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An Interactive Approach to Economic Development Among African American Former Welfare Recipients: Shattering the Myth of the Work-First Approach

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Abstract: This study explored the experiences of African American women as they transition from welfare to work and the barriers and challenges that impede their move to a position of economic self-sufficiency. The study found three systems of barriers to impede the women's progress. These include W-2 systems barriers, workplace barriers, and personal barriers. Removing the barriers must first be addressed before families can become self-sufficient.

Introduction

In 1996 Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), taking a major step to change the culture of welfare from a system of dependency to one of personal responsibility and self-sufficiency. PRWORA provided the states with certain discretion in designing their own systems of welfare reform. Therefore, Wisconsin was one of the first states to undertake the challenge, and early in 1998, it completed its transition from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to Wisconsin Works (W-2). The mandate to caseworkers was to quickly move recipients to the workforce and reduce dependency on cash assistance. The philosophy of W-2 was to develop economic self-sufficiency through labor force participation.

Several studies have investigated the status of families who left welfare (Brauner & Loprest, 1999); some have looked into education and training as vehicles for promoting economic self-sufficiency (Bell, 2000); and others have examined the low-wage job market and how welfare recipients are faring in such markets (Holzer & Stoll, 2000; Jacobson & Green, 2000). Another critically important issue, though often overlooked, is the differential impact of the new welfare on members of racial/ethnic minority groups (Carroll, 2001; Holzer & Stoll, 2000; Jacobson & Green, 2000). While the racial and ethnic impacts of welfare reform have received less attention from the research community than other effects, existing evidence indicates "somewhat differential impacts for minorities and whites, and in some studies, discriminatory treatment of minority groups" (Savner, 2000, p. 3). For example, Holzer and Stoll (2000) and Jacobson and Green (2000) found that white recipients were more likely to find employment, and Carroll (2001) found that they received more favorable treatment from welfare agency workers. Other findings indicate that African Americans were less likely to be hired in majority white companies and were more likely to be hired in majority black companies.

Theoretical Framework and Purpose of Study

Two of the frameworks more widely used to explain poverty and welfare use are the theories of individualism and structuralism. The individual perspective focuses on the achievement of persons, arguing that we are ultimately responsible for our own economic positions, that opportunities are available to all who are willing to work hard and to those who are sufficiently motivated (Hunt, 1996). The social structuralism perspective assumes that poverty is a result of economic or social imbalances within our social structures that serve to restrict opportunities for some people (Secombe, 1999). It is concerned with the effects of capitalism, a changing economy, and how systems contribute to the very culture of poverty that they are trying to change.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to examine the experiences of African American women in the city of Milwaukee and explore the personal and structural barriers that influence their successful transition from welfare to work. The study also sought input from their employers to explore their experiences with post-welfare recipients in the workplace.

Methodology

This was a qualitative study, informed by the interpretive interactionist perspective (Denzin, 1989). The participants for this study included six employer representatives and 15 employed African American women who were former welfare recipients and receiving case management services through welfare reform agencies. Interviewing was the primary mode of data collection and the data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

The findings will address the barriers that complicate the transition to self-sufficiency and programs, services, and strategies that are used or recommended to overcome some of the barriers. The study found three systems of barriers that inhibit the transition to economic self-sufficiency. They are W-2 Systemic Barriers, Work Place Barriers, and Personal Barriers.

W-2 Systemic Barriers

W-2 African American employed participants and employers identified a number of systemic issues that negatively influence the women's move to self-sufficiency. While these barriers do not have the same inhibitory effect, together they are seen as critical obstacles to meeting the objectives of W-2. The most frequently cited barriers were (a) the philosophy of the work-first approach to welfare reform, (b) lack of opportunities for improving human capital through education and training, and (c) negative interactions with case workers.

Philosophy of the work-first approach. One of the fundamental barriers that both participants and employers identified was the philosophy of a “work-first” approach to welfare reform. The study found that, in most cases, participants were unprepared for the workplace and their unfamiliarity with workplace cultures and expectations were major challenges for them. The employers also shared their experiences noting that oftentimes the workers were under prepared and under skilled to fulfill work expectations. While W-2 agencies provided some training, these were usually basic skills and soft skills training (Martin & Alfred, 2001).

Lack of opportunities for increasing human capital. The findings indicate that another significant problem with the W-2 program is the lack of provisions for the pursuit of higher education. Human capital theory suggests that increasing human capital is directly related to education and training (Reich, 1992). Therefore, in order for individuals to increase their worth in the workplace, they must engage in opportunities that will increase their education and work skills level. However, participants noted that the W-2 program, because of the way it was implemented, discouraged them from pursuing higher educational opportunities.

Negative interactions with caseworkers. The women discussed the rigidity of agency workers in administering the welfare-to-work program, their difficulty in accessing caseworkers, and the humiliating experiences they encounter during their interactions with agency staff. One of the most common experiences described was their difficulty in gaining access to their caseworkers. While a few of the participants reported pleasant interactions with their caseworkers, many reported interactions that left them with a shattered sense of self.

In summary, from the findings of this study, it appears that one of the primary roadblocks to advancing the principles of welfare reform lies within the system itself, primarily with its work-first philosophical approach, the limited opportunities for increasing human capital, and agency practices that discourage the growth of human potential.

Workplace Barriers

Workplace barriers represent those policies, practices, and behaviors in the workplace that create obstacles to African American women's employment access, retention, and advancement. The path to self-sufficiency rests with the women's ability to maintain long-term employment, with wages that will push them above the poverty level. The barriers with the most inhibitory effects were found to be the low-wage labor market with its lack of critical fringe benefits and limited opportunities for advancement, lack of employer support and understanding, and inadequate training, mentoring, and coaching.

The low-wage labor market. The employees in this study were concentrated in the low-wage service sector jobs, and often worked part time with little employment benefits. Their wages ranged from 6.25 to 12.25 with only two participants earning over \$9.00 an hour. With such low wages, it becomes almost impossible for a family to transition to a position of economic self-sufficiency. The findings from this and other studies clearly indicate that the emphasis of the "work-first" approach to self-sufficiency is more of a myth than a reality when dealing with families who are concentrated in the secondary labor market.

Lack of employer support and understanding. Both the participants and employers in the study strongly agree that employer understanding and support are crucial in keeping post-welfare recipients in the workplace. Workers expressed the desire to be treated as an equal employee and not as a W-2 recipient and to have the employer understand their situation and to be flexible with their scheduling when family emergencies occur. They also tend to thrive better in a work environment that promotes a sense of family and community. Working in a caring environment was found to be a central element in helping workers attach themselves to the workplace. However, many employees find themselves in oppressive work organizations that compound the stress and challenges they face in their transitional efforts from welfare.

Inadequate training, mentoring, and coaching. It has been established that many of the women transitioning from welfare end up in the secondary labor markets with jobs that require minimal skills and education. Therefore, workplace training is usually limited to the specific skills necessary for job performance. The training and coaching necessary to help these new

workers meet other cultural expectations are often lacking. As one employer noted, "It takes a whole bunch of coaching to get them to a point where they are comfortable in the workplace. They don't know; they don't have information. A lot of them it is their first job that they ever had. It takes patience, tolerance, and long suffering on my part to try to work with them. You have to help them from the transition of no job to the job market."

These experiences speak to the complexities and challenges of developing post-welfare participants, particularly the ones who are new to the workplace. As these data indicate, it takes a special employer, one who is dedicated to the development of human potential to help the new entrants in attaching themselves to the workplace. Together with that dedication, it takes continuous coaching, some degree of flexibility, and a communal work environment.

Personal Barriers

Post-welfare recipients demonstrate characteristics, behaviors, and have histories that serve as obstacles to their employment retention and advancement efforts. Of the barriers identified, the ones cited most frequently include (a) fear of failure and fear of change, (b) substance and domestic abuse, and (c) a lack of financial and social capital resources.

Fear of change, fear of failure. One of the most frequently cited personal obstacles was fear of failure and the change itself. Many of the participants voiced a fear of not meeting W-2 expectations and time limits, not meeting workplace expectations, losing a predictable life, but most importantly, leaving children with unfamiliar daycare providers. One community agency employer noted that African American and Hispanic women were less likely to seek employment in the suburban areas, where most of the higher paying manufacturing jobs are located, because these jobs would take them too far away from their children. The fear of abandoning their children keeps the women in low-paying jobs within the city limits.

Substance abuse. Both employers and participants reported substance abuse to be a major obstacle to women's employment. Because of the handicapping nature of substance abuse, it transcends itself to other areas of a woman's life, to include personal relationship, parenting responsibilities, and physical and mental well being. This finding supported that of Martin and Alfred (2001) who, in a survey of Wisconsin W-2 agency staff and area employers on barriers to employment, found substance abuse to be one of the highest personal issues facing post-welfare recipients. About 80 percent of the W-2 staff surveyed indicated substance abuse to be very problematic. However, these same personnel reported that their agencies were less likely to offer services to address this handicapping condition.

Lack of social and financial capital resources. Many women in transition face two serious problems: they have no money and they do not have social support within their family and in their community. An analysis of the demographic data reveals that the ones who have advanced in their jobs, make over \$10 an hour, and are pursuing post-secondary education have families that support them in their efforts. The majority of the women, however, were single parents who lacked support of family and friends. As Ann noted, "I don't have a support system, and that is my biggest problem. Before, it was easier for me to stay home and raise my kids. Now I have no support, no one to help me. If I run into a problem with W-2, I don't know what to do or where to turn. This whole support thing is tough."

The findings present compelling evidence of the complexities of the challenges women face in their struggles to meet the expectations of the welfare reform initiative. These obstacles can be viewed as an interconnecting web, with each greatly impacting the other.

Minimizing the Barriers to Welfare Reform

Although the daunting task of moving people out of welfare may seem unrealistic in today's capitalistic society, there are, however, changes that could be implemented to make the transition less daunting. The participants had some suggestions for W-2 agency staff, employers, and W-2 participants to help break down the systems of barriers.

What Reform Agencies Can Do

Agency representatives were overwhelmingly asked to be more humane in their interactions and to be more empathetic in their understanding of the issues facing these workers. Participants also expressed the need for a more professional environment, for caseworkers to be more knowledgeable about their jobs, and for them to be more flexible when scheduling appointments so they don't conflict with the work schedules. Similarly, both the employers and the participants believe that one way out of poverty is with better education and training. They recommend that W-2 should study the possibility of implementing a combination of school and work activities while participants continue to receive subsidized childcare and other benefits.

The employers, in particular, suggested W-2 agencies should provide training for those employers who hire low-income workers. It was also suggested that W-2 agencies should partner with employers, make them aware of the services available to them under the Workforce Attachment and Advancement program, and encourage and support them in their efforts to provide on-site education and training programs. Finally, participants recommended that W-2 partner with community agencies to expand services and make clients aware of all the services that the W-2 agencies themselves provide. It was also recommended that W-2 agency staff should be trained to identify, work with, and make appropriate referrals for clients with substance abuse and other mental health problems.

What Employers Can Do

Both employers and participants in the study suggested that employers who hire low-income workers should be aware of the issues that confront this segment of the population. Therefore, the employers in the study recommended that companies should make it mandatory for their management staff to participate in these training sessions.

It was also suggested that employers create mentoring programs and provide on-going coaching to new employees. This would help new comers learn the workplace expectations, minimize their fear of the work environment, acquire on-going training and instant feedback, and promote a communal work atmosphere. The study found that although the low-wage market is a barrier to economic self-sufficiency, participants who work in environments where they are supported are more likely to remain on the job than those who work in oppressive environments.

What W-2 Employed Participants Can Do

The participants in the study had several recommendations for working W-2 participants like themselves, to help minimize the personal barriers. Since a lack of post-secondary education and training was found to be one of the major obstacles that keep women in the low-wage labor market, workers in that market were strongly encouraged to find ways to further their education and become more marketable. One way that could be accomplished is by creating systems of social support whereby the women could mentor one another.

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Participants were also advised to take the initiative to research the provisions under W-2 and the various services available. With that knowledge, they could make requests for those services and programs that would help minimize or eliminate some of the barriers. The participants agree that navigating the system of welfare reform becomes easier for those who have armed themselves with knowledge of the system. Finally, good human relations skills and a positive attitude were also found to contribute to more positive interactions with agency staff and with members of the workplace.

An Integrative Approach to Women's Learning and Economic Development

The results suggest that we have to broaden our approach to addressing women's learning and economic development from the dichotomy of the individual or social structural perspective to an integrative approach that would address the interlocking systems of personal, institutional, and structural barriers that stand in the way of economic development. In order to address these barriers, we must pay attention to the development of human, social, and identity capital resources among former welfare participants.

The theory of human capital assumes that an investment in education and training enhances individual competencies, develops organizational competencies, and promotes individual employability (Falk, 2001). Social capital encompasses the norms of networks and relationships that can enhance one's values in the employment marketplace (Balatti & Falk, (2001). Building social capital resources provides a network of support, not only in one's personal life, but also in her professional life. Identity capital, on the other hand, is the "investments individuals make in who they are" (Levine & Cote, 2002, p. 147) and manifests itself in individual agency, self-esteem, and locus of control. Adult education, human resource development, and welfare reform agencies can create partnerships and together they can play a more significant role in women's learning and economic development.

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