

The Effects of Social Welfare Development on Poor Single Mothers in the United States

What Is to Be Done?

Poor single mothers have received unequal treatment, in U.S. welfare policies, from New Deal welfare development through the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Notable are provisions based on a mother's relationship to her child(ren)'s father and negative depictions of mothers receiving welfare. New Deal policymakers put "deserving poor," including single mother widows of white male wage earners, in the Social Security entitlement program maintaining their respectability, while "undeserving poor" mothers, single because they had not married, were divorced or deserted, in means-tested programs associated with societies' marginalized. Today, these mothers must also identify their child(ren)'s father, raising safety and privacy concerns. Additionally, neoliberal policymakers defamed "undeserving poor" mothers, identifying them as "Welfare Queens" and negatively reformulating the notion of "victim." We add our voices to feminists advocating alternative views of humans as social beings, interconnected, caring, rather than individualistic, to facilitate accounting for women's caregiving work in public policies. Here Martha Fineman's notion: "the vulnerable subject," reminding us we are all "vulnerable" for significant portions of our lives, provides a more comprehensive vision of social experience to base policies on than individualism, found in classical liberalism and today's neoliberalism.

Poor single mothers have been treated badly in U.S. welfare policies, at least since the New Deal, and their treatment has deteriorated with the ascent of neoliberalism. Feminists, in response, have exonerated caregiving work, especially mothering, reminding us that this labour is indispensable to everyone's well-being, and so have proposed varying solutions accordingly. In our paper we contextualize U.S. welfare policy historically, noting how its development

corresponds with changes in liberalism, the basic political ideology in the U.S. We stress the discursive strategies, to denigrate poor mothers, that neoliberals employed in their rise politically, observing that while empirical data ran contrary to their destructive portrayal of welfare recipients, they were successful in passing legislation discontinuing a needy parent's statutory entitlement to poverty assistance. We argue that this societal treatment of a vulnerable population raises normative considerations. Here we regard both Martha Fineman's notion that all people are "vulnerable" for significant portions of their lives and Carole Pateman's (1998) thesis that all women potentially suffer from inequality because they have been socially constructed in the private sphere, and continue to be perceived that way. Finally we consider proposals feminists, most notably Fineman and Pateman, put forth as solutions to this situation.

Historical Background

The United States has experienced differing social welfare policy regimes, some existing before the national governmental policies were enacted in the 1930s New Deal era. The pre industrial period, roughly 1700-1870, for example, involved people, in a more rural time, working together to assist each other when in need. The Industrial Revolution, urbanization, and mass immigration, gave rise to the Industrial Policy Regime, dating from approximately 1870-1900. During this period, policy makers took an institutional approach to dealing with the poor, such as the establishment of poorhouses and orphanages. The Progressive era began in the early 1900s, as poorhouses and orphanages reformed, private charities expanded, and state governments established workers' compensation and widow's pension programs (Wilson). In the 1930s, when the Great Depression caused massive poverty, it was countered by an expansive growth of national governmental social welfare programs (Ford), known as the New Deal. *The Social Security Act 1935* signaled the formulation of a new social welfare policy regime creating large federal programs such as: Social Security, Aid to the Blind, Unemployment Insurance, Minimum Wage, public housing, job programs, and Assistance to Dependent Children (ADC).

Significantly, these "New Deal policymakers intentionally moved the respected widows of white male wage earners," the so-called, "deserving poor," "out of the means-tested ADC program ... into the universal Social Security program ..." (Gordon 1994: 282-84). They kept poor non widowed mothers, the "undeserving" poor, in means-tested programs, associated with societies' marginalized. When in the process of instigating and/or redoing poverty laws, "U.S. policymakers have consistently separated the 'deserving' from the 'undeserving' poor, guiding the "former into well-funded universal programs while shuttling the latter into stingy means-tested programs." In this process, poor

single non widowed mothers are made more vulnerable to officially approved humiliation (Smith 264-265).

Policy regime change occurred again in the 1960s with The Great Society expanding upon New Deal Programs. Poverty in the U.S. had been found to be as severe as that seen in underdeveloped nations and this finding, together with the social movements of the 1960s—the civil rights, anti poverty and welfare rights movements, created demands for expansion in social welfare programs. Subsequently, food stamps, medicaid, medicare, Head Start, job training and other programs became part of the Great Society Program (Wilson).

Non widowed, poor single mothers' right to government support, however, was becoming somewhat questionable even in the 1960s. Goals of the ADC program shifted from making sure that children did not grow up impoverished to ones enforcing gender ideology and racial and cultural control, foreshadowing the measures that would occur for poor mothers and their dependent children as neoliberalism came to inform more U.S. policymaking. Relatedly, the ADC Program was changed somewhat in the '60s. Poor male parents became eligible for aid and the Program was renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), reflecting, in part, concern that its benefits and eligibility rules had discouraged marriage.

Liberal philosophy: U.S.: historical shifts The differing social welfare policy regimes discussed above can be seen as changing according to the shifts that have occurred within U.S. liberalism historically. "Ideologically, the U.S. is a liberal state" (O'Neil 73). It was founded on tenets such as individualism, a weak state, free markets, and private property. This early form of liberalism presumed people should take responsibility for themselves and while government should protect property, provide for national defense, education, and some infrastructure projects that benefit the general good such as highways and bridges, social expenditures were to be curtailed to prevent free-riding. Finally, in this view of liberalism, markets and property should be largely unregulated and taxes minimal.

This explanation of liberalism, however, differs from the popular usage of the term "liberal" as now employed in the United States, where it usually means a stronger state, one with greater involvement in economic affairs and social provisioning (98). Historical developments, primarily the economic upheavals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries caused liberals to see state intervention in the economy as necessary. "Liberalism, itself, came to be understood not as individualism and laissez faire, but as a sense of social responsibility coupled with a more activist and bureaucratic government" (Gordon 1990: 72). In the 1930s, when the Great Depression caused massive poverty, it was countered, as noted above, by further and expansive growth of national governmental social welfare programs (Ford), known as The New

Deal. This latter form of liberalism is sometimes referred to as “new,” “revisionist,” or “welfare state liberalism” (Freeden) while the older form of liberalism, containing the philosophy’s original tenets, is often referred to as “classical” (O’Neil) and/ or “traditional” liberalism (Pateman 1998).

Further, as also mentioned above, The Great Society Programs, that were in part the result of the social movements of the 1960s, created even further expansion in social welfare programs. However, while public policies and considerable underlying political philosophy were continuing to move in a leftward direction, discontent with this interpretation of liberalism was forming.

Neoliberalism, a term indicating that the original ideas of liberalism (i.e., free markets, a weak state, and individualism) were emerging (O’Neil), came to fruition theoretically in the 1960s with the development of a neoclassical school of thought developed in the Department of Economics at the University of Chicago and referred to as the “Chicago school.” This school of thought became the predominant one within the academic community of U.S. economists (Cassidy 28). Neoliberalism sought to extend the rationality of the market, but it was not exclusively economic (Grewal 16). It also advocated a lessened concept of the state’s role in providing social services to support people’s welfare.

Some manifestations of neoliberalism in the U.S. can be seen in the 1980s when the Reagan administration reduced both funding and eligibility for public assistance (Amott). More importantly, Reagan constructed acquiescence for neoliberal policies in the political culture. Many people refocused on the notions of individualism and less government that together with the growing culture of consumption, and a market-based populism, served as the means for the policies of neoliberalism, and its resulting inequalities, to gain support (Thompson 25).

U.S. Republican party congressional candidates, campaigned successfully in 1994, under the auspices of the “Contract with American.” It emphasized “...individual liberty, economic opportunity, limited government, personal responsibility, and security at home and abroad.” (Gingrich et al. cited in Naples 908), setting the stage for a barrage of conservative legislative (Naples 908). In 1996, President Clinton, tempered by these conservative victories, signed the “welfare reform” bill, thus ending the New Deal commitment to a social safety net (Miroff, Seidelman and Swanstrom 129).

Neoliberalism has been able to reverse the various political and economic gains made under welfare state policies and institutions. As mentioned earlier, this is not a new development in liberalism’s history. It is more a resurgence, after decades of welfare state policies (Harvey), of classical liberalism as we see its tenets, particularly individualism and the free market enabled by a weakened state, one less able to regulate or engage in social provisioning, emergent.

Discursive Strategies Employed: Neoliberal Ascendancy to Power in the U.S.

Discursive strategies were essential to the political ascent of neoliberals generally as they have also fought a war of words. (Mittelstadt 736). Their destructive portrayal of women receiving welfare was particularly effective in this rise. Two of their techniques were “the politics of disgust” and the disparaging of and/or redefinition of a word’s meaning. Ange-Marie Hancock analyzes how public identities are formed through stereotyping and then formulating moral judgments of various characteristics, such as race, class, and gender, assigned to groups that legislative policy is being formed around. The public identities can then be instrumental in ideological rationalizations for the policy agenda(s) in question. Hancock analyzes, in particular, the public identity established for the “welfare queen” during the debates about welfare reform in 1995 and 1996. She contends, that the public identity created, in the case, “welfare queen,” agitated “disgust,” and, as a result, sent the political process itself on a particularly unhealthy course. Hancock points out how these stereotypes and politically intended ideas were persuasively exploited to instigate a “politics of disgust.” As such they provided the basis for the contentious 1996 welfare reform debate that effectively ended the Aid to Families with Dependent Children Program, first established in the New Deal policy regime, as way to aid poor single non widowed mothers.

For a segment of her research, Hancock conducted a random sample of 82 documents from the congressional floor debates on welfare reform to analyze their content. She found that the debates and public understanding generally were framed by a public identity that consistently painted welfare mothers as “lazy, hyperfertile and black.” As a final result, this consistent definition of welfare mothers held to a minimum the kinds of policy prescriptions theoretically possible regarding any public help these improvised mothers might receive in providing for their children. In a content analysis of the media, Hancock found the same to be case. The voices of the women affected by poverty policy were not part of the welfare reform debate. Further, in these congressional debates, work for pay and work caring for children were artificially and strictly separated. While compassion was evoked for welfare children, there was no sympathy for their mothers, nor were these mothers referred to or seen as good mothers.

Hancock talked to poor mothers themselves to show how the world in which they actually live and raise their children in was not the one described by policymakers and the media. In listening to the welfare recipients themselves, Hancock learns that the attributes assigned to them, such as “laziness” and “hyperfertility,” had no basis in fact, but rather were just part of the neoliberal project to socially construct a negative public identity for these women.

Neoliberals, in their rise to power, also successfully changed and denigrated the meaning of the word “victim,” whose reformulated, and made dominant, negative connotation of shame, disgrace and/or pity still exists today. Alyson Cole convincingly describes the pervasiveness of the anti-victim discourse and its power to shape U.S. politics. She analyses how a sustained campaign to redefine the language of politics has undercut contemporary progressive politics (19). Cole describes how neoliberals were able to ignite an antiliberal politics, in large part, by redefining popular ideas of the term “victim” from connoting a person who had suffered injustice to a notion of someone who just felt sorry for her/himself and sought “a handout” from society.

Recognition of victimhood had been a central component for identifying systemic oppression and galvanizing collective action to challenge oppression (Mittelstadt 737). U.S. social movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Liberation Movement, had made use of the word victim in their recognition of injustice, including personal injustice. In the 1960s and 1970s, groups affected by discrimination, such as women, African Americans, the poor, etc. had engaged in consciousness-raising projects in which they named themselves as victims. Through this process, they could perceive reasons, for their unjust treatment, such as sexism, racism, and/or classism, which in turn empowered them to call for ending this discrimination. For this reason, neoliberals targeted the meaning of the word victim. In the early 90s, literature denigrating the notion victimhood emerged. Its main targets were multiculturalism, identity politics, and feminism. It argued, while it was true that women and minorities had been subjected to unfair treatment in the past, all that was now over. It, supposedly, could no longer be said that racism, sexism, classism, etc. were practiced in any substantial way. Minorities and women were depicted as continuing to claim victim status as they benefitted from it. They did not have to take responsibility for their failures and could just continue to advance policies from which they benefitted, such as affirmative action programs.

Neoliberal critics admonished groups claiming victimhood to just stop complaining, take responsibility, and cease blaming others for their problems. Cole argues, “[That b]y investing victimhood with new meanings and rendering it a badge of shame, anti-victimism has made it extremely difficult to address pervasive forms of social injustice ...” (19). Those who formerly claimed they were victimized were now supposed to nobly deny any suffering they may see themselves as enduring.

Empirical Data Notwithstanding: Welfare is “Reformed”

While neoliberals were successful in changing the popular connotation of the word “victim” to mean someone feeling sorry for themselves, and were equally

successful at depicting poor mothers receiving welfare as lazy hyperfertile “welfare queens,” some well-researched data, as in Hancock’s above, was revealing a different reality. For example, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) at the University of Michigan’s Institute of Social Research began following five thousand American families from 1969 forward, in longitudinal studies. Their findings, for the ten-year period 1969-1978, revealed some of the following information. Poverty, in the U.S., was more widespread, but less persistent, than was popularly imagined (Corcoran, Duncan and Hill, 243). A family’s poverty periods frequently happened because of marriage termination or job loss, and ended with remarriage or another job. While one-quarter of the PSID sample were poor at some time during the period 1969-78, the majority were poor one or two years (243). About one-tenth of the sample were poor at least eight years but even they did not fit easily into the stereotypes neoliberals had been creating. One-third of the long-term poor were elderly or lived in elderly headed households. More than one-quarter were children, and more than one-quarter of them lived in families in which the head had worked a substantial amount in at least five out of the ten years (243).

Other data shows that just prior to welfare “reform” passage, the maximum AFDC benefit for a family of three in New York, the most generous welfare state, was \$703 a month and the maximum payment in, the least generous state, Mississippi, was \$120 a month (Ford 270). “In 1996, a family of three was below the poverty line when its monthly income was 1,082, or less. Even adding in food stamps, New York’s combined benefit was \$935 a month and so below the poverty line (Albelda and Tilly cited in Ford 271). Welfare simply did not “pay” women enough to escape poverty (271).

Nonetheless, the neoliberal propaganda campaigns won out. Political power had, in notable part, shifted from liberal to neoliberal or conservative groups, and with it the policy paradigm changed from defining the welfare problem as one of insufficient money for the poor, to one of getting people off welfare and into jobs (Schram cited in Cherlin 102).

Welfare policy underwent a regime shift in 1996 with the passage of the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* (PRWORA). Basically, it replaced welfare as we had known it since the New Deal. The ongoing statutory entitlement for poor parents, AFDC, was replaced by the Act’s provision, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Public assistance entitlement ceased. States now designed programs around work requirements, and the “temporary assistance” was/is “limited to two to five years (over a person’s lifetime in most cases)” (Ford 271).

In the decade-plus years that followed welfare reform, studies have exposed the inadequacy of using, reduction in welfare rolls, to indicate the Act’s success. Joel Handler and Yeheskel Hasenfield critique the low-wage job market,

stating, “For many people, the labor market has failed and shows little sign of improvement” (67). When looking at wages and benefits, these authors raise considerations, such as the “low level of the minimum wage, the unstable and part-time nature of many low-wage jobs, the difficulty of finding reliable childcare, and the frequent lack of health insurance coverage” (Handler and Hasenfield cited in Cherlin 102).

In another study, Sandra Morgen, Joan Acker, and Jill Weigt refute the notion endemic to the neoliberal creed that individualism and the “market’s” supposed efficacy can resolve poverty problems. They base their argument on empirical evidence from their ten-year study of 759 families in a more progressive state, Oregon, following PRWORA’s passage. They record how low-wage jobs and inadequate social supports have left many families in poverty, despite welfare roll decline. They relay the actual “human costs” from welfare “reform,” poor mothers and their children are bearing, as the right of families in need to public assistance was replaced by work requirements, regardless of how little the worker might be paid.

Normative Considerations

The most noticeable aspect of PRWORA has been the discontinuation of a needy parent’s statutory entitlement to poverty assistance and its replacement of time-limited assistance accompanied by compulsory work requirements. What is not so often realized, however, are the ways U.S. welfare, historically and “reformed” contains restrictions based on a mother’s relationship to her child(ren)’s father. As we noted earlier, during the New Deal policy regime, single non-widowed mothers were placed in a means-tested program for the “undeserving poor.” Now, in the welfare reform act, a mandatory child support and paternity identification requirement provision has been added in which the mother must name her child(ren)’s biological father and assist the state in pursuing him for support or face severe penalties.

Paternity identification raises concerns such as privacy, family regulation, the right of association, etc. Provision supporters argue that mandatory support payments improve some needy households’ conditions. In 2002, for example, states collected about ten billion in support payments. (Turetsky 2003: 5). That said, it should be remembered the single mother on welfare is “in effect, being coerced by her desperate economic circumstances to serve as the state’s proxy tax collector” (Smith 257) and she must give the state any support received, until the reimbursement level is met.

Support provision advocates further argue, it assures that fathers will pay for their children’s material needs, while also compensating the mother for providing the family’s caregiving labor. The father’s monthly payment, however,

is not designed to reflect fair payment for the mother’s work, but “calculated as a proportion of the payer’s income earning potential” (Smith 258). Further, “if we divided the monthly payment (the payer is typically ordered to submit between 225-300 each month to the state) (Turetsky 2007: 2) by the total number of a mother’s actual caregiving hours, we would end up with a miserable low wage rate” (Smith 259). The mandatory child support and paternity identification requirement provision also raises safety concerns for the mother and sometimes for her child(ren). “It is estimated that 20-30 per cent of women on welfare reported domestic violence in a current relationship, and about half reported at least one domestic violence incident in their lifetimes” (Tolman and Raphael cited in Smith 261).

Additionally, the Act’s explicit promotion of marriage is a concern. While marriage is not mandated by the law, it is strongly encouraged. The Act’s preamble, which contains the findings of Congress and the Act’s purposes, proclaims the virtues of heterosexual marriage while contending that there are negative consequences to the mother and the child from out-of-wedlock birth’ (Title IX, Section 912). According to feminist legal scholar, Martha Fineman, “Welfare reform during the 1990s should have been understood as a direct attack on all caretakers in that it undermined the value of unpaid care work and demonized motherhood outside of the patriarchal paradigm” (8).

What Is to Be Done?

Classical liberalism and today’s neoliberalism are anchored in individualism, where humans are viewed as rational/self-interested and competent social actors. In reality, however, “...as humans, we all require care” (Hamington and Miller xvi). Ethics grounded in this realization, would view humans as social beings, enmeshed in relationships. So what are some things that could be done and how might society be different if an ethic based on care needs were taken seriously in terms of policy and practice generally, and for low-income mothers in particular? Some feminist scholars who analyze women’s experience with welfare, such as Gwendolyn Mink, Martha Fineman and Anna Marie Smith, think we should “[S]crap TANF, and replace it with a well-funded universal caregivers’ entitlement (Smith 267-8).

When Carol Gilligan formulated the notion of interconnected human relations in her “ethic of care,” a new approach to moral philosophy was presented that did stress relationship, empathy, and compassion. Gilligan, and feminists who built on her work, identified care as an overlooked aspect of moral consideration: one which can be grounded on the fact that we all need it (Hamington and Miller). Further, as Sarah LaChance Adams states, “[C]are empowers an individual” (240). “This is one of the reasons men have been most powerful

historically. Most have had the benefit of having at least one woman responsible for them ... [while] ... women have given more care away” (241).

Martha Fineman has been engaging in a normative discussion of the socio-cultural institutions that give rise to and perpetuate inequality. Related to the notion of care, she emphasizes “vulnerability,” reminding us that we are all “vulnerable” for significant portions of our lives. This view provides a more comprehensive vision of human experience, than the Rational Man or self-interested, competent adult view of the universal human subject, to base political theories and policies on. While the notion of vulnerability has been associated with want, loss, dependency, etc., Fineman works to extend the term, and its applicability. She reminds us “that vulnerability is—and should be understood to be—universal and constant, inherent in the human condition (1). She posits vulnerability as,

the characteristic that positions us in relation to each other as human beings and also suggests a relationship of responsibility between state and individual. The nature of human vulnerability forms the basis for a claim that the state must be more responsive to that vulnerability and do better at ensuring the “All-American” promise of equality of opportunity. (3)

Fineman maintains that “[w]e must confront this foundation flaw in the [classical] liberal model...” of the autonomous human subject. Instead, we should develop social policies that recognize “...individuals are anchored at each end of their lives by dependency and the absence of capacity.” And that, “...between these ends [of being a child and being elderly], loss of capacity and dependence may also occur ... as a result of disability or illness” (5).

We would also stress here, that most of us, who are female, choose motherhood, where we provide care for our children. This caring for our children in their vulnerable stage, unfortunately makes us vulnerable, in what is thought of as our supposedly autonomous, full-of-capacity stage of life. And, “[w]hen one takes care of another, they lend some of their own autonomy to the other person” (Adams 241). According to economist, Ann Crittenden, not only are U.S. mothers not paid for all the work they do, they are also penalized for it. The gift of care is usually both selfless and exploited and as such, is the single biggest risk factor for poverty in old age (6).

What then should be the political and legal implications of the fact that we are born, live, and die within a fragile materiality that renders all of us potentially and actually vulnerable during our lives? Regarding caregivers generally and mothers, especially low-income single mothers specifically, Anna Marie Smith, expanding on the caregiver’s proposal above, would

create a universal caregiver’s entitlement program that would provide generous benefits to caregivers from all walks of life.... By treating low-income, single mothers as the equals of middle-class parents, a universal caregivers’ entitlement program would contribute to undermining the “welfare-queen” legacy. It would create the sense that the state actually does respect the low-income mother as an equal valued member of society.... (265)

We should recognize that she too, together with all mothers, is a productive citizen. She/they are creating, in economist Crittenden’s words, “a much-needed public good—human capital” (2) or in layman’s terms, well-raised children who grow into productive law-abiding citizens.

It is notable here that Anne Marie Smith, in her statement above, while especially concerned about low income lone mothers, calls for a “universal caregiver’s entitlement program that would provide generous benefits to caregivers from all walks of life.” This is because women generally can find themselves in need of such a program.

“All women are one man removed from welfare,” is a saying from the Second Wave of Feminism (Klatch 87). And, while in today’s context this motto should be somewhat altered to include “or one paycheck” as more women are now single and/or working for pay, and the word “poverty” substituted for the word “welfare” given the present tenuousness of “welfare,” the message nonetheless remains relevant. Women’s wages, while improving, in the aggregate remain lower than men’s and women continue to provide the preponderant amount of their family’s caregiving labour, though many men now contribute to this work (Ford).

We would also consider here that the larger, often unrecognized cause for women’s ongoing tenuous position is their social construction in the private sphere. As political theorist, Carole Pateman (1998) tells us,

... liberalism originally defined citizenship as contingent upon an individual’s ability to participate in the public realm while, at the same time, socially constructing women in the private sector. Citizenship in liberal society [still means autonomous individuals and] is measured by [their] paid participation in the workforce. In this scheme, women, who perform societies’ necessary, but unpaid, domestic sphere labor, are overlooked. (242)

Moreover, most all women, whether they perform domestic sphere labor or not, are affected by the private sector designation for their gender. And as Pateman observes, a universal caregiver entitlement program “does not promote consid-

eration of this private and public sexual division of labor...” or the perception of it. Therefore, she proposes instead a basic income for all people, maintaining this has the potential to promote relations of equality because “...it can help break the long-standing link between income, marriage, employment, and citizenship [while enlarging everyone’s] ... opportunities” (2003: 117). A universal basic income, for Pateman, is as fundamental to democracy as universal suffrage. Economic well-being enables peoples’ ability to govern their own lives and helps them to exercise citizenship. A basic income would aid in providing the general security required if citizenship is to be of equal worth to everyone. In Pateman’s words, “While suffrage is the emblem of equal citizenship, a basic income would be the emblem of full standing as a citizen, of citizenship that is of equal worth...” (2003: 3).

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