
Values Underlying U.S. Low-Income Rural Mothers' Voices about Welfare and Welfare Reform: An Inductive Analysis

This study explicitly identifies the main values that rural welfare recipients reveal when they talk about their experiences with welfare and welfare reform. An inductive analysis of values is conducted using interview data from 49 current and former recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) residing in the states of Massachusetts, Maryland, Minnesota, and New York. Seven main values that emerge from the data are self-esteem, autonomy, uniqueness, advancement, security, independence, and fairness. A conceptual diagram of these values is developed to illustrate how these values are related.

Values have often been at the center of policy debates over welfare in the United States. From a public viewpoint, welfare policies have a history of being strongly criticized because they go against core American values such as independence, individualism, responsibility, and hard work (Gilens, 2000; Lichter & Crowley, 2002). The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA: U.S. Public Law 104-193 [1996])

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and the establishment of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) reflected the antipathy towards the welfare system. The 1996 welfare legislation brought fundamental changes to the 61 years of federal policy by shifting welfare from an entitlement program to a short-term, transitional experience, and by imposing mandatory employment regulations on welfare recipients. These changes mirror the so-called American mainstream value of responsibility and self-sufficiency.

The viewpoints of welfare recipients have not been at the center of the public debate of welfare reform. Policymakers simply discounted the perspectives of welfare recipients and did not consider their values. The irony in this situation is that welfare recipients hold the key to the success of welfare reform legislation. This has been maintained by various scholars who have argued that welfare reform has not made effective changes due to the restricted input from welfare recipients, which has created incorrect assumptions about welfare-reliant mothers (Broughton, 2003; Seccombe, 2006; Tickamyer, Henderson, White, & Tadlock, 2000).

The present study explicitly identifies the main values that rural welfare recipients reveal about their experiences of welfare and welfare reform. Studying the values of welfare recipients can reveal how they perceive their environments, how they make important decisions, and why they conduct themselves in certain ways, because values "influence perceptions, decisions, and actions and as a result, affect the

welfare of individuals, their family members, and the community” (Leichtentritt & Rettig, 2001, p. 150).

This study builds on the increased understanding of the perspectives of welfare recipients, which is an important accomplishment in the recent qualitative literature on welfare reform. Qualitative researchers have made an important contribution to questioning the assumptions of PRWORA by listening to the voices of welfare recipient. These researchers have found that welfare mothers are committed to work (Broughton, 2003; Monroe & Tiller, 2001; Tickamyer *et al.*, 2000), support work requirements (Seccombe, Walters, & James, 1999), and aspire for self-sufficiency (Monroe, Tiller, O’Neil, & Blalock, 2007); however, it is a complicated challenge for welfare mothers to make a transition from welfare to work, largely due to work-related expenses (Edin & Lein, 1997). Qualitative studies have also reported that welfare recipients tend to embrace the stereotypical image of welfare-reliant mothers for other recipients but not themselves (Seccombe, James, & Walters, 1998). Some researchers have discussed the potential similarities between the values of welfare recipients and mainstream values (Tickamyer *et al.*) but have not conducted an explicit analysis on values.

We base the present paper both on the literature of welfare and on that of values discussed in the non-welfare contexts in order to investigate the values of welfare recipients in a more explicit and integrative manner. Our research has the potential to link welfare and poverty research to values research. The consideration of values theories or frameworks has been rare in the literature of welfare and poverty even though interest in the values of the poor have a long history. Further, the definitions of values have been absent or arbitrary in the literature because there has been little conversation between welfare researchers and values researchers. We have found very few studies that utilized a values theory to understand the values of inner-city parents in poverty (Minton, Shell, & Solomon, 2004, 2005; Minton, Shell, & Steinberg, 1997). We expect that results from the present study will introduce a values framework to the literature of welfare and welfare reform.

The unique differences between rural and urban

welfare recipients are another piece missing from welfare reform policy discussions. Previous research on welfare reform has focused on urban areas and the factors influencing the success or failure of urban welfare recipients. It is not surprising that previous research on welfare has predominantly focused on residents of the inner cities because welfare reform has been framed as an urban policy issue (Wiseman, 1996). On the other hand, the unique challenges faced by rural welfare recipients are often overlooked in the welfare reform debate as well as the literature (Katras, Zuiker, & Bauer, 2004). Some of these challenges include restricted access to limited employment opportunities, public transportation, and fewer childcare choices (Katras *et al.*). However, rural welfare recipients deserve more attention given the high incidence of poverty and welfare participation in rural communities (Jolliffe, 2004).

The present study is the first to explicitly identify the values of rural welfare mothers using qualitative data. Researchers and policymakers will benefit from the explicit descriptions of values expressed by welfare mothers when evaluating what welfare reform has pursued. We also expect that this study will provide implications on the literature for the values of low-income mothers in countries other than the U.S.

BACKGROUND

Values: Definitions, Theories, and Research

Values in this paper are defined as “one-word ideals that represent a person’s deeply held convictions about what is good, important, and desirable” (Yang & Rettig, 2003, p. 350), which “guide the way social actors (e.g., organizational leaders, policy-makers, individual persons) select actions, evaluate people and events, and explain their actions and evaluations” (Schwartz, 1999, p. 24). This definition indicates that values are guiding principles in personal life as well as in social arenas such as policymaking. It is important to clearly define values because the misuse or overuse of the word values is very common in public and academic discussions (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004; Rohan, 2000) as well as in the policy arena. Scholars have not paid attention to the

differences between values and attitudes and have used them interchangeably even though values are more abstract and durable than attitudes, which are associated with concrete social entities (Hitlin & Piliavin; Rohan).

Values have been an important topic for theory and research in many academic disciplines given the strong motivational components of values in human behaviors (Rokeach, 1973). Two most cited authors in values theory and research are Milton Rokeach and Shalom Schwartz. Rokeach, in his book *the Nature of Human Values*, defined a value as “an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” (Rokeach, p. 5). He classified values into instrumental values and terminal values. Instrumental values are associated with means or modes of conduct that will include intrapersonal moral values and personal competence values. Terminal values, in contrast, are related to goals or end-state of existence and may be society-centered or self-centered. Rokeach developed a Value Survey that has been the most widely used in values research.

Schwartz (1996), who did not support Rokeach's values classification, suggested a structural model of value systems. This model consisted of 10 value types on two motivational dimensions: (a) openness to change – conservatism and (b) self-enhancement – self-transcendence. The 10 value types are power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, conformity, tradition, and security. In Schwartz's pie-chart-shaped model (not shown), adjacent values tend to be similar, and values in opposite positions may be in a conflicting relation. Schwartz developed a Value Inventory to measure value priorities.

Previous empirical research of values, led by Rokeach and Schwartz, has predominantly used quantitative measures of a pre-chosen list of values to study the human value system and priorities. This deductive approach is limited because researchers may omit important values or because the abstract names of values may confuse the respondents and lead to measurement errors. An inductive analysis of

values using qualitative data has the potential to complement the deductive approach by identifying values from the unrestricted narratives of research participants.

Values, Poverty, and Welfare

Scholarly discussion of values in the context of poverty has a long history and has been debated since Lewis' (1959) work on the “culture of poverty.” The debate is around whether low-income individuals have different values from higher-income individuals and if different values prioritization among the low-income population is the cause of poverty. These debates can be roughly divided into two groups: (a) those who agree with the idea that the values of low-income individuals are distinctively different from dominant or middle-class values, which have often been interpreted as the cause of poverty and (b) those that disagree with this pathological interpretation and suggest that low-income individuals accommodate their values to survive.

The earlier supporters of class value comparisons were Oscar Lewis and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Their studies substantially influenced the understanding of the poor and later welfare legislation by Americans. Lewis (1959) introduced the concept of “culture of poverty” based on anthropological work in Mexico. He explained that people in poverty maintain a unique value system compared to the rest of the population and then transmit the values systems to their children, which leads the cycle of poverty. Moynihan (1965) proposed that the unique values and culture of African American families are attributable to their poverty and implied that public policy needs to alter the value priorities to reduce poverty among African Americans.

Several opponents of the culture of poverty have criticized blame-the-victim approaches and have suggested alternative explanations. Rodman (1963, 1971) proposed the concept of the “lower-class value stretch.” This concept refers that lower class individuals develop alternative values as a realistic response to their socioeconomic deprivation while still maintaining the dominant values of a society. These individuals end up with “a wider range of values than others within the society” (Rodman 1971, p. 195). Rodman

also discussed “pragmatism” to explain that the lower class abandon mainstream values in certain areas and behave depending upon their circumstances to adjust to their environments. Liebow (1967) similarly argued a “mosaic” nature of underclass values that include both middle-class values and an alternative shadow system. He commented that the latter helps the poor to adapt to day-to-day struggles. One of the more recent approaches to low-class values is Gould’s (1999) “rational accommodation” framework. He noted that African Americans in inner-city ghettos are committed to mainstream ideals but have accommodated their values to cope with their poverty and limited opportunity structure.

METHOD

Rural Families Speak Project

The present study conducted secondary qualitative data analysis. Data for this study came from the Rural Families Speak (RFS) Project, a longitudinal, multi-method, and multi-state research project that assessed changes in the well-being and functioning of rural low-income families with children in the context of welfare reform. Rural counties were selected using Butler and Beale’s (1994) rural-urban continuum codes that are based on population size and distance from metro areas. Participants were identified and recruited in rural counties through programs serving low-income families, including Food Stamps, Head Start, the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and welfare-to-work. The project team interviewed low-income mothers in 14 U.S. states over three waves between 1999 and 2003. The inclusion criteria at the time of the initial interview were: (a) at least one child was under 13 years old in the household and (b) household income below 200% of the poverty guidelines. Additional information about the RFS project is available at the project website (<http://www.ruralfamilies.umn.edu>).

Participants

The participants of this present study were 49 current and former welfare mothers in seven rural

counties across four states. To maximize the qualitative purpose of this study, we used a subset of data that included rich, relevant, and a manageable number of interviews. We obtained this subset data from a two-step screening process. First, we selected mothers who were receiving or had received TANF benefits at the time of Wave 3 and who participated in all three waves. This step identified 103 mothers from 12 states. Second, we evaluated the interview transcripts from these 103 cases in order to find which states solicited rich and in-depth qualitative data on welfare and welfare reform in comparison to other states. This step resulted in a sub-sample of 49 interviews from current and former welfare recipients from Massachusetts, Maryland, Minnesota, and New York.

Table 1 shows the characteristics of these 49 mothers. On average, these mothers were 31.2 years old (range = 20 to 46 years) on December 31, 2001 and had 2.3 children in the household (range = 1 to 7) at Wave 1. Twenty mothers were married or living with a partner (40.8%), 16 were single (32.7%), and 13 were divorced or separated (26.5%) according to the baseline information. Almost 80 percent of the mothers ($n = 39$) were non-Hispanic White, which represents the race and ethnicity of rural population in the selected states. Thirty-two were on TANF at the point of at least one of the three interviews (65.3%) while 17 left TANF before the first interview (34.7%). In terms of their employment status across three waves, 15 were continuously employed (30.6%), 20 were intermittently employed (40.8%), and 14 were continuously unemployed (28.6%).

Interviews

The Rural Families Speak Project used semi-structured interviews to understand various aspects of individual and family life among a group of rural, low-income families. The interviews averaged two hours and topics ranged from family economics, public assistance, parenting, support networks, to home and neighborhood environments. Interview protocol questions that were relevant to the present study are as follows: “Do you feel changed welfare regulations have affected your family? In what way?” (Wave 1 and Wave 2), “Sometimes people express

Table 1. Characteristics of Interview Participants (N = 49)

	n (%)	n (%)	
Age (M= 31.2 years, range: 20-46)			
Marital Status (W1):		Education (W1):	
Single	16 (32.7)	< 8 Years	1 (2.0)
Married	11 (22.4)	Some High School	10 (20.4)
Living with Partner	9 (18.4)	High School or GED	12 (24.5)
Divorced	8 (16.3)	Training after High School	6 (12.2)
Separated	5 (10.2)	Some College	20 (40.8)
Race/Ethnicity:		TANF receipt (W1-W3):	
Non-Hispanic White	39 (79.6)	Continuous TANF	6 (12.2)
African American	4 (8.2)	On and Off	19 (38.8)
Hispanic	2 (4.1)	Left TANF before W1	17 (34.7)
Multi-Racial	4 (8.2)	Left TANF during W1-W3	7 (14.3)
Number of Children (W1; M=2.3):		Employment (W1 – W3):	
1	15 (30.6)	Continuously Employed	15 (30.6)
2	20 (40.8)	Intermittently Employed	20 (40.8)
3-4	10 (20.4)	Continuously Unemployed	14 (28.6)
5-7	4 (8.2)		

strong opinions about people who are receiving welfare. What kinds of opinions have you heard?” (Wave 2), “Have you ever received TANF benefits? How much time do you have on your TANF clock? Is the time limit a concern for you and your family? Why or why not?” (Wave 3). In addition to responses to these questions, the participants were able to freely comment on welfare and welfare reform in other parts of interviews.

Analysis

An inductive analysis was conducted to identify the main values of welfare mothers based on their lived experiences and subjective perceptions of welfare and welfare reform. We adopted and modified Rettig and colleagues’ (Leichtenritt & Rettig, 2001; Yang & Rettig, 2003) inductive process of value analysis used in their studies that explicitly described the values of other populations.

The first step of the analysis was reading and rereading transcripts to obtain a holistic sense of these mothers’ thoughts, feelings, and reactions. We used all interviews at three waves but did not examine longitudinal changes since interview questions regarding welfare and welfare reform were dissimilar across waves. We used all interviews at three waves. Despite the longitudinal nature of the Rural Families Speak project, a longitudinal understanding of values was not the goal of our analysis since questions regarding welfare and

welfare reform varied across three waves of data collection. The second step involved identifying value units that are statements from the voices of rural welfare mothers about welfare and welfare reform. The third step of the analysis was articulating value units using one-word nouns that the mothers implied and value theorists and researchers have used. When a few nouns competed for the same value unit, we chose the noun that has the closest meaning to what the mothers implied. The last step was constructing a visual representation of these values that showed the essence of the mothers’ experiences.

We collaborated on these analytic procedures as a team. Two authors conducted the first three steps individually, compared and challenged each other’s analysis, and reached a consensus on identified value units and their names. All authors participated in naming the values and developing the visual representation. We used MAXqda2, a qualitative data analysis software program, for the first three steps of the analysis and acquired peer reviews on the first draft of the paper.

Findings

The analysis identified seven main values from the voices of 49 rural welfare recipients about welfare and welfare reform. The values identified were self-esteem, autonomy, uniqueness, advancement, security, independence, and fairness. These values guided the

perceptions, decisions, and behaviors of the current and former welfare mothers concerning welfare and welfare reform.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem was an important value when the mothers talked about their experiences with welfare. In this paper, self-esteem refers to a welfare mother's perception that she is a valuable person with respect and dignity. Because they were aware of the stigma surrounding welfare, most of the mothers felt that receiving welfare benefits damaged their self-esteem. For example, some mothers commented that, "it's humiliating to ask for help from a government" and "I don't think anybody's proud of being on welfare."¹ Several mothers described specific situations where their self-esteem was damaged such as when others expressed negative attitudes towards them or treated them rudely in public places (e.g., grocery stores, welfare offices, hospitals, and banks) or during private interactions with their family and neighbors. Both implicit and explicit stigmatization seriously affected their self-esteem.

The mothers made specific efforts to protect, maintain, and even enhance their self-esteem during the interviews. We interpret these efforts as their strategies to differentiate themselves from the stereotypical welfare recipients. The first strategy was to justify their participation in the TANF program. These mothers provided persuasive reasons including their personal and family issues (e.g., physical and mental health problems, pregnancy, becoming a single mother without any help, and not having transportation) and structural constraints (e.g., low wages and limited jobs in rural areas). They also emphasized the temporary, not long-term, need for help. The mothers wanted to justify the reasons for their welfare reliance even when the interviewers did not ask why they were on welfare.

The second strategy was not to include themselves in the group of welfare mothers. The mothers referred to other welfare recipients as "they" instead of "we." Some mothers directly contrasted

"them" (i.e., long-term, hopeless welfare recipients) and "me" and criticized "their" problematic lifestyle. These mothers commented that it was unfair to provide public assistance to stereotypical welfare mothers. Others who did not stigmatize welfare mothers still stated that "they" needed help. Along with the distinct language used, a number of mothers excluded themselves from the target population of welfare reform recipients. When responding to the question "Do you feel changed welfare regulations have affected your family?" many mothers often rejected the impact of welfare reform on their lives even though they later may have realized this exclusion was not true. These strategies are in line with previous research (Broughton, 2003; Seccombe, 2006; Seccombe *et al.*, 1998).

Autonomy

Autonomy was another important value that these rural welfare mothers revealed during the interviews. Autonomy, here, refers to a welfare mother's freedom to decide her own lifestyle instead of being forced to live in a certain way by others. They felt that the welfare system stole their autonomy because their desire for autonomy conflicted with the work requirements of the TANF legislation. This sentiment showed that many mothers were uncomfortable with the "new paternalism" of welfare reform (Mead, 1997).

There are several specific situations where these mothers realized they could not maintain their autonomy. They felt powerless when they were unable to select their preferred life style due to regulations. Some mothers wanted to go to college instead of working full-time, to wait for a gainful job instead of being employed at minimum wage, or to stay at home to take care of young children instead of struggling with finding childcare. However, the welfare system controlled what the mothers could or could not do. These mothers commented, "They told me what I was supposed to do," "They define full-time," and "They decided that we didn't deserve any more." These mothers often had to work at any job at any wage for a certain number of hours to follow the welfare regulation regardless of their desire.

Some mothers realized that their autonomy was not protected when they faced complicated guidelines

¹Extensive quotes supporting the seven values are not included due to the page limit but are available upon request.

and paperwork. Several of them revealed their discomfort of losing autonomy by saying that: "They got to know everything." Furthermore, some mothers felt their privacy was violated because they had to report parts of their personal life such as wages and boyfriends. Most mothers could not pursue autonomy despite their aspirations because they needed the welfare benefits to care for their families.

Uniqueness

Uniqueness played an important role in the rural low-income mothers' reactions to welfare reform. Uniqueness refers to these welfare mothers' individual differences, circumstances, and needs, as one mother stated, "I don't think it's fair to put everybody in one category." Some mothers talked about how welfare reform was problematic because it did not consider differences among individuals or families when policymakers imposed work requirements and time limits.

Many mothers expressed their value of uniqueness most commonly when they talked about other recipients' special circumstances making it difficult for them to meet the requirements of welfare reform. These unique circumstances included restricted work ability (e.g., physical and mental health problems), challenging family situations (e.g., limited access to childcare or transportation, grandparents raising grandchildren), and limited means to stable and gainful employment (e.g., lack of education or work experience). These mothers noted that enforcing employment regulations and the time limit was harsh for some people and that denying access to welfare benefits could put them in serious danger.

Some mothers also highlighted the value of uniqueness when they discussed their own distinctive needs and situations. Some complained that the regulations of welfare reform were rigid and unable to satisfy their unique needs because the new system was insensitive to individual work experience or reasons for being on welfare. They explained how their situations were special and how they did not fit into the definition of the stereotypical welfare recipient. This aspect of uniqueness is closely associated with the previous discussion about justifying why they received welfare in light of self-esteem.

Advancement

Advancement was identified as a strong value held by many of these mothers. Advancement refers to moving toward a higher economic position based on a gainful wage or attaining a better earning potential based on additional education or training. A number of mothers often used the phrase "get ahead" to express strong aspirations for advancement. They believed that leaving TANF was not a sufficient condition but rather a prerequisite to achieve advancement in becoming "better off." Many of these mothers had plans to enhance their earning power, which often included going to a college and obtaining job-related licenses or certificates.

The majority of mothers perceived welfare reform as a barrier to their advancement while a few mothers viewed the change in legislation as a positive motivation for advancement. Many commented that they could not advance and used the word "stuck," because the more they worked, the greater amounts of benefits they lost. Some mothers, who felt welfare reform was inhibiting them from advancement, criticized that "the system puts people back." One area that several mothers expressed this sentiment with was higher education. Because welfare reform discouraged postsecondary education, some delayed going back to college while others took college courses and worked full-time.

The combination of inflexible work requirements and structural constraints, such as low wages, further decreased the possibility of many of these mothers' advancement. Many were in the situation where they had reduced or no welfare benefits even though their low-wage jobs hardly offered wage increases, promotions, or other benefits. Only a few reported that welfare reform motivated them to advance by forcing them to leave TANF and maintain continuous employment, despite the difficulties that came along with it.

Security

Security was a key value that these mothers expressed when they discussed their experiences and opinions of welfare reform. In this paper, security refers to a status where a welfare mother can

maintain a safe and stable family life. Although security was a top priority to these mothers, their family life was not safe due to limited and unstable income. Common examples of insecurity were being unable to pay bills or rent and not having sufficient food at home. In addition to the financial hardships, a few mothers commented on how poverty could be associated with the overall insecurity of family life; for instance, a child being taken away by the government, leaving children undisciplined, family members being separated, and staying in an abusive relationship.

Welfare reform was a serious threat to the security of these families. Many mothers were doubtful about how they could maintain family security without the safety net of welfare. As one mother said, "It's scary to think about." Many mothers were seriously worried about losing security as they approached their time limits or lost welfare benefits because their income increased as a result of mandatory employment. Their wages were still not enough to make ends meet despite their increased work effort. Further, the time limit imposed by welfare reform was very burdensome and it was often overwhelming when coupled with personal and structural constraints such as lack of human capital, limited job opportunities, and other resources in rural communities.

The welfare recipients developed several strategies to preserve their family security. Some decided to limit the number of working hours in order to maximize their income from work and cash assistance. Others carefully watched the amount of time left on their welfare clocks and tried to stay off welfare as much as possible to secure time for future emergencies.

Independence

Independence was another value that the mothers expressed, despite their current or previous participation in TANF. In this paper, independence refers to a status where a welfare mother supports her family without relying on public assistance. The mothers emphasized that they were on welfare not because they did not value independence or did not want to work but because they needed temporary

help for circumstances out of their control. They also applied their value of independence to other welfare recipients. The mothers blamed "free riders" of welfare and insisted that everybody should work because working was what able-bodied people were supposed to do and could benefit from.

These mothers' perspectives on their level of independence varied depending on how they defined independence. The majority of mothers perceived that they were dependent on the government because they were receiving public assistance including cash and Food Stamps. They revealed strong aspirations for leaving welfare and finding stable employment to provide for their families. On the other hand, some believed that they were independent because they already had a long history of work or because they had been working without long-term reliance on the welfare system. For example, one mother commented, "I am not one to stay home and to be taken care of. I am one to go out and know that I have responsibilities and I will support myself."

In general, most mothers agreed with the need for work requirements in welfare reform from the aspect of independence. Several mothers said that they became independent because they did not receive cash assistance any longer as a result of welfare reform. However, these welfare leavers were not always satisfied with their independence from the system because they were forced to move from welfare to low-wage jobs while they still needed help to survive. Working may mean independence from reliance on the public system but may not lead these mothers to independence from their need for support.

Fairness

Fairness was an overarching value portrayed in the rural welfare mothers' voices. Fairness refers to the justice in the distribution of welfare assistance and welfare reform regulations. A number of mothers used the phrase "It's (un)fair" when they talked about their opinions of welfare and welfare reform, and then explained why it was (un)fair based on their other values.

Many mothers argued that welfare benefits

should be fairly distributed. These mothers tended to classify welfare recipients into those who deserved and those who did not. Those that deserved benefits were families who really needed help. The undeserved were welfare abusers who simply relied on the government without any effort to work or those who received benefits in dishonest ways. Some argued that those who actually needed assistance, including themselves, could not receive adequate benefits to maintain family security due to welfare abusers. It seemed that these strong opinions were related to their strategy of enhancing self-esteem by distancing themselves from stereotypical welfare mothers.

Some mothers did not agree with the welfare stigma. They pointed out that the stigma was not fair because there were many non-stereotypical mothers, including themselves, who worked hard or had unique situations that inhibited them from working. They were frustrated that the stigma had a negative effect on many welfare families' sense of well-being. These perspectives stem from their value of uniqueness and self-esteem.

Their viewpoints on the fairness of welfare reform were contradictory. Based on their agreement with work requirements to welfare abusers, some regarded the changes in regulations as fair. Others argued that imposing the same requirements and time limit regardless of circumstances was not fair because it did not consider unique situations, attacked the security and autonomy of many families, and did not help most families that did not have the means to advance. The mothers' voices about welfare reform were ambivalent as one mother commented, "It's a double edged sword." Some mothers gained some independence by getting off welfare and obtaining a job; however, they were still not making enough to make ends meet and move their families financially forward.

Conceptual Visualization of Main Values

We constructed a conceptual diagram to represent the seven values (see Figure 1). Swartz's (1996) model of value structure provided insights into the overall shape of our visualization. The boundaries between values are in dotted line, meaning that adjacent values were related and often appeared together in the data. We located fairness in the

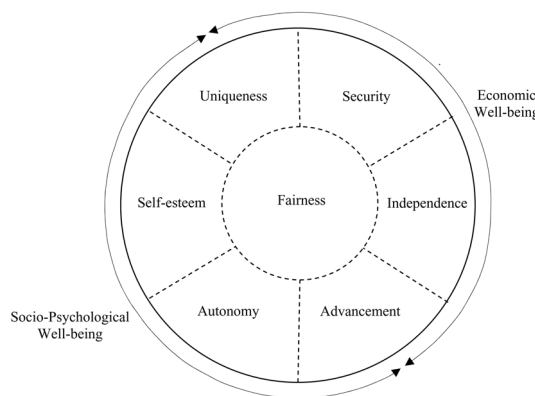


Figure 1. Structure of Main Values Underlying Welfare Mothers' Voices

center of the circle in order to illustrate that fairness was a linking value to other six values, based on the structure of the mothers' voices. This is unlike Swartz's model that did not have a central value.

Fairness and each of the other values were linked in the following contexts. Self-esteem was related to fairness when the mothers felt unfair to belittle their self-esteem due to welfare reliance. This relation was also clear when the mothers attempted to differentiate themselves from other welfare recipients by saying that it was unfair to support the "free riders." Autonomy and fairness were connected because these mothers regarded the ignorance of autonomy in welfare policy as unfair. Uniqueness was linked to fairness because they believed it was unfair to impose the same regulations on all welfare recipients. A relation between security and fairness was found when mothers viewed the reform as an unfair threat to family security, which was the safety needed for basic level of living. Advancement and fairness were associated in that many mothers perceived welfare reform as an unfair game because they could not "get ahead" due to reduced or taken benefits as they tried to move ahead in the workforce. Finally, independence and fairness were related, for example, when these mothers agreed that work requirements were fair to stereotypical welfare recipients.

Figure 1 also shows that security and independence pertained to economic well-being while autonomy and self-esteem pertained to the socio-psychological well-being of these mothers. Uniqueness

and advancement was related to economic well-being in general, but some mothers discussed these two values in relation to socio-psychological well-being. For instance, uniqueness was important when they highlighted their own distinctive characteristics from those of other welfare recipients, and pursuing advancement was helpful for their socio-psychological well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study explicitly identified the main values portrayed in the experiences and opinions of 49 current and former rural welfare recipients in the United States. The values were self-esteem, autonomy, uniqueness, advancement, security, independence, and fairness. These values were interrelated to each other and guided how they perceived, decided, and behaved regarding welfare reform. For instance, the mothers desired to maintain self-esteem and autonomy in their lives while pursuing security, independence, and advancement. The hope is that the welfare system will enable them to make decisions and actions in accordance with these values and will take the uniqueness of each welfare recipient into serious account.

The mothers experience difficulties in pursuing their values and have to deal with value tensions. Stigma around welfare often damages their self-esteem, even though they make efforts to protect this value. They are unable to exercise autonomy as much as they want due to the paternalistic approach of welfare reform. Security, independence, and advancement are challenging goals for some mothers who have to struggle with minimum day-to-day survival and structural barriers. Values pertaining to socio-psychological well-being, such as self-esteem and autonomy, could conflict with values that are relatively more associated with economic well-being, such as security and independence. For instance, there may be a tension between self-esteem or autonomy and family security in the situation where they need to decide to go on or leave welfare. These findings are in line with Tickamyer *et al.*'s (2000) comment that welfare participants frequently find

difficulty in pursuing mainstream American values, which are also theoretical goals of welfare policy, because of the bureaucratic implementation of welfare policy.

The mothers need to accommodate their values with contradictory realities. Becoming a welfare recipient may mean lowering or abandoning their aspirations for self-esteem or autonomy because of the limited resources they have. Some mothers make rational choices not to lose public assistance despite their values of independence and autonomy. For instance, they delay or give up higher education even though it is what they need for advancement and what their autonomous self wants to pursue. Some mothers reduce the amount they work because they do not want to lose welfare benefits. These value accommodations seemed to be their survival tactic in the midst of severe financial hardships and often contradicted some of the central values. This finding supports the literature including the explanation of inner-city residents' values (Gould, 1999; Minton *et al.*, 1997) and Rodman's (1971) concept of pragmatism.

It is worth discussing the similarities or differences of values between rural and urban low-income parents even though it would be somewhat hasty to make a conclusion due to scant empirical research in this area. According to Minton and associates' (1997, 2004) quantitative studies, family security was the most important terminal value (i.e., end-state value) among inner-city urban mothers. Other high ranked values included self-respect, happiness, a comfortable life, freedom, a sense of accomplishment, self-respect, and equality (Minton *et al.*). It appears that most of these values are similar to the main values in this study, including security, self-esteem, advancement, and fairness. What this comparison implies is that the values of rural low-income mothers may not be very different from the values of urban low-income mothers. However, it is crucial to note that rural environments, where low-income mothers implement these values, are often more challenging compared to urban environments. In rural communities, for example, resources needed to achieve security and advancement (e.g. jobs, transportation, childcare, and other public services) are limited. It may be extremely difficult for rural

mothers to pursue self-esteem while being on welfare given that reliance on public assistance tends to be highly stigmatized in rural areas (Duncan, 1999). The present study suggests that future research should investigate the experiences of rural welfare recipients when they implement their main values and how these experiences are different from the experiences of urban welfare recipients.

From a human ecology perspective, the present study has an important implication on the literature for the values of low-income mothers in countries outside of the U.S. In Bubolz and Sontag's (1993) human ecology theory, values are a key concept that is part of the family process and guide decision-making and behaviors in family life. However, our findings show that even in the wealthiest country in the world, low-income mothers experience difficulties in pursuing their values and have to sacrifice some values to simply survive. These difficulties and value tensions are likely to be greater among low-income families in other countries, particularly in countries where many families may not have adequate resources needed to realize their values. Unique societal and cultural characteristics may play a meaningful role in the implementation of the values of low-income families, similar to the role that the rural context played in the current study. Human ecology theory also acknowledges that environmental characteristics are as crucial as individual and family values and that survival is the core reason that families interact with their environments (Bubolz & Sontag). Future research in countries other than the U.S. should pay attention to what low-income families experience when their realities do not allow them to pursue their values. Human ecology theory will provide a useful framework for this investigation.

Limitations of the Study

The present study includes several limitations that should be considered when applied to a larger population. First, the scope was restricted to 49 rural welfare mothers from seven counties of four selected states in the U.S. even though the data were rich for qualitative analysis. Other rural counties and states may be different in terms of the race or ethnicity of the rural population, TANF requirements and

eligibility, and the political culture. These regional characteristics might be related to how the interviewed group of rural welfare recipients experienced and perceived welfare and welfare reform. Second, we did not focus on variations among participants because their values seemed to be consistent. However, it would be hasty to conclude that the values and experiences of our participants were homogeneous. Value priorities may vary depending on personal and family circumstances. For example, TANF leavers might be different from current recipients, and those who were sanctioned off TANF might not be the same as those who voluntarily left TANF. Third, the qualitative analysis utilized secondary interview data that a larger research project team gathered without a particular attention to values. The data could have provided deeper descriptions of underlying values if the interviews had exclusively focused on values and welfare.

Policy Implications of the Study

This study has practical implications for the current welfare policy. First, policymakers need to consider the values of welfare recipients in the evaluation of welfare reform if they strive to accomplish its intended outcomes. This study showed that many of these welfare mothers already aspire for the values that welfare reform attempts to infuse in them. Therefore, it may be unnecessary to allocate substantial funding on welfare-to-work programs if the main purpose of these programs is to promote self-esteem and independence. It would be more effective to ensure family security by supporting them to obtain and maintain gainful employment because security is a prerequisite to self-sufficiency.

The welfare policy also needs to consider individual differences concerning the needs and circumstances of welfare recipients including place (i.e., rural or urban areas). Previous welfare reform research has largely ignored rural areas and the unique challenges that welfare recipients in these areas face. This study articulates the views of rural welfare recipients, a population that is often understudied. Our findings suggest that a one-policy-fits-all approach may not work well, given

that uniqueness was an important value for the mothers. One of the alternatives could be offering a few options for the time limit and work requirements so welfare recipients can choose a welfare package at the initiation of their caseload. Not only would this needs-based approach better serve the welfare recipients, but also it would accelerate their movement from welfare to stable employment.

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