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A desperate means to dignity Work refusal amongst Philadelphia welfare recipients

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ABSTRACT ■ Sentiments favoring a sweeping overhaul of the United States' social welfare system culminated in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996 – a law that mandates states to move almost all recipients from cash assistance on welfare to paid work. This ethnographic study examined work refusal among women who left menial jobs to return to welfare, or to subsistence by other means. Seventy interviews and 18 months of participant observation revealed a pattern of confrontations with authority figures at various job sites as well as resentment of the subservience often demanded of workers in the lowest tiers of the primary economy. Confrontations in training programs and at work afforded impoverished women the chance to express their resentments about being relegated to unrewarding, low income work and to maintain vestiges of even a defiant dignity in the face of a hostile social order.

KEY WORDS ■ work refusal, welfare-to-work, poverty, working poverty, women's experience

In November 1996, the United States Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), an overhaul of the nation's social welfare policies that dismantled a system of income supports for poor Americans dating back to the Great Depression.

PRWORA – often called ‘welfare reform’ – mandated critical changes to the social welfare system including a five-year lifetime limit on cash income assistance, and requirements that welfare recipients comply with attending such programs as job training and structured employment searches.

Among the law’s provisions were the following: (1) a five-year lifetime limit on welfare receipt, though states may exempt up to 20 percent of their caseloads from this limit; (2) requirements that states cut welfare roles by at least 50 percent by 2002; (3) mandates that recipients participate in subsidized employment, community service, vocational training and/or structured job search programs to ‘work off’ welfare benefits. Money once used for welfare checks could be used instead to fund ‘life skills’ training programs to socialize women for work; (4) the right of states to ‘sanction’ – that is to withhold welfare benefits – from clients who do not comply with requirements (e.g. someone who ignores orders to attend a welfare-to-work training program);¹ (5) tax breaks for businesses that hire welfare recipients.²

Citing the reduction in the nation’s welfare roles as well as anecdotal evidence of women leaving public assistance and making good in the workforce, conservative commentators and the nation’s lawmakers have heralded PRWORA’s success (DeParle, 1997a). The US welfare roles have indeed been reduced as mandated by law. From 1996 to 1999, the number of American families receiving support from cash assistance fell from 4.1 million to 2.4 million (Zedlewski and Alderson, 2001).

But as this study documents, statistics citing reduced welfare roles mask the serious problems of women who have lost public assistance but remain without stable employment. This article is part of a larger study examining current and former welfare recipients’ interpretations of their experiences as workers performing menial tasks at poverty-level wages. As will be detailed in this article, women I interviewed ($N = 29$) often left jobs in a gesture of defiance, typically triggered by disagreements with authority figures over issues such as hours, required tasks and disrespectful treatment. These small acts of resistance were an effort to achieve a sense of agency and dignity in the face of unremitting poverty and little hope of better in the future. Wages that left workers impoverished did little to enhance motivation to remain employed if other means for subsistence could be found.³

This study is particularly timely because it provides an in-depth look at an issue that analysts have noted while tracking the employment retention of women leaving welfare. A recent study suggests that about one in seven of these former recipients is struggling without any form of regular income, including wages, support from a spouse or disability benefits (Loprest, 2003). A Brookings Institution study noted that 40 percent of people who leave welfare endure periods of unemployment (Holzer and Stoll, 2001).

One recent survey of 95 families without earnings or cash assistance found that many survived by receiving a government housing subsidy and food stamps, as well as charity and help from friends or family (Zedlewski et al., 2003). Those without subsidized housing typically moved in with friends or relatives to avoid homelessness (Zedlewski et al., 2003). Almost 70 percent told researchers they worried about or experienced difficulty in affording food, and almost all had cash income 50 percent below poverty level – about \$600 per month for a family of three (Zedlewski et al., 2003).

Nonetheless, conservative policy makers and many national newspapers have insisted on trumpeting welfare reform's supposed victories. Since PRWORA's enactment in 1996, newspapers have regularly featured success stories, as well as articles contemplating what to do with those who seem to defy all logic and refuse work despite welfare programs' efforts to make them employable. One notable *New York Times* profile of a Wisconsin welfare recipient helps illustrate how both policy makers and much of the American public frame the question of public assistance and work. The story concerned Opal Caples, a mother of three who eventually lost a job cleaning hospital toilets after a stretch of unexplained absences. Caples presented well at job interviews.

But she loses jobs as fast as she finds them, and a few months after joining the hospital, she has supervisors fretting over her absences. That is to say she's the kind of woman – with untapped resources and unpredictable troubles – that the state, the nation, is seeking to transform. (DeParle, 1997b)

In short, this reporter, as well as many Americans, frames the problem of fragile work attachment as deficiencies inherent in the women themselves. Missing from such discourse is the question of how low-income jobs, and the nature of menial labor itself, shape welfare recipients' perceptions of their futures as self-sustaining wage earners. Unlike the focus of the welfare-to-work programs now seeking to 'transform' women like Opal Caples – in which welfare recipients' refusal of low-paying and demeaning work is viewed as a personal deficit requiring correction – this article suggests other explanations for fragile work attachment: that the jobs these women are offered prove gratuitously demeaning both by virtue of wages earned and their treatment in the workplace.

Background considerations

PRWORA managed to win the support of Americans after more than two decades of campaigning by conservative writers and politicians, who argued that the growth of social programs during the 1960s War on Poverty had produced a population of chronic, long-term welfare recipients in the

nation's inner cities (Gilder, 1981; Mead, 1992; Murray, 1984). In the public mind, welfare receipt became inextricably linked to personal indolence, drug abuse, 'illegitimate' births, as well as the proliferation of urban crime – all unsavory aspects of the nation's 'underclass' (Auletta, 1982).

But the structural factors that contributed to the rise of the inner city's woes were not an issue for conservative politicians and researchers. Such structural factors include the changing face of the American economy in the second half of the 20th century, as cities lost the large industrial base that had successfully sustained semi- and unskilled workers in stable, unionized jobs for several generations. Communities have been compelled to adapt to the loss of jobs, human capital, and social networks (Wilson, 1987, 1996). During the 1950s and 1960s, manufacturing jobs left the inner city at the same time that large tracts of subsidized housing were erected to serve low-income residents (Jargowsky and Bane, 1991; Jencks, 1991; Wilson, 1987, 1996). A number of researchers including Rank (1994) have argued that people are poor not because of 'welfare dependency' or personal deficits but because of their relegation to the secondary economy – a sector of employment characterized by low wages, few if any benefits, and considerably less job stability than is found in the primary economy.

As will be examined in this study, women engaged in conflict with direct authority figures while working in the menial jobs described in previous research (Rank, 1994). These jobs typically demanded subservience, paid poverty-level wages, and offered little to buttress workers' self-respect. The findings presented here contradict the assumptions leading to the enactment of PRWORA. During debate in 1996, many US lawmakers argued that any job at all offers more dignity than a life on welfare (US Congress, House of Representatives, H3740). That view was echoed by Katherine S. Newman's study (1999) of fast food workers in New York City's borough of Harlem. According to Newman, even a poverty-level wage job offering minimal advancement allows workers to join the middle-class 'on the right side of American culture' and to shield motivated young people from the unseemly inner-city world around them (Newman, 1999: xv). Fast food workers know their jobs are poorly valued and offer virtually nothing to enhance status (Newman, 1999: 120). She contends, however, that workers benefit from having structure and purpose – as well as from being part of a workplace culture that reinforces the work ethic (Newman, 1999: 102).

But does the refusal to stay in a low-wage job, or endure maltreatment by a supervisor, indicate moral defect? Does this behavior warrant re-engineering (Newman, 1999: xv) so that welfare recipients can join those on the right side of American culture? As will be argued here, women in this study refused to mechanistically respond to the imperatives of the new welfare law by accepting whatever low-wage work might be available.⁴ In their seminal analysis of the status injuries suffered by American manual

laborers, Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb described how the burden of class in an industrialized, advanced capitalist society shapes the beliefs of those near the bottom of the social hierarchy (Sennett and Cobb, 1972). Workers may be very suspicious of the idea that opportunity exists for all who are competent, and that society's rewards are distributed fairly; thus, members of the lower class resent those who dominate them (Sennett and Cobb, 1972). Compounding the resentment of status injury are the failed attempts to win respect through work and status – as the avenues to distinction and economic reward are few (Sennett and Cobb, 1972: 251).

The law's impact

Despite the decrease in the nation's welfare caseloads, much evidence suggests that many of these workers cycle in and out of jobs paying very poor wages and offering few benefits – thus leaving many still trapped in poverty (Peterson et al., 2002). Many studies (Boushey, 2002; Boushey and Rosnick, 2003) have suggested that the menial and poorly-paid jobs these women obtain may themselves threaten the PRWORA's goal of moving workers to permanent self-sufficiency. Without adequate pay or benefits, cycling back to public assistance seems almost inevitable, at least until the five-year maximum benefit is reached.⁵

A variety of qualitative and quantitative studies have illuminated the efforts of impoverished Americans to find and maintain stable employment despite the considerable hardship caused by poverty-level wages, and insecurity of job tenure (Figlio and Ziliak, 1999; Rank, 1994; Schram, 2000). Lacking skills and education, welfare recipients are typically funneled into jobs with low pay and little potential for earnings growth (Kaye and Nightingale, 2000). The study edited by Kaye and Nightingale found that despite the robust economy of the 1990s, the share of hourly jobs with low or near-low earnings has been increasing, especially in the inner cities, up from 34.4 to 42.6 percent from 1988 to 1997 (Smith and Woodbury, 2000: 56). Because of their over-representation in the secondary market, a third of female workers received hourly wages insufficient to lift them out of poverty in 1997, even if they worked full-time for an entire year (Kaye and Nightingale, 2000: ix). Similarly, a longitudinal study by the Metropolitan Research Development Corporation surveying recent and current welfare recipients ($N = 3900$) found that the majority had been employed full-time for most of the past two years. But the majority earned wages so low that their families remained below the official poverty level (Polit et al., 2001).

PRWORA has forced local social service agencies to de-emphasize income maintenance in favor of developing programs to move women into

jobs. Indeed, much evaluations research is now underway to assess the efficacy of these programs, which typically emphasize some combination of vocational and 'life skills' training, as well as supervised job searches and/or incentives programs for women to increase their efforts to find and maintain employment (Holcomb et al., 1999). Various social service agencies are struggling to serve individuals with numerous barriers to employment including non-completion of high school, poor reading and math skills, limited work experience, substance abuse/mental health issues, and long-term receipt of public assistance (Nightingale et al., 2002).

Many researchers have emphasized the personal deficits that some welfare recipients must overcome to secure employment including severe depression and anxiety (Pettersson and Friel, 2001; Siefert et al., 2000; Stromwall, 2001), as well as low education attainment and/or physical illness (Zedlewski and Alderson, 2001). Others have focused on the structural factors impeding steady work attachment. These structural factors include poor wages (Andersson et al., 2002; Boushey and Rosnick, 2003); lack of access to child-care (Boushey, 2002); a spatial mismatch between available jobs in the suburbs and inner-city residents (Holzer and Stoll, 2001); and inability to secure jobs offering health benefits (Peterson et al., 2002).

Methodology

Data were gathered from March 2000 to September 2001. Research included participant observation and 70 interviews in two Philadelphia sites: a neighborhood in Kensington, which has Latino, white, Asian and African-American residents, and a housing project in North Philadelphia, an area that is predominantly African-American. Though these two areas are differentiated primarily by racial demographics, they share many attributes: high rates of unemployment and welfare receipt, and streets blighted by closed and vandalized factories.

I became familiar with the neighborhoods in two preceding years of pilot research. In addition, I worked as a social worker for a clinic in Kensington from 1994 to 1996, followed by a position providing in-home services to the impoverished elderly in North Philadelphia in 1999. I began assembling my sample in January 2000 by writing to 22 food banks. Women who cycle between welfare and jobs typically turn to food banks and other charities when they find themselves without income from either wages or public assistance. Two zip codes were used to ensure that the food banks were located in the relevant communities. The letters outlined the aims of my study: to allow women to tell their own stories about experiences trying to move from welfare to work. The letters also specified measures to preserve respondents' confidentiality. A fee of \$10 was offered

for each interview. Though several food bank directors offered to circulate a flyer recruiting participants, this method was declined because of the potential for luring people who did not meet the study's criteria.

A Protestant missionary operating a food bank in Kensington provided my first referral. This respondent then helped me with other referrals, and I began gathering a snowball sample. When other food banks did not yield referrals, I contacted agencies administering welfare-to-work training programs. Despite my concerns that these new programs would be reluctant to cooperate – both because of their swelling caseloads and the risk of negative statements from former clients – two program directors provided names and addresses of women who had returned to welfare after working. Each woman was sent a letter explaining the study.

Interviews lasted from one to two hours, and were either preceded or followed by casual field observation for a total of 320 hours of research. My participant observation in 2000 to 2001 included routine socializing on weekends, especially in the project apartments, when boyfriends or extended family stopped by for visits. During a visit with Mabel, an African-American living in the project, I watched as she tried to negotiate with two white social workers to have her children returned from foster care. She had been accused of neglect after a neighbor reported her weekend cocaine use a year before. Field work allowed me to observe efforts to earn money: I purchased cassette tapes from Leslie, 23, during a yard sale in Kensington, and helped Mia, 40, carry cases of beer and gin to sell to the neighbors.

Mia allowed me free access to her apartment on several weekends, when it served as an illegal bar and carry-out liquor store. On these nights, it was a hub of activity. I recruited five respondents as they stopped by one Friday night to socialize. On another day in Kensington, I sat on the porch of one respondent's row home watching as white men in late-model cars pulled up to speak with African-American men standing on the corner. The respondent, Kate, credited the neighbors, who were selling crack cocaine, with protecting her. 'The lock on this house has been busted for years, but I never have to worry', she said.

Semi-structured interviews and follow-ups exploring work history were administered to each of the 29 respondents over an 18-month period for a total of 70 interviews. In several cases, I interviewed women in groups when they insisted they would be more comfortable in the presence of others. This method proved helpful because one woman's comments about a job typically evoked comments from a friend who had similar or conflicting experiences. Three withdrew from the study after a single interview, and four withdrew following the second interview. Interviews ceased once patterns emerged showing consistent results. All interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim to capture the nuances of their comments. Interviews and field observation were coded and sorted into 157

categories, including 54 related to occupational experiences (type of job, wages, benefits, etc.).

Fragile work attachment was defined by recruiting only women who: (1) were unemployed after working within the preceding year; (2) were receiving cash assistance prior to their last job; (3) (a) were current welfare recipients, (b) were expelled from welfare for non-compliance with welfare-to-work mandates, (c) left cash assistance roles by other means (e.g. awarded Social Security Disability Benefits), or (d) had exceeded their maximum lifetime welfare benefit. The sample included whites ($N = 7$), a Latina ($N = 1$), and African-Americans ($N = 21$). The greater proportion of African-Americans reflects the ease of obtaining a snowball sample in a high-rise building. My minimal Spanish language skills impeded interviews with more Latinas.

Though respondents were recruited according to the customs of purposive research and were not intended to be a representative sample (Crabtree and Miller, 1992), their wages and occupational choices were similar to the findings of several quantitative studies. The 29 women worked 33 jobs for a mean wage of \$6.19 in a period of a year prior to the start of my field work, until I left the field in September 2001. These mean figures are lower than other studies showing that TANF leavers typically earn between \$7 and \$8 hourly (Acs and Loprest, 2001). Wages in my study ranged from \$4.25 per hour plus tips at a donut shop to \$8 hourly for clerical work. Respondents had education levels ranging from eighth grade to post high school, with a mean 10.5 years education. Women had from one to eight children each ($X = 2.8$ children).

I asked my respondents to describe their experiences as they fried food; sold mattresses for telemarketers; changed diapers for the frail elderly; filled boxes; or staffed counters at fast food chains. Many of these jobs included commutes of up to two hours to the Philadelphia and New Jersey suburbs. Respondents found some jobs described here through their own efforts, and some were assisted by welfare-to-work programs. In some cases, respondents were sent to a community or government agency for \$5.15 an hour to 'work off' their welfare check.

Working poverty

Women in this study engaged in confrontations with supervisors to define exactly those working conditions they would tolerate, and to limit their exposure to situations demanding subservience or reinforcing the status injuries defined by Sennett and Cobb. Further, the confrontations reflected their feelings about working in poverty-level jobs that offered little hope for advancement. Workers who quit after confrontations consistently

described dissatisfaction with pay as well as anger over their treatment by supervisors.

Each of the 29 women noted that the wages they earned were never enough to move them from poverty, and often afforded a standard of living even worse than when on welfare. By the time I concluded field work, four respondents reported losing their cash assistance after exceeding their five-year lifetime limit. All but three lost benefits at some point during the study after being sanctioned for non-compliance. Sanctions could be imposed by caseworkers for a number of infractions including failing to attend a mandatory welfare-to-work program or defying orders to find work. Many respondents alleged they were sanctioned unfairly for trivial infractions (e.g. failing to submit a pay stub to their caseworker to prove compliance).

Twenty-four of the 29 described having left jobs either during or prior to the study because of dissatisfaction over wages, their supervisors or certain tasks. One who left a job over wages was Dorothy, a 34-year-old from North Philadelphia. She took a job cooking for a hospital. She was supposed to net \$180 per week. 'But then they kept laying me off every couple of weeks, like if they didn't need extra people. Then maybe they'd call me back. So why should I stand there and take people getting their little attitudes with me?' she said.

I met Kate, 39, at her home in Kensington. We sat at a small dinette table in the kitchen, where she offered me a Pepsi from a picnic cooler. The refrigerator had stopped working months before, and she could not afford to have it repaired. She hoped to assume ownership of the house by paying off \$2800 in property taxes owed the city of Philadelphia by a family member. If she fails to pay the total, the city can seize the house and sell it. Kate was between jobs, having just left a job working an assembly line at a factory that produced cheese cakes. It paid \$6.25 per hour.

The bosses there, they could get a little smart. But all places are like that no matter where you go. Sometimes when you work, it's a little funny. They act like they're giving you something, you know? You feel funny. Sometimes you feel like just walking out, like I don't need this. You know? You got to hold a lot in.

You mean, if they're giving you a bad time –.

But it's the same everywhere else ... That's what I don't like. I worked for what I made, you know what I mean? It makes me feel like you're nothing.

As with many others in the study, Kate complained both of low wages and the cost of working, including transportation to jobs outside the city, and in some cases, paying an agency a fee for locating a job. In addition, as women began to earn an income, they became discouraged when such

supports as food stamps and housing subsidies were reduced.⁶ Thus, though they worked, their standard of living failed to improve.

Denean, a 48-year-old Kensington resident who received public assistance, believed that work would not provide a standard of living better than welfare. She complained about the demands of welfare reform.

They say, 'You go out and look for a job. There's jobs in Jersey.' Why would I want to go to New Jersey for \$8 an hour? Give me something to go for. That's what the problem is: They're not offering people enough. These people are saying, 'I'm not going out there for that.' It's a waste of time. There's carfare. To Jersey, it could run – a transpass in Philly is \$17 weekly. Then you've got the train, so I guess it'll cost \$10 a week for your speed pass to Jersey. Then you have to get a babysitter, and that's outrageous.

Though PRWORA subsidizes daycare costs for one year after finding work, Denean and others feared what would happen when they exhausted the benefit. 'After that, you're on your own honey', she said. As part of PRWORA, former welfare recipients are offered one year of subsidized childcare for their first year of paid employment, as well as one year of Medicaid (federally-funded health insurance for the poor). Architects of the law hoped women would advance enough after one year employment to find jobs that offered both medical benefits and wages high enough to pay for childcare.

Karina, 34, left a job packing potatoes after a fight with her boss. She also resented the pay, \$6.10 per hour. She decided to look for work without the help of welfare-to-work programs because she never found work that could lift her above poverty or offer advancement. 'The jobs they place you in, I don't know why they'd sent you to places like those. You be making minimum wage.' She found the potato plant job on her own but it was far from adequate. Karina noted that after six months, she would be eligible for a 10-cent raise. She decided the job was not worth the two-hour trip by subway and bus every day.

Personal deficits?

By many accounts, Vera's story below would seem to support the arguments of those who view welfare receipt as a problem to be corrected with psychotherapy, drug treatment programs, or sanctions designed to punish those who procreate outside of wedlock. Vera, a 38-year-old resident of a North Philadelphia housing project, quit a job in January 2000 as a hotel housekeeper – even after losing all cash assistance because of refusing to comply with welfare-to-work requirements. At the time of my three interviews with Vera, she was living in her cousin's apartment and had no

income of her own. She admitted to a long struggle with alcohol and cocaine abuse. Her eight children were in the care of relatives.

Vera's run-ins with authorities and her reactions were typical of many in the sample. When she went to work at the hotel, at a rate of \$25 daily as a 'trainee', she found herself resenting her housekeeping supervisor.

You have to bend over all the time. I kept bending over all the time to put the sheets on the bed. And then if I didn't do it right, my boss would come and snatch it back off the bed because he didn't like the way it was and then I would have to do it all over again. It was hard for me to be doing that. He'd rip the sheets right off, right there in front of me . . .

Critical in this description is the manager's display of scorn. Such flamboyant gestures would likely not be tolerated in interactions between more skilled workers and managers. An accountant might become irritated over spelling errors in a letter, but would likely not elect to humiliate his administrative assistant by tearing the document. Again, this is a situation in which a manager chose not to treat an employee with respect. He did not have to. With a 9th grade education and no previous employment experience, Vera was easy enough to replace – a fact that was readily apparent in both the manager's demeanor with her and the rate that he chose for her compensation.

Vera responded with acts of defiance. She chose not to invest in the job by doing as little as possible. By her own admission, she chose not to pay close attention to the manager as he instructed her in the fine points of making a bed look ready for hotel guests. Vera engaged in petty theft, an act that allowed her to compensate herself in a way that her boss would not. She finally decided one day to stay home for her shift, thus leaving him short-staffed. It could certainly be argued that Vera lost a job foolishly, walking away instead of working. But a counter-argument can be made that the job itself and associated prospects were deficient. If she had moved beyond the 'trainee' stage, she would have made \$35 per day. That means \$175 weekly before taxes. Vera said:

My boss was terrible. He didn't want to give you no money. Plus he wasn't giving checks at all. He was giving us money out of his pocket. The rest of the money that we supposedly got from tips, he'd get. I wasn't going to stay there that long for \$35 a day and 40-something rooms which you have to do everyday.

Sharde of North Philadelphia might be discounted as personally deficient by many welfare reform proponents. She left school in 11th grade, and when I met her in November 2000, she was a 21-year-old mother with two daughters, ages six and four. But her experience in the workforce also raises questions of the worthiness of work opportunities in the bottom tiers of the market economy. Through a 'temp service', Sharde found a job in August

2000 in a factory packaging stationery for \$7 an hour. It offered no health benefits. The factory was not unionized, and many of the employees were illegal immigrants, being paid 'under the table'.

She described her month-long stay there as a virtual sparring match in which she defied her boss on small points but ultimately accommodated his demands. Her boss did not allow workers to take an extended break during the eight-hour shift, except for a 30-minute lunch. He wanted them to limit their smoke breaks to a few puffs, then return to the line. 'But I am going to smoke my whole cigarette because I am not no machine. You understand? But he had no problem with that, long as I did what I had to do.' She was willing to defy him only to the point that he would not reprimand her or dock her pay. And although she often told him belligerently, 'I am not no machine' when told to work harder, she was careful to accommodate some of his demands.

The males who worked there would go to his house and work for a few little extra dollars. Like chipping the paint off his walls and stuff. Not me. He knew I wouldn't. There was a lot of people new there who he'd make do that for a couple of extra dollars.

Do you know how much extra money they'd get?

Like \$50. For the day. That's not worth it. He'd be having Miss Daisy wash dishes. Come on. You think you've got slaves. Well no ... Now if he asks me to work extra time on the weekends, of course. It's extra money for me and my children. I'm going to do that.

Though Sharde had no high school diploma and no formal skills training, she had more capital for negotiation in the workplace than the illegal workers. She acknowledged that Miss Daisy, a native of Russia, had little choice but to wash the boss's dishes on weekends. But Sharde could choose not to be a 'slave' and perform personal service for this boss.

Yet for all of her 'attitude' and professed toughness, Sharde knew that her own defiance would have to be limited as well. She believed that by avoiding conversations with her co-workers, she would not be suspected as a 'conspirator' when problems arose, such as employee theft. The only person she ever befriended there was her immediate supervisor and that was for a pragmatic concern: 'Because if I go to lunch with her, there's nothing they could say that I did at lunch that was wrong.' The factory manager finally told the temporary agency that referred Sharde that she was no longer needed. She does not know why she lost the job.

Michelle, 25, of Kensington, went back on welfare after several weeks of working in a low-end department store. She commuted more than two hours daily for a job that paid about \$6 per hour. Originally, she said, one of the managers had promised that she would work days only. That way,

she would be home at night with her six-year-old son and two-year-old daughter. Their father would watch them during the day shift. Michelle became disillusioned when she was regularly scheduled instead to work evenings. As she described it, she became increasingly more frustrated each day. I asked if she had considered talking to the manager who organized the schedules. She replied that talking to the woman would have been futile. 'The woman that made up the schedules, she just had a real attitude about everything, like she was better than everybody. Well, she's not better than anybody.' One day, Michelle decided not to go in. She did not call her manager to explain why. But Michelle was told then by welfare that she must prove lack of employment to begin receiving her cash assistance again.

I called the manager yesterday and I said, 'I need a letter telling welfare that I'm not working for you anymore. I have to support my kids.' And he says, 'Oh you want something from me after you abandon your job.' I guess I really did kind of abandon the job because I just never did show back up.

And like I was told I was going to get morning hours. But the woman who was working there who made the schedules up and stuff, she never gave me morning hours. She always gave me night shift. I have two kids to take care of and how are you going to give night shift when I don't get home until 12 and then I have to be back up at seven to get my son ready for school?

After several weeks, Michelle was awarded public assistance. To those who argue that fragile work attachment is a consequence of personal deficits, Michelle's behavior might be viewed as irresponsible. This would overlook the fact that Michelle felt cheated when her request to work days only was dismissed without explanation. In addition, her pay was not adequate to support a family of three. The job offered no benefits. Welfare did offer a one-year childcare subsidy that Michelle gave the babies' father to watch them while she worked. Their father, no longer romantically involved with Michelle, refused this chore unless paid. Michelle worried often about childcare. Further, Michelle's knowledge that she would probably be stranded in low-status, menial jobs for the duration of her working life likely exacerbated her anger over the manager's condescending attitude. 'Now welfare wants to send me to another one of those classes where you sit there and listen to what kind of jobs you can get', she said. 'And none of them are going to pay you nothing.'

Preserving dignity

For many, discouragement over wages and jobs that offered little or no hope of advancement was compounded by the stigma associated with welfare

receipt (Lipsky, 1980; Soss, 2000). Several women interviewed expressed discomfort with receiving public assistance, even while complaining that they could never find a job that paid enough to pull them out of poverty. Every time she visits the welfare office, Kate, for instance, covers her face with a scarf so that no one recognizes her. Doreen, 48, of Kensington, described feeling humiliated both by her welfare caseworker, and by her boss at a donut shop. Regarding the caseworker, she said:

It's like, he judges people. What right does he have to judge people he don't even know?

What gave you the sense that he was judging you?

Because of the way he was talking to me. Like a little child. Like I was stupid and didn't know anything.

Tell me how he did that.

Alright, he can sit there and say, 'Well you've been through this. You're supposed to be bringing this and bringing that. And no, we can't do that. And these papers aren't proof enough for welfare.' I said, what are you talking about? They have took these papers for proof for a long time. Now you're telling me they're not good enough for the welfare.

She described feeling much the same way when receiving instructions from her supervisor on the midnight shift at the donut shop. Doreen earned \$4.24 per hour plus \$5 to \$6 nightly in tips. She kept the job, well below the nation's \$5.15 per hour minimum wage, so that she could continue to receive food stamps, which can be awarded to working poor Americans. She feared that by earning much more than minimum wage, she would lose this critical support and would not be able to make ends meet. Unfortunately, her treatment at the donut shop offered little hope or reinforcement of positive esteem.

There too, you have a manager that thinks she's too good for you and treats you like crap. She thinks she's better than everybody and she'll yell at you like you're a little child. And she's only 30. I said, I'm 48-years-old, honey. I'm old enough to be your mother. But she yells at everybody. She don't care who you are. . . . I'm glad I work at night because I don't have to run into her much. Because I know there would be a free-for-all. I'd wind up punching her out.

Confrontations with supervisors may have also served to defend some of my respondents against the daily reminders that they would likely remain in the bottom rungs of the nation's economy for the remainder of their working lives. Though they had no means of mounting a general challenge to the status quo, they could challenge particular representatives of it.

Letiqua's confrontation with a supervisor is a case in point. Letiqua, 29, was sent by her caseworker to 'work off' her cash assistance at a government agency or face sanctions – the immediate loss of cash assistance. The meaning of this placement did not elude her. As many in this study noted, 'I knew I was only there because welfare sent me.' Letiqua and Mia, neighbors in the North Philadelphia project, expressed wariness over the tax credit businesses receive for hiring welfare recipients. 'They aren't really hiring us. They only hiring us for tax purposes', Mia said.

Aware of the 'real reasons' for certain job assignments – a business tax break, or in Letiqua's example, a punitive means to work off a welfare check – many observed supervisors with considerable wariness, distrustful of motives and watchful for signs of maltreatment.

When I first went there I noticed right away that the lady, the supervisor, didn't like me. They had all these other people there . . . and she sections me off like in a little cubicle. And what I had to do was write down the people whose cases had been closed. So I finished this and I'm sitting there and twiddling my thumbs, and I'm like, now what do she want me to do? So I go over there, and she was like, 'Oh excuse me, I'm talking on the phone so you can sit and wait for me out there.' Well I got mad then and there . . . so she got a nasty attitude and now I have to show my colors . . . so I'm sitting out there and she sees my face and she says, 'What's wrong with you?' I said, 'No, what's wrong with you?' She was like, 'You don't come in my office when I'm on the phone.' And I was like, well as a matter of fact, I don't have to come into your office. I don't have to come in here at all. And I quit. And I dropped the folders and I walked out. She had a nasty disposition to me and I didn't like the way she was talking to me in front of people.

For Letiqua, virtually all aspects of this situation proved a painful reminder of her inequality, from the supervisor's authority to determine where and under what circumstances interactions would be conducted, to the positioning of her peers in separate work groups. Letiqua assumed that she had been singled out to be placed in a work area apart from the others because an authority figure had capriciously taken a dislike to her. Her description of the incident does not include qualifiers such as, 'I know the boss might have needed me to do something different than everybody else' or 'Maybe I just interrupted her at a bad time.' Letiqua's reaction to the supervisor's comments and work assignments indicate that she entered the office already expecting to be treated unfairly.

A worker who felt that she had a legitimate chance to establish herself in this environment might have accommodated these slights and accepted the need to abide by the supervisor's wishes. It is also worth noting what Letiqua's actions cost her: By storming out of the office, and refusing to work, she became non-compliant with the requirements of PRWORA, thus

leaving herself vulnerable to sanctions such as loss of cash benefits and food stamps. To Letiqua, the overriding concern was to preserve some sense of immediate dignity in a situation which denied her a fair chance to establish legitimacy from the beginning. 'My mother always tells me to turn the other cheek with these people at these jobs, but I know better', she said. 'You turn the other cheek, and the next thing, you being stepped on. So I had to show my colors with this lady.'

Incentives that might have socialized other workers to comply with the demands of the job were not offered to Letiqua. Such incentives might have included the hope of being offered fulltime employment with benefits, pay increases and the possibility of promotion as ability and willingness to work efficiently became recognized. Such incentives were simply not part of Letiqua's overall job experience. Prior to the job described above, Letiqua had worked in a nursing home, and in an office as a housekeeper. She had never earned more than \$7 hourly, and had never received benefits.

Though low-income workers are certainly not alone in having conflicts with supervisors, and even in quitting a job over experiences of maltreatment, to those in low-wage jobs, these incidents are a response to recognition of their own menial status, and their inability to advance. By walking out of the office, Letiqua refused the imperatives of PRWORA and its premises that low-income women would accept any job they could find, and passively submit to the disciplines of low-wage, service sector workers. Though Letiqua had few options, she was not prepared to mechanistically comply with a law that she recognized would ultimately not improve her income or her identity as a worker. At the end of the study, Letiqua had returned to public assistance and hoped to find a better job one day.

Akasha, 23, found two jobs on her own during the study, one as a hotel housekeeper, and the second at a fast food restaurant. She quit her job as a housekeeper after becoming angry with her supervisor.

I tried to stick in there but every time I turned around my manager was there giving me attitude. You know, I tell her, I don't have to respect you but I chose to respect you because you're my elder. But just like you want to be respected, I would like to be respected also. There was mornings I'd come in there, excuse my language, but feeling like pure shit . . .

What would she give you attitude about?

I would come in, and I would say I was the nicest one to this lady. I would come in every morning and go to the store for this lady. Every morning, do you need anything from the store? Because I would go to work and get breakfast at work. I had to be there at eight o'clock. Whatever you want, write it down and I will get it for you. And so that went on for a good month and a half.

I would give her breakfast. I even did her hair in microwaves. It took me 11 hours to do this lady's hair. I didn't charge her or nothing . . . I did her hair micros. It took me 11 hours. And I didn't want nothing. I did it for a favor. I mean, you did me a favor by hiring me. A week and a half after I did her hair, that's when her attitude towards me started to change. And I'm not sure if it's because I wouldn't fix one of the braids in her hair. One day she asked me if I could fix her braids and this was the day I had to rush out. And I couldn't. The way I put stuff together, she was upset because I couldn't fix her hair.

A worker with a sense of legitimacy might not have gone to the lengths that Akeshia felt appropriate to accommodate a supervisor. She did not expect that executing the work itself – cleaning toilets, changing beds and vacuuming rugs – would ensure that her supervisor recognize her inherent value. Akeshia believed her boss had done her a favor by hiring her, rather than feeling that she deserved employment by virtue of her own value as a worker. Thus, Akeshia's strategy became one in which she performed tasks, voluntarily, that might have been done by a personal servant to win her boss's respect, and to help enhance her job security. In this way, her experience was similar to that of Sharde, who even as she professed to despise her former boss, noted that she 'tried to stay out of trouble' and complied with some demands.

Unfortunately, Akeshia's supervisor apparently developed an expectation that Akeshia would be available as a virtual servant whenever needed. Leaving work without complying with the 'request' to fix the boss' hair was perceived as being uncooperative, and the supervisor became less friendly and polite. During an argument with her boss regarding hours, Akeshia decided to retaliate by leaving the job altogether.

So I said, well I got something for ya'll. I don't want your job. Ya'll messed with me. Ya'll plucked me around like I wasn't nothing. Now I'm going to do the same for ya'll and I didn't go back. I feels as though as I right. It was only a little \$5.15 an hour job anyway and it wasn't doing that much for me. But I wanted to prove my point.

Though she was willing to do favors for a boss as a way of ensuring continued viability, she was not prepared to accommodate disrespect.

A few months later, she found a job at a fast food restaurant after learning of the opening through a friend. It paid \$5.15 per hour and was physically strenuous. 'The job was horrible. I tried to stick it out there. I went in there with a positive attitude and I would leave out of there with a negative attitude', she said. She left the fast food job after six weeks, following a confrontation with her manager. One day, a man with children ordered breakfast and two cups of orange juice. The restaurant did not sell

a breakfast beverage, so Akesha poured them each a glass of pink lemonade. According to her logic, it was a better choice than Coke or Sprite. The man was in a bad mood, and he complained to Akesha with a nasty tone of voice.

Well I was letting him know that it's not my fault that we don't have fruit punch. And he asked for the manager and I called her over. Then he started getting smart with her and I was trying to explain something to him and she told me to shut up. She said, 'Shut up.' And I looked at her and said, 'Excuse me,' I said, 'I'm not going to take it. My mom don't tell me to shut up and I'm sure not going to take it from ya'll.' *They have this attitude, you need us. And that's the attitude the hotel had. They the ones who pay my bills. None of them knew how it is to struggle.* (emphasis mine)

And the manager, you know, took his side. She told me to shut up. So instead of me shutting up I said I quit. You're not going to disrespect me like that when I'm not in the wrong.

Compounding the customer's assault on her dignity was the supervisor's order to 'shut up'. This evoked many layers of meaning for Akesha, including recognition that others in this society – especially those who represent authority – will not understand her needs and concerns, particularly those that stem from her status as an impoverished single mother.

In December 2000, Karina, 33, found a job packing potatoes through a newspaper advertisement. She stayed at the job for one month, but left shortly after a confrontation. One day, as she prepared to leave for work, her young son had an asthma attack. Her baby sitter felt uneasy using the nebulizer machine to assist the boy's breathing.

So I called and told them I was going to be late. But I didn't talk to my supervisor. I called someone in personnel. When I got there he was like, 'Where's you been?' He said, 'Well I hear you called and asked if you should come in.' I was like, I called and said I was going to be late. Why would I call and ask if I should come in? I'm supposed to come in everyday.

He said, 'Well I suggest if you want to keep your job, and you're going to come in late, you're going to have to have a letter. I suggest you be on time.' I said, 'Well look. You're not going to sit there and talk to me in any old kind of way. I'm an adult. Like I said, I called and told them I was going to be late and I'm here. Now if you want me to work, I can or I can go home.' He said, 'Just go and find your spot over there.'

There are certain ways I think they should talk to people. Because I'm grown too... It made me upset because I don't talk to people like that and I don't deserve to be talked to that kind of way.

The boss had demanded a physician's letter verifying her son's illness. Such requirements are not routinely made of workers with more legitimacy. For unionized work, contracts often specify the circumstances when an employer can demand proof that someone or their child has really been sick. Staff, managerial, professional and high status workers can routinely call in sick. Questions are not asked unless absences become excessive. The supervisor's insistence that she produce proof of her son's illness may well have revealed to her an unbearable truth about the power dynamics of their relationship: the manager demanded a doctor's note simply because he could. Just as with the manager who 'asked' Sharde's illegal immigrant co-workers to wash dishes and paint walls at his house on weekends, or the boss who accepted Akesha's duties as her personal hairdresser, Karina felt the humiliation of 'knowing' that the boss could make certain demands without retribution. Because these workers brought little in the way of educational and skills capital to their menial, low-paid jobs, the managers could afford to alienate them. They were easily replaced. The loss of these employees would not mean a long search for an employee with special skills, and since there was no union in any of these plants, they did not have to worry about the inconvenience of a grievance hearing. Karina described her perception of the manager's treatment:

There are certain ways I think they should talk to people. Because I'm grown too. He was like that with everybody. He was just very nasty. Period. I know he's my supervisor and I'm willing to accept that. But you're not going to talk to me any old kind of way.

The boss' treatment, combined with the low pay, convinced her to leave the job and return to welfare.

Tina, a 25-year-old respondent from Kensington, also chose to retaliate through the act of quitting, even though it left her without the \$5.50 per hour salary that helped her and her husband support two children. She worked at a small corner store for several months, making sandwiches and stocking shelves. One night during her shift, she received a call from her husband asking her to come home quickly. Her two-year-old son had a nose bleed that he could not stop despite applying ice and pressure.

And I only live right across the street. Like there was plenty of times when there was a girl there [another worker] and another one with her, I was able to leave. Because of me leaving and him giving me a hard time about it – like I was only gone 10 minutes – I felt like really that's my son, that's important to me. It seems like he would have the respect to say, that's OK, take all the time you need. He was like, 'Well what if you lived far away?' Well I still would have left. That's my son ...

I quit for that reason, because he really had gave me a hard time. He was just like, 'Well you left her [the other worker] alone.' Well I hadn't. But I wasn't going to stand there and argue the point. I left him say what he needed to say. I was like, that was my son and I would have left no matter what. Because that's my son. I'd said I'd be right back. He was kind of nasty about it so I just said, 'I quit.'

He had no compassion, like when my son had the bloody nose. He's also like that as a landlord, because my friend was renting from him and she had to have buckets all around for leaks, even right above her bed. And then he raised the rent when the gas prices went up.

When the boss refused to accept a seemingly reasonable explanation for having left her post, he denied her the respect that might have been a salve for the status she lost just by virtue of the job itself and wages. After she quit, she and her husband made ends meet with his \$9 per hour job in a factory, and by receiving food stamps and a state stipend to cover utility bills. For Tina and other respondents, respect – as represented by the content and tone of interactions with employers – became a symbolic currency to replace other forms of compensation denied them in the workplace. More than any other aggravation, its denial or devaluation provoked reactions of defiance, confrontation and the resort to the most powerful tool they seemed to possess: 'I quit.' The possibly devastating outcome of such an action seemed much less important, at least in that moment, than the immediate goal of letting authority know, somehow *all* authority, that you were not to be ignored or disrespected.

Where the programs fall silent

Program directors in various welfare-to-work programs are attempting to improve the women's chances for finding work by teaching them how to dress properly for job interviews, to show up for work on time, and to follow certain points of workplace etiquette such as calling in when sick. More ambitious programs are seeking to refer women to social services for mental health issues such as depression and substance addiction, or to classes to address basic literacy.

None of the above strategies is completely without merit: lives of grinding poverty certainly have led many, for instance, to develop severe depression and/or substance addictions. Having spent their childhoods attending poorly funded inner-city schools, basic literacy and low educational attainment are serious problems for many. The problem with such programs, however, is that they simply fail to address the larger structural issues that would likely keep their clients in poverty even if each of

these programs could successfully remove the 'personal deficiency' barriers that impede work attachment. As was noted in a study recently completed for the Department of Health and Human Services, over a third of female workers in 1997 earned wages insufficient to lift a family of four out of poverty even while working continuously full-time for a year (Bernstein and Hartmann, 2000). The percentage of women (35.3%) earning low wages is 12.8 percent higher than for men. 'Compared to the overall workforce, low-wage workers are more likely to be women, minority, non-college educated, nonunion, in the retail trade industry and in low-end sales and service occupations' (Bernstein and Hartmann, 2000: 23).

Most of the women affected by PRWORA are being funneled into a sector of the economy characterized by very low wages, little job security and very often without the promise of a full-time position, the study noted. Interestingly, a recent report designed to assist welfare-to-work directors develop programs to reward participants for improved efforts to find and keep work included a cautionary note based on economic realities: '... the number of families below the poverty line is increasing, child poverty rates exceed those of most industrialized nations and extreme poverty remains staggeringly common in some locales' (Hill and Pavetti, 2002: 7).

Thus, the women in this study were left basically alone trying to find ways of making meaning of the grim structural realities they faced when entering the workforce whilst facing a diet of ineffectual programs for their personal inadequacy. Contrary to the optimistic predictions of welfare reform's proponents, the data presented here suggests that very low-wage workers are not able to find dignity in virtually any job. Nor were the women shielded from status injuries by the protective cocoon of a workplace culture, with veteran workers and managers offering moral support, as suggested by Newman (1999). Entrance into these worksites did not offer a move to the 'right side' of American culture, as Newman argues; rather, their work experiences served notice of the chasm between themselves and more affluent Americans. Workers in this study found their wariness of the wider society reinforced by the actions of supervisors who knew these former welfare recipients were easily replaced by other unemployed, unskilled laborers.

Recognizing that continued poverty was almost inevitably their future fate, with or without the help of programs, they chose to engage in small acts of contestation and resistance in order to have some feeling of agency and dignity in the face of these structural realities. They might not be able to advance themselves beyond the world of marginal employment and spells of subsistence but they could frame the meaning of a certain situation through the tool of confrontation. By engaging in such confrontations, and walking off a menial job, they were able – at least for a time – to achieve

a kind of agency, dignity and personhood by refusing to work on unacceptable terms defined by others.

Notes

- 1 Under PROWRA, Congress gave states the right to determine the duration and severity of sanctions for non-compliance with work mandates. In Pennsylvania, a family that has been on welfare two years or more will lose all cash assistance for a minimum of 30 days. A family that has been on welfare for less than two years will lose only cash assistance for the head of household, meaning that children continue to receive welfare (State Policy Documentation Project).
- 2 A business hiring a welfare recipient can receive an income tax credit of up to \$2700 annually, if the worker remains employed for a year. This total is reduced and pro-rated, however, if she leaves prior to a year's employment. If she stays employed for two years, an additional \$1800 is added to the tax break (Pennsylvania Bureau of Workforce Investment/Tax Credit Unit).
- 3 During periods without income from wages or welfare, women survived through a variety of strategies. Even prior to 'welfare reform', six of the 29 women had sent children to live with relatives in neighborhoods they deemed safer and more affluent. By the time I concluded my field research in September 2001, six more had been awarded Social Security Disability (SSDI) benefits after a series of hearings to prove that they or a dependent family member had a major physical or mental illness. (Such benefits were found to pay each family from \$400 to \$500 monthly.) Two more were in the process of applying for SSDI at the study's conclusion. Others relied on help from family, boyfriends or charities such as food banks during times without income from welfare or wages. Some engaged in the secondary economy (e.g. selling cans of beer from a project apartment) to earn money.
- 4 Several noted studies have chronicled efforts by low-income and/or working-class people to make meaning out of sorely limited occupational choices (Liebow, 1967; MacLeod, 1995; Willis, 1977). By casting themselves in opposition to more upper-class youths who take better jobs, the boys in Willis' study were able to define their job choices in ways that were meaningful to them, and therefore make these choices enhance their self-image and manhood. Women in this study, however, were not able to secure stable income or jobs that offered hope for enhancing their identity as workers. Therefore, some sensed that preserving a sense of self-identity came in confrontations with authority figures who represented the wider society.
- 5 In October 2002, Pennsylvania instituted a program offering extensions

beyond the five-year limit for women who are (1) victims of domestic violence or (2) are willing to work 30 hours per week in a community service position or ‘work related activities’ as determined by the Department of Public Welfare in exchange for their welfare check. The program has been criticized for paying women less than the \$5.15 national minimum wage and keeping them trapped in poverty (Philadelphia Community Legal Services).

- 6 PROWRA gives states discretion regarding how much income from wages is allowed before such supports as food stamps, cash assistance and housing subsidies are reduced while people try to make the transition from welfare to work.

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