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“Because they are motivated by desiring to improve themselves, experiencing special circumstances, and attempting to meet their children’s needs, they suggest that their welfare reliance should not be viewed as shameful.”

THE CHALLENGE OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY
Women on Welfare Redefining Independence

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Drawing on interviews conducted with fifty-one single mothers in a rural state, this article explores how women who rely on state assistance sustain a belief in their own self-worth. The article first shows that single mothers hold firmly to the value of self-sufficiency. It then shows that they can hold to that value because they believe that their welfare reliance is different from that of other women and because they redefine independence to allow for acts that might normally be understood to challenge that norm. The findings are compared to those in other studies that cover some of the same issues. The discussion draws on three levels of context for interpreting the findings: the current discourse concerning single mothers and, more specifically, welfare recipients; the client stance that develops among those who deal with bureaucracies; and, finally, the interview situation itself.

During the debates about what has euphemistically come to be called “welfare reform,” much attention was focused on the issue of “dependency.” The conservative goal—built into the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 and accepted by both political parties—centered on creating economic self-sufficiency defined more or less as independence from public welfare programs. All able-bodied adults—unless independently wealthy—were to be engaged in work for wages (Epstein 1997, 41). This goal of self-sufficiency rested on the notion that poverty and dependence were one and the same phenomenon and that both ultimately derived from the character flaws bred through existing social welfare provisions: the causal analysis suggested that a reliance on social welfare led to dysfunctional subcultures (replete with fatherless families) that, in turn, engendered inadequate personality traits that, to complete the cycle, resulted in further reliance on social welfare. Charles Murray (1984), one of the most outspoken early critics of welfare, for example, viewed the existence of welfare programs as creating “moral hazards”: once these programs were provided, individuals were encouraged to choose them over work, and thus they became trapped in dependency.

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As commentators have noticed, liberals did little to undercut the conflation of poverty and dependence on welfare that asserts that dependence itself is the “principal problem of the welfare system” (Tickamyer et al. 2000); often, the only difference between the “right” and the “left” could be found in the degree to which the government should be responsible for making work pay (Epstein 1997). Even feminist theorists viewed dependence as a problem for welfare recipients insofar as they became subject to control by the state—the public husband—as a substitution for control by the family—the private husband (Abramovitz 1988; Brown 1981; Fraser 1990).

Although Murray (1984) illustrated the moral hazards of welfare dependency with the hypothetical couple of Harold and Phyllis (who used a cost-benefit analysis to choose welfare over employment), single mothers—as the chief recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—became the specific focus of much of the critique. The growing number of single-mother families was used as evidence of the moral breakdown of the society as a whole (as in Dan Quayle’s casual comment about Murphy Brown and in the 1993 Atlantic Monthly article that asserted that “Dan Quayle Was Right”) (Whitehead 1993; Stacey 1994). Indeed, single motherhood itself came to represent a host of wrong “choices”—to live without men, to raise children without fathers, and often, given the demographics of the population, to be black or Hispanic rather than white. Single mothers who “chose” welfare reliance over waged employment represented another set of character flaws: they were lazy, unmotivated, likely to cheat, and, in the worst-case scenario, had children simply to lengthen the period and increase the monetary value of their benefits.

The striking effectiveness of this political rhetoric rests in part on its capacity to draw on and reinforce racism. The American public largely believes that most welfare recipients are African Americans (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001), and it draws on “the centuries-old stereotype of blacks as lazy” (Gilens 1999, 3). Such notions extend to all welfare recipients who are viewed as individuals who—because they are looking for a free ride—not only violate cultural mandates to be independent and self-sufficient but rely on resources provided (through taxes) by those who have chosen the route of hard work. Conversely, the benefits that accompany good jobs (e.g., health insurance underwritten by employers) and high incomes (e.g., tax deductions for the interest on
mortgages) are cast as personal achievements and as rights rather than forms of dependence (Coontz 1992).

A substantial body of literature demonstrates that these stereotypes—and the myths of middle-class independence on which they rest—are accepted not only by the general public but by welfare recipients themselves. A study by Briar (1966) found that black, white, and Mexican American women receiving AFDC never spoke of us but instead used the word them to refer to others in the same structural position as themselves. Similarly, Kerbo (1976) found that some welfare mothers internalized the stigma of being recipients and believed that people are poor because they are lazy and irresponsible about work. Goodban’s (1985) study also found that many women blamed themselves for their situations and were ashamed of being on welfare.

Three more recent studies report similar findings. Davis and Hagen (1996) argued that the most striking changes between their analysis and that of Briar in 1966 were “the women’s sense that they are entitled to support from the government” and their “anger at what they experienced as the intrusiveness of the welfare agency” (p. 333). Davis and Hagen also reported “some striking similarities between [their] findings” and those in earlier studies: “Like Briar’s participants, these women clearly differentiated themselves from the stereotype of the welfare cheat....One of the ways the women dealt with the stigma of welfare was to externalize the reasons for their entry into the system” (p. 334). Seccombe, James, and Walters (1998) found that while welfare recipients attributed “their own reliance on welfare to structural factors, to fate, or to the idiosyncrasies of the welfare system itself,” they attributed “welfare use by other women to laziness, personal shortcomings or other inadequacies” (p. 861). Finally, Tickamyer et al. (2000), drawing on data collected in four focus group discussions among welfare recipients, found that the women made “strong distinctions between deserving versus undeserving recipients that mirror(ed) the views of the larger culture” (p. 179).

among the patrons of a soup kitchen all found distancing and differentiation techniques to be common.

Like these studies, this research examines how the members of a stigmatized group deal with that status. More specifically, it examines the views of single mothers toward their own use of means-tested programs and their efforts to differentiate their use from that of others in the same category. It also extends beyond the prior research on welfare recipients in three ways—in the breadth of the questions it asks, in its sample, and in its suggestions for a way to interpret the findings. First, and most important, while I explore the extent to which single mothers in a rural area are both familiar with and share stereotypes about welfare reliance and distinguish between “us” and “them,” this is not the only research focus. I also examine how women who rely on welfare can explain that practice within a commitment to the broad goals of self-sufficiency and independence. That is, this article asks how (in the midst of negative attack on welfare and welfare mothers) the women who require assistance from the state can maintain a self-definition of themselves as “worthy” citizens who meet the normative requirement of self-reliance. Second, I draw on a broader sample than do the other studies of welfare recipients insofar as it encompasses women currently relying on Aid to Needy Families with Children (ANFC) (whether or not they also engage in paid employment), women who have relied on ANFC in the past but no longer do so, and women who have never relied on ANFC but rely on other means-tested programs. Third, whereas the other scholars analyze their findings within the broad context of the public stigma attached to welfare reliance and the narrower context of the behavior required from clients of bureaucracies, this study raises the possibility that the context of the interview is a significant explanatory factor and compares the findings to other studies that analyze the attempts of individuals in stigmatized groups to maintain a positive sense of self.

In what follows, I describe the setting and the methods of data collection for my research. I then report my findings in two sections. In the first (and shorter) section, I provide evidence that the single mothers I interviewed did subscribe to a belief in independence as a personal goal and that because of that goal, they hated to ask for help from the state; I demonstrate as well that they were well aware of the stigmas associated with single motherhood and welfare reliance. This material sets the stage for the second section where I explore how the women resolve the
contradiction between welfare reliance and the commitment to self-sufficiency. I suggest both that the women differentiate their reasons for relying on, and the manner in which they make use of, state assistance from those of other women and that the women redefine welfare reliance so that it can be subsumed within a vision of themselves as self-sufficient. Finally, in analyzing these findings, I explore the relevance of three levels of contextual influence.

METHOD

This article is based on interviews with fifty-one single mothers with at least one child younger than the age of 18 in the state of Vermont. All of the women have relied on some form of means-tested assistance. Initially, I located respondents through a variety of techniques such as placing notices about the research in the State Department of Health Office (which handles the Women, Infants, Children [WIC] Program), at a local parent-child center (a resource for young mothers and their children), and at various day care centers. Those who agreed to be interviewed were then asked to provide the names of other single mothers. All interviews were conducted by me or by a research assistant.

SETTING

The growth in the number of single-parent families in the United States as a whole (as well as in other countries) (Burns and Scott 1994) is a well-established fact. Vermont is no exception. While an image of two-parent families predominating in rural areas proves to be correct about the past, by 1990 rural areas were catching up with the rest of the country in the breakdown of the “traditional” family structure (McGranahan 1994). In 1990, when 24 percent of the children in the United States as a whole were living in families headed by a single parent, 21 percent of the children in Vermont were living in the same situation; seven years later, the proportion of families headed by a single parent had risen by almost 24 percent in Vermont (to 26 percent) and by almost 13 percent (to 27 percent) in the United States as a whole (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2000).

As is the case elsewhere, Vermont’s families headed by women are highly likely to be poor even though the majority of them are white.2 In
1990, when 12 percent of all persons in Vermont lived in a family consisting of a female head of household and her children, almost half (42 percent) of the state’s poor consisted of those very female heads of families and their children (Livingston and McCrate 1993, 6). In 1995, when the median income for all Vermont families was $44,000 (slightly above the median for all U.S. families), the median income for single mothers with children was only slightly more than a third of that—a paltry $16,000 (Institute for Women’s Policy Research 1998).

While welfare “reform” was being debated in the country as a whole, it was debated in Vermont as well. In 1994 (two years before the PRWORA), the Vermont legislature passed Act 106, a welfare restructuring project (WRP) that was the nation’s first statewide demonstration of time-limited welfare. Vermont’s WRP had the major goal of making dependence on ANFC benefits transitional, and starting in 1994, it randomly assigned all applicant and recipient families to one of three groups: 60 percent were subject to all provisions of WRP as well as to the thirty-month time limits and the requirement to accept subsidized employment, 20 percent were subject to all provisions of WRP except the time limits, and the remaining 20 percent were subject to regular ANFC policies (Kitchel 1998). My sample of respondents includes women in all of these groups as well as women whose welfare reliance ended before the new policies were put into effect. The sample also includes women who had never relied on ANFC or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) but who did rely on other means-tested programs such as food stamps, WIC, and Medicaid.

SAMPLE

At the time of the interview, the women included in this study ranged in age from nineteen to forty-five, with an average age of thirty-four; at the time at which they first gave birth or adopted a child, the women ranged in age from seventeen to thirty-nine, with an average age of twenty-five. Of the fifty-one women, slightly under half (47 percent) had 1 child, 31 percent had 2 children, and the remaining fifth had 3 or more; the average was 1.9 children. Although all of the women were white, three women were raising children who were not white: one woman had adopted a child from Asia and two women had given birth to biracial children.
Two-thirds (63 percent) of the women had previously been married (although not in all cases to the father of their child or children). Most of the previously married women became single as the result of divorce or separation. Among those who had previously lived with the father of their children (whether married or not), at the time of the interviews the women had been living on their own for an average of slightly more than four years. For the majority of the women interviewed, then, single motherhood was not a conscious “choice.” However, one of the women did choose to adopt a child on her own.  

Living arrangements varied among the women in the sample. Although three-quarters of the women lived alone with their children, six of the women were living with a domestic partner, one woman was living with her own mother, and four were living with another single woman and her children.

As a group, the women were quite well educated. Although 58 percent of the women had no degree beyond high school, 60 percent of this group was either currently in some form of higher education or had received some college credits in the past. Another 13 percent of the women had completed a two-year degree, and the remaining 35 percent had a B.A. or more advanced degree.

Like single mothers in the United States in general, the women interviewed in this study were quite poor, and their median family income (at $16,042) stood almost precisely at the level found by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research study. Family incomes ranged from a low of $6,400 to a high of $39,000. These incomes came in various ways. Although at some point or another 70 percent of the women had relied on ANFC, at the time of the interview, only a third (31 percent) of the women relied on ANFC and other state supports (although some of them, as required by WRP, held down jobs as well); another two-fifths (29 percent) of the women had relied on ANFC but were no longer doing so (although most of them were drawing on some other state supports); and the remaining 29 percent of the women were employed and supplemented their earnings with at least one means-tested program (such as Medicaid or WIC). In short, all the women had experience with means-tested programs, and the majority had experience with ANFC either in the past or at the time of the interview.

Vermont welfare recipients differ from those in the United States as a whole most markedly in terms of race/ethnicity: whereas 30.5 percent
of U.S. recipients in 1999 were white, 94 percent of Vermont welfare recipients were white (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2001). Vermont welfare recipients also tend to have somewhat fewer children (an average of 1.8) than do welfare recipients in the country as a whole (an average of 2.1). Vermont is also among the most generous states: TANF families receiving cash assistance in fiscal year 1999 received, on average, $471 in Vermont in contrast with an average of $357 elsewhere. As noted, at the time of the interview 31 percent of the women were relying on ANFC either in part or in full. These (20) women were similar to samples studied by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) during approximately the same time period in terms of average number of children, age of youngest child, age, and proportion who had never married (Bloom et al. 1998). However, the respondents in this study were more likely than those in the MDRC sample to have completed high school and to have received a degree beyond high school. In short, with the exception of education, the respondents in this sample are much like the “typical” welfare recipient in Vermont, albeit quite different from welfare recipients in other parts of the country.

DATA COLLECTION

The interviews generally lasted at least two hours; they were all taped, and the tapes were subsequently transcribed. All interviews used an interview guide and followed essentially the same format adapted to special circumstances and the flow of information. The women were asked a series of questions about their backgrounds (education, marital history, age at which they had their first child), their current living situations (who lived in the household, whether they owned or rented), and sources of income (jobs, reliance on means-tested programs, child support). The women were also asked extensively about the extent to which they relied on family and friends for both material and emotional support. Finally, at the end of the interview the women were asked a set of questions that probed specifically their attitudes toward welfare:

In general, there has been a lot of discussion of welfare and time limits for women on welfare. How do you feel about these issues? Do you think the government should offer more or less support than it now does? Why?
THE COMMITMENT TO SELF-SUFFICIENCY

The interviews suggest that a desire to be—and to be perceived as being—independent and self-sufficient is a central issue for single mothers in Vermont, as it is for single mothers elsewhere (Hertz and Ferguson 1997), for Vermonters as a whole (Nelson and Smith 1999), and, indeed, for most U.S. citizens (Bellah et al. 1985).

Cathy Earl, a single mother of three children, works as a cleaning woman and receives Medicaid and food stamps. She said, “I like to do things on my own; I like to be self-sufficient, so [asking for help is] not something that I do a lot.” Karen Kelly, who receives the full range of state assistance—ANFC, food stamps, and Medicaid—argued her entire way through the interview. Whenever the interviewer used the word rely to describe her relationship with an agency or individual from whom she drew support, she challenged that interpretation of her behavior: “Rely! See, that rely word isn’t one that I do. I’m a very self-sufficient woman.”

Almost invariably, women who, like Cathy and Karen, accept state support claim that they hate asking for that help. They draw on different kinds of self-characterizations—as adults, as former middle-class citizens—to explain why they view assistance as a challenge to their self-images.

One woman, for example, suggested that the receipt of food stamps (in contrast to the entitlement of unemployment insurance) was somehow shameful for her as a mature person: “Unemployment was not a problem, getting food stamps was. I felt like, at thirty-seven, this was not something I should be doing.” Kitty Thompson, similarly, made her assessment of the embarrassment and humiliation of receiving state support within the context of appropriate adult behavior and then added that she evaluated herself against the reference group of other single mothers:

Kitty Thompson: Through the winter my fuel bill, the electric heat here had gotten so high that I couldn’t afford it, so I went to the state—different community shelves. So they helped me out to pay . . . four hundred dollars of the electric bill.

Interviewer: And what were your feelings about getting that kind of help?
Kitty Thompson: Extremely embarrassing. It’s very embarrassing and humiliating, because I’m an adult, I should be able to do this. There are plenty of other people who are single parents that are getting by, doing a
lot better. . . Asking total strangers if they can help me with my electric bill because I won’t have any more heat is extremely embarrassing—especially because you have to bring in all your receipts of every bill you’ve paid in the last month.

For other women, the fact that they had always thought of themselves as middle class made relying on a practice they saw as the province of the poor especially difficult. As was the case of the people eating in soup kitchens (Cohen 1997), these respondents made family relevant as a testament to their good character:

I was raised upper middle class so this is all new to me and it took me a very long time to be able to use food stamps in my town. I would go shopping someplace else where people didn’t know me. It was very embarrassing. It was very difficult.

The first time I ever went to welfare, and the first time I went to my Reach Up appointments, it was really, really scary because you never know what people are going to think, and there’s such a stigma to welfare, and you just don’t know what’s going to happen—what people are going to think of you, how they’re going to treat you, what they’re going to say about you. You just don’t know. And especially for me, coming from a middle-class family and not thinking that I would ever be on welfare, thinking that things would always be provided, you know, and that I would be working.

As these comments suggest, a keen awareness of the stigma attached to single mothers in general and welfare reliance in particular underlies the women’s anxieties. Several women explicitly commented on their knowledge of negative attitude toward single mothers: “I guess I’d have to say that—in the communities and in this rural area—single parents are still looked upon very poorly as though we choose this life.” Others noted that welfare recipients were maligned in public discourse: “People think that [welfare is] a negative thing. Even [the governor] . . . runs his mouth on TV about how horrible it is.”

EXPLAINING DEPENDENCY

Given these attitudes of valuing self-reliance and hating to ask for help, and given the consciousness the women have that single mother-
hood and welfare reliance place them in a stigmatized group, women who are (or have been) welfare reliant have two dilemmas. First, the use of welfare threatens their understanding of themselves as worthy of respect. Second, the use of welfare challenges their stated commitment to self-sufficiency. I turn to a discussion of the manner in which they resolve these predicaments.

DIFFERENTIATING ONE’S OWN WELFARE USE FROM THAT OF OTHERS

The welfare-reliant women in this study, as in other studies, have techniques for differentiating themselves from others who are in similar situations, and thus they are able to maintain and project a positive self-image in the face of having joined a stigmatized group. These techniques fall into two general categories: demonstrating that their reasons for relying on welfare differ from those of other women and demonstrating that they differ from others in the manner in which they make use of welfare.

Reasons for Welfare Reliance

As was true of the women interviewed by Davis and Hagen (1996), Tickamyer et al. (2000), and Seccombe, James, and Walters (1998), the women in this study could simultaneously denigrate welfare reliance by others and justify their own use of state support by emphasizing the ways in which their own practices differed. Three modes of differentiation prevailed here: in contrast with others, the women were using welfare to make something of themselves; they were relying on welfare only because they had encountered special circumstances precluding employment; and they were responding primarily to the urgent needs of their children.

Welfare reliance to improve oneself. Several of the women interviewed indicated that their use of welfare was necessary as part of a long-term strategy for bettering themselves. Welfare, they insisted, was not a way of life but a step on the road to self-sufficiency through self-improvement. Jackie Porter, a twenty-six-year-old mother of one child, for example, said that she had to “have assistance of some sort” because she “had no income when [she] was going to school.” Tara Marshall, another young mother, also explained that welfare reliance was a way
for her to go to school and accomplish her goal of becoming a teacher. Because she had this long-term goal, her relationship with the state was reciprocal: as she “used” welfare to achieve her goals, the state of Vermont “used” her as an investment in human capital:

But then I think . . . I am an investment opportunity for the state of Vermont, because I want to stay here. I want to be in the state of Vermont and I can contribute to the state of Vermont . . . . I want to feel like I’m in service to the global community. I guess I feel like I can be if I’m educating children.

Special circumstances. A number of the women interviewed explained that special circumstances, which made it impossible for them to seek employment for either the short or, in some cases, the relatively long term could justify their reliance on welfare either currently or in the past.

Although she was no longer relying on welfare when we spoke with her, Diana Spenser explained that during the period immediately preceding her pregnancy, she had no alternative:

[When you are pregnant] your whole body just kind of changes and slows down, and I just . . . couldn’t get the work, and after I was eight, nine months pregnant I was substitute teaching, too, for extra money . . . and that just sort of slowed down as well. So being on state aid was a last resort.

Joan Meyer’s welfare reliance was likely to be for a longer period. She wanted us to understand that her status was beyond her control: “I was not a teenager; I did not go out and get pregnant just out of stupidity. I was married. I had children in wedlock. And he got to walk out.” She also wanted us to understand that she could not possibly seek employment outside the home: “Because for me at minimum wage with three kids it’s not possible [to support myself through employment] until they are all in school full-time which is another three years.” Karen Kelly, who had so adamantly insisted that rely was not a word in her vocabulary, told a harrowing story about the circumstances that led her to move to Vermont. Although she insisted that she would get back on her feet soon, she insisted as well that she had no alternative but to move to a place of comfort and support:
My daughter was violently molested on Cape Cod, and the perpetrator was not removed, and continued to try and harm her and kill my other daughter and our cat. And it went on for a year. And in the process we lost my job, our home, everything. I had a choice. I could stay there, and continue to fight the fight, or I could get my daughter safe. And so we spent the last summer traveling around, camping, looking for a place to move to. . . . And I came up here, having gone to school here, I realized that every time I’m here, I feel like I’m at home. And so we moved here!

For the children. Perhaps most common, the women say that they rely on welfare to fulfill the obligation of ensuring that their children’s needs are met. Welfare use is thus incorporated into, and justified by being, a good mother who can and will provide for her children (Rains, Davies, and McKinnon 1998). Anne Davenport, who had said that welfare was embarrassing because of her “upper middle class” background, stated that welfare would not be her choice but that in the absence of child support from her ex-husband, she had no alternative if she was going to take care of her children:

If it was me and I needed money I would be very hard pressed to apply to the state, but because I have children I really don’t have a choice and I really hate it. Believe me, I really hate it. But I don’t have a choice, especially having no support from their father.

Jackie Porter said similarly,

You know, people can look down on me, and people can talk and say, “Oh, she’s on welfare,” or “Oh, she’s getting food from the food shelf.” But you know what? I don’t care. I have a child and if she needs to eat, I’m going to get food. I’m going to get beans if I have to!

Elizabeth Vincent, who was no longer relying on welfare, when asked whether it had been a hard decision to turn to ANFC, responded, “No—because I had to feed my kids and I couldn’t do it anymore. . . . I was working full-time and couldn’t do it.”

Morally More Acceptable Use of Welfare

The women in this study thus offer accounts of their reasons for relying on welfare. Because they are motivated by desiring to improve
themselves, experiencing special circumstances, and attempting to meet their children’s needs, they suggest that their welfare reliance should not be viewed as shameful. As they offer these accounts, the women also make claims about the manner in which they behave as welfare clients; they argue that their behavior differs from that of the “stereotypical” user because they are temporary rather than long-term clients, honest rather than dishonest, and making progress rather than stagnating. And, as will be seen below, the women back up their assertions with evidence that others—most notably the welfare officials with whom they work—have testified to their unique qualities.

**Temporary use.** Several women commented that they believed that the vast majority of women on welfare viewed it as a permanent crutch and even, as the stereotypes claim, had children solely to ensure the continuation of benefits: “I do know of women . . . single mothers . . . and I have friends like that, that just allow themselves to go through that, and just say that that’s the way that they’re going to raise their kids”; “I just know a lot of people are just having children, they’re very abusive of their children, and they just do it so they can stay on welfare.” By way of contrast, they explained that their use of welfare was only temporary. In making this assertion, the women are responding directly to one of the chief critiques of welfare use—that it engenders long-term dependency—and insisting that regardless of their reasons for relying on welfare, they planned to move, or had actually moved, beyond that dependence in short order: “I was lucky enough that the intake worker that I got realized that I was not the stereotypical welfare person to stay on it the rest of their lives”; “And I knew I wouldn’t be on ANFC forever. It was just a safety net for me.”

**Not abusing the system.** If, in the minds of these women—as in the minds of the public—long-term use of welfare constitutes a form of abuse of the system, so too do other behaviors such as cheating and not making progress. Anne Davenport, who was quoted above as saying that she only used welfare to enable her children to survive and that she hated being on welfare, insisted as well that she differed from other welfare mothers because she was sincere about her need. Indeed, Anne proudly believes that this sincerity has been noticed by her caseworker:

The first caseworker that I had was great; this new one was an asshole for a while, but he’s mellowed out now that he realizes I’m not here to cheat the system, just trying to survive. But I think because they’re so over-
whelmed by so many people it’s really hard to figure out who’s sincere and who’s not and they have to be very cautious when they first start out with you if they don’t know you.

Like Anne, other women also believed that they were different from others and deserving of—and even receiving—special treatment because they were making extensive progress. Recall, for example, how Tara Marshall argued that she was an “investment” for the state of Vermont. Jackie Porter, who claimed that she needed welfare to attend school, also claimed that her progress on welfare was noticed by her caseworker and constituted the reason she was treated differently from other women:

I felt fine about asking for the support and I got it easily—pretty quickly too. I mean, it all depends on the stages that you’re at. Different levels. I mean, they could see from my performance that I was trying very hard and I was progressing. I went from this point and I zoomed to this point, and I really believe that that’s why I got it as easily as I did. There are people that are at point zero, and . . . they’re not showing any improvement, they’re showing lack of interest . . . and they’re not going to get the money as easily. They have to—it’s like proving their cases or something.

In two ways, then, the women interviewed made a point of showing how they differed from other welfare recipients: their reasons for use were more justifiable, and their particular practices were demonstrations of short-term reliance and of both honesty and progress.

RESOLVING THE CONTRADICTION: WELFARE RELIANCE IS NOT DEPENDENCE

As noted, other scholars have reported that women on welfare are aware of the negative views that prevail in the minds of the public and indeed share many of those views. Those studies have also shown that to maintain self-esteem and present themselves as worthy, welfare recipients construct their reliance in terms that enable them to differentiate themselves from others similarly situated. These findings, however, do not fully explain how they handle the contradiction between a stated commitment to the values of independence and self-sufficiency
and obvious dependence on any of a number of forms of social assistance. The remaining portion of this article turns to this issue. It argues that the women have two major rhetorical strategies for resolving that contradiction: redefining independence and redefining support.

**Redefining Independence**

In *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz (1992) argued that the belief that the worthy U.S. citizen is a self-reliant individual rests on mythology. She noted that those who have been most revered for their “autonomy” in the past relied extensively on both subsidies from the government and cooperation with others: the Western settlers depended deeply on free land, colleges, communal events, dams and irrigation, railroads, and a host of other supports for the “family farm” to sustain their much touted “self-sufficiency”; similarly, the 1950s suburban family built its purported self-reliance on GI benefits; the National Defense Education Act, Federal Housing Administration, and Veterans Administration loans; and fixed-rate mortgages. Indeed, Coontz argued that the middle-class family today can appear autonomous because it depends so heavily on loans from family members for down payments on homes (for which they then receive mortgages that can be claimed as tax deductions), employer-sponsored health insurance plans that are paid in pretax dollars, and a host of other benefits available through employment and tax deductions. Independence and dependence, it seems, are in the eye of the beholder. And the middle-class beholder often defines the latter as reliance on means-tested programs while preserving the accolade of independence for its own private and public practices of claiming necessary assistance.

As the evidence above has shown, to a great extent this viewpoint is shared by the women who have relied on welfare (and other state subsidies) in the past and by those who continue to do so. However, several of the women interviewed engaged in practices of redefinition. These practices involved delimiting the notion of independence to a narrow sphere of behaviors, thereby making reliance on welfare (or other means-tested programs) irrelevant to claims of self-sufficiency.

Kara Lattrell is one such woman. She is a proud individual who has been involved in a variety of political activities around welfare reform, and (as will be discussed further below) she has come to view welfare as a “right.” Even so, she has difficulties reconciling her reliance on
welfare with her commitment to independence. The “solution” is to redefine self-sufficiency so that it means living within the budget allowed to her by her monthly ANFC grant and not having to draw from the neighborhood food shelf. That is, Kara Lattrell has satisfied the requirement of self-sufficiency and can maintain pride in that accomplishment whenever she can avoid dependence on charity:

I always sort of feel like I’m doing really well if I haven’t had to go to the food shelf for quite a while. It’s like, I hate going to someplace like the food shelf... because, you know, I have a lot of pride that I can make it on what they give me. They don’t give me shit, but I can make it anyways! And so for me the big blow to my ego is because I’ve screwed up and I’ve... gone through the food stamps and I have to go to the food shelf. And that’s kind of my little message to myself—manage that little, tiny little scrap well enough.

Jackie Porter similarly carved out a sphere of behavior that she could call up as evidence of her moral strength as a self-sufficient woman. In her case, that area pertained to the ability to wait between scheduled appointments with her welfare counselor and to abstain from seeking help until her “turn”: “I’ve never asked an agency for help. I’ve always been strong, and waited until my appointment. Even though there were times where I was like, I really need to see my [Reach Up counselor], I would always wait.”

As these cases suggest, by delimiting the concept of dependence to a tightly confined subset of behaviors, the women could present themselves as strong and self-reliant, even as they drew on ANFC and other forms of state support to meet the bulk of their daily needs.

A variation of this strategy—and one that focused more on the external presentation of one’s self than on one’s internal assessment—was to identify assistance received from public agencies as less of a challenge to the appearance of autonomy than help received from friends and family. Barbara Quesnel, a thirty-seven-year-old mother of a six-year-old daughter, is employed in a nursing home part-time while attending school to earn her associate’s degree. She never relied on ANFC, but she did draw on food stamps, Medicaid, and subsidies for child care. These supports, she suggested, were acceptable within a notion of herself as an individual who could tend to her own needs because they were “less personal” than the help she might have received from people she knew. She explained her reasoning: “It’s always been very important to
me to be able to take care of myself. I would feel like a failure around
my friends as opposed to an agency."

Redefined Notions of Support

The strategy just discussed involves redefining “independence” as a
narrow realm of behavior and as not accessing the support of family or
friends. By way of contrast, some women engage in acts of redefining
“dependence” on public support. Two variations of this practice are
explored. In one rendition, women view the act of acquiring ANFC or
other forms of state support as evidence of their own resourcefulness
because it demonstrates that they are able to get badly needed assis-
tance; in a sense, then, these women are redefining themselves away
from the common perception that equates welfare use with dependence
and toward a notion of themselves as self-reliant individuals. In the
other variation, the women challenge the notion that welfare is evidence
of “dependence” by calling up notions that range from the almost des-
perate idea that the money granted through ANFC is simply a “loan” to
a political assertion of welfare as a “right”; in this case, the redefinition
centers on the support itself rather than on the individual engaged in
receiving that support.

Getting resources is not dependency. Some of the women redefine
themselves and their actions so as to view reliance on means-tested pro-
grams as evidence that they have the stamina and inventiveness to track
down necessary resources. Having these skills and abilities meant that
in relying on welfare they were not demonstrating dependence or
neediness but the obverse.

Kitty Thompson is a twenty-four-year-old mother of one child born
outside of marriage. When her child was younger, she relied on ANFC;
now that she is employed full-time (as a production worker at a craft
factory), she has reduced her reliance on the state. Yet she still receives a
subsidy for her housing, assistance in meeting the expenses of child
care, commodities from WIC, and Medicaid. Even so, Karen argues,
she does not now need—and has never in the past needed—“help”
because she has been proactive in the search for resources. Likening her
search to doing her homework, she suggests that she has fulfilled her
side of the obligation to take care of herself:
When I first moved here, what I did was I called up every department of social services in the two counties. I called up every resource possible. They give you out these sheets with all these different numbers. And I basically did all my homework, and called everything I could possibly think of that might be able to help me. So I haven’t really needed help, just because I’ve investigated everything possible.

Jackie Porter, who received ANFC in the past but presently only receives food stamps and Medicaid, spoke much the same way insofar as she defined assistance seeking as evidence of self-reliance. Although at one point after she had assumed she could manage on her own she had to return to a program that had previously offered support, she incorporated that return into her notion of herself as “very independent”:

It was seeming impossible. That’s when I went back to the parent-child center for a while. I mean, I’m very independent when it comes to, you know, trying to find a way to make ends meet. I’m good at that. If this person doesn’t work, I’ll call this person. I just wasn’t finding a job.

Like Karen and Jackie, Elizabeth Vincent was willing to risk the appearance of dependence when she relied on food stamps because she knew not only that it enabled her to be a good mother but that it meant she was being resourceful:

It was just awful for me [to use food stamps]. But, eventually, it was just . . . use them or don’t eat. So, we gotta eat. And I started thinking to myself, hey I’m doing this for the kids. So I’m proud of it, because I’m using my skills to find the resources that I need to get where I want to go for my family and I.

Redefining the assistance itself. In contrast with those who redefine themselves as resourceful rather than dependent when they seek out and obtain necessary assistance, some women challenge the public perception that welfare is a handout. Recall, again, how Tara Marshall presented herself as an “investment” opportunity for the state. Diana Spenser’s redefinition is somewhat different—and perhaps a bit more “desperate.” She had relied on welfare during her pregnancy, and she found it shameful and humiliating to have to do so. She now seeks to consider that assistance a “loan” the state provided to help her get back
on her feet. Indeed, she has even attempted to have the state acknowledge that redefinition:

Diana Spenser: You know, I had a lot of things I wanted to say about welfare. One of those [is that] just when you’re in a position of need, you know, it would have been nice not to have food shoved on me, and all of the things that I didn’t need. And I would have probably preferred to go to them in desperation and say, “No one else will give me a loan. I’m going to need this much money for the next four months. Will you lend me the money and then let me pay it back through community service, or through you know, through financially, whatever?” Because I mean, I knew how much money I would need, and I knew how much time I wouldn’t be able to work, and . . . I was really far behind, and it just would have been easier to be able to pay it back. And so I still feel like I owe this certain amount of money to society, and it just sort of would have been nice to have a system like that.

Interviewer: How are you going to make peace with that?
Diana Spenser: I’ve done community service before, and I’m not quite in a position to do that right now. And I think I’m very giving in the store [I own]. I mean I give away a lot of free things to people, or you know, people come in and like [my daughter’s] toys or something, or other children, and I give whatever I can to the people that I meet. I’ve done the big brother/big sister thing before, and I think that is really worthwhile . . . It just really helps children. So I would probably get back involved in that. And I’m just really open; I think I wrote the welfare department and said, “Look, I’m looking for ways to pay back the money that I borrowed, if you have any community service projects that you think that I could do.” And they didn’t really give any response to that. I think maybe they have a lot of applicants, or whatever.

If Diana’s redefinition involves a certain rejection of the notion that she was actually receiving support—and an assertion that she has begun to repay the loan she received—other women redefine welfare away from its common (public) interpretation as a shameful handout to view it as a welcome gift, a social service, an entitlement, and even, in its most political stance, a right.

Karen Kelly, who resisted the word *rely* throughout the interview, said that she had learned not to be ashamed of welfare reliance because she was receiving a gift from Vermont:
I live in Vermont! I applied for welfare in Massachusetts and was told I couldn’t get it. Here in Vermont I can, and I didn’t know that when I moved here. I did not know that when I moved here. I think that, of course there are things—asking a family of three to live on $550 a month is ridiculous, and it’s asking people to lie, and to cheat, and to steal. On the other hand, I’m not entitled to any of it. It’s really a great gift that I’m being given.

Arlinda Smith learned to consider WIC and food stamps a “service” the state provided to those in need rather than as a source of humiliation:

[I was] embarrassed at first. You know, the WIC bus was coming . . . Did the neighbors know? I just was in this kind of denial about it. I didn’t feel comfortable. I don’t think anybody really does. And then the food stamps. I was really ashamed. I would look around at the co-op make sure no one was there. And then I remember talking to a friend who was on them and she said, she got to a point this is what was happening to her, and I got to that point about the food stamps. I mentioned it to my friend Caitlin [who was very surprised]. That’s a service that’s out there. That is what it is for.

Although a political assertion that welfare was a right was uncommon among these women, there were those, such as Kara Lattrell, who did engage in this act of redefinition:

That’s why welfare was there—so I could raise my child. That’s what I chose to do. . . . I also believe, now that I’m older, . . . everybody should be guaranteed an income. You know, because there’s gonna be somebody who’s out of work. You know, because we don’t have 100 percent unemployment in this country. So I think that’s what I thought too when I was gonna have her, you know. I mean, I’m gonna need a place, I need it. So, I didn’t even question that I was gonna go on it.

DISCUSSION

The findings in this article demonstrated first that a group of single mothers in Vermont hold tightly, as do others, to a norm of self-sufficiency and independence and that they hate to ask for help. The
findings demonstrated as well that these women are aware of the negative characterization of single mothers and welfare recipients and that, in fact, they share that public perception. I then argued that these stances confront the women with two dilemmas: to “justify” their welfare reliance so as to distance it from the stereotype and to make reliance (typically termed dependence) compatible with the norm of self-sufficiency. I argued that the first was resolved through differentiating themselves from other welfare recipients both in their reasons for relying on welfare and in the manner in which they used that assistance. I argued that they resolved the second dilemma in two ways. Some redefined self-sufficiency and independence so that welfare reliance could fall within its umbrella: they delimited an arena of claimed self-reliance, or they recast self-reliance as not relying on friends or family. Others engaged in acts of redefinition of welfare reliance itself by claiming it was a manifestation of independence because it demonstrated resourcefulness or by claiming that the assistance itself was a state investment, a gift, a loan, a service, and a right.

Davis and Hagen (1996), Seccombe, James, and Walters (1998), and Tickamyer et al. (2000) have similarly reported that women on welfare are likely to draw on common stereotypes to explain the behaviors of other welfare recipients and that (at least some) women make distinctions between their reasons for being welfare reliant and those of others. As noted, those findings are echoed in the accounts of the women in this study. The women used individualistic explanations and negative character assessments to describe welfare reliance by others (“I just know a lot of people are just having children, they’re very abusive of their children, and they just do it so they can stay on welfare”). However, when describing themselves, they drew on less condemning analyses to explain how they became single mothers (“I was not a teenager; I did not go out and get pregnant just out of stupidity. I was married. I had children in wedlock and he got to walk out”) and how they ended up on welfare (“I just wasn’t finding a job”).

But their explanations for how they differ from other single mothers and other welfare recipients do not depend on this mode of distinction alone. The women also claim that they use welfare in a way that differs from (and is more acceptable than) that of others. And when the women make these careful distinctions, they do so precisely on the basis of character. Moreover, the particular character traits they draw on use the public language of, and answer directly, the moral charges leveled at
welfare recipients. Hence, they discuss their sincerity and honesty (“I’m not here to cheat the system, just trying to survive”). And they are especially proud of the progress they make (“I mean, they could see from my performance that I was trying very hard and I was progressing. I went from this point and I zoomed to this point”). In short, they assert that being a single woman or relying on welfare may not be their “fault” (and thus they differ from patrons of soup kitchens interviewed by Cohen 1997, who claimed responsibility for their poverty), but the manner in which they respond to those situations is their responsibility, and they are more than willing to be held accountable for their subsequent behavior.

Indeed, the women are very concerned with how they are viewed by others—by their family and friends, by the welfare officials who supervise their cases, by the public at large, and, I suggest, by the person conducting the research interview. This concern with appearances is completely understandable given the contexts within which these women have to conduct their daily lives. At the broadest level is the public discourse (highlighted during the debates about welfare reform) that declares that single motherhood, welfare reliance, and even poverty itself can all be read as evidence of character flaws. At an intermediate level is the daily negotiation within which welfare recipients conduct their lives as clients. And finally, at a micro level is the interview situation itself. The first two have been used as explanatory factors by some researchers; the last of these has been largely ignored.

Although Seccombe, James, and Walters (1998) drew on the social psychological “attribution” theory of Fave (1980) and Jones and Nisbett (1972) to explain their findings, they ultimately linked the requirement of attribution to the broad context within which these attributions are made: “They have internalized the commonsense ideology that a need for welfare represents a personal inadequacy” (Seccombe, James, and Walters 1998, 862).

By way of contrast, Tickamyer et al. (2000), while looking at this broad context as well, also focused on the next layer of contextual influences within which these attributions develop. They quoted from Ferguson’s (1984) analysis of bureaucratic effects to explain how being a client gives shape to the manner in which needs are presented:

There is only one sort of “demand” that a poor person can ordinarily make upon a welfare agency and that is more adequately conceived of as
a request, a plea for help. One cannot demand to participate in decision-making, to see a policy changed, or to redirect resources. In other words, one cannot demand to be included as a participant in the political process itself; to be a recipient is also to be a spectator. (pp. 145-46)

This analysis helps explain findings in this study as well. Many of the respondents, when asked to consider what kind of policies might improve their lives, speak in a client’s language of requests and pleas for help and frame their appeals with reference to their special worthiness. Jackie Porter, for example, mentioned that she had once had to return to welfare for extra money; she described the interview as one in which she made her claim as a dependent client:

And I called them up and I begged and pleaded and was just, you know, “I feel really, you guys have helped me so much, I think I can swing three hundred dollars and even more if I have to.” I’m like, “I’ll pay whatever I have to but I need something.”

If the client stance can explain the form of requests made by recipients like Jackie, Ferguson (1984) suggested it can also explain why women on welfare believe that they must differentiate themselves from others. She argued,

Since benefits are distributed to individuals, not to groups, any perception by the clients of common interests is blurred and the existence of a shared situation is disguised. . . . To protect themselves from the psychological consequences of being labeled as failures, welfare recipients frequently disassociate themselves from other clients, viewing themselves as atypical. (p. 147)

In fact, as has been shown above, the particular form of that disassociation—the focus on short-term use, honesty, and progress—refers precisely to character traits that would please the welfare workers whom recipients confront as clients. (Indeed, although the respondents in this study were white and relatively well educated, they did not claim either of these “privileges” as a basis for difference from the stereotypical welfare recipient even though they did sometimes draw on family background.) Although Jackie Porter immediately denies the language she has just used—of begging and pleading—she does suggest that making
a representation of herself as especially worthy eases the process of making claims.

Interviewer: You said that you begged and pleaded, but then you just got it all. So did you find that it was generally pretty easy to get that help when you needed it, if you talked it through with them?
Jackie Porter: I was very surprised that I got all of it. I was astonished. I was very happy. And it wasn’t like I begged and pleaded but I praised myself in a way that I was [saying], “Look where I’ve come,” and that kind of thing. (emphasis added)

Furthermore, it seems likely that this tendency toward differentiation and representation of special worthiness would be especially likely when—given a fixed pool of resources under the block grants of PRWORA—welfare clients have to compete among themselves. Once again, recall that Jackie made precisely this point when she said others were “not showing any improvement” and therefore were “not going to get the money as easily.”

Finally, the interview situation itself might be acknowledged as constituting an additional layer of contextual influence. Tickamyer et al. (2000) and Davis and Hagen (1996) both relied on focus group discussions. In the former cases, women were asked to volunteer by the officials of a human service agency; three of the focus groups were conducted at the agency, and the fourth at a job training site. In the latter case, the groups met in a conference room of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The research of Seccombe, James, and Walters (1998) was conducted in a fashion more similar to my own: snowball samples and interviews conducted in homes of respondents by the authors and graduate students. In each case, then, the interviewer or focus group leader had but a fleeting relationship with the respondent; in each case, the interview was a professional (or her or his surrogate). Sympathetic and unthreatening as we might have tried to be, we must have represented, at the very least, the public world that had evaluated these women and ultimately found them wanting of full citizenship; we may even have been regarded as spies for agencies that have subjected them to surveillance and supervision.

This is not to deny either that these responses are meaningful or that they constitute important data. Indeed, research studies using quite different methods—where the researcher was more of a participant
observer (Snow and Anderson 1987; Fontana 1977) and/or better
known to the respondents (Rosier 2000)—find similar patterns of
claims to difference from a stigmatized group. At the same time, the
findings in this study—and of others that rely on interviews with unfa-
miliar researchers—must be evaluated at least in part in light of the
methods through which they were obtained. A simple thought experi-
ment might convince us of the performative nature of this particular
identity. Imagine Jackie Porter, Karen Kelly, and Anne Davenport in
the perfect privacy of a conversation with their peers. It is easy to envision
that in that particular situation, they might compare stories about the
income they conceal from their welfare officers; they might even com-
pare strategies designed to convince those same officers of their urgent
needs, sincerity, and progress. Of course, some of these evasions and
schemes emerge in these interviews and focus groups (as they did even
more extensively in the repeated interviews reported by Edin and Lein
1997 and the participant observation of Carol Stack 1974). Karen
Kelly said, “Asking a family of three to live on $550 a month is ridicu-
lous, and it’s asking people to lie, and to cheat, and to steal.” Jackie Por-
ter both acknowledged and denied that she “begged and pleaded.” Anne
Davenport spoke disrespectfully about her welfare officer (“this new
one was an asshole for a while”). But, for a large part, what these
research strategies revealed was precisely what the middle-class dis-
course on welfare reform left available: assertions of worthiness based
on assessments of character and not a structural analysis of the causes of
the material poverty of women’s lives.

At the same time, I would also assert that these are not just represen-
tations or identities put on for “us.” Rather, they constitute one way of
claiming a high moral ground—because they differ from others,
because their “dependence” is compatible with self-sufficiency—that
women on welfare can call up for themselves. Rosier (2000) suggested
that such claims of “difference” can also provide a mechanism to
escape fatalism:

The logic that underlies and compels belief that one’s own family is dif-
ferent from and superior to others’ is quite simple—if families are differ-
ent from the majority of others, they can then hope and expect their chil-
dren to avoid the human tragedies they observe with regularity in their
communities. (pp. 248-49)
Claims of difference thus not only constitute a way of resisting denigration in relations with others, but they also constitute a way of resisting denigration in an interior landscape as a way of holding onto hope.

The fact that these women engage in strategies and performances need not cause us to view them as somehow different or “other.” The inconsistencies between “cheating” and honesty, between begging and claiming, are no greater than those experienced by anyone who at one moment justifies an action that at another moment causes shame. What might give us pause and an acknowledgment of something “pathetic” (in the true sense of the word), though, is the tightly delimited space accorded welfare recipients in which to make claims of worthiness. These women only rarely are able to make broad critiques of public policy; for the most part, they position themselves as individuals forced to make distasteful choices in the face of a disapproving world. Wong (1998) made a similar point:

As my interviews proceeded, I always hoped that [my respondents] would be perfect critics—able to pierce through the veil of hypocrisy and hegemony of the Right that surround and grip our society. In other words, I desired that they narrate what I wanted to hear. . . . Unfortunately, the women were often situated in the position of the consumer or the ventriloquist, as Fine (1992) would put it. They blamed the “welfare queen,” or the “insensitive bureaucrat.” Although the women were wonderful narrators of their biographies, they were terribly inarticulate about the political and social imaginary. They did not connect the macrostructural shifts with their familial, social and personal lives. Occasionally, they shifted to the voice of the critic of state policies. These voices percolated in whispers and in straining to be heard. Meanwhile, their articulations did not pervade beyond their own self-understanding and consciousness. (p. 186)

Because the debate about welfare has been waged in terms of dependency, dysfunctional cultures, and character flaws—rather than in terms of structural causes for poverty including the absence of a real system of social welfare and an adequate (or livable) minimum wage—women who need to believe in their own worthiness and who want to convince others of this worthiness, both to garner respect and to continue to receive benefits, have little room to maneuver.

In short, women who rely on means-tested programs, and especially those who draw on programs that make that reliance visible to others
(e.g., food stamps, which are used in public places), like the members of other stigmatized groups—the homeless, patrons of soup kitchens, and nursing homes residents—face ongoing challenges to their sense of self-worth. Fashioning a positive identity, to themselves and to outsiders who might judge them, has two components.

First, it involves distancing themselves from others in the discredited category (Snow and Anderson 1987). By engaging in this practice, members of such groups avoid being discredited. But in doing so, they can also fail to see their common interests with others in the category, thereby intensifying isolation and precluding the possibility of collective action. Speaking about the inner-city mothers she interviewed, Rosier (2000, 266) reminded us that the reason for these practices originates in the practices of the public. She pointed out that while inner-city residents are often urged to act in a collective manner to improve the conditions of their communities, common stereotypes suggest that their neighbors “are primarily dishonest and untrustworthy, lazy, violent, and unscrupulous.” Similarly, when welfare recipients distinguish themselves from others in the same structural position, they do so because the public discourse has created both the discredited category itself and the specific terms of that discredit.

If the public at large has a role to play in creating the incentive for distancing, it also has a role in the second component of the strategy, which is the construction of narratives that indicate full understanding of, and compliance with, the “expectations” for a “normal” person in our particular social order. Like the soup kitchen patrons Cohen (1997, 86) interviewed, the respondents in this study “identify themselves with mainstream, middle-class values,” which, in this case, means that they suggest that they have taken “personal responsibility”—if not for the condition of poverty itself, for efforts to improve oneself—and they assert that they value “self-sufficiency” over dependence even as they transfigure these notions to meet the daily conditions of their lives. They thus encourage the hearer of their narratives to accord them the respect due “normal” citizens. That is, while the narrative impulse is common to members of stigmatized groups, the terms of the narrative are dictated by the prevailing discourse. While the narrow space of claiming self-sufficiency as waiting for an appointment or avoiding a food shelf is testimony to what our society has done to welfare recipients, the similar strategies of other “discredited” groups suggest
simultaneously the burdens we place on members of those groups and the enduring ability of the human spirit to resist shame.

NOTES

1. As Tickamyer et al. (2000) noted, there is also a critique in the feminist literature that “has contested the dominant framework that juxtaposes the norm of independence against the deviance of dependence. . . . This work has proposed a model that starts from an assumption of universal vulnerability, rather than autonomy, which normalizes interdependence” (p. 176). See, for example, the work of Tronto (1993) and Sevenhuijse (1998).

2. For a discussion of the poverty of rural single-parent families, see Lichter and Eggebeen (1993) and Lichter and Mclaughlin (1997); for the significance of race, see Dill and Williams (1992).

3. These debates received wide press coverage in local newspapers. During the 1990s, the two major regional newspapers had almost 300 articles on welfare “reform.”

4. Vermont’s “welfare” has been called Aid to Needy Families with Children (ANFC) rather than the more common Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

5. These included such policies as allowing ANFC parents who obtain unsubsidized jobs to have the first $150 plus 25 percent of the balance of their earnings disregarded in calculating their family’s ANFC benefit and extending transitional Medicaid coverage from twelve to thirty-six months following termination of a family’s ANFC grant.

6. Vermont’s means-tested programs offer support to a broader range of households than is the case elsewhere. More specifically, Vermont offers two programs that supplement Medicaid. Dr. Dynasaur provides health care for children younger than 18 and for pregnant women in households where the income is below 200 percent of the poverty level. The Vermont Health Access Plan provides health care for adults who do not have health insurance, for individuals in households with incomes below 150 percent of the poverty level, and to uninsured parents with dependent children in households with incomes below 185 percent of the poverty level (http://www.dsw.state.vt.us/districts/ovha/ovh10.htm). Vermont Women, Infants, Children, the special supplemental nutrition program for women, infants, and children, is available to pregnant women and to women and children in households with children younger than the age of five if the family income is below 185 percent of the federal poverty income guidelines (http://www.state.vt.us/health/cph/nutrition/wicsfinfo.htm#compare).

7. Determining which mothers were single mothers “by choice” turns out to be a risky business. In order not to engage in a semantic struggle at this point, I maintain the word choice to refer to those women who sought adoption of a child while they were not married. For other interpretations, see Hertz and Ferguson (1997), Bock (2000), and Davies and Rains (1995).

8. As noted above, I allowed the women to designate themselves. The women who were living with domestic partners spoke of themselves as “single mothers.”

9. All names are pseudonyms. In some cases, personal details have been changed.
10. Reach Up is the name given to Vermont’s JOBS program, which, under the welfare restructuring project, became a program of case management.

11. Interestingly, the women were split on the matter of whether help from an agency or help from an individual posed more of a threat to one’s self-conception. Whereas Barbara Quesnel believed that agencies were preferable, other women had precisely the opposite stance. Amy Phelps, the thirty-four-year-old mother of two girls aged thirteen and eight, has relied on both her own and her boyfriend’s families with help in daily life. She believes that getting by in this manner demonstrates more strength of character than relying on agencies would:

   I do have to say through all of my down times and transitional periods . . . I never went on any kind of public service—only the health insurance which is a form of Medicaid. So I guess that’s really an accomplishment for me with just accessing support from families.

12. Davis and Hagen (1996) noted, What was interesting was the openness with which many of the older women shared the stories of working without reporting their earnings. Even though the groups were meeting in the offices of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the women had no inhibitions about discussing the additional ways they used to help support their families. (pp. 330-31)

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