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Pride, Prejudice, and a Dose of Shame: The Meaning of Public Assistance

Karen A. Gray

Little is known about women's retrospective views on the receipt of public assistance, including their relationships with their caseworkers. This article examines the findings of 20 in-depth interviews with women about their experiences with public assistance after they went from public assistance to a living-wage job. The respondents' self-stories are interpreted using a social constructionist framework.

Keywords: *public assistance; shame; social constructionism; social workers*

Although there is some knowledge of how current recipients of public assistance view themselves and other recipients, little is known about women's retrospective views on their receipt of public assistance. Some researchers have speculated that a good relationship between a recipient and a caseworker is instrumental in helping the recipient become wage reliant (S. G. Anderson, 2001; Cheek & Piercy, 2001), but former recipients have rarely been asked about their relationships with their caseworkers.

This article examines the findings from 20 in-depth interviews with women of their experiences with public assistance after they went from public assistance to living-wage jobs. The results confirm the findings of some previous studies of welfare recipients' perspectives while receiving assistance, but the results also offer some new and different perspectives. Social construction theory is the lens through which the results are examined. It states that knowledge and meanings are created within interactions with others and therefore are always changing. Context is critical; individuals' cultural, political, and economic contexts shape their knowledge and meanings (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Gergen, 1985, 1991).

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BACKGROUND

Although much has been written about how welfare recipients are viewed by the dominant culture, "much less has been written about how welfare recipients view their own and other welfare recipients' situations" (Rank, 1994, p. 128). Many Americans believe that an individual is at least partially responsible for his or her poverty or wealth (Smith & Stone, 1989), so Americans disdain welfare recipients as being on welfare because of their personal shortcomings. Surveys do not always determine whether welfare recipients feel this way about their own situations as opposed to those of everyone else who is on welfare (Cole & Lejeune, 1972).

Some studies have used surveys to examine current welfare recipients' feelings (e.g., Popkin, 1990), some have used interviews (e.g., Davis & Hagen, 1996; Rank, 1994; Seccombe, 1999; Seccombe, James, & Walters, 1998), and some have used both (e.g., Goodban, 1985). The results have been the same: Many welfare recipients subscribe to the popular stereotype of welfare recipients as lazy, cheating, bad mothers for whom public assistance is generational and a way of life. However, they usually do not apply this stigma to themselves and instead raise issues of sociostructural imbalances (e.g., the lack of living-wage jobs and good-quality day care) and/or bad luck, such as divorce or poor health. In only one study did the respondents (former welfare recipients) express empathy toward current recipients (Cheek & Piercy, 2001).

Insights have also been gained into the relationships between welfare clients and their caseworkers from the caseworkers' perspectives. For example, Hendrickson and Axelson (1985) found that many professionals who work with the poor (including social workers) do not think that the poor want to work. In a prewelfare reform study, Gerdes and Brown-Standridge (1997) examined the vocabulary that caseworkers, supervisors, and recipients used to describe their relationships. They found several implicit rules that governed these relationships. For instance, the caseworkers thought that they must ask "shaming" questions and that it was their job to determine the veracity of their clients' statements. In addition, they discussed means of getting off welfare only when their clients raised the subject, and they "warned" the clients that even working part-time would result in cuts in benefits. The caseworkers shunned relationships of any depth with clients by avoiding or minimizing conversations. Gerdes and Brown-Standridge concluded that better worker-client relationships—relationships that had some depth and were more respectful—might help more women to leave welfare.

Recipients' views of caseworkers are generally overlooked (S. G. Anderson, 2001). Although caseworkers were sometimes mentioned by respondents in Rank's (1994) and Seccombe's (1999) research, a few more-recent studies have examined recipients' feelings and attitudes toward caseworkers in depth. The recipients identified several areas of praise and/or

complaints: the caseworkers' competence and knowledge of services, accessibility to clients, and personal treatment of clients (S. G. Anderson, 2001; McPhee & Bronstein, 2003; Pearlmutter & Bartle, 2000). They thought that competent caseworkers could help them find good jobs (Pearlmutter & Bartle, 2000). S. G. Anderson (2001) suggested that relationships in which caseworkers emphasize their clients' moral worth are critical in helping clients to succeed. Former welfare recipients who became caseworkers also reported the importance of caring caseworkers (Cheek & Piercy, 2001).

The respondents in all but one of these studies were currently receiving welfare; only one research team interviewed former recipients. It is possible that after former recipients have become wage reliant, they feel differently about welfare recipients and caseworkers. For example, former recipients may distance themselves from other recipients or may feel empathy for them.

METHOD

Design of the Study

The findings reported here are part of a larger research study, and they answer the research question: How do women describe their lives in and out of poverty? After the first woman I interviewed told of her experiences with and humiliation by caseworkers (without prompting by me), I asked the remaining respondents about their experiences with public assistance (if the respondents did not bring up the subject spontaneously). Humiliating experiences tended to be one of the women's salient memories of living in poverty.

The purposive sample of 20 women was drawn from one site, Project QUEST, a community-based job-training program in San Antonio, Texas, that offers a holistic approach to job training for low-income individuals. The job-training program is long term in that it offers free college tuition, books and other supplies that are needed for college, child care, transportation, counseling, and emergency assistance; this type of training is dramatically different from what most welfare-to-work job-training programs offer. It is important to note that Project QUEST also differs from most job-training programs because it offers training only for jobs that pay a living wage, which at the time of the study was \$10.43 per hour in San Antonio (C. Anderson, 1998). (For a further description of Project QUEST, see Harrison & Weiss, 1998; Osterman & Lautsch, 1996; Walljasper, 1997.)

Sjoberg, Williams, Vaughan, and Sjoberg (1991) suggested that the only way to study truly disadvantaged people is through some form of an in-depth case-study approach. Thus, in this study, I interviewed 20 women using the collective case approach, in which I analyzed the interviews in terms of their generic and specific properties (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). I conducted the interviews in 1999, usually in the women's homes, 1 to 4

years after the women had graduated from Project QUEST. Before Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) was implemented in Texas (on November 5, 1996), 17 of the 20 women had graduated from Project QUEST.

The Respondents

I developed three categories of samples: women who were entirely off public assistance after they graduated from Project QUEST, women who still received TANF after they graduated from Project QUEST, and women who received other public assistance (food stamps, Medicaid, or subsidized housing) after they graduated from Project QUEST; I planned to find at least six women in each category (Morse, 1994). I suspected that there might be differences between women who received no public assistance post-QUEST and women who received some form of assistance; for example, the circumstances of women who were unable to become wage reliant might have been different from those of women who met their goal. Project QUEST gave me a list of all the women enrolled in the project from 1993 to 1995 who were on public assistance before that time and (because this study was part of a larger research project that included interviewing children) who had children. Of this list, 53 appeared to meet my criteria: Each woman had graduated from Project QUEST and had a child who was currently a teenager or had been a teenager at the time the mother was in Project QUEST. I tried to contact all 53; of those I reached, 19 actually met my criteria. To have at least 6 women in each category, I had to include 1 woman who did not have a teenager. See Table 1 for the characteristics of the respondents (all names are aliases). All but 1 of the 20 women whom I interviewed were no longer receiving public assistance. Sixteen of the women held living-wage jobs, 2 had returned to college to earn another degree, and 2 held jobs that paid less than a living wage.

Analysis

Each interview was audiotaped, augmented with note taking (including notes on such context issues as the moods of the interviewees and the researcher), and transcribed soon afterward (Wolcott, 1995). Prior to the interviews, I developed a preliminary, provisional list of codes; each code had a definition, which is considered first-level coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This coding was simply a framework to be used to begin interviewing, with the anticipation that other codes, or themes, would emerge, which they did. Some of the new codes were developed after the first few families were interviewed, and the rest were added as the research progressed.

I used ad hoc meaning generation—the use of different approaches—to analyze the interviews (Kvale, 1996), including several approaches that were discussed by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Kvale (1996): noting patterns and themes, seeing plausibility, subsuming particulars into the

TABLE 1: Characteristics of the Sample (N = 20)

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Off All Public Assistance Post-QUEST (n = 7)</i>	<i>On Food Stamps, Medicaid, or Public Housing Post-QUEST and for 1 Year or Less (n = 6)</i>	<i>On TANF or AFDC Post-QUEST for 1 Year or Less (n = 7)</i>
African American	1 woman: Joan	2 women: Barbara, Myra	2 women: Donna, Rochelle
Latina	4 women: Cathy, Betty, Sandra, Emily	2 women: Jo, Frida	3 women: Linda, Sylvia, and Angie
White	2 women: Rhea, Diane	2 women: Sydney, Sally	2 women: Ann, Grace Lee
One to two children while in QUEST	2 women: Cathy, Rhea	2 women: Myra, Sally	3 women: Rochelle, Grace Lee, Ann
Three to seven children while in QUEST	5 women: Joan, Betty, Sandra, Emily, Diane	4 women: Sydney, Jo, Barbara, Frida	4 women: Donna, Linda, Reyes, Angie
Had a man helping out financially during QUEST	4 women: Cathy, Joan, Emily, Betty	4 women: Frida, Myra, Sally, Sydney	2 women: Rochelle, Ann
Had a man helping after QUEST	4 women: Cathy, Emily, Betty, Joan	5 women: Barbara, Frida, Myra, Sally, Jo	2 women: Linda, Sylvia
Substantial support while in QUEST from family members or friends (either housing or a car)	3 women: Betty, Rhea, Diane	3 women: Barbara, Frida, Sydney	5 women: Donna, Linda, Angie, Ann, Grace Lee

NOTE: TANF = Temporary Assistance to Needy Families; AFDC = Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

general, and making conceptual or theoretical coherence. First, I reviewed each interview for themes within that interview. Next, I compared the themes in the interviews and determined the patterns among the themes. I then reviewed the interviews again and compared the findings to those reported in the literature until the data were thoroughly analyzed.

RESULTS

Three main themes emerged from the women's stories of life on public assistance:

1. The attempts by "the system" and individuals to humiliate the women and/or the humiliation or shame that the women felt. The women were particularly disappointed by the lack of recognition of their strengths.
2. The women's prejudice against and empathy toward other poor or low-income people.
3. The women's new pride in their personal accomplishments.

Theme 1: The Humiliation and Shame of Public Assistance

Within this theme, there were three subthemes: experiences during the application process at the public assistance office, experiences with specific caseworkers, and experiences outside the public assistance office.

Application process. Six women spoke of the suspicions harbored against them during the application process and the lack of recognition of their strengths. They wanted the system and the caseworker to acknowledge that they were currently or recently employed and were currently or had been taxpayers most of their lives. These women were upset that a stranger made incorrect assumptions about them and did not take the time to learn their stories. A few women thought that the application process was designed to assume that an applicant was lying—that everything an applicant said was suspect. They also felt upset that their entire lives were open to scrutiny.

Sally's story illustrates these feelings. When her mother-in-law died, Sally, who was only a teenager, took custody of her mother-in-law's three younger children. She was working, but the pay was not enough to support her child plus these three children, so she applied for assistance. That she had taken on such a huge responsibility at such a young age and that the children would have otherwise gone into foster care were not acknowledged, let alone applauded. Instead, "they treated me really bad . . . like I was a statistic. Especially when I had the other three kids that weren't mine when their mother died. They gave me such a hard time."

Three other women thought that the system was designed to humiliate them and thwart their efforts to obtain assistance. They said that the welfare

office rules and the caseworkers often assumed that because women on public assistance often do not have paid employment, they should work for the assistance and because they “lie around the house all day,” asking them to “earn their welfare checks” was reasonable. These incorrect assumptions meant that the women were given no choices in appointment times and were expected to wait patiently, sometimes for hours, if the caseworkers were running late. Issues such as day care or transportation, both needed to keep such appointments, were ignored by the rules. Rhea’s story illustrates this situation:

It’s like you’ve worked so many years, you’ve paid taxes to cover things like this . . . so now the system is just giving you back a little . . . because you put in so much. So, why should we feel like second-class citizens? But when you go to an assistance office, you’re made to wait forever; they act like they’re doing you a favor. It’s like, “I don’t care whatever other appointments you have, here’s your appointment; there’s no way we’re going to schedule it around what you need.” Like if you’re going to school, well, OK, you’re going to miss a day of school to go get your food stamps.

Caseworkers were mentioned in general in the preceding stories. The following stories are about particular caseworkers. The women remembered these interactions and relationships long after the interactions or relationships were over.

Caseworkers. Six other women’s stories also contained themes related to the application process. Whereas the stories in the previous section were more general in nature—more about the welfare system than about a particular caseworker—these stories illustrate specific interactions between clients and caseworkers and specific ways in which the women’s self-narratives were doubted.

Two women had only negative memories of their caseworkers. When they told their caseworkers that they were leaving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the predecessor to TANF, for paid employment, Donna and Angie felt that their caseworkers were jealous of the amount of money they were going to make as nurses. Instead of being congratulated, they were punished. Donna’s assistance was cut off while she was still in school. Donna also felt that she was even being encouraged to stay on AFDC. She said,

And then the transition, getting off of welfare, was traumatic. . . . I was in nursing school, getting ready to graduate, and I called my worker to tell her, “Look, I’m going to start a new job.” She was so mean, “You know you’re not going to be eligible for food stamps or anything anymore.” And I was like “OK.” I think the whole thing was when she asked me how much money I was going to make; she just looked at me like, “You’re making more money than I am.” I think she was kind of mad. . . . I’ll bet you it’s harder to get off [welfare] than it is to get on [it].

However, not all the stories involved only negative feelings. Two women had both negative and positive experiences with caseworkers. Emily's story is an example. Emily contrasted one worker's behavior, who she said suspected her of lying, to that of another caseworker, who praised her, calling her a role model.

There were two other stories involving helpful, respectful caseworkers. These caseworkers took the time to get to know their clients' stories. Sally, for instance, wished that she could find the caseworker who nudged her. Sally's caseworker, Carolyn, took the time to get to know Sally well enough to know that she ran away from home because she had been sexually abused and had never gone to high school. After Sally earned a GED, Carolyn encouraged her to go to college, always pointing to her strengths. In turn, Sally encouraged Carolyn to continue to try to touch her clients' lives as she had done with Sally.

Outside the public assistance office. Because food stamps are visible to the public, many humiliating incidents occurred in grocery stores. In this case, the stranger was not a caseworker, but a clerk or fellow shopper. The grocery stores were where women experienced the larger society's perceptions of them firsthand. Donna, for example, kept her children in mind while enduring dirty looks. She said that she tried hard to give her three boys "middle-class" experiences, such as participating in the Boy Scouts.

Six women described such incidents in grocery stores in which strangers made assumptions about the women on the basis of their use of food stamps. As in the welfare office, no one attempted to learn the women's attributes. Buying groceries is a necessity and a task that parents have to do frequently. The women felt that the possibility of being chastised while performing such a mundane chore always loomed over them. However, the grocery store was not the only place that people felt free to rebuke the women.

Sometimes, the stigma surfaced in unexpected places, such as the mother's or child's school, an employer's office, or on a bus. Four women recalled such incidents. In addition, three women went to great lengths to keep their receipt of public assistance a secret from their fellow students. For example, Cathy started to cry when she told me that she did not tell any other students her full story until she graduated because she felt it did not fit with her image as the class president. She finally disclosed her circumstances to her classmates only after another student came out as a lesbian.

Two women told ironic stories about not being believed. For example, because Donna had been on AFDC for 13 years, she was often asked to tell her story in public to promote Project QUEST, and when Project QUEST received a national award, Donna flew to Washington, D.C., to accept it. While she was being interviewed by the press, Donna said,

It was almost like they didn't believe me, the things that I was telling them. . . . Their big thing was, "Gosh, you're a Black woman, and you speak so well." I

was like, "Pardon me?" Oh yeah. These were American [*sic*] Press reporters. . . . I said, "Well you think that just because I was on welfare and stuff that I don't have any intelligence? What is your point?" At that point, the interview was over [laughed].

Theme 2: Prejudice and Empathy Toward Others

The women expressed both compassion for and disgust with other welfare recipients, sometimes simultaneously. Five women spoke with empathy for those who were still on public assistance. Rhea's comments were representative of how most of these five women felt:

And I always said, "Well, you can't tell; if somebody dresses nice when they go to one of these appointments, that doesn't mean that they're defrauding. That means that maybe they just got on it. Maybe they had a nice job and they suddenly lost everything."

Eleven women had mixed feelings. For example, Betty explained,

And I can see why a lot of people don't do nothing because you don't make nothing once you're working, and then you get your food stamps cut [laughed]. The only way you're going to live is off that. At least you know you'll have your food every month. . . . Instead of rewarding you for working, they punish you kind of.

But later, Betty questioned why people stay on public assistance. She believed that because she was able to get off welfare, others should be able to do so as well. She said,

Because you also have people that do just stay on the assisted living, and they don't care [laughed]. So their kids are kind of like bad kids sometimes. . . . It's like with me, I tell people that I wasn't that smart and being that I was pregnant and everything, and I still got to college. Sometimes, it makes me mad when people don't do it. Don't take advantage of all the opportunities. They can take advantage of like Project QUEST helping them, and people don't do it. Why not? Some people are lazy [laughed].

Betty said this after she explained that she might have to go back on assistance because of massive layoffs in her field.

Theme 3: New Pride in Oneself

QUEST provided more than a path off public assistance for some of the women. Although they were proud of their work before they entered Project QUEST, six women recounted that they had doubted their intellect or ability to do well in school before they enrolled in the project; their success in college made them realize that they were not "stupid" and allowed them to

construct self-stories of competence and pride. Sally's poignant story illustrates this point. Sally had not attended a single day of high school and considered herself uneducated. After she earned a GED, she was apprehensive about going to college, and for her, "it was just amazing when I got to graduate. That was probably the single most important accomplishment I did for myself because I knew I wasn't stupid anymore [started crying, as did her son]."

Besides school, the women's jobs were another source of pride. Many QUESTers find meaning and satisfaction in their current work, as opposed to the drudgery they experienced in their previous work. They feel that they are truly contributing to a better society. Four women relayed such sentiments. Barbara, for instance,

loved school . . . it made me feel, gave me self-worth. . . . It's really rewarding because now, where I work, everybody looks at me and [says], "Go to Barbara . . . because she's a good nurse." And that makes me feel important . . . and I'm respected. . . . So I'm really confident in what I do. . . . It [graduating from nursing school] built my self esteem. It made me feel like I had a purpose. . . . He [a surgeon] would always grab me to do really neat procedures like chest tubes, and he would also help, let me do central lines. . . . LVNs don't do that, RNs do. So . . . I'm real confident in what I do.

Later, Barbara added that she thinks that

I'm more worthy; I have more worthiness. I serve a purpose now. I always felt I did, but I'm doing something now that I enjoy. I really love nursing. I really do. I don't have a problem getting up, going to work every morning. Yeah, I really enjoy my job.

DISCUSSION

The feelings and thoughts about public assistance that the women expressed were complex and included shame, humiliation, prejudice against and/or empathy toward others on welfare, anger, astonishment at being categorized, and pride in themselves. Such feelings are sometimes how people perceive themselves through others' eyes on the basis of these others' comments. For these women, these others were either strangers or society as a whole. Social construction theory is the lens through which I examined the results.

Theme 1: Humiliation and Shame

Relationships are the means by which individuals construct their views of themselves. Personal stories are co-constructed within relationships (Gergen, 1994), and they "are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself)

about one's life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned" (Rosenwald & Ochberg, quoted in Gergen, 1994, p. 193). Self-narratives are developed in social and local contexts on the basis of action and conversations with significant others (H. Anderson, 1997). It is most often with family members and friends that people craft their stories and become who they are.

The stories that the women in this study told about themselves—the self-narratives or identities that they constructed with family members and friends—were those of hardworking women. This hard work was often done under adversarial conditions; most of the women were single mothers and held low-wage jobs, and some women held more than one job. Usually, the jobs were not a source of pleasure; they were a means to a paycheck. Nonetheless, the women were working and were proud of their efforts. They were doing their best to make ends meet and to provide a good life for their children, but circumstances forced them to rely on public assistance as a supplement to their labor. None intended for public assistance to become a lifestyle, as their caseworkers or strangers sometimes suggested.

When the women applied for public assistance, caseworkers and strangers sometimes challenged these stories of strong, industrious, and diligent women; the women were suddenly called lazy and incompetent. The self-narratives that the women constructed with loved ones were not the stories that outsiders were telling about them; indeed, their own stories were in conflict with those that the outsiders provided.

In these confrontations with outsiders, it was implied that the women were also failures as mothers—that they were "bad" mothers. For example, Angie's first caseworker told her "that I should have thought about it before I got pregnant—how I was going to support the child." Just as it is damaging when an adolescent tells his or her mother that she is a bad mother, thereby shaking her self-narrative as a good mother (Gergen, 1994), so it can be debilitating and confusing to be told the same thing by strangers. Because individuals rely on others to construct their stories with them, self-narratives are multiauthored. Therefore, when others, especially those in the dominant culture, start defying their self-views, even if they are strangers, the individuals question themselves about the incongruities. As one woman put it, "You keep getting negative [comments] for so long [that] you start to believe [them]. . . . [They] make you become something that you're really not."

These incongruities led to feelings of shame in some of the women. Although in most contexts, the women felt pride in their competence, in the context of the welfare office with an application in hand or at the grocery store with food stamps in hand, they were targets for comments that were meant to humiliate. Some of the women incorporated this feeling into their self-stories, and some refused to do so.

For nine women, the application process proved to be humiliating. It would have been difficult enough if all they had to do was apply for assistance, which was akin to admitting their failure to support their families.

But, in addition, the caseworkers did not recognize their successes, and their honesty was questioned, which compounded the humiliation. It was bewildering to many of the women that they were treated this way when their caseworkers did not know their personal stories. Many of the women had been taxpayers for years and thought that those taxes were for emergency situations such as this. Instead, they were treated like "deadbeats" and "just another number." This humiliation seemed to be a deliberate attempt to make the women feel shame.

The topic of humiliation resonated through most of the women's thoughts on and experiences with public assistance. When speaking of this humiliation, 10 women spoke of the indignities that they endured during the application process. Most agreed with Ann's sentiments: "I don't like going over because, I mean, it's hard to ask for assistance. . . . It was real hard." It is difficult for many reasons, most of which have to do with Western notions of independence (Rank, 1994) and individuality.

Western culture assumes that all people are capable of self-direction and responsibility and that the individual is ultimately responsible for his or her actions. This belief is most evident in our laws; instead of families, social classes, or other groups, individuals have rights. Indeed, the very word *autonomy* has rhetorical power (Gergen, 1991). Intertwined with this reverence for individuality is the ideal of independence. We celebrate our independence every Fourth of July. We teach our children that it is most desirable to be independent, both in thought and action. We Americans value independence much more than dependence and interdependence.

Thus, for a woman who is applying for public assistance, it is difficult to admit that independence (as defined by American culture) is not possible, that she has failed to achieve the American ideal. After a woman takes the first difficult step of admitting this fact to herself, she has to go to a public space, admit to a stranger that she is not able to be independent, and ask for assistance. Then it is not enough that she has to ask, she has to prove that she deserves assistance and is not lying, and she often has to argue with a caseworker.

After the woman discloses her income and financial resources to the caseworker, her finances are then compared to those of other adults. Means tests are experienced as degrading and humiliating because the applicant realizes that most of the people in the United States are better off than she is (Handler & Hollingsworth, 1971). The tests are yet another reminder that she is perceived as inadequate.

The amount of personal information that has to be disclosed to be eligible for welfare is another stinging reminder of dependence and a severe loss of privacy. Almost all of an applicant's entire life is expected to be an open book from which a caseworker can read to determine the applicant's eligibility for welfare; an applicant's circumstances and behavior are closely scrutinized. The loss of privacy can mean the loss of dignity (Handler & Hollingsworth, 1971). Having to tell a stranger, often an unsympathetic one,

all one's business (except one's strengths) can leave one feeling exposed or violated, as several women's stories illustrated.

These women shared the humiliation and shame that comes with public assistance. They came face to face with the prejudices that Americans have toward welfare recipients in many venues, both public and private. They heard remarks in the welfare office and in the grocery store, from strangers, caseworkers, and friends. These remarks were continual reminders that Americans often view them as failures, inadequate, poor mothers, lazy, or incompetent.

The women's reactions to these encounters were equally complex. Besides humiliation and shame, some felt anger, and many were astounded that they could be judged without their stories being known. Some women confronted those who attacked their stories of competence and hard work; others kept silent and kept some of their stories secret, even from friends.

People often keep secrets to avoid shame or ostracism, as three of the women described. Each woman felt that her story of public assistance might crowd out her story of diligence and success, so each was not able to tell that story until it was a part of her past, until she had added another success to her story. Keeping secrets from friends is quite an effort; one has constantly to guard what one says and does. These secrets suggest that the level of shame these women felt was fairly high.

Research has reported that welfare clients want better services (S. G. Anderson, 2001; Pearlmutter & Bartle, 2000), as did the women in this study. What these women said that has not been reported in the literature is that they also wanted validation for their efforts and recognition of their strengths. In addition, several women seemed to agree with the welfare respondents in Popkin's (1990) study that the system kept them down because whenever they tried to get ahead by getting a job or going to college, their public assistance was cut. Several women suggested that the system, including caseworkers, is designed to keep women on welfare. Unlike what the respondents in Gerdes and Brown-Standridge's (1997) study reported, most women in this study did not believe that caseworkers would help them leave welfare. Caseworkers were usually perceived as insensitive at best.

Only two women were given encouragement by their caseworkers. One of the two believed that this encouragement was part of the process that helped her get off welfare. She and her caseworker had a relationship, the kind that may help more women leave welfare for work (S. G. Anderson, 2001; Cheek & Piercy, 2001; Kane & Bane, 1994; Pearlmutter & Bartle, 2000). In such relationships, caseworkers act less like eligibility workers and more like social workers. They focus less on compliance and more on helping women become wage reliant. This caseworker listened to and believed her clients' stories, something all clients want, whether of social workers, physicians, or employers (H. Anderson, 1997). Most of the women wanted people to know their multiple stories, not just their public assistance story.

Theme 2: Prejudice and Empathy

Several women expressed ambivalent feelings toward other welfare recipients. Because all people have multiple inner voices, sometimes conflicting, and because these women heard so many disparaging comments about welfare recipients, they adopted this prejudice as an inner voice. One voice knew that this stereotype must be wrong because it did not fit with their personal circumstances, but another voice thought, "How can so many Americans be wrong?" So these women tried to reduce the tension by explaining that they, along with some others, were the exceptions to the rule.

Although previous studies found that welfare recipients stigmatize other recipients (Briar, 1966; Davis & Hagen, 1996; Rank, 1994; Secombe, 1999; Secombe et al., 1998), most of the women in this study voiced either feelings of compassion or mixed feelings of compassion and denigration toward others on welfare. It was not surprising that the women expressed empathy; when people go through the same difficult experience, they often feel an affiliation with their fellow sufferers. But the women with mixed feelings may have still been struggling with how to reconcile their own receipt of public assistance with the myths. They knew that their stories were incongruent with the myths, but they could not quite believe that everyone else's stories could be. Although none of the women mentioned the stigma of welfare as a motivator to get off public assistance, it was something that appeared to affect them deeply.

Theme 3: New Pride in Oneself

Although all the respondents were proud of themselves and their labors before they entered Project QUEST, many also had feelings of self-doubt about their intelligence and wondered if they could really graduate from college. Although they were receiving public assistance, they also experienced the degradation that usually accompanies it. Their self-stories of competence shifted back and forth. As H. Anderson (1997) noted, "To restore or achieve self-competency, one must transform one's self-story" (p. 234). The women's accomplishments during and after Project QUEST offered them new sources of pride and new self-stories. The women reconstructed their self-stories as a result of Project QUEST.

Finally, it is necessary to mention that these women are not representative of the population of welfare recipients. They had extensive formal support from Project QUEST and informal support from family members and friends (Gray, in press). Most of them left public assistance for living-wage jobs by earning college degrees. None of this experience is "typical" of welfare recipients.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Caseworkers should be encouraged to concentrate more on developing relationships with their clients and less on determining applicants' eligibility for public assistance (Bane, 1994). Caseworkers must look for and commend their clients' strengths, as so many of the women in this study desired. Relationships between clients and caseworkers are key to successful programs (S. G. Anderson, 2001; Schorr, 1991).

Most women reported that they were embarrassed about relying on public assistance, but that the receipt of public assistance was necessary for their survival. When women feel that bad asking for help, further humiliation is not going to facilitate their exit from welfare. In general, caseworkers should not use shame because of its negative psychological effects (Lutwak, Panish, & Ferrari, 2003). If caseworkers' relationships with clients were more like those of a poverty-relief system than of a poverty-maintenance system, more women might feel empowered to obtain the skills that are necessary to become wage reliant (S. G. Anderson, 2001; Gerdes & Brown-Standridge, 1997).

Although some of the changes in practice should occur on the front line, administrative and policy changes will need to be made to enable caseworkers to develop more positive relationships with their clients. Supervisors and caseworkers need training in comprehensive psychosocial assessments from a strengths-based model and should have extensive knowledge of community resources (Pearlmutter & Bartle, 2000).

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) should consider recommending practice standards for public assistance caseworkers, as it has done for nine areas of practice, including child protection. A BSW should be recommended for entry positions. The likelihood of agencies following through with such a recommendation is small; after all, child protective service workers are not required to have BSWs, and their work requires at least as much sensitivity and expertise as does that of public assistance caseworkers. An easier first step would be to require that administrators, especially supervisors, have BSWs or MSWs. This, too, will be a difficult task. But part of NASW's mission is to shape public policy by lobbying for legislation to improve human services to individuals and families and advocating for proper recognition of the social work profession (NASW, 2005). Difficulty should not prevent action.

Caseworkers' incomes are sometimes not much higher than their clients', and there is no sense of professionalism in their jobs. Caseworkers are taught that clients lie and that they need to learn to differentiate between a lie and the truth. They are overworked and underpaid, with low status and little chance of promotion, because many of them have no more than associate's degrees. They feel as powerless as their clients except in relation to their clients (Kingfisher, 1996). So, in addition to requiring a social work degree (which will help ensure a sense of professionalism), the system

should ensure that caseworkers' salaries reflect their expertise. Competent casework requires a variety of skills, including advocacy, counseling, and planning, plus extensive knowledge of community resources. But providing adequate salaries for caseworkers will be difficult to implement, too, for doing so implies that the poor are worthy of help from professionals.

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