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# The Potential Impact of Gender Role Socialization on Welfare Policy Formation

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*This paper addresses a five year welfare reform pilot project conducted at the state level. The outcome of research findings for this project indicate that factors other than the obvious are barriers to women choosing work over welfare. Gender role socialization may play an active and very significant role in this process. The reality of which may inhibit welfare reform efforts at the state and national levels.*

## INTRODUCTION

As future generations reflect on the 90's decade, it is likely that one of its labels will be the decade of welfare reform. During the 1990's, numerous states waged reform measures to reduce the welfare rolls. Presently, and likely the most enduring, is the federal effort to diminish the welfare rolls. Actually, efforts to reform the welfare system began in the 1980s. Under the Reagan administration, state initiatives were encouraged to reduce the welfare rolls and several states initiated projects to do so (Greenberg and Wiseman, 1992).

These state efforts to reduce the welfare rolls for the most part did not reach their intended goals. As a result, the concerns over welfare reform continued and became a central political issue during the campaign for the U.S. presidency in 1992. After the presidential election welfare reform remained high on the national political agenda and in August 1996, President Bill Clinton signed into law new national welfare reform legislation.

This new law, *P.L. 104-193*, was a Federal block grant program and replaced the existing Aid to Families with Dependent

Children (AFDC) program with the new Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program (CRS, October 7, 1998). This new TANF legislation has dramatically altered welfare as it ended the historical entitlement based approach for cash aid to eligible families that had been the foundation of AFDC. Consequently, numerous states have adopted a range of welfare reform programs with tougher sanctions designed to move recipients from welfare to work. (CRS, August 20, 1998). This Federal legislation to end welfare as we presently know it was deemed necessary, in some views, since past state efforts to reform welfare were not successful.

### THE FAILURE OF STATE GENERATED WELFARE REFORM EFFORTS

Along with numerous other states, the state of Washington in 1987, initiated a five year welfare reform effort. A primary goal of this effort was elimination of able-bodied recipients from the welfare rolls. This effort, referred to formally as the Family Independence Program (FIP), continued through 1992. Specifically, state policy makers designed the program to reduce the welfare rolls by meeting the expected work-related needs of recipients. Those needs included health care and child care benefits, educational training and the replacement of food stamps with cash. In spite of these very bold efforts to encourage movement off the welfare rolls, the program failed to meet expected goals (Taylor, 1996). In the final evaluation of the program, FIP recipients did not fare any more successfully than Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) recipients in the job market (Taylor, 1996). In fact, the job attainment success of FIP recipients was considerably less than their counterparts in the AFDC program during the five year period (Taylor, 1996).

This author's experience working on the research project that monitored FIP, over a five year period resulted in the identification of two important factors that contributed to the effort's failure to reach its goals. First, it appears that gender roles played a significant part in individual perceptions regarding work and welfare. This especially appears to be the case in the choices made by women with children on the welfare rolls. Secondly, it appears that program designs such as those underlying FIP are dictated to

the poor, and therefore do not adequately incorporate the insights, perceptions, and needs of program recipients. This lack of participant involvement in program design results in the exclusion of vital information necessary to insure program success.

This article focuses on the first issue, though the second issue must be kept in mind in exploring the first. It is suggested here that if participants had been more directly involved in program design, the relevance of gender roles could have been recognized and more adequately addressed in the design.

## WASHINGTON STATE'S WELFARE REFORM EFFORT

### *Program Design*

The Family Independence Program was a welfare reform effort that took place in the state of Washington between 1987 and 1992. FIP was a five year program created by the Washington State Legislature as an alternative to the AFDC program, to the Washington Employment Opportunity Program (WEOP), and to the State's Work Incentive (WIN) program. The goal of FIP was "to increase the economic self-sufficiency of welfare families and decrease the number of children growing up in poverty" (The Urban Institute, 1994).

The provision of monetary benefits, training and educational opportunities for future employment, transitional child care, transportation benefits and health care benefits for recipients and their children were services intended to serve as incentives for people getting off welfare. In providing these incentives, it was expected that FIP participants would increase their job skills and face fewer barriers to employment, compared to AFDC recipients who were not provided these incentives and supports. It was posited that with these incentives and supports, FIP recipients would move more rapidly from welfare, unlike traditional AFDC recipients, to self-sustaining employment.

The long standing AFDC program and FIP, the welfare reform effort, held important similarities, but they differed in three major respects. First, AFDC participants received food stamp coupons; FIP participants were instead provided the cash equivalent of their food stamp allotments. Second, the level of financial assistance for child care provided to FIP participants was much higher

than that provided AFDC participants. Third, unlike AFDC recipients, FIP recipients who participated in approved training and educational programs or who worked part or full-time received cash bonus incentives. In contrast, under AFDC policy guidelines, certain recipient households that qualified were mandatorily assigned to job search, education, and training programs. Those AFDC recipients failing to participate in these mandatory activities risked sanctions, although sanctions were infrequently enforced in Washington (Greenberg, 1993).

The overall goal of FIP, as reflected in policies, was to approach welfare and work from a more flexible position. In devising the FIP program, sponsors intended for the program to offer special tools that would assist welfare recipients in making, program designers presumed, a smooth transition from welfare into the work force. These special tools would remove the major barriers or constraints for recipients that had prevented them from moving into the workforce previously. For example, anticipated expenses for childcare were absorbed by a transitional child care allowance, a wide variety of employment and training activities with an emphasis on education were available to recipients and medical benefits were replaced by transitional Medicaid for those employed recipients who succeeded in moving through a probationary period without medical coverage.

### THE FAMILY INCOME STUDY

The Family Income Study (FIS), conducted by the Washington State University Social and Economic Sciences Research Center, was a five year longitudinal research effort that collected a variety of data on the Family Independence Program. Data collection began in 1988 and continued through 1992.

The FIS questionnaire used for data collection solicited information from respondents in a number of areas. Data were collected about labor market behavior, public assistance and family history, household composition, educational experiences, assets and income, housing, health status, child care, children's school and social activities, and food expenses. In addition, information on psycho-social characteristics of respondents including measures of respondent self esteem, sense of personal control, depression, and dimensions of social support was collected. The

questionnaire was administered to over 2100 households on public assistance in the first year. In addition, data were collected from respondents through both personal interviews and by telephone contact over the five year period of the project.

### *Subjects*

The study population, for the most part, resided in Western Washington and lived in metropolitan areas. The great majority were white. The respondents averaged 30 years of age. About three-fourths of the assistance population had one or two children, with one the more common number. In 62% of the households only one adult was present (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 1990).

The state of Washington's assistance population differs demographically from the national assistance population in several respects—ethnicity is the most obvious difference. The national assistance population is predominantly African American or Hispanic; some 40 percent are black, another 20 percent are Hispanic, Asian, or Native American, and the remaining 40 percent are white. For Washington, only 6 percent of the assistance population is black, 18 percent is Hispanic, Asian or Native American, and 76 percent is white (Washington State Institute for Public Policy 1990:2).

One of the more robust demographic characteristics of the population concerns the educational level of the assistance population in Washington state. The Washington state public assistance recipients' educational attainment was, in general, exceptionally low. Forty-one percent did not have a high school diploma and another 17 percent of recipients later secured a GED. Only 9 percent reported completion of education or training beyond high school, including vocational training, community college or beyond (Washington State Institute for Public Policy 1990:2).

The educational level of this group was compared to the educational profile for the non-poor. The great majority of these women classified as the non-poor live in Western Washington, in the metropolitan areas. Among the non-poor, only 14 percent had not completed high school and another 7 percent were GED recipients. Twenty-two percent, just over a fifth, have an associate degree, a four year degree or more, and another 4 percent have

completed a training program (Washington State Institute for Public Policy 1989:5).

Another significant characteristic was work history. Many among the assistance population worked or had recently worked. During the first reference year in the study, the period between mid-1987 and mid-1988, 41 percent worked. Those who worked averaged just over 31 hours per week.

Work led to two major benefits for the assistance population. First, in families where the mother worked, income levels were 20 percent higher than incomes of families with non-working mothers. Second, in Washington, work explained more of the exits from assistance than are explained from studies of the national assistance population. For respondents who left assistance during the reference year, more than half attributed their exit to getting a job, increasing their work hours, higher pay or related reasons.

#### FIP POLICIES AS CONTRASTED WITH AFDC

Although the services and benefits provided participants in AFDC and FIP have important similarities, they differed in three major respects. First, AFDC participants received food stamp coupons; while FIP participants were provided the cash equivalent of their food stamp allotments. Second, the level of financial child care assistance provided FIP participants was much higher than that provided AFDC participants. Third, unlike AFDC recipients, FIP recipients who participated in approved training and educational programs or who worked part or full-time received cash bonuses. These bonuses were calculated as a percentage of a benchmark standard, which was computed as the AFDC cash payment standard plus 80 percent of the food stamp Thrifty Food Plan. Under AFDC, in contrast, certain recipient households were mandatorily assigned to job search, education, and training programs. Those failing to participate risked sanctions, although sanctions were infrequently enforced in Washington State (Greenberg, 1993).

Thus, the overall goal of FIP, as reflected in its policies, was to approach welfare and work from a more flexible position. In devising the FIP program, sponsors intended that the program provide a tool that would assist welfare recipients in making a smooth transition from welfare into the work force. In doing so,

barriers or constraints that recipients might face were anticipated in the conceptualization of the program. For example, anticipated expenses for childcare were absorbed by a transitional child care allowance, a wide variety of employment and training activities with an emphasis on education were available to recipients and medical benefits that might not start up until after six months of employment were replaced by transitional medicaid.

### *Analysis Sample*

This author's study utilized a subsample of the FIS public assistance sample and limited inquiry to white females who were not in the labor force at year one of the study, but were participants in the AFDC program. Because these respondents were AFDC recipients who were not working at year one of the study, they were good candidates for the FIP program, if they chose to participate. On the other hand, they were appropriate control group subjects if they chose not to participate in the FIP program. The total number of such recipients at year one for this study was 702. Eight of those cases were assigned a missing code and classified as missing by Year 5. Therefore, 694 cases were used in the final analysis. The mean age of the respondents in the sample at year one was 30.54 years of age. Educational levels were low, with an average of 11.3 years at year one and 11.97 percent at year 5 for all respondents. Approximately forty-one percent were divorced or widowed, while 29 percent had never married at Year 1.

In year 5 of the study, those who were married increased from 16 percent to 22 percent and those persons divorced or widowed dropped by 10 percent (31%). Those respondents who were in the never married category dropped from 29 to 16 percent during the five year period. The average number of children per respondent at year 1 was 2.21, and 2.45 at Year 5 (Lidman and Weeks, 1990: 2-3).

## FINDINGS

### *FIP*

Overall, FIP did not achieve intended results. By the end of the five year period, FIP recipients were no more successful than AFDC recipients in job attainment.



*Analysis of Findings: Author's Subsample*

The findings of the author's subsample indicated a more successful transition by AFDC participants from welfare to work than FIP participants during the five year study period.

Based on the results of discriminant analysis and a cross-tabulation of AFDC and FIP participant data at Year 5, 417 out of the 702 respondents in this subsample ended up in the working category. *Working category* refers to those individuals employed, either part-time or full-time, anytime during year 5. Of the 417 respondents classified as working, approximately, 211 persons were working and receiving some form of welfare as well. A cross-tabulation of welfare recipients data at Year 5 indicated 84 respondents were receiving FIP (six of these respondents were also receiving AFDC) and working and 127 respondents were receiving AFDC only and working. After five years, at least 59% of the 702 respondents in this subsample were working at the time of the Year 5 interview. But, the number of persons who moved from AFDC to work compared with those who moved from FIP to work during the five year period was significantly greater.

Other findings in the author's study indicate that FIP program respondents were concerned with some of the same issues FIP program sponsors assumed they would be, but the decision to work or remain on welfare also included hidden or underlying dimensions of what were thought by policy designers to be common barriers to a successful move from welfare to work. For those mothers not in the work force by year 5, these underlying dimensions may have been mechanisms that forced recipients to weigh their personal benefits of moving from welfare to work against the personal costs of doing so.

The greatest concerns for these respondents included financial and material support, children and their school activities, wages, and social supports. It appears, that even though financial, material, and emotional support may have been present in these respondents' relationships, other factors such as decent wages and involvement with children's school activities may have been unresolved barriers to lasting employment. Even though respondents receiving FIP were provided an opportunity to attend school or training during the five year period, the mean educational level for this group only slightly increased from

11.33 years to 11.97 years. This fact would have some bearing on the continued low wage opportunities for those recipients choosing work.

Although schooling and training seemed likely avenues for recipients, the time spent away from family while pursuing education or training may have been considered a greater short term cost for recipients than a long term benefit, as fewer FIP participants than AFDC participants chose to enter the work force.

The personal conflicts faced by mothers with school aged children involved in extracurricular activities such as band or sports, may have had greater consequences than policy makers anticipated. The competing demands of schooling (or training or work) for themselves compared to time spent with their children may be significant unmeasured factors in decision-making by mothers. Even though social, emotional and financial supports may be adequate in these situations, unmeasured costs to recipients such as these may determine final choices. For example, a mother may not be willing to sacrifice time and attention away from her school age children to engage in schooling or training for herself, especially if those children are active in school activities. Difficulties balancing the physical and emotional costs involved with schooling or training for the FIP recipients, compared to the well-being of mother and children, may be even greater if it is a single parent household which does not involve frequent contact with extended family.

Although these possibilities may help suggest possible explanations regarding the employment choices of welfare recipients, other questions remain unanswered. For example, what is the reasoning underlying these choices? What forces encourage women to make choices to remain detached from the workforce when opportunity to make a transition into the workforce with several amenities is presented? One possible explanation may be found in the social structure rather than in the individual psyche.

#### TOWARD A POSSIBLE EXPLANATION: GENDER ROLE SOCIALIZATION

In recent years women scholars, such as Chodorow (1978), Gilligan (1982), Miller (1986), Jordan et al. (1991), and Miller and Stiver (1997), have presented alternative approaches to explaining

Table 1

*Dependent Variable Outcomes*

<i>Actual Groups</i>	<i>RESPONDENTS WORKING</i>		
	<i>AFDC</i>	<i>FIP</i>	<i>AFDC + FIP</i>
Welfare and Work	127	84	211
Work/No Welfare	206	0	206
Total working	333	84	417

Table 2

*Dependent Variable Outcomes*

<i>RESPONDENTS NOT WORKING</i>	
No Welfare/ No Work	49
FIP Only/No Work	84
AFDC and FIP	8
AFDC Only	144

individual socialization. Their work has focused on understanding more fully the development and identity formation of women in the socialization process than that provided by traditional male-based models of individual human behavior and development.

Gilligan's work highlights two important characteristics in the socialization process, paradigmatic and structural. Her work revealed the experiences of women do not fit existing models of human development. Instead of pointing to this disparity as a problem in women's development, Gilligan suggests these limitations may be a representation of the conceptualization of the human condition, "an omission of certain truths about life" (Gilligan 1982:2). Gilligan elaborates on this point, by emphasizing the impact of structural elements in individual development. She suggests the existing differences between males and females develop within a "social context where factors of social status and power combine with reproductive biology to shape the

experience of males and females and the relations between the sexes" (Gilligan 1982:2). Gilligan's efforts resulted in her discovery of a "different voice" characterized by gender not by theme. This theme unfolded as she studied the development of moral decision making among women. The voice, Gilligan asserts, is not necessarily exclusively male or female but reflects two different modes of thought. One mode focuses on individualization and rights, the other on connectedness and responsibility. In other words, one mode reflects the dimension of separateness and impersonality consistent with traditional paradigm thinking. The other mode reflects the dimension of interrelatedness and the value of personal experiences and relationships characteristic of alternative paradigm thinking (Schriver, 1998). Although these themes are not necessarily tied to gender, according to Gilligan, they do seem to reflect the different developmental experiences of males and females. Similarly, the work of Miller (1976), reinforces this theme. Miller suggests that "women's sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then maintain affiliation and relationships" (1976:83).

Chodorow's work (1978) also addresses identity formation in women. Her work explores and accounts for the differences in personality development in males and females. Chodorow asserts that women, universally, are largely responsible for early child care. This early social environmental difference results in basic differences in personality development of girls and boys. Chodorow's explanation is that personality formation is almost entirely set by three years of age, and that for both girls and boys the caretaker during the first three years is almost universally female.

This early environment results in female identity formation taking place in a context of ongoing relationships, since "mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like and continuous with, themselves." Girls in turn see themselves as more "like their mother, thus fusing the experience of attachment with the process of identity formation." This early environment also results in boys being experienced by their mother as male opposite. Boys "in defining themselves as masculine separate their mothers from themselves." By doing this, relatedness, connectedness, and empathy is less central in their early identity formation and definition

of self. Individuation and separation is instead more central in males' identity formation (1978:pp. 150, 166–167).

According to Chodorow "girls emerge from this period, the first three years, with a basis for 'empathy' built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not." At the end of this early developmental process, "girls come to experience themselves as less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the external object-world, and as differently oriented to their inner object-world as well" (p.167).

Chodorow posits that these different early experiences have significant consequences for the developmental experiences of both males and females throughout their lives. Attachment continues to be more important for female identity formation and separation and individuation remains more important for the development of masculinity in boys. Male identity tends to be threatened by intimacy, female identity, by separation. Males tend to have difficulty with relationships while females tend to have problems with individuation (in Gilligan 1982:8–9).

#### TOWARD RETHINKING WELFARE REFORM—SUGGESTED POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

In considering the alternative ways in which women and men are socialized to think about themselves and their connection to others and their environment, a new perspective needs to be included to expand our understanding of women, work, and welfare. If we consider the work of these theorists, the choices made by welfare mothers to delay entering the workforce at critical points in their parenting years may be more fully explained.

Gilligan and Chodorow offer new perspectives on the dimensions of identity formation that may very well significantly influence women's decision making about education, training and work.

Gilligan finds a "different voice" for women, one that focuses on connectedness and responsibility which celebrates interrelatedness and values personal experiences and relationships. Chodorow emphasizes the impact of maternal socialization. Her work also addresses the relatedness and connectedness that appears to be a strong dimension of gender socialization in women.

These processes ultimately become important elements in identity formation.

These alternative perspectives on identity formation suggest the need to focus on the social structure and the processes by which females are socialized to think about personal or familial relationships, especially maternal relationships. If socialization does serve as an important underlying predictor of gender role behavior, then the choices made by the welfare mothers in this study may be more fully explained. Their decisions to forego opportunities for education, training and work in order that their social and nurturing responsibilities for maintaining close relationships with their children could be fulfilled, may not be nearly as confounding as it seems when viewed only through the lenses of traditional developmental and socialization theories. These newer perspectives shed needed light on the structural socialization of women and the superficial manner in which this issue has been addressed in policy making and program design historically. As in the case with many welfare reform efforts, Washington state policy makers presumed that employment would or should be the ultimate goal for the FIP program participants. As a result, the most apparent barriers to job attainment such as lack of education and training/work were addressed. It is also quite possible that FIP participants may have initially viewed lack of education and training as the only barriers to their entering the world of work. However, when confronted with the reality of choosing education, training, and, ultimately, work over parenting responsibilities, the findings of this study suggest that mothers may have seen the welfare and general well-being of their children, as reflected in the time and attention available to their children when their children needed them as their primary responsibility. Conversely, these mothers chose to deny themselves the long term benefits of schooling, training and job-generated income in order to meet their responsibilities to their children.

This data does not address the reasoning, nor factors that impacted the different outcomes for AFDC compared to FIP recipients. Given that AFDC recipients were given less options to pursue work compared with a greater number of options offered to FIP recipients, it can be assumed, FIP recipients had more options to exercise personal judgment regarding themselves and their

families. Because of lingering questions such as this, the use of existing alternative theories to help explain the confounding lack of success of FIP and other welfare reform efforts, welfare research needs and deserves much more attention by policy makers, policy analysts, and researchers.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS/SUGGESTED OUTCOMES

The ultimate goal of welfare reform has been uniform in thought. Able-bodied individuals are encouraged and expected to become active in the workforce. The intent is that movement into the workforce would not be sporadic, but long term. The assurance that any previous model will insure this type success has been fleeting. We are intrigued when part of the model is effective, but when welfare reform does not address the entire issue, the end result does not generate the expected outcome.

I propose a model in which recipients have a voice regarding their present and future needs. Certainly, these needs may vary depending on the individual, but allowing the recipients a voice will open communication regarding the life course placement of the recipients themselves and their families (Clausen, 1986).

Keeping the life course development of the family in mind, I propose a plan that acknowledges the various life-cycles of the family. The family progresses through various stages of development, such as, early marriage, young children, pre-teen, adolescents and so on (Bengston and Allen 1993; Demo and Allen, 1996). Given these various changes in family development, parents may be more flexible in assuming challenging work or training roles at some points in the family life course than at others. A welfare reform plan that reflects the life course of the family will give consideration to gender role socialization for women, especially so for women who are very traditional in their views regarding the role of mothers. Avoiding the likelihood of forcing women to make a choice between work and family may prove more realistic and feasible, given past failures of welfare reform.

Another focus of this plan would be to address the psychological wellbeing of the client. Given that welfare is a program that inherently embodies a stigma that may be passed on to clients, it would be unrealistic to assume that individuals are unaffected by

its use. Long-term use may generate feelings of low self-esteem, or feelings of inadequacy in clients, of which they may not be aware. Providing psychological services or support groups for clients would be one means to addressing this issue.

Integrating Life-Course theory into welfare reform policy allows policy makers to look beyond the individual and address a comprehensive picture of the individual, family and environment. Policy should be in sync with the life-course development of the family, as the individual develops within the family, so does the social, psychological and environmental dimensions of the family.

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