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A View From the Inside Out: Recipients' Perceptions of Welfare

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Welfare use is a highly stigmatized behavior in American society. The word itself conjures up various images of disdain in the minds of most Americans. Yet how do the recipients of welfare discern and react to being on public assistance? The focus of this paper is on understanding the manner in which recipients view their own situation, how they perceive the general public's attitudes toward themselves, and their views on fellow welfare recipients. Also examined are how such attitudes influence recipients' behavior towards welfare. These perceptions and behaviors are explored in detail through the use of in-depth, open-ended qualitative interviews with a random sample of welfare recipients. The concept of managing and coping with stigma is utilized to provide insights into the results.

Much has been researched and written about how Americans view welfare and welfare recipients, and more generally their views concerning those in poverty (e.g. Nilson, 1981; Hendrickson and Axelson, 1986; Smith and Stone, 1989). For the average citizen, individuals in poverty and on welfare are perceived as responsible for the situation in which they find themselves. That is, lack of effort, thrift, morality, ability, and so on, are typically cited as major reasons for poverty and welfare use (see Feagin, 1975; Kluegel and Smith, 1986).

Much less has been written about how welfare recipients themselves view their own and other welfare recipients' situations, and their perceptions of how the general public views and acts toward their situation (e.g. Briar, 1966; Handler and Hollingsworth, 1971; Cole and Lejune, 1972; Kerbo, 1976; Goodban, 1985; Popkin, 1990). Furthermore, the limited number of studies which have looked at welfare recipients' perceptions have predominately used a quantitative analytical approach.

While informative, such an approach has generally not been able to provide an in-depth examination into the content of recipients' attitudes and perceptions of welfare.

This paper explores these different perceptions in detail through the use of in-depth, qualitative interviews with welfare recipients. It is a look at attitudes from the inside out, providing a revealing juxtaposition. Also addressed are how such attitudes influence recipients' behavior towards welfare. Coping with stigma is used as an overriding framework to interpret the attitudes and behaviors of welfare recipients.

The concept of stigma has provided a powerful tool for interpreting and understanding the attitudes and behaviors of individuals who fall into discredited categories (Pfuhl, 1986). These have included a wide range of groups, including gays and lesbians, individuals convicted of crimes, those suffering from physical handicaps, and so on.

Research has shown that considerable social stigma is also attached to the use of public assistance programs (Horan and Austin, 1974; Williamson, 1974; Keith, 1980; Moffit, 1983; Waxman, 1983; Camasso and Moore, 1985; Kluegel and Smith, 1986). There are several reasons behind such stigma. Use of welfare tends to jar against the individualism which most Americans pride themselves in (Gans, 1988). From this ethos, those who rely on government assistance for financial support rather than their own efforts are perceived as failures. Consequently, individuals receiving welfare tend to be highly stigmatized by a general public who hold strongly to individualist beliefs.

An example of this comes from a 1978 study by Coleman, Rainwater, and McClelland. In interviews conducted in Boston and Kansas City, participants were asked who they felt were the lowest class in society?

The word used most often by our sample members to characterize the life style and income source of people at the bottom was welfare. . . . The principle enunciated . . . was that the welfare class and people at the bottom are nearly synonymous terms, that any American for whom welfare has become a way of life is thereby to be accounted among the nation's lowest-class citizens (1978: 195).

A second reason behind the stigmatization of welfare and welfare recipients is the fear of encouraging dependency upon the state. As Goodban notes, "Afraid that handouts will encourage dependency, assistance programs stigmatize those who receive benefits to prevent them from asking for more, and to make it clear to others that there is an emotional price to pay" (1985: 404).

The idea goes back to the English Poor Laws. If public relief were an attractive alternative to employment (according to this argument), individuals would opt for relief rather than work. As de Tocqueville noted in his 1835 lecture to the Royal Academic Society of Cherbourg,

Any measure which establishes legal charity on a permanent basis and gives it an administrative form thereby creates an idol and lazy class, living at the expense of the industrial and working class. This, at least, is its inevitable consequence, if not the immediate result (1983: 113).

The concept became known as that of less eligibility, which "meant that persons on relief should be kept in a condition necessarily worse than that of the lowest paid worker not on relief, the objective being to make relief undesirable and to provide the recipient with a clear and strong incentive to get off the relief rolls" (Waxman, 1983: 82). Along with such undesirable conditions would come a hefty dose of stigma as well.

Thus, stigma surrounds public assistance and its participants. What is less apparent is how and in what ways recipients' perceptions and behaviors regarding welfare are shaped and influenced by this stigma. The focus of this paper is on understanding the manner in which recipients view their own situation, how they view the general public's attitudes toward themselves, and recipients' views on fellow welfare recipients. The discussion section utilizes the concept of coping with stigma in order to provide insight into these findings.

Methodology

The data analyzed in this paper comprise one component of a larger study designed to explore the lives of welfare recipients

both quantitatively and qualitatively. Three separate yet complementary sources of data were gathered—a large, longitudinal caseload sample of welfare recipients; in-depth interviews with a small number of families on welfare; and fieldwork of the welfare system. All three sources of data were gathered in the State of Wisconsin. This paper focuses entirely on the in-depth interviews with families. The strength of such interviews is that they have the potential to provide considerable richness and insight into welfare recipients' lives, including attitudes and perceptions.

The in-depth interviews were conducted during the summer of 1986. A random sample of welfare recipients was generated based upon access to the entire universe of recipients in one county during May, 1986. The sample was stratified by household type, as well as by welfare eligibility status. Of interest were different types of families both on, and currently exiting the welfare rolls. These included female headed families, married couples, singles, and the elderly.¹ Because the interviews were face-to-face, it was impractical to randomly sample the entire state given the cost and time constraints involved. A representative county was chosen which roughly reflected the overall state population, containing urban and rural areas, occupational diversity, and so on.

The response rate was 76 percent. This rate represents the number of interviews conducted, divided by all households we attempted to locate (whether contact was made or not). For those whom we were able to contact, the refusal rate was 5 percent. Individuals without telephones were tracked down, several interviews were conducted in Spanish with the aid of an interpreter; in short, all avenues were used to contact sampled recipients. Participating respondents were paid 15 dollars.

Fifty families were interviewed (in addition, five households were interviewed in the pretest). By design, the demographic composition of the sample approximately mirrored that of the caseload data set.² The interviews were conducted in respondent's homes, and averaged between one and a half to three hours long. All interviews were tape recorded.

For female headed families, the elderly, and single welfare recipients, the head of household was interviewed. For married

couples, we attempted to interview both the husband and wife together. However in several cases we were only able to interview the wife.³

At the onset of each interview, respondents were informed that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions being asked, rather our concern was in understanding their honest appraisals of their feelings, experiences, and behaviors. In addition, it was stated clearly to all recipients that we were not a part of the welfare administration, and that our affiliation was university based. We also stated verbally and in writing that all responses would be confidential.

Most respondents appeared open and frank about their feelings and behaviors. For example, individuals would often volunteer sensitive information (e.g. incest, violence in the family, painful childhoods, etc.), and would frequently express genuine emotion during the interviews. Overall, rapport between interviewer and interviewee was excellent. This was assessed in two ways. Following each interview the overall perceived rapport during the interview was recorded. In addition, by listening to each interview several times, rapport was also assessed.

The interviews were open-ended and semi-structured around several major topics such as attitudes regarding welfare, family dynamics, employment, the experience of getting on and off public assistance, and so on. As a reliability check on the answers given during the interviews, they were compared with the information from respondents' caseload records (which had been made available from the state). The match was high, thus lending confidence in the interview data.

In addition to the actual interview, fieldnotes were taken which described the setting in which the interview took place, the recipient's dwelling, the surrounding neighborhood, the physical appearance of the recipient, and any other relevant information which might provide greater understanding into the recipient's situation.

The interviews were then transcribed from the recording tape. These were entered as files into a mainframe computing system. The transcriptions reflected the exact wording and manner in which responses were given. Each transcription was then triple checked with the original tape for accuracy.

Names and places have been changed throughout the paper in order to protect the confidentiality of respondents. In addition, the interviews have been slightly edited. For example, phrases such as "you know" have been largely edited out. However, none of the original wording has been altered from that contained in the transcriptions. The intent is simply to provide greater readability by editing out unnecessary phrases.

Recipients' Views of Welfare

Three distinct perceptions are explored. First, how do recipients view being on welfare? Second, how do they perceive and react to others attitudes towards them? And third, what are their views regarding the predicament of their fellow welfare recipients? The comparison of these three different perceptions provides an intriguing juxtaposition which is interpreted in the discussion section.

Recipients' Perceptions of their Situation

How do recipients view being on welfare? This issue is explored in terms of two questions. First, what are recipients general attitudes towards being on welfare? And second, to what extent do they feel responsible for their situation?

General Attitudes. Research has shown that most individuals applying for public assistance feel considerable anxiety and/or embarrassment during the application process (Briar, 1966; Schwartz, 1975; Prottas, 1979; Lipsky, 1980; Goodsell, 1984; Susser and Kreniske, 1987). Furthermore, most recipients clearly hope to get off public assistance, and believe in the ethic of work (Goodwin, 1972; 1983). Such attitudes were found for this sample of welfare recipients as well. Thus it is not surprising that virtually all able bodied recipients in the sample reported disliking being on welfare and expressing a clear desire to exit from public assistance programs.⁴

Two specific reasons underlie this. First, many recipients desire independence, rather than being reliant on the taxpayer's dollars. This view is consistent with the overall dominant ideology of individualism. As one woman noted,

I'd rather be able to support myself, you know, work, and make the money myself instead of having someone sign a check and

send it to me once a month. 'Cause I don't really like to live off other people. I'd rather work and make the money and support myself, in the best way that I could.

A second and closely related reason why recipients wish to get off the welfare rolls is the lack of privacy and the stigma associated with public assistance programs. Extensive documentation is needed to qualify. This need for documentation continues with update checks, six month reviews, and so on. When asked if she would like to get off welfare, a female head of household with two children responded,

I'd love to get off. 'Cause aid makes me sick. They just interfere in your life so much. You gotta do this, and you gotta do it when they say do it. And you gotta go to the doctors they want you to go to. And I don't like that. Unhuh. You don't have any privacy with aid.

Likewise, a 19 year old married woman who had recently gotten off of assistance commented,

'Cause when we were on welfare, I didn't really like the feeling. And I always felt like I was bein' watched. I always heard stories that they'll have you investigated or follow you around, see what your living status is like. And I didn't like the feeling of it. So I'm just glad that we're off from it. Really glad (laugh).

While welfare recipients desire to get off the rolls, most were nevertheless grateful for the assistance available to them. These attitudes became evident when recipients were asked what they would do if there were no welfare programs at all. Karen Davis, a 24 year old separated mother, responded,

I probably would have perished a long time ago. I really would have. Starvation, or something. When you've got two kids you do what you have to do. That's really the main reason I went on it too, because of the kids. I had no choice. But if it wasn't for that . . . I would have to say we would have perished a long time ago.

Others mentioned relying on family members more, and several discussed illegal activities as alternatives to not having access to public assistance. In general, recipients' attitudes towards being on welfare are that they clearly want to get off

the programs in the future, but are nevertheless grateful for the assistance available.

The Issue of Responsibility. To what extent do welfare recipients feel that being on public assistance is their responsibility? Within the interviewed sample, 82 percent felt that their being on welfare was due to circumstances beyond their control. Only 6 percent felt that they were solely responsible for being on welfare, while 12 percent felt that being on welfare was some combination of the two.

Recipients often referred back to the reasons for entering the welfare system in order to illustrate why it was that they felt their being on welfare was due to circumstances beyond their control. For example, the elderly discussed illnesses they had encountered. Singles mentioned incapacitation or other traumatic events. Female heads of households mentioned not being able to support their families on low paying jobs, no child support, and lack of affordable day care. Married couples discussed layoffs or jobs simply not paying enough.

An example is Colleen Bennett and her husband. They had been on and off welfare sporadically for several years. Colleen was asked to explain why she felt that their being on welfare was due to circumstances.

Loss of jobs, layoffs. Well, when Randy was born we just financially could not pay for a hospital, or a doctor, and stuff like that. It usually was something that just came up out of the blue and happened, and you didn't have any other income.

For most recipients, being on welfare is perceived as the result of unfortunate circumstances and situations over which the individual has little control.

Recipients' Perceptions of How Others Act and Feel Towards Them

Having explored how recipients feel about being on welfare, how do they perceive others attitudes towards them? Furthermore, how do they react and adjust their behavior to such perceived attitudes? As noted earlier, most Americans hold quite negative attitudes about the welfare system and its recipients. The question then is whether those receiving welfare encounter

such negative attitudes firsthand, and if and how they adjust their behavior in light of such attitudes?

The General Public. Slightly over two thirds of the interviewed sample reported specific instances of feeling that they were treated differently by the general public when it became known that they were receiving public assistance. These occurrences ranged from blatant antagonism to more subtle forms of disapproval. The most frequently cited cases occurred with the use of food stamps.⁵ Several examples are illustrative. Janice Winslow, a 37 year old separated mother of three, discussed the difficulties in using food stamps.

You really do have to be a strong person to be able to use food stamps and not get intimidated by how people treat you when you use them. And even then it's still hard. You feel people's vibes, you know, in the line. And the checkout people are almost without exception rude, unless you really get to know them. And I always feel like, "God, I'll be glad when I don't have to use these." They never ever leave any change in there. So every time you check out, they always have to go up to the office to get change, so you got all these people waitin' in line—it's like, you know, "These food stamp people."

Once about six weeks ago I turned to the woman behind me and said, "I don't know, I have not once come up here and bought something with food stamps where they didn't have to go and get change for, like a five or something, that they had in the drawer." She says, "Well, I guess it's just one of those ways that they're not making it easy for you."

A second example comes from a married couple who were asked if they had noticed any difference in the grocery store when they used food stamps:

It's absolutely blatant in the stores. They'll smile and be chatting with you, and then they see you pull out the food stamps—they just freeze up. And they scrutinize the food. I mean, I get really hyped. If it's a birthday or something, and I'm buying steak so that we can have a birthday dinner at home—ohh, the looks they get on their faces. Once I had a clerk tell me, "You buy really good food with your food stamps" (laughter). Jeez. Yeah, there is a difference.

Recipients may develop several strategies for dealing with the stigma of having to use food stamps. Some shop at off times or with checkers whom they know personally. For example,

When I go to buy with food stamps, I try to go at night so not too many people get behind me. Especially when the employees ask about the I.D. And then they want to see one more I.D. And it's very, very uncomfortable. I guess I cannot be like other people that just carry their food stamps in their hands like money. I just . . . can't do that.

Similarly, Jody Edwards, a 23 year old single parent, explained,

I try really hard to hit a day that nobody's gonna be at the store because I just get all flustered. I have a terrible time using my food stamps. Just hate it! Just hate it.

Others may go to stores where the use of food stamps is fairly common. For example, one rural woman often went into the metropolitan area to shop.

Well, when I went grocery shopping, I usually went to Ceders (a supermarket). Because I figured a lot of people go in there and use 'em, you know, so I wouldn't feel out of place. Otherwise, it would look bad, and I still felt stupid.

Alternatively, recipients may send someone else to use their food stamps, or perhaps dress differently,

I feel like I have to be dressed really nice and look nice to use 'em. I don't wanna look all dumpy and look like I fit it (the image of a welfare recipient).

Beyond food stamps, recipients felt stigmatized by the general public in other ways as well. Cashing their AFDC check, using a Medicaid card, telling an employer that they have been on public assistance, all may result in perceived differential treatment. A separated woman with two children discussed one such instance,

When I was looking for apartments, I was living with my mom for a while. And when I was looking, I couldn't prove the fact that I was turned down because of it, but you just know that yourself. The minute you say, "Well I'm getting aid, or AFDC," then all of

a sudden they sing a different tune. Or the place gets rented out to somebody else.

In discussing the use of her medical card, 29 year old Cindy Franklin noted,

Some receptionists turn off the friendliness when they see Medical Assistance. Sometimes I catch them looking at me, maybe if I have on a necklace or something. I don't think I look like the stereotypical welfare mother, and I see them scrutinizing me and thinking it over. It's pretty subtle.

Not as subtle were the reactions to Denise Turner's daughter.

My oldest daughter, she graduated from middle school. And she told me last year that she did not want to receive the hot lunch program because the children made a difference. So I had to scrape for the last couple of years while she was in middle school and try to make ends meet so that I could send her with a dollar or two dollars every day. Which is a big chunk out of our budget. The food program at school is a big help. But rather than see her mistreated, or have her friends sit away from her, this is what I had to do. Either have her bring a lunch, or give her money. And I don't think it should be that way. But people are very class conscious about these kinds of programs.

These examples illustrate some of the ways in which welfare recipients experience firsthand the negative attitudes held by the general public. Although not all recipients reported such occurrences, over two-thirds did. Furthermore, many recipients noted that these negative occurrences were experienced frequently, rather than as single instances.

Family, Friends, and Acquaintances. What are the perceived reactions of family, friends, and acquaintances to the individual's situation of being on welfare? As might be expected, there is a tendency for more positive support and understanding among close friends and family. Thus, while family members or close friends may dislike the concept of welfare, many are also understanding of the need for their relative or friend to have sought assistance.

However, there is also a degree of perceived animosity as well. For example, particular family members may express

strong disapproval of any member of their family relying on welfare. Such was the case with Kelly McGrath, a divorced mother of four. She was asked about the reactions of her family to her situation.

It varies. The female family members understand. And they never give me any problems or anything. But my brothers always figure I should be out working. I think it's just all the stereotypes that go along with it (receiving welfare). They just don't want their sister in with that stereotype.

In order to deal with the perceived negative feelings among both acquaintances and the general public, many recipients adapt the strategy of letting as few individuals as possible know that they are receiving public assistance. When asked if his friends had any opinions about his being on welfare, 24 year old David Grey responded, "Well, I really don't let 'em know about it. I don't think it's really anything I have to advertise, nor do I want to." Likewise, when Mary Summers was asked if her relatives expressed any feelings about her situation, she replied,

They don't talk about it. In fact, I like to stay away from some of the relatives until I go back to work. I mean, it's just a situation that you don't even wanna get into. Let it blow over, and when you get back (on your feet) and have a little dignity again, well then you can go back.

Finally, a woman living in a small rural town was asked about her friends reactions:

Well, there's alot that don't know that I am (on welfare). There's alot of 'em I work with. They make some nasty comments about people on ADC or welfare, as they call it. And I always say ADC, 'cause it sounds better. But, I don't really say anything. It doesn't really bother me, 'cause I figure, well, keep my mouth shut. What they don't know don't hurt 'em. It's none of their business. It used to bother me when they'd make their snide remarks, but I figure, well . . . let 'em. Wait 'til they have to do something like that, and it happens to them. They'll find out.

It is evident that most welfare recipients report various degrees of stigma in their dealings with the general public and/or acquaintances, ranging from obvious discrimination to more subtle forms of behavior.⁶ Recipients may develop several strategies for dealing with such animosity. The most obvious is to conceal the fact that they are receiving welfare. If that strategy is impossible (as with the case of food stamps), then an attempt may be made to either minimize their contact with the general public (when having to reveal one's welfare status), or to physically dissociate oneself from the image of a "typical" welfare recipient (by dressing according to middle class standards, watching what one buys in the supermarket, and so on). Given the general public's widespread disdain towards the welfare system, these perceptions and strategies should not be surprising. What may be surprising is the view of welfare recipients towards other welfare recipients.

Recipients' Perceptions of Other Welfare Recipients

Having looked at how welfare recipients view their own situation, and their perceptions of how others act and feel towards their situation, we now look at how welfare recipients view the predicament of other welfare recipients. In order to address this issue, several questions were asked which focused on the needs, behaviors, and reasons why other welfare recipients were receiving aid.

To a large extent, welfare recipients were critical in their assessment regarding the plight of their fellow welfare recipients. In fact, the opinions of welfare recipients appeared quite similar to that of the general public's assessment of welfare and its participants. That is, individuals viewed other welfare recipients as largely to blame for the situation in which they have found themselves.

Approximately 90 percent of the sample felt that those on welfare were either partially or fully to blame for being on public assistance. While a variety of reasons for welfare use were given, most mentioned either a lack of ambition and/or laziness as important factors in explaining why others are on welfare. A typical assessment is the following quote from Pam Bucholtz, a

married woman who was living with her unemployed husband on the outskirts of a rural town.

In my point of view I think they're too lazy to get out and find a job. In our case we're not. We're out looking. But some of these other people they're the ones that don't wanna work. They just don't wanna get out and work. They'd rather sit and collect on the government.

Related to such attitudes, is the idea that there are many on welfare who are abusing or cheating the welfare system. An example of this attitude is from Lisa Hicks, a 22 year old female head of household,

The money is to take care of your bills and your kids. Except they don't do that. They take it and party off of it. Or go out and buy new clothes for themselves. And their kids don't have anything. They walk around with holes in their clothes and hungry all the time because they take and gamble, or whatever with the money.

Certainly not every recipient felt that those on welfare were lazy or abusing the system. Some mentioned circumstances over which individuals had little control. Others mentioned becoming less harsh in their assessment having been on welfare themselves. However, as with the general public, most on welfare are quite critical of many of their fellow welfare recipients.

In addition to the negative reasons for why recipients felt other recipients were on welfare, many also discussed aspects of the common welfare stereotype in characterizing fellow recipients. This stereotype includes the idea that most on welfare are minorities, that those on welfare are there for long periods of time, that women have more children to get higher welfare payments, and so on. Several examples illustrate such attitudes. An elderly man commented,

I don't know what the percentage is but I would venture to say that 80 percent of the people on welfare are black, hispanic, or some of the boat people. And they're on there for year after year after year after year. They never get off it. It's just a way of life.

Take these welfare mothers out here. Alright, they're getting \$560, \$570, \$700 a month. Now you know, and I know, that they don't spend that much on groceries or rent. All they have to do if

they wanna increase their salary is go out and have another kid. And it seems to me, that's what they do. (laughter)

Likewise, another recipient remarked,

I think that's why a lotta these people have children because they don't wanna work. They wanna have everything handed to 'em. And they figure if they have two, three of 'em (children), they get more money. And a lotta these people, these young women that get that help, they're always in the bars. Out drinkin' and that.

Again, not every welfare recipient referred to such stereotypes in characterizing other welfare recipients. However, many did. What is surprising about such characterizations is that they come from fellow welfare recipients.

To summarize, welfare recipients view being on public assistance as largely beyond their control, and express a strong desire to leave the welfare rolls. Second, many recipients experience firsthand a variety of negative attitudes towards receiving welfare, and often adjust their behavior in order to minimize their encounters with such attitudes. Finally, recipients tend to be quite critical in their assessment of their fellow welfare recipients. A lack of ambition and/or laziness are seen as key factors in explaining why others are on welfare. In the discussion section below, the concept of coping with stigma is used to provide a broad framework for understanding these differing perceptions.

Discussion

As mentioned earlier, welfare use is a highly stigmatized behavior in American society. The word welfare conjures up various images of disdain in the minds of many Americans. This would appear as true for those on public assistance as for those looking from the outside in. It is this disdain and stigma which provides a backdrop for interpreting the perceptions and behaviors found in the preceding pages.

Erving Goffman defined stigma in the following way,

While the stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable

kind—in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak. He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma, especially when its discrediting effect is very extensive; sometimes it is also called a failing, a shortcoming, a handicap (1963: 2–3).

Being on welfare is indeed such a stigma. As Kerbo notes, “to be a welfare recipient in the United States means degradation; to be stigmatized at the hands of the general society, politicians, and even social workers” (1976: 174). It is not surprising then that most who receive public assistance desire to leave the rolls in order to excise such stigma.⁷ That desire is consistent with research findings indicating that most individuals who begin a welfare spell, exit in a relatively short period of time (Bane and Ellwood, 1983; Duncan, 1984; Coder and Ruggles, 1988).

The fact that welfare recipients experience such stigma is also not startling given its pervasiveness. Various degrees of stigma are experienced firsthand—from the grocery store, to cashing an AFDC check, to telling one’s relatives about being on welfare. The result of these disclosures is often scorn.

Nor is it surprising that recipients should attempt to conceal their identity as a welfare recipient in light of these attitudes. As Goffman noted,

The issue is not that of managing tension generated during social contacts but rather of managing information about his failing. To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when and where (1963: 42).

For most welfare recipients, the decision is to conceal this aspect of their life as much as possible.

The use of food stamps is therefore particularly hard for many individuals because it constitutes a stigma symbol—it identifies the user as a member of a stigmatized group. Likewise, living in subsidized housing, the use of a Medicaid card, and so on, function as stigma symbols and hence cause various degrees of anxiety among recipients.

Finally, the fact that many on welfare exhibit the same negative attitudes about their fellow recipients as those in the general public, is again not surprising. As Goffman wrote, "a stigmatized person is first of all like anyone else, trained first of all in others' views of persons like himself. . ." (1963: 134). Therefore, "it should come as no surprise that in many cases he who is stigmatized in one regard nicely exhibits all the normal prejudices held toward those who are stigmatized in another regard" (1963: 138).

The recipient, however, is often careful to distinguish between his or her case, and that of others. Briar (1966) has described this as a distancing process. That is, while many recipients may feel that the common welfare stereotype holds true, in their particular case it does not. This distancing process is clearly evident in the remarks of Dan Wilensky, an out of work husband,

Like the people that hang out downtown, the bums. I can't see how they can just be a bum. I mean everybody can find a job one way or another. Like I said we're on General Assistance to survive, okay. And not just to be on it. But once I find a job we'll be off of it. And we probably won't be back on it. 'Cause I can keep a job. But like people that are downtown, the bums and everything, I'm sure they're to the point now where they're so lazy that they won't wanna get a job. So they're just sittin' back and sayin', "Hey, let somebody else pay everything for me." There's both kinds of people. The bums, and then people like us that are having trouble finding the first job.

This type of sentiment was not unusual. It was voiced in numerous interviews. As Briar noted, such distancing "reflects the desire of these recipients to dissociate themselves from the image they have of other recipients" (1966: 51).

The concept of coping with stigma is thus central to understanding recipients' perceptions and behaviors regarding public assistance. It is a key component in interpreting why recipients feel and act the way they do concerning their own situation, the general public, and other welfare recipients. Like most Americans, recipients attach stigma to the welfare system and its participants. Yet they themselves are welfare recipients and hence

must face such stigma, including their own. It is precisely that contradiction and its resolution which are the keys to understanding recipients' attitudes and behaviors regarding welfare.

Finally, it is often assumed that the poor in general and welfare recipients in particular are somehow different in their attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs regarding the welfare system (Banfield, 1974; Gilder, 1980; Murray, 1984; Mead, 1992). For example, that recipients are resigned to living on welfare, not motivated to leave the welfare system, do not care or feel embarrassed about using public assistance, are sympathetic to other welfare recipients, and so on. The results from this qualitative study stand in sharp contrast with such a viewpoint. In fact, welfare recipients would appear quite similar to the general population in terms of their dislike of welfare and how they cope with such feelings of disdain.

What is important about these findings is that the policy debate regarding welfare recipients is often premised on the assumption that recipients' perceptions and motivations need to be altered in order to conform to more mainstream values (e.g. Domestic Policy Council, 1986). Yet it is precisely these mainstream values which underlie the recipient's view of the welfare system. Policy discussions should be based not upon how different the recipient is from the rest of us in terms of their perceptions of welfare, but rather upon how much they have in common.

Notes

1. The definitions of these categories were: (1) female heads of household with children under age 18 (no spouse present); (2) married couples (with or without children); (3) single heads of household (no children or spouse present); and (4) elderly household heads (age 65 and over).
2. Among several of the demographic characteristics of the qualitative sample are the following: (1) Household structure — 44 percent female headed/20 percent married/18 percent singles/18 percent elderly; (2) Residence — 86 percent urban/14 percent rural; (3) Race of household head — 64 percent white/28 percent black/8 percent other; (4) Education of household head — 52 percent 12 or more years of education/48 percent less than 12 years of education; (5) Employment status of household head — 38 percent employed/62 percent not employed; (6) Average length on welfare — female heads (4.2 years)/marrieds (1.6 years)/singles (.9 years)/elderly (3.1 years).

3. Six of the ten interviews with married couples were conducted with both the husband and wife. The remaining four were conducted with the wife only.
4. The exception being the incapacitated, who were thankful for the assistance and planned to remain on the programs unless a viable alternative could be found.
5. And, of course, one of the latent functions of food stamps is indeed to stigmatize the recipient, thereby increasing their motivation to remain on the program only briefly.
6. A final example of stigma perceived by recipients comes from my field-work. One of the social service agencies that I visited was located in a very small town. Across the street was a tavern. The case workers detailed how individuals would often sit and gaze out the window of the tavern to observe people going into the office. They would then gossip and joke about who was on welfare, what their situations were, and so on. Potential welfare recipients entering the office were generally well aware of this.
7. Furthermore, it is often posited that stigma surrounding welfare programs plays a functional role in the rationing of scarce resources, recruiting and maintaining a labor force, and preventing deviant behavior (Loewenberg, 1981).

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