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The Journey From Welfare to Work: Learning From Women Living in Poverty

Debra M. McPhee and Laura R. Bronstein

This multiphase study was designed to gain a qualitative understanding of the experiences of single-mother welfare recipients and the effect of welfare reforms on recipients' perceived ability to care for themselves and their families. The findings were drawn from the first phase of the study in which individual interviews were conducted with 39 current or former recipients, all of whom were women of color living in socioeconomically disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Eight themes are analyzed, and the implications for social welfare policy and practice are discussed.

Keywords: *welfare reform; qualitative study; TANF; women; poverty*

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 is a historic illustration of the power of conservative ideology transformed into public policy. The act eliminated welfare entitlements to poor families through Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and established Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), transferring responsibility to the states in the form of block grants and transforming the welfare system from one focused on eligibility and cash assistance to an employment-based program. Individual states, and subsequently counties, were given the freedom and power to redesign services and distribute block-grant funds as liberally or restrictively as they wished. Guided by well-entrenched beliefs that the welfare system has served to create dependence, disincentives to work, and a rejection of the traditional nuclear family (Gilder, 1981; Murray, 1984), TANF focuses on moving recipients into jobs and self-sufficiency by way of ultimatums and the establishment of lifetime limits on benefits. Six years plus into the program, there are red flags as to

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how well this legislation is achieving its purported goals of reducing poverty and increasing self-sufficiency for the women and children who are the vast majority of the recipients.

Although state government officials are currently discussing the effect and reauthorization of TANF, they have little access to reports that include feedback from those who are the most directly affected by the program—the recipients themselves. To gain a better understanding of the specific experiences of women with children in large urban areas, we worked with the participants of a community demonstration project that used group work to help mothers in Miami–Dade County, Florida, to make the transition from welfare to work. What follows is a brief literature review with implications for the fit between recipients and the current labor market, an outline of our methodology, a review of our findings, and a discussion of the implications for social welfare policy and practice, made possible by the women who were generous enough to share their experiences with us.

TRANSITIONING FROM WELFARE TO WORK

The current climate for many women who are attempting to transition from welfare to work is bleak, at best. Research has revealed that economic gains are marginal for the majority of recipients who are leaving welfare. Women, on average, earn about 75¢ for every dollar earned by men, and women of color earn even less, with African American women earning only 64¢ and Hispanic women earning only 55¢ for every dollar men earn (Malveaux, 2000). Nearly two out of five women work in jobs that pay low wages and rarely provide health insurance benefits (Kim, 2000). The consequence of low-paying jobs translates into the reality that one third of women who are paid low wages live below 150% of the poverty level.

African American welfare recipients now outnumber White recipients, and Hispanic recipients are becoming an ever-increasing portion of the state rolls. DeParle (1998) reported that the disproportionately large exodus of Whites from the welfare rolls has altered the racial imbalance in a program that has long been rife with racial conflict and stereotypes. Some analysts have warned that the growing racial and urban imbalance could further erode political support for welfare and public assistance (DeParle, 1998). State governments need to recognize the reality of these changing demographics as they develop strategies to support people in getting off welfare. Because an increasing percentage of welfare recipients are women of color and non-English-speaking, it seems certain that they will face substantial challenges in finding and maintaining employment.

In addition to the barriers of gender, race, and ethnicity, TANF recipients are often beleaguered by additional impediments to finding and retaining jobs. According to Hagen (1999), many recipients have learning disabilities, which may account, in part, for the fact that 40.7% of women welfare

recipients have less than a high school education (Loprest & Zedlewski, 1999). Furthermore, more than 60% of AFDC mothers have a history of battery by an adult partner, and clinical depression is a prevalent syndrome among recipients (Hagen, 1999). This reality translates into the situation in which approximately 40% of recipients cycle back and forth between welfare dependence and employment (Henly, 1999)—not because they want to remain dependent on welfare but because of a labor market that does not provide adequate jobs, sufficient income, or supporting benefits to enable women to provide for their families on a consistent basis.

Finally, for women with children, participation and success in the workforce and/or job training programs is undeniably dependent on the availability of supportive services, especially reliable, affordable, high-quality child care. Working mothers spend approximately 27% of their monthly income on child care (Edin & Lein, 1997). Yet even for those who may be fortunate enough to find minimum-wage jobs, child care—if it is available—is often too costly and of poor quality. Poor women are perpetually faced with choosing between welfare assistance or tenuous low-skilled jobs that do not provide health care benefits or sufficient income for adequate child care. The unavailability of child care or problems with unreliable care frequently lead to missed days on the job and ultimately to the loss of jobs (Perlmutter & Bartle, 2000). This pattern has traditionally defined poorly educated, poorly skilled women's revolving-door relationship with the welfare system.

What is known about recipients who have so far left the welfare rolls is that 21.7% left for employment, 15% left because of changes in state policy, and 56% left for "unknown reasons" (Delgado, 2000). The majority (58%) of those who left for employment have earnings below the poverty level (Children's Defense Fund, 2000). Whereas a purported goal of TANF is to "move" money from means-based subsidies into supports for employment, this goal has not been adequately achieved, and despite increases in the depth of poverty, most states are spending less on poor people than they did before TANF was enacted (Nolan, 2001).

METHOD

Procedure

The research reported here made use of a multiphase qualitative design. Qualitative data were collected in two phases. The first phase consisted of long individual interviews with 39 current and/or former welfare recipients, all of whom were women of color residing in socioeconomically depressed neighborhoods in Miami-Dade County, Florida. The participants were recruited from the pool of participants in a county demonstration

project that is designed to support recipients' move to self-sufficiency. Of the 46 women in the demonstration project, 39 were interviewed. The 39 interviews were conducted as the women began their experience with the group. At the conclusion of their tenure in the year-long demonstration project, a second phase of interviews was conducted with participants in five focus groups. In addition, the women responded to three quantitative self-assessment scales both before and after their participation in the demonstration project.

The findings reported here were drawn solely from the 39 transcripts of the individual interviews conducted beginning in March 1999. In the interviews, the participants were asked open-ended questions related to welfare, housing, health care, transportation, children and family, supports and resources, self-assessment, and their future; a final question invited them to address anything that we omitted. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed using the McCracken (1988) long-interview qualitative method—a five-stage process of data analysis using an editing approach to text analysis whereby the researchers systematically reduce and reassemble the data. Printed transcripts allowed for a meticulous process of reading and rereading the data so that key themes could be identified. Through this process, emerging themes and clusters of themes develop as the analysis progresses through successive stages (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). The process builds on the interplay of empirical observation and theory (Blumer, 1987) that permits the identification of patterns in participants' realities and their anchoring and elaboration in a conceptual framework. From the analysis of the interviews, eight predominant themes, reflective of these women's perceptions, emerged: (a) personal humiliation by case-workers, (b) a system characterized by disrespect, (c) a desire for control and independence, (d) parenting as the top priority, (e) strong self-perception and resourcefulness, (f) political savvy, (g) a unique sense of self, and (e) ambitious personal goals.

Sample

The average age of the 39 participants was 35 years. The women had an average of 2.7 children younger than age 18, which is slightly higher than the average TANF recipient who has an average of 2 children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). Nine respondents also had 1 or more children older than age 18. Fifty-six percent of the recipients had completed high school or had general equivalency diplomas, and 28% had "some college." At the time of the interviews, 51% of the participants were receiving TANF. All the women had received TANF within the previous 18 months. In addition, 49% were receiving some type of housing subsidy or assistance, 61% were receiving food stamps, 53% were receiving Medicaid, and 64% of their children were receiving Medicaid.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations in our sampling procedure and data. First, at the time of the interviews, the average length of time that the women reported having been on welfare was 9.1 years. Because this figure is much higher than the national average, we went back and reviewed exactly what the women said in the interviews with regard to their time as recipients. We found that the women often responded to this question by including the time they received benefits when they were children living with their mothers, as well as the time they had received benefits as adults on their own. Second, we did not consistently collect data on breaks in benefits or how often the participants may have cycled on and off welfare. Thus, this figure is not reliable. In addition, an important item that we did ask about but that we are not able to report is employment status. Because we did not consistently make a clear distinction between TANF-supported work and other work, our employment data are not clear. Last, because our sample was a nonprobability convenience sample, our findings are not generalizable to the larger population of welfare recipients.

FINDINGS

The analysis of data revealed the eight major themes listed earlier regarding the perceived experiences of these women as they attempted to transition from welfare to work. Many of our findings reflect themes that have emerged in other qualitative studies of conversations with welfare recipients. The following sections describe the eight predominant themes, including comments in the participants' own words. Parallel themes from prior studies are noted where indicated.

Personal Humiliation by Caseworkers

The participants' descriptions of their consistently negative experiences with TANF and other "system" caseworkers mirror the findings of other qualitative researchers (Brandwein & Filiano, 2000; Perlmutter & Bartle, 2000; Seccombe, James, & Walters, 1998; Tickamy, Henderson, White, & Tadlock, 2000). This theme did not take the form of shame at accepting assistance from the government but, rather, of the stigma created by welfare workers and other professionals. The recipients perceived workers as going out of their way to humiliate them through words and interactions, with the purpose of highlighting their lower status, as in the following comments:

It's the way they talk to you, the way they talk down at you that's humiliating. They're working for the government. "You're here to get something from the government, so I'll talk down to you any way that I want to."

They look at you like you an outcast, like you ain't nobody, like you smaller than them.

Those people that helped you fill out the applications thinks just because you're getting help from the government, you should be humiliated, you should be embarrassed, and you should be made to wait.

This theme of personal humiliation by caseworkers is closely connected with the second emergent theme of a *system* characterized by disrespect.

A System Characterized by Disrespect

Although the women we spoke with voiced a good deal of self-respect, the majority of them reported that their experiences with individual TANF caseworkers and the agencies delivering these services were demeaning. This finding reflects those from other qualitative studies. For example, Seccombe et al. (1998) stated that recipients view the welfare office with suspicion and distrust rather than as a sanctuary for help. Perlmutter and Bartle (2000) noted that in addition to being provided with inaccurate and inadequate information, recipients report being made to wait for long periods to see unsupportive and inflexible workers who are frequently openly hostile. One woman with whom we spoke described her experience with the TANF recertification process this way: "With that recertifying, they want to know the whole life history of your grandparents, things that you don't know about, that's what they want to know, from the last time your mom or your father had anything to do with each other . . . your hygiene, your menstruation . . . they want to know everything." The following is a poignant description of one woman's typical interaction with the local TANF office:

One day, I had to wait a whole day before I got seen. . . . I had an appointment for 9:30. 9:30 a.m., I went to the front . . . to the window [and asked,] "Where's my caseworker?" "Caseworker is not in yet." 11:30, waiting, caseworker is not in yet. People are being called. I'm a very nice person. When it come to waiting, I'm very patient. . . . 12:00 come, "Oh, they out to lunch." "Am I going to be seen today?" "We don't know. We haven't seen your worker." People have been seen who came with me to see the same worker have gone by and left. By the time 4:30 came, I asked, "Am I gonna be seen today?" "Well, your worker left."

Desire for Control and Independence

Many of the women in our study expressed their desire to be independent and to maximize control over their and their children's lives. Their remarks centered on three areas: not wanting to be a burden to their families; TANF requirements, including family caps and absent fathers; and the role of education in their lives.

Many of the women had entered the welfare system as a result of pregnancy. They saw AFDC as their only means of independence, offering freedom from burdening and/or being controlled by their families. One woman described her initial decision to seek assistance as follows:

I was in college, and I got pregnant my first year. I was a freshman, so I came back home. I come from a real close-knit family. In the beginning they were like, "We'll support you." But in the end, you know, you have to have . . . your own money, just to be yourself. And so I went. I like to have my own. I like to be myself, independent.

Despite a strong desire for independence, the women saw TANF policies, including family caps and requirements of absent fathers, as limiting their quest for independence. For example, like the recipients in Seccombe, Walters, and James's (1999) study, they opposed family caps, believing that because most births are unplanned, they do not influence the birth rate of women receiving assistance. Regarding the system's increased requirement to pursue fathers for child support, the women thought that this was either a hopeless endeavor that was not adequately enforced by TANF caseworkers or would result in the imposition of systemic controls on them and their children, not on the fathers. One woman described her experience when she actively sought a caseworker's assistance in seeking child support: "They tell me to fill out the paper. I fill the paper out and give it back to them. They say, 'Oh, we can't find him.'" Another woman reported that her caseworker told her the following:

If you can't find him, and I give you a social security number, and I tell you to do a worldwide search with his social security number, you should be able to come up with something. . . . We don't know where he's at. He's not even out of Miami, so how hard is it to contact a person that been working all of his life but not supporting his child?

Another woman described her response to her TANF worker's demand that she identify her child's biological father: "I told her I would live by myself, stay by myself. . . . I could deal with it better by myself. . . . But she keep ask'n 'Who is the baby's father?' And then they would tell you, 'Well, if you don't answer the questions, you're not gonna get through the system.'" "

Many of the women's comments regarding education also revealed their strong desire for independence. The women expressed an interest in acquiring an education for themselves and their children. However, they equated acquiring an education solely with getting "the proper piece of paper," which, in turn, would provide access to a world of resources and respect. Here, escaping the overwhelming controlling and oppressive nature of the system overshadowed any intrinsic desire for an education. One woman described the message she gives her daughter regarding an education:

I've explained to her that you must go to school, you must educate yourself in order to make it in society. . . . You need an education in order to get a job because it's not all about your experiences, but a piece of paper. If you say you went to Princeton, you're liable to get the job instead of somebody who has six years of experience doing it. You know, just a piece of paper, that signature on that paper means a lot.

Another woman said, "I need the paper because people acknowledge paperwork. When I get the paperwork, then I can use what I already got, and then I ride on the paperwork." Other authors (Soss, 1999) have talked extensively about how participation in the welfare system shapes one's views; here we may be witnessing an example of the effect of the huge paperwork requirements on recipients' interpretation of the "power of the paper." Whereas middle-class women certainly value the "paper" that comes from an education, too, women with financial resources who are not governed by TANF rules have the luxury of choosing where and when they go to school and what they want to study. Self-fulfillment usually plays some role in middle-class women's decisions to attend school. In contrast, the women in our study spoke exclusively about education as a way to satisfy TANF requirements and gain independence from the system.

Parenting as the Top Priority

As in Tickamyer et al.'s (2000) study, the women with whom we spoke expressed the overwhelming sentiment that parenting was their top priority in life. This priority was often expressed in tandem with their concern that TANF regulations did not provide adequate supports for women simultaneously to be "good-enough" parents and breadwinners. One woman with 11 children said that she was not overwhelmed by her 11 children; instead, she said, "I was overwhelmed by the demands of WAGES [Florida's TANF program]. It was just too much for me; all I had time for was my children. It's not that I don't wanna work, but I just don't have the time for nothing else but my children. You know, whoever came up with this policy, they failed to realize that it doesn't work for everybody." One woman had this to say about her experience attending required work-related classes for 70 hours a week: "One of the kids got his fingers smashed on the door, and the tip of it was amputated. I tried to take him to class with me, but the insurance they had wouldn't let kids in. So I had to stay home with him. I was home for two weeks with him, so I have to make up all those hours, plus I owe other hours." This woman's "choice" to care for her injured child, rather than attend the work-related class, was typical of our sample and reflects the responses found in Tickamyer et al.'s conversations with women.

Strong Self-Perception and Resourcefulness

Contrary to traditional thinking and in keeping with the findings of Davis and Hagen (1996) and Soss (1999), the women we spoke with expressed a positive and strong sense of self. They described themselves as able, resourceful, motivated individuals who were simply caught in a low period of their lives, trapped by a system that was not supportive of their getting ahead. One woman said of herself: "Yes, I'm a very happy individual, a self-made individual." As she began her involvement with the community demonstration program, one woman described herself this way: "My strength is I'm a go-getter. I am not gonna sit there and wait until someone comes along that's gonna help me. I'm gonna go and help myself. If something has to be done, I'm going to help myself." Embedded in this last self-description is the translation of this self-perception into action.

Similar to findings by Soss (1999) and Rank (1994), many women described actions they had taken on their own or their families' behalf to advocate for or acquire the resources they needed. One woman described her abilities as follows: "I were adequately able to clothe me, my family, and most of the neighborhood 'cause people always give me stuff. Or if I don't have, I get on the phone, and say, 'I need some clothes, Burdine's. Could you give me some clothes?' And I don't stop till I get it." The strong personal sense of self and resourcefulness that we heard negates the sense of hopelessness that some may expect from this population.

Political Savvy

A number of women presented long analyses of politicians' and policy makers' misconceptions of welfare recipients. One participant noted,

Social workers, politicians, therapists . . . they don't understand. They're sitting there, around the table, putting the program together, but they don't have the people there that *needs* to be there to put this program together so everything [won't] be in place . . . and you won't ever get the success that you need.

This political savvy was also manifest in the women's awareness of the larger, potentially disastrous, ramifications of legislation like TANF. Similar to the respondents in Secombe et al.'s (1999) study, the women we spoke with said things like, "We're not gonna make it 'cause the way it's going now, it don't seem like we're gonna make it to 2001." Another woman spoke about her life with her son: "I would like it to be better where he don't have to ever go out there stealing or robbing or taking from somebody." Inherent in this comment is the understanding that the supports are unlikely to be there to prevent increasing crimes like prostitution, drug sales, and burglary that people sometimes resort to when they see no other available options to feed themselves and their children.

Unique Sense of Self

The women frequently described women on welfare in terms consistent with popular images—recipients are dependent on welfare primarily because of laziness and the lack of personal initiative—yet they did not ascribe these characteristics to themselves. Rather, they distinctly described themselves as being different and separate. This finding is consistent with the work of other researchers, such as Briar (1966), who described the phenomenon of “estrangement” in which recipients do not identify themselves personally with the larger community of welfare recipients. Davis and Hagen (1996) observed that the participants in their study would often say “them,” not “we,” when referring to women on welfare. One woman we spoke with stated, “Well, a lot of ‘em, they be trying to stay here, stay on welfare, and do nothing.” Another said, “They could be, you know, a welfare recipient, but yet they could still have dignity. They don’t have to go around with . . . dirty feet, and waiting for handouts.”

On the basis of their analysis of in-depth interviews with 47 women on welfare, Seccombe et al. (1998) concluded:

It appears that welfare recipients, like those who are not on welfare, overestimate the degree to which individualistic notions of negative personality traits or dispositions shape the use of welfare. Yet, when it comes to explaining their own behavior, they are likely to attribute it to structural or situational causes that are beyond their control. (p. 864)

This tendency to ascribe individualist causes to other women’s reliance on welfare but to ascribe structural causes to their own reliance on welfare was consistent across our sample. The participants saw themselves as unique and subject to circumstances that were temporary and beyond their control. This perception appeared to hold, regardless of the length of time the individual had received benefits. For example, one woman who had received AFDC and now TANF benefits on and off for a total of 11 years stated, “To me, it’s just a supplement, ‘cause I don’t look at it as, you know, just sitting at home waiting for my check. . . . To me, it’s not like my entire existence is to be sitting at home. . . . Every day [I’m] going out there, doing more for myself, push myself, make it better for myself.” Another woman said this of welfare recipients: “They have a baby, so they’re on welfare, and this is what they do, and they don’t work, and they sit at home and they watch TV. No. That’s not me.”

Ambitious Personal Goals

The overwhelming majority of the women with whom we spoke voiced ambitious goals, embedded in strong middle-class values. One woman said:

"Hopefully, when I finish school, I can get a full-time job, one job, and just be able to afford to buy a house. . . . I'm looking forward to being able to put something aside for the kids for college, and things like that." Coupled with ambition was the absence of attention to the concrete resources and changes required to attain these goals. Many women spoke of owning their own homes and starting their own business to escape the control of others. One participant stated, "I need to get this business, to be on my own and independent and not be working for others that will not give you the raise, the yearly raise and your merit raise that you really deserve." Another passionately expressed her belief that her own business would free her from the control of others:

I want to do a courier service, messenger. I'll be independent. I'll be on my own. Just like the state, my boss talks down to me. . . . I try—I try to prove myself, over and over again, to others, and I hate—I hate doing it. . . . I don't wanna prove myself that I'm better or that I'm good or that I'm intelligent. . . . I wanna work hard for my own, for my own business, not for somebody else's.

DISCUSSION

The data from our interviews with the women paint a hopeful picture of individuals who have a strong sense of self, resourcefulness, and ambitious personal goals. Yet in listening to the voices of these women, we found that a number of pieces were missing from their conversations. What was glaringly absent was any discussion about the specific skills or concrete resources that they had acquired through their involvement in the services designed to support the success of TANF. Although the women were clearly worried about the greater demands of TANF (implemented 3 years before our interviews), they either discussed the lack of supports or distinctly omitted mention of any supports for addressing these demands that the legislation was "supposed" to provide.

These findings raise significant concerns about the obvious disconnection between these women's access to resources and the ambitious goals they expressed for themselves and their families. For example, one woman had this to say about TANF-related services: "I told them when it stops, I don't know what I'm going to do. It's going to be like the end of the world or something." Our findings indicate that participation in welfare-to-work programs aimed to support TANF legislation may ironically further bolster the women's strong positive self-image but without helping the women form realistic goals on their own behalf. One participant anticipated:

When I finish this program, I'm gonna have the things I want in life. I'm gonna have that business I want. I'm gonna have this fine house I want, with things in life I want. I ain't gonna need no more the welfare office because I believe I'll be established in life. . . . Anything in life you can get if you work hard for it.

Perhaps the most significant finding was the lack of focus on the concrete skills that are necessary to achieve the ambitious goals the women set for themselves or to support their parenting. The women's experience with TANF services did not produce any lasting infusion of resources to enable them to function independently. Neither was there any measurable increase in the individual or collective skills of the participants that would lead to an increase in self-sufficiency. Speaking of her experience with a number of job training programs, one woman said, "You got to go to school or get a job. . . . I have to go up there for orientation and everything, you know, like sit in a room while they tell us about how to go look for job. I already knowed that." This recipient then said that she did not have access to the essential services that she needed to sustain stable employment, with child care being at the top of her list. She asked, "Of course, I want to work. You think I don't? I don't have no motivation problem, but tell me what I suppose ta do with my two little kids all day while I'm away work'n?" Again, motivation does not appear to be at issue. However, this focus on low motivation, to the exclusion of concrete supports (especially for child care), continues to be overemphasized by many welfare-to-work training programs. One recipient alluded to the absence of supports as she reflected on her experience with TANF: "It's been OK, but it could've been better. . . . I shouldn't be leav'n with the same problems that I had coming in."

Therefore, although the women with whom we spoke had positive personal attributes, without concrete skills and resources these attributes are not likely to translate to sustainable, adequately paid employment. In a study of the relationship between race and the rate at which women exit the welfare rolls, Harknett (2001) found that "over a two-year follow-up period, white women in the control group worked less than African-Americans and the same amount as Hispanics, yet white women were more likely to leave welfare than African-American or Hispanic women" (p. 382). Given that all the participants in our study were women of color who had no advanced job skills and concrete services to support their independence, it is realistic to assume that they will encounter significant difficulty finding sustainable employment and exiting the welfare rolls for more than a limited time.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

In the wake of the reforms brought on by the 1996 TANF legislation, the next decade will bring significant challenges, not only for poor families but for the professionals whose job it is to assist them. This "assistance" can take many forms. First, social workers need to find more ways to include recipients' voices in policy and program development. Whereas there have been some excellent studies that have included women's voices, these voices need a wider audience. In addition to providing valuable input to policy makers, expanding vehicles for recipients to contribute to public policy

decisions (such as the TANF reauthorization process) will empower them as politically active and able to influence the programs that are supposedly designed to "help" them and their children.

Second, studies that include women's voices need to be used to help dispel common myths about welfare recipients. Myths regarding this population, especially ones that place welfare mothers' laziness at the core of their personalities, do enormous harm in a variety of arenas. For one, they harm women and their children when such myths make them ashamed of their recipient status, leading them to question their worthiness as human beings and preventing them from developing relationships with other recipients. In addition, these myths perpetuate ineffectual programs, policies, and professional practice when misinformation guides the development of services and policies. Instead, programs and policies need to be developed in response to accurate information about the needs of adult and child recipients.

Third, policies and programs need to provide adequate resources to frontline workers for implementing high-quality services. Although there are well-intended aspects of the TANF program, its implementation is often shortsighted and poorly resourced. In that it is the frontline social service workers who continue to be the disenfranchised women's link to state and federal services, these staff can play a critical role in creating and promoting opportunities that facilitate connections among women, providers, community leaders, and resources.

Helping to elevate the voices of those at the bottom is especially important when one considers that when the TANF policies were introduced in 1996, the United States had enjoyed a near decade of unprecedented economic strength and stability, including a low rate of unemployment and relatively low inflation. Yet despite the strong economy, the percentage of individuals, families, and children who were living in poverty at the end of the 1990s had been reduced by only 1% or less (Secombe, 2000). Given this scenario, it is clear that the plummeting U.S. economy since 2001 has been and will continue to be devastating economically and politically for poor women and their children.

Fourth, although TANF claims to support "family values," its implementation places a disproportionate emphasis on work to the exclusion of parenting. Although the money saved from moving women off the welfare rolls was intended to be used for support services such as high-quality day care and improved transportation, these supports have not been sufficiently developed. Until they are, TANF will not meet its goals of successfully moving women from welfare to work.

This lack of commitment to providing comprehensive resources to TANF recipients is connected with the final critical implication of our work: To be truly transforming and supportive of clients' self-sufficiency, interventions must reinforce clients' strength and autonomy in the psychological and economic arenas. Although many frontline staff members are committed to

their clients, methods of intervention have traditionally been anchored in an individual intrapsychic perspective. As a result, efforts are often directed toward helping clients assess their individual motivation and to “make do” rather than combat the realities of disappearing benefits and increasingly restrictive public policy (McPhee, Marcus, Caragata, & Hutchinson, 2002).

The participants’ experiences and perceptions are compelling and disturbing. They are compelling because they offer a “bottom-up” view of the welfare system (Tickamyer et al., 2000) that is essential to any genuine evaluation of the 1996 reforms. They are disturbing because when compared with current programs and legislation, the stories illustrate how rarely policy makers and helping professionals make use of the wisdom in the lived experience of poor women. To serve the short- and the long-term needs of poor women and children better, frontline social service workers and professional social workers must direct efforts toward ensuring that clients have a greater voice in the development of welfare policies, programs, and services. Findings such as those presented here must be interwoven into the growing body of research and integrated into the development of direct interventions and public policies. And then, social workers must be willing to go further. Swigonski (1996) argued that compassion and justice need to be the guiding forces in reform. Effectively serving poor women and children will require social workers genuinely to embrace empowerment as a practice ideal and reacquaint themselves with the values of social justice, the skills of political advocacy, and the power of social action. That is, professionals need to engage in the political process and, standing with their clients, confront the significant gaps in public policy that make it unrealistic for the majority of women to escape poverty and attain economic self-sufficiency. To do so, they will have to reevaluate their own perspectives and long-held conceptions of appropriate “clinical” roles. It is in this area that social workers and other frontline professionals have a critical role to play in the promotion of social justice and social action on behalf of the poor clients they serve.

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