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Negotiating the Discourse of Work: Women and Welfare-to-Work Educational Programs

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Introduction. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 is requiring increasing numbers of low-income women receiving public assistance to participate in short-term job training, with the goal of rapidly entering the workforce and ultimately achieving self-sufficiency. Recent evaluations of early state Awelfare to work@ programs for poor single parents suggests that short-term job training has the potential to help some participants increase earnings and reduce welfare receipts, but that poverty levels, welfare receipt, and unemployment frequently remain high among participants (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1995).

There is a pressing need for more studies that will increase our understanding of how work-related adult education programs can better assist low-income women in gaining employment that will enable them to support themselves and their families. A limitation of previous research is a focus primarily on isolated outcomes of program participation, without examining the job training experience itself. In particular, we know little about the process of learning that occurs in job training programs, the women=s beliefs and expectations about work, and other influences on women=s work-related learning, in particular the family

The purpose of this research was to investigate the learning experiences of a small group of women participating in a short-term adult education program designed to move them from welfare to work, and to examine the roles of the women=s families in learning to work. Critical educational theory provided the general theoretical framework for our study. Critical educational theory is concerned with how educational institutions, culture, and processes reflect and reproduce broader social systems such as patriarchy and capitalism. We were particularly interested in understanding women=s agency in light of these structures; i.e., how the women actively accommodated and resisted the meanings and social organization of the educational program, work, and family.

Research Design. Our theoretical perspective suggested that a critical ethnographic approach would be most appropriate as a mode of inquiry. Critical ethnographic research has been described by Quantz (1992) as an investigative approach designed to "represent the culture, the consciousness or the lived experiences of people living in assymetrical power relations" (pp. 448). The setting of our research was a sixteen week, business skills training program for women receiving Aid to Families wth Dependent Children (AFDC). Two teachers from a local technical college provided instruction for the program, which included computer skills training and basic skills education. We collected data on program practices, participant experiences and

perspectives through a series of classroom observations and interviews with eight program participants and program staff. Our approach to data analysis reflected a number of elements recommended by Carspecken and Apple (1992) for critical qualitative research: normative reconstructions and identification of normative structures (the sets of unstated rules and assumptions that underlie social actions and the meaning given to those actions); description of system relationships (relationships between normative structures, social sites and social groups); and the use of system relationships as explanation for individual and group actions and norms. Our analysis connects microlevel beliefs and practices to macrolevel issues of work, education, and welfare reform in the United States.

Findings. One aspect of our findings relates to what we have come to describe as a discourse of work. Drawing on Bourdieu and Foucault=s ideas, Gee, Hull, & Lankshear (1996) describe a discourse as a set of related social practices and social identities or positions. A discourse not only shapes what actions we consider appropriate, it also affects how we define ourselves as certain kinds of people. Early in our analysis, it became apparent that certain beliefs and practices, or a discourse of work, affected how the women were expected to handle their family responsibilities in relation to their participation in school and, ultimately, in paid employment. It also became apparent that there was a discrepancy between the women=s lived experiences of connecting work, family, and school, and this discourse of work. Here we briefly illustrate three elements of this discourse: control, self-sufficiency, and Awork first.@

Control. The discourse of work, as we have seen it manifested in public policies, the media, and in the program we studied, suggests that women must Acontrol@ their lives such that they do not allow their family lives to interfere with meeting dominant expectations for work and school (such as performing all expected work and school tasks, being on time and avoiding absences). According to the discourse, such control is achieved primarily by good time management, appropriate decisions about jobs and when to have children, and suitable psychological attributes (e.g., self-discipline). Frequently, women=s welfare status is attributed at least in part to their individual deficiencies in these areas, such as lack of decision-making skills.

The interviews suggested that much of the women=s lives was beyond their individual control. Several aspects of their family lives were particularly problematic, including childcare, housing, and transportation. For example, childcare was sometimes simply not available, not affordable, or within a reasonable travel distance. When children got sick, childcare providers typically refused to take them. Landlords were negligient in apartment upkeep, sometimes making them dangerous for children. Mailboxes were subject to theft of welfare checks and other official mail. Cars were unreliable, and public transportation left the women with limited control over their travel schedules. Relationships with men were another area in which the women struggled with control issues. A number of the women had past experiences in which their work and home lives were controlled by husbands or boyfriends. The women also described work situations in which they had little control over their work schedules or job duties, and had little job security. T. explained: A . . . you never know what your boss gonna have you do. You might need to stay [overtime]. Anything could come up.@ This type of situation interfered with the women=s ability to manage both work and family, since childcare providers typically would not

accomodate unexpected schedule changes. Lastly, the job training program itself conflicted with the women=s control over their family and work lives. Some women were informed only a a few days in advance that they could and should attend the classes. This led to rushed arrangements for childcare and transportation, which continued to be problematic for some women well into the program. While some women found the learning environment disruptive at times, and two women were harrassed by other students, they could not choose to leave program without jeopardizing their benefits.

The women attempted to exert control in various ways over the many unpredictable variables in their lives. They devoted huge amounts of time and energy to attempts to Acontrol@ their family lives, through trying to find reliable childcare, carefully scheduling household routines, avoiding relationships with men who might interfere with their work and school (and who for the most part were not perceived as sources of assistance in handling family responsibilities). The women tended to focus their energy and attention on their current situation because it seemed more within their control than future events. They talked about living Aone day at a time@ and doing little advance planning because their lives were so unpredictable: AI don=t live further than the moment because I can=t guarantee what=s going to happen tomorrow.@ Some women explained how they Aset their minds@ to one thing and otherwise tried to control their thoughts while in class, so that family problems wouldn=t interfere with their concentration. However, such thoughts were not always controllable, as L. described: ANow if I was sitting back in that classroom I would be sitting at the computer wondering how I will get to class tomorrow and the rest of the week because my son had child care problems . . . Wondering how I am going to feed my kids. That keeps you from concentrating.@

Reflecting the dominant discourse, the teachers observed that the women=s lives were Aout of control@ and they needed to learn to manage their time and responsibilities more effectively. The program was intended to be Alike work,@ with rules about attendance and appropriate behavior. However, program staff actually helped the women negotiate their family demands by Abending the rules;@ for example, letting them bring sick children to class, come late to class without penalty, and use the office phone to handle family-related communications.

Self-Sufficiency. The dominant discourse also promotes the notion of Aself-sufficiency;@ i.e. individuals should be able to provide economic support for themselves and their families. Self-sufficiency is equated with not relying on the government or charity for such support. According to the discourse, women have two socially acceptable means of achieving self-sufficiency, either through work (wage labor) or through marriage. A lack of self-sufficiency is equated not simply with economic dependency, but also with moral and psychological deficiencies (Fraser & Gordon, 1996). Women on welfare are often assumed to be passive, lazy, irresponsible, immature, and otherwise psychologically dependent in a highly pejorative sense.

Reflecting the values of the dominant discourse, our interviewees expressed strong desires to be economically self-sufficient. As A. stated: AI wanted training to get a decent job . . . So I can be financially stable. Not have to depend on nobody but myself.@ They unanimously did not view men and marriage as a viable source of economic support. Their beliefs were linked to previous experiences with men who lost their jobs, left their families, and did not provide child support. As one woman stated: AThat man could be gone . . . You got to be the breadwinner.@ Some of

the women had been in relationships with men who restricted their economic independence by not allowing the women to work, dictating how they could spend their money, or squandering household money on drugs and alcohol.

Through the interviews, we found that the women who were more successful in handling the combination of family, school, and work demands were those who had cultivated supportive networks of friends and/or family who could help with childcare, transportation, and other responsibilities. A few women developed friendships in the class that led to sharing transportation and helping each other with childcare issues. Almost paradoxically, the women who had the most potential for self-sufficiency in an economic sense were those who were most dependent on other people for other kinds of support.

While they were not self-sufficent economically, the women described themselves as independent and placed considerable value on independence. L. commented AI don=t think I could have another man because of how independent I am. I am used to doing things on my own.@ In her and other women=s comments, independence was typically linked to being a single mother and not being Adependent@ on a man for help with managing a household or raising children. Their reliance on other family members and friends for various kinds of assistance did not seem to conflict with this sense of independence. Many of them discussed how they were trying to make their children Aas independent as they can be@ by teaching them to do household chores and care for their siblings. A few women described themselves as possessing what might be considered Aemotional self-sufficiency.@ For example, A. explained that her parents frequently criticized her, but AI=m doing good, so even without their support I support myself. I=m doing just fine.@

AWork First,@ a term being used to describe strategies for moving welfare recipients into unsubsidized employment as quickly as possible, reflects another dimension of the discourse of work. What it suggests is that occupational work, and a Protestant work ethic should be the defining features of one's life. In our study, the teachers told us that the lack of work ethic was a particular problem for the women learners in their program. M. said, for example, "I think that one of the things ... with this group is the discipline that a lot of us have for work doesn't seem to be ingrained. I mean I grew up with the German work ethic, you worked. We went to school ... with strep throat. You just do it.@ In the same vein, K. added that some of the women "looked for excuses to stay home like they would stay home with a child when maybe they had a sniffle. Days when I would just send mine out the door and say sorry honey, suck it up and go off to school. And those people aren't going to make it in the job force unless they have someone holding their hand.@

Our interviews suggest that the women learners in the program were expected to put work/school before all else; certainly their children and themselves. The women, however, viewed their children=s needs as their top priority and they worried constantly about asking too much of their children, neglecting their children=s needs, and taking chances with their children=s welfare. A. outlined her priorities in this way, "I am always thinking about my kids no matter where I go. They the only thing I got in the world except my mother. So I protect them. They my priority. I gotta take care of them." LS. was aware of her children=s unmet educational needs when she told about her 8-year-old daughter who Aalways asks me questions like why don't we never do this

together and her teacher even mentioned to me once that she needs more one on one attention. I have to explain to them that she is not my only child and I have a busy schedule. There is a lot of things I want to do with my kids that I can't do with them because I am so busy and there is only one of me and there is four of them. I feel bad when she asks me questions like that.@ T. recounted the chance she took with her child=s welfare when she wanted her 4-year old to be able to go on a school trip to the zoo but couldn't be there to put him on the bus herself. So, "I met this girl across the hall from me and I let her friend put him on the bus. I felt really guilty but I thought she was nice."

Besides being viewed by the women as compromising their work as parents, meeting all of the expectations of 'work first' seemed to be taking a personal toll on the women physically and emotionally. They talked about being deadly tired all the time. T. said for example, that her children were "gettin' to the age where now they beginnin' to bug me. We wanna do this. We wanna do that and I try to do the things that I can. ...but it's like I be so tired sometimes ...] I don't never want to do nothin'". LS., who worked two jobs in addition to attending the program, noted that the stress was affecting her performance in the class: "I was talking to K. and asking her why won't my typing speed go up. She said probably because you have so much going on you can't concentrate. I think that's what it is." LS. added, "Yeah, I am tired. My friend told me I should stop saying I am tired because God may take me away if he keep hearing me say I am tired so it's like I am trying to change it to exhausted. I am exhausted for real!@ LS. didn't even feel she had time to attend church anymore: AI do go to church but lately I haven't been going, probably in the last 5 months because I am so busy. I figure I don't have to be in church to praise God. I can do that on my own."

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Discussion and Implications. Our findings suggest that the discourse of work that implicitly guides adult education practice is incompatible with the way that women actually negotiate the demands of work in relation to family life. It is also incompatible with another dominant set of social beliefs, the Adiscourse of mothering@ (Griffith & Smith, 1987) that requires mothers to give their family responsibilities priority over work or education, and in particular assigns women the primary responsibility of caring for their children=s emotional, social, and intellectual needs as well as their economic needs. Rather than perpetuating this discourse, we argue that researchers and adult educators should make this discourse explicit so that its assumptions can be challenged more openly in adult educational practice.

Based on our findings, we have identified several assumptions inherent in the discourse of work that merit critical discussion. First is the assumption that Acontrol@ in one=s work and family lives is primarily an individual achievement and gained through the application of Arational@ skills such as time management. Many aspects of these women=s lives would not have been within their control even with the best time management strategies. Indeed, the nature of their lives made so-called rational strategies such as advance planning seem irrational because they would have resulted in at best wasted effort, at worst unrealized hopes and even faulty actions. Control, and the viability of planning, depend on wealth, social position and power. For example, one of the the middle-class program teachers, whose life seemed more Ain control@ than her students, was able to pay for childcare in her own home. In addition, this same teacher was able

to negotiate a change in the course schedule to accomodate her childcare provisions. While such negotiation is possible in certain professional positions, it is unlikely that most women on welfare will move into jobs that will grant them such power, or an income sufficient to give them a wider range of childcare options.

We can also question the assumptions underlying the goal of Aself-sufficiency.@ The concept of self-sufficiency is linked to the individualism pervasive in the dominant Western value system that has made Adependency@ into a stigmatized condition (Fraser & Gordon, 1996) and rendered invisible the ways that we all are dependent on others. In case of wage labor, men typically have relied on women to perform household work so they could meet the demands of outside employment. Women who work outside the home frequently rely on childcare providers, domestic laborers, friends, relatives, and schools to handle their household responsibilities. Furthermore, wage labor itself is the product of an interdependent relationship among employers and employees. Definitions of Aself-sufficiency@ - and its opposite, dependency - are socially constructed, and as Fraser & Gordon (1996) point out, are a product of unequal power relationships. People become dependent as a consequence of racist, sexist, and classist social structures, not by individual choice or deficiency. The women in our study struggled against this socially imposed and stigmatized definition of dependence in describing themselves. Their self-descriptions reveal how gendered power relationships are inherent in definitions of independence (i.e., in terms of how they defined themselves in opposition to the implicit notion of the housewife who is dependent on a man)

The concept of Awork first@ with its narrow definition of work as wage labor, is most directly at odds with the discourse of mothering, that requires women to give priority to the work of the family. The women in our study struggled openly with this conflict, emotionally as well as practically in their prioritization of daily activities. The discourse of mothering also has oppressive elements, particularly the expectation that mothers should be always available to meet the needs of their families. Neither the discourses of work or of mothering acknowledge that women might have physical, emotional, or spiritual selves that deserve care and sustinence.

Our study adds to a growing body of evidence suggesting a need for adult educators to give more attention to the ideological bases of work-related adult education, for example, to the very nature and meanings of work and vocation, and the schism between work and family (Way & Rossman, 1994). Further, we argue that adult educators can make important contributions to the efforts called for by Hart (1992) and others to establish more emancipatory organizations of work and education that are reconciled with the work of the family. Such efforts would not consist of simply making it easier for women to put Awork first@ by providing childcare, transportation, or flexible schedules. Current attempts to create Acareer ladders@ or school-to-work programs that reinforce the traditional separation of work and family are also inadequate. Instead, as Hart (1992) suggests, we must start by reconsidering the values that underlie current conceptions of good and productive work. We must find ways to move beyond the orientation towards individualism, control and efficiency that dominates both work and work-related adult education and towards the Ahumanization@ of work, both in the home and workplace.

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