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ANALYSIS

Demystifying Welfare: Its Feminization And Its Effect On Stakeholders

Nicholas D. Hartlep, M.S.Ed.

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Publication Date: October 1, 2008

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Professors Handler and Hasenfeld's thesis in *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality* (2007) is that the majority of welfare policies in place are constructed upon myth. As Handler and Hasenfeld indicate, "This book will show that just about every one of these [welfare] policies is based on *myth*" (p. 4). Unfortunately, these myths, or false assumptions inevitably lead to the misrepresentation of African-American women as virtually the sole recipients of welfare. This "welfare queen" myth is perpetuated through media blitzkriegs that preserve the voicelessness and helplessness of welfare recipients and leave them unable to correct these erroneous beliefs. Welfare is misunderstood, mystified, and feminized by many stakeholders (i.e. government, media, majoritarian culture, etc.). This text analysis will assess how well the text achieved the following: (1) articulate why the current U.S. welfare state is based upon myths or false assumptions, (2) analyze what these false assumptions mean for stakeholders, especially African-American women, (3) argue why welfare is an issue of importance in the 21st century, and (4) express what the feminization of welfare says of the majoritarian culture.

The U.S. welfare state is based upon myths which are simply false assumptions. According to Handler and Hasenfeld, "Myth and ceremony allow politicians and the public to paper over the massive contradictions of welfare policy" (p. 4). Welfare myths include, but are not limited to the following: (1) Welfare recipients are malingering and lazy individuals. These feigning individuals exploit the welfare system in a detrimental way and do not work nor attempt to help their situation; (2) Welfare recipients benefit from "entry-level" jobs. These jobs lead to upward mobility and future success and earnings; and (3) The problems welfare recipients experience are self-induced. The root

causes of their struggles are their immorality and inability to adhere to the mainstream culture.

The sentiment that families who receive welfare are malingering and lazy is a myth. In fact, according to Handler and Hasenfeld, if we “[s]ummariz[e] the profile of welfare families...many are working, have worked, or will try to work when they leave welfare” (p. 63). This indicates that the general public’s paradigm of welfare recipients is based upon erroneous convictions. Many of these false assumptions have historical origins. Labeling welfare recipients lazy commenced in the mid-1960s. Handler and Hasenfeld state that “[b]etween 1965 and 1967, when antipoverty programs began to be criticized, news depictions of poverty became racialized” (p. 175). This biased media coverage negatively impacted the general public’s opinion of African American’s and their work-ethic. Therefore, believing that *all* welfare recipients are lazy and exploiting the welfare system is a belief predicated on prejudice and racism.

The belief that welfare recipients benefit from “entry-level” jobs is fundamentally incorrect. Furthermore, believing these jobs lead to upward mobility and future success and earnings is wide of the mark. Handler and Hasenfeld posit that “[m]obility is also a myth. Most of the jobs do not lead to promotions; they are not ‘starter’ jobs” (p. 12). The underlying issue is that welfare recipients need to be trained and prepared adequately for their occupations. This requires that these individuals are equipped through education and experiences that will lead to job retention and job satisfaction. This means welfare recipients are best served through job education and furthering their current level of education, not by working menial jobs for low-wages. These menial jobs lead nowhere.

Among the myriad of myths regarding welfare and its recipients, perhaps the most insidious is that the problems welfare recipients experience are self-inflicted. Some speculate immorality causes the poor to stay on welfare. Sadly, many people judge welfare recipients based on an erroneous belief that they would rather purchase alcohol than food. This previous myth can be summarized in the expression “beer instead of bread.” While some may fit this model, not all people on welfare purchase alcohol with the monies they receive from cash-assistance programs.

The aforementioned false assumptions impact many stakeholders. A few of these stakeholders include, but are not limited to, the following people and/or entities: (1) government—local, state, and federal, (2) welfare recipients, especially African-American women, and (3) the education system.

Firstly, government, albeit a large entity, is impacted by false assumptions about welfare and its clients. The government may be at the local, state, or federal level. Government plays and has a direct impact on those people on the welfare rolls. As Handler and Hasenfeld so poignantly state, “The deserving poor programs are universal and administered at the federal level—Social Security and Medicare. The undeserving poor programs are administered at the state and local level—AFDC (now TANF) and general relief” (p. 187). As one can determine from the previous quote, government—a stakeholder in welfare—aids in perpetuating false assumptions about who are the deserving and undeserving poor. These false assumptions mean government has the ability to enact change in welfare policy, yet they have yet to do so. Handler and Hasenfeld note “[...] with very few exceptions, the basic approach of U.S. antipoverty policy is to focus on individual behavior rather than the structural conditions that cause

poverty” (p. 70). The welfare system is a broken system and needs to be corrected in order to serve adequately those on the welfare rolls. Handler and Hasenfeld argue that “[...] the U.S. welfare state reinforces social stratification” (p. 7). If government chose to halt poverty in the United States, there would be a monumental and positive effect nationally. According to Danziger and Gottschalk, as cited in *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*, “Ending a year of poverty will save society \$26 billion” (p. 47). It appears that ending poverty is not one of government’s priorities. It does appear that the status quo will continue until a different stakeholder effects change.

Secondly, welfare recipients are directly impacted by false assumptions held about them, especially African-American women. The morale of welfare recipients is often broken due to the stigma that is attached to those on the welfare rolls. One salient myth is “[b]eing poor is always an individual moral fault” (p. 190). What is more, welfare recipients are required to go through demoralizing bureaucratic requirements in order to garner the services they so desperately need. The hurdles and impediments these welfare recipients incur oftentimes call into question their morality and trustworthiness. In order to dismantle these false assumptions welfare recipients are undoubtedly required to persevere through having their character being judged and feeling inadequate and stigmatized. Unfortunately, many needy individuals are not able to overcome these obstacles and end up *not* receiving the services they need. African-American women are unfairly viewed as receiving an inordinate percentage of welfare services. This “welfare queen” philosophy is assumed due to the media’s inaccurate portrayal of welfare recipients. In fact, “[t]hey [TANF recipients] are not primarily African American; they are primarily adults with small families, on welfare for short spells, and usually employed

in the low-wage labor market” (p. 8). Clearly African-American women are demonized through the welfare processes.

Thirdly, the education system is directly impacted by false assumptions about the poor, indirectly those on welfare. According to Rouse and her colleagues, as cited in *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*, “[...] by the time children start school, about half of the school achievement test score gap already exists” (p.107). What this indicates is that the welfare-to-work framework is based upon the false assumption that gaining entry-level employment will alleviate an individual’s hardships. What this truly illustrates is the need to educate those on the welfare rolls rather than coercing them into the low-wage labor market. Education is the vehicle by which the impoverished may find escape from a life of hardship and destituteness.

Welfare is an issue of importance due to the fact many people are suffering and in need of assistance. Additional to our civic and ethical responsibility in aiding those in need, it is incumbent that social policies be corrected. Not only would society reap the benefits in monetary savings, society would also benefit from a better-prepared and educated citizenry. Welfare-to-work is a great framework if coupled with the necessary aids. This means access to safe and affordable childcare and housing. Also, welfare is an issue of importance because of its potential to serve many underserved people.

The feminization of welfare says many things about the majority culture. Handler and Hasenfeld assert, “Women are more likely to be poor than men” (p. 39). Handler and Hasenfeld explicate indicating that “[...] gender discrimination continues to play a large role in the difference in earnings between men and women” (p. 40). The causes of the

feminization of welfare include, but are not limited to the following: (1) family composition and (2) inequalities in access to education.

Family composition has changed in recent times with the dissolution of marriages, the higher proclivity of cohabitation, and the higher incidence of single-mother-headed households. The nuclear family no longer is the proxy. Two-income-earner families are not as common as many would believe. Families are required to do more with less. This scenario oftentimes presents itself with a single parent—many times a mother—having to do everything to keep the family on-track.

Inequalities exist as they relate to access to education. The barriers to education may be a lack of affordable childcare. If mothers are single and have dependent children, they will need affordable childcare while they are at school. However, how can these women go to school if they lack the financial resources to pay for childcare? These mothers do not see education being viable due to the exorbitant cost of childcare.

As one can determine from the facts presented in this text analysis, finding a solution to our precarious situation is something that is difficult and requires decisions to be made delicately; currently there is no one comprehensive panacea. Nearly all welfare policies in place are constructed upon myth. The United States' paradigm of welfare recipients is based on false beliefs. Many of these false assumptions have historical origins—one being the “welfare queen”—which unjustly stigmatize African-American women. There is a lot of work to be done. Who will be the vanguard of social (welfare) change?

References

Handler, J. F., & Hassenfeld, Y. (2007). *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*.

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