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Introduction to the Special Issue

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Introduction to the Special Issue

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Guest Editors

The *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* has hosted a number of special editions since President Clinton “ended welfare as we know it.” Special topics such as *Evaluation of TANF* in 2001, *Coping with Poverty* in 2006, *Globalization and Social Justice* in 2007 and *Contemporary Social Welfare History* earlier this year brought attention to issues of critical concern within the field. All have focused on human well-being in the wake of a society that appears less caring for those who are most vulnerable: the poor, immigrants, people of color, and single mothers on welfare. Additionally, each special edition framed the issues within the broader contexts of socially unjust systems, competitive global markets, and political and legislative processes that have led to policy changes—some positive, many not.

This special edition aims to continue this analysis by exploring and critically evaluating the lived experiences of women on and post-welfare using historical knowledge and current

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qualitative and quantitative research data. We have put this edition together out of concern with the celebratory approach that too many policy analysts have adopted in proclaiming the 1996 welfare initiative a "success." Like some of our colleagues, we are struck and amazed that many researchers consider welfare to be successful. We have also been discouraged that too few of our colleagues have raised concerns about the current dismal state of women on welfare and of the plight of those who have left or disappeared from the rolls. Researchers and scholars have been slow to bring attention to poor women raising families on their own and to the disconnect between their *real* lives and the statistics that *report* on their lives. While it is true that welfare numbers are down, those who have been forced off or have left welfare are not doing well at all.

Welfare policy has rarely taken account of variations in place and in the situations of heads of households, and as a result, the consequences faced by poor families have been more dire for some than for others. Reliance almost solely on quantitative data has obscured the problems that poor families face today: from only a numbers perspective, the complexity of situation, locale, and circumstances are lost and, as has been the case, rendered invisible and ultimately ignored. What is not seen is not heard and not addressed.

We focus herein on how the actual experiences of low-income women challenge conventional ideas about the success of current welfare reform. We discuss how we must use this information to inform and impact public policy by addressing the systems of inequality that structure women's lives. Over the past decade, too many women have disappeared from eligibility programs. A large majority is barely getting by in low-wage jobs without opportunities to advance into higher paid work. Many more move in and out of the low-wage job market with distressing regularity, and over forty percent remain poor. Women who had been attending college as a means to escape poverty have dropped out, due to state restrictions on post-secondary education. Some women are in prison, others have lost their children or given them to grandparents to raise; some have taken their own lives.

We take as our framework for this special edition the work of Alice O'Connor (2001) in *Poverty Knowledge* wherein she

brings attention to the ways in which poverty research has become an industry of sorts, more interested in entrepreneurial gains and less interested in ameliorating poverty. O'Connor sums up welfare reform as a "triumph of politics and ideology over knowledge." In this volume, we bring forth some of the omitted knowledge that has been gathered by scholars and researchers from the late 1990s into the twenty-first century. We seek to provide new poverty knowledge that better recognizes the contemporary situations of women raising children on their own. Of concern to us is that the preponderance of evidence being produced—the "ideological manifestos"—that celebrate welfare success will continue to influence, maintain and sustain the harsh attitudes of the current welfare policy, despite an acknowledgment by the Department of Health and Human Services (2006) that the "causes of welfare receipt and dependence are not clearly known" (*Indicators of Welfare*, p. 1).

Rightly, O'Connor and others argue that individuals' needs for welfare are "problems of the political economy (rather) than behavioral problems of the poor" (p. 7). This understanding requires that poverty knowledge be "more interdisciplinary, qualitative as well as quantitative, and much broader in scope" (p. 6) than individual-level reform. But looking at poverty among women in this rich and much more complex way "will require a basic change in the way we as a society think collectively about 'the poverty problem,' a change that begins with the redirection in contemporary social scientific knowledge ...knowledge based principally on qualitative, national-level data" that is strong enough to counter the array of "ideological manifestos" promoted in the 1980s and carried forth into the current time (pp. 4, 5).

In our *Call for Papers*, we encouraged scholars and researchers to submit manuscripts that would challenge the proclaimed success of welfare reform and reflect the diversity of women's lived experiences on and beyond welfare. We also urged authors to suggest recommendations for crafting policy that can raise women and their families out of poverty and allow them dignity and respect. Hence, this special edition provides us, and the authors who have written for it, the opportunity to bring attention to the lived experiences of women who are poor, often raising families on their own, and to not

only insist that public policy consider their situations but to use the available multi-level data to propose a policy agenda that will raise them out of poverty.

In *Poetic Justice* (1995), Martha Nussbaum writes that “the ability to imagine vividly, and then to assess judicially, another person’s pain, to participate in it and then to ask about its significance, is a powerful way of learning what the human facts are and of acquiring a motivation to alter them” (p. 91). This is poignantly discussed by Alford Young (2006) in “Unearthing Ignorance,” as he illustrates how people who are poor are often imagined and assessed. Using images of Hurricane Katrina survivors, he offers two contradictory descriptions: one is of those we imagine who are often depicted as shiftless, lazy, menacing, and violent and the other is of those who actually exist, who are less recognized for their ability to act courageously and behave in hopeful, caring, persistent, and resilient ways. It is this latter image, he argues, that is absent among normative constructions. Here, Young purposely aims to present “a more thorough and complex depiction of this population...capable of handling extreme conditions and...the capacity to endure under duress” (p. 210)...(and) “to act with patience and composure during the course of so much of their everyday lives, even while living in the midst of trying conditions” (p. 209). He says that we must reconstruct these images in order to care and respond.

It is with this same intent that we present this Special Edition to report some of the real stories behind welfare reform. These articles portray women who are struggling to control their environments, partly in response to being controlled by them. These are women who did not “talk about being stigmatized but about being judged and/or degraded,” women who were “actively coping and saw themselves as fighting literally to feed their children” (McIntyre, et al., 2003, p. 327) and themselves. This research must be a central component of the deliberations on welfare policy and the evaluation of its results.

To frame this special issue, we set forth a call to scholars and policymakers to re-conceptualize and re-evaluate poverty and welfare reform within a broader lens. In the lead article, “Women’s Lives and Poverty: Developing a Framework of Real Reform for Welfare,” we

illustrate the limits of the large-scale, highly quantitative evaluation studies which have permeated the welfare debates and call instead for multi-method approaches that incorporate qualitative studies which ensure that women's voices are an integral part of welfare discourse. We also promote the use of an intersectional approach that demonstrates the complexity of the lives and identities of welfare recipients.

The papers that follow exemplify this approach and challenge the success of welfare reform. We begin with three case studies—Maine, California, and Mississippi—which capture and reveal how the complexities of women's lives, regardless of location, circumstance, or environment, are disregarded and indeed exacerbated by welfare reform. We then turn to the impact of welfare reform, beginning with a multi-year study of welfare leavers which follows families for a three year period, documenting their movements in and out of poverty and situations of despair—changes that go unnoticed by single quantitative accounts. We conclude with three papers that more specifically examine the implications of the criminalization of women as a result of fraud conviction, increased hardship and discrimination among women as a result of location and age, and the welfare discourse appropriated by adolescents that stands in stark contrast to the lives they really live. Throughout this issue, a common theme emerges: to move toward greater social equity, social welfare policy must truly be reformed. These papers, both individually and collectively, provide a direction, a set of actions, and an agenda for this to be accomplished. Importantly, they also contribute to the new poverty knowledge called for by Alice O'Connor.

One of the defining characteristics of welfare reform was the mandate for employment, and years after welfare reform, the work requirements continue to get stricter. Sandra Butler, Janine Corbett, Crystal Bond and Chris Hastedt demonstrate that the workfirst focus often ignores the barriers to employment that TANF recipients experience. Quite simply, the employment focus of welfare reform, without more holistic supports to sustain women and their families, basically ensures that women will have neither long-term success in the labor market nor raise themselves and their children out of poverty. After demonstrating the complexity of women's lives and the

inability of a workfirst approach to raise them out of poverty, the authors use this research to influence public policy in Maine. Their research was central in defeating a state bill that proposed increasing work requirements and setting stricter time limits for receipt of TANF. Butler and her colleagues set the stage to not only delve deeper into understanding the lives of women on welfare, but to also use that data to impact public policy.

While the overall welfare policy discourse treats women as an undifferentiated category, the reality is that this is not the case. Alejandra Marchevsky and Jeanne Theoharis share a powerful ethnographic case study of Mexican immigrant women in Los Angeles County. Central to their analysis is how race, gender and nationality intersect to impact the treatment and experiences of women in the welfare system. They challenge us to understand the lived experiences of women on welfare within this context. In contrast to welfare evaluations that demonstrate the success of moving women off welfare, their research demonstrates not only that moving women off welfare does not equate with success, but that it also ignores discrimination and structural inequality within the system. Using a civil rights perspective, Marchevsky and Theoharis reveal how the identity as low-income Mexican immigrant women profoundly shaped how they were understood and treated within the welfare bureaucracy and the labor market—conclusions which are conspicuously and intentionally absent in conventional large scale evaluations of welfare reform.

Moving across the country to the southern part of the United States, Deborah Harris and Domenico Parisi introduce another important variable into understanding the experiences of women and welfare—that of geographical place. Comparing two counties in the Mississippi Delta, Harris and Parisi find that the focus on caseload reductions as an indicator of the success of welfare reform does not capture family sacrifices preceding welfare exits or family well-being following an exit. Central to this, they note that geographic place matters, offering women different opportunities to move off welfare or prohibit that move. A clear implication of this work is how aspects of the local context must be used in studies of poverty and welfare reform, especially to inform welfare policymakers

on the importance of place-based contexts in framing welfare policies and programs.

These three case studies, taken together, indicate how the complexity of women's lives is not only under-represented by current measures of success in welfare, but also that the measures themselves—namely reduced welfare caseloads and work attachment—do not necessarily indicate success for women on welfare. In a unique longitudinal study of eighteen Iowa welfare recipients, Cynthia Needles Fletcher, Mary Winter and An-Ti Shih track changes in housing, employment, program participant and family composition using qualitative research methods. This paper takes leaver studies into new arenas by following recipients for multiple years, using in-depth qualitative analysis, and detailing the lives of those who have left cash benefit programs, those still receiving benefits, and those cycling on and off programs. Indeed, these methodological twists set the paper apart from traditional welfare leaver studies and, as a result, the authors are able to highlight the diversity of experiences of welfare recipients by exposing the overwhelming complexity of their lives, the troublesome family scenarios they encounter, the fragmented nature of the welfare system and the bureaucracy surrounding it, and the resilience that they—and often their caseworkers—reveal as they confront the harshness of rigid rules and regulations.

Beginning the next section, which looks at the implications of welfare reform in more specific situations, is "The Untold Story of Welfare Fraud," a unique collaboration between academics (Richelle Swan, Linda Shaw, Sharon Cullity, and Mary Roche), staff of the Supportive Parents Intervention Network (SPIN) [Joni Halpern and Wendy Limbert], and the Office of the Public Defender (Juliana Humphrey). It considers women caught up in the "web of welfare fraud" and examines both their reasons for committing fraud and the circumstances that led them to do so. These authors expose the criminalization of low-income women who are often unknowingly—because of partner demands or a lack of understanding of income reporting requirements—committing and being convicted of welfare fraud, a conviction which results in the loss of all public welfare benefits. The development of a diversion program for first-time fraud offenders—a collaborative venture between

the Public Defender's office and SPIN, a grassroots organization working to strengthen low-income and welfare families and the communities within which they live—seeks, in addition to ensuring that the offenders repay the money owed and fulfill a mandatory community service requirement, to provide women with opportunities which will allow them to legitimately support themselves and their children.

Older women—and underserved group in the welfare reform literature—in rural Appalachia were deeply affected by welfare reform, especially by the mandates that required work and restricted benefits to five years, according to Debra Henderson and Ann Tickamyer. Age, as well as location, did not allow older women to weather these changes well: the multiplicity of problems that these women faced, intensified not only by age but by isolated living conditions, exacerbated their numerous encounters with periods of extreme hardship. Their classification as “able-bodied” and “capable of working,” for example, put them face-to-face with ageism in the marketplace. This was especially acute in the rural area in which they were living because of the severe lack of employment opportunities. When they tried to obtain employment, employers passed over them for younger, healthier adults. Circumstances which further added to their difficulties included the facts that over fifty percent of the women were providing in-home care for an uninsured, non-recipient spouse with health problems; forty-three percent had less than a high school education, and sixty-eight percent were unemployed. The authors write that “regardless of situation, limitation, or circumstance they found that their safety net had disappeared: they were denied benefits, required to take ‘personal responsibility’ for their life situations, and deemed capable of achieving economic independence by entering the labor market.”

The final article by Staci Lowe addresses “welfare discourse and the everyday lives of urban adolescents.” Clearly, one intent of the 1996 welfare policy was to reduce adolescent pregnancy, an often cited “cause and manifestation” of an earlier constructed “welfare crisis.” Here, Lowe positions the discourse of adolescents—most of whom are teen parents—against the reality of their lives: her intent is to investigate their capacity to understand and apply the messages of the wide-scale 1996

welfare reform mandates. From interviews conducted with both female and male youth, she discloses their capacity to appropriate the wider society messages of personal responsibility, work, and time-limited benefits while also facing and navigating—and expressing their concerns about and frustrations with—a challenging economy and increased competition for jobs. Once they were able to hear their own stories, however, they better understood the difficulties that they and others had in complying with welfare mandates. What also became clearer to them was that the complexity and difficulty of their lives was more attributable to structural explanations of poverty than to the individual behaviors that they had so readily accepted. As with the case study of older women in Appalachia, “the complex social environment...shaped by structural elements of poverty was not accounted for adequately in the planning of welfare reform policy.” In both these cases, as in too many others, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act continues to create severe hardships for those people whose lives are complicated by structural conditions beyond their control.

Michel Foucault maintained that the creation of knowledge outside of societal power structures is difficult because of the many ways in which the voices of the disempowered are systemically silenced by “expert” knowledge systems. Truth, then, becomes a function of who has power. We are optimistic that a construction of knowledge grounded in life experiences, as revealed in the articles in this edition, carries the potential for a more representative depiction of truth—a new poverty knowledge which can contribute to and influence the design of welfare policy that responds to the complex lives of women raising families alone. Among the directions for change suggested through the studies presented here are:

- the establishment of the premise that people who work should not be poor: a domestic policy agenda must support access to health care, transportation, child care, education/job training, and wage supplements;
- a recognition that people who are unable to participate fully in the labor market could

contribute more to their families and improve their personal well-being if given greater access to quality health care and structured opportunities for work and education, including community-based employment projects;

- a modification of work requirements for individuals with disabilities or who care for children with disabilities without jeopardizing federal work participation requirements;
- the development of a focus on local job promotion and local transportation infrastructure to bring needed jobs to an area;
- the provision of more information about alternatives to public assistance;
- the establishment of programs that address the special needs of older recipients and assist those who are trying to enter the labor market by offering job and educational training that take their advanced age and physical shortcomings into account;
- an invitation to those most affected by policy the opportunity to define their situations and be a part of the discourse—a clear understanding of the ramifications of welfare reform legislation can only be achieved by investigating and acknowledging the experiences of the women most impacted by this policy;
- an insistence that future research include a broader set of methodological approaches and disciplinary perspectives in order to: (1) more fully understand the real impact of welfare reform on the lives of the poor; and, (2) help shape a policy agenda that tackles poverty in light of numerous contextual factors.

We have taken Alice O'Connor up on her invitation to participate in the conversation that seeks to “redefine the conceptual basis for poverty knowledge” and “broaden the empirical basis for poverty knowledge,” to “change the way poverty knowledge is produced and organized” and “to challenge the distinctions that associate narrowly constructed, hypothesis-testing models of inquiry with ‘objectivity’ while denigrating more theoretical, historical and structural analyses as

'advocacy' or ideology" (p. 22). We urge readers to accept this invitation with us.

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