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Recommended Citation

Alfred, Mary; Butterwick, Shauna; Hansman, Catherine; and Sandlin, Jenny (2007). "Neoliberal Welfare Reform, Poverty and Adult Education: Identifying the Problem and Engaging in Resistance," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2007/symposia/1>

Neoliberal Welfare Reform, Poverty and Adult Education: Identifying the Problem and Engaging in Resistance

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Abstract: This symposium explores the foundation of neoliberal ideology which has been central to the reform of welfare and adult education policies programs and the increase in poverty and oppression. We outline of an alternative vision, informed by a feminist social justice orientation.

Discourses of Education, Work, and Success in Adult Literacy and Welfare-to-Work Programs

The growth of poverty in the United States, Canada, and around the globe is closely tied to neoliberal social and economic policies that derive from the idea that “the market” is and should be the organizing principle for all decisions – political, social, and economic (Giroux, 2004). Goods and services that were once considered to be guaranteed as part of a social safety net, and as necessary for engaged citizens living in a democracy – such as access to adequate health care, housing, fulfilling employment, and a decent education – are increasingly coming under attack in our current practice of neoliberal capitalism (Giroux, 2005). In the United States, neoliberal policies have created huge deficits, high unemployment rates, and job layoffs (Giroux, 2005). Neoliberal policies and practices have also concentrated economic and political power and made it available only to few, have subordinated social needs to the market, have constructed public social services as unnecessary and wasteful, have bankrupted public funds, and have slashed public welfare services (Giroux, 2004). Summing up some of the major consequences of neoliberalism, Giroux (2004) states that neoliberalism has waged an “incessant attack on democracy, public goods, the welfare state, and non-commodified values” (p. 495).

Central to the ideology of neoliberalism are the notions of *individual responsibility* and *self-reliance*. Neoliberal ideology promotes individual responsibility while it downplays structural issues and eschews governmental and corporate responsibility. Within neoliberalism, what used to be considered to be shared *social* issues are no longer open for discussion among the general public; social issues have, instead, become “utterly private miseries” (Giroux, 2004, p. 496). By stripping issues of anything resembling the political or social, individuals can no longer easily “translate private worries into public concerns and collective struggles” (Giroux, 2004, p. 494). Moreover, the ideology of neoliberalism works as a form of powerful hegemony because it presents its market-based approach to social, political, and economic issues as the *only* approach. The rhetoric of neoliberalism appeals to universal laws and evidence-based, scientific research; it also couches itself as neutral, apolitical, and *un-ideological* (Giroux, 2005). In doing so, the social devolution and destruction that has accompanied neoliberalism is shrouded in “appeals to common sense and allegedly immutable laws of nature” (Giroux, 2005, p. 10). Thus, neoliberalism “offers no critical vocabulary for speaking about political or social transformation as a democratic project. Nor is there language for either the ideal of public commitment or the notion of a social agency capable of challenging the basic assumptions of corporate ideology as well as its social consequences” (Giroux, 2005, p. 10).

The practice of adult education exists within this context of neoliberalism, which increasingly focuses education towards training workers for the service sector, and for preparing lifelong consumer-citizens. Indeed, central to the neoliberal ideology is a “particular view of education in which market-driven identities and values are both produced and legitimated” (Giroux, 2004, p. 494). Both formal and informal education operate as a powerful forces for producing the ideological beliefs and affective dispositions necessary to reproduce the ideologies and practices of neoliberalism (Giroux, 2004). While this results in negative consequences for everyone, it is especially harmful for poor and working class workers and learners, and thus I believe it is particularly important to interrogate how adult education complies with neoliberal ideology to exacerbate persistent poverty and the increasing inequalities between the privileged and poor (Giroux, 2004). In my research, then, I have been concerned with how dominant ideologies become manifest through the discourses of education, work, and success that are created and perpetuated in adult literacy and welfare-to-work programs. My research has focused on issues of power, gender, race, politics, and curriculum in policy and educational programs, in particular basic skills programs and workforce-related programs geared towards welfare recipients. Following Fairclough (1995, 2003) and Gee (2005), I believe in the power of language and discourse to shape not only ideologies but also material conditions. Fairclough (1995) argues

We live in an age in which power is predominantly exercised through the generation of consent rather than through coercion, through ideology rather than physical force; it is mainly in discourse that consent is achieved, ideologies are transmitted, and practices, meanings, values, and identities are taught and learned. (p. 219)

Examining the discourses that circulate and are negotiated in adult education programs serving marginalized learners, then, can provide insight into how the ideology of neoliberalism is reproduced—and, perhaps, resisted.

I draw upon two recent related empirical studies I have conducted in which I examine ideologies within educational programs serving poor adults. The first study examined how success is constructed in educational programs serving women on welfare. An analysis of interview and observational data in two such programs revealed ideological beliefs held by teachers, students, and administrators that uphold many of the tenets of neoliberal ideology. For instance, I found that the dominant discourses in these programs promoted the views that women on welfare were unemployed primarily because they lacked a work ethic; that students were dependent on the welfare system and possessed many individual deficits; that workforce success was primarily a result of individualistic factors such as effort and hard work, having the right attitude, and behaving properly; and that race and gender played little or no role in determining a person’s ability to gain employment (Sandlin & Cervero, 2003). The second study I draw from explored the ideological orientations of success stories that are told by adult literacy teachers and program directors about learners in adult literacy programs in the United States. Using Burke’s (1962) method of pentadic narrative analysis, Carolyn Clark and I (Clark & Sandlin, 2007) analyzed 257 success stories that were published annually from 1978 through 2005. We found that while many aspects of the stories remained stable over time, *agency* shifted from the early stories to the later stories. That is, in the early stories, the programs acted as the agency, and received a great deal of credit for the success of the student. In the more recent stories, however, the programs fade into the background, and success is a result solely of the individual student’s hard work. The more recent stories draw upon the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy, as they promote an agenda that “scorns the ideal of collective empowerment and social

responsibility in the name of economic realism” (McLaren, 1995, p. 103). This individually-focused ideology of self-reliance obscures other paths to success and ignores structural factors that impede success.

Giroux argues that education reinforces the practice of neoliberalism through valuing and crafting particular forms of knowledge, values, and identities that help reproduce the ideologies and practices of neoliberalism (Giroux, 2004). In both of these recent research projects, I found that the discourses in adult literacy and welfare-to-work programs uphold what I have called the “myth of educational amelioration” (Sandlin, 2003-2004)—the idea that one’s pathway out of poverty is unproblematically linked to how hard one—alone, as an individual—works to acquire basic skills or adult literacy education. This discourse works hand in hand with the ideology of individualism which is so essential to neoliberalism. Giroux (2004) argues that behind the repeated calls for self-reliance that currently dominate public and political discourse is “an eviscerated and refigured state that neither provides adequate safety nets for its populace, especially those who are young, poor, or racially marginalized, nor gives any indication that it will serve the interests of its citizens in spite of constitutional guarantees” (Giroux, 2004, p. 496). It is our challenge as adult educators to continue to illuminate how neoliberal ideology is enacted in educational programs for poor adults, and also to find ways that we can problematize and work against these dominant discourses.

Welfare Reform and Economic Self-Sufficiency: Linking the Personal and the Structural

The United States welfare reform legislation of 1996 gave the states generous block grants to develop welfare reform programs that would end family dependence on governmental assistance. The main thrust of that policy was its “work-first” approach to self-sufficiency, with the assumption that individuals will become self-sufficient if they work. Two opposing views dominate discussions on welfare dependency: participation in the welfare system and economic well being. These are referred to as individualism and structuralism (Seccombe, 1999) or what Albelda, Drago, and Shulman (2001) call the neoclassical economy and the political economy. The individual or the neoclassical perspective argues that we are responsible for our economic positions, that opportunities are available to all who are motivated and willing to work hard (Albelda, Drago, & Shulman, 2001), and that those who remain economically dependent have themselves to blame. This view assumes a competitive marketplace, individual initiative, and nongovernmental interference to be sufficient in creating an even playing field for economic independence. In contrast, the social structural perspective assumes that one’s financial position is a result of economic or social imbalances within our social structures that serve to restrict opportunities for some people while privileging others (Seccombe, 1999). According to Seccombe, the structural perspective encompasses three broad themes: (a) a concern with capitalism, (b) a focus on the changing economy, and (3) a concern that the welfare system itself promotes poverty (p. 43). While these debates on welfare dependency continue, research studies make visible women’s experiences with the “work-first” approach to economic independence.

Table 1: Barriers to Economic Self-Sufficiency Among Former Welfare Recipients

Sociostructural Dimensions		Individual Dimensions
Reform Policies and Implementation Practices	Policies and Practices of Work Organizations	Individual Characteristics and Personal Agency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ideology of the work-first approach ▪ States' approach to reform ▪ Implementation practices at the agency level ▪ Agency and staff financial incentives for caseload reduction ▪ Limited opportunities for post-secondary education and training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Low-wage labor market ▪ Limited promotion ▪ Lack of fringe benefits ▪ Lack of employer support for low-income workers ▪ Inadequate training, mentoring, and coaching ▪ Discrimination and the stigma of welfare 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of financial resources ▪ Lack of social capital resources ▪ Substance abuse ▪ Fear of failure/fear of change ▪ Unfamiliarity with the workplace ▪ Domestic abuse ▪ Housing instability ▪ Physical and mental disabilities ▪ Low levels of literacy

Findings from welfare research studies (Alfred, 2005; Alfred & Martin, 2007; Carroll, 2001; Corbett, 2002; Holzer & Stoll, 2000; Seccombe, 1999) and other literature sources (Albelda, 2000; Piven, Acker, Hallock, & Morgan, 2002; DeParle, 2004; Sawhill, Weaver, Haskins & Kane, 2002) were analyzed to determine the challenges women encounter in their attempts to meet expectations of the welfare reform legislation. The data suggest three interlocking systems to impede the progress of former welfare recipients (See Table 1).

The structural barriers were found to be the ideology of the work-first approach policy at the federal level, its implementation at the state and agency levels, and policies and practices within work organizations. These systems of barriers are those that former recipients have very little control over. The individual dimensions consist of psychological characteristics and personal living conditions. These categories are interdependent with each one exacerbating the others. As a result, a more holistic approach is needed to facilitate transition to economic self-sufficiency.

Welfare reform has focused primarily on changing individual behavior and has paid less attention to the structural barriers inherent in the state, agency, and workplace practices. However, the evidence suggests that the development of economic self-sufficiency is influenced by both personal *and* structural determinants, and together these must be considered in finding solutions for welfare dependency. At the personal level, there must be a focus on building human capital, social capital, and identity capital resources. *Human capital* is an individual characteristic representing education, training, and experience, which is converted into wages and economic benefits in the labor force (Gaughan, 2002). Human capital resources are viewed as a major determining factor in one's economic well being. Putnam (1995) describes *social capital* as the "features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (p. 66). Social capital encompasses an interconnecting web of networks and relationships that can enhance one's opportunities for more independent living. Cote and Levine (2002) defines *identity capital* as "investments individuals make and have in who they are" (p. 147). According to Cote and Levin, one must establish a stable sense of ego identity to negotiate life's course and to maintain positive interactions to benefit from social capital resources inherent within communities of support.

Additionally, addressing the structural impacts of welfare reform must take place within the federal, state, agency, and workplace contexts. At the federal and state levels, policy makers must revisit the ideology that low-wage work with little education and training support will promote economic independence among low-literate adults. Overall, the findings clearly suggest

that post-secondary education determines quality of employment, wages, access to fringe benefits, and alleviates many of the personal problems low-income families face. Within the workplace, employers must develop family-friendly policies and practices that would address discrimination and promote workplace socialization. Employer support for education and training was also found to enhance employability and promote employee retention and advancement. Such a holistic approach holds some promise for economic self-sufficiency among former welfare recipients.

Shutting the Door on Hope: Higher Education and Low-Income Adults

In 2003, approximately 35.9 million people, or 12.5% of the population of the United States, lived at or below the federal guidelines for poverty (US Census Bureau, 2004). More recent data (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Lee, 2006) shows that the number of people in poverty has risen, although stabilized, at 37 million people, or 12.6% of the population. While poverty rates for non-Hispanic Whites has declined in the past few years (from 8.7 in 2004 to 8.3% in 2005), it has risen for minority groups in the United States; the 2005 poverty rates include 24.9% for African-Americans, 11.1% for Asians, and 21.8% for Hispanics. The poverty rate of all people in the US ages 18 to 64, who are traditionally considered to be the age bracket of adults who participate in adult educational activities, was 11.1% (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Lee, 2006).

Of 110 million American workers between the ages of 25 and 64, 60% have not earned a college degree, only 18% have ever taken any college classes (Cook & King, 2004), and ten million Americans have not earned beyond an associate degree (Hatfield, 2003). Because of this lack of educational attainment, 62% of low-income adults age 16 or older are unemployed, and 46% in this group are non-white. Women make up 69% of low-income workers, and African-Americans and Hispanics account for a total of 50% of those in poverty (Cook and King, 2004). Out of the working poor in the United States, seven out of ten had a high school education or less (U.S. Department of Labor, 2003).

In capitalistic societies such as the United States, access to formal education beyond secondary education is essential for adults to facilitate their economic mobility. However, due to a number of governmental and societal factors, the door to higher education for low-income adults is closing; furthermore, changing policies and practices by higher educational institutions and state and federal governments have increasingly limited learning opportunities for adult learners, particularly low-income adults. Among these policies are the “Work First” policies of the Welfare Reform Act, which have limited educational opportunities for individuals and instead forced welfare recipients into minimum wage service industry jobs, adding to the poverty issues for low-income adult learners. The tuition at higher educational institutions, including community colleges, has reflected double-digit elevations due to fewer contributions from the state and federal governments, while at the same time the amount of available financial aid (non-loan) had declined.

The door to higher education is repeatedly slammed shut in the faces of low-income adult learners. Without access to higher education, low-income adults will continue through cycles of unemployment, part-time employment and dead end jobs that will preclude them from entering a job-market that increasingly demands some form of post-secondary education. What should be adult educators' role in helping low-income adult learners' gain and maintain access to higher education? How can we hold the door open for low-income adult learners?

Perhaps one way adult educators can help hold the door to higher learning open is through conducting research focusing on access to and retention in higher education for low-

income adult learners. Although adult learners in higher education have been the center of much research, most of these studies focus on middle class adult learners, not low-income adult learners (Hansman, 2006). There has been little research that focuses on low-income adult learners' barriers for participation, the access issues that they encounter as they attempt higher education, and obstacles for them to remain in higher education and complete their studies. Research that focuses on these issues may help shape policies and higher educational practices to support low-income adult learners. For example, a recent study (Gofen, 2007) which examines first-generation low-income students in higher education shows that their families provide much support to these students in completing their higher educational degrees. Perhaps policies and practices that support families of first generation students will improve access and retention for adult learners in higher education.

Adult educators have been notoriously absent from many policy discussions concerning low-income adult learners. In June 2007, the *American Association for Adult and Continuing Education* (AAACE) is sponsoring a policy conference at the University of Maryland that will bring together continuing education practitioners, scholars, and policy makers concerned with work life issues and policies. The purpose of the conference is to identify collaborative strategies to address policy issues regarding lifelong learning and work transitions. Adult educators may become proactive in supporting low-income adult learners in higher education through participating in discourse that is available at this conference and other venues, designing and conducting focused research, and proactively engaging in policy development,

In Conclusion: Building a Feminist Framework for Social Welfare Reform

To conclude, we offer definitions of two key concepts: poverty and social justice. "People are poverty stricken when their income, even if adequate for survival, falls radically behind that of the community. Then they cannot have what the larger community regards as the minimum necessary for decency; and they cannot wholly escape, therefore, the judgment of the larger community that they are indecent. They are degraded for, in the literal sense, they live outside the grades or categories which the community regards as acceptable". (Galbraith, 1998, p. 245). Social justice, on the other hand, refers to the "full participation and inclusion of everyone in a society's major institutions, and the socially substantive opportunity for all to develop and exercise their capacities and realize their choices" (Young, 1990, p. 173)

To operate effectively in the explication of poverty and to move toward a social justice framework requires the articulation of an alternative vision. Recognizing the complexities of fighting for and against the welfare state, Fraser (1997, p. 6) calls for an approach that brings together the politics of recognition with the politics of redistribution. The former addresses issues of cultural domination, while the latter addresses economic inequality. She emphasizes the necessity of combining these two approaches in her call for a "systematic reconstructive thinking about the welfare state" (p. 43) to achieve gender justice. For this paper, her ideas have been extended to offer the beginnings of an intersectional analysis that recognizes other forms of injustice including racial, class, and cultural. These norms are outlined in her seven principles: anti-poverty, anti-exploitation, income equality, leisure-time equality, equality of respect, anti-marginalization, and anti-androcentrism. Anti-poverty, Fraser argues, is "the first and most obvious objective" and one that is "crucial to achieving gender equity" (p. 45). "A welfare state should at least relieve suffering by meeting otherwise unmet basic needs" p. (p. 46) and preventing poverty would be a major advance in any postindustrial welfare state. As has been noted, cuts to welfare rates and services leave a large gap between the resources required to meet basic needs and what is actually provided. Fraser does not stop with this key principle, however,

noting that there is still a danger that antipoverty efforts could exploit or further stigmatize welfare recipients as they could be vulnerable to exploitation by unmonitored wage subsidy programs and situations where employers use them as cheap labour. To achieve this goal, she identifies the second principle of anti-exploitation and the need for a rights based, not simply needs based approach, one where obtaining support is not based on the discretion or whim of a husband, employer, or state official.

Reducing poverty and exploitation must also be combined with her third principle-- income equality--which requires “a substantial reduction in the vast discrepancy between men’s and women’s incomes” (p. 47) as well as reduction in the gap between the wages of racialized and non-racialized individuals. Achieving this principle requires active labour market development including pay equity measures and the dismantling of racist migration and immigration policies that maintain marginalization, below poverty wages and insecurity for groups such as domestic workers and migrant labourers. Fraser’s fourth principle focuses on leisure time and the problem of “time poverty” and a recognition of which individuals and groups are undertaking both paid and unpaid primary care work. Having a well supported publicly funded child care system would help to support this principle. Equality of respect would challenge welfare policies and programs that trivialize women’s and other oppressed groups’ caring activities and contributions exemplified by assumptions that this is not work. Much of the recent reforms do not recognize the labour, time and resources required by impoverished groups and individuals to survive and to adequately care for their families and communities. Closing offices and requiring clients to travel on the bus to other locations at great distance from where they live is an example of this lack of recognition. The anti-marginalization principle is Fraser’s sixth point, one that would prevent marginalization and promote participation in all spheres of life, not just paid work, but including politics and civil society. Policies that promote the more equal sharing of the important work of elder and child care and regarding it as a social and not simply private responsibility would help, as would initiatives to bring welfare recipients as equal participants to the policy making arena.

Her final principle, anti-androcentrism, challenges views that present men’s life patterns as the norm. “Social policy should not require women to become more like men not to fit into institutions designed for men, in order to enjoy comparable levels of well-being” (49). We can extend this orientation to an anti-Eurocentric view, one that troubles those assumptions of what counts as the norm in relation to caring, family, and community life. Fraser notes that all of the principles interrelate and the nature of their interconnection will depend on the context. “The goal should be to find approaches that avoid trade-offs and maximize prospects for satisfying all—or at least most—of the seven principles.” (49) We conclude with note about hope and optimism as articulated by Cornel West who said “optimism is the belief that things are going to turn out as you would like, as opposed to ‘hope’ which is when you are thoroughly convinced something is moral and right and just and therefore you fight regardless of the consequences”.

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