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# Exposure of Young Welfare Recipients to Family and Peer Receipt of Welfare and Unemployment Benefits

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*The current study examined exposure to family and peer receipt of unemployment and general welfare benefits for a sample of 262 unemployed youth between 16 and 24 years of age who were in receipt of social assistance. The findings reveal that exposure to receipt of benefits was most pervasive through peers, with moderate exposure via siblings and minimal exposure via parents. The findings are discussed in relation to existing explanations which suggested that the receipt of benefits is intergenerationally transmitted. It is recommended that future investigations of the cultural transmission of poverty and receipt of benefits include the influence of peers.*

In Canada, youth unemployment has persisted at elevated levels (Shaw, 1985). This phenomenon has also translated to social assistance rolls, where jobless youth comprised approximately one half of social assistance case loads in many centres across Canada (e.g. Ottawa, 40%, Winnipeg 47%, CCSD, 1985). Part of the prevailing stereotype of individuals in receipt of welfare benefits is the notion that they are products of a social setting which perpetuates reliance on social assistance intergenerationally (Knight & West, 1977). However, the social context of jobless youth in receipt of benefits, and hence the validity of this perspective, remains relatively unexplored. The purpose of the present study was to examine youth in receipt of general welfare assistance to determine the extent to which they are part of a social context which has perpetuated receipt of welfare. The term 'social context' is used to refer to various significant others

with whom unemployed individuals are likely to interact, such as family members and peers.

The negative imagery surrounding social assistance populations has been an integral dimension of theories of cultures of poverty extended in the 1960s (Coser, 1965). Such theorizing has contributed to negative stereotypes of individuals in receipt of welfare benefits (Alston & Dean, 1972; Cabell, 1985; Feagin, 1972; Golding & Middleton, 1982) who have been depicted as "lazy loafers, welfare chiselers, able bodied men, trifling women and their illegitimate children (Poinsett, 1982). Studies of media characterizations of individuals in receipt of social assistance have further demonstrated that the press has perpetuated the negative stereotypes. For example, Cabell's (1985) study of articles in two New York magazines revealed that welfare recipients were denigrated by the press through the use of labels such as "scroungers or spongers". The salient themes identified in these articles were those of fraud and abuse of the social assistance system on the part of welfare recipients.

The negative stigmatization of those in receipt of welfare benefits has been extended to jobless youth (Armstrong, Bazalgette and Reed, 1981), and has included the position that these individuals are largely a product of environments characterized by receipt of welfare (Shaw, 1985). More importantly for the current study, authors have adopted the notion that reliance on social assistance is transmitted intergenerationally (Chambre, 1985; Knight & West, 1977). Based on a study of 356 young men and their fathers, Knight and West (1977) concluded that the tendency to take more than average advantage of welfare payments and to neglect welfare contributions are features which are transmitted from father to son. Similarly, in discussing the causes of youth unemployment, various authors have stated that family background influences are key factors in young people being able to secure work (Dayton, 1978; Shaw, 1985). Shaw (1985) has maintained that most unemployed youth between 16 and 24 years of age who qualified for Canada Employment and Immigration Commission (CEIC) job skill and development programs came from families with both parents unemployed or from single parent families with unemployed mothers. This situation was perceived as translating to a vicious circle of employment instability, low education and low earnings.

Others have maintained that much of the early work, which has advocated negative imagery and the intergenerational transmission hypothesis, has created and reinforced negative attitudes and psychological traits (Hill & Ponza, 1982) and, thereby, has contributed to long-term welfare dependency on the part of young people (Coe, 1982). This argument is in synchrony with popular criticisms of descriptions of cultures of poverty. It has been stated that descriptions of the poor have supported the maintenance of the ideology of capitalism (Kerbo, 1984) by reinforcing the view that poverty is a product of individual inadequacy (Alston & Dean, 1972; Cabell, 1982; Kerbo, 1984). It is suggested here that earlier theories, resolving to blame the victim, fail to take into account the structural explanations for unemployment and, in this instance, the general shortages of jobs for youth in particular.

Based on stereotypical notions of welfare subcultures (Alston and Dean, 1972; Cabell, 1985; Feagin, 1972) and models extending the transmitted deprivation notion (Golding and Middleton, 1982) one could speculate that jobless youth in receipt of welfare come from a background geared toward a career of joblessness and receipt of social assistance. Although there is some evidence to support the concept of the welfare subculture being transmitted via parents (Knight & West, 1977) little attention has been given to the relative influence of others with whom the young unemployed interact (Wijting, Arnold & Conrad, 1978). This is an issue of considerable concern given the importance attributed to peer and sibling relationships (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). In fact, little is known about the wider social context of welfare receipt which surrounds youth who are unemployed and receiving social assistance. The current study constituted a reexamination of the notion of intergenerational transmission of cultures of poverty. Specific attention was focussed on the history of parental employment and receipt of unemployment insurance and general welfare assistance on the part of parents, siblings and peers.

## Method

### *Subjects*

The sample consisted of 262 unemployed youth in receipt of general welfare assistance, including 179 males and 83 females,

who were part of a larger study designed to monitor the flow of participants through a 6 month work experience program. These youth entered an Ontario government sponsored Youth Corps program conducted in the northeastern Regional Municipality of Sudbury in the Spring of 1984. The participants were identified by local case workers as individuals between 16 and 24 years of age who were in receipt of general welfare assistance for a minimum of three months prior to the start of the program. Mean age of respondents was 20.2 years. The age range represented the operational definition of "Youth" by program sponsors. All youth meeting the above criteria were contacted by their case worker to participate in the program.

### *Procedure*

A background characteristics questionnaire entitled the Youth Employment Questionnaire was completed by subjects on the first day of their entering a one week life skills course which constituted the initial phase of the Youth Corps program. Data were collected over a two week period in small groups consisting of approximately 10 to 20 subjects with three adults available to assist individuals. This procedure circumvented any problems arising from illiteracy or misunderstanding on the part of the participants. All subjects were informed of the right to withdraw from the study or refuse to complete any particular question. All subjects present at the time of data collection completed the questionnaire.

### *Instrument*

The Youth Employment Questionnaire was designed to provide a descriptive profile of the unemployed youth in terms of various background characteristics such as ethnicity, SES, and living arrangements. Questions regarding length of time out of school and out of work, perceived social support through parents, peers and siblings and indirect exposure to unemployment and receipt of unemployment insurance (UIC) and welfare benefits through parents, peers and siblings were also included. Specific to the current study, five separate questions measured present employment status of each parent and of brothers, sisters and friends who were out of school. Two questions were de-

signed to determine the extent to which each parent was unemployed and looking for work while these youth were growing up. Subjects were asked the question, "While you were growing up how much of the time was your father/mother unemployed and seeking work?" A second set of questions included in our study generated data on receipt of welfare benefits on the part of mother, father, brothers, sisters and close friends. Responses on the scale ranged from 1. Never, 2. Sometimes, to 3. Often.

## Findings

### *Profile of the Parents*

In general, the welfare youth did not come from family contexts reflecting high levels of parental unemployment. Subjects were asked the question, "while you were growing up how much of the time was your father unemployed and seeking work?" A majority of the males (78%) and females (74%) reported that their fathers had never been unemployed. Supporting the trend of high levels of paternal employment, less than 6% of the total sample (11 males and 4 females) stated that their fathers had been unemployed often. The data for maternal employment revealed that 49% of the males and 60% of the females had mothers who had never been unemployed and seeking work. Less than 12% of the total sample (21 males and 11 females) stated that their mothers were unemployed often. None of the subjects came from homes where both mothers and fathers had often been unemployed.

The data for parental receipt of welfare, presented in Table 1, reveal that only 2% of subjects (3 males and 1 female) had fathers who received welfare benefits often. Similarly, less than 6% of the subjects, including 8 males and 5 females, stated that their mothers had received welfare often. Table 1 also illustrates that most of the respondents (over 75% of the males and females) were never exposed to fathers or mothers who had been in receipt of welfare benefits.

Parental receipt of UIC was also relatively low with only 39% of the males and 33% of the females indicating that their fathers had received UIC sometimes or often. Similarly, 29% of the males and 18% of the females stated that their mothers had obtained UIC some of the time or often. Hence over 60% of the

Table 1  
*Parental, Sibling and Friends' Receipt of Welfare and UIC Benefits  
 Reported by Young Male and Female Welfare Recipients*

	Male Welfare Recipients (N = 179) <sup>a</sup>						Female Welfare Recipients (N = 83) <sup>a</sup>					
	Never		Sometimes		Often		Never		Sometimes		Often	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
<i>Receipt of Welfare</i>												
Father	89.3	133	8.7	13	2.0	3	87.0	67	11.7	9	1.3	1
Mother	81.5	123	13.2	20	5.3	8	76.3	58	17.1	13	6.6	5
Brother/s	54.8	74	37.8	51	7.4	10	66.2	49	25.7	19	8.1	6
Sister/s	70.1	94	20.9	28	9.0	12	62.9	44	28.6	20	8.6	6
Close Friend/s	19.9	30	59.6	90	20.5	31	30.3	23	52.6	40	17.1	13
<i>Receipt of UIC</i>												
Father	61.3	92	35.3	53	3.3	5	67.5	52	29.9	23	2.6	2
Mother	70.9	107	24.5	37	4.6	7	81.6	62	18.4	14	0	0
Brother/s	44.8	60	50.0	67	5.2	7	44.4	32	48.6	35	6.9	5
Sister/s	67.2	90	32.1	43	.7	1	69.1	47	29.4	20	1.5	1
Close Friend/s	10.6	16	56.3	85	33.1	50	28.4	21	54.1	40	17.6	13

<sup>a</sup>Missing data are the result of not all subjects having contact with each of the four relationship categories.

males and females in the present study had fathers and mothers who had never collected UIC.

The results for parental receipt of welfare and UIC demonstrate that most of the current sample, who were themselves in receipt of welfare, did not come from homes where parental receipt of benefits was a common phenomenon. Only small percentages of youth in receipt of welfare had parents who had been heavily in receipt of benefits during the time these youth were growing up.

### *Profile of the Siblings*

To further explore the familial context as a possible factor in youth becoming welfare recipients we turned to a consideration of sibling receipt of welfare and UIC benefits. As is evident in Table 1, a substantial percentage of the males and females who had brothers and sisters stated that their siblings had never received welfare. Only 7.7% of the subjects with brothers (10 males and 6 females) indicated that their brothers had often received welfare. Similarly, only 8.8% of the subjects with sisters, including 12 males and 6 females, stated that their sisters had often received welfare.

Of the males and females who had brothers, approximately 45% stated that their male siblings had never received UIC. The non-receipt of UIC on the part of sisters was even lower with close to 70% of males and females stating that their sisters had never collected this benefit. The data for receipt of UIC also demonstrated that only 5.7% of the subjects had brothers who had always been in receipt of UIC while only one male and one female indicated that they had sisters who were 'often' in receipt of UIC.

The data for sibling receipt of benefits demonstrated that exposure to receipt of UIC and welfare benefits through siblings was relatively moderate, which may be reflective of the youth employment situation in general. The data also suggest that exposure to receipt of both types of benefits through siblings was somewhat more prevalent than exposure through parents.

### *Profile of Peers*

Of the three social groups investigated, the peer group rep-



resented the most substantial context of exposure to receipt of welfare and UIC (see Table 1). Eighty percent of the males and 70% of the females stated that their friends had sometimes or often received welfare. Hence, only 20% of the total population (30 males and 23 females) had friends who had never collected welfare benefits. Exposure to receipt of UIC through friends was also quite substantial with 89% of the males and 72% of the females stating that they had friends who had received UIC sometimes or often. Only 14% of the total population (16 males and 21 females) indicated that their close friends had never been in receipt of UIC.

#### *General Exposure to Welfare*

Analyses were performed to determine the number of subjects who were heavily exposed to receipt of welfare simultaneously through familial and peer group contexts. The first step involved generating frequencies for subjects who had fathers, mothers and siblings who had received welfare. Additional distributions were then generated to consider the added peer dimension. The data for the family context demonstrated that only 26% of the sample (43 males and 26 females) reported having both parents and at least one sibling who had received welfare sometimes or often. When the breakdown was restricted to only those subjects who had 'often' been exposed, the figure reduced to 14% of the population (13 males and 6 females). These results illustrate that exposure to welfare through the familial context was surprisingly limited with only a small percentage of subjects who were heavily exposed to extensive receipt of welfare assistance through parents and siblings.

When exposure through peers was included in the social context, the data revealed that 22% of the total population (37 males and 21 females) had been exposed to parents, siblings and peers who had received welfare some of the time or often. Only 3% of the subjects, including 4 males and 2 females, came from social contexts wherein parents, siblings and peers were often in receipt of welfare. These results indicate that only a small proportion of the subjects who participated in this study were exposed to welfare receipt on three separate fronts, through parents, siblings or peers. Hence only a small handful can be

considered as stemming from a background totally directed toward receipt of benefits.

### Discussion

The current study of unemployed youth in receipt of social assistance provides a basis for seriously questioning the notion of intergenerational transmission of joblessness and consequent reliance on social assistance. A minority of males and females in the present investigation had parents who were unemployed or in receipt of welfare benefits while they were growing up. This finding clearly contradicts previous work which has promoted the view that reliance on social assistance is passed on from parents to their offspring (Knight and West, 1977; Shaw, 1985).

Although the current study has relied quite heavily on retrospective data, the impact of parental joblessness on young people and their families is well established (Elder, 1974), suggesting that subjects in the current sample would have been more likely to accurately recall the presence of this experience than, perhaps, other less stressful events. The low incidence of parental joblessness and limited reliance on UIC and social assistance might, in this instance, be attributable to regional disparities. This study was conducted in the Regional Municipality of Sudbury, a single industry mining community characterized by high levels of youth unemployment and sporadic work opportunity for youth in response to prevailing decreases in international market demands for nickel as well as continued adoption of new technologies by the mining industry. The majority of youth in this community had fathers who were consistently employed in the region except for occasional labour disputes that were resolved through strike action. Unlike their parents, however, these youth have had less opportunity to obtain steady work. Hence, joblessness and reliance on welfare benefits, as experienced by the Sudbury sample, cannot be explained solely by socialization models which advocate the process of intergenerational transmission. These results clearly point to a need for community-specific considerations of unemployment in analyses of subjects' receipt of benefits.

Wijting, Arnold and Conrad (1978) have drawn attention to

the paucity of research on the scope of individuals who may be instrumental in the transmission and formation of a welfare subculture. Our introduction of sibling receipt of UIC and welfare benefits into the current investigation partially redresses this concern and provides a more expansive foundation for examining the extent to which youth come from familial contexts geared toward receipt of benefits. The data illustrate that although percentages were slightly higher for sibling as opposed to parental receipt of benefits, very few of our subject came from family backgrounds geared toward chronic receipt of social assistance. The fact that sibling receipt of benefits was slightly higher than parental receipt may be reflective of general work and unemployment patterns of youth. It is also acknowledged here that youth unemployment is clearly a structural problem. In the face of job shortages we can no longer attribute the blame for joblessness, and hence reliance on welfare benefits, to the individual. In terms of policy implications, the escalating level of youth unemployment must be dealt with primarily on a structural level.

In the current investigation, the limited exposure of subjects to receipt of benefits through parents and siblings is strongly counterbalanced by exposure to the peer group. Notwithstanding the small number of subjects who were exposed to benefits from within all three social contexts, the high numbers of best friends in receipt of benefits warrants attention. Recent investigations have demonstrated that, by providing an alternative world view to that of parents and other authority figures, adolescent peers play an important role in influencing personal development of youth (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). For example, it has been demonstrated that within the framework of social relations, which can extend beyond those which emerge from interaction with parents, peers co-construct a unique set of moral codes and values (Youniss, 1980). Other authors writing on youth and work (Roberts, Noble & Duggan, 1982) have suggested that high rates of joblessness may translate to a subculture of unemployed youth who view unemployment and receipt of benefits as common and therefore acceptable. Affiliations between jobless youth could then translate into counter-productive work related attitudes and behaviors. Such reasoning should apply

equally to the older (22-25 yrs.) subjects in our study given current theorizing regarding the process of individuation (cf. Grotevant & Cooper, 1985) and the potential for delayed development due to prolonged financial dependence (Patton & Noller, 1984).

Partial support for the view that unemployed peers are a positive rather than a negative influence in the lives of unemployed youth emerged from multiple discussions with three groups of subjects (N=30). In a series of group interviews conducted shortly after the questionnaire data were collected, participants stated that their unemployed friends were a strong source of social (and sometimes, economic) support. During periods of unemployment, peers took each other in, leant each other money and spent time talking to one another when depression began to set in. One subject intimated that there was somewhat of an understanding amongst the unemployed. He stated, "When someone has a job, or has money, then they buy the beer and stuff, like nobody really thinks about it, or we don't keep score, we just know when there's no money we help each other, cause next month it might be your turn to do without." Another youth maintained, "Sometimes when things get really bad and like someone can't afford the rent, then someone else takes them in." In terms of emotional support the subjects were in general agreement that their unemployed friends represented someone to talk to, a sounding board and a shoulder to cry on.

In contrast, the subjects in the study also agreed that parents and family members were largely unsympathetic to their unemployed status. Insofar as family members (and parents in particular) had little exposure to unemployment, they viewed joblessness as a personal failure. One male stated, "I don't tell my old man when a job is over any more, because he doesn't understand. He just thinks I'm lazy and no good and hanging around doing nothing. He says there's jobs out there for people who want them. And like I'm pounding the pavement and all I get is put downs." Generally, the various comments suggested that parental attitudes largely reflected the negative imagery which has traditionally surrounded unemployed populations. Contrary to the negative myths surrounding welfare populations, our group interview data revealed that these youth were, thusfar, committed to employment and were persistent in their

search for jobs. In most cases the strong desire for work was coupled with a more general life plan. These youth expressed a strong need to build a future based on a steady job. They expressed desires to marry, have homes and to start families. To them, unemployment represented a clear impediment to constructing a life based on a general value system and a range of life goals shared by most North Americans.

The most striking observation from the current study was the large number of peers in receipt of benefits. Given the potential socializing and social support function served by this group, further investigation is certainly warranted. It may be that unemployed youth are most likely to gravitate toward other unemployed youth because of various criticisms to which they are subject. Individuals in the current investigation stated that they would turn to their unemployed peers for social support and shy away from less sympathetic and more critical parents and family members. This outcome suggests the need to investigate the possibility of a peer-based transmission hypothesis. One directive for future research would be to explore the extent to which individuals exposed to intermittent or chronic states of joblessness are able to sustain one another and to maintain a positive outlook toward the world of work, in the relative absence of social support from the family. In fact the negative imagery and stigmatization of unemployed youth by potential sources of social support could translate to a structural division between employed and unemployed individuals. Without the approval and support of those connected to the public sphere of the work world, jobless youth could sink into resignation and succumb to the negative stereotypes.

The results of the current study suggest the need for a re-examination of the position that receipt of benefits is intergenerationally transmitted. The low receipt of social assistance on the part of parents and siblings indicates that, for some youth, reliance on benefits may not be attributable solely to family background factors. More importantly, by questioning the seemingly universal application of the intergenerational transmission concept, one is also faced with the need to re-examine the negative imagery revolving around youth in receipt of benefits, such as the press and media portrayal of welfare youth as reck-

less, selfish and parasitic spongers (Cabell, 1985; Alston & Dean, 1972; Golding & Middleton, 1982). In so far as the families of youth in the current study were not heavily exposed to joblessness and receipt of benefits, it would be unrealistic to characterize all young welfare recipients with the many negative qualities attributed to individuals socialized within cultures of poverty.

Both welfare-based officials and media personnel should be sensitized to the potential effects of negatively stereotyping our unemployed youth. Closer attention also should be directed to the manner in which the peer group functions as a support system for unemployed youth. Given the power of the peer group, it might serve as a vehicle through which the negative attributions often associated with joblessness may be modified, thereby altering the cycle of joblessness and chronic reliance on benefits.

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