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Welfare Mothers, High Risk Consequences, and Political Agency

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Abstract: This paper examines how welfare mothers struggling to access and succeed in post-secondary education are influenced by educational advocates who provide services.

Introduction

Welfare reform created dramatic shifts in priorities and form in an already complex society of competing ideologies. Welfare mothers were expected to adjust to policy changes that they did not fully understand. A concentrated focus on employment first, self-sufficiency, time limits, and allowable activities required adjustments in service delivery as well leaving educational providers to interpret how best to meet the educational and training needs of poor women.

There is a mood of meanness shaped by a conservative ideology that does not support increasing recipients' level of educational attainment, a known indicator of economic advancement. Within this coercive and unfriendly environment poor women struggle to get accurate information, have a voice in decision making that will affect their lives, and make choices among few presented to them. Adult education agencies such as community colleges, universities, local community organizations, and non-profit service and advocacy centers provide training and support for welfare mothers while struggling over control for the definition and meaning of "education for work" mandated within welfare reform policy. Advocates work around the limitations of welfare policy to help clients but strategic approaches differ.

The divergent and often contradictory interests among educational advocates raise questions about the impact of such strategies on poor women's education (Sparks, 2001). This paper investigates how women on welfare are influenced by the strategic implementation of welfare policy by educational advocates espousing social justice and the subsequent political actions women take in order to further their own educational needs and desires.

Risk and Danger

Most welfare mothers have a heightened awareness of "socialized risks," described by Giddens (1990) as situations and consequences of limited or privileged access and control of resources, such as the control of differential class-based access to education and training. Welfare mothers know they are not only constrained by a rule-bound bureaucracy and its administrative authority (Ball, 1990) but must rely on Health and Human Services (HHS) caseworkers to give them a fair shake. While there is a sense of familiarity grounded in the day-to-day routines, there is a push-and-pull of different influences that is tension filled and contradictory. The world is full of risk and danger, a loss of stability and orientation. Basic trust between welfare mothers and HHS or in a secure future safe from disaster is undermined causing anxiety, dread, or emotional supersensitivity which is essentially repressed in order that one can go about daily life. People become numb to the litany of possible risks which are out of their control (Giddens, 1990) as benefits can be given or withheld.

As the welfare state abdicates its responsibility of care and civil rights recipients often go elsewhere for assistance. The limitations of expertise and expert systems are often questioned, however, even as welfare mothers seek the advice of educational advocacy experts or advocacy

knowledge. The knowledge and skill that experts share with welfare mothers is, in many cases, reappropriated by them in situations of necessity. They use the information they receive to further their own interests and needs, yet the degree of trust they place on the regulated knowledge is questionable. This process relates to all aspects of social life but “does not add up to feelings of secure control over day-to-day life circumstances...the lack of control which many of us feel about some of the circumstances of our lives is real” (p. 146). Yet, there are opportunities for reconnecting with people. Examples of this phenomenon are the creation of informality and smallness evident in community centers of advocates or localized agencies that administer federal money. The mix of risk and opportunity are so complex that it is difficult for people to know how far to trust particular systems or whether to trust them at all.

Welfare reform policy is unevenly implemented and a heterogeneous configuration of elements exists among advocate positions. As I have shown elsewhere, educational advocates working for social justice are maneuvering around in an arena of unequal power and control which leads them to strategic meanings, attitudes, and actions (Sparks, 2001). They face challenges of balancing multiple goals against human and civil rights in a unfriendly system. The political interests and educational orientations advocates have about women’s education influence the strategies they use. These implementation responses can be thought of as ways to contend with the system through consultation, negotiation, and contestation. Education for low-skill welfare mothers is a complex matter given the range of stakeholders involved with providing services. While advocates are trying to provide educational opportunities they may, however, inadvertently add to the burdens of women and families through unequal power relations, paternalistic practices, low quality or bare bones training programs, and preparation for low demand jobs.

How do welfare mothers contend with the circumstances of a constantly shifting, high risk local environment? Giddens (1990) is helpful in analyzing how they might respond to the socializing efforts to discipline them and to the educational advocacy efforts of local providers. He suggests a range of adaptive reactions to the risk profile of modernity. Pragmatic acceptance maintains a focus on day-to-day problems and tasks where temporary gains are all that is hoped for or planned. It implies a deep underlying anxiety, a “not thinking about it” (p. 136) whereas sustained optimism evokes a conviction of “be happy, don’t worry” attitude that is based on a sustained belief in rational thought. Cynical pessimism provides an outlook with practical implications that dampens the emotional impact of anxieties through humor or parody. “Cynicism takes the edge off pessimism” (p. 137). Radical engagement, on the other hand, is an attitude of practical contestatory action toward perceived sources of danger with an optimistic outlook. These are not discrete adaptive reactions. On the contrary, for example, it is difficult to maintain pragmatic acceptance in every sphere of life for all time. While the avoidance of contestatory engagement is often used to buffer or withdraw from the harsh realities of survival, it is likely to be interspersed with periods of active engagement. This active engagement implies political agency with vested interests, periodic if not sustained conflict, and multiple contradictions. Moving from hope to compromise the dialectic between political agency and high risk consequences can be seen.

Meaning Oriented Inquiry

The data used for this study is a collection of interviews with women on welfare from an ongoing five-year study of poor women’s education. I used a qualitative feminist research design (Reinharz, 1992) to collect a purposeful sample of information among various stakeholders; adult educators and educational advocates in addition to the women receiving assistance. The fifty interviews with welfare mothers were collected in four phases. All phases asked about various

aspects of accessing education under welfare reform and experiences of working with caseworkers, advocates, and others.

<u>Project</u>	<u>Interview strategy</u>	<u># of sessions</u>	<u># of participants</u>
Phase One:	Group	12 sessions	30 women
Phase Two:	Individual	varied	12 women
Phase Three:	Individual	varied	5 women
Phase Four:	Individual	varied	3 women

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded, extensive field notes were taken and analytical memos written up. Secondary sources included program materials from educational and vocational agencies. Research questions (emerging from my previous inquiries) include: 1) how do women on welfare interact with educational advocates, 2) how do they respond to the strategic actions advocates use to provide educational access and opportunities, 3) what behaviors and attitudes do they develop to further their educational desires and needs?

My process of analysis consisted of asking the above questions of the transcribed interviews. I was interested in perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and subsequent actions taken or not taken on their own behalf. I bracketed stories telling of their relationships with various advocates and was interested in the language they used to describe these relationships and interactions looking for their interpretations, how they made sense of their experiences. Having collected this data I juxtaposed it to the findings of my studies with educational advocates.

Interactions and Responses

Welfare mothers encounter not only gendered policy which strives to morally discipline them into marriage, a strategy that is being promoted even more forcefully with reauthorization of welfare, but often find themselves directed to educational advocates espousing social justice while employing practices which further undermine women's freedom and autonomy. This is not to say there are no educational advocates working on behalf of women but to point out that welfare mothers must navigate an uneven set of educational advocate strategies. Loss of stability, unequal power relations, and self-advocacy emerge as important issues for women on welfare.

Loss of Stability, Looking for Someone to Trust

Under the circumstances, welfare mothers are in high risk, high consequence situations. They are dealing with constraints and limitations on all fronts. Desiring "environments of trust" (Giddens, 1990, p. 121) they must, nevertheless, be ever vigilant as they are being uprooted and displaced from life as they know it.

"You have to do what the [case]worker says. If you don't know something you're going to do what the person says so I was just going along. Then when I found out about client advocates I started calling them first before I listened to her. That's what I do now" (Roxanne). "Client advocates, the people who are on your side, they tell you straight out what to do, what not to do, what's right" (Watu). These statements from Roxanne and Watu might suggest there are good guys and bad guys and once you figure out who is who everything will be all right. Of course, it is not this simple. Nevertheless, Roxanne and Watu illustrate a perspective toward educational advocates that positions the advocates as supportive of welfare mothers and caseworkers as less than helpful. Is this belief well founded?

Watu, an African American mother of two young children, was enrolled in a vocational program at a community-based organization that thought they knew what was best for their clients.

The agency often redirected clients into services they deemed more appropriate than those stipulated in the welfare contracts thus jeopardizing training opportunities for the women and funding from HHS for themselves. Watu described her training, “I think there are days wasted because we’re skipping from one thing to the next, from chapter one to chapter three then from chapter eleven and back to five. It’s not consistent.” Watu told me, “I’m going to wait and see if they teach me how to do the stuff I need because some of the teachers don’t seem to know much.”

Programs where unskilled instructors are used result in poor quality programs at the expense of the women. Educational agencies may offer approved fast-track training programs but the quality of the programs, instructors or curriculum are not guaranteed. The patriarchal structure of relationships between the administrative authority of HHS and the educational provider as well as the paternalistic decision-making on the part of the illustrated provider are part of the already contested terrain of welfare reform.

In contrast, Libby found an educational advocacy organization that she could trust to assist her in meeting her self identified needs. They taught her research skills and how to use the internet to build a case to her caseworker regarding her interest in enrolling in lactation technician training at the community college. She credits them with providing solid guidance by showing her how to do things for herself. There were other examples like this in the stories of the women, however; there were equally numerous stories about vocational and literacy programs of poor quality, counseling approaches which directed women into programs for which they were not interested, as well as false and misdirected information disseminated by educational advocates.

Power and Authority

Structural relationships between welfare mothers and educational advocates, like those between advocates and HHS are based on hierarchy and unequal power or patriarch advocacy, similar to what Fraser calls “public patriarchy” (1989, p. 146), with its tacit norms and implicit assumptions that constitute welfare practices. The welfare system does not deal with women on women’s terms but rather by positioning them as gendered subjects whose needs are interpreted for them according to patriarchal necessity. This foreshadows many of the relationships between educational advocates and welfare mothers.

Keri, a mother of a seven year old daughter, suggests one of the ways that these structural relationships are created and maintained when she talked about a community-wide advocacy meeting. “They talked about the laws but they just talked about welfare recipients in the abstract. They never put names or faces or people to it. I guess it made them feel better, otherwise they’d have to think that this is actually a family or a person that we’re dealing with and not just numbers.” By looking at numbers served, counting open slots in training programs, assessing the dollar amount allocated to childcare, lamenting the shortage of rural literacy programs, or calculating the multiple barriers faced by many recipients, advocates and others forget who they are there to serve because the numbers create a faceless population. Perhaps, as Keri says, “it made them feel better, otherwise they’d have to think” about the families.

Patriarchal advocacy is seen when adult education experts develop fast track training programs that they know will not provide the level of skill needed to find living wage work. Community colleges are particularly vulnerable to this charge since they have been asked to design programs that conform to the mandated time limits of cash assistance. The new time limits put arbitrary boundaries on traditional vocational training that has its own logical structure. Welfare mothers are expected to take these shortened programs even though the training is inadequate to lifting them out of poverty.

Women talked about training programs that did not prepare them for jobs in their local economies, community college personnel admitted their students did not have the skills necessary to retain a job even if they found one, and at least one community-based program told of employers who complained because the new workers did not have the basic academic skills of reading and writing needed to do the job. Welfare mothers are being trained to be dependent on rather than independent of the patriarchal structures. While community colleges and other vocational training agencies may be providing less than ideal education for welfare mothers they are applauded for their efforts on behalf of poor families.

Political Agency and Self Advocacy

A major finding is that women are acting on their behalf. They develop their own approaches and strategies to dealing with high risk situations of uncertainty. Strategies they use may not be easily recognizable because they are not always publicly organized efforts.

Women are seeking advocacy assistance, particularly from legal aid to fight for their rights of education or childcare, and community workers who will go into meetings with the caseworkers. Seeking advocacy assistance is a first step, moving outward, looking for help in accessing the services for which they are eligible. Motivated by a focus on day-to-day problems such as getting the help needed to study for the GED, Cathy talked with someone at Even Start to help her with her problems in reading. "If I decide to join they do a home visit once a week, they have family literacy classes and they provide child care. They'll help me with the reading and writing. They've already told me I can get a tutor if I want." Negotiating relationships with educational advocates, Cathy must determine if the program gives her what she is looking for.

Others talked about a community action organization that provided advocates who accompanied recipients to meetings with caseworkers when disputes arose or for women who wanted some support. "If it hadn't been for the LAP counselor who went with me to meet with my caseworker I don't think I would have gotten the money to fix my car. Without a car I can't get to classes or take my sons to daycare. My caseworker doesn't seem to care if I make it to class or not."

They are educating themselves about job options, researching the training required, and the job market in order to convince caseworkers to allow them to proceed with self selected training. Already mentioned is Libby who had to not only convince her caseworker there was a need for lactation technicians in her community, but she had to go through vocational testing before she was allowed to follow her interests. Another example is Sandy who talked about being directed to a dental hygiene program even though there were no jobs in her small rural community. Collecting information from several dental clinics that documented this low demand she was able to convince her caseworker to let her prepare for a job in the high demand field of computer information processing.

Informal learning from each other is a powerful strategy because the women are able to share information whenever they come in contact with each other. One person tells another that school is an option or that GED preparation is allowed once vocational training has been completed. Rose told me, "They don't tell you your options. They don't say, "Oh, you can go to this school, then if you have time on your contract you can still attend another school. I was thinking after I finish my certified nurses assistant training I have to go right to work. But, really I don't. I could study for my GED. We learn from each other, that's how I found out that I could go, from a friend."

Another strategy used is coming together in semiformal groups for labor organizing and educational support with the purpose of creating new social movements. San Francisco Bay area community colleges and universities have formed support groups, organized by welfare mothers

through the women's centers, as a place to talk about their struggles of being students, workers, and mothers. Sharing information, providing moral support, and creating a network of solidarity they learn about their rights and how to make the system work for them. Self-advocacy and empowerment are also the objectives of a community-based group that several women talked about that helped them learn public speaking and grassroots organizing skills along with a political awareness. These women have an attitude of radical engagement (Giddens, 1990) using practical action in the continuous face of high consequence risks.

Discussion

Whether welfare mothers can be optimistic about their future or day-to-day living may be a luxury they cannot afford, but they must be actively engaged, at whatever level of adaptation, with the coercive welfare system if they are to get the education and training they need, and if they are to have any chance of moving out of poverty. Welfare mothers seek assistance from educational advocates, who symbolize a potential safe haven for many, yet advocates may find recipient's trust in them jeopardized when they are working in their own best interests and not those of welfare recipients.

A lengthy discussion in one of the group sessions with welfare mothers raised questions about how the general public views poverty. Women related situation after situation where they thought they were misunderstood, judged, and easily dismissed because others do not understand what it means to be poor women. In the end, many welfare mothers realize they must rely on each other and learn to advocate for themselves. Yet not all women have the strength, resources, or skills to navigate the system alone and depend on advocates.

Considering the high risk consequences women face if they do not get into education and training, they must develop and use their political agency. At the same time, the development of political agency heightens women's awareness of their rights under the system not just the responsibilities that are typically the focus of their caseworkers. An interdependent model of advocacy and empowerment is called for, one where the interests of welfare mothers and their families is the centerpiece.

Implications

Women on welfare, like all of us, live in a world of risk that influence adaptive reactions. As adult educators we have a responsibility to create relevant educational programs that facilitate decent living in the world. More recipients must learn to advocate for themselves. Adult educators have the teaching and research skills to help them learn how to do that.

Selected Resources

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