



The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 29

Issue 1 March - Symposium on Native American
Wellness

Article 9

March 2002

Public Voices and Public Policy: Changing the Societal Discourse on "Welfare"

Vicki Lens
Yeshiva University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Public Policy Commons](#), [Social Welfare Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lens, Vicki (2002) "Public Voices and Public Policy: Changing the Societal Discourse on "Welfare"," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol29/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



Public Voices and Public Policy: Changing the Societal Discourse on “Welfare”

VICKI LENS

Yeshiva University
Wurzweiler School of Social Work

Much of the public discourse on welfare reform is subjective and value laden, a composite of socially constructed stories and myths that support the dominant ideology. This article reports on a study that examines the language used by government officials, poverty experts, advocates and others to discuss welfare reform. Statements made about welfare reform were extracted from the Washington Post and the New York Times and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Dissecting the public language of welfare provides insight into how prevailing ideologies are communicated and reinforced, and how they can be changed.

Social problems that involve a lack of something—such as health care, money, food, housing or child care—are inevitably framed by one basic question: is it the individual or the government’s responsibility to provide it? Stated in this way, the answer is less empirical than ideological. Ideologies of “self-sufficiency” or “individualism” determine the response, with welfare serving more a symbolic than substantive purpose (Edelman, (1975), 1998; Schramm, 1995). This figurative use of welfare is communicated through language as we construct stories, myths, and “facts” to support this dominant ideology. Even scientific studies designed to measure and explain poverty often conform “to the prevailing biases of welfare policy discourse” (Schramm, 1995, p. 6) using language that supports those biases. In this way, when formulating policy, the “words of welfare” can become more significant than any “facts” about welfare (Schramm, 1995).

While welfare rarely falls completely off the public's radar screen, sometimes the public discourse about welfare remains in the background, generating no action. Other times, as in 1996 when the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program was abolished and replaced with the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program (TANF), the rumblings turn into shouts, and major policy changes are enacted. While policy changes are, of course, the result of a confluence of factors, it is words that signal and embody the changes, with language "not simply an instrument for describing events, but . . . a part of events, strongly shaping their meaning and the political roles officials and mass publics see themselves as playing" (Edelman, (1975), 1998, p. 132). Thinking about welfare thus requires thinking about the words used to describe it.

This article reports on a study of the "words of welfare" that preceded the enactment of TANF. It is based on a qualitative content analysis of statements made by elected officials, poverty experts, bureaucrats, advocates and others about welfare reform in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* between 1994 and 1996. Studying this public discussion provides insight into the prevailing ideology of welfare, and how that ideology is communicated and reinforced. It also leads the way to constructing different "words of welfare" that promote a different response to poverty (Schramm, 1995).

Methodology

There are many sources for finding the public "words of welfare". They include books, academic articles, the popular media, and the historical record made by legislators (i.e. legislative transcripts, speeches etc). This study chose the popular media because it is the most inclusive, providing a forum for disparate communities and individuals to exchange ideas and debate proposals. It functions as our town square, providing a daily chronicle of how social problems are defined within society and by whom. It is where politicians and others go to plead their case (Cook, 1998). Since this study sought to examine what was being said about welfare reform by the various and most influential participants in the debate, the popular media was the most fertile

source for extracting this information. Thus, while this study is not an examination of the role of the media in public policy, it uses the media as one kind of a historical record of the public discourse.

Newspapers were chosen because within the hierarchy of the popular media, including television, radio and print, they are the primary and most influential source of information for political information (Chaffee and Frank, 1996; Johnson, Stamm, Lisosky, and James, 1996; Neuman, Just, and Crigler, 1992; Dickson, 1992; Patterson, 1980). The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* in particular were chosen because "they are recognized as leading and influential newspapers read by lawmakers, policy makers, and the more highly educated and informed public" (Dickson, 1992, p. 565; Loseke, 1997). It is in these two newspapers that those groups that form the political elite are likely to be quoted, and hence where the words that encapsulate a society's dominant ideology can be found. However, restricting the study to these two newspapers is also a limitation of the study. They are perceived by some as liberal in bias and are not necessarily representative of the way news is reported in the rest of the country, or even by other national newspapers that may fall at different points in the political spectrum (with the *Wall Street Journal* or the *Christian Science Monitor* as but two examples).

The *Washington Post Index* and the *New York Times Index* were used to identify articles about welfare, and in particular articles about the reform of the AFDC program, between January 1994 through August 1996, when TANF was passed. This time period was chosen because that was when the public debate over welfare reform reached its peak, as evidenced by a doubling of the number of welfare related newspaper articles in the *Post* and the *Times* between 1994 and 1995. However, restricting the study to this time period is also a limitation of the study. It coincides with an attempt by conservatives to consciously and deliberately engage in a media blitz to sell the American public on the new conservative revolution (Cook, 1998). Thus the level of regressive conservative rhetoric may have been higher than in previous periods. However in as much as this rhetoric was followed by the abolishment of AFDC, focusing on this time period can provide useful insights on the power of public words.

Four hundred and sixteen articles on welfare reform and AFDC were identified, with ninety seven eliminated because they did not contain descriptive accounts of welfare and welfare recipients. Thus a total of three hundred nineteen articles (144 articles from the *Post* and 175 articles from the *Times*) were chosen as the sample for this study. Statements made about welfare reform by various individuals and organizations were extracted from the articles and coded and analyzed using HyperResearch, a computer software program for qualitative research that assists in the organization, storage, retrieval and analysis of coded material.

Findings

This study began with the assumption that welfare is condemned by virtually everyone and those that rely on it are similarly disdained (Gans, 1995; Gordon, 1994; Ellwood, 1988; Katz, 1989). Why this is so has been covered thoroughly by others. Katz (1989) argues that contempt for the poor and support of capitalism goes hand in hand. When people are measured by how much they produce those who produce little or nothing will be judged the harshest of all. Piven and Cloward (1994) explain that denigrating the poor and stigmatizing welfare use helps capitalism work by insuring a cheap pool of labor. Abramovitz (1996) contributes the view that certain of the poor, specifically women raising children without husbands, are derided as much for how little they produce as the fact they are trying to produce it outside of capitalism's patriarchal system.

The question asked by this study, then, is not why, but how, does a society communicate these views. The first part of this question requires us to identify who is doing the talking; what groups in our society are given the public space, and how much of it, to talk about social problems? Thus although this study is primarily qualitative, quantitative analysis was used to determine who participated in the public discourse and how frequently.

Those connected to government, including elected officials, federal appointees, and state and local bureaucrats, dominated the debate, representing 58% of all sources quoted in the newspaper articles. Of elected officials quoted, three fourths served

on the federal level. Outside of government, experts, defined as individuals or organizations engaged in research on poverty, were relied on the most, constituting 14% of all sources. 10% of all sources were recipients. Advocates, defined as "individuals or groups "concerned with improving services and resources on behalf of the poor" (Kemp, 1995, p. 196) were less represented, making up only 7% of all sources. Social service workers and religious leaders, at 3% each, were heard from the least. In sum, by far the largest group participating in the public discourse was the political elite—politicians and government officials (Zaller, 1992).

The next step was to examine how these various participants communicated their underlying ideologies about welfare and welfare reform. We know that one way to uncover this is by examining the myths and values that are embedded in our discourse (Loseke, 1999). Attention must also be paid to what is not said, as these silences can be signs of what a society chooses to ignore or is unable to discuss (Edelman, 1988). These three facets of public discourse—myths, values, and silences—are discussed below.

Communicating myths about welfare

Myths are simplistic stories that help us ward off the anxiety we feel about potentially disruptive social problems by providing us with a ready made cast of characters, including victims and villains, and equally as ready made solutions (Edelman, (1975), 1998; Stone, 1989). Both villains and victims, despite their complexity, are distilled into "typifications" or stereotypes, a "convenient shorthand" for describing people and problems (Best, 1995, p. 114).

In the past, the stereotypical myth of the welfare queen has played a prominent role in welfare discourse (Seccombe, 1999; Abramovitz, 1996; Gordon, 1995; Handler, 1995). Drawing on racial stereotyping, this myth brands female welfare recipients, and especially African-American women, as deviant, promiscuous, and manipulative, willing to live off the "system" rather than become self-sufficient. Another dominant myth is to paint the welfare poor as the "other" in American society, with labels such as the "underclass" used as a code word to imply undeservingness, and deviance from the dominant American culture (Gans, 1995).

Participants in the TANF debates overall marginalized recipients, calling forth the stereotypical images of the "underclass" although not by that name. Those elected officials on the conservative end of the political spectrum (mostly Republicans) relied primarily on language that emphasized the "otherness" of welfare recipients; the kind of people as one elected official put it "you would not let baby-sit your kids or grand kids" (Vobejda, 1995c, p. A1). These officials invoked broad generalizations that vilified recipients. Thus, one compared recipients as a group to animals, who become dependent if not encouraged to find their own food (Pear, 1995b, sec. 1, p. 1). Another found them lazy, unlike "other" Americans, such as the immigrants of yesteryear who knew the value of hard work. (Rosenbaum, 1995, sec. 4, p. 7)

Bureaucrats and experts also depicted recipients negatively, but using what Schramm (1995) refers to as an "economist therapeutic managerial discourse" that focuses on how the state can regulate individual behavior. The dramatic rhetoric of the elected officials was replaced with more measured, objective and dispassionate language that described individual faults. Thus bureaucrats provided a catalogue of problems from educational and skills deficiencies to personal problems. For example, one described recipients as "a "challenge" to work with because "they don't have the staying power because of absenteeism, or they don't like the boss, or the supervisor changed what they were doing" (Jeter, 1995, p. B1).

Experts likewise painted a bleak portrait of recipients, characterizing them as people bewildered by the social mores of working. Thus, they were described as "lack[ing] social skills . . . resent[ing] the authority of supervisors, quarrel[ing] with co-workers or customers or fail[ing] to report to work on time" (DeParle, 1994b, p. A1). Other were unable "to understand some of the unwritten rules of office etiquette" (Thompson, 1995, p. A1). Still others suffered from "a debilitating lack of self-esteem" (Vobejda, 1995b, p. A1). Like the bureaucrats, experts provided descriptions that reinforced stereotypical images of the "underclass" as consisting of behaviorally dysfunctional individuals.

Recipients, either as described by journalists or as they described themselves, also reinforced these stereotypes. These narratives portrayed recipients as incompetent and almost child like. They were described as "strangled by insecurity" (Vobejda, 1995b,

p. A1), another so befuddled “even now social workers must tell her where to put her first and last names on forms” (Hsu, 1995, p. B1). (A full exploration of how recipients described themselves is beyond the scope of this article, and is reported elsewhere. Lens, in press).

There was a dearth of counter images to contradict these negative images. Neither advocates nor more liberal elected officials (primarily Democrats), the two groups most likely to offer a competing version of welfare recipients, did so. Both groups were largely silent when it came to constructing a public image of welfare recipients, a silence that could easily have been construed as agreement. And while liberals and advocates did not turn recipients into the villains described by others, they also did not provide an alternative and more positive image. Missing from them were any descriptions or vignettes that cast recipients as “heroines” or “survivors”, mythical archetypes that would have demonstrated strength in the face of adversities like extreme poverty or difficult life situations.

Thus, while strains of the welfare queen myth were present, especially among the broader generalizations made about welfare recipients, the ineptitude and dysfunction described was more child-like than queen-like. Unlike the arrogant and scheming women represented by the myth of the welfare queen, these women were described as less unwilling to work as incapable of working because of a range of personal defects. They still securely occupied the position of “other” in American society, but in a medicalized version that focused on psychological and behavioral defects.

The existence of these myths play a very important role in the public discourse about welfare. As Edelman states “to believe that the poor are basically responsible for their poverty is also to exonerate economic and political institutions from that responsibility and to legitimize the efforts of authorities to change the poor person’s attitudes and behaviors” ((1975), 1998, p. 134).

Constructing moralities

Construction of social problems also include constructions of moralities (Loseke, 1999). Embedded within the public discourse are sacred symbols or themes that locate the problem in a particular moral universe. They are invoked by the selective use

of language that can encapsulate in a word or phrase an entire ideology. The word "welfare" is itself an example of this. It is a word that "connotes to a great many people that the problem lies in the public dole which encourages laziness" (Edelman, (1975) 1998, p. 135). The word dependency has a similar import, invoking images of individual indolence rather than structural impediments as the cause of poverty.

Lakeoff (1996), a cognitive and linguistic scientist, has studied the way in which conservatives and liberals use language to communicate their world views, and hence their moralities. He likens the nation to a family, with the government as parent and its citizens as children. Conservatives use a "strict father model" of parenting, which emphasizes tradition and authority, self-control, obedience and discipline. Liberals follow a "nurturing parent model" which stresses love, empathy, tolerance, self-exploration, and the questioning of authority. Each uses different words to communicate their respective ideologies. Conservatives rely on such terms as individual responsibility, tough love, dependency, deviant, and self-reliance. (Lakeoff, 1996, p. 30). In contrast liberals use words like social responsibility, concern, care, help, oppression, and basic human dignity (Lakeoff, 1996, p. 30–31).

Lakeoff contends that a conservative ideology has dominated over the last twenty five years because its language has dominated the public discourse: As Lakeoff explains:

They have done this by carefully working out their values, comprehending their myths so that they can evoke them with powerful slogans, repeated over and over again, that reinforce those family-morality-policy links, until the connections have come to seem natural to many Americans, including many in the media (p. 19).

The TANF discourse was in fact infused with the moral language of conservatives, although this type of language was used primarily by elected officials. Other participants in the discussion including experts, advocates, and bureaucrats relied on more scientific and morally neutral language. The terms "welfare dependency", "self-sufficiency" and "responsibility" were uttered over and over again by elected officials, (of both parties), and the President. For example, the President spoke of "real reform that promotes work and responsibility" (Havemann and Devroy, 1995,

p. A6), and “replacing dependence with independence, welfare with work” (Jehl, 1994, p. A1). Elected officials spoke of recipients who “don’t accept the same responsibility” as other taxpayers (Havemann, 1995c, p. A5) or that “we want [recipients] to be personally responsible” (Havemann, 1996, p. A1).

True to Lakeoff’s “strict father role” conservatives relied on the moral themes of self-discipline and self control. Recipients were likened to unruly teenagers, requiring “tough love” (Havemann, 1995, p. A5). It was necessary “to knock the crutches out” (Dowd, 1994, p. A1), and “ [though] people will fall down . . . they will learn to walk” (“Rethinking welfare”, 1995, p. A1).

However, conservatives added a new twist by borrowing from the moral language of liberals. For example, they spoke of “empowering” recipients (“Republican officials”, 1995, p. A1), and described how “the end of the welfare state . . . mark(s) the beginning of the opportunity society” (DeParle, 1994a, sec. 4, p. 5). They also talked about “liberat[ing]” welfare recipients, and “sav[ing] the children” (Pear, 1995c, p. A19).

There were some attempts by liberals to use “liberal” language, invoking themes of compassion, helping, and protection of the young. Thus, one Congressman, after invoking the Holocaust while denying that he was, went on to warn his colleagues to “open your eyes. Read the proposal. Read the small print. . . . They are coming for the children. They are coming for the poor. They are coming for the sick, the elderly and the disabled” (Toner, 1995, p. A23). Conservatives were also accused of “committing legislative child abuse” (Vobejda, 1995a, p. A1) and “waging a campaign of hate against children” (Pear, 1995a, p. A18). In a particular dramatic plea, one Congressman asked “Where is the compassion . . . where is the sense of decency? Where is the heart of this Congress? This bill is mean. It is base. It is downright lowdown. What does it profit a great nation to conquer the world, only to lose its soul?” (Pear, 1996, p. A1).

However, this type of language was the exception rather than the rule, with conservatives and liberals alike adopting the moral language of “individual responsibility”. Moreover, the conservatives’ appropriation of the moral language of liberals helped inoculate them from liberal criticism; they too, were trying to help women and children albeit in a different way.

In sum, the language of conservatism, and the morality it implies, dominated the public discourse. It was communicated effectively through key words, such as “welfare”, “dependency” and “responsibility”. These words acted as a cognitive trigger, framing the issue of poverty as an individual problem, in the same way the myths described above framed welfare recipients as individually incompetent and dysfunctional. The words functioned as a linguistic reference, enabling people to reinforce previously held beliefs about the causes of poverty and the type of people who are poor (Edelman, (1975), 1998). In this way language served not to educate or inform, but to insure the stability of the dominant ideology.

Construing the silence

What is missing from the public discourse can be as important as what is included. Certain aspects of a social problem are never questioned because they either challenge a society’s bedrock ideology or have been absorbed so completely into the cultural landscape that they have become invisible (Edelman, 1988). According to Edelman, some problems and their solutions are designed to divert attention from certain threatening ideological and structural mine fields in a society. As an example Edelman cites poverty and the major responses to it in this earlier century—the New Deal and the War on Poverty. He posits that the consensus that emerged for these two measures was actually a way of avoiding the larger and more threatening issue of economic inequality, the solution to which would require the disruption of the entire economic system instead of funding a few anti-poverty programs.

As would be expected based on Edelman’s theory, the solution of structural changes was absent from the public discourse. Less predictable was the fact that many of the participants in the debate found nothing incongruous in proposing individual solutions while acknowledging structural obstacles.

The bureaucrats who worked with the poor, the experts who studied the poor, and the advocates who represented the poor, all pointed out the structural problems of insufficient wages. An official who directed a welfare to work program noted that a woman who “get[s] a \$4.50-an-hour job . . . is still poor, and she’s still on welfare (Rimer, 1995, p. A1). Experts pointed out

both deficiencies in the labor market for low-skill jobs and the low wages that these jobs pay. One pointed out that even a \$.90 increase in the minimum wage would “still leave many (children) in poverty” (Loose, 1996, p. D3). Another made a direct connection between welfare and the working poor by explaining how working mothers in low wage jobs, such as cashiers and clerks, were worse off than those on welfare and were “45% more likely than those on welfare to experience . . . hardship” (DeParle, 1995, sec. 4, p. 1).

However, neither the experts or bureaucrats translated these structural explanations into structural solutions that would transform low wages into living wages or otherwise alter the economy. Instead, both discussed individual solutions, focusing on “personal responsibility” and individual behavior. Thus for example, several bureaucrats spoke of “changing the culture of welfare” (Clairborne, 1994, p. A3), and “implementing policies that nudge” recipients into working (Havemann, 1996, p. A1). Experts likewise spoke of solutions that, for example, mandated work for recipients but did not address insufficient wage levels.

Advocates also spoke often and forcefully about the structural obstacles to self-sufficiency. Emphasis was placed on perceived deficiencies in the labor market, with advocates posing such questions as “where are the jobs? Everyone knows that the jobs are not available” (Rimer, 1994, p. A12), and others pointing out that “many welfare recipients cannot find jobs even when the labor market is good” (DeParle, 1994c, p. A1). However, while advocates pointed out the lack of jobs and low wages they did not attempt to explain why this was so. In other words, while they described the economy they didn’t explain why it worked that way; they did not, for instance, attempt to explicate the underlying workings of the economy, the nature of capitalism etc. The closest any advocate came to framing the issue in terms of class or income inequality was the following comment made during a rally protesting welfare reform: “My God . . . it’s Christmas day, and all those making decisions are warm and cozy with presents around the fireplace and drinking spiked eggnog. And all the poor people are out here” (Tory, 1994, p. D1).

One consequence of this silence was that the solution proposed by the political elites of the government, which focused

solely on changing individual behavior, dominated the discussion. There simply were no structural alternatives offered. This failure to include a radical, or a more progressive, perspective is also indicative of how far the public discourse on welfare has shifted. According to de Goede (1996), since the 1980s liberals have "frequently accept[ed] the conservative diagnosis of what is wrong" (p. 317), letting the conservatives define the problem, and the solutions. This has resulted in liberals being almost as resistant to suggesting structural changes as conservatives. The media in turn has reinforced this shift to the right by labeling it as mainstream ideology (de Goede, 1996).

The absence of more radical solutions illustrates that the public discourse is a limited discourse. Despite the liberal tint of the newspapers chosen, those quoted within them maintained a conservative stance. Liberal advocates accepted and even parroted the conservative terms of the debate, while radical arguments were not even included. Contradictory information was thus absorbed and subsumed into the dominant ideology, insuring its continued hegemony over the public discourse.

Changing the Public Discourse

What then can be done to change the narratives that compose our discourse about poverty? How can new myths be propagated, different values incorporated, and new ideas included? Lakeoff (1996) suggests that liberals learn, as conservatives have, how to use language more effectively; to view it less as a way to rationally discuss ideas than as a vehicle for instilling values. Since much of what goes on in the public discourse is about competing values and ideologies, language should be used that communicates these differences. Liberals, by using the "opposition's" words or failing to come up with compelling rhetoric of their own, made it more likely that a certain ideology, in this case the conservative's, would prevail.

Thus one step toward changing the public discourse is changing the language of it. For liberals, it means consciously injecting "liberal" words, such as caring, compassion and tolerance, into speech, and avoiding "conservative" words, such as "dependency" and "responsibility". It also means avoiding the term

"welfare", which has become so embedded in our language that conservatives and liberals alike (including this author in this article) use it routinely. Much more effective, for example, is the word "child poverty". The different impact of the two words is clear; it is as difficult to argue against "child poverty" as it is to argue for "welfare", a term with such negative connotations that it is hard for anyone to be for it. Moreover, a term such as "child poverty" is more likely to invoke discussions of structural and economic change than the term "welfare". In the same vein, describing someone as applying for "help" rather than applying for "welfare" conjures up a different, less negative, image of the applicant.

Myths about the type of people receiving public assistance, and why, also need to be challenged. In the TANF discourse, no alternative myths were offered of recipients, even by advocates. The prevailing myths portrayed women as incompetent, child-like and suffering from low self-esteem. But poor women daily confront challenges and obstacles that would stymie the most sophisticated and educated among us. What is needed is stories that describe how they meet those challenges, and which emphasize strengths rather than weaknesses. In such narratives, words such as courageous, resourceful or inventive can be substituted for "flustered" and "confused". Even words such as "victim" should be avoided. Instead such women should be labeled as "survivors", which communicates strength and resiliency.

Alternative narratives that re-frame the decision to apply for help can also be constructed. (it is here also that Lakeoff's list of liberal words can be most helpful). Thus contrast the following two statements, both equally as true: "she applied for help to enable her to care for her children" with "she applied for welfare after leaving her job". Or contrast "she never worked a day in her life" with "she has spent her days caring for her young children and protecting them from harm". It is these types of narratives that need to be injected into the public discourse by challengers to the dominant ideology.

Narratives that emphasize interdependence, rather than individualism, should also be emphasized. In this way the concept of "welfare" can begin to shed its negative image and instead symbolize a spirit of collectivity where neighbor helps neighbor. Although "rugged individualism" is considered one of the

dominant ethos of American society, its counterpart—interdependence—is equally a part of the culture. Even that paradigm of rugged individualism—the wild west and the cowboys that inhabited it—was offset by collectively arranged wagon-trains, quilting bees, and community harvests. Nor has this longing for connection disappeared. The nostalgia many Americans feel for small town USA reflect a desire for interconnectedness and community, and the obligation to help one's neighbors that accompanies it.

The homeless rights movement that sprung up in the early 1980s in New York City is an example of how the status of vulnerable populations can be shifted from outcast to cared for member of the community. Advocates, through a skillful use of the media, worked to replace images of the "bowery bum" with a more sympathetic picture of the homeless as victims of a callous society that needed to better protect and shelter its most vulnerable. While this view has dissipated somewhat, even today the homeless are often viewed more benignly and compassionately than the "welfare mother".

Interjecting the theme of interdependence into the welfare debate requires that women receiving public assistance be transformed from the "other" to "neighbor"; that they be considered part of the community and not outside of it as they are now. Like medical patients who are referred to by their illness, thus obscuring the whole person these women are too often narrowly defined by the label "welfare". They are not "mothers" but "welfare mothers", thus severing their connection to the larger community of mothers. To restore this connection requires emphasizing the commonalities between these women and other families. "Mothering" narratives should be created that describe families on welfare as coping with many of the same issues around children and family life as other families. Women receiving public assistance, many of whom work, must also be included in the larger community of workers. Work place stories, in contrast to the stories described above that focus on individual ineptitude, should highlight obstacles and working conditions shared with others in the workforce.

The positive role many recipients play in their communities also need to be emphasized. One source in the African-American

community is the image of the strong matriarch who protects her young fiercely and who is a symbol of strength and inspiration to others. She is the woman in the inner city who "polices" the neighborhood for signs of danger and emphasizes the value of education to her children. Many however do not connect this image with that of women on welfare, even though they are often one and the same person.

Finally, alternative solutions need to be introduced into the public discourse. One striking characteristic of the TANF discourse was the absence of structural solutions even while structural obstacles were being identified. One could argue, as Edelman has (1988), that such a discussion is unlikely to happen because it threatens the existing political and economic order. However even within that order, there is room for variation. Welfare policy is not static; it has loosened and tightened over the years. And there are many, including academics, poverty experts and advocates, who have proposed alternative solutions. However, this study demonstrates the difficulty in making those alternatives a meaningful part of the public discourse, especially when the conservative view serves as the starting point for the debate. While there of course many factors that influence how we solve social problems, adopting new "words of welfare" that challenge the dominant myths and values embedded in our discourse is one way in which to make these alternatives heard and influence the course of welfare policy.

References

- Abramovitz, M. (1996). *Regulating the lives of women*. Boston: South End Press.
- Best, J. (1995). *Images of issues*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Chaffee, S., & Stacey, F. (1996). How Americans get political information: Print versus broadcast news. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 546, 48–58.
- Cook, T. (1998). *Governing with the news*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- De Goede, M. (1996). Ideology in the US welfare debate: neo-liberal representations of poverty. *Discourse and Society*, 7 (3), 317–357.
- Dickson, S. (1992). Press and U.S. policy toward Nicaragua, 1983–1987: A study of the New York Times and Washington Post. *Journalism Quarterly*, 69 (3), 562–571.

- Edelman, M. (1988). *Constructing the political spectacle*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Edelman, M. (1975, 1998). Language, myths and rhetoric. *Society*, 35 (2), 131–139.
- Ellwood, P. (1988). *Poor support*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gans, H. (1995). *The war against the poor*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Gordon, L. (1994). *Pitied but not entitled*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Handler, J. (1995). *The poverty of welfare reform*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Johnson, M., Stamm K., Lisosky, J., & James, J. (1996). Differences among newspapers in contributions to knowledge of national public affairs. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 16 (3), 1–8.
- Katz, M. (1996). *In the shadow of the poorhouse*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Katz, M. (1989). *The underserving poor: from the war on poverty to the war on welfare*. New York: Pantheon.
- Kemp, S. (1995). Practice with communities. In C. Meyer & M. Mattainin. *The Foundations of Social Work Practice* (pp. 176–204). Washington, D.C.: NASW Press.
- Lakeoff, G. (1996). *Moral politics: What conservatives know that liberals don't*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Lens, V. (in press). Welfare reform, personal narratives and the media: How welfare recipients and journalists frame the welfare debate. *Journal of Poverty*.
- Loseke, D. (1999). *Thinking about social problems*. Hawthorne, N.Y.: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Neuman, R., Just, M., & and Crigler, A. (1992). *Common knowledge: News and the construction of political meaning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Patterson, T. (1980). *The mass media election: How Americans choose their President*. New York: Praeger.
- Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. P.L. 104-193, 42. U.S.C. 1305 (1996).
- Piven, F., & Cloward, R. (1993). *Regulating the poor*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Schram, S. (1995). *Words of welfare: The poverty of social science and the social science of poverty*. Minn: University of Minnesota Press.
- Secombe, K. (1999). *So you think I drive a Cadillac*. Needham Heights: Allyn and Bacon.
- Stone, D. (1989). Causal stories and the formation of policy agendas. *Political Science Quarterly*, 104(2), 281–300.
- Zaller, J. (1992). *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix

References from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*

- Clairborne, W. (1994, February 26). North Floridians are pioneers in Clinton-like welfare program. *The Washington Post*, p. A3.

- DeParle, J. (1995, December 3). Compassion play; less is more: Faith and facts in welfare reform. *The New York Times*, sec. 4, p. 1.
- . (1994a, December 18). The nation: Despising welfare, pitying its young. *The New York Times*, sec. 4, p. 5.
- . (1994b, October 24). Welfare mothers find jobs are easier to get than hold. *The New York Times*, p. A1.
- . (1994c, April 14). State's eagerness to experiment on welfare jars administration. *The New York Times*, p. A1.
- Dowd, M. (1994, December 15). Americans like G.O.P. agenda but split on how to reach its goals. *The New York Times*, p. A1.
- Havemann, J. (1996, May 13). As welfare cases drop, politicians fight for credit; but experts say reasons for decline are unclear. *The Washington Post*, p. A1.
- . (1995, February 14). White House says GOP welfare plan is too lenient in work requirements. *The Washington Post*, p. A5.
- Havemann, J. and Devroy, A. (1995, March 21). Bishops win concessions on welfare bill; Rules chairman to urge end of restrictions aimed at teen mothers. *The Washington Post*, p. A6.
- Hsu, S. (1995, December 24). Told to get a job, many in rural Va. are doing just that. *The Washington Post*, p. B1.
- Jehl, D. (1994, June 15). President offers delayed proposal to redo welfare. *The New York Times*, p. A1.
- Jeter, J. (1995, December 11). Lack of entry-level work trips Md. welfare reform; most new jobs require high skills, study says. *The Washington Post*, p. B1.
- Loose, C. (1996, June 3). Children of the working poor called 'invisible' in welfare debate. *The Washington Post*, p. D3.
- Pear, R. (1996, August 1). The welfare bill: The overview; Clinton to sign welfare bill that ends U.S. aid guarantee and gives states broad power. *The New York Times*, p. A1.
- . (1995a, February 17). Democratic governors oppose shifting welfare to states. *The New York Times*, p. A18.
- . (1995b, March 25). House backs bill undoing decades of welfare policy. *The New York Times*, sec. 1, p. 1.
- . (1995c, February 1). Governors agree children must be protected no matter what shape welfare takes. *The New York Times*, p. A19.
- Republican officials. (1995, February 9). Republican officials agree on repealing welfare entitlement; Governors join house members in support. *The Washington Post*, p. A1.
- Rethinking welfare. (1995, April 7). Rethinking welfare; Time limits—A special report; Iowa plan tries to cut off the cash. *The New York Times*, p. A1.
- Rimer, S. (1994, January 14). Welfare plan places limits on cash grants. *The New York Times*, p. A12.
- . (1995, April 10). Rethinking welfare: Work requirements—A special report; Jobs program participants; still poor and in need of aid. *The New York Times*, p. A1.
- Rosenbaum, D. (1995, March 26). Word for word / Congressional record; speaking for themselves, House members talk welfare. *The New York Times*, sec. 4, p. 7.

- Thompson, T. (1995, March 6). For job seekers, a fear of trying; many prospective employees must battle isolation, low self-esteem. *The Washington Post*, p. A1.
- Toner, R. (1995, March 23). Congressional memo; a day of anger as Republicans are put on the defensive. *The New York Times*, p. A23.
- Tory, S. (1994, December 26). Holiday on the front lines of hope; at the Capitol; Christmas day rally lures 1,000 with mix of politics, sustenance. *The Washington Post*, p. D1.
- Vobejda, B. (1995a, September 20). Senate passes welfare overhaul; President indicates his support. *The Washington Post*, p. A1.
- . (1995b, May 8). Inching into employment; recipients' pace doesn't fit reform scenario. *The Washington Post*, p. A1.
- . (1995c, February 14). Welfare an afterthought, teen mothers say. *The Washington Post*, p. A1.