people accept the terms of their own domination. By establishing self-negation as a common and necessary feature of modern society, theories of power affirm what social movement scholars long have known (McAdam, 1990; Piven & Cloward, 1977): that resistance, not the lack thereof, is the aberration.

We synthesize ethnographic and analytical treatments of resignation into a coherent literature, revealing disparate, even conflicting accounts of the process and rationales for why people submit to undesirable terms. One way to organize accounts of resignation is on a continuum running from agency to structure. On one end of the continuum, one finds accounts of resignation as *personalization* involving people accepting a hardship and explaining it in ways that emphasize human agency and discount macrostructural contexts. In these accounts, a person accepts a painful condition (e.g., homelessness), sometimes even embracing it as an identity, and understands that condition as the result of personal decisions. These narratives can be self-blaming but also self-serving, as when people attribute their unemployment to an unwillingness to work in exploitative jobs. On the other end of the continuum, one finds accounts of resignation as *socialization* involving disadvantaged persons accepting the terms of their domination unknowingly, the result of a daily education experienced through multiple institutions through which one “learns their place.” At the extreme, one finds accounts of “normalization” or “naturalization,” where people come to understand their oppression as reflecting a sensible or inevitable ordering of the world. Since things could not have been otherwise, these accounts stand in sharp contrast to the personalized narratives of resignation, which presume the possibility of multiple social trajectories. In the middle of this continuum, one finds explanations of resignation as the result of an intentional *calculation*. In these accounts, agency and structure comingle, as they describe people acknowledging structural constraints and selecting a course of action that results in a hardship but is viewed as the lesser of two evils. Here, resignation is intentional and pragmatic, understood neither through vocabularies of motive that downplay inequalities and power dynamics nor through macrostructural theories that downplay human agency to stress the influence of propaganda or routinized socialization but as a cleareyed choosing of the best bad option.

Personalization

Qualitative research has revealed resignation to be a common theme in the narratives of poor Americans, and this resignation often takes the form of personal accountings involving some form of explaining disadvantage as the result of individual failings. Liebow (1967) observed that poor Black men, facing racial discrimination and material hardship, attributed their limited involvement with their children and their mothers by pointing not to structural barriers but to flawed character. According to this “theory of manly flaws,” “the man is always careful to attribute his inadequacies

as a husband to his inability to slough off one or another attribute of manliness, such as independence of spirit, a liking for whiskey, or an appetite for a variety of women” (p. 76). In this way, men were able to save face by blaming themselves—they were too manly to be husbands and fathers—which in their telling placed the power entirely in their hands rather than in social forces having to do with deindustrialization or labor market discrimination, which hindered their ability to provide for their families (see also Edin & Nelson, 2013).

A key component of personalized resignation, then, entails fully recognizing the dominated position one finds oneself in. Rather than “hiding from their humanity” (Nussbaum, 2004), those who account for their resignation through personalized narratives often accept the reality of human frailty and vulnerability. Snow and Anderson (1987, p. 1354) describe a process whereby homeless people embrace their reality, often referring to themselves as “tramps” or “bums,” signaling their resignation to a role viewed as permanent. Similarly, Bourgois (1995/2003, p. 142) found that young men growing up in New York City’s Spanish Harlem chose to sell drugs over entering the formal economy, a safer and more lucrative option, because “obedience to the norms of high-rise, office-corridor culture [was] in direct contradiction to street culture’s definitions of personal dignity.” Duneier (1999) also gave self-defeating practices explicit attention in his ethnography among mostly homeless street vendors who expressed resigning to privation and often addiction with “the ‘Fuck It!’ mentality.” Duneier wrote, “Although giving up was a choice of sorts—no one forced them to do it—it was not a choice they made at a time of rational stability; it was not a choice that a person wanted to make” (pp. 60–61). This act of letting go was a “form of retreatism” marked by mortification for harming loved ones and a sense of liberation from dropping interpersonal obligations. In each of these examples, resignation is expressed both as predetermined and irreversible as well as personal identity, such that one’s social standing reflected who one ultimately *was*.

This suggests that when social obstacles appear insurmountable, people resign themselves to that state of affairs by creating or accepting a marginalized identity to make sense of their lives. A classic elaboration on the relationship between the (real or perceived) endurance of adversity incentivizing personalized resignation is Braithwaite’s (1989, pp. 100–01) theory of reintegration, which hypothesized that when public shaming in response to lawbreaking has no definite end, it curdles into stigmatization. When this occurs, the ostracized lawbreaker, seeing no alternative, is forced to reject his rejectors and adopt a deviant identity, joining a criminal subculture. Personalized resignation can occur when individuals perceive their efforts are routinely or inescapably thwarted; conclude that the process of striving is not only pointless but also painful; and embrace an identity at the bottom that emphasizes the role of human agency.

Socialization

If personalized accounts of resignation involve people explaining their marginalization as the result of a series of missteps or intentional decisions, socialized accounts of resignation often involve people neglecting to question their domination altogether. Although social theorists from Marx (1848/1978) and Du Bois (1920/1969)

to Beauvoir (1952/1989) and Fanon (1952/1967) have analyzed dynamics of resignation as socialization, in recent decades Bourdieu has emerged as the theorist most closely associated with this perspective. Bourdieu (1989/1996, p. 4) contends that resignation occurs only with the “active complicity—which does not mean that it is conscious and voluntary—of those who submit to it.” His concept of symbolic violence has been widely applied in the inequality literature to explain routinized self-negation. Holmes (2013, p. 170) uses the concept to explain how Oaxacan migrants understand their work as berry pickers, quoting a social worker as saying they “like to work bent over.” In the agricultural fields of Western Washington, a natural ordering of the world (the average height of Oaxacans) appears to align with a social ordering of the world (the demands of field labor). Drawing on Bourdieu’s writings on “‘misrecognition,’ the largely unconscious rejection of the ‘unthinkable,’” Scheper-Hughes (1992, p. 276) likewise describes the naturalization of child mortality in the Brazilian community of Alto do Cruzeiro. The ubiquity of child death meant mothers understood children as flighty, fragile creatures, indicating “‘infants are like little birds,’ here one moment, flying off the next” (p. 364). Consequently, “a good part of learning how to mother on the Alto includes knowing when to let go of a child who shows that he wants to die” (pp. 270–71, 364). Socialized resignation, then, often involves the erasure or denial of pain, rather than the acceptance or embracing of pain characteristic of personalized resignation. As a consequence, those who have been thoroughly socialized to resignation do not understand their social situation through an identity (which implies choice) but through historical and sociological processes that condition them, body and soul.

Of the social theorists who analyzed the dynamics of socializing resignation, Gramsci (1971) was among those most concerned with its practical accomplishment. Sociologists have empirically extended Gramsci’s ideas by investigating how hegemony is produced by political authority (Graebner, 1987) and globalization (Rupert, 1995), as well as at the point of capitalist production (Burawoy, 1979), but much work remains unfinished when it comes to understanding how resignation is arrived at and experienced within the context of democratic governance. The most thorough accounts of resignation as socialization are found within the ethnographic tradition. Consider, for example, Willis’s (1977/2017) account of how working-class boys in Britain are trained for working-class jobs through their primary schools or Desmond’s (2007) examination of how a rural, working-class upbringing socializes young boys into accepting dangerous jobs as young men. Martin’s (1998, p. 504) analysis of preschool instruction and play found that they help “girls learn that their bodies are supposed to be quiet, small, and physically contained.” Similarly, political scientists and sociologists have analyzed how disadvantaged persons have been conditioned into civic disengagement by a history of defeat (Gaventa, 1980) and repeated exposure to social suffering (Desmond & Travis, 2018).

Calculation

Resignation can also be a calculated decision involving the relinquishing of rights in exchange for an outcome that is more advantageous, or at least more certain, than one that likely would have resulted from the assertion of rights. As Mann (1970,

p. 425) observed, resignation can be *normative*, as when someone “views his own inferior position as legitimate,” or *pragmatic*, as when people left with few choices knowingly select a lesser evil, or both (e.g., Sennett & Cobb, 1972). Whereas resignation as personalization diminishes the role of structure and resignation as socialization diminishes the role of agency, resignation as calculation splits the difference, representing legible decisions made under duress or within the contexts of power imbalances.

To the extent that researchers have investigated how institutions encourage people to resign themselves to some difficult process, it often has been by observing that they are paid to do so. At least since Marshall (1949/1964), sociologists have documented how the poor have been made to relinquish rights in exchange for relief. Goldberg (2007) has shown how American welfare policy throughout the twentieth century forced low-income families to choose between government aid and full citizenship. As Piven and Cloward (1971/1993, pp. 166–67) have written, “A central feature of the [welfare] recipient’s degradation is that she must surrender commonly accepted rights in exchange for aid” (see Kohler-Hausmann, 2017). In her ethnography of mothers enrolled in a Medicaid-administered Prenatal Care Assistance Program, Bridges (2010) found expectant women secured state aid only by relinquishing certain privacy protections. In the main, research documenting how the American state conditions the extension of resources on the concession of rights has focused on a series of transactions, such as the relinquishing of political and civil rights in exchange for assistance or the signing of a plea deal in exchange for a lighter sentence (McCoy, 2005). In such cases, resignation is explained through a process of coercion, whereby a person under duress accesses a suboptimal arrangement in exchange for a benefit.

The literature we have synthesized above reveals that disadvantaged Americans often narrate turning points or critical life decisions by reference to a kind of self-negation which takes different forms, but these accounts generally have not analyzed how resignation is intertwined with the work of democratic governance undertaken by state institutions such as child protective services. Even in research where state action (e.g., incarceration) is shown to produce a self-negating outcome (e.g., declining to vote) (Weaver & Lerman, 2010), the process by which this occurs remains unclear. *That* we sell ourselves short or resign ourselves to unfair treatment has been long established, but sociologists have not paid sufficient attention to how institutions shape and how people encounter and understand this process, with Goffman’s *Asylums* (1961), and its thick description of a “betrayal funnel,” being the classic exception to this rule.² As a result, studies often observe that disadvantaged Americans generally “feel wronged by the system” (Anderson, 1976/2003, p. 130) or “shunned, hidden, [and] forgotten” (MacLeod, 1987, p. 4) but have not

² Halsey et al. (2016) have provided another notable exception with their phenomenological account of desistance. Our claim is not that social scientists have neglected to document deference to corporate or legal authority but that accounts often have not thoroughly analyzed the routine institutional dynamics and social conditions that give rise to that deference. As a review of the literature observed (Guhin et al., 2021), in recent years sociologists have avoided studying processes of socialization altogether, leaving theories of power underdeveloped.

fully specified the unique conditioning moments through which these lessons are imparted. Without a hard look at such moments, our theories of resignation veer toward the tautological (e.g., the poor accept their lot because the experience of poverty trains them to), fail to provide the mechanisms of resignation, and neglect institutional processes that can be challenged and altered.

In this paper, we analyze parents' accounts of resignation in the CPS process, organizing their narratives according to the three perspectives of self-negation we have articulated and identifying conceptual terms associated with each form of narration. First, we consider personalization, identifying three interrelated components: *stigmatized identity*, *embodied power*, and *fatalistic events*. Stigmatized identity manifests when individuals link resignation to personal character or attributes. Embodied power, however, does not entail the act of self-marginalization but captures how people see institutions in terms of idiosyncratic actors and interpersonal dynamics. With fatalistic events, individuals prioritize a focus on key life events that afford them with cathartic, discrete explanations of resignation. While these components afford individuals with “vocabularies of motive” (Mills, 1940), personalized narratives tend to emphasize a sense of predestination or inevitability rather than accountability.

Second, we consider the socialization perspective, identifying how it can be described as *behavioral*, *status-driven*, or *normalized*. Narratives of behavioral socialization emphasize how repeat exposures to an adversarial process and social adversity train one to engage in resignation as a resolution to such a process. Status-driven resignation manifests in accounts in which social comparison (i.e., based on class differences) leads disadvantaged individuals to forgo persistence, exercising only deeply constrained agency. Last, normalized resignation represents extreme socialization, wherein people view giving up as familiar and even appropriate.

Third, we evaluate the calculation perspective and draw out three rationales: *altruism*, *deprivation*, and *triage*. Altruistic calculation speaks to a process where individuals treat resignation as an other-oriented act through which they attempt to protect or promote others' needs. Deprivation-driven calculations happen when resignation unlocks access to resources. Last, resignation is sometimes treated as a matter of triage, when individuals report how considerable constraints led them to select a reasonable, if painful, option. These rationales uncover how one's understanding of hardships and opportunities, especially in the context of system involvement, may promote accounts of conscientious action that remains self-negating.

Data & methods

This article draws on 81 in-depth interviews with parents in New Jersey investigated by CPS. Classified according to the county in which respondents' most recent CPS investigation took place, the sample includes 24 parents from Essex County (Newark); 25 parents from Mercer County (Trenton); 19 parents from Middlesex County (New Brunswick); and 13 parents from eight counties elsewhere within New Jersey. Speaking to parents who experienced CPS involvement in different places and times—some spoke to us about very recent cases; others about cases that took place

years ago—expanded our sample’s representativeness beyond a single city, time period, or regional office with a unique institutional culture.

Parents with CPS involvement are a hard-to-reach population, and the universe of those parents was not accessible, as child welfare cases are not public. Accordingly, we recruited interview subjects in-person, through fliers, and via snowball sampling.³ We advertised the study at a variety of places, including food pantries, soup kitchens, libraries, assistance offices, churches, and grocery stores. Interested parents were eligible for participation if they confirmed they had been investigated by CPS in New Jersey and their case(s) had since closed.

Women and families of color are disproportionately exposed to CPS involvement (Kim et al., 2016; Wildeman & Emanuel, 2014). Our sample reflects these disparities. Over three-quarters of respondents are female, and the sample includes 54 Black parents, 19 white parents, and 8 Hispanic parents (see Table 1).⁴ Most (64.2%) parents in our sample had received some form of cash assistance (e.g., Supplemental Security Income) in their lives, and 43.2% endured housing instability or homelessness at the time of the interview. These findings align with previous studies describing the economic profile of parents investigated by CPS (Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2014).

Parents in our sample also experienced other forms of compounding disadvantages (see Table 2). Over 60% reported a mental health issue of some kind. Nearly half (46.9%) reported involvement in one or more domestic violence incidents. A majority of respondents (53.1%) reported drug or alcohol dependency across the life course, and 16% reported being dependent on drugs or alcohol at the time of their interview. Half of parents reported prior involvement with the criminal legal system. Over 80% reported some form of trauma in childhood or adulthood. In childhood, 34.6% experienced violence in the home; 33.3% were raised by parents who used or sold drugs; 18.5% faced a premature death in the family; and 17.3% were victims of sexual abuse. In adulthood, the most common form of trauma was domestic violence (38.3%). Additionally, 14.8% of parents survived physical or sexual assault; 8.6% recovered from a traumatic injury; 6.2% faced a catastrophic event (e.g., home burned down); 4.9% experienced the death of a child; and 3.7% had witnessed a death or killing. Slightly over a third of our sample (34.6%) reported being involved themselves with CPS as children. The amount and degree of adverse life experiences reported by the parents indicates our sample is characterized by severe deprivation and correlated adversity (Desmond & Western, 2018).⁵

³ To avoid biasing the interview sample, we capped snowball chains to include no more than three people.

⁴ In 2019 point-in-time estimates (Children’s Bureau, 2020; New Jersey Child Welfare Data Hub [NJ CWDH], 2020), Black children accounted for 23% and 42% of the population in foster care in the United States and New Jersey, respectively, in spite of representing 13.7% of American children and 14.3% of New Jersey children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020a, b) (see Table 1).

⁵ Our sample is weighted more toward more significant CPS experiences. Over 69% of parents faced family separation in one of their cases, and 50.9% were not reunified with one or more children. In New Jersey in 2019, 90% of children with active CPS cases were served in-home; 51% of discharged children were reunified with their parents; and 42% of discharged children lived with relatives, entered a kinship legal guardianship, or were adopted (NJ CWDH, 2020).

Table 1 Sample characteristics

	<i>n</i>	%
County:		
Essex.....	24	29.6
Mercer.....	25	30.9
Middlesex.....	19	23.5
Other.....	13	16.0
Gender:		
Female.....	62	76.5
Male.....	19	23.5
Race:		
Black.....	54	66.7
White.....	19	23.5
Hispanic.....	8	9.9
Cash assistance ^a :		
Ever.....	52	64.2
Current.....	28	34.6
Never.....	28	34.6
Missing.....	1	1.2
Housing situation ^b :		
Stable.....	44	54.3
Unstable.....	15	18.5
Homeless.....	20	24.7
Missing.....	2	2.5

N = 81

^a Includes respondents who received cash assistance from the state (e.g., disability, welfare) in adulthood, directly or through their partners

^b We marked respondents as stably housed if they were independent, owning, or renting. We included parents with housing assistance among the stably housed. We labeled parents as unstably housed if they were doubled up (including living with kin or non-kin). We marked parents as homeless if they were unhoused, living in a shelter, motel, halfway house, or supportive housing

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews between November 2018 and October 2019. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim, resulting in 5,454 pages of material. Interviews covered a wide range of topics, beginning with a parent's life history. To better understand parents' experiences with CPS and enhance the validity of our data, we asked respondents to share accounts of specific cases (Weiss, 1994). We sought information on the circumstances of families prior to their case involvement, the reasons for referral to CPS, and the requirements faced upon case initiation. We also asked parents to describe their interactions with institutional actors, their efforts in meeting requirements, and their case outcomes.⁶ The

⁶ We attempted to reduce recall error by constructing life event timelines with parents during the interviews (Berney & Blane, 1997). These timelines aided researchers' understanding and often prompted

Table 2 Compounded disadvantage and trauma

	<i>n</i>	%
Mental health issue reported:	49	60.5
Domestic violence incident:	38	46.9
Drug or alcohol dependency:	43	53.1
Ever	30	37.0
Current	13	16.0
Criminal legal system involvement:	40	49.4
Trauma in childhood:		
Violence in the home ^a	28	34.6
Parents substance abuse involved ^b	27	33.3
Premature death in the family	15	18.5
Sexual abuse	14	17.3
Trauma in adulthood:		
Domestic violence	31	38.3
Physical or sexual assault ^c	12	14.8
Traumatic injury	7	8.6
Catastrophic event	5	6.2
Death of a child	4	4.9
Witnessed a death or killing	3	3.7
Involvement with CPS as a child:	28	34.6

N = 81

^a We defined violence in the home to include violence between parents, at the hands of siblings, and domestic violence from adolescent significant others. It does not include violence that occurred during punishment

^b Includes respondents whose parents abused alcohol or drugs and respondents whose parents provided these substances to others (e.g., selling), including the respondent as a child

^c One of the 12 parents reported both physical and sexual assault

final part of the interview examined how respondents' experiences shaped their subsequent behaviors, relationships, and outlooks. An interview guide aided our exploration of these topics, but our semi-structured approach provided needed flexibility for respondents and researchers (Newman, 2002). On average, interviews lasted about two hours, the shortest being 42 minutes and the longest being nearly four hours. They were conducted at a place of the respondent's choosing, and respondents received \$50 compensation. We use pseudonyms to protect parents' privacy.

We used iterative analysis to analyze the interviews. We wrote fieldnotes after completing each interview to reflect on key themes. The team also engaged in open

Footnote 6 (continued)

further recall from respondents. We cross-referenced transcripts and timelines with official documents and contemporaneous, respondent-written communications for a small subset of parents (*n* = 5). However, the following accounts focus on how parents narrated their own experiences.

coding of transcripts and met with one another to discuss emerging ideas throughout the interviewing period. Concurrent coding sensitized us to patterns and allowed us to hone our approach in subsequent conversations. We identified resignation as an inductive theme emerging from parents' accounts early in the study and revised our understanding of its nature throughout the interview process (Charmaz, 2008). The research team began structured coding after completing the final interviews.⁷ During this period, we constructed detailed timelines of respondents' lives and, in particular, their CPS cases.⁸

The context of resignation: conditions of structural adversity

Before turning to the key perspectives and concepts that surface in individuals' accounts of resignation, it is necessary to consider how conditions of adversity may either spur or provide a pretext for resignation. It is important to note that some structural conditions, such as power imbalances (e.g., between manager and employee) or time constraints (e.g., to complete requirements), are not inherently adverse. They may, however, amplify the consequences of correlated adversity when such factors constrain individuals' agency in institutional processes or produce inequitable outcomes. Similarly, the presence of structural adversity is neither wholly determinative nor unidirectional, just as some forms of marginalization may deepen persons' struggles yet encourage their collectivist ethos (Stack, 1974). Structural adversity shapes individuals' everyday decision-making and guides their experiences in institutional processes. This means structural adversity is a common, motivating factor for resignation but not a generalizable mechanism of it.

We begin by considering the salience of structural adversity among parents who have been involved with the CPS system. When a child is removed from a household, parents may choose to engage in a process to facilitate family reunification or withdraw from that process. Parents' participation provides no guarantee of reunification, but their outright noncompliance risks permanent loss. Almost all of the parents we spoke to in this study participated in their cases for some length of time. Our findings focus on parents' accounts of why and how they accepted a legal (and often practical) end to parenthood. Many parents described how poverty and correlated

⁷ To analyze our interviews, we developed a codebook for use in MAXQDA. First, the team independently open coded three interviews using the software. We subsequently met to compare codes and notes, drafting the formal codebook. Second, we each coded two different interviews for a total of six interviews. Each researcher was assigned one interview expected to work well with the codebook and one interview expected to strain the codebook. We then met twice to revise and finalize the codebook, having reviewed each other's codes.

⁸ One may suspect that parents who surrendered their rights were those charged with more serious allegations of child abuse. We found no evidence of this pattern. Parents faced similar reasons for removal—and similar challenges to reunification—but behaved differently throughout their CPS process and experienced different outcomes. Respondents who reported “giving up” did report higher levels of criminal-legal involvement, substance abuse, and mental illness than other CPS-involved parents. This difference heightens rather than diminishes the significance of investigating resignation in an institutional context.

adversity worked against their efforts at reunification. Individuals who endured housing insecurity and unemployment at (or near) the start of their cases struggled to achieve the stability. Because housing and financial stability can be requirements of the child protection process, parents referenced their inability to address these issues as reasons for resignation.

Lanelle, a Black mother, went to some lengths with her partner, Orion, to secure housing for her family, but the couple was hindered by uncertain or unstable housing assistance as well as an initial CPS directive that forbade them from living together. Their case, along with child removal, had originated when neighbors called the police during a domestic dispute. This resulted in the family's eviction from a program meant to promote family stability. To afford an apartment in the private housing market, Lanelle and Orion needed to pool their incomes, and Lanelle wanted Orion to be a presence in her children's lives. About a year into their case, the judge suggested the couple move in together. The couple found a three-bedroom home and were ready to sign a lease when they discovered the security deposit voucher provided by CPS had expired.

Lanelle: I told 'em about what he [the lease officer] did, what they did with the security deposit. ... But then she [the judge] still went forward to terminate my rights. Which to me, that didn't make sense because she had an option of putting us back into reunification and going forward.

Interviewer: ... So then after that court hearing, your rights were terminated?

Lanelle: After that court hearing they weren't terminated. I gave them up because I was frustrated. ... I signed them over.

Lanelle could neither understand the judge's use of discretion nor persuade her to do otherwise, and the couple had been unable to rehouse themselves in a suitable home without assistance.⁹ Lanelle's voluntary surrender was akin to a worker saying, "You can't fire me. I quit." That is, Lanelle wrested some self-determination out of an outcome she believed to be inevitable.

Housing instability alone seldom determined the outcome of a parent's case, but it always presented as a clear challenge to reunification (Bullinger & Fong, 2021). For Dorothea, who is white and 49-years-old, her loss of housing made giving up

⁹ The *Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980* established a broad and variable requirement that states make "reasonable efforts" at reunification (*Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980*) but left room for considerable state- and caseworker-level discretion. In a turn away from family preservation, the *Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997* encouraged concurrent planning, so that as parents worked toward reunification the state simultaneously drafted plans for child removal and placement (*Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997*). The law also regulated when states were required to file for the termination of parental rights. Interpreted in resulting litigation (*In re Parental Rights as to A.J.G. and A.C.W.*, 2006), states' temporal standards create a presumption that the termination of parental rights serves the child's best interests upon meeting these thresholds and that "the parent has the burden to offer evidence to overcome the presumption that termination of his or her rights is in the child's best interest." Recent legislation repealed a federal time limit on reunification services without altering the aforementioned presumption of termination of parental rights (*Family First Prevention Services Act*, 2018). This allowed resources to be provided for a longer period, but the mandate to file and the state's presumption about the child's best interests were left intact (see also Waldfoegel, 1998).

straightforward. Harried by caring for three young children, Dorothea threatened to kill her “workaholic” husband and soil his bed. She carried out the latter threat, resulting in a restraining order and a CPS case. Dorothea explained why she did not fight for reunification with her two sons in matter-of-fact terms: “It was all settled that [my ex-husband] had the boys because he had the house. It was all mutual agreement because ... I didn’t have a house.” Dorothea described the outcome as “mutual” and impermanent, but her lack of stable housing encouraged her meaningful turn away from parenthood.

Parents who were unable to resolve conditions of structural adversity, including housing instability, could accordingly fight their cases to the end or resign early. In other situations, parents resolved conditions related to structural adversity but struggled to satisfy other requirements. This was true of Faith, a 44-year-old Black mother, who relocated from her deteriorating home because the judge told her, “You move today, you’ll get your children back tomorrow.” Yet after the move and her successful completion of mandated programming, Faith was told she took too long to end her relationship with the noncompliant father of her younger son. Her parental rights were terminated in court. Structural adversity, especially as material hardship, is therefore a necessary but not sufficient explanation for why some parents surrender their parental rights while others see their cases through to the end. Of the parents who overcame significant material hardship, such as homelessness, some fought and were reunited with their children; others fought and lost; while others resigned, signing over their rights or refusing to complete necessary requirements.

Overcoming structural adversity within the context of a CPS case regularly required kin- and/or state-based support. For instance, Laura, who is 52 and Black, faced a CPS case after the police raided her home and arrested her partner for selling drugs. The incident led to her eviction for both criminal activity and nonpayment (her partner had been a rent contributor prior to his arrest). Laura relied on kin for temporary housing support while she met CPS programming requirements. Later, CPS provided her access to a voucher that reduced her rent burden and soon thereafter Laura was reunified with her daughters. Structural adversity could initiate CPS intervention, and it worked against parents’ reunification efforts when parents did not overcome material burdens (e.g., homelessness, joblessness).¹⁰ In the subsequent sections, which focus on the three key perspectives on resignation and their contingent conceptual components, we illustrate how individuals recognize structural adversity as a motivating factor in their accounts.

¹⁰ This is applicable to other contexts, such as criminal law. For example, a person may be arrested for a criminal offense, which may be related to correlated adversity, and then see incentives in resigning quickly (by taking a plea deal) because they fear pretrial detention or program participation will compound their disadvantage (by, e.g. forfeiting shelter placements, suspending public assistance) (Olderman, 2012; See, 2023).

Personalization

We first consider accounts of resignation as personalization, a form of individual accounting typified when actors center their own identities to explain hardship or disadvantage. As we articulated above, accounts of personalized resignation may include three conceptual components: (1) stigmatized identity; (2) embodied power; and (3) fatalistic events. By stigmatized identity, we mean that the individual references their self-perceived, disadvantaged identity to legitimize resignation as a product of character. Because such accounts are ubiquitous in the empirical literature focused on “identity talk” among poor Americans (e.g., Braithwaite, 1989; Duneier, 1999), we do not provide an empirical elaboration here. We also note that accounts of stigmatized identity rarely emerged during our interviews. Parents repeatedly expressed sensitivity to social identities, but for the most part, they did not adopt negative social identities in the mode, for example, of a homeless man calling himself a “bum” (Snow & Anderson, 1987). This may be because relinquishing one’s parental rights, or having them stripped, represents a limit case for stigmatized identity since the process does not permit parents to emphasize some positive aspect of their identity to explain their resignation (as with Liebow’s (1967) “theory of manly flaws”). By embodied power, we mean individuals narrate their experiences through references to the influence of specific actors (e.g., a bad lawyer, a helpful caseworker). In so doing, they perceive institutions and structural forces through idiosyncratic actors and interpersonal dynamics. By fatalistic events, we mean that individuals invest considerable stock in salient, negative life events, treating them as decisive, individualized reasons for resignation. Phenomenologically, embodied power and fatalistic events have considerable overlap, but we parse them for analytic clarity.

Embodied power: resigning to and because of others

By embodied power, we refer to the fact that state power is experienced through interpersonal interaction (Collins, 2004) and discuss how seeing a state process, its rules and decisions, as a product of idiosyncratic yet intractable personalities can provide a clear accounting of resignation. We found that parents reported contemplating and reacting to CPS actors’ actions and perspectives. When these actors insinuated or expressed opposition to reunification, parents felt demoralized and steered toward resignation. The examples that follow document how personalized resignation extends beyond individual identity and instead involves relational thinking about others’ attitudes and behaviors.

Parents cited statements of CPS actors, including caseworkers and attorneys, as decisive reasons for giving up. Ruby, a 53-year-old Black mother, fought for reunification with her children. She faced child removal because of problems related to child supervision, substance abuse, and poor housing. She complied with programming, attending substance abuse classes for 2.5 years. When we asked Ruby if she was given a reason for continued family separation, she replied,

“Matter of fact, one of the [CPS workers] didn’t even want me to get my kids back. She kept saying, ‘I don’t want you to get your kids back.’ ... That’s all she kept saying.” Ruby subsequently went to court, where the judge supported the mother’s claim, questioning the caseworker’s opposition to reunification. But soon after, Ruby missed an evaluation for one of her children because “this lady had me so stretched out.” Ruby acknowledged structural adversity, finding the combined tasks of maintaining her sobriety and securing stable housing especially difficult. However, because she believed her caseworker was against her, Ruby came to view the loss of her parental rights as inevitable. “I knew I wasn’t gonna get my kids back,” she said. “This lady [the caseworker] had it in her mind, that, ‘No you’re not gonna get your kids back.’ And I kind of felt that I wasn’t. That’s why I think I just got tired of the journey because this lady kept telling me I wasn’t gonna get my kids. So, it’s basically like I just kind of gave up and said, ‘Forget it.’ I didn’t give up on my kids, but I just gave up on trying to fight her.”

In Ruby’s case, a perceived power imbalance along with anticipated defeat became a self-fulfilling prophecy (Gaventa, 1980). Ruby framed her loss in personal terms. She did not lose to “the state” or to “CPS” but to “this lady,” her caseworker, underscoring the fact that parents confront institutional barriers through specific people with their own personalities and goals. While the caseworker’s reported opposition to family reunification may have been in-line with system-wide policies that account for time in-placement and parents’ participation at appointments, Ruby personalized her struggle: She blamed her caseworker but did not center the system’s broader dynamics nor her correlated adversity in her resignation narrative.

Affirming support by various institutional actors, on the other hand, encouraged persistence. Laura, the mother who ultimately reunified with her children, remembered CPS caseworkers saw her as “young [and] gullible,” but “they also saw me as a person that needed another chance. ... I think they looked at me as being a good member, a sincere member of society.” Parents like Laura, who spoke of affirming caseworkers who treated them with dignity, extended resources, and advocated for reunification were more likely to view caseworkers’ more invasive actions (e.g., home inspection) as “just doing their job.” Even these parents tended to accord legitimacy to specific CPS workers rather than the broader agency, and these parents also sometimes dealt with caseworkers they viewed as both demoralizing and affirming within and between cases (cf. Bell, 2016).

Being told by an actor of the institution that you have reached “the end of the line” had material and psychic significance for system-involved parents. This was especially true when the message was delivered by those meant to assist them, like their court-appointed attorneys. Brielle, who is 25 and Black, faced a CPS investigation after she evicted her child’s father for ordering adult films on her cable subscription. He retaliated, reporting her drug use to CPS. Brielle attempted to meet requirements and fight for reunification, but she recalled her public defender dissuading her. “My attorney made it seem like it was already sealed in stone,” she said. “And they kept telling me, ‘It’s too late.’ It just made me feel discouraged, like to know that there’s nothing that I could do.” Ruby and Brielle’s examples also point to another conceptual component of personalization: fatalistic events.

Fatalistic events: resigning to individualized circumstances or incidents

When offering personalized narratives of resignation, individuals also tend to emphasize salient life events in which they feel their identities are maligned, that their fates are sealed by others, or that their circumstances block persistence. In this way, resignation can be tied to specific, personal incidents rather than chronic struggles with social adversity and institutional compliance. This was true of the parents with whom we spoke who pointed to recalled prognostications and beliefs of both institutional actors and family members as motivators for resignation. Audrey and Cole, a white couple in their early thirties, were unable to regain custody of their sons after completing a battery of requirements (including rehab, outpatient counseling, and therapy) and making repeat court appearances. Audrey told us that she completed alcohol treatment and programming requirements, achieving sobriety. She described nearly being reunified one day in court only to hear the biological father of her eldest child announce his discomfort with that outcome. Audrey recalled her lawyer telling her, “They’re gonna come home today, don’t worry about it. You had one slip in all this time.” Then, her ex-partner showed up in court. Audrey continued, “They let [my ex-partner] talk, and he said he didn’t feel comfortable with the boys coming home to me.” Audrey’s young sons were placed with her aunt. Of the father of her first child, Audrey said, “He signed all his rights away anyway. So, it’s like, you didn’t even fight for him!” While Audrey’s response to her kids’ removal represents one aspect of her process of giving up, she and Cole blamed Audrey’s ex-partner for their loss of custody. “It broke my heart,” Cole said. “Why would you want your child in [CPS] care instead of with their mom? It really broke me. That’s what made it so hard for me to continue to keep trying to get him [his son] back.” After the setback in their case, Cole returned to using heroin, and Audrey began taking the drug for the first time. “I gave up,” Cole said. “Then they told [us] there was nothing they could do and basically forced me to sign my legal rights over.” By focusing on the ex-partner’s statement in court, Audrey and Cole did more than redirect blame to another individual. They also distilled a single, poignant story for how their efforts in a prolonged, evaluative process came to an end.

Many parents, including those who did not face child removal, felt their identities as caregivers were threatened by CPS involvement and reported asking themselves questions like, “Am I a bad parent?” Given that CPS is an adversarial state process that, by its mandate, may call into question the validity of one’s prosocial identity, it is possible that individuals equipped with fewer resources (e.g., stable shelter, income) may instead embrace an (a) identity as a lesser provider or (b) a mindset of brokenness, to use Cole’s term, or exhaustion. Here and in subsequent sections, we will elucidate how parents pondered over their CPS involvement and the perceived absence of social approbation. In many accounts of personalized resignation, others’ pronouncements engendered pain and withdrawal—even when parents quibbled with those assessments. This may be related to the fact that parents like Cole had few narrative resources to contest the other’s assessments.

Perceived fatalism in the face of trying demands therefore encouraged retreat from the case process. However, parents found ways to resist giving up—or to voice their disapproval while also taking tangible steps toward relinquishing their

rights—such as in the following recalled exchange between Brenda, a 48-year-old Black mother, and her caseworker. While incarcerated, Brenda remembered taking a written test that deemed her an unfit parent. Having lost other children to CPS, Brenda resisted the imposition of sacrificing her rights. “She [the caseworker] came to the jail and ... said, ‘Ms. Jackson, it’s become obvious to us that you’re no longer qualified to be a parent,’” Brenda said. “‘I mean, you tried this seven times.’ This is the way she talking to me. So, I got a little hostile with her. I said, ‘Bitch, mind your business. I don’t need you to judge me.’ ... When I got to court, I’m sitting there, and they telling me, ‘Sign the papers.’ I didn’t sign them. No. I said, ‘Take my rights. I’m not giving them to you.’” Personalized resignation can thus accommodate a clear-eyed understanding of one’s position and the verbal rejection of a perceived, often-defeating social identity.

Previous research has shown that parents who see caseworkers as controlling or coercive, as well as those who resist the stigma of being labeled “neglectful,” tend to be less cooperative (Dumbrill, 2006; Sykes, 2011). We can see resistance in Brenda’s non-cooperation and her rebuke of the system, but her actions were laced with resignation as well. Cursing a caseworker is antithetical to fighting for reunification. Brenda took consolation in the fact that she never signed the papers in court, but she lost her parental rights anyway. Informally relinquishing one’s parental rights could be a quiet process, characterized by skipped meetings and court appearances, or a loud one, as when parents berated and threatened caseworkers. Mistaking the latter as “resistance” and the former as “resignation” would be, for these parents, a distinction without a tangible difference. The common thread is that respondents’ views of caseworkers, attorneys, kin, and other actors had a meaningful influence on their cases, encouraging or discouraging cooperation and resilience.

Socialization

Accounts of resignation as socialization consider how daily experiences and interactions in critical institutions habituate individuals to disadvantage and inculcate individuals’ often unwitting participation in their own domination. The idea that resignation can be so deeply cultivated within individuals that it is both unconscious and voluntary is most closely associated with Bourdieu (1989/1996) and Marx (1848/1978) and has been strongly criticized within the literature on resistance.¹¹ Such a view is also incompatible with our own definition of resignation, which requires individuals’ consent. Keeping this in mind, we suggest individuals employ socialization narratives when offering accounts of resignation that describe a learning process through which they came to see consent to their personal disadvantage as reasonable, sensible, or natural. Our findings identify three modes of socialization: (1) behavioral, (2) status-driven, and (3) normalized. By behavioral

¹¹ Our conceptualization of socialization endeavors to heed Garfinkel’s critique, interpreted by Lynch (2016) to suggest “that general models of the *actor* should be put aside in favor of investigations of concrete *actions*,” by framing socialization in terms of reported conduct.

socialization, we mean individuals describe self-negation as a form of learned conduct emerging from exposures to hardship. With status-driven socialization, on the other hand, resignation is seen as a pragmatic response for disempowered individuals engaged in social comparison. In our empirical findings, status-driven socialized resignation often emphasized poverty and class disadvantage. Last, normalized socialization signals instances when individuals portray self-negation as ordinary or unremarkable.

Behavioral socialization: process-driven resignation

Our findings indicate that individuals' reported conduct could be sped or slowed by prior familiarity with resignation and acute social adversity. Parents often explained giving up by referencing an unremitting yet stalled battle with the state, prompting our consideration of variation in giving up's timing. Parents investigated by CPS face a series of timelines. At the front end, agencies have the authority to investigate parents in New Jersey for 60 days, after which a determination on the validity of the maltreatment allegation must be made (see CPP-II-C-5 in New Jersey Department of Children and Families, n.d.). If child removal occurs, federal law imposes a general time limit on reunification, mandating agencies file for the termination of parental rights if children have remained outside their original homes for a prolonged period of time (i.e., 15 of 22 months) (Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, 1997); however, cases may be closed and new investigations opened, resulting in some parents experiencing CPS supervision for long stretches. Child welfare agencies engage parents throughout the process, entreating or compelling them to enroll in programs and calling on them to make their cases in courts. CPS may also provide needed resources during the case process. For example, some parents reported that CPS connected them with social services and provided furniture and housing assistance. Cases are closed in reference to the time expired and to the parent's compliance or noncompliance. In 2019, 24% of children discharged from placement in New Jersey (e.g., to reunification, to adoption) had spent between 13 and 24 months in CPS care (NJ CWDH, 2020). Some parents with whom we spoke reported giving up late in their cases, when they felt caught in an unremitting process that yielded few returns and even possible harms. Others reporting resigning much earlier, near the start of their CPS involvement. Parents' accounts revealed that their behavioral responses, including persistence and resignation, evolved within and between cases.

At one end of the spectrum, parents reported giving up after a prolonged struggle. Consider Corinne, a white 45-year-old mother. Corinne had been hospitalized after a mental breakdown in 2013. In the aftermath, she and her husband endured employment and housing instability. They made ends meet by moving their family of five in with Corinne's husband's extended family, straining the kin network. Corinne said she fell apart after CPS arrived and determined pills were missing from her prescribed psychiatric medicine. She remembered suffering a panic attack after her children were removed "because it [the CPS investigation] was too much to handle." After a second hospitalization, Corinne returned to the home at which she had stayed after her initial hospitalization. She participated in drug testing as well as

intensive outpatient and psychiatric care, all the while seeking stable housing. She attended repeat court dates and engaged in supervised visitation. But Corinne felt that nothing worked. “I did everything they asked me to do, and I still didn’t get them back. So, I just gave up after a while,” she said.

Corinne highlighted several factors relevant to giving up. For one, her intensive outpatient programming helped her only by signaling compliance. “I mean, I just went to make them [CPS] happy,” she told us. “I didn’t feel like I really needed to be there.” Corinne also characterized her weekly, two-hour-long supervised visitation as emotionally debilitating. While she welcomed time with her children, she felt discomfited by the gaze of the institution. “It was just humiliating,” she said. “The whole time we were interacting with our kids [the therapist would] be writing notes and stuff. I felt very under the microscope. ... The visits were more stressful than anything else.” When Corinne elaborated on what she meant about the visits being unproductive, she expressed a desire for “positive feedback” and remembered hearing negative, “nitpicking” comments instead. For example, Corinne recalled the caseworker’s wish that she had asked her children about school during the visitation. Additionally, Corinne and her husband faced persistent setbacks when attempting to secure housing, and her caseworker determined that Corinne’s mother’s place was not “big enough” for the family. Feeling no closer to reunification than they had been at the start, Corinne and her husband stopped going to court roughly 18 to 24 months into the case. “It just seemed like no matter what we did, it was never good enough. So, eventually I just gave up, and I stopped going to court, because we never were going to get them back.” Corinne’s account suggests the combined weight of structural adversity, her discomfort with the CPS process, and her perceived inability to make progress socialized her to believe persistence would be futile. Behavioral socialization therefore leads individuals to see persistence as something that may entail tolerating continuing burdens and aversive conditions with little benefit.

The parents who gave up the fastest had been through the CPS process before. In such cases, giving up was somewhat normalized. Some mothers decided to forfeit their rights while children were still in the womb. In other instances, prior familiarity led a parent to contemplate or threaten resignation, even if they did not act on it. Giving up could be sped up if a parent faced incarceration or a sense of personal catastrophe at the start of the case. Last, the speed with which parents gave up seemed to depend on their satisfaction with the placements of children, along with the amount of pressure applied by caseworkers or kin.

Some parents gave up at the initiation of their CPS case and even in anticipation of child welfare engagement. Susan, a 46-year-old white mother, who was struggling with substance abuse and facing eviction, anticipated CPS engagement. She was receiving welfare at the time and had been moved from placement in a hotel to transitional housing. The residence knew about Susan’s addiction through her paperwork, and it triggered her eviction when other residents began smelling the acrylic she huffed. Upon being told that she and her son would have to leave, Susan remembered having an immediate emotional breakdown, “flipping out and cursing at everybody and losing it.” She said, “Well, you’re just going to take my son away from me. I’m just going to kill myself because it’s not worth it to live if I can’t have him.” CPS had not arrived, and no one at the residence had told Susan her son would

be removed. Rather, Susan “assumed it because [she] had no place to go.” Susan’s account highlights how structural adversity informs individuals’ reported decision-making and suggests that personalized theories (i.e., her belief CPS would remove her son) may indirectly socialize resignation.¹² Having expressed suicidal thoughts, Susan was transported to the psychiatric ward, and CPS became involved in her son’s care. Susan could not recall signing away her parental rights in court, and she still placed calls to CPS about reunification at the time of our interview in 2019. The office informed her the case had closed three years prior, via her own voluntary surrender.

Having a prior case or previously losing children to the system seemed to condition a parent to give up on future encounters with CPS. During her last pregnancy in 2010, Verna, who is 47 and Black, endured six months of homelessness and a brief period of incarceration. She drank alcohol excessively during her pregnancy and relinquished her infant immediately after delivery. CPS offered Verna the opportunity to enroll in an alcohol detox program. Instead, Verna told us she “chose drinking.” “I signed the papers and that was it,” she continued. “I just signed my rights because I didn’t want her to be in my world. It might be more better for her to have a good foster momma.” Verna had formally and informally given up before. In Verna’s first CPS case, she gave up slowly. It took repeated requirements and court appearances before she consented to the loss of her oldest children via a kinship legal guardianship.¹³ During her first case, Verna observed CPS caseworkers interact with the kin parent who assumed custody of her child. “Because [CPS] was sitting on her side [in court]. I’m like, ‘I don’t know where they’re at. Is [CPS] with me or for her?’” Verna turned inward, elevating the more advantaged kin parent and viewing the caseworker as oppositional. Verna also accepted the caseworker’s logic about where her child would thrive. She recalled her thinking at the time: “Yeah, [the foster parent] got a stable roof, and she got a job. I do not have no stable roof. I don’t have no good job. ... Maybe it might be more better for her to have them.” For Verna, resignation in this context initially unfolded over a drawn-out process, one that may have socialized her to give up quicker in subsequent CPS encounters. Parents’ accounts illustrate that socialization produces behavioral consequences that are manifest when familiarity with institutional processes and social adversity quickens individuals’ consent to disadvantage.

Status-driven socialization: recognizing one’s disadvantage vis-à-vis others

Status-driven socialization occurs when individuals report that they learned to recognize their own circumstances, relative to others, as something that disempowered persistence and encouraged resignation. Parents were attuned to their own

¹² Other parents also feared CPS involvement and family separation in response to eviction. They often reported that CPS did become involved—imposing requirements and providing resources—but did not always remove children.

¹³ Kinship legal guardianship arrangements assign caregiving responsibilities to appointed guardians without requiring the termination of parental rights.

experiences of structural adversity. They also reported being sensitized to the class advantages afforded to children in placement. When the contrast was significant, parents described how they felt trained to see how their desire to raise their children conflicted with their ambitions to see those children thrive. Because the rights of parents are so firmly enshrined in American law (e.g., *Troxel v. Granville*, 2000), child welfare agencies face strong legal barriers to rights taking. Additionally, the state is forbidden from terminating parental rights because it deems that a placement grants children greater opportunity (*In interest of B.G.C.*, 1992), but parents sometimes forfeited their rights on those very grounds. Parents observed and ultimately accounted for advantages afforded to children placed in foster homes with access to greater wealth and social capital. Those who were homeless or jobless recognized that their children might be better off with stable housing and a provider with a steady income. Parents' considerations about class advantage focused on more precise and idiosyncratic matters as well, such as how a placement would affect their children's schools and whether children would have separate bedrooms. In cases of status-driven socialization, attention is trained on individuals' conditioned views of their straits and capacities vis-à-vis others, not their identities (as is the case with personalization). Status-driven socialization is also distinct from conceptual forms of calculation, described below, because individuals' accounts reflect a form of disempowered or constrained agency.

In some instances, parents remembered being explicitly told by CPS caseworkers that their circumstances made them (or their kin) lesser providers. Faye, a 35-year-old Black mother, hoped her daughter, Tara, might be placed with her (Tara's) maternal grandmother. But Faye's mother lived in Trenton, where the child poverty rate was nearly forty percent, while Tara's paternal cousin once removed lived in Princeton, a much more affluent community. The CPS caseworker, Faye recalled, preferred the cousin for this reason. Faye herself recognized this point, expressing concerns about her daughter being raised in her mother's neighborhood, but she weighed such sociological concerns (e.g., the crime rate) with more intimate considerations (e.g., her mother's character), whereas her caseworker reportedly placed more emphasis on ecological evaluations having to do with an area's school performance and neighborhood safety.¹⁴ Given the choice between two capable caretakers, parents believed the state tended to favor the one who would provide children with access to more opportunities. Faye did not embrace resignation as a calculation that would empower Tara's future, but she recognized how she was ill-equipped to challenge institutional actors' steps or alter their decision-making.

Another form of status-driven socialization manifested in accounts involving parents describing how comparing themselves with class-advantaged foster caregivers led to their resignation. Simone, a 33-year-old Black mother, faced intergenerational CPS involvement. CPS transitioned from care to supervision when, at fourteen years of age, Simone was raped and conceived a child. She never exited CPS oversight,

¹⁴ Other parents recognized class advantages but continued to fight for reunification. Faith said, "I be thinking sometimes, maybe it's a good thing that my youngest son didn't come home to this type of area [in Newark]. But, then again, you would like to raise your own kids."

owing to subsequent allegations about child well-being and continuing case involvement. Simone decided to surrender her rights after discovering her daughter had been placed with a family friend, not only because she was known and trusted by her kin, but also because Simone thought doing so would give her child “a good life.” “She [the adoptive mother] put my daughter in private school,” Simone told us. “This lady’s a doctor, and they have a nice, beautiful house. It’s nice, and they’re good people. And I couldn’t, I could have fought it, but I felt like it was O.K. because she already did so much for my daughter.” Parents like Simone understood giving up as the loving sacrifice, one that could equip their children with greater advantages. When enmeshed in processes that specifically account for individuals’ capacities relative to others, people may describe their resignation as socially willed or, through comparative introspection, appropriate.

Normalized socialization: making resignation quotidian

A third form of socialization, which is both potent and (at least in our case) rare, emerges in the accounts of individuals who suggest resignation is an ordinary, unemotional affair. Normalized socialization is most consistent with past studies documenting the “naturalization” of self-negation, an extreme consequence of socialization that prompts individuals’ often subconscious acceptance of the terms of their own domination (Holmes, 2013; Scheper-Hughes, 1992). Individuals who express normalized socialization tend to suggest resignation is common and unremarkable. In so doing, they routinely discount any presumptive pain, grief, or shame associated with resignation. For instance, in describing her children’s relinquishment, Verna said, “I just let them go. Isn’t that something?” Yet Verna’s account of behavioral and status-driven socialization qualified her resignation as understandable if not normative. Additionally, she recast persistence as a Herculean response to continuing structural adversity and CPS requirements. She said, “I don’t feel like I’m a weightlifter or something. But it wasn’t a weight, like, I don’t love my kids. ... I’m tired of going back and forth to [CPS].” Verna rationalized her disengagement from the CPS process through a straightforward, unburdened narrative that recognized her limitations.

Just as giving up quickly could be normalized through individuals’ personal familiarity with CPS, others also normalized prompt resignation. Many parents knew friends or kin whose children had been removed from their care, and they knew of people who had surrendered their rights. Over 59% of the parents with whom we spoke knew people who had been investigated by CPS. Brenda told us that she felt her caseworker’s disdain when she voluntarily gave up a child at birth, having been through the CPS system before. Referring to the caseworker, Brenda told us: “She had an attitude, ‘How could somebody give their child away?’ People do it all the time. How do you think adoption’s possible?” While Brenda’s caseworker, in her eyes, saw giving up as parental negligence, Brenda resisted this interpretation. As we have shown, parents often recast voluntarily surrendering their parental rights *as their right* and as an affirmative parenting decision that served the best interests of their children.

Normalized socialization occupies a somewhat more suspect status as a subvariety of socialized resignation because it is more often theorized and imposed by analysts than verbalized by individuals. Yet when employed by those who resign, it notably demands that individuals describe themselves in often socially undesirable terms, prompting further consideration of the incentives associated with this form of accounting. It is possible that denying pain helps to diminish it or to discount the effect of processes over which individuals have little control. For example, Verna could suggest she “just let them go,” but she did so only after a process of socialization that led her to question her persistence and dismiss her capacities. Alternatively, unemotionality may be a defensive mechanism used to counteract actual or anticipated experiences of absent sympathy or “disenfranchised grief” (Smith, 1759/1982; Thompson & Doka, 2017).¹⁵ This may have been true for Brenda, who already had memories of being treated as “less than human” and being told she was not “qualified to be a mother” when she relinquished her child to a trusted friend. Regardless, accounts of normalized socialization give individuals opportunities to diminish or deny the presumptive pain and stigma of resignation.

Calculation

The calculation perspective frames resignation as an elective decision to accept some form of hardship with the recognition that consenting to one’s own disadvantage may yield other benefits. Accounts of resignation as calculation stand in contrast to conventional socialization perspectives because individuals describe their decision-making as intentional and pragmatic. These narratives pose a different challenge to our definition of resignation because questions of consent, its status as a contestable yet sought-after object (Jaleel, 2021), and alternative options are especially salient. While individuals are certainly free to narrate the forfeiture of rights as a discerning calculation, its status as an act of resignation depends on whether individuals can avail themselves of an alternative option. In the context of inequality and democratic governance, calculations may sometimes be better understood as “facing the facts.” We identified three conceptual forms of calculation: (1) altruism, (2) deprivation, and (3) triage. Altruistic calculation frames resignation as a conscientious decision where an individual consents to some loss to improve the well-being of others. In deprivation-driven accounts, individuals cast resignation as a materialist, resource-motivated decision, describing how they believed self-negation unlocked key supports for themselves or others. A final form of calculation motivated by triage manifests in narratives in which the consent to disadvantage is described as the only reasonable option to mitigate harm.

¹⁵ It could also be a way, we must admit, to help one get through an in-depth interview.

Altruism: protecting others through resignation

Using the resignation as calculation perspective, some individuals may describe giving up as an altruistic act that involves accepting personal disadvantage to promote others' needs. Parents reported resigning when they perceived it would serve their children's well-being. Emberlyn and Qasim, a Black couple in their twenties, decided to relinquish their parental rights when they perceived the CPS process was affecting their family's morale. Parents like Qasim "locate[d] the state as a primary danger in their children's lives" (Gurusami, 2019, p. 129) and aimed to relieve children of this harm by withdrawing from the process. The idea of protecting children from the state was particularly salient for Black parents intimately aware of the history of racially stratified government intervention into family life (Roberts, 2000; Simmons, 2020). Because CPS involvement unfolds against this backdrop, Black and white parents experienced both their cases and resignation differently. For example, Emberlyn said her caseworker "was scared of me because I was big and Black." Likewise, Qasim said, "Oh, they [CPS] saw me as a ... the angry Black criminal." Black parents routinely rejected the validity of racist stereotypes and made efforts to counteract them. Responding to the circumstances of visitation, Emberlyn felt she "could not keep playing with my kids like that" because "it's either all or nothing with our children." Emberlyn knew she could not, as one of her sons asked at the end of visits, stay with him. Yet she could shield her child from the circumstances of state-controlled supervision by surrendering. Here, understanding the spillover consequences of system involvement for family members and kin prompts individuals to consider resignation as a self-sacrificing means to block the state's reach. The broader implication is that perceived altruism motivates resignation because the individual sees self-negation as having the capacity to alter the outcome (or consequences) of an institutional process. Accounts of resignation as altruistic calculation also had the effect of recasting the act of surrendering parental rights as a prosocial exercise of agency (e.g., good parenting).

In other situations, parents felt they could better protect their children by releasing them from their own homes, which were sometimes marked by violence and other threats. Joyce, a 54-year-old Black mother, dealt with a CPS case in 2000 when her family's situation was deteriorating. She had resigned from her job with Mercer County Social Services to care for her ailing mother. Joyce's then-husband started having psychotic episodes. He would "barricade" the family inside the home and threatened violence against others. Joyce herself had begun using crack cocaine, "self-medicating," she said, in response to these burdens. At the time the case began, the family had moved into a motel. Joyce felt like she was "carrying the weight of the world on [her] shoulders." When CPS entered her life, Joyce eventually decided her children faced greater risk in her household than they would in foster care: "We were supposed to go to court, and the only reason why I didn't is because I felt bad. The children were in a better environment than what I could give them. Instead of dragging them back and forth all over the place, and I explained that to my kids. My kids can tell you to this very day, I thought it was the best thing to do." Joyce's statement shows that altruistic calculation and status-driven socialization can intersect.

Some parents considered sacrificing their parental rights a positive or productive act, particularly when two conditions were met: when they were satisfied with their children's placement and, second, when such a placement allowed contact with their children. In some instances, parents withheld consent until they felt assured they could preserve communication with their children. Such narratives highlight how individuals may conceive of their resignation as agentic, calibrated to secure a favored outcome or lesser evil. Consider the following exchange with Brenda, who had signed away her parental rights in previous CPS cases.

Interviewer: On this last case, you resist them [CPS]—

Brenda: Entirely.

Interviewer: —pushing you to give up?

Brenda: Entirely.

Interviewer: Whereas, in the past, with [your friend], you gave your children to her?

Brenda: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Interviewer: Tell me the difference.

Brenda: ... Well, the difference with that was, I know I'd see them again. With [my friend taking custody], I knew I'd see my children again. With this [last case], I don't know when I'm going to see him, if ever. You know?

Brenda illustrates how parents attended to certain parenting aims within the CPS process. Brenda had formally entrusted two of her children to her friend's care, explaining, "I willingly gave up my children, but I was right there. They knew who I was. I was a constant fixture in their life as they were growing up." She continued, "They had two moms; they had two dads." This approach to parenting—what Gurusami (2019) has called "collective motherwork"—is not recognized by our systems of law, but Black feminist scholars have identified its long history in African-American communities that "recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible" and valued "othermothers—women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities" (Hill Collins, 1990/2000, pp. 178–83).

In keeping with this tradition, Brenda developed her approach to shared motherhood in response to state intervention. She had lost her first child to adoption as a sixteen-year-old, after her sister called CPS when Brenda left her child at their uncle's house. Brenda resigned her second when she "ran away" from a CPS program when she remembered being told: "They're [CPS] going to take your baby anyway." During her stay in a shelter, Brenda relapsed, leaving her daughter in the shelter's care. It was in this situation that her friend offered an alternative. "She said, 'You know they took the baby, right?' I said, 'I figured as much, that was going to happen,'" Brenda recalled. After expressing her anger, the friend told Brenda she would have assumed custody: "She said I could have took the baby to her. And she really meant it. Because she took two of my kids and raised them."¹⁶

¹⁶ In Brenda's recollection, CPS resisted placing her second son with the friend on the grounds that the friend needed a larger house.

If parents' satisfaction with children's placement could encourage resignation, dissatisfaction with foster caregivers could encourage parents to fight their cases to an end. Kamirah, a 42-year-old Black mother of six, had resigned elder children to kin based on her criminal-legal involvement and her wish to prevent her children from lingering in CPS care. However, she continued fighting for her younger son based on her concerns about the conditions of his foster care. During Kamirah's weekly visits, she told us that she observed her child had "open gashes" behind his ear. Kamirah called the police and refused to leave until the police transferred her son to the hospital. She recalled, "It was like, 'You telling me I can't have him because I got in trouble, but he in a place where he getting like physically abused?'" CPS later informed Kamirah that her son had been removed from the home. In the end, however, Kamirah was not reunited with him. A sense of altruism accordingly fueled persistence in certain conditions, but that alone did not guarantee reunification.

Deprivation: addressing needs through resignation

Parents sometimes recalled discerning opportunities to gain resources through resignation, treating it as a calculated act to address deprivation. Parents encountered situations in the CPS process in which resignation facilitated access to care. This occurred, for instance, when Adelaide, a 48-year-old Black mother, sought to transfer her newborn to kin during her incarceration. Since her kin could not make the 25-mile drive from Trenton to New Brunswick, Adelaide accepted a neglect charge, a condition for securing safe transport for her daughter. "I called [CPS] and, in order for them to transport [my newborn] to Trenton, I had to say that I neglected my daughter in court," Adelaide said. "So, I did that." In this instance, the agency's policy required an admission of guilt.¹⁷ Several parents reported being unable to unlock state resources without making similar concessions, in this case formally accepting culpability in court or demonstrating guilt.

Demonstrated need did not on its own facilitate access to state resources. For instance, Emily, a 20-year-old white mother who did not face child removal, called a homeless hotline during a period of housing instability, triggering a CPS investigation. Emily was familiar with the resources CPS could offer, having heard of its Keeping Families Intact program along with CPS vouchers for furniture and clothing. She said, "I asked for as much assistance as possible, and I got denied for everything." According to Emily, a CPS worker told her, "We have to just make sure that you find somewhere to stay with the baby and that you're not in too much immediate need, that you're able to provide for the child, that the child is not malnourished or cold." If Emily did not find stable shelter, CPS indicated it could remove her child.

¹⁷ Similarly, Fong (2020, p. 624) found caseworkers believed the extension of resources was activated only by a finding of culpability (i.e., establishing child maltreatment). In the context of the criminal legal system, treatment courts often require court-involved persons to enter a guilty plea prior to participation, the plea being "the price of admission" (Orr et al., 2009, pp. 11, 17). In these ways, state resources are released after acts of self-negation.

Emily remembered the following exchange with a caseworker: “And then I asked her, ‘Do you wanna take my child away after that?’ And she said, ‘Well, you have to find a place to stay ’cause eventually, if you don’t, of course, you can’t have the kids sleeping in the street.’”

Or consider Aurelia, a 54-year-old Black mother, who was diagnosed with depression and used crack cocaine and alcohol. An attempted overdose of pills precipitated the CPS case that would result in the loss of her children. Aurelia attempted to take her life once more, and her addiction deepened. She decided to give up after her final caseworker, remembered as being “real nice,” counseled her to forfeit her rights. The caseworker could offer something in return: He would reunify her children, who were scattered across placements, with Aurelia’s father. “He said, ‘Why don’t you let your dad get your kids? Then they’ll all be together again.’ ... And that’s what he did. And it took like two, three months, and my dad was really nice with my kids.” The caseworker helped Aurelia’s father find a “nice house in a nice neighborhood” and “hooked [the] house up” with furniture, clothes, and beds. Once Aurelia felt assured the caseworker and her father would provide for her children, she voluntarily surrendered her rights.

Likewise, Julia, a 38-year-old white mother, prioritized the care of her children over maintaining parental rights. As an adult, Julia had endured considerable trauma, including intimate partner violence, sexual and physical assault, and the murder of a romantic partner. CPS had lent her much-needed support (e.g., facilitating access to medical care, material resources) during her first case in Connecticut and helped her leave her abusive boyfriend. Yet Julia faced repeated CPS involvement owing to truancy, drug-use accusations, and her involvement with the criminal legal system. She sought reunification with her children during a later case, but she struggled to make her court dates, maintain sobriety, and complete mandated coursework. After being deemed an “unfit parent” during one of her missed court appearances, Julia remembered being told that her children “would be eligible for free tuition and room and boarding fees at any state university in Florida or Pennsylvania” if she signed her parental rights over to the adoptive mother. She said, “I really could not say ‘no’ to that.” Under considerable self-reported duress, poor parents sometimes indicated they relinquished custody of their children to obtain needed care for them. In some cases, resignation serves as a means to meet needs or resolve conditions of deprivation.

Triage: resignation as Hobson’s choice

Some parents reported that they gave up on the CPS process because they were offered one choice or none at all. Their accounts underscore how individuals aiming to prevent harm and access resources, under conditions of strain and inequality, may view resignation as the only reasonable option. Parents sometimes surrendered their parental rights over one child to protect or have a chance to raise other children. This was particularly the case for parents who were raising children with severe behavioral problems. Cynthia, who is Black and 63, was one of a number of parents we met who invited CPS into her life because she was raising a challenging child. At

the start of the 1980s, Cynthia received a call from the school nurse, informing her about an institution previously unknown to her: CPS. Cynthia had grown up with beatings—she still had scars from ironing cords—and disciplined her children by spanking them with a belt. The school nurse told Cynthia that she would be reporting her to CPS after observing marks on the arm of her son, Tyrus. Nothing came of the initial report. “It was just a call to let me know [CPS] was in town,” Cynthia said. But Cynthia struggled to parent Tyrus. Her son had violent tendencies, which included drawing bloody pictures and attempting to drown his two-year-old half-brother in the bathtub. He was impulsive and unrepentant, stealing Cynthia’s rent money and self-harming. Cynthia gave up on corporal punishment after she realized that “he liked the hurt.”

Desperate for help, Cynthia turned to her family. Although family members were willing to help with her eldest daughter, they were at a loss when it came to Tyrus. “We’ll keep her,” Cynthia remembered her family members telling her, “but you have to take him with you.” She continued, “That was everybody’s attitude. ... Once the word got around you got a bad kid, it’s out there. I used to have to take him with me wherever I went.” Unable to control Tyrus herself and having received limited support from kin, Cynthia turned to CPS. CPS workers ultimately decided Tyrus required medication, pressing Cynthia to consent. When she resisted, they “turned the whole thing around,” labeling her as uncooperative. In Cynthia’s telling, the agency would not address Tyrus’s or her family’s needs by medicating the boy. She said, “To me, what they wanted to do was keep him calm when he was in school and around other people but not when he came home. I didn’t feel comfortable with giving my child some type of medicine like that.”

Cynthia did not agree with the agency’s recommendation, but she lacked alternative options. She worried something “serious” would happen, that Tyrus would harm himself or her other children. Cynthia concluded that Tyrus “can’t stay in the house because it’s all of us against one kid.” In the end, Tyrus was placed in a foster care. Cynthia defended the decision: “I had my daughter and my other son. If I have to sacrifice one for those, then that’s what I have to do.” When parents characterized resignation as a form of triage, they did not necessarily draw on the personalization perspective; failing to resign, in their accounts, may have posed greater threat to their self-concepts as parents. Triage is distinct from altruistic calculation because it draws on utilitarian framing and entails consigning someone or something for the benefit of others. Last, triage need not intersect with deprivation, as individuals from class-advantaged backgrounds (including some parents with whom we spoke) may confront a similar albeit slower exhaustion of options. For instance, individuals may resign themselves to certain situations, tolerating what they deem to be lesser evils (e.g., workplace cultures for workplace stature).

Some parents recalled caseworkers actively encouraging the surrender of parental rights over some children to enable parents to care for other ones. In her twenties, Simone met a caseworker who she found helpful and was assigned a public defender who made her options clear. The public defender advised Simone to concede the fight, giving up her rights to her first four children for the chance to raise her fifth, with whom she was pregnant at the time. Simone did not fully trust the public defender, but neither could she reject his advice outright. “He [the public defender]

said, ... ‘The state is advising that you give your first four up for adoption in order to keep your baby that you’re having.’ I was like, ‘What?’ So, I literally just give my kids for adoption. He’s like, ‘No, just allow them to be adopted by the foster parents that they already have.’ ... But yeah, so my kids was forcefully adopted, and she [the caseworker] ... was like, ‘Well, I’m going to put it to you this way. Either they get adopted, or we’ll take the next one you’re having.’ So, that’s when I signed the rights for my kids to get adopted.” She concluded, “If I would have stood my ground, they would have took my daughter.” Simone’s situation reveals how some parents felt pressured to surrender some children to retain others.

Simone’s story also raises questions about whether her narrative represents resignation or a facing of the facts because persistence, which may have led to the involuntary termination of parental rights, would severely imperil her future rights.¹⁸ While parents like Cynthia and Simone identified a form of triage as a motivation for resignation, their accounts offered little indication of normalized socialization. Making decisions that were both uncommon and socially stigmatizing often left parents with a sense of “disenfranchised grief,” which occurs when people endure losses that go without acknowledgment, social sanction, or public mourning (Thompson & Doka, 2017; Wall-Wieler et al., 2018). As the calculation perspective does not require resignation’s naturalization, it may therefore conflict with the socialization perspective, in general, and normalized socialization, in particular.

In other cases, however, respondents indicated CPS caseworkers used their discretion to permit parents to retain custody of newborn children while working toward reunification with elder children, encouraging persistence rather than resignation. Maya, a 50-year-old Black mother, came under CPS supervision for being “fifteen and pregnant.” Having been evicted by her grandmother, Maya gave birth to a son in foster care and subsequently faced continuing supervision as a parent to her son. A young parent, Maya described herself as having “no sense of direction.” She believed her child’s paternal grandmother reported her to CPS in hopes of securing custody, citing Maya’s unstable housing and her grandson’s missed immunizations. In court, Maya was instructed to secure housing. When she failed to do so by a certain deadline, a judge ordered child removal. Maya, who was then pregnant with a daughter, resisted. She provided a fake address and absconded from CPS and the court for two weeks with her son, staying with her child’s father’s cousins until being arrested. After the arrest, Maya told her mother to surrender the child to CPS and foster care. A week later, Maya was released from jail, and she gave birth to her daughter while living with her grandmother. CPS did not remove her daughter on account of Maya’s kin support, but her caseworker ordered Maya to seek stable housing and complete parenting courses for reunification with her son. However, the most pivotal and beneficial decision, in Maya’s memory, occurred when a CPS

¹⁸ Being involved with CPS or facing involuntary surrender may trigger supervision when parents give birth to younger children and curtail the agency’s obligations in future cases. For example, “a formal termination of parental rights to a previous child is grounds for termination of rights to a future child,” meaning that “voluntary relinquishment may occur because it [cannot] be used in the same way” (Brank et al., 2001, p. 346).

caseworker helped her secure cash assistance and rent a room from a supportive foster parent. Maya remembered the caseworker telling the judge, “Miss Hart is a good mother. She just needs structure.’ ... That’s why they allowed me to live with the lady who was a foster mother who had foster kids.” Ultimately, Maya moved into her own apartment and achieved reunification. Maya’s caseworkers did not make her feel the structural adversity she endured (e.g., housing instability, intergenerational CPS involvement) was insurmountable.

Discussion

The parents we interviewed understood resignation—in the form of relinquishing their parental rights—as a reasonable response to intersecting burdens. The impulse to resign was shared by many parents, including those who never faced child removal and those who reunified with their children. Structural adversity was a common, motivating context for resignation because hardships, such as housing instability and incarceration, worked against persistence by impeding successful compliance and incentivizing resignation.

We began by synthesizing a vast literature on resignation, organizing it around three perspectives emphasizing personalization, socialization, and calculation. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive, but each is accompanied by significantly different social ontologies. A key implication of our evaluation of theoretical work on resignation is that adopting certain theoretical orientations (e.g., Marxian, Bourdieuan) is no prerequisite for the empirical study of the matter. We believe this serves as a necessary corrective to some theoretical treatments which tend to view resignation in a monochromatic light, as always “symbolic violence,” for example. Resignation can take many forms—some calculated, others tacitly accepted—and often doesn’t appear in the first instance as self-negation at all. In fact, ostensibly resistant action (e.g., berating a caseworker) can itself be a form of resignation if viewed not from the point of view of the action but from the point of view of the outcome. Analyses that emphasize verbalized dissent often overlook enacted resignation, promoting resistance through interpretation alone. This selective reading is out-of-step with empirical realities and runs the risk of casting individuals who resign in a lesser light. Our analysis has shown that individuals may resist in one moment yet resign in the next, and vice versa, and reveals how narratives of resignation are rich and deeply varied, prompting new questions about how individuals craft meaning in response to pain and loss.

We organized our empirical findings using three perspectives synthesized from the social-scientific literature on resignation and developed several new concepts associated with each perspective. First, personalized accounts of resignation emphasize individual agency and identity, often overlooking the role of macrostructural forces that help to produce resignation. We found parents who offered personalized accounts of resignation reported being especially attuned to interpersonal interactions with institutional actors who embodied state power. Additionally, parents’ perceptions that their identities as caregivers were called into question and their recollection of fatalistic prognostications or life events sometimes afforded individuals

with vocabularies justifying resignation because they came to see the termination of parental rights as inevitable. As such, our study expands the definition of personalized accounts of resignation beyond those in which stigmatized identities are embraced (e.g., Snow & Anderson, 1987) to highlight how people processed within bureaucratic systems can come to understand their plight through idiosyncratic terms.

Second, we analyzed socialized narratives of resignation, in which individuals describe a learning process through which they come to accept their disadvantage as appropriate or normal and resign accordingly. Parents who had experienced prior socialization or endured acute, correlated adversity articulated how resignation—as a form of conduct—could be sped up. For other parents, the constraints of parenting in poverty and the experience of comparing themselves to class-advantaged caregivers played a role in their accounts of resignation. In rarer circumstances, the notion that giving up was neither unusual nor emotional reportedly eased resignation. Our contingent concepts give researchers a framework through which to understand and explain how socialized resignation is taught. Future studies may elaborate subvarieties of socialization associated with other forms of learned and status-driven conduct. Notably, our study does not ascribe to the characterization of resignation as the result of subconscious socialization. Quite the opposite: We demonstrate how an education in resignation can be both rapid and blunt. This strains Bourdieu's (1989/1996, p. 39) assertion that educative statements “in [their] nontransformed form ('you're nothing but a worker's son') ... would be completely devoid of symbolic efficacy and would even be liable to incite a revolt.” Our findings indicate that researchers should be slow to classify actions that appear as resistance as actual resistance and instead probe how unobvious lessons may still beget tacit resignation. Relatedly, our study demonstrates that scholars should be leery of labeling behavior resignation or resistance based on isolated actions or outcomes.

Third, we assessed calculation perspectives, typified in accounts wherein individuals respond to structural constraints through deliberate, pragmatic efforts aimed to minimize harm and maximize opportunity. Many parents voiced concerns about the negative consequences of structural adversity and the CPS process itself. Their narratives identified resignation as a process of discerning and securing the best bad outcome. Some drew on altruistic motivations, considering resignation an act of parental sacrifice through which they could improve their children's lives by shielding children from state supervision or securing their placement with trusted kin caregivers. Others viewed resignation as a means of addressing needs in conditions of deprivation. In such circumstances, parents saw resignation as the cost of opportunity. Last, some parents, who were raising difficult children or enmeshed in a prolonged CPS process discussed resignation as a form of triage. Researchers might draw on calculating narratives of resignation to understand dynamics and outcomes in an array of contexts. Altruistic calculation might apply to the case of a person recently released from prison if they elect to enter a halfway house to protect kin from state supervision that comes with parole (Comfort, 2016). It might also apply when a tenant served with an eviction notice avoids “doubling up” with friends because doing so threatens the housing stability of those potential helpers (Desmond, 2016).

Scholars may evaluate competing conceptualizations of resignation, considering the respective roles of the individual who reports or enacts self-negation and the analyst who shapes its understanding. This may be the case, for example, in competing narratives about a coma-like illness afflicting asylum-seeking children in Sweden whose claims were rejected (Aviv, 2017). Our theorization therefore encourages researchers' reflection on their definitions (e.g., of consent) and their social or institutional positions. Our analysis also raises questions about how and when actions are treated as instances of resignation. For example, triage could be a mechanism of resignation outside of the context of child welfare as well as for groups rather than individuals. Cynthia, the mother who struggled to raise her son Tyrus, indicated the school faced similar questions to her own. She reported that teachers insisted Tyrus be removed from a mainstream classroom, a decision parallel to her resignation (see Fletcher, 2010; Mitchell, 2017). Her report raises questions about how higher-power actors, including street-level bureaucrats, participate in a kind of resignation themselves.

Resignation & democratic governance

Although recent years have witnessed an efflorescence of research focused on *subversion* with studies of how power is resisted in overt and covert ways (Mumby et al., 2017; Scott, 1990), a comprehensive account of the reproduction of social disadvantage and institutional power must also trace the dynamics of *resignation*. Resignation may be “the commonest effect of that form of ‘learning by doing’ which is the teaching performed by the order of things itself” (Bourdieu, 1997/2000, p. 233). This seems particularly true in the context of state power because theorists have long recognized the advantages of governing through socialized compliance (Gramsci, 1971; Lukes, 1974/2005). The process of resignation in general, and the forfeiture of rights in particular, is a crucial feature of democratic governance. Still, theoretical treatments of self-negation have far outpaced empirical ones, leaving underexplored how institutional processes encourage people to forfeit their rights when doing so comes with little or no material benefit and how people experience resignation within institutional contexts.

The process of surrendering parental rights was a critical case through which to study the dynamics of resignation within the context of state action, especially given that surrendering a child is a highly consequential and functionally permanent act, which provides parents few tangible benefits and mainly a gutting loss; that parents are provided legal counsel, are formally entitled to a process that facilitates reunification, and are not directly penalized for seeing that process through to its final conclusion; and that state actors overseeing the child removal process are trained and required to strive for family reunification for a period of time. Most basically, our findings affirm the relevance of resignation to sociological accounts of inequality. Doing so not only helps to align ground-level reports with macro-theories of power that stress the importance of self-negation (e.g., Bourdieu, 1989/1996; Fanon, 1952/1967); it also more fully represents people's lived experience. After all, the theme of resignation came to us inductively, through parents' repeated accounts. If

what led parents to give up was central to their stories, it should be central to ours as well.

Our approach allowed us to identify several specific moments of socialization where parents recalled being explicitly steered toward rights forfeiture or placed in a situation where surrendering their children appeared as the only viable option. Although scholars long have documented how poor Americans have been coerced to forfeit political and civil rights in exchange for government aid (Marshall, 1949/1964), this study moved beyond this transactional perspective, showing that institutions need not secure people's rights by offering resources. For the parents we met, forfeiting their parental rights was a legible response to adversity and a key feature of democratic governance under conditions of severe deprivation.¹⁹ Previous research has shown how resource-constrained state institutions restrict services by placing bureaucratic or psychological demands on those who seek help (Lipsky, 1980/2010; Piven & Cloward, 1971/1993). In a similar way, an adversarial process can be lubricated if individuals are conditioned to see state-provided solutions as individual choices.²⁰

“You get tired of everything”: the phenomenology of resignation

Focusing on perspectives that parents employed when making sense of why they relinquished their parental rights, we have identified a range of explanations parents use to self-narrate their experience. Parsing different perspectives and barriers for analytical clarity, however, has the distinct drawback of misreading parents' real-life experiences, which were often typified by simultaneously confronting intersecting, compounding hardships (Halsey et al. 2016). Talking with parents made us realize that an honest attempt to understand their experiences of being investigated by CPS and reaching a decision to relinquish parental rights required that we attempt to account for how adversities pile on all at once. Parents felt pushed to give up when they were flooded with a sense that the process was overwhelming or that the system was set against them. In their telling, parents conveyed being fatigued with “the journey,” engulfed by seemingly insurmountable challenges. Ramona, a 32-year-old Hispanic mother, dealt with a CPS case after she dialed the NJ 2-1-1 hotline for help during a spell of homelessness. She divulged an urge to resign when she said, “There comes a time when ... you get tired of everything. The pain and everything just gets to you. It just falls really hard on you.”

To conclude, we attempt to represent the phenomenological experience of loss and resignation by featuring one mother's story that, in its complexity and amount of compounding setbacks, shares much in common with many other parents we

¹⁹ Future research drawing on the accounts and experiences of caseworkers alongside those of system-involved individuals will be critical for answering these questions and will likewise overcome a key limitation of this study.

²⁰ As is manifest in the paradigmatic example of plea bargaining, state-led resignation requires the acknowledgement of guilt, an acknowledgement that both protects institutional resources (a trial is forgone) and upholds the legitimacy of the institution (the accused affirms the accusation) (McCoy, 2005).

met. We return to Faye, the 35-year-old Black mother, who ultimately relinquished her parental rights to a relative. Faye's CPS case began when her daughter, Tara, was two-and-a-half. Faye and Tara's father were having relationship trouble. Faye said, "We was just arguing and always fighting around her." This led the couple to split up, which caused Faye to become homeless. She alternated between sleeping in her car and at friends' apartments, often dropping Tara off with the child's paternal cousin once removed. The cousin eventually reported Faye to CPS, which enraged her. Faye lashed out at Tara's father—slicing his face with a blade—and was arrested. After two weeks, Faye was released from jail and enrolled in New Jersey's Pretrial Intervention Program. By then, she had lost her job.

At first, Faye tried for reunification. She remembered her CPS caseworker being "pretty helpful." Yet Faye was not in a position where she could readily comply; nor did she sense anyone was on her side. She got the impression that the child's father, CPS, and her own mother supported giving custody to the cousin. This made Faye feel, even in the early days of her case, that her daughter was "already lost." Through these impressions, Faye personalized resignation, calling attention to others' opposition and power and perceived fatalism. This impending sense of loss demotivated Faye from completing the requirements her caseworker imposed. Faye knew she had to "go out there and try to find a better job and everything" and obtain housing, but she could not figure out "how to get [her]self back in order." After Faye's father died and her uncle was murdered in the span of a few months, she stopped looking for work and slid into a depression. She started heavily drinking and smoking marijuana. "I didn't want any responsibilities," she remembered. With these details, Faye highlighted how acute stressors and an interest in relieving her pain socialized resignation.²¹ At age four, Tara remained in her relative's custody, and Faye incurred a second criminal charge. She continued to withdraw, ending her engagement with her CPS caseworker and self-medicating with alcohol. Although Faye's mother tried to improve her daughter's emotional well-being and drive, in the end Faye felt crushed by the weight of it all: her poverty and homelessness, alcohol dependence, pending criminal case, the death of her father and uncle, and the loss of Tara. Faye described the sensation as "giving up hope" and being "overwhelmed." Faye's parental rights were terminated in court.

Like many parents with whom we spoke, Faye faced structural adversity (homelessness, poverty) and institutional barriers (CPS workers opposed reunification), as well as network disadvantage (deaths in her family, opposition to reunification within her social network), simultaneously. The co-occurrence of these challenges compounded with multiple, overlapping and self-reinforcing adversities Faye experienced before CPS entered her life. Those adversities often compromised parents' ability and will to comply with CPS requirements. A resounding implication for our understanding of resignation is the need for analysts to strive for a fundamental phenomenological recognition of the situation, to try and grasp as fully as possible what it felt to undergo processes that led to a self-negating decision. If we wish

²¹ Recall, also, that Faye reported elements of status-driven socialization based on the CPS caseworker's placement decision, which may have intersected with altruism- or deprivation-driven calculations.

to understand what it feels like to be investigated by child protective services, for example, we must attempt to feel *all at once* the complete suite of the problems facing parents whose children have been removed from their care, as the parents themselves do. To the parents we spoke to, their compounding disadvantages felt suffocating and inescapable. Parents gave up after they were flooded with a sense of hopelessness in the face of what seemed like unending burdens or impossible requirements. In this light, the fact that more parents didn't give up is perhaps the real sociological puzzle.

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Declarations

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