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From Self-Sufficiency to Personal and Family Sustainability: A New Paradigm for Social Policy

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Current social policy that affects welfare recipients focuses on the concept of “self-sufficiency” where leaving welfare for work is the goal. While this approach has reduced welfare rolls, it has not necessarily helped low-income people improve their economic, educational, or social outlook. This paper suggests that the concept of Personal and Family Sustainability (PFS) may be a better way to evaluate and direct social policy. A definition of PFS is developed from the environmental and community development roots of sustainability and four domains for creating PFS indicators are introduced.

Keywords: *Self-sufficiency, sustainability, social policy, poverty, welfare, TANF*

The notion of “self-sufficiency”—and its related terms, “independence,” “self-reliance,” and “self-supporting”—have become the embodiment of poverty reduction policy. On its face, self-sufficiency appears to be an appropriate goal for social policy. However, this paper asserts that using self-sufficiency as a social welfare policy goal results in programs and evaluations that are unclear, inequitable, dichotomous, and limited in scope.

Self-sufficiency has become so ingrained in American society that the media, policy makers, researchers, and the general public no longer question the legitimacy of this goal. Examples are abundant in federal social policy. For example, one of the four federal goals for welfare reform (called Transitional Aid to Needy Families or TANF) is to “end the dependence of needy parents

on government benefits . . ." (House Committee on Ways and Means, 2004, sections 7-4). Indeed, the Congressional publication, *Background Material and Data on the Programs Within the Jurisdiction of the Committee on Ways and Means*, commonly known as the *Green Book*, explicitly states that reducing welfare and promoting "self-sufficiency" has been a Congressional focus since the 1960s.

While this paper focuses primarily on welfare, TANF is not the only entitlement program that sets self-sufficiency as its goal. Title XX of the Social Security Act, which created the Social Services Block Grant, sets out to: (1) achieve or maintain economic self-support to prevent, reduce, or eliminate dependency; and (2) achieve or maintain self-sufficiency, including reduction or prevention of dependency (House Committee on Ways and Means, 2003, section 10-6).

Using TANF as an example, this paper introduces and examines how a broader concept, Personal and Family Sustainability (PFS), may be a more effective way to define, evaluate, and direct poverty reduction. Although the emphasis on self-sufficiency in TANF has reduced welfare rolls, the larger societal goal of helping low-income people—especially single mothers—enter stable jobs or improve their economic, educational, and social situation has not been met. This paper suggests a new paradigm for considering the goals of social welfare policy. It introduces and examines how a broader concept, Personal and Family Sustainability (PFS), may be a more effective way to define evaluate, and direct poverty reduction.

Current and past U.S. presidents have used the concepts of self-sufficiency and independence to define social welfare policies. In its welfare reauthorization proposal, for instance, the Bush Administration described helping "each family reach its highest degree of self-sufficiency" (Office of the President, 2003, p. 13) as a fundamental goal of TANF. In the same vein, former President Clinton, who signed the 1996 welfare reform bill into law, said, "We want a welfare system which emphasizes getting people to work, self-sufficiency, and welfare as a transition, not as a way of life" (Federal News Service, 1995).

The media has also adopted the self-sufficiency mantra without questioning or defining the term. Months before the signing of the welfare reform bill, the *Washington Post* described a

Virginia welfare-to-work program as “a shift from dependency to self-sufficiency” (Benning, 1996). Similarly, the *Columbus Dispatch* (Candisky & Johnson, 2004) defined self-sufficiency as non-reliance on public assistance. The article describing the impact of welfare reform on the life of a 38-year-old single mother of three teenagers concluded that “steady work has not brought self-sufficiency” (p. 1A).

Researchers and the general public also accept self-sufficiency as an appropriate policy and programmatic goal. Research centers, policy-related articles, and websites commonly link self-sufficiency to ending or reducing welfare-use and poverty. A search using the terms “self-sufficiency and poverty” on the popular Internet search engine Google brings up more than 165,000 “hits” from conservative, liberal, and bipartisan research centers, as well as from academic, religious, secular, political and apolitical organizations and individuals. A cursory glance at these websites suggests that many people and institutions accept self-sufficiency as a legitimate goal of social welfare policy.

Self-Sufficiency: A Problematic Term

Despite widespread acceptance of self-sufficiency as a defined social welfare policy goal for decades by policy makers, researchers, and the general public, both the term and the concept are problematic. In the literature critiques focus primarily on two overlapping areas: (1) self-sufficiency is difficult to define and thus even more difficult to evaluate and (2) the term is itself limited, unattainable, and insufficient for policymaking.

Despite its frequent use there is no agreed-upon definition of self-sufficiency. Long (2001) reverts to what is described as the generally accepted public definition: “a financially self-sufficient family . . . has enough resources to meet its needs without public support” (p. 390). The specifics of such a definition are still unclear. As a result, according to Long, it is “virtually impossible” to evaluate the effectiveness of those policies and programs that espouse self-sufficiency.

Others use the term self-sufficiency in conjunction or interchangeably with the terms independence, self-reliance, or well-being (Cancian & Meyer, 2004; Braun, Olson, & Bauer, 2002;

Daugherty & Barber, 2001). The term is often defined broadly as holding a paying job or being in a state of well-being, with limited reliance on welfare benefits (Cancian & Meyer, 2004; Parker, 1994). Some researchers also distinguish between work-related benefits and benefits paid to individuals involved in TANF-mandated community service jobs. A study by Sandfort and Hill (1996) operationalized self-sufficiency as income from labor, child support, and assistance from relatives in one model, while another model included income from a husband's labor in addition to other variables.

Generally speaking, however, definitions of self-sufficiency usually assume paid work and lack of "dependency" on income-based government benefits, especially welfare or TANF (Johnson & Corcoran, 2004; Caputo, 1997; Bowen, Desimone, & McKay, 1995; Gowdy & Pearlmutter 1993). This view of self-sufficiency continues to be used in research and policymaking, but many argue that it belies how people of any income bracket actually live, and it should be redefined.

Bratt and Keyes (1997) add that the term and its concomitant policy approach suggests that people who are not "self-sufficient" are somehow "insufficient." They also note that the term implies that individuals who receive government assistance need no support once they leave the welfare system. Further, Bratt and Keyes argue that nearly all American citizens, regardless of income, receive some form of government assistance, be it tax deductions for mortgages and interest payments, Social Security and Medicare benefits to the elderly, GI Bill and VA services to veterans, tax withholdings for pensions, or others. Indeed, in their Ford Foundation study of nonprofit housing organizations, Bratt and Keyes struggle both with defining self-sufficiency and with determining the point at which a family becomes self-sufficient. They offer, instead, a "continuum of self-sufficiency" (p. x), with different levels representing varying degrees of public assistance. Such notions suggest that the focus on self-sufficiency, independence, and dependence should be reframed as interdependence. Even the most rugged individualist likely benefits from a number of governmental and non-governmental resources from public housing subsidies to tax-deferred college loans to tax deductions on vacation homes and primary residences.

Gowdy and Pearlmutter (1993) also oppose the dichotomous nature of the term, which suggests that one is either self-sufficient or one is not. Other researchers describe self-sufficiency and dependency as a "myth" when applied to low-income people. Edin (1995) believes that the focus on this dichotomy ignores what it actually costs to raise a family in the United States. She argues that welfare does not provide enough money to create a state of total dependency, and similarly, that low-wage jobs do not pay enough to move a family to a state of economic well-being. Low-income people may depend on welfare benefits for survival, but they cannot survive on welfare alone. Indeed, low-income women use several means to "make ends meet" and increase their human capital by receiving welfare benefits, engaging in paid work (both reported and unreported), accepting help from families, friends, and their children's fathers, and implementing other survival strategies (Edin & Lein, 1997).

Daugherty and Barber (2001), Gowdy and Pearlmutter (1993), and Braun, Olson, and Bauer (2002) propose redefining self-sufficiency so that it better represents the realities of people's lives. Daugherty and Barber (2001) focus on an "ecology to work" perspective that would change the philosophical and empirical definition to specific achievable actions. These researchers suggest that the term self-sufficiency, as well as independence, misrepresents and oversimplifies the power and meaning of human agency. The term, they propose, is based on a moral American myth of self-reliance and individuality, when the reality of women's lives is more of an ongoing process affected by social policies and daily events.

Using a client-centered perspective to develop a new scale of economic self-sufficiency (ESS), Gowdy and Pearlmutter (1993) note that self-sufficiency appeared to be more of a process than a goal for the 244 women in their study. They used factor analysis to determine that self-sufficiency should reflect four dimensions: 1) autonomy and responsibility, 2) financial security and responsibility, 3) family and self well-being, and 4) basic assets for living in the community.

In their study of teenage mothers receiving AFDC, Lie and Morney (1992) do not try to redefine self-sufficiency but instead attempt to operationalize it by developing 16 indicators that cover

arenas ranging from economic to social to educational and from career to day-to-day situations. Braun, Olson, and Bauer (2002) build on Lie and Moroney's work by connecting self-sufficiency to well-being and sustainability to promote "sustainable well-being" for low-income individuals and families. Despite these efforts to develop a definition of self-sufficiency that carries greater relevance for welfare and poverty reduction, the term continues to lack clarity and remains difficult to evaluate.

Developing a Conceptual Model of Sustainability

Perhaps the term self-sufficiency, with its multiple vague and misleading definitions, is simply the wrong goal for social policy. The causes of poverty are very complex and any public policy designed to tackle this social issue must reflect this reality. The literature shows that families need a combination of factors that go well beyond an hourly job or job training. These include financial factors, social support, neighborhood quality, logistical help, psychological well-being, and even the welfare system itself (Hogan, Solheim, Wolfgram, Nkosi, & Rodrigues, 2004; Harris, 1996; Blalock, Tiller, & Monroe, 2004; Cancian, Haveman, Meyer, & Wolfe, 2002; Cheng, 2002). The Personal and Family Sustainability (PFS) model addresses these concerns.

Personal and Family Sustainability is based on the premise that society can more effectively reduce poverty using a model that is multi-faceted, culturally appropriate, and reflective of the reality of poverty and welfare use. PFS builds on the concept of sustainability, which has its origins in the environmental movement, urban studies, and in community and global economic development (Agyeman, Bullard, & Evans, 2003; Fernando, 2003; Rogers & Ryan, 2001). Sustainability is, in fact, widely used as a concept and goal for environmental and global economic issues, and has recently made leeway into the community and social development arenas in the United States.

The United Nations defines economic sustainability in global terms, referring to the extent to which a country has achieved lasting economic transformation. In this context, sustainability focuses on how a country makes changes that lead to enduring individual and collective well-being for its citizens (Agyeman,

Bullard, & Evans, 2003; World Commission on Economic Development, 1987). Usually, those "changes" address large structural issues such as environmental factors, technologies, and health care (Prugh & Assadourian, 2003).

At the community level, the terms 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' are often used interchangeably (Fernando, 2003; Hempel, 1999). Both concentrate on community development that is future-oriented and focuses on renewal and replenishing resources. Whether environmentally or community-based, sustainability has come to mean development and resource use that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43).

Others extend the term 'sustainability' to include environmental justice and human rights, emphasizing that environmental problems disproportionately affect those living in poverty (Agyeman, Bullard, & Evans, 2002; 2003). This view calls for a "just society" where all citizens enjoy material, social, economic, and political equity. This concept speaks to the need for sound and safe transportation, plentiful jobs, and meeting all human and environmental needs. Fernando (2003) points out that this notion is a social justice perspective and requires an understanding of the relationship between nature, society, and the political world.

The ecological/environmental framework, the community development focus, and the social justice perspectives all share an understanding of sustainability as a holistic examination of the human condition, focusing on creating unified solutions rather than incremental and patchwork policies (Agyeman, 2004). Agyeman states that "Achieving sustainable development requires an emphasis on quality of life, on present and future generations, on justice and equity in resource allocation, and on living within ecological limits," (p. 674). In this view, the concept of sustainability involves development, renewal, redevelopment, and maintenance of resources. Similarly, after considering the ecological nature of the concept, Pearce, Atkinson, and Dubourg (1994) offer a simple definition and emphasize that "[sustainability] is nondeclining human well-being over time" (p. 470).

Ecological economists discuss the need to enhance and conserve our "natural capital" (i.e., natural resources such as fish

supply, energy, forests; all renewable and replenishable) (Hinterberger, Luks, Schmidt-Bleek, 1997; Agyeman, 2004). A people-focused parallel to this notion is human capital for individuals and families. Often defined as education, training, and skills that facilitate productive activity (Becker, 1964), human capital is an individual resource that meets the primary criteria for sustainability: it is both renewable and replenishable. It is, indeed, arguably the only human renewable and replenishable asset.

It is, however, the social justice perspective that offers a useful connection between sustainability and social welfare policy, though few researchers have made this connection. Braun, Olson, and Bauer (2002), for instance, address this topic by stating that current policy focuses on well-being for the few rather than long-term sustainability for many. Similarly, Garces (2003) espouses the development of a sustainable health care system for older adults in Europe by focusing on social sustainability that has legal, administrative, cultural, economic, and quality of life factors that are universal to all citizens. Likewise, Glasmeier and Farrigan (2003) examine poverty in Appalachia, linking sustainable community development to asset building in the community, which leads to improved jobs and human capital development.

The implied and explicit understanding of the interdependence of humans and their natural, social, and cultural environment makes sustainability a useful concept for individuals and families. If a goal of American social welfare policy is to enhance the well-being of its citizens (Blau & Abramovitz, 2004), then policymakers must consider the issue within a holistic sustainability framework.

To understand the notion of Personal and Family Sustainability, it is necessary to use a combination of relevant and generally accepted "self-sufficiency" factors from the literature in accordance with sustainability indicators suggested by the United Nations and the United Kingdom. The PFS approach presents an opportunity for policymakers and researchers to reach beyond the limits of the self-sufficiency paradigm to a perspective that is simultaneously present- and future-oriented.

Defining Personal and Family Sustainability

To avoid repeating the confusion and inequity associated with the notion of self-sufficiency, it is critical to clearly define the concept of Personal and Family Sustainability. To begin with, PFS must address the complexity of poverty and welfare use. Often explanations for poverty and welfare use focus on behavioral/cultural and structural factors (Iceland, 2003; Rank; 1994). The behavioral/cultural perspective places the onus of poverty and getting out of poverty on the individual and on her/his behaviors or actions (Mead, 1996; Auletta, 1983; Wilson, 1996), which are sometimes linked to mental health issues (Danziger, Kalil, & Anderson, 2000; Jayakody, Danziger, & Pollack, 2000). This approach creates unintended roadblocks and makes it more difficult for the individual to leave poverty.

The structural perspective maintains that poverty and welfare use are the result of larger shortcomings found in the structure of society: too few jobs, limited public transportation, and social and economic issues such as changes in the labor market, falling real wages, and jobs leaving the inner-cities (Wilson, 1996; 1987; Massey & Denton, 1993; Blank, 1997).

Research suggests, however, that long-term poverty and welfare use are likely the result of a combination of several factors: human capital development, work and employment, family structure and family issues, psychological and physical health, social networks and relationships, and housing and physical environment. Although the literature in this area is vast, there are some notable explorations by Wilson and Aponte (1985), Wilson (1996), Popkin (1990), Massey and Denton (1993), Edin and Lein (1997), Blank (1997), Iceland, (2003), and Henly, Danziger, and Offer (2005).

The PFS approach reflects the complexity of poverty and is consistent with the community development idea of sustainable communities: it encompasses long-term health and vitality for the community and its citizens, including education, economic well-being, resilience and continued renewal (U.N. Division of Sustainable Development, 2003; Hempel, 1999). From this perspective, Personal and Family Sustainability can be seen as *maxi-*

mizing full human potential to establish long-term economic, physical, psychological, and social well-being for individuals and their families.

This definition addresses one of the key criticisms of recent welfare reform: that it reduces the number of welfare recipients but increases the number of working poor (Lichter, & Jayakody, 2002; Perry-Burney, & Jennings, 2003). PFS also addresses one of the main reasons welfare was reformed in the first place: the common stereotype that welfare recipients lack motivation to work and leave the system on their own (Seccombe, 1999). By aiming to "*maximize full human potential*" rather than simply reduce the number of recipients, an ecological and lasting impact emerges.

PFS moves social policy away from the idea of social control (Cowger & Atherton, 1974) to a strengths-based (Poulin, 2005) or resiliency perspective (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000) by setting as its goal the idea of maximizing human potential. The notion that individuals have inner strengths that interact with environmental factors is now common in academic fields such as psychology, sociology, social work, and family studies. Reconceptualizing self-sufficiency as PFS allows policymakers to use a broader ecological perspective and focus on more expansive goals than simply leaving welfare for a job, any job.

Developing PFS Indicators

Any new concept requires a way to operationalize its components. In the environmental and community development movements, it has been crucial to develop sustainability indicators in order to move the concept beyond theory to practice (Bell & Morse, 2001). The United Kingdom, for example, developed 50 indicators from a list of 190 quality-of-life domains and determined that human capital (education and health status), social connections that increase chances for productivity, and equality issues are important measures of social or human sustainability (Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs, 2004).

Personal and Family Sustainability fits within a similar framework, especially considering those elements that research has shown to be consistent with long-term economic success: structural and cultural/behavioral factors. These factors, however, are

not as dichotomous as they first appear, but are actually interrelated. In considering their interrelatedness, the human ecology perspective is particularly useful.

PFS indicators are best thought of as a set of interlocking domains at the individual, social, and environmental levels, rather than strict indicators of a particular outcome. Researchers and practitioners commonly consider social indicators for children and families by assessing the health, education, and social well-being of children in families (Brown & Moore, 2003; Jacobs, 1994). Looking through the lens of PFS, these indicators could be used at the public policy level as well as at the practitioner level. While there are several "indicators" available, one common group of indicators is derived from the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2004). Since the Forum and many other indicators focus primarily on children, some further conceptualization is needed to appropriately fit PFS indicators to families.

The Forum uses four domains for considering key national indicators of well-being: economic security, health, behavior and social environment, and education. The first domain is economic security, which encompasses a family's financial situation and other indicators related to economic security such as income, secure employment, housing issues, nutrition, and health care. A second domain is general health/healthcare access, which could be expanded to reflect mental health and overall psychological well-being. Research suggests, indeed, that psychological well-being, including depression, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, are relevant to low-income families (Brown & Moran, 1997; Popkin, 1990; Dolinsky, Caputo, & O'Kane, 1989) and should be included within the indicators.

A third domain that can foster indicators is behavior and social environment. Focusing on children, the Forum on Child and Family Statistics looks at safety issues and risk behaviors such as substance abuse and physical safety. For PFS, this domain might be expanded to embrace safety from domestic violence as well as family's social environment and/or social capital. Coleman (1988) defines social capital as the personal relationships and connections that exist within a family and in the larger community. These relationships and connections can be both positive and negative. Negative connections can hamper positive well-

being, but positive social capital can connect families to resources, services, and even job or education opportunities (Dominguez & Watkins, 2003; Antonucci, Akiyama, & Lansford, 1998).

Education is the fourth domain identified by the Forum. Since the Forum's indicators focus on children, these indicators examine education and school enrollment. Expanding this area might involve a broader understanding of education, viewing it as human capital development. Here the linkages between the fourth and first domains are apparent, as education and work are essential to improving economic well-being: considering long-term career development instead of job-placement or academic education instead of job-readiness programs.

The clear connection between the fourth domain and the first highlights the interrelatedness of all four domains and specific indicators within each. Human capital development may be essential for lasting economic security, but it cannot be developed without education. Poor health or lack of access to health care can hinder the ability to work as can domestic violence or insecure housing. All of these indicators affect psychological well-being just as depression, low self-esteem, and low self-efficacy can limit desire for, access to, and success in health status, employment, and education.

Conclusion

Self-sufficiency and its related terms—*independence, self-reliant, and self-supportive*—have long been the goals of many, if not most, social welfare policies. Unfortunately, these concepts have been defined in ways that are inconsistent, dichotomous, and limited in scope. To have a lasting positive effect on social welfare, governments and practitioners should take a longer, more complex look at psychological well-being and economic success, preferably from an ecological perspective. The main goal of this paper was to introduce and develop the concept of *Personal and Family Sustainability*, which stems from the notion of sustainability as used in the arenas of environmental justice and community development.

Future research should further explore alternatives to self-sufficiency as the goal of social welfare policy. The conceptual

model of Personal and Family Sustainability should also be further explored. While this paper considers social indicators espoused by the Forum for Child and Family Statistics as possible domains from which to develop social welfare indicators, specific PFS indicators should be created to further clarify the concept and test its usefulness as a means to promote more comprehensive and far-reaching goals in social welfare policy.

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