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### Recommended Citation

Johnson, Michelle and Lechuga, Debbie (2012). "Welfare Identity: Separating the Public from the Private," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2012/papers/24>

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## **Welfare Identity: Separating the Public from the Private**

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### **Introduction**

In 1995, Jane Goodwin wrote “U.S. welfare policy has yet to adequately address a mother’s two work roles - care-giving and wage-earner” (p. 254). The first welfare programs began in the early 1900s and the first statewide Mothers’ Aid Law passed in 1911. In 1935, the federal government launched a program called Aid to Dependent Children, which later be changed to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) (Cheng, 2007). Cheng (2007) noted this program was created to address the issue of poverty in the USA by assisting impoverished mothers to financially care for their children. As the welfare system evolved in the 1960s, it included more programs such as educational services, job training and job search assistance to aid single mothers in gaining employment (Cheng, 2007, p. 212). However, the welfare system would undergo a major overhaul in the mid-1990s. In August of 1996, President Clinton proclaimed by signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PWROA) there would be an end to welfare as we know it (Deavers & Hattiangadi, 1998). By signing the act, almost 60 years of entitlement came to an end. Welfare recipients soon found themselves faced with having to conform to more strict policies and requiring them to participate in job search activities. Under the provisions of the newly signed Act, states were given more discretion and authority over determining welfare policies with the federal government still overseeing and intervening as needed (Lee, 2009).

The welfare system, as it was initially designed in the early 1900’s, offered widowed or single mothers financial support for their families, allowing them to stay home and care for their children. However, the major change in the system required all recipients enter job search activities unless they are exempted from participation. Following the transformation of the welfare system, the images of impoverished widows in need of financial help to care for their children also changed. Single mothers needing welfare benefits were once perceived as worthy were now considered unworthy, lazy cheats unmotivated to find employment (Seccombe & Walter, 1998). This image and identity transformation can be traced in the literature.

The purpose of this literature review is to understand how female welfare recipients view their personal and public identities. Despite the proliferation of literature that addresses the effects of policy, barriers to employment and the stereotypes and stigmas surrounding them, little is known about how female welfare recipients perceive themselves and construct their identities.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Welfare recipients, both in the past and present day, have been ascribed a misinformed public identity and as a result they have been deemed undeserving of public assistance and benefits. The literature addresses the following four areas: their barriers to becoming self-sufficient, their lack of motivation to become employed, notions of forming self-efficacy, and an overall identity held by the public of them as being lazy, cheaters and undeserving (Bruster, 2009; Davis & Hagen, 1996; Chen & Corcoran, 2010, Fletch et al, 2008; Turner et al, 2006; Dreier, 2004; Lee & Vinokur, 2007;). While the literature does provide us insight into their

controversial public identity, it does not provide us information on how they develop their own personal identity.

Welfare recipients develop a personal identity that is separate and seemingly unscathed by their negative public identity. In order to provide us insight into how they developed this separate identity, we examined a study completed by Alarid and Vega. In 2009, Alarid and Vega completed a study examining how 104 women, who had been convicted of felonies, viewed their personal and social identities. In the study, they defined a personal identity something “differentiates an individual from a group, such as personal characteristics, traits, goals, values, and abilities.” (Alarid & Vega, 2009, p 705). Social identity was defined as relying “on an individual’s perceived membership in one or more groups, such as that defined by one’s familial role, occupational world or friendship networks (Schwartz 2005). Social identity is an individual’s assigned or chosen place in the social world relative to others, and is related to gender role and expectations” (Alarid & Vega, 2009, p 705).

Using their concepts of personal and social identities, we will explore how the literature chronicles the development of the public and personal identities of welfare recipients. However instead of using the term “social”, we will use “public” because the concept of social identity as presented by Alarid and Vega do not accurately describe welfare recipients. Welfare recipients do not see themselves as having a “perceived membership” in welfare or to have “chosen” their place on the welfare roll. While they are cognizant of their stigmatized, stereotyped status in public (Seccombe & Walter, 1998; Seccombe, 1999), they do not ascribe themselves as members in the welfare group. This contradicts the stated meaning of “social” identity by Alarid and Vega (2009).

### **Findings**

Women on welfare have moved past the construction phase in developing their identity and have learned to integrate these fragmented pieces of themselves to create their personal identity. The following sections explore our findings in the literature on how women on welfare have constructed a public identity that is shaped from the challenges they experience and the social images created by harsh descriptive words.

#### **Constructed Public Identity**

The literature describes the stereotypes, negative images and perceptions of welfare recipients in society. The some of the commentary used to concoct the stereotypes and negative images are lazy, cheater, welfare queen, parasites, failures, chiseler, freeloader, and parasite (Dreier, 2004; Davis & Hagen, 1996; Seccombe, 1999; Rank, 1994). Even though a great deal of literature also documents the economic hardships of welfare recipients, it simultaneously supports the belief that society stigmatizes and devalues those living in poverty (Goodban, 1985).

In studies pertaining to welfare recipients, women reported feelings of humiliation, shame, fear, embarrassment, and being powerless (Popkin, 1990; Davis & Hagen, 1996; Goodban, 1985; Perlmutter & Bartle, 2002; Seccombe, 1999). These feelings can be directly connected to the public’s perception that these women feel they are entitled to receive public assistance. According to Davis and Hagen (1996) the public is not alone in its assessment of entitlement. They found recipients in 1996 differed from those in 1960 on the basis that they believed they were entitled to the benefits as long as they were attempting to better themselves. In addition, Davis and Hagen (1996) also found women who did not internalize the stigma were

able to attribute their welfare receipt to an unfair system and not as a perceived personal flaw. This perceived lack of fairness presents challenges for these women as well.

In our analysis of the literature, we found not only do women on welfare encounter particular challenges unique to their circumstances, but they also must face and deal with the social perceptions as welfare recipients. In what follows, we discuss these two issues and how they contribute to female welfare recipients' public identities.

Challenges women on welfare encounter. Rank (1994) suggests women who rely upon welfare encounter additional challenges, particularly within their personal relationships, which are strained by their economic hardships. Assistance payments are not enough to cover monthly expenses so the money runs out before the month's end. The lack of money puts tension on relationships already strained by disapproval and ill feelings. These feelings are exhibited by family, friends and case workers (Rank, 1994). The stress of receiving welfare comes from inside and outside the home for these women.

In addition to the impact of economic hardship, Davis and Hagen (1996) found that the scrutiny of the system also has an effect on women's privacy, pride and self-esteem. The scrutiny and intrusiveness of the system, as described by the women in Davis and Hagen's (1996) study, was due to being asked too many questions about the absent father, being told what to do and when to do it. The system is also characterized as being unfair due to the strict participation requirements, tough sanctions, lack educational opportunities which limits their chances of being self-sufficient (Cooney & Weaver, 2001; Lens, 2008; Perlmutter & Bartle, 2002). The system also exposes them to the public's constant scrutiny as well. Welfare recipients are the subjects of negative comments overheard in welfare offices, grocery stores, and doctor's offices (Seccombe, 1999; Seccombe & Walter, 1998). These negative comments are pieced together to create a negative public image of these women.

Public images of women on welfare. These negative public images are reinforced by politicians, the print media, social media, and the welfare system and more recently in the movies (Dreier, 2004). In 1996, when the welfare system was overhauled by PWORA, the stricter policies and more punitive penalties confirmed for the public that recipients would not voluntarily choose to leave the system instead they must be forced off it. With mandatory work requirements and educational services being limited, these women found themselves being pushed into low paying jobs (Cheng 2007; Cooney & Weaver, 2001). Scholars argue the welfare system sends a clear message to welfare recipients: it is not concerned with your desire for an education, your learning disabilities, lack of job skills, deficiencies in literacy, alcohol or drug dependence issues, struggles with domestic violence, a desire to be a good parent or a need for stable employment that provides benefits (Chen & Corocran, 2010; Fletcher et al, 2008; McPhee & Bronstein, 2003; Turner et al, 2006). The focus of the new system is self-sufficiency through employment and for these women it seems to be at any cost.

Effect of challenges and public images on identity. Despite negative images related to receiving welfare, welfare recipients reportedly have voiced self-respect, a desire for independence, an intrinsic desire to receive an education, and feeling that parenting is a top priority in their lives (McPhee & Bronstein, 2003). The findings from the literature suggest in order for women to successfully transition from welfare to work, they need to develop high levels of self-confidence and a positive self-image to be displayed in the public arena.

However, the effects of the challenges have a psychological impact so these women have devised strategies to cope. Goodban's (1985) findings from a study on the psychological impact

of being on welfare revealed three basic coping strategies. The strategies that emerged were: 1) a recipient may deny she is a welfare recipient and identify with the middle class insulating herself from criticisms; 2) a recipient may internalize the criticism and identify with the lower class resulting in her having a negative self-image feeling helpless; and 3) in an adaptive pattern is a woman who accepted her criticized role as a welfare recipient but did not internalize the negative self-image (Goodban, 1985).

#### Integrated Personal Identity

Based on the literature, we found self-efficacy and a cognizant awareness of public images of themselves play a crucial role in the formation of a personal identity for women on welfare. In what follows, we discuss each of the components and how they affect female welfare recipients' integrated personal identity.

**Role of self-efficacy.** Goodban (1985) and McPhee and Bronstein (2003) discuss the strong self-perception, unique sense of self and basic coping strategies used by women on welfare to protect their personal identities. In addition, Bruster (2009) discusses the increase in self-efficacy for women going through welfare programs. For example, the women in McPhee and Bronstein's (2003) study observed themselves as able, resourceful, motivated, possessing a desire for independence and happiness. These women did not ascribe the stereotypical traits to themselves; instead they projected those on to the "other" women on welfare. These women were most often able to separate themselves from stigma surrounding welfare by accepting the public identity but not internalizing it; therefore, they did not see themselves in the negative public images (Goodban, 1985). These women were able to separate themselves, insulate their personal identities and increase their self-efficacy.

**Cognizant awareness of public images.** Women on welfare are aware of the stigma and stereotypes that surround the decisions they make to remedy their temporary situations affecting their families. So while welfare reform portrayed these women as refusing to leave the system, these women are simply trying to resolve a moral dilemma: should I take a job (possibly unreliable) or remain on public assistance (a steady, reliable source of income)? They understand attempting to move from welfare into a low paying, unreliable job could have them cycling in and out of the welfare system (Fletcher et al, 2008). These women are aware of the conflict surrounding welfare and work. So, they invoke a caring response and resolve this conflict by contemplating everyone's stake in the resolution (Belenky et al, 1986).

**An integrated personal identity.** The personal identities for these women has evolved to the level of constructing knowledge by integrating the voices of others. They are self-conscious and aware of how to balance the extremes in their daily lives (Bleneky et al, 1986). They also recognize their circumstances are temporary and sometimes beyond their control (McPhee & Bronstein, 2003). By believing the circumstances are short-term, they are led into experiences that further self-efficacy and help create a strong sense of self. By attempting to integrate the knowledge gained from personal experience by participating in the system, these women have risen to a new way of thinking about themselves (Bleneky et al, 1986). They are able to extricate the constructed public identity from their personal identity and began to create their own self narrative. They begin to deal with the complexities in life. No longer feeling hopeless or helpless, they see themselves as motivated, resourceful, in control and have a strong desire to be independent (McPhee & Bronstein, 2003). Even though, they are not superwomen, they do learn to adapt and survive in a society that has deemed them as unworthy (Seccombe, 1999). These constructivist women who receive welfare are able to envision a future for themselves and are

able to maintain a personal identity free from public's negative of welfare recipients (Blenky et al, 1986).

### Discussion

Welfare recipients find their personal identity continually being attack, while their public identity is constantly evolving to conform to the social pressure to leave welfare and become self-sufficient. By examining the existing literature, we understand a welfare recipients' personal identity contains their personal characteristics, traits, goals, and values (Alarid and Vega, 2009). Therefore welfare recipients take those sorted pieces of themselves and begin to shape their personal identities. They cycle through silence, received knowledge, procedural knowledge, subjective knowledge and finally begin to construct knowledge for themselves (Belenky et al, 1986). At this stage, their personal identities become protected and insulated from outside negative criticism. The negative public images are not internalized; instead these women remain motivated, independent and able to critically think about the choices presented to them. Most make the tough decision to endure the harsh criticism, as well as the program policies, to be the sole providers for their families. By layering the concepts presented by Alarid and Vega (2009) and Belenky et al (1986), a layered conceptual identity model is revealed offering an explanation for the reason these women follow the adaptive pattern as presented Goodban (1985).

It is important for adult educators to understand the two closely intertwined identities and how the prevailing personal identity is the one keeping these women motivated with desire to be independent. As these students enter our classrooms seeking an education, they come with identities on the surface fitting the most popular stereotypes but underneath the multiple layers lies a personal identity well protected from the criticism. It is an identity that realizes its current role is temporary and sees a more permanent role built upon the foundations of education and hard work.

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