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ACCOMMODATION AND RESISTANCE AMONG RECIPIENTS AND
WORKERS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF WOMEN AND WELFARE

presented by

Catherine E. Pelissier

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**ACCOMMODATION AND RESISTANCE AMONG RECIPIENTS AND
WORKERS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF WOMEN AND WELFARE**

By

Catherine Elizabeth Pelissier

VOLUME I

A DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

ACCOMMODATION AND RESISTANCE AMONG RECIPIENTS AND WORKERS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF WOMEN AND WELFARE

By

Catherine E. Pelissier

In the United States, where poverty is often viewed as the outcome of character deficits, what is the significance of participation in the welfare system? How do the women who comprise the majority of both adult recipients and low-echelon workers make sense of their places in the welfare bureaucracy, of each other, and of prevailing ideologies of poverty and gender? This dissertation addresses these questions by examining the experiences of welfare recipients and workers as they are constructed and expressed in talk and conversation. Emphasis is placed on the extent to which the women's discourse was constrained by, and served to perpetuate or challenge the cultural and social systems within which they live day-to-day.

The study is based on seventeen months' investigation of two welfare rights groups located in a small city in Michigan, and of daily life in a rural county welfare office. Data were gathered by means of participant observation, tape recordings of naturally occurring conversation, and interviews conducted with both workers and recipients.

The study focuses on recipients' and workers' accommodation and resistance to received stereotypes and ideologies, and on the nature of the relationship between the two groups of women. The study found that recipients and workers did not blindly reproduce received stereotypes and ideologies, but rather invoked or challenged them for their own purposes at hand, purposes that were often resistant to the welfare system. In addition, the women often drew on ideologies prevalent in the wider society in their constructions and critiques.

Despite fundamental similarities in the women's backgrounds, recognition of commonalities and expressions of comembership between workers and recipients was rare. Current economic differences between the two groups of women overshadowed commonalities based on gender and economic vulnerability.

While their critiques of the welfare system had no discernible impact on the welfare bureaucracy, both recipients and workers were constructing identities and interpretations of the system that were in opposition to received views. Insofar as the women were engaged in counter-hegemonic projects, possibilities for structural change in the future remain open.

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My debt to the participants in this study is matched by my debt to my committee members. Ann Millard, chair, mentor, and friend, was simultaneously my harshest critic and most steadfast supporter. I thank her for her persistent insight. Frederick Erickson has had a major impact on my thinking since I began graduate studies; my emphasis on talk and conversation speaks to his continuing influence on my approach to both theory and methods. I thank him for introducing me to the phenomenon of social construction in action, and for providing me with the tools to investigate it. Rita Gallin's expertise on gender and economics is hopefully evident throughout the

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CHAPTER 1
OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

Introduction

In contemporary Western culture, poverty is often viewed as the outcome of individual deficits rather than of economic or supernatural forces. This view is particularly the case in the United States, with its Horatio Alger stories and ideologies of opportunity. In addition, government programs designed to address poverty, known collectively as the welfare system, have "become critical in determining the lives and livelihood of women" (Piven 1984:15). Women, in other words, are the principal subjects of the welfare system; they comprise the majority of the adult poor and the majority of welfare workers in the United States. Little is known, however, of the day-to-day experiences and views of the women who work for and receive welfare, specifically with regard to how they interpret and construct their positions in the welfare system, each other, and received ideologies of poverty and gender.

While feelings of degradation associated with being on welfare are often alluded to in the literature (e.g., Piven and Cloward 1971; Sidel 1986; Wineman 1984), the nuances of such feelings are not explored; nor are the

ways in which recipients express their feelings in conversation with each other addressed. A similar criticism may be made of the literature on welfare workers: while it is common knowledge that workers are overburdened (Prottas 1979; Wertkin 1990), and that, like many women in "women's" occupations, they suffer from low pay and status (Ehrenreich and Piven 1984; Wineman 1984), we know little of how workers express or construct their experiences as workers.

A second gap in our knowledge concerns the commonalities among workers and recipients. In focusing on either workers or recipients, much of the literature on welfare seems to mirror the institutionalized divisions between them; with the exception of commentaries pointing out that women are indeed the principal subjects of the welfare system (Fraser 1989), and that they have a potential for establishing comembership and solidarity (Piven 1984; Withorn 1984), little effort has been made to compare the experiences of workers and recipients and to explore commonalities as well as differences among and between them.

Finally, recipients and workers are often portrayed as powerless, and are given little credit as active agents engaged in creating meaning and struggling to improve their worlds. Indeed, there is ample evidence that "disempowerment remains intrinsic to centralized

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bureaucratic assistance" (Wineman 1984). However, I will argue that workers' and recipients' actions, as embodied in their conversational interchanges, do not arise from "a mere suffering of, but from a creative response to" (Willis 1977:132) the exigencies of the welfare system.

This dissertation addresses the gaps and shortcomings in our knowledge of women and welfare by examining the experiences of welfare recipients and workers as they are constructed and expressed in talk and conversation. The analysis of talk, as it occurs both naturally and in the context of interviews, allows for detailed explorations of how women who receive welfare and women who work for welfare participate in constructing meaning and identity in their worlds. In situating workers and recipients together in the welfare system, this dissertation additionally explores their commonalities and differences.

Organization of Dissertation

In this chapter, I discuss the theoretical issues which inform my endeavor, and describe the social and historical context of welfare in the United States. Chapter 2 includes a description of the populations included in the study and the methods used to gather and analyze data. My focus in Chapters 3 and 4 is on the views and perspectives of recipients and workers, following which, in Chapter 5, I discuss possibilities for

comembership between workers and recipients, two groups who are considered -- and who often consider themselves -- to be in an antagonistic relationship to each other. Finally, in Chapter 6, I explore some implications of this study for both theory and practice.

Theoretical Issues

A great deal of contemporary social theory is concerned with the relationship between human action and structural constraint (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Giddens 1984; Ortner 1984). This dissertation speaks to that relationship by exploring both the ranges of and limits to women's creative participation, as workers and recipients, in the U.S. welfare system.

In their introduction to Women and Social Protest, West and Blumberg (1990:4) take as a working assumption that, "throughout the ages and cross-culturally, women of different classes and races have acted on their felt concerns whenever and however they were able." This assumption recognizes both sides of an agency-structure dialectic. On the one hand, it recognizes that social construction "is not carried out in a social vacuum" (Bourdieu 1990:131); thus the interpretive and constructive work that welfare workers and recipients engage in must be viewed within the context of powerful and dominating ideologies that in many ways erect

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boundaries to interpretive and constructive possibilities. A dominant system, in other words, contains the power to "impose the principles of the construction of reality" (Bourdieu 1977:165; see also Gramsci 1971), thus placing limits on what is available for women to think with (Smith 1987).

On the other hand, West and Blumberg's assumption recognizes agency, the power of human beings to create and impose meaning, and to act in the world. As Alverson (1978:6) has stated:

The self must exist in part by virtue of the freedom or power of the individual to create meaning in the world. And it is this ability to bestow meaning and hence to help constitute the nature of the environment that is the privilege of consciousness and distinguishes it from a mere thing.

My goal in this dissertation is to recognize the power of structural and social constraints, while underscoring the creative and active engagement of women as participants in the welfare system. Specifically, women's active engagement in constructing their world and its meanings will be examined in the context of the social and cultural constraints to which they are subject.

The Production and Reproduction of Culture and Society

A second major issue in anthropology to which this dissertation speaks concerns the production and reproduction of culture and society. The most recent

approaches to this enduring concern in anthropology have been characterized by Ortner (1984) as "practice" approaches, the central problem of which is "that of trying to understand how the system constructs actresses and actors and how these agents realize and transform the system" (Collier and Yanagisako 1989:29). At the most abstract theoretical level, my focus is on how participants in a particular "system," the welfare system, reproduce or transform some of its key features, namely, stereotypes and ideologies concerning recipients, workers, and the place of welfare in society.

As I am using them here, the concepts of production and reproduction refer to a single social process; I am not using them in what are taken to be typically Marxist senses,¹ but rather am using them to refer to the ongoing production (creation, transmission, transformation) of culture and society, or, more specifically, of institutional arrangements and systems of meaning.

The concern with ongoing production and reproduction is based on the claim of social construction theorists and students of interaction that phenomena such as gender, class, inequality, or values and ideologies, are socially constructed, maintained and changed (e.g., Berger and Luckmann 1966; Erickson 1975a, 1986; Erickson and Shultz

¹ Yanagisako and Collier (1987) point out, however, that Engels, not Marx, treated the two as separate phenomena.

1982; McDermott and Roth 1978). Such phenomena must, first of all, be located in their doing; they are not given, and people do not simply enact them; rather, they are accomplished or occasioned by participants interacting in particular contexts (Erickson 1975; Erickson and Shultz 1982; Moerman 1988).² The analytic focus of this dissertation, then, is on both the content of women's interpretations and the processes of constructing interpretations in conversation.

Again, however, while a practice approach focuses on real life activities and on the agents doing those activities, it also recognizes that "'the system' does in fact have [a] very powerful, even 'determining' effect upon human action and the shape of events;" the emphasis on "action and interaction is thus not a matter of denying or minimizing this point, but expresses rather an urgent need to understand where 'the system' comes from" (Ortner 1984:146). Participants in interaction are thus not free to construct anything they want -- society is not "the

² The ways of phrasing this connection are as numerous as the debates concerning its nature. For my purposes, Giddens (1984), who focuses on "structuration" and structure as "virtual," and Mehan (1979), who focuses on the "structuring of structures" and "constitutive" ethnography, provide useful frameworks for thinking about this connection. Despite ongoing debates -- most of which point to either the neglect of "micro" studies to connect to "macro" phenomena, or the neglect of "macro" studies to illustrate what the "macro" phenomena look like at the ground level -- most scholars would agree that what are considered "micro" and "macro" mutually implicate and constitute each other.

plastic creation of human subjects" (Giddens 1984:26) -- but are often constrained by the system and by what is culturally available for them to think with. My emphasis on the interpretive and constructive accomplishments of participants in conversation does not therefore imply that actors are free from all constraints; rather, I take cultural systems to be simultaneously constraining and enabling (Collier and Yanagisako 1989; Giddens 1984).

Accommodation and Resistance

One element of the concern with the production and reproduction of culture and society is the concern with the reproduction over time of systems of inequality. In their relationships to one another, the welfare system, and to society at large, women workers and women recipients are situated in hierarchical and oppressed social spaces. According to Collier and Yanagisako (1989:34-35), practice approaches, "in viewing cultural systems as simultaneously constraining people and enabling them to resist and shape the system...substitute a dynamic instability of struggle and resistance for a static, Durkheimian equilibrium." This formulation allows for a connection between accommodation and resistance and production and reproduction, providing a useful framework for an analysis of recipients' and workers' talk and conversation. Accommodation and resistance, then, are

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here seen as key means whereby production and reproduction are accomplished.

In examining how women jointly invoke or produce stereotypes and interpretations in their talk with each other, my concern is to explore the ways in which these stereotypes and interpretations represent gradients of accommodation and resistance to prevailing ideologies. The emphasis on gradients is crucial here because, as Bookman and Morgen (1988:viii) discovered with working-class women, the women in my study were neither full-time zealous radicals nor full-time "downtrodden poor folk trapped in 'worlds of pain'." Rather, their talk was sometimes resistant, sometimes accommodating, and often a little bit of both as they drew on one prevailing ideology in order to resist another, or vacillated between different positions in different contexts. Like ideologies and stereotypes, then, accommodation and resistance are accomplishments and occasions, being both patterned yet unique in each instance. What at an abstract level may look like contradiction may at the ground level be seen as reasoned participation with specific others in particular contexts.

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Inequality and the varieties of accommodation and resistance associated with it have served as the focus of many discussions of colonialism, class, and gender. In this section, I briefly outline key works and approaches

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Agency and Self-identity

In his study of the Tswana of Botswana, who have been subject to colonial rule for over 100 years, Alverson (1978:7) works to "interpret the correspondences between the material incorporation of the individual into society's institutions and the content of his [sic] conscious self-identity." Contrary to the "scars of bondage" thesis, which argues that forces of oppression, such as colonialism, intrude on meaning and self-identity in the same way that they intrude on material conditions, Alverson argues that people have the power to create meaning, self-identity, and life projects which resist those imposed by external forces.

Following Alverson, I will demonstrate that welfare workers and recipients are actively engaged in constructing their meaning-worlds. The evidence for such a claim, as with Alverson's, is provided by workers' and recipients' talk. Recipients, it will be argued, do not simply internalize the views of the welfare system or society at large concerning their self-worth or place in society; rather, they interpret these views, and in so doing create and impose their own meanings, some of which may in certain ways accommodate those external images, and

others of which resist them. This is accomplished, moreover, within the context of severe material constraints. Workers also struggle with externally imposed definitions, particularly in terms of their relatively powerless position in the bureaucratic hierarchy of the welfare system. Like recipients, however, they interpret their situation and actively construct their own meanings within it.

Everyday and "Hidden" Forms of Resistance

In his work on peasant resistance in Southeast Asia, Scott (1986) emphasizes what he calls "everyday forms of resistance," meaning resistance in the mundane, day-to-day process of living. While examinations of peasant resistance have traditionally focused on organized uprisings and insurrections, Scott (1986:1) calls for an exploration of "less obvious and non-confrontational forms of resistance," including "symbolic or ideological resistance," for example, "gossip, slander, rejecting imposed categories, [and] the withdrawal of deference" (ibid.:22).

In addition to "everyday forms of resistance," Scott (1990) discusses "hidden transcripts," forms of resistance that people engage in "backstage," away from the view and hearing of the dominant group, or that are disguised so that members of the dominant group may only suspect their

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true meaning. Together with "everyday forms of resistance," the notion of "hidden transcripts" provides the means to explore and characterize the activities of people who, for reasons of safety (ranging from the preservation of one's employment to the preservation of one's life), are dissuaded from outright rebellion. As Moore (1988:180) has pointed out, "knowing when to give in is an integral part of knowing how and when to resist, if you happen to be poor and weak." In addition, Cloward and Piven (1979:656) claim that forms of resistance (what they call "deviance") are constrained both by material options, and by what is considered to be "'sex appropriate,' 'age appropriate,' [and] 'social-class appropriate'" (see also West and Blumberg 1990).

Scott's (1986) emphasis on everyday resistance provides the means to circumvent dichotomies between intentions and consequences of resistance, or, in feminist parlance, between the personal and the political:

It is no coincidence that the cries of "bread," "land," and "no taxes" that so often lie at the core of peasant rebellion are each joined to the basic material survival needs of the peasant household. Nor should it be anything more than a commonplace that everyday peasant politics and everyday peasant resistance (and also, of course, everyday compliance) flows from these same fundamental material needs. We need assume no more than an understandable desire on the part of the peasant household to survive--to ensure its physical safety, to ensure its food supply, to ensure its necessary cash income--to identify the source of its resistance to the claims of press gangs, tax collectors, landlords, and employers (Scott 1986:26).

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It is precisely the fusion of self-interest and resistance that is the vital force animating the resistance of peasants and proletarians (ibid.).

In what follows I take up Scott's emphasis on the everyday, with the goal of looking at forms of both accommodation and resistance. I am also primarily concerned with symbolic or ideological resistance; although recipients' and workers' descriptions of instrumental actions are alluded to, the overall emphasis is on accommodation and resistance as discussed and accomplished through talk and conversation.

Scott's interpretive framework for peasant resistance is a materialist one. While the material constraints suffered by recipients are more severe than those experienced by workers, when placed in a broader context, the economic vulnerabilities of both groups of women reflect the economic marginalization of women in U.S. society. Both, moreover, suffer similar ideological constraints having to do with prestige and self-worth.

The Nature of Political Activity

Scott's (1986, 1990) criticism of the traditional emphasis on organized insurrection to the neglect of less dramatic, everyday, and sometimes hidden forms of resistance resonates with feminist critiques of what may be grouped under the rubric of "male bias" in the social sciences. In taking as basic the notion that the personal

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is political,³ feminist scholarship has provided great impetus for a focus on the everyday, and has additionally made a strong case for a concomitant reexamination of many taken-for-granted assumptions, such as what constitutes political activity.

The invisibility of women in many studies of political activity has prompted feminist scholars to question standard definitions of politics and to call for a broadening of such definitions to include "the everyday struggle to survive and to change power relations in our society" (Morgen and Bookman 1988:8; see also Moore 1988).

The edited volume, Women and the Politics of Empowerment

(Morgen and Bookman 1988), includes many examples of

activities that fall outside the realm of electoral-representative politics but which may nevertheless be

considered "political." Of particular relevance here is

Thornton Dill's article on African American domestic

workers, in which she refers to women's stories of using

"confrontation, chicanery, or cajolery to establish their

own limits within a particular household" as "stories of

resistance" (1984:37). In another context, Nelson

(1984:217) argues that, "claiming benefits from public

³ "The personal is political," characterized by Philipson and Hansen (1990:6) as the "revolutionary battle cry of the women's liberation movement" of the 1960s, points to the connections between personal and everyday issues, such as sexuality and domestic arrangements, and politics and social structure (see also Morgen and Bookman 1988).

social programs is a political as well as an administrative act" (see also Gordon 1988). Works such as these provide both theoretical and methodological contributions to the framing of phenomena of interest, and thus to what is visible and what is not (see also West and Blumberg 1990).

Morgen and Bookman (1988:4) define political activities as those that

are carried on in the daily lives of ordinary people and are enmeshed in the social institutions and political-economic processes of their society. When there is an attempt to change the social and economic institutions that embody the basic power relations in our society -- that is politics.

In this dissertation, I consider ideologies, perceptions, and stereotypes as key features of social institutions, and, in addition, consider conversation as one location for attempts to change the world -- i.e., politics.

Women Together, Women Apart

...knowledge in everyday life [is] socially distributed, that is, [it is] possessed differently by different individuals and types of individuals (Berger and Luckmann 1966:46).

In Feminism and Anthropology, Moore (1988:11) calls for a "deconstruction of the category 'woman'," for a movement beyond the assumption of shared biology and oppression to a consideration of both difference and similarity (see also Ramazanoglu 1989). Recent works in feminist anthropology and sociology have taken up this

call, and have examined the intersections of, for example, gender, class, ethnicity, culture, and religion, among others. The collection of articles in Women and the Politics of Empowerment, for instance, provides numerous examples of how women's experiences of gender oppression are "structured by class, ethnic, and racially specific experiences" (Morgen and Bookman 1988:11). In her study of pro-choice and pro-life women, Ginsburg (1989:6) points to the ways in which an issue (in this case, abortion) can separate women -- a reminder that "women, even with similar class and cultural backgrounds, rarely experience themselves or act as a homogeneous social group with a universal set of interests." The point is that women are not homogeneous, and that feminist scholarship, in order to accommodate all women, must recognize and explore difference.

The focus on both women workers and women recipients, rather than on either one or the other, allows for an exploration of both what it is that welfare recipients and workers share, and what it is that they do not share. I will argue that there are both fundamental similarities and fundamental differences in the women's situations, experiences, and interpretations. In addition, I will explore the conditions under which women recognize their commonalities and those under which they stress their

differences, with the goal of gaining insight into both the constraints to and the possibilities of comembership.

A Focus on Talk:
Contested Definitions and Symbolic Power

Language is a primary means by which we share our lives with others, providing the means to typify and categorize experiences in ways that have meaning for ourselves subjectively, and objectively for others in the same category of experience (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The use of language in interaction -- talk, or conversation -- is a significant and fundamental means by which humans experience and construct their worlds, and create meaning (Giddens 1987).

As Bourdieu (1990:54) has claimed, "politics is, essentially, a matter of words." In this dissertation, I focus on the spoken word, and view talk and conversation as a key location for the ongoing interpretation and construction of the social world. Accordingly, I examine talk and conversation among (and on occasion between) welfare workers and recipients. Although some talk between myself (as an interviewer or participant) and workers and recipients is included, the bulk of my data consists of what is referred to as naturally occurring talk, talk produced for reasons other than that there was

a researcher present (see Chapter 2 for further discussion of this issue).

In the analyses to follow, I focus on talk as a way of interpreting and constructing characterizations or classifications that help participants "place" themselves and others in particular social spaces. These spaces are contested and disputed. Recipients and workers are in continual struggles with themselves, one another, and the welfare system in their attempts to impose their view of reality; in other words, particular interpretations, stereotypes, and ideologies are the targets and means of accommodation and resistance. The power to construct groups or categories is the power of what Bourdieu (1990:137) refers to as "worldmaking," the struggle over which is part and parcel of an ongoing struggle over the perception of the social world. Workers' and recipients' struggles over the perception of the social world may thus be seen as bids for the power of "worldmaking."

Workers' and recipients' talk, then, is taken to be constitutive of their accommodation or resistance: the "discourse of the hidden transcript," according to Scott (1990:189), "does not merely shed light on behavior or explain it; it helps constitute that behavior." Again, although I will on occasion make reference to what may be called "practical" acts of resistance, such as avoiding certain tasks at work or not reporting other able-bodied

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adults living in the household, my main emphasis is on the work that people do in talking with each other to make sense of what is going on in their lives. I take this talk to be in itself accommodating or resistant activity.

The symbolic power of "worldmaking," however, is not removed from the "everyday." Recipients' and workers' classifications of themselves and each other are both accomplished in the course of and are directly implicated in the day-to-day activities of their lives as recipients and workers. In the end, whose view prevails has serious implications for the daily lives of both workers and recipients -- e.g., for how long a recipient has to wait for her food stamps, or for how often a worker is officially challenged by her clients.

Continua and Contextualities

In this study, I do not take accommodation and resistance to be mutually exclusive, but rather consider them as opposite ends of a continuum, within which there is a range of variation, and within which "mixed forms"⁴ -- partaking of both accommodation and resistance -- may be considered. The following statement by Bookman and

⁴ I borrow the phrase "mixed forms" from Erickson and Mohatt (1982), who use it to refer to the communication practices of communities in interethnic contact.

Morgen (1988:viii) with regard to working class women holds as well with the women in this study:

Their consciousness and their actions contain elements of both consent and resistance, and embody contradictory ideas about their place as women, as minorities, and as members of the working class.

Furthermore, it is often the context, rather than the act itself, which determines the dividing line between accommodation and resistance. The stories or characterizations of workers and recipients, while resistant in the immediate context of their relationship to the welfare system or each other, often appear accommodating when examined in the context of the larger culture, and in terms of mainstream ideologies and values. For example, in resisting the welfare system's work requirements, recipients often invoked ideals of family and motherhood that have been identified by feminists as patriarchal ideologies inimical to the interests of women (Ramazanoglu 1989:148-149).

Summary

The theoretical issues of concern in this dissertation include the ongoing production and reproduction of the hierarchical relationships between recipients and workers and between each group and the welfare system. The production and reproduction of these often taken-for-granted hierarchical relationships is

accomplished, at least partly, through accommodation and resistance to received ideologies; accommodation and resistance, in turn, are often located in talk and conversation. In what follows, then, I explore the work that women in the welfare system do to recreate or transform what is taken to be given.

Women and Welfare

Historical Background and General Overview

Piven and Cloward (1971) have outlined the historical roots of the U.S. welfare system, connecting it with relief measures enacted in sixteenth century Europe to cope with population change and the evolving market economy. In this section, I provide a brief outline of the history and substance of welfare, with an emphasis on Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and food stamps, the major welfare programs of concern in this study.

The immediate forerunner to AFDC was Mother's Pensions, a state-level, "outdoor relief" program⁵ providing cash to women bereft of male breadwinners to enable them to stay home with their children. This form of relief was to be provided specifically to morally

⁵ Outdoor relief consists of money, subsidies, and other benefits given to recipients in their own communities and homes, as opposed to indoor relief, best known as the poor house.

upright families; the majority of recipients, according to Abramovitz (1988:193), "turned out to be both widowed and white." The program was started in 1911 and continued until 1935, but it was never instituted in all states, and included at its maximum only 50 percent of the counties in the nation (ibid.; see also Piven and Cloward 1988).

This situation changed in 1935 with passage of the Social Security Act, which required all states to implement a new program called Aid to Dependent Children (ADC). As its name indicates, however, ADC did not provide provisions for mothers directly, but only for their children; it was also initially limited to single-parent families. Coverage for mothers was introduced in 1950, and in 1961 the program expanded to include unemployed parents, thus providing aid to intact families with an unemployed male head (Abramovitz 1988:317; Piven and Cloward 1988). Finally, in 1962, Aid to Dependent Children was renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to reflect a targeting of families rather than of individual children.

Aid to Families with Dependent Children is a "means-tested" program, meaning that individuals must meet criteria regarding income and assets in order to qualify for assistance. The goal of the program is to provide for shelter and other needs of destitute families, such as electricity and heat. Families that qualify for AFDC

automatically qualify for Medicaid, which covers health care costs. Food costs are covered by food stamps, a separate program enacted in 1964 and administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The food stamp program provides recipients with coupons (as opposed to cash) that may be used to purchase food items only. In addition to ostensibly providing for families' basic needs, welfare departments also have Workfare programs, which require that recipients with children over a certain age (the age varies by state) attend school or other job training programs, or find employment.

Although the Michigan Department of Social Services (DSS) was established in 1939, Michigan has a long history of welfare programs. Poor laws were enacted as early as 1790, and poor houses were established in the early 1830s, even before Michigan was admitted to statehood in 1837. The Department of Social Services that was established in 1939 had its origins in the State Welfare Department, established in 1921, and its predecessors, the State Board of Corrections and Charities, established in 1879, and the Board of State Commissioners for the General Supervision of Charitable, Penal, Pauper and Reformatory Institutions, established in 1871 (Office of Communications, Michigan Department of Social Services 1989).

The Michigan Department of Social Services is responsible for administering the AFDC⁶ and food stamp programs in the state. These programs are part of what the Department classifies as Financial Support Programs. The remaining programs are divided into Health Care Services and Social Services. All programs are administered through county offices, to which potential recipients must apply. The funds for AFDC come from both federal and state sources. In fiscal year 1990, 46.2 percent of the DSS budget came from federal funds, while 48.2 percent came from state funds (the remaining 5.2 percent came from "other" funds). The federal funding for AFDC was 55 percent and the state funding, 45 percent. Of the Department's entire budget, the greatest single portion, 39 percent, was spent on the Financial Support Programs. Although the state shares administrative costs of food stamps with the federal government, funding for the actual food obtained through the program is 100 percent federal, through the Department of Agriculture. (All of the above is from the Michigan Department of Social Services Biennial Report 1989-1990.)

The division between financial, health, and social services in Michigan is reflected in the division of labor

⁶ In Michigan, AFDC is often referred to as ADC, in both state publications and by recipients and workers. I use AFDC here because it is the correct acronym for the program, and because it is common usage in the literature.

among workers in the Department. Most notable is the division between those in the Social Programs, who typically hold degrees in social work or psychology, and those in Financial Support Programs, who are not designated as "professionals" and usually do not have college degrees. The non-professional workers are referred to by the welfare department as Assistance Payments Workers, and are the focus in this dissertation. Their job is to interview prospective recipients, process the paper work involved in applications, and monitor cases on an ongoing basis.

Potential recipients must meet two criteria of eligibility in order to receive welfare benefits. First, a potential recipient must have at least one child. Poor adults without children are not eligible for AFDC.⁷ Second, applicants' income and assets must fall below a certain limit established by the state. Once applicants have met the eligibility criteria, they receive bi-weekly checks (referred to as "grants") to cover rent, electricity, and personal needs.⁸ The amount of the grant varies for different areas of the state, called zones, in

⁷ Prior to fall 1991, when the program was terminated, single adults could apply for General Assistance, a solely state-funded and -administered program.

⁸ "Personal needs" refers to items other than basic shelter needs, including, for example, clothes and toiletries.

order to reflect differences in the cost of housing; additionally, individual grant levels fluctuate to reflect changes in recipients' other sources of income. As stated, AFDC recipients are automatically eligible for Medicaid, and many also receive food stamps.⁹

To qualify for and continue to receive welfare, recipients must enroll in the Michigan Opportunity and Skills Training (MOST) Program; only women who are three or more months pregnant or who have a child less than one year old are exempt. The MOST program requires recipients to participate in some form of education or job training, to actively seek out or hold paid employment, or to work as a volunteer in various forms of community work (including work for the welfare office).

The Functions of Welfare

In 1971, Piven and Cloward published the now famous Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare, in which they describe how public assistance programs serve to regulate the labor force in capitalist economies. They claim that public welfare programs expand during times of economic contraction in order to quell civil protest, and contract during periods of economic expansion in order to

⁹ Although most recipients receive both AFDC and food stamps, applicants may choose not to apply for food stamps, or, conversely, may receive food stamps but not AFDC.

force people into low-wage labor. Public assistance thus serves as a mechanism of both social and economic control.

More recently -- and more optimistically -- Piven and Cloward (1982) claim that the expansion of public assistance in the 1960s and 1970s has changed the nature of the relationship between the welfare system and the economy. In their view, because poor people consider welfare a "right" rather than a privilege, and because it offers a viable alternative to low-wage employment, welfare now poses a threat to capitalism. Wineman (1984) disagrees with this optimistic assessment, claiming that, regardless of the nature of its relationship to corporate capitalism, the welfare system remains, at base, a degrading and disempowering system. This sentiment was clearly shared by the women who participated in this study.

In addition to the debates concerning the functions of public assistance in general are analyses of the particularly gendered nature of the welfare system. From a feminist perspective, the welfare system serves to regulate not only the economic behavior of women, but also their social -- and particularly sexual -- behavior (Abramovitz 1988; Gordon 1988). While there is considerable debate in the literature over what may be called "economic" versus "feminist" approaches to understanding the functions of welfare, the two need not

be seen as mutually exclusive: the welfare system can be analyzed in terms of its regulation of women's social and sexual behavior, and of their economic behavior (see Abramovitz 1988).¹⁰

The distinction between "deserving" and "undeserving" poor -- an integral distinction in public assistance policy throughout its history -- has very specific and gendered features. The key attribute of a "deserving" male has been his willingness to labor. Able-bodied men unwilling to labor due to alcoholism or some other moral failing were -- and continue to be -- categorized as "undeserving."

The case with women is different. Willingness to labor has been only one criterion in determining a woman's status as "deserving" or "undeserving;" the other has been her general moral stature, more specifically, her sexual behavior, which has usually been discussed in terms of her "fitness" to raise children.¹¹ Indeed, until 1968, *Charles Roach* welfare departments held a mandate to raid women's homes in the middle of the night in order to determine if they

¹⁰ In terms of government expenditures on welfare programs (as opposed to discussions concerning the fundamental need of capitalism for access to cheap labor), Neubeck and Roach 1981:316) argue that, "the ideological preoccupation with the morality of the poor is strongly shaped by a concern for holding down economic costs."

¹¹ The notion of moral "fitness" harks back to Mother's Pensions (Nelson 1990).

were engaging in illicit sexual affairs. Called "man in the house" rules, such policies were ostensibly designed to ensure that women be supported by the men in their lives rather than by the welfare department; however, they are clearly part and parcel of society's view of poor women as promiscuous. Indeed, if such couples were caught, it was the woman who was punished by losing her welfare grant, rather than the man being punished by being legally forced to provide financial support for his partner and her children.¹² The "suitable home" rules enacted in the southern states, which penalized women with illegitimate children, reflected similar sentiments, and served the additional function of providing a way to coerce women into low-paid labor (Piven and Cloward 1971, 1988).

According to Abramovitz (1988:315), "tensions between the need to reproduce the labor force and to assure a supply of low-paid female labor along with general disregard for single mothers and racist attitudes shaped the ADC program from the start and help explain the program's stigma and low status." The need to reproduce the labor force through women's unpaid labor was evident in frequent policy statements to the effect that women's

¹² As Piven and Cloward (1988:642) have pointed out, however, such rules were also "almost surely intended to prevent nonmarket income from reaching men in the low-wage labor pool."

"natural" role was to raise children; as such, Abramovitz (ibid.:315) claims, ADC "institutionalized the state's role in subsidizing the reproduction of the labor force."

In addition, along with Piven and Cloward (1971), Abramovitz (1988) has pointed out that the refusal to provide aid to "undeserving" women effectively provided for workers to meet the demands of the low-paid market. Indeed, Piven and Cloward (1988:643) have claimed that "the preoccupation with family morality was deceptive" -- that market forces have always been at the heart of welfare policy. This is evidenced, for example, by "workfare" programs which do not confine women to family roles, but rather force them into low-paid employment.

Nevertheless, the issue of morality remains a powerful one in the discourse of welfare, and although official refusals to help women on the basis of their sexual behavior no longer exist,¹³ the provisioning of aid continues to have moral overtones. At a more subtle level than official policy, workers' perceptions of potential recipients' moral characters have an impact, ranging from whether or not applicants receive welfare, to how quickly their applications are processed, to the amount of

¹³ This situation may be changing, insofar as several states, including Michigan, are considering instituting policies that would penalize women who give birth to additional children while receiving welfare.

information they receive on other assistance programs for which they might be eligible.

The distinction between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor points to fundamental beliefs about poverty, wealth, and adulthood in the United States. Parker (1973) has pointed out that Western views of poverty and wealth were transformed during the Industrial Revolution from phenomena associated with the workings of God to phenomena reflective of personal and moral character. These views were part and parcel of the European poor laws that formed the basis of relief measures instituted in the United States. As Polanyi (1989:153) claims in her "grammar" of American culture, "proper people" (adults) should be able to take care of themselves; those who cannot are less than "proper people." Other authors have pointed to the importance in the United States of beliefs in the work ethic and in economic opportunity (e.g., Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches stories) (Abramovitz 1988; Hertz 1981).

Welfare, however, is not only a demeaning and punitive form of public assistance; in providing for at least some financial needs, welfare also provides women with an alternative -- albeit an unattractive one -- to dependence on men or abusive relationships (Abramovitz 1988; Piven 1984; Piven and Cloward 1988). As such, it challenges society's view of women's "place." Pearce and

McAdoo (1983:170) have claimed that, "inconsistencies in social welfare policy may reflect the general ambivalence in American society about the role and status of women. Enabling women to become 'primary' earners is not yet a societal goal."

As already pointed out, however, women's association with the welfare system includes not only receiving welfare, but also working for welfare (Ehrenreich and Piven 1984; Fraser 1989; Gordon 1990; Withorn 1984). Mink (1990), for example, demonstrates that middle-class women reformers were instrumental in the construction of the American welfare system. Women's continued role as workers in the welfare system reflects both occupational segregation and cultural views concerning women's roles as caregivers (Ehrenreich and Piven 1984; Fraser 1989) -- views that, as Abramovitz (1988) has pointed out, have often been applied differently to women in different classes.

Shrinking Support for Public Assistance

Aid to Families with Dependent Children and food stamps combined failed to provide income equal to the federal poverty level in all but one state (Alaska) even prior to the federal cuts instituted by the Reagan administration's Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981. The 1981 cuts, combined with the 1983 cuts, made

significant reductions in both AFDC and food stamp benefits (Joe 1983:181-2). Financial incentives to work were also reduced, rendering low-wage work even less profitable than before the cuts (ibid.:183). Writing in 1983, Pearce and McAdoo pointed out that, "the real value of the average welfare payment, accounting for inflation and the declining size of recipient households, has decreased by approximately 20 percent in the last decade" (1983:165).

States have also been making cuts in their welfare programs. In Michigan, as a result of both budget reductions and inflation, the purchasing power of AFDC grants was reduced by 21 percent between 1981 and 1991 (Michigan DSS Information Packet 1991). Governor John Engler, elected in 1990, has proposed severe cuts in both grant levels and department staff; as of this writing, however, many of the proposed cuts are being forestalled by the courts (with the exception of General Assistance, *which* which was eliminated in fall 1991).

CHAPTER 2

PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS

In this chapter I describe the participants in the study and the methods of data collection and analysis. Following Briggs (1986), I take theory and methods to be inextricably tied; particular theoretical perspectives entail particular methodological approaches, and methodological questions have issues of theoretical import embedded in them. My division between the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 1 and the discussion of methods presented in this chapter is thus somewhat inappropriate. The discussion of talk and conversation in Chapter 1, for instance, points to a methodological emphasis on conversational exchanges. The phenomena of interest, and the ways in which we go about exploring them, then, are considered separately here only for purposes of discussion.

Participants¹

Assistance Payments Workers

The main group of Assistance Payments Workers (hereafter referred to as AP workers, or simply workers)

¹ Initial and continuing access to participants is discussed in the section on data collection.

included in this study was comprised of 17 women ranging from 24 to 59 years of age, with an average age of 40. This group made up the entire work force of AP workers in Kenyon County, a rural county in central Michigan.² The women had been involved in AP work from one to 18 years, with an average of 11.5 years.

In addition to participant observation at the welfare office, I attended a three-day training session for new workers. Thirty workers who had been in the welfare department for six months or less participated in the training. On occasion, I draw on data from the training session.

Assistance Payments workers are concerned with administering the Financial Support Programs of the Department of Social Services (including AFDC and food stamps). In Kenyon County, AP workers are responsible for interviewing potential recipients, processing their applications, opening, closing and maintaining cases, and conducting yearly reviews.³

Workers are organized in units, each of which is headed by an AP Supervisor, who often has been an AP worker herself. Workers consult their supervisors when

² With the exception of the State Governor, all personal and place names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

³ In other counties in Michigan, these duties are divided among different categories of AP workers.

they have specific questions concerning departmental procedures, or when they wish to pursue "exceptions," which entail receiving departmental approval to bend the rules. In all cases, AP supervisors have the final decision-making power.

In the Department hierarchy, AP workers are one level above clerical workers. Unlike workers in the other units of the Department (e.g., Social Services), AP workers, as noted above, are not classified as "professionals." Only 18 percent of the AP workers in Kenyon County had completed their BA degrees.

All of the AP workers included in this study are white, partly as a result of the population composition of Kenyon county. The absence of diversity was recognized by the workers, who felt that minority workers would be uncomfortable in a white rural setting and thus would not stay in the position for long (field notes 8/1/90).⁴ There are no statistics available on the ethnicity of AP workers throughout Michigan; thus there is no way to evaluate the representativeness of my sample for the state. I am aware, however, that there are other counties in Michigan with more ethnic variation among AP workers than the county in this study.

⁴ Nevertheless, the county did hire an African American worker several months after this study was completed. As of this writing, eight months later, she is still there.

Welfare Recipients

The group of welfare recipients included in this study was comprised of 79 women that I encountered in welfare rights groups and at the welfare office. My primary focus was on six women who were currently or had been core members in one of two welfare rights groups, the Madrid Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO), and Low-Income People for Equality (LIFE); core members were defined as continually active participants. Both groups were located in Madrid, a small city in central Michigan. Of the six women, one was no longer receiving welfare at the time of the study, and one had recently moved from the AFDC program to General Assistance (GA, welfare for adults not living with children⁵); both were included in the study, however, because they were core members in MWRO or LIFE. The remaining four women were enrolled in either or both AFDC and food stamps. They ranged in age from 24 to 48. Ten other women whom I interviewed or who attended welfare rights meetings on a more or less regular basis are also included in the study. Of these ten, one was no longer receiving welfare, and one had received welfare in the past but was currently on SSI (disability). Finally, 24 women who attended welfare rights group meetings only once

⁵ This program was eliminated in fall 1991.

or twice, and 39 women I encountered at the welfare office in Kenyon County are occasionally referred to in the following chapters.

The group of welfare recipients was less stable over time than the group of AP workers. With the exception of the AP workers I encountered at the training session, the 17 workers in Kenyon County remained in one geographic area (the welfare office) for a set period of time each day. This was not the case with welfare recipients, despite the fact that my overall focus was on welfare rights groups, which one would consider to be relatively neatly bounded. Participants came and went, and even the core membership was not stable over long periods of time. My attempts to interview individual recipients encountered numerous barriers, ranging from sudden moves to work schedules that fluctuated frequently and did not allow for time to just "sit around." In some cases, women expressed a willingness to talk to me, but we just "never got around to it" -- every time I called or came by wasn't a "good time," and a "good time" never presented itself.

With one exception (an African American woman), the welfare recipients with whom I worked are Anglo. In Michigan, 50.5 percent of AFDC recipients are Anglo, while 45.7 percent are African American; the remaining 3.8 percent fall into the category "Other" (DSS Information Packet, March 1991). More people of color were not

included as participants in this study because they by and large did not participate in either of the two welfare rights groups in Madrid.⁶ Members of both welfare rights groups expressed a considerable amount of racist sentiment, usually focused on claims that minorities (and sometimes "foreigners") received special treatment not accorded to Anglos. Although such claims were often contested, I would speculate that the existence of such sentiments rendered the groups inhospitable for members of ethnic minority groups.

Representativeness of Samples

The sample of AP workers included in this study is too small to warrant claims that it is representative of AP workers in Michigan or the United States. Accordingly, this study can only be said to be representative of one group of workers in one county in rural Michigan. Several characteristics common to AP workers in general, however, indicate that the patterns exhibited by this group of workers may be similar to those exhibited by workers in other welfare offices -- although such a claim could only be substantiated through further study,

⁶ There was one African American woman present at the first two Madrid Welfare Rights Organization meetings I attended, and the one African American woman I interviewed was on the MWRO mailing list, although she was not an active participant.

There are structural similarities in AP work throughout Michigan, and to a lesser degree, throughout the United States. All AP workers in Michigan deal with the same state welfare policy, and all workers throughout the nation deal with the same federal welfare policy. Assistance Payments workers in Michigan, moreover, have similar responsibilities and working conditions, even though these are divided along lines of specialization. In terms of work structure and organization, then, the Kenyon County office was not unique, but was in many ways similar to other welfare offices in Michigan, and perhaps in the United States.

As a group, the workers included in this study were also exposed to some of the same social phenomena that other workers are exposed to. Several workers in Kenyon County had previously worked in other counties, both rural and urban, and all the workers attended state-wide conferences and training sessions. As a group, then, the women in this study were not isolated from other AP workers in Michigan; they were given opportunities to exchange experiences and views with other workers, and were exposed to official departmental views concerning both their work and the populations whom they served.

Assistance Payments workers, throughout Michigan and the United States, serve a population with similar needs (shelter, food, medical care) and characteristics (the

majority are women with children). In addition, the AP population itself in Michigan is relatively uniform with regard to gender (87 percent female) and education (less than 20 percent college educated) (Wertkin 1990). As members of American society, AP workers are also exposed to society-wide stereotypes of poor people in general, and of poor women in particular. Although the extent to which women believe these stereotypes prior to becoming AP workers no doubt varies, it is reasonable to assume that all AP workers enter the welfare system with some familiarity with such stereotypes.

Given the similarities in work structure, content, and organization; contact among workers throughout Michigan; shared characteristics of both AP workers and of the population they serve; and the society-wide nature of stereotypes of poor people, workers in the Kenyon County office may produce constructions that have characteristics in common with those produced by other workers in other welfare offices in Michigan, and perhaps in other areas of the United States.

As with AP workers, the sample of welfare recipients included in this study is small, and thus cannot be said to be representative of welfare recipients in either Michigan or the United States. In addition, the recipients on whom I place the strongest focus were involved, to one degree or another, in welfare rights

groups. The vast majority of welfare recipients in Golden County, in which the two welfare rights groups were based did not participate in either group. I would speculate that many women on welfare are isolated, and suffer from fear of confronting the welfare system (a fear that was often expressed even by the women most involved in welfare rights), lack of knowledge of how to go about confronting the system, or embarrassment over receiving welfare. In this sense, then, if I were to claim representativeness, it would be to claim that the women are representative of the type of welfare recipient who tends to get involved in welfare rights groups -- in other words, of women tending toward activism.

As with the AP workers, however, the welfare recipients in this study share a number of characteristics with welfare recipients both state- and nation-wide. The majority of AFDC recipients, as indicated above, are women with children. They all must contend with a welfare bureaucracy that, because of federal mandates, shares certain features across states; and they all have to contend with poverty as it is shaped in the United States. As poor people and as poor women, they are subject to the stereotypes attached to these groups in the United States. In addition, as with AP workers, the recipients in this study -- as I suspect may be the case with a segment of the welfare population in general -- were geographically

mobile; they moved across both state and county lines, interacting with a number of welfare offices, and drew on these varied experiences in their constructions of themselves and of the welfare system. On the basis of these common characteristics, then, it is possible that the constructions produced by the women in this study share certain features with those of women in other welfare rights groups in other counties and states, and perhaps with those of women on welfare in general, when they have the opportunity to discuss welfare with each other.

For my purposes, then, I am assuming that it is reasonable to view the particular group of workers I worked with in Kenyon County as workers in the generic sense, and to view the recipients I worked with in Golden County as recipients in the generic sense. Certainly, workers and recipients themselves talked of each other more often than not in generic terms, drawing, in their constructions, on their various experiences with each other over time.

In sum, I do not claim that my sample is representative of either workers or recipients in general. As a result of the shared characteristics outlined above, however, the constructions explored in the following chapters may have some currency among workers and recipients in other settings. The extent to which the

description and analysis presented here characterizes the issues surrounding women and the welfare system in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the U.S. remains to be refined by further studies.

Data Collection

Research Sites

Research with welfare workers was conducted at the welfare office, in both private and shared spaces. I also encountered workers at one three-day training session and at a conference.

Work with welfare recipients was conducted primarily at the meeting places of the two welfare rights groups and at women's homes and in restaurants.⁷ In addition, I attended legislative hearings and participated in several public demonstrations in front of the state capitol and at the welfare office.

Access

Welfare workers and recipients differed in terms of accessibility. In the welfare office, I had daily access to the same group of women over an extended period of

⁷ Some of the women preferred to meet in restaurants for interviews. Perhaps they did not want me to see their homes, or perhaps they were interested in my invitations to lunch.

time. My access to welfare recipients was more sporadic, often not occurring on a daily basis, and usually lasting only several hours at a time.

Access to Welfare Workers

Initial access to welfare workers was granted by state and county officials. Although I had initially requested permission to work with AP workers in Madrid (where the two welfare rights groups were based), I was refused access by the county director. An official at the state welfare office correctly predicted that the director of the Kenyon County office would be more interested in my study, and thus I sought, and received, her permission to conduct the study in her office. Prior to beginning participant observation in the welfare office, I met with two workers and their supervisor to negotiate the conditions of my presence: I was not to interfere, and I was to help (e.g., run errands) when warranted and possible. Following this negotiation, I attended a staff meeting at which I introduced myself to the entire group of workers. Finally, once I began participant observation at the welfare office, I solicited workers' permission to observe and discuss their work on an individual basis. By the end of my three months at the office, only two women had refused to let me observe their interviews with

recipients; one of them also declined to be interviewed.⁸

Access to workers' interviews with recipients was also subject to the permission of recipients.

Access to Welfare Recipients

I learned of the Madrid Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO) through the telephone directory, and after speaking with one of its members, was invited to attend a meeting. In contrast, one of the members of Low-Income People for Equality (LIFE) heard of my study through a nutrition counselor at the county health department, and called to invite me to attend one of their meetings. Permission to regularly attend the meetings of both groups was subsequently granted by the core members of each group. Since the participants varied from meeting to meeting, however, I sought permission to tape record meetings at each event. Interviews with recipients were requested on an individual basis.

In addition, my initial contact with some recipients occurred over the phone. This usually occurred when they called for advice on welfare (during the three months when I volunteered for this duty with MWRO); in a few cases, I

⁸ These refusals were not outright, but rather took the form of delays and other evasions. Once I got the feeling that the two workers were not comfortable with my presence, I stopped pursuing them.

used MWRO's phone list, for which I had received permission of the group.

Continuing Access

With both groups of women, access was repeatedly negotiated across time. I had to have something to offer the women in exchange for their time, energy, and confidences. Although a sympathetic ear often seemed rewarding to the women -- especially to recipients who found little sympathy for their plight among the general public -- the sheer weight of practical and material constraints suffered by both groups of women warranted additional contributions on my part. These contributions took the form of work at the welfare office (xeroxing, running errands), and providing transportation, computer work (for MWRO and LIFE), and occasionally food for recipients.

Methods of Data Collection

Methods of data collection for this study included participant observation and interviewing. In keeping with the goal of the ethnographic enterprise, emphasis was placed on gaining access to the meanings held by participants (Erickson 1979; 1986). My focus throughout the study was on talk, particularly that occurring among

welfare recipients and among welfare workers, although some talk occurring between the two groups of women was also included. A second focus was on interviews with the women; these were most often conducted with the women on an individual basis, although on occasion they occurred with two or more individuals.

Conversations

As outlined in Chapter 1, talk is an important vehicle for the construction and expression of world views, identities, and meanings. Conversational exchanges among workers and among recipients, then, as they occurred naturally (as opposed to being orchestrated by an outside researcher), provide key data for this dissertation. Accordingly, whenever possible I kept a tape recorder running when I interacted with either recipients or workers. A constantly running tape recorder allowed me to be opportunistic and to avoid imposing my own definitions of what was important onto the event (by turning the recorder on and off when something I deemed "important" was happening -- an action that no doubt would have been noted by participants) (Erickson 1986). Since a running tape recorder was a feature of my presence, participants were able to get used to the recorder as they got used to me.

Interviews

Although there are numerous problems with interviews, including both issues of validity and power, they are nevertheless very valuable sources of data on the ways in which people experience and interpret their worlds.

In this study, I followed two approaches to interviewing. One was to schedule events called "interviews" with individual women, for the purpose of discussing their experiences with the welfare system. Although I orchestrated these events, I made every effort to follow Briggs's (1986:93) admonition to "listen before you leap" -- in other words, to conduct interviews in ways that capitalized on, rather than violated, received ways of communicating. Although I had sets of questions in mind, the order in which questions were answered, and how participants chose to answer them, were unspecified. In addition, other topics or approaches to topics introduced by the women were not glossed over but rather pursued. Mishler (1986) has claimed that respondents will often produce stories when they aren't prevented from doing so by the asymmetries of power so often evident in traditional approaches to interviewing; along with numerous other scholars, he claims that stories and other narratives are "one of the natural cognitive and linguistic forms through which individuals attempt to order, organize, and express meaning" (1986:106). The

workers and recipients who participated in this study often did respond to my inquiries with stories.

My second approach to interviewing also followed Briggs's (1986:121) call to avoid what he calls "communicative hegemony," or the imposition of particular forms of communication. As Briggs outlines, standard interviews impose not only the classic question-answer format, but also may violate norms of who gets to ask questions of whom, under what circumstances, and concerning which topics. In addition to my approach to interviews discussed above, then, I made every effort to ask questions informally, when the topic was already being discussed. By attending closely to naturally occurring conversation, I was able, on occasion, to insert my research questions when they were topically and contextually appropriate.

Data Analysis

Data analysis had two foci: the content of what was said (e.g., the stereotypes of workers and recipients held by the two groups of women), and the process by means of which the content was produced (e.g., how the stereotypes were jointly constructed or expressed by women talking with each other). In what follows, I draw primarily on content analysis, but make use of the tools provided by various approaches to the analysis of conversational

interaction (most notably sociolinguistics and conversation analysis) where appropriate.

Analysis was conducted in two steps: audio tapes were indexed, and then segments of tape were transcribed. The segments chosen for transcription were those that seemed representative of a particular theme that emerged when I listened to the tapes, or those containing a unique occurrence that nevertheless, by virtue of the animation in participants' voices or by their comments on the event afterwards, seemed important. Transcripts of segments of talk were then subject to content analysis, and, in some cases, to an analysis of how participants jointly produced the content.

As Mishler (1984:34) has pointed out, investigators with different interests emphasize different features of talk in their transcripts: "the notational system defines what is relevant and how it is to be presented." In accordance with my analytical foci, then, I draw on two sets of transcript conventions. When discussing content, the transcripts focus on words; accordingly, the details of turn-taking and other extralinguistic features are omitted from the transcripts. This is not the case where I am concerned with process as well as content. When exploring talk as jointly produced, overlaps, pauses, stress, and so on may convey as much meaning as do actual

words -- or at least help to convey the meaning intended by the actual words.

Analyzing talk as a jointly accomplished phenomenon underscores the socially constructed nature of the meanings and interpretations expressed through talk. Participants in interaction alternately help one another tell their stories or make their points (by, for example, a strategically placed "uh huh" or expression of surprise), or challenge or reinforce certain constructions. When the analysis is focused on process as well as content, I will use a different set of transcript conventions that are designed to accommodate and represent what, upon repeated listenings to audio tapes, seem to be the most significant and prevalent features of talk among welfare recipients and workers. This set of transcript conventions is included in Appendix A.

Notes on Partisanship

Poverty and welfare are not neutral phenomena in American culture. Nor is the relationship between women on welfare and AP workers particularly cordial. Being a member of this culture, I could neither feign ignorance of issues surrounding public assistance, nor claim outsider status. This situation presented me with a number of dilemmas that I would like to briefly explore before presenting the analysis of my data.

Throughout the course of fieldwork, I made no attempts to be "objective" -- to remain uninvolved in the political aspects of women's lives, or to avoid "taking sides" with them on important issues. There were two aspects to my "place" in the field that I want to discuss here: my place as a member of the same culture as the women I was working with, and my partisan position with each group of women.

Renato Rosaldo (1989) discusses at length Dorinne Kondo's fieldwork experience in Japan. As a Japanese-American, Kondo was subject to her hosts' cultural expectations about someone who looked Japanese. The experience was not as extreme for me, because I was not, in fact, in another culture, but in my own. I was nevertheless crossing class lines, and found it curious that, because we were all American and all women, I was expected to share certain assumptions about the world held by workers and recipients, and to know about things that they considered obvious, such as the nature of certain kinds of relationship problems, or feelings of pride or humiliation. Like Kondo, moreover, I had trouble with "indelicate" questions, such as, for instance, those pertaining to workers' incomes.⁹

⁹ While income was not a taboo topic for welfare recipients -- indeed, income insufficiency was a standard conversational topic -- workers followed the more middle-class notion that income is a more or less private affair. In the end, I gained access to information concerning
(continued...)

The second aspect of my relationship with the women concerns my partisan positions, positions that I took as an active member of my own culture, and that were expected of me by the study participants. I began the study more sympathetic towards welfare recipients than workers, since recipients are the poorer of the two groups, and since they fit into the category of the oppressed more than do workers (at least in the popular left). This did not mean that I took sides against workers. Workers, like recipients, are women who suffer from both economic and social inequalities in U.S. society; moreover, both are "victims" of the welfare system: while women on welfare are subject to both insufficient funds and stigma, workers are overworked and have low status in the welfare bureaucracy.

I was able to avoid some of the potential conflicts of my partisan positions by working with workers and recipients in separate counties. Although each group of women was aware that I was working with the other, I was not working with someone's particular worker, or with

⁹(...continued)

workers' incomes by means of a confidential questionnaire. Although I wondered if my hesitancy to query workers about their incomes was simply a projection of my own middle-class values, rather than a reflection of norms which they shared, I find it significant that I did not experience this hesitancy with recipients. Was this, however, because poor people don't have the same social standing as members of the middle class?

someone's particular client. The impact that working with recipients and their own AP workers might have had on my relationship with each group was quickly made evident to me through the attempts made by both workers and recipients to recruit me to their points of view.

I was surprised at the degree to which I was expected and recruited to be partisan. This, I think, reflects a very important commonality among the two groups of women: their powerlessness and their politicization of their respective situations. Both groups of women wanted me to share their respective points of view, as when I was invited by a worker to agree with her characterization of a recipient as a child abuser, or when I was invited by a recipient to agree with her that politicians realize the ramifications of cuts in the welfare budget and yet pursue them anyway.

As part and parcel of this recruitment, both groups of women had high expectations of the results of my research. Since they themselves were relatively powerless, they expected me to express their concerns, to legitimize their cases. This was particularly so with the AP workers, who felt that they had no voice with administration and management. I, on the other hand, could document their plight and thus force management to

make long-needed changes. Workers assumed, of course, that management wouldn't like my report.¹⁰

As stated, although I "took sides" with both groups of women, I was more sympathetic to the plight of recipients than to that of workers. I sympathized with the demands placed on workers, and with their low status in the welfare bureaucracy, but was more touched and outraged by the plight of the recipients, who, in addition to being overworked and suffering from the stigma associated with being poor, also had to contend with not always having enough food to eat.

In either case, however, my participation in the women's constructions was minimal. Although in individual interviews I often supported, or at least did not challenge, the women's views, when with more than one worker or recipient, I became, for the most part, a peripheral participant, making few substantive contributions to the topic at hand. In Appendix B, I draw on evidence from the transcripts to illustrate my point that the kinds of contributions that I made to participants' constructions were minor when compared with the constructive work that they accomplished with one another.

¹⁰ The expectation that my study would vindicate the workers, or demonstrate to the world that recipients were victims and not villains, seems to indicate that the women did not consider me so much as "one of them" as an outsider who could verify and legitimize their perceptions of reality.

CHAPTER 3

WELFARE RECIPIENTS AND WELFARE RIGHTS GROUPS

In this chapter, I explore the views of women on welfare about (1) their identities as welfare recipients and as women; (2) key others that feature in their lives as welfare recipients; and (3) the workings of the welfare system. Specifically, I focus on the women's views as they are constructed or expressed in discourse, and on how particular ways of making sense reflect accommodation or resistance to received welfare and gender ideologies. The analysis focuses on women's life stories and on naturally occurring conversation in welfare rights group meetings.

The chapter is divided into two sections. In the first, I explore five prevalent themes in recipients' welfare biographies. These themes concern views of employment and education, the weight of material absences and of social stigma, and perceptions of the structural constraints of the welfare system and of how best to deal with them. The themes reflect varying degrees of accommodation and resistance to mainstream U.S. ideologies concerning women, welfare, and the nature of economic success.

In second section, I focus on welfare recipients interacting with each other in the context of welfare

rights groups. My emphasis in this section is on the work that the women do together to construct palatable images of themselves as welfare recipients, and to construct images of key others in their lives, most notably, welfare workers, politicians, rich people, and men.

I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the differences between talk produced in my interviews with recipients and that produced in welfare rights group meetings. I argue that participants in welfare rights meetings accomplished constructions that were either absent or only nascent in the interviews, and fully developed or altered those that were present. Thus, although elements of resistance were clearly evident in the welfare biographies, the comembership established at welfare rights meetings both strengthened the resistance and provided grounds for the development of new perceptions. The welfare rights meetings also provided greater opportunity for participants to explore and either appropriate or dismiss mainstream models of women's roles and the nature of economic success and security. My argument is not that women were transformed by their participation in welfare rights groups as in a before-after sequence, but that the meetings provided a context conducive to expressions and constructions that differed in both content and tone from those found in the interview data.

Themes in Recipients' Welfare Biographies

Recipients' stories and comments portray the experience of being poor, female, and on welfare, and provide insight into how women make sense of the welfare system and their place in it. The five themes described here emerged naturally from the women's narratives; they represent patterns in how this particular collection of women on welfare interpreted the welfare system and their relationships to it. The themes also represent what the women believed was most important for me, as an outsider, to know.

Throughout discussion of the themes, I will point to elements of accommodation and resistance. In so doing, I draw on three narrative types outlined by the Personal Narrative Groups (PNG) in their book, Interpreting Women's Lives (1989). The first type of narrative "reveal[s] that the narrators do not think, feel, or act as they are 'supposed to.' Such narratives can serve to unmask claims that form the basis of domination...or to provide an alternative understanding of the situation" (PNG 1989:7). A second type of narrative "unfold[s] within the framework of an apparent acceptance of social norms and expectations but nevertheless describe[s] strategies and activities that challenge those same norms" (ibid.). Finally, a third type of narrative is produced by "women who

apparently thrive within the established norms and parameters or even assertively contribute to the maintenance of prevailing systems of gender domination" (ibid.). I will refer to these three types as counter-narratives, mixed narratives, and status quo narratives. Note that both talk itself and the activities described in talk may be viewed in terms of accommodation or resistance.

The Women

The twelve women interviewed ranged in age from 19 to 48, and had at least one child each (see Table 1). Eight of the women had been married at least once, three of whom had been married more than once. Three of the women were presently living with men who contributed to household expenses.

The women's reasons for their initial contact with the welfare department included divorce, having a baby, husband's unemployment, husband being placed in jail, and being kicked out of a parent's home. Half of the 12 women had received welfare continuously for 18 months to 10 years. Maggie, for instance, received welfare for three years prior to entering graduate school. Jody, on the other hand, had remained on the welfare rolls for the nine years since her divorce. The remaining six women had been on and off of the welfare rolls a number of times; they

had been connected to the welfare department intermittently for an average of 12 years. Pat, for example, had been on and off welfare for 25 years, with each episode as a welfare recipient lasting anywhere from nine months to several years. Mary received welfare for one to two years, was out of the welfare system for two years, and then got back on the rolls for another five. Their relationships with the welfare department were interrupted by periods of employment providing sufficient wages for survival, or by support from men.¹ The majority of the other women I encountered through telephone conversations, at welfare rights groups meetings, and in the welfare office (either directly or via their files) also had sporadic relationships with the welfare department. Only three of the 12 women had relatives other than their own children who had ever received welfare.²

All twelve women had been employed for pay. Many of them had worked numerous jobs, and many had worked while on welfare. As with the sporadic nature of many women's interactions with the welfare system, this finding is supported by the literature (Zopf 1989:4).

¹ Women can, and often do, work while receiving welfare, and also often live with men who contribute financially to the household. In the cases referred to here, the woman's (or her partner's) job paid enough that public assistance was no longer needed.

² For one woman this information is unknown.

TABLE 1: RECIPIENTS INTERVIEWED *

Name	Age	Education	Marital Status	Number of Children	Years on AFDC	Reason for Starting AFDC	Paid Employment
Susan	33	High school diploma; several college courses	Divorced 3 times; living with fiancé	4	17 years on and off	Husband out of work	Factory worker, water resources center worker, day care manager, prostitute
Louise	38	Two Associates Degrees	Divorced	1	4 years on and off	Divorce	Math tutor
Mary	late 20s	High school diploma; several college courses	Divorced	2	10 years, on and off	Had child	Cashier, bar maid
Jody	42	High school diploma	Divorced	2	9 years steady	Divorce	None
Jane	32	GED	Divorced; living with fiancé	4	10 years, on and off	Divorce	Nurse's aide, waitress, security guard, janitor
Pat	48	High school diploma; college classes	Divorced twice	3	25 years, on and off	Husband in jail	Domestic worker, cook, waitress, street vendor, carnival worker, gas station attendant, clothes alterations; other sources of income: pan handling, stealing checks
Katie	19	11th grade	Living with fiancé	1 (pregnant with second)	2 years steady	Kicked out of parents' home	Cashier
Dee	25	High school diploma; 3rd year college	Single	1	10 years steady	Had child	Unknown, but minimum wage
Tara	29	Working on high school diploma	Single	2	6 years steady	Had child	Cashier, waitress
Maggie	39	M.A.	Divorced	1	3 years steady	Divorce, illness	Nurse
Martha	36	High school diploma; in nursing program	Divorced	5	9 years, on and off	Divorce	Animal groomer, factory worker (car parts), domestic worker
Janet	24	B.A.	Single	1	18 months steady	Had child	Secretary, waitress, lab technician, tree farm laborer, horse urine collector (Dept. of Agriculture)

* Susan, Louise, Martha, Janet and Pat were also core members of welfare rights groups.

The three factors the women most commonly associated with their participation in the welfare system were men, children, and jobs. In many cases, the reason that divorce was so economically devastating was that child support was insufficient or not forthcoming.³ Coupled with the disadvantages experienced by the women in the labor market (only three of the women had been able to find employment paying more than the minimum wage⁴), the burdens of providing child care if they did work left them financially vulnerable.

Poverty was not simply a problem of unemployment per se, then, but was related to the specific nature of women's economic marginalization in U.S. society, a significant aspect of which has been their financial dependence on men and their financial responsibility for children. The multiple factors associated with women's experiences with the welfare system have been used by feminist scholars to criticize the "male pauper" model of welfare, which has as its subject the single able-bodied adult male. As Pearce (1984:510) points out,

the traditional analysis of the problem of poverty for the able-bodied poor has been quite simple: their problem is joblessness, and the solution is to 'give' them a job....The simple formula 'joblessness is the problem, jobs are the solution' does not work for

³ This is the case throughout the U.S., despite class stratification (Ehrenreich and Piven 1984).

⁴ As of April, 1990, the minimum wage was \$3.80 per hour; it was raised to \$4.25 per hour in April, 1991.

women because their poverty is different from that of men.

Although they did not use the term, the women in this study clearly recognized the shortcomings of the "male pauper" model.

Themes

Working is Expensive

The 12 women I interviewed were unanimous in the conviction that working was costly: it was a way to lose money, not make it. By virtue of their educational credentials, they, like many women on welfare, were for the most part restricted to minimum wage work in the service sector. Although minimum wage jobs provided more income than AFDC, they typically did not provide either Medicaid, which the women strongly desired, or child care, which they considered a necessity. Minimum wage work, then, was considered a losing proposition.

Martha had learned this lesson well. Martha started receiving welfare after her divorce, when she was awarded insufficient alimony to care for her five children. Her first reaction to getting on welfare was to try to get off of it, which she tried to do by getting a job -- contrary to the advice of her worker at the time, who suggested that she get an education, not a job. Martha quickly discovered that she could not make ends meet, got back on

welfare, and decided to try the education route, with which she has been struggling ever since. Her reaction to a recent suggestion made by another worker that she find a job illustrates what she learned from her experience:

You know, I had one [worker] who wanted me to go to a high school or adult education classes and I said, "I have all of high school and I have [a] really great grade point [average]," and she goes "well then why aren't you working?" I said, "I, I know I can go out and get a minimum wage job or two or three, in a, you know, this week. My problem is that whenever I go to work, I can't pay... rent. Now if you can tell me that I would be a couple hundred dollars ahead, you won't have a problem, but I have not, I've never yet come out ahead." I mean, it's not like you can mark your money "made at Quality Dairy"⁵ [and it sounds] better, you know [Martha, 8/8/90]

Other women echoed this sentiment. Mary, for instance, argued that the welfare department's policy of deducting a certain amount from an AFDC grant for each dollar earned -- until the entire grant was terminated -- "punishes" people who try to work [Mary, 2/21/90]. Janet experienced just this kind of "punishment" when she increased her work hours only to find herself facing cuts that would leave her unable to meet her rent and child care costs [Janet, 4/24/90]. And Dee, like Martha, found that she was poorer when working than when receiving welfare: her welfare worker used her gross rather than net pay to represent her income,⁶ her food stamps were

⁵ A local convenience store chain.

⁶ The higher one's income, the greater the corresponding reduction in welfare benefits.

terminated, and she was left saddled with both transportation and child care costs. She was barely breaking even; it was "like I was just working for the experience of it" [Dee, 2/17/90].⁷

While some women mentioned Medicaid, all the women considered child care a key factor in their negative assessment of employment. Jane, for instance, in balancing the income generated by employment against the costs of child care, decided that she was clearly better off on welfare [Jane, 3/12/90; 3/28/90]. Addressing herself to the welfare department, she said, "pay our baby sitters -- pay them what they would want us to pay them -- then we'll go to work. But they [the welfare department] don't want to" [Jane, 3/12/90].⁸

Work, then, was expensive for mothers; as Katie summed it up: "it's just cheaper...to not work" [Katie 8/16/89]. Without provisions for child care, employment was something that the women could rarely afford to engage in. Their unwillingness to seek employment, then, -- or

⁷ Dee, who had taken an economics course at the local community college, felt that welfare--or, as she called it, "wealthfare"-- worked to keep people poor so that the wealthy would be provided with a cheap source of labor [Dee, 2/17/90].

⁸ Jane is referring to the fact that welfare child care grants cover only a fraction of the actual cost of child care.

to report it to the welfare department⁹ -- was a considered and deliberate decision reflecting financial necessity.

In Susan's view, the issue was not only one of financial necessity, but also one of parental responsibility. In discussing her efforts to get off of welfare, Susan told me the story of her children's molestation. Responding to pressure from her family to stop engaging in prostitution -- from which Susan reported she made up to \$1500 weekly -- Susan took a job working during the day for \$200 a week. Because \$200 was insufficient to cover the costs of hiring an adult baby-sitter, Susan was forced to hire some local teenagers to care for her children. The teenagers sexually molested the children, who were still suffering the psychological repercussions three years later. For Susan, trying to do things the "right way" by getting a "respectable" job turned out to be the wrong way. Not only was she better able to care for her family's financial needs as a prostitute, but she was better able to protect them physically -- she was, in her own definition, a better parent. She learned that trying to play by the rules had numerous -- and often unacceptable -- costs, and that trying to get off of welfare could be a dangerous

⁹ See the theme, The Requirements of Structural Constraint, below.

proposition, as she indicated when she said, "I put my kid's lives in jeopardy to try to get off it [welfare]" [Susan, 8/9/90].

The "work is expensive" theme provides a clear critique of the "male pauper" model of welfare. Unlike single able-bodied adult males, the women, like most women on welfare, were mothers, with primary responsibility for the care of infants and children. Simple employment, without provisions for child care, was thus insufficient for their needs. This theme, then, provides a specifically gendered critique of the welfare system.

The theme also provides an example of resistance to the work ethic. The women did not consider employment as valuable in and of itself (Dee was not interested in working "for the experience of it"). Although many of the women tried to work in order to either supplement or get off welfare, they found work a losing proposition and decided to give it up rather than stick it out. Their refusal to work given the constraints of child care costs and their indictment of the welfare system's totally inadequate child care provisions flies in the face of an official welfare ideology that states that people on welfare should work and that the system accommodates women by paying for child care.

Martha's story about her interactions with a welfare worker concerning employment provides a good example of a

counter-narrative. Martha, in explicitly choosing welfare over minimum wage work, and in claiming that money made at a job is no better than that acquired through welfare ("it's not like you can mark your money 'Made at Quality Dairy' [and it sounds] better"), counters the prevailing view that any kind of work (independence) is better than welfare (dependence). This view was the result of experience: Martha tried to accommodate the prevailing view, but found it impossible. Dee, Jane, and Katie also provided examples of counter-talk.

Susan's story, focusing on the oppositions of prostitution versus legitimate work, and being able to care for one's children versus leaving them open to mistreatment and assault, is (although I have not provided a transcript here), a good example of a mixed narrative. Susan tried to accommodate prevailing views of what constitutes appropriate work, only to find that, in practice, appropriate work hindered her abilities to fulfill models of good parenting, which include both financial and physical protection. In her experience, then, the kind of work that allowed her to accommodate models of both work (in and of itself, rather than in its appropriate or inappropriate forms), and parenting was prostitution, an illegitimate and stigmatized occupation. This provides an interesting mix of positions: her view runs counter to prevailing categories of appropriate and

inappropriate work, but nevertheless does not question the work ethic per se (as Martha seems to do); nor does she question a mother's total responsibility for the care of her children.

Education is the Way Out

If a minimum wage job was not the way to get off of welfare, a well-paid job was, and the way to get a well-paid job was to get an education. This view was shared by all the women except Louise and Janet, who had higher degrees and thus knew from experience that education was not a panacea.

Katie was clear about the connection between low-paying jobs, welfare, and education:

...the only way to get off welfare is to go through school, that is the only way, because, you make more money living on welfare than you do at a job...at a minimum wage job -- or even a four dollar an hour job [Katie, 8/16/89].

Accordingly, one of Katie's great frustrations was that she could not get sufficient child care support from the welfare department to enable her to attend and finish high school.

Pat, too, felt that education was the way to get off of welfare, as evidenced by her numerous attempts to get a college degree. She had a lot of financial trouble, and tended to begin but never finish programs, but considered a degree or some kind of certification crucial. Jane also

had a difficult time staying in school -- "I got sick of going to school, I said the heck with school, I dropped out of adult [education] six times" [Jane, 3/12/90] -- but nevertheless saw it as important.

Other women, too, were pursuing educational credentials: Mary was taking courses in interior design and real estate on and off; Tara was working on her high school diploma; Martha was taking courses in nursing; Susan was taking paralegal courses; and Dee was in her third year of pre-medical studies at a local community college. Finally, Maggie and Janet hoped to end their short careers as welfare recipients when they entered graduate school.

As striking as the ubiquity of the perception that education was crucial to "making it" was the frequency with which the women began but did not complete educational programs. Pat, Mary, Jane, Martha and Susan all had trouble sticking with a program. Although my data on this issue are sparse, it is reasonable to assume that the financial and child care burdens the women experienced when employed also plagued their attempts to go to school. The difference, however, was that one never got ahead with a minimum wage job, whereas, from the women's point of view, completing an education offered a potential payback; thus the positive valuations of education and the absence

of criticisms of school similar to those made of work (i.e., child care costs).

The "education is the way out" theme represents a status quo approach that does not resist but rather accommodates mainstream models of achievement and success: the women felt that if they could only get credentials, they would succeed. They did not criticize the lack of child care support they received from the welfare department when discussing education, as they did when discussing employment, although the amount of child care coverage provided was the same.¹⁰

Not everyone, however, agreed that education was the key to success. Louise had a college degree that she was eventually able to use to get off of welfare, but it was such a struggle that she eventually took a job teaching abroad, remarking that [paraphrase] "I have to go overseas to get a decent job!" Along with Janet, who also had a college degree, Louise disagreed with the idea that the problem of being on welfare was an individual one that could be remedied by individual efforts (e.g., acquiring educational credentials). The problem, rather, was systemic, reflecting an inequitable economic structure [MWRO, 5/9/90]. As such, the views expressed by Louise

¹⁰ Even though women spent fewer hours in class than at work, child care was still a problem. As mentioned above, Katie could not get the child care support needed to enable her to attend classes for four hours per day.

and Janet would provide examples of counter-narratives resistant to the status quo.

Welfare Inadequacies and Weighty Symbols

Although the jobs accessible to the women and the costs of child care often led them to "choose"¹¹ welfare over -- or, in many cases in addition to¹² -- work, the women also unanimously agreed that welfare did not provide them with sufficient resources for survival. Maggie, who reported not paying her utilities so she could pay her rent, talked about how much she had missed the luxury of toilet paper when she had been on welfare. Now that she was no longer receiving welfare, Maggie was "phobic," and always needed to have eight rolls of toilet paper in the house; her friends who were still on welfare remarked on her affluence when they saw her supply [Maggie, 5/26/89].

Problems making ends meet was something everyone had to contend with, and comments about letting bills pile up, using money from the "personal needs"¹³ part of the grant

¹¹ I place this word in quotation marks to reflect the women's belief that applying for welfare was never a choice, but rather something that they were forced into out of economic necessity.

¹² In these cases, the women either didn't report extra income, or were careful to keep their earnings below a level that would negatively affect their grant (e.g., cuts in Medicaid coverage).

¹³ Welfare grants are divided into "basic needs," covering shelter and utilities, and "personal needs,"
(continued...)

to pay for heat, and being hungry at the end of the month were ubiquitous.¹⁴ Not only were welfare grants insufficient to cover the expenses for which they were targeted, but they did not account for numerous other expenses, such as clothing, transportation, and laundry.

The symbolic -- in addition to the real -- force of certain shortages was particularly poignant for the women, and the absence of particular items, or classes of items, was acutely painful to them. Two examples will serve to illustrate this point.

Milk

Maggie's phobia about toilet paper, mentioned above, was matched by an extreme desire to always have milk in the house:

...and with a kid, and [you] know talking with other...AFDC mothers, you always feel if you have

¹³(...continued)

covering clothes, shampoo, laundry detergent, and so on -- in other words, "everything else." Food stamps comprise a separate form of assistance, and are restricted to food items only; it is illegal to use food stamps to purchase toilet items, pet food, cigarettes, or alcohol.

¹⁴ Such comments reflect the reality of current grant levels. In 1991, a family receiving both AFDC and food stamps in Michigan lived at only 78% of the federal poverty level (AFDC alone was at 53% of the poverty level); and only 28% of AFDC recipients received enough in their shelter allowance to cover actual shelter expenses. At only 53% of the federal poverty level, the 1991 AFDC minimum was the lowest in ten years (Michigan Department of Social Services Information Packet, 1991).

milk in the refrigerator, you know...then, you're meeting some kind of maternal need....Milk is symbolic or something, it really is [Maggie, 5/26/89].

Maggie and her friends recognized a powerful connection between milk and motherhood, and the inability to provide milk for their children meant that they fell short of societal standards of motherhood.

Christmas

Christmas stories also served to underscore the severity of the deprivations of poverty and welfare. In the following exchange, Laura, Susan, and Susan's boyfriend, Fred, discuss Christmas:

- L: I cried and cried at Christmas because I looked at my Christmas tree, there was nothing under it, my kids had [nothing, my kids didn't have nothing]
- F: we didn't have a whole lot either
- S: we didn't have a whole lot
- L: [can't decipher]
- S: and then, you know what I had for one year for Christmas?
- L: I had stuff under there from my parents
- S: I had--
- L: my mom let me borrow some presents to put under my tree so it wouldn't look so [blank] because it just drove me crazy
- S: when I was pregnant with her, and I had to move outa my house, and sign my land over to my mom, so I could get ADC, in Georgia when Jerry left the second time, I was seven months pregnant with her, we had a pine tree limb in a bucket in the house, and what Andy made in first grade is what covered that tree, and I

got three hundred dollars my first check, no food stamps, no nothing....[skip segment] but, I took my, my rental money, and I went to the store and I bought ten dollars worth of Christmas stuff, and that's what they had for Christmas.

[LIFE, 8/19/90, tape 2, side 1, segment 208-226].

In this segment, both Laura and Susan emphasize the difficulty of not having presents for their children at Christmas: Laura by recounting the extreme measure of resorting to symbolic presents; Susan by telling how she used rent money for presents, and by describing a pitiful pine tree limb in a bucket decorated with a child's cut-outs for want of finer ornaments.

The women often referred to absences at Christmas time. What was most painful to them was their inability to provide presents for their children -- an indication of the importance of their identities as mothers, who, in order to be deemed adequate, are responsible for providing for all their children's needs -- "needs" in U.S. culture including the delights of "childhood" as well as the basic necessities of food and shelter.

In sum, the women experienced trouble meeting both basic needs and "extra" needs, i.e., those material needs crucial to adult identity in American capitalist society, but unrecognized -- and, in a twist on a Marxist concept, perhaps deemed "false" -- by the welfare system, and, when it comes to poor people, by society at large. The inability to fulfill these "extra" needs -- the need to

have decent clothes, to be able to buy nice things for one's children, especially at Christmas, and so on -- left the women feeling doubly deprived, and doubly inadequate.

Susan resisted such feelings of inadequacy by using part of her rent money to buy Christmas presents for her children. The story she produces is thus a counter-narrative: she resists both welfare rules and regulations, and an ideology that says that poor people shouldn't have "luxuries," especially at tax payers' expense. In a larger context, however, Susan's resistance to one set of circumstances and ideologies may be viewed as accommodation to another social phenomenon, namely, consumerism. It also reflects accommodation to the views that it is a parent's (in this case a mother's) responsibility to provide for all of a child's needs. At this level, Susan's story might be considered an example of a mixed narrative.

Stigma

All of the women referred to the stigma of being on welfare (see Goffman 1963). Food stamps, since they are such a visible marker of one's status as a welfare recipient -- as Maggie said, "you're branded by your food stamps" -- were often the focus of discussions of stigma:

M: I was living in this one apartment, and waiting and waiting for [them], you know, you wait for the food stamps to come

C: uh huh

M: and, for like three or four or five days I [] and I hope our food stamps come, and this was when I first moved to Metuchen, and was living in kind of a middle class, um, neighborhood

C: uh huh

M: and, I wou--I hated to go outside the door 'cause I felt so different

C: uh huh, uh huh

M: and, and I went through a whole thing there where I wouldn't even check my mail until after dark, you know, I just felt so odd

C: oh, wow

M: anyway, so, um, it, it was one day, and the mailman came, and Dale, [he] was like three or something, and he was outside playing, he saw the mailman put the food stamps in the mailbox and he started screaming, "MOM! OUR FOOD STAMPS ARE HERE! OUR FOOD STAMPS ARE HERE!," like this [laughing] you know

C: oh, God [laughs]

M: and I was just so humiliated, I said, "GET IN HERE!," you know, and, and in one way it was real funny, but in another it was so pathetic

C: uh huh, uh huh

M: you know, and he was waiting so desperately for 'em too

C: for 'em too

M: you know, and, it was just, and that's how it was

[Maggie, 5/26/89]

Maggie's references to being "humiliated" and to feeling "different" and "odd" illustrate her experience of stigma. Other words used by the women to describe feelings associated with using food stamps included "embarrassing,"

"horrible," and "degrading."¹⁵ Women told of getting dirty looks from cashiers and people behind them in line at the grocery store, and of cashiers holding up food stamps and yelling loudly to other cashiers for change.¹⁶

Some women developed strategies for dealing with the stigma associated with food stamps. Maggie, for instance, told of friends who would only shop late at night, and of one woman who would dress up in her fanciest clothes to shop, "for her pride" -- a strategy that may unwittingly reinforce certain stereotypes of food stamp abusers. At the opposite end of the spectrum, neither Mary nor Dee was disturbed by others' reactions to their food stamps. Dee's understanding was that welfare was a loan; once she got a job, the social security deducted from her future paychecks and the support payments made by her child's father would go directly to the state to pay back her AFDC and food stamp grants. Consequently, she felt no need to be embarrassed or ashamed about using her food stamps.

Mary's construction of the situation was less elaborate, but equally effective: simply put, no one else in her family had ever been on welfare, Mary was

¹⁵ Interestingly enough, while regular paper money has photographs of presidents, food stamp bills feature photographs of the declaration of independence and the liberty bell, as if to illustrate those great American values and principles unattainable by recipients.

¹⁶ "Change" here refers to smaller denominations of food stamps. Recipients are not supposed to receive regular money as change.

temporarily "stuck" where she was, and she was not going to be on welfare forever. She therefore had no reason to feel bad: "I don't think that anybody treats me rude on it or anything like that but maybe, I really don't pay attention because it doesn't matter" [Mary, 2/21/90].

Mary's and Dee's reactions to the stigma of food stamps were unusual. None of the other women I encountered during the course of this study, either fleetingly or on more intimate terms, expressed similar sentiments. Regardless of their approach to it, however, all the women in this study were aware of the stigma associated with being on welfare, and felt compelled to address it in one way or another -- by telling horror stories about it, taking action to publicly identify themselves as other than "welfare recipient," or by refusing to give in to it.

The women's various responses to stigma illustrate elements of both resistance and accommodation, providing examples of both status-quo and counter-narratives. Many of the women seemed to suffer acute embarrassment and shame over food stamps, and as such acquiesced to the stigma associated with food stamps. The literature on welfare is replete with discussions of efforts at "deterrence" -- of policies designed to deter people from applying for or remaining on welfare through the use of embarrassment, shame and humiliation (e.g., Katz 1986;

Piven and Cloward 1971). The visibility of food stamps may be one example of a deterrent policy -- the shame suffered by those having to use them deters other would-be recipients -- and insofar as the women acquiesce to its effects, they are contributing to its efficacy. Shopping only at night is one form of such acquiescence. Maggie's story of her son's public display of their status as welfare recipients provides another example of acquiescence, and as such is an example of a status-quo narrative. Although she gives in to and thus maintains established norms, however, she clearly does not thrive or benefit from this.

Maggie's story of her friend who dressed up in her finest clothes, on the other hand, is a counter-narrative describing a form of resistance.¹⁷ In dressing up, the woman works against a public display of shame, thereby mitigating the deterrent impact that seeing someone use food stamps might have on potential recipients. Choosing to ignore the stigma of food stamps -- as both Mary and Dee managed to do -- also provides an example of resistance.

¹⁷ It is ironic, however, that this strategy plays into the image of the "welfare cheat." In resisting the stigma attached to food stamps, the woman in Maggie's story serves to reinforce negative stereotypes of welfare recipients upon which much stigma is based.

The Requirements of Structural Constraint:
Manipulation versus Hyper-truth

The women made use of two distinct strategies in dealing with the inadequacies of the welfare system. The first was to manipulate the system by means of certain kinds of impression management (such as deference to workers), or by withholding information about extra income (such as that provided by unreported adults living in the household). The second strategy was to play by the rules, but with a vengeance. This approach consisted of providing the welfare department with all the required information plus some, being aware of and demanding one's entitlements, and, occasionally, policing other welfare recipients who break the rules. I refer to these two approaches as "manipulation" and "hyper-truth," respectively. Seemingly diametrically opposed, both strategies reflected a perception of welfare provisions as inadequate.

Manipulation

Manipulation was the most common of the two approaches. The underlying assumption of this approach was that if you were totally honest with the welfare system, you would not be able to survive. Lying and impression management were the two key manipulations

engaged in by the women who used this approach; I discuss each in turn.

Lying. Telling welfare workers the truth, like getting a minimum wage job, was considered an expensive proposition. The most common type of lie women felt economically compelled to tell concerned extra income, most often generated by under the table work, or by the contributions made by another (undeclared) adult living in the household. Maggie was very clear about the imperative lie:

M: I mean, if you go in there blankly and naive like I did and you think, you know, you work honestly with them and all that

C: uh huh

M: that'll last about a month or two

C: wow

M: and then you, you'll hit some crisis, and then you go to your friends, and they tell you how to handle it

[Maggie, 5/26/89]

In the following exchange about the experience of a friend who had to apply for "emergency needs,"¹⁸ Louise

¹⁸ "Emergency needs" designates a particular category of aid consisting of one-time grants given in emergency situations. Items covered under emergency needs include, for example, security deposit and first month's rent for homeless people or recipients who have been evicted, and coverage of bills to energy companies that are threatening to cut off a recipient's heat or electricity. If one characterized all people seeking welfare as desperate, those applying for emergency needs are doubly so.

relates both what she saw as the psychological cruelty of the welfare system, and how recipients are pressed into lying in order to survive:

L: you have to lie

C: right

L: you know you have to lie

C: right

L: I went through, one of the

C: []

L: I had a, a friend whose baby died, sudden infant death syndrome, she was on welfare, and, I mean, you have to go out, it's, it's an emergency need, you have to out and you have to sit, and you have to go in, and you have to tell them everything that you have in the world, and if you have 50 bucks it has to, you know, if you have anything over 50 bucks, it has to go in there, and, and you have to DO that to bury your baby

C: that is incredible

L: and

C: oh, to get money to do that?

L: to get money to bury the baby

C: oh, Jesus

L: you know, and

C: []

L: I'm sitting there with her saying, you know, and they say "how much money do you have?" and she wants to count, I say, "you don't have any money"

C: uh huh

L: "you don't have any money, you spent it all. Who cares if you got a check yesterday, you paid the rent."

C: that is incredible

- L: because they want you to, they want you to spend your rent money and, and what do YOU know?, your BABY died for God's sake, that's horrible
- C: that is horrible, that is horrible
- L: that is horrible
- C: it's almost like
- L: they want you to get bids, to get bids, let's, let's get the cheapest [we can get]
- C: wait a minute, wait a minute, they want to--
- L: find out, find out how much people co--will charge, and go with the cheaper one, [I mean] she was lucky that she had, you know, she was from Nashville and, they had a family plot, right, and, and so the the mortician who worked there
- C: but how could somebody sit there and say that to somebody who just lost her baby, "go get bids"?
- L: that's, that's the rule, that's the rule, "we need to know how much people will charge and, and we have to go with the least expensive"
- C: it's almost like you get put in a category that's not quite human
- L: oh, yeah
- C: oh my god, that is incred--that is an incredible story, I can't believe that, it's incredible, I mean, how could?
- L: she was LUCKY because she didn't HAVE to, because this guy, I mean, they had a relationship with him, and you know how it is in small towns like that, I come from a small town in southern Ohio, it would be the same way, you know, I mean, there is somebody who deals with your family and deals with all the paper work
- C: right right right
- L: you know, and they bury your people
- C: right

- L: and and he was willing to give her all kinds of discounts and all kinds of things
- C: that is just, that's just
- L: because he knew that she was in hard financial times, so she didn't have to go out and do it
- C: that's inhuman, I mean, that's
- L: yeah
- C: that's just not right
- L: people don't have to do that, people shouldn't HAVE to do that
- C: no, NO
- L: they DO, but they shouldn't have to, it shouldn't be that way
- C: that's just not right
- [Louise blows her nose]
- C: what a story, God
- L: emergen--people who are waiting to apply for emergency needs, have bad stories, you know?

[Louise, 9/7/89]

In this story, Louise illustrates the coldness and cruelty of the welfare system in the face of human tragedy -- even a baby's death fails to evoke compassion. The juxtaposition of issues of death and survival in the story underscores the imperative to lie: under the psychological pressure of coping with her infant's death, Louise's friend is forced to lie to save her rent; if she doesn't (one could conjecture), she could suffer the additional loss of her shelter. What's more, Louise's friend has to be told to lie -- it does not come

naturally. The need to lie to survive in the system is inexorable, grief and loss notwithstanding; thus Louise's conclusion that "people who are waiting to apply for emergency needs, have bad stories."

Impression Management. As Scott (1990:3) has pointed out, "one of the key survival skills of subordinate groups has been impression management in power-laden situations." Encounters with welfare workers are clearly power-laden situations for recipients, insofar as their food and housing may depend on the outcomes of such encounters. Maggie elucidated the importance of impression management in such situations:

AFDC mothers--ones I knew myself--would present that [compliant] face to them, like they're controlling us and regulating us, but when you go home, we make our own decisions about certain things, but it also is a matter of complying to get something, anything [Maggie, 5/26/89].

In other words, apparent compliance -- going along with what workers say and not challenging their views of recipients' lives and characters -- was a deliberate "face" women put on in order to get what they wanted.

Compliance was not the only possible "face," however. When I asked Louise about a compliant presentation of self, she replied, "it depends, I mean, sometimes if you get real threatening to them [i.e., identify yourself as a member of Welfare Rights], they'll give you more too, they'll follow the rules" [Louise, 9/7/89]. Both

approaches, however -- or any others that might exist, such as acting ignorant -- illustrate the same point: namely, that the women felt compelled to put on a particular "face" when interacting with workers.

The underlying assumption of this approach to impression management was that workers were not simply implementing set rules and regulations (although policy was presented as immutable at any given point); rather, workers were considered to have some leeway and, more significantly, the power to help some people more than others -- in other words, they were viewed as gatekeepers to the welfare system. Additionally, this approach assumed that welfare was structurally inadequate -- that even at its best, the resources it provided were insufficient.

Hyper-truth

The "hyper-truth" approach consisted of an exaggerated "playing by the rules" -- of telling one's worker every detail, of reporting changes that don't need to be reported, of filling out every required form and getting it in on time, and so on. Even those who used this approach, however -- most notably, Dee and Mary -- recognized that welfare, in the form in which one typically receives it, was insufficient for survival. This approach, then, had two additional features that

worked to improve one's living conditions while staying well within the rules and regulations of the welfare system. One was to hold the system to its own rules: if recipients had to play by the rules, then so did the welfare system. Thus Dee threatened to sue the welfare department when she was inappropriately cut off, and Mary pressured the welfare department for three years to get a new roof put on her house. Playing by the rules, then, was not passive, but entailed a specific kind of confrontation with the system.¹⁹

The second feature of the "hyper-truth" approach consisted of policing other clients. There were only two women in the group, Mary and Jane, who reported actually taking steps to police other clients, but I think the phenomenon is important given the fact that many of the women felt that welfare cheats did exist, and that the existence of such cheats had a negative impact on the well-being of other, more honest, recipients.

Jane was particularly angered by people who, she felt, abused food stamps. She worked hard to stretch her own stamps (by, for example, mixing powdered and regular milk and buying in bulk), and was incensed by people who used their stamps to buy "junk food," or who plotted to

¹⁹ Forcing the welfare department to play by its own rules was part of Mary's strategy when she referred to putting on a "threatening" face (see above). In her case, however, this was not coupled with any need to be honest herself.

get cash change for the stamps in order to purchase alcohol or cigarettes. Jane eventually contacted the police to check on the legality of such behavior, but did not pursue the issue any further [Jane, 3/12/90].

Mary was more direct in her policing of abusers, and more explicit about her reasons for doing so:

M: well, I think a lot of people abuse food stamps, too

C: mm huh, how do they, in what ways?

M: um, I, I think, I've seen a lot of people, well, like when I worked at Quality Dairy

C: uh huh

M: they would, um, get something that doesn't cost very much so they can get the change

C: get the change

M: and then try, try to come back, but, that kind of, pisses me off, so I'd always ask 'em for their [food stamp] card, because you know, I'm struggling

C: mm huh

M: to get, and I don't like it when I see somebody abuse them

C: right, so what, they would get the change and then use the change to buy something that you are not supposed to use food stamps for

M: yeah, like, this

C: like cigarettes or

M: yeah, this old man, he would come in there and try to, he would go, like, if there's two clerks, he would go to me and then go to the other girl, and then, and then he'd come back in a few minutes later and go get a quart of beer [laughs]

C: and buy something, okay

M: and I would, you know, and I would

- C: uh huh, uh huh, okay
- M: say no and then I'd go get the manager and stuff, like that
- C: uh huh, uh huh
- M: and I seen that a lot and then, um, the people that send their kids in to get a candy bar and get the change and like that
- C: oh, okay
- M: and then I would ask them
- C: uh huh
- M: you know, "you have to have your card to use them"
- C: uh huh
- M: and um, "your name isn't on the card"
- C: okay uh huh, uh huh, wow, so you think some people, I mean, one of the strategies
- M: there's a lot of people abuse 'em
- C: that people have is to somehow get around the rules and regulations, so that they can buy other things
- M: and I think that probably is what makes it worse for the people who really do try

[Mary, 2/21/90, side 1, segment 338-360]

In this segment, Mary goes beyond complaining about food stamp abusers to actively confronting them. And her reason for doing so is clear: food stamp abuse "probably is what makes it worse for people who really do try."

The strategy of policing other clients may have been based on a particular interpretation of the welfare system as inadequate, namely, one that saw resources being depleted through individual abuse (by potentially

undeserving people), as opposed to one that saw resource insufficiency as a characteristic feature of the system itself. If the former were the case, then eliminating abuse would be the way to increase the availability of resources for those who "really do try." The difference between the "manipulation" and "hyper-truth" strategies, then, was not related to perceived insufficiencies of the welfare system, but rather to the perceived basis of such insufficiencies. From the perspective of the "manipulation" approach, the welfare system was inherently insufficient; even if one were to receive all one's entitlements, it still wouldn't be enough. From the perspective of the "hyper-truth" approach, in contrast, the problem was not with the system, but with individuals -- whether they be welfare cheats or workers who don't following the rules. In either case, the system was seen as insufficient; the cause, however -- and thus the remedy -- was different.

This theme -- as one might predict from the opposing views contained in it -- provides examples of a range of narrative types. The narrative produced by Mary concerning food stamp abuse is a good example of a status-quo narrative. Not only does Mary help perpetuate prevailing stereotypes, she also assertively contributes to the policing function of welfare. In contrast, Maggie's description of putting on a compliant face in

order to get something from one's worker is an example of a counter-narrative, describing forms of resistance, as is Louise's "bids for burial" story. Neither Louise nor Maggie are really playing by the rules, although they may present themselves as such in order to accomplish their goals.

Welfare Rights Groups: The Joint
Construction of "Us" versus "Them"

Overview of the Welfare Rights Groups

Madrid Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO)

The Madrid Welfare Rights Organization is a local branch of the National Welfare Rights Union. The original national group (National Welfare Rights Organization, or NWRO) was born in the context of the civil rights movement in the mid 1960s. Piven and Cloward (1977), who first outlined the idea of a welfare rights movement in a 1966 article in The Nation, summarized NWRO goals as follows:

If hundreds of thousands of families could be induced to demand relief, we thought that two gains might result. First, if large numbers of people succeeded in getting on the rolls, much of the worst of America's poverty would be eliminated. Second...we thought it likely that a huge increase in the relief rolls would set off fiscal and political crises in the cities, the reverberations of which might lead national political leaders to federalize the relief system and establish a national minimum income standard. It was a strategy designed to obtain immediate economic aid for the poor, coupled with the possibility of obtaining a longer-term national income standard (Piven and Cloward 1977:276).

In its heyday (1969), NWRO boasted 22,500 members nationwide. Its membership base quickly dwindled, however, as (a) it turned from grass-roots organizing and militant resistance (most prominently in the form of sit-ins at local welfare offices) to lobbying, and (b) civil rights and poverty waned in funding popularity (Piven and Cloward 1977). The national office closed in 1973.

During the 1980s, however, there was a resurgence of interest in welfare rights activities. As with the rise of NWRO, this resurgence took place in a wider social context, this time that of increasing homelessness and economic dislocation.

The contemporary MWRO was founded in 1982 by Louise, after a fortuitous encounter with the head of the National Welfare Rights Union, based in Detroit. Membership was never very large (at one time meetings were attended by up to 20 people), and as of this writing, MWRO has a core membership of fewer than five people.

The official goals of MWRO are to teach recipients how to use policy manuals so that they are aware of and can work to enforce their entitlements; to advocate for recipients in specific cases (by, for example, attending hearings as recipients' representatives); and to try to influence legislative budget allocations by testifying at public hearings. The underlying assumptions of these goals are:

1. Recipients rarely receive all that they are entitled to receive under existing policy. One way to deal with this is to put pressure on individual workers and their supervisors (thus the goal of teaching recipients how to figure out what they are entitled to).

2. In confronting the welfare bureaucracy, any number of people together is better than someone alone; individuals trying to confront the welfare department by filing for hearings have a difficult time withstanding the pressure put on them by workers and other representatives of the system to back down (thus the goal of advocacy).

3. Even if recipients were to receive all their entitlements under existing policy, welfare grants would still be insufficient. The way to deal with this is to put public pressure on policy makers, specifically on legislators who make decisions regarding budget allocations (thus the goal of testifying at public hearings).

At the time of this study, MWRO held monthly meetings at a local community center, where it had had an office until financial and staffing problems compelled the officers to shut it down. By the end of the study, MWRO had acquired office space in the local Community Resources Center; the office space was provided free of charge for one year. At the time of this writing, however, Martha, a new core member, was still struggling to set up more or less regular meetings following the resignation of the most recent chair in January 1991 (the preceding chair had resigned in July 1990).

Low Income People for Equality (LIFE)

Low Income People for Equality was started in spring 1990 by three women. Susan, the president of LIFE, had been trying to no avail to participate in a government program that would allow her to purchase a home. Feeling that she was getting the run-around from both the program coordinators and her State Representative, Susan decided to write a letter to the Governor. As she told her story to her day-care customers (Susan ran a day-care business in her home), they decided to sign the letter with her. In the end she had 25 signatures. Armed with this letter, Susan and two of her friends, Janice and Sylvia, decided to attend an MWRO meeting in the hopes of getting more signatures and help in confronting the system. The three women found no one: the meeting had been canceled for lack of participants. So they decided to start their own group.

LIFE members were drawn from Susan's day-care business. They were all low-income, and the majority of those who attended the weekly meetings -- ranging from three to ten people -- were on welfare.

The concerns of LIFE extended beyond those of MWRO. While a central issue, LIFE members felt that welfare was not the only problem faced by low-income and poor women; rather, they situated welfare in the context of a larger society that placed numerous constraints on individuals'

abilities to "make it."²⁰ Issues of child care, housing, collusion among men in different classes, and the inaccessibility of programs designed for low-income people, were thus weighted equally with welfare policy. LIFE concerns, then, spilled over from welfare policy to address other, inextricably related, concerns: day care, housing, and male-female relationships. Accordingly, during the course of its short life of seven months, activities contemplated by LIFE included not only picketing and advocacy, but also lobbying for day care programs for low-income women, making a film to educate the public about poverty, getting involved in recycling programs, and pushing for pay freezes for legislators. The goals of LIFE, then, were both broader and more diffuse than those of MWRO.

LIFE differed from MWRO in other respects as well. As stated, most LIFE members were recruited from Susan's day care business, who in turn brought along their friends. Although there were those among MWRO membership who were friends, these friendships grew out of common participation in the group. LIFE members, in contrast, were friends to begin with, and LIFE was one among several

²⁰ MWRO members also made connections between welfare and the larger society. While recognized as important, however, issues of the larger society were not considered an official part of the MWRO agenda, and thus were never the target of MWRO activities.

activities that the women engaged in together; they also "hung out" together, and topics of conversation at the meetings included relationships, children and family, and bar-hopping, as well as welfare, housing, and collusion among men. The expanded agenda of LIFE when compared to MWRO, then, may have been related to the wider set of relationships among its participants.

The location and conduct of LIFE meetings reflected this wider set of relationships. While MWRO meetings were held in a location geographically separate from the rest of the women's lives (in an official meeting room), LIFE meetings were generally held at Susan's home. Although occasional attempts were made to mark the meetings (by sending children outdoors, announcing beginnings and endings), LIFE meetings were by nature more integrated with the rest of life than were MWRO meetings. LIFE-related talk was punctuated by jokes about individuals' sexual exploits and by activities such as eating, smoking, and drinking; talking with children also was interwoven into official activities.

Overlapping Membership, the Demise of LIFE, and Issues of Recruitment

In the summer of 1990, Louise, the most active member of MWRO, took a job teaching overseas. Earlier in the year, I had introduced Louise and Susan, and they had

started discussing what their groups wanted to accomplish; Louise had also held a training session on how to use welfare policy manuals for LIFE members. Although Louise's suggestion that MWRO and LIFE merge was rejected by the LIFE membership, Louise did convince Susan to take over the position of chair of MWRO. Susan accepted this position in July 1990, but held it for only eight months before resigning to move to Florida in February of 1991.

Although it did not merge with MWRO, LIFE was able to continue on its own for less than three more months, and finally died a quiet death in September of 1991. The group had been together for only seven months. Throughout the course of this research, MWRO as well struggled to survive. I sometimes attended meetings where I was one of only three people present, and sometimes meetings were canceled for lack of participants. Often, individuals attended only one or two meetings before disappearing. MWRO has nevertheless continued, and although there is a high turn-over of core membership, there have nevertheless always been one or two core members. I would speculate here that while LIFE suffered from some of the same problems with membership that MWRO suffered from (see below), the nature of the relationships between its

members added an additional burden; as friendships waxed and waned, so did group membership.²¹

The problem of recruiting and retaining active members was frequently discussed at both LIFE and MWRO meetings, and participants had their own explanations for this shared problem. Core members recognized the subversive nature of their activities -- and of the mere existence of the groups -- and often cited fear as a major contributor to membership problems. In confronting the system, it was felt, one risked being punished by it. Core members offered other explanations as well, including material and logistical constraints (e.g., time, transportation, lack of telephones), and lack of community values (people would join, get help with their problems, and then move on).

²¹ For example, during the spring of 1990, Janice, one of LIFE's core members and a close friend of Susan's, had a birthday party for a girlfriend. She hired Fred, Susan's boyfriend, to dance (this was cheaper than taking her friend to a male strip-tease bar). Fred slept with Janice's friend, and after Susan found out, Janice never attended another LIFE meeting. Another example: as LIFE was forming, Rita moved into Susan's house because she had no place to live. Living in close quarters put pressure on their relationship, and several times Susan threatened to kick Rita out; at one point, Susan even accused Rita of stealing money. One result of this friction was that Susan actively blocked Rita's bid for an official position on the LIFE board, having members vote when Rita was not present. Eventually, Rita both moved out of Susan's house and dropped out of LIFE. The point here is that aspects of the women's relationships outside of the group had an impact on the cohesion of the group, and may have contributed to its demise.

Conduct of Meetings: The Establishment of Comembership

A typical MWRO meeting lasted an hour and a half, and was devoted to discussing current issues (e.g., proposed budget cuts), recruitment and group activities, and individual problems. These were the official agenda items of the meetings, and they fulfilled the purpose of getting together in order to address problems and propose possible actions. Regardless of the particular content of these agenda items on different occasions, however, there was always an unofficial yet clearly predominant orientation to ideology. Although members did address such concrete -- and clearly important -- issues as how to figure a food stamp budget, the most striking accomplishment of the meetings was the establishment of comembership among participants, and the construction, reiteration, or reinforcement of shared critical interpretations of welfare and society.

The following 20-minute tape index of a typical MWRO meeting illustrates the overwhelming emphasis placed on comembership and critique, or on what may be called unofficial agenda items, as opposed to official, explicitly welfare-related items (such as preparing for legislative hearings or a picket). I use the term comembership to refer to the recognition of similarity and commonality (Erickson 1975a; Erickson and Shultz 1982; see

also Shultz 1975). Unofficial items dealing with comembership and critique are underlined; official agenda items are in bold. DSS refers to the Department of Social Services.

- 000 [people arrive; shuffling chairs around]
- 086 Sandra reads a letter Sharon wrote to DSS about her difficulties handling cuts in her food stamps--cuts that were the result, moreover, of a previous error on the part of DSS.
- 111 Sharon responds to Sandra's letter by claiming that when DSS makes a mistake, the client is the one to pay. She tells her story about trying to make ends meet on \$82/month in food stamps for three people, much of which consists of listing her expenses. She underscores her indignation by pointing out that people on welfare pay taxes too.
- 160 Sharon continues her lament with the claim that DSS penalizes people for divorce and then wonders when clients don't report extra income. She criticizes fraud referrals, and then makes the general claim that when you're on welfare, you may as well be living in Russia or China.
- 199 Louise officially opens the meeting by suggesting that everyone introduce themselves.
- 230 After a side sequence by Sharon on people on welfare using the concept of "tough love" to raise their children, Louise turns to listing MWRO goals: **advocacy and legislative work**.
- 244 Louise brings up problems of membership: MWRO doesn't have enough people working on advocacy.
- 260 Louise points out that **MWRO needs advocacy workers** because DSS doesn't follow the rules it's supposed to follow. Susan, a member of LIFE, says that she wants her group to **devise solutions to problems associated with welfare that can then be presented to legislators**. She refers to a recent TV program describing the welfare system in Wisconsin, and states that we need to find ways to address the issue of run-away fathers.
- 273 Louise points out that education--a commonly cited solution to the welfare problem--is useless if the jobs are not out there, and offers a critique of a "free" labor force.
- 286 Louise again brings up the problem of membership, and lays out her claim that people join, get off welfare, and then leave the group
- 289 Proposing that **all welfare programs be combined**, and referring to the fact that this is supposed to be a free country, a woman starts discussing the rights of

- homeless people, and how we have our priorities wrong: we don't allow abortion but don't take care of babies once they're born, and we have fancy technology to keep people alive but mistreat the aged. She then tells a story about a decrepit old man she knew when she worked at a hospital.
- 324 Louise picks up this topic and talks about poverty and health, and outlines how children on welfare are dying and how the rich are getting richer while the poor are getting poorer. Group participants then start discussing what they have to live on.
- 350 From this, participants start discussing how legislators think about welfare recipients.
- 368 This brings up the topic of attempts to control women's reproductive capacities, which is followed by a discussion of why women get on welfare (following traditional models of marriage and motherhood).
- 388 The discussion moves to why people on welfare won't fight the system (fear).
- 415 After a discussion of trash bag price hikes (another example of how difficult it is to live on welfare), the topic returns to membership problems.

[MWRO 4/4/90, side 1]

The most striking feature of this sequence is the extent to which critiques of the system predominate. This is typical of MWRO meetings (as it was of LIFE meetings; see below). In the course of approximately 20 minutes, the following assertions are put forth:

- recipients are the ones to pay when DSS makes a mistake²²
- you cannot live on what DSS gives you
- DSS forces you to lie (by not reporting extra income)
- if you're on welfare, you may as well be living in a communist country
- DSS typically doesn't give recipients what they are entitled to

²² The mistake most often made is "overpay," giving recipients more than they are officially entitled to. When the error is recognized, the welfare department must recoup the overpay; this is usually done by reducing the recipient's grant by a certain percentage (usually 5%) each month until the total amount has been recovered.

- education and job training programs are a farce in the face of current economic trends
- poor people (especially children and the aged) are not well taken care of in this country
- there is an increasing gap between rich and poor
- people in power make erroneous assumptions about poor people and intrude into their private lives and rights

These criticisms of the welfare system and of society at large serve to underscore the women's comembership as victims (and angry ones at that) rather than as failures, and to establish a common, shared interpretation of their situations. Although one could argue that the official business of the meeting to this point -- discussing advocacy, legislative work, and membership -- is subsumed by this larger project, I would argue that the project of establishing comembership and a common understanding of what is wrong with welfare and society are what provide the grounds for the conduct of official business. Following Scott (1990:191), such critiques may be considered "a condition of practical resistance rather than a substitute for it."

The clear connection between unofficial and official agenda items -- perhaps indicating the problematics of making such a distinction -- can be seen at segment 260, when Louise points out that MWRO needs advocacy workers because DSS doesn't follow the rules it's supposed to follow. The perception that the welfare department does not follow its own rules, and shared agreement on that

perception, is crucial to then establishing and acting on the goal of advocacy.

A key activity in the construction of comembership and shared interpretations entails jumping from individual situations to generalized assertions (and sometimes back again). Sandra begins the segment [086] by describing Sharon's experience with food stamp cuts. Sharon uses this story to make the general assertion that the welfare department makes recipients pay for its own mistakes, and then reinforces this general assertion by going back down to the personal level to outline her personal struggles. During segment 289-324, a woman makes a general assertion about the way old people are treated in this country and, again, backs it up with a specific example. Finally, Louise's assertion in segment 324-350 concerning the gap between rich and poor is picked up by all the participants, who each start listing what it is that they have to try to live on. This jumping between individual and general levels was a ubiquitous feature of both MWRO and LIFE meetings.

Despite the differences between the two groups outlined above, this description applies to LIFE as well as to MWRO meetings: the establishment of comembership and common interpretations and understandings of different aspects of the "system" were the most predominant features of meetings, although they were rarely on the official

agenda. Indeed, in the case of LIFE the focus on interpretation and common understanding was even more pronounced, despite the fact that most of the members were friends and thus had other ties besides their common poverty. Although LIFE meetings occurred in the president's home and were more integrated with other aspects of members' lives than were MWRO meetings, then, the index and discussion of the MWRO meeting provided above capture characteristic features of LIFE meetings as well.

Manual Training Sessions

MWRO manual training sessions, during which members learned how to interpret and use the official policy manuals of the welfare department, provide a good illustration of the importance of comembership and common interpretation to practical activity. The rationale for manual training was the view that the welfare department did not always play by their own rules; the goal of the sessions was to enable recipients to get everything they were entitled to according to policy.

During the course of my research there were three manual training sessions, two of which were attended by

MWRO members exclusively, and one of which was attended by both MWRO and LIFE members.²³

Of all the MWRO meetings, the manual training sessions were the most focused. The task was clearly defined at the outset; rather than having a number of items to discuss, ranging from current budget debates to individual problems, manual training sessions were limited to discussion of particular manual items.

During a manual training session, the construction of a view of the system occurs parallel to the description of welfare programs covered by the manual. In other words, as the instructor lays out the various programs, opportunities are provided for the interpretation and critique of the rationale behind the programs or the way in which the welfare department and its workers routinely interpret and implement policy. This provides the reason for learning to use the manuals. While learning how to use the manuals is fairly straightforward (albeit cumbersome) if one has sufficient patience -- a matter of

²³ There were several reasons for the relative rarity of this event. One concerned the difficulty of scheduling -- it was difficult enough to get people organized for a regular meeting, let alone an extra one. Second, policy manuals are cumbersome; the five regularly used manuals contain hundreds of pages of policy, and the frequent updates (there were over 20 sets of updates from March 1990 to March 1991, some of which were over 50 pages in length) require constant re-learning. Third, manual training implies at least the possibility of commitment to doing advocacy work -- something that few people are willing to engage in given its outright confrontational stance and the excessive amount of time that it takes.

learning how they are indexed and organized, and of getting used to a particular kind of language -- the reasons for using them, and the ways in which one might want to use them, are not given, and must be established.

The following transcript is from a training session on food stamps. There are three people present, Louise, Kathy (a new member) and myself. Louise showed us how to look up food stamps in the manual index, and then read excerpts from the manual, explaining what she read as she went along. The focus was on "expedited" food stamps, a program that allows people in emergency situations to receive food stamps within five days (a regular food stamp case can take up to 30 days to open). The transcript begins with Louise reading from the manual:

L: "If the application is filed in person the interview must be held the same day. If the clien--client qualifies for out-of-office or telephone interview, it must be conducted no later than the first working day"

K: hmmm

L: okay

C: hmm

L: so they have to interview you right away. They need to have the following minimum verifications. See, [um] the problem is, you're playing lawyer, you're playing lawyer with this stuff

K: yeah

L: because what, what they are always gonna do is, an-- they'll, they're not gonna read on, the department doesn't read on, the department doesn't apply [all] kinds of things

[MWRO manual training 1/17/90, side 1, segment 220-231]

In this segment, Louise interrupts her reading from the manual to explain why recipients should pay close attention to what is written in the manuals. As she is getting ready to read the list of minimum verifications, she stops to explain that knowing the minimum verifications is important because the welfare department and its workers are "not gonna read on." What she means by this is that workers' familiarity with the manuals is limited. For instance, the types of verification workers most often ask for are at the top of the list in the manual. If you "read on," however, you find that there are a number of alternative types of verification that can be used. Also, at the end of each sub-section addressing a specific program, there is a section on exceptions to the rules. Since workers usually do not make a thorough search of the manuals to make sure that each recipient receives all that she is entitled to as quickly and as easily as possible, it is up to the recipient to play "lawyer" -- dig -- and use the information she gets to press her worker to give her something (here, to give her food stamps quickly). The assumption -- and the rationale for playing "lawyer" -- is that workers are ignorant of or unwilling to learn the details of welfare policy.

The following exchange provides an even clearer example of how Louise provides the reason for learning the manuals:

L: believe it or not, EVERY program and EVERY move that DSS makes, they have rules and regulations about how they need to proceed, and what their time limits are, what their rules are, everything they do is totally bound by law, and all of that is stuff that you can know, all of that is stuff that is accessible to people, they don't necessarily tell you, they certainly don't break their backs trying to let you know that

C: [laughs]

L: but all of it is that way

[MWRO manual training, 5/9/90, tape 1, side 1, segment 088-100]

There are two key phrases here: "believe it or not, EVERY program...[has] rules" (delivered in a sarcastic tone), and "they certainly don't break their backs trying to let you know that." That there are regulations, and that workers don't feel compelled to educate recipients about the range of rules, is sufficient reason for recipients to educate themselves.

Resistance

The strong need to establish comembership and shared understandings points to the resistant nature of the two welfare rights organizations. This resistance took the form of critiques of the system that provided explanations for the situations in which individual members found themselves that countered the individual deficit explanations put forth by both the welfare department and the larger society. It also took the practical forms of

efforts to learn more about how the welfare system works (through training sessions on welfare policy), attempts to change the system (by organizing public demonstrations and testifying at legislative hearings), and, until it could be changed, help for those trapped in the system (by means of advocacy). The establishment of comembership was crucial to this enterprise and can be seen as an act of resistance in and of itself. The interpretations of the welfare system constructed at the meetings and the planning of activities based on those interpretations, moreover, were subversive insofar as they confronted a system that was not only powerful in and of itself, but that also had the support of the wider society. The sheer amount of time devoted to establishing comembership and to concerted constructions of particular interpretations is thus understandable.

Constructions of "Us"

A major assumption of this dissertation is that categories, stereotypes, interpretations, and so on, are accomplished or occasioned (Erickson 1975a; Erickson and Shultz 1982; Moerman 1988:90). What this means is that individuals, in their conversations with each other, do not simply enact received stereotypes, but rather invoke, modify, or create new stereotypes, categories, and interpretations for the purposes at hand.

In the remainder of this chapter, I explore welfare rights group members' joint constructions of themselves ("us") and of key others ("them"), both of which also include the women's views of the welfare system. Accordingly, I use the transcript conventions outlined in Appendix A, which help the reader to visualize the joint nature of the constructions. (Where I occasionally draw from interview data, transcripts are presented in the format used in the first section of this chapter.)

Definitions of "Us"

In what follows my main concern is with the categories most often invoked by recipients: "welfare recipient," "welfare mother," "working person," and "typical woman." The categories "welfare mother" and "typical woman" are gendered, in contrast with the more general categories of "recipient" and "working person."

I begin the discussion with negative stereotypes of recipients, and then move to women's responses to these negative stereotypes and to their positive constructions of themselves as hardworking, ordinary people.

Negative Stereotypes of Recipients

The literature on public assistance is replete with illustrations and critiques of negative stereotypes of

welfare recipients (e.g., Abramovitz 1988; Katz 1986; Piven and Cloward 1971; Sheehan 1975; Wineman 1984). Such stereotypes are also found in the media, and are often alluded to in the everyday world in the course of everyday conversation. The range of locations in which these stereotypes are found is evidence of their ubiquity.

Before turning to a discussion of how recipients responded to negative stereotypes, I would like to briefly summarize the stereotypes of welfare recipients that I have encountered in the literature, the welfare office, and in my interactions with friends and acquaintances.

The most frequently encountered stereotypes of welfare recipients refer to negative character traits. Most notable are laziness and lack of motivation: welfare recipients are said to be on welfare because they are too lazy to get out and get a job. Laziness and lack of motivation may be expressed in a number of ways, ranging from irresponsibility to inability to defer gratification (the latter of which often invokes images of children and "primitives"). Secondly, welfare recipients are dishonest; thus the ubiquity of the "welfare cheat" and "welfare Queen" labels. Finally, for women, the stereotypes are often gendered to include promiscuity as a major characteristic; thus the classic story of the welfare mother who produces baby after baby in order to either augment or simply continue to receive benefits.

The following examples of my personal encounters with negative stereotypes of recipients as expressed by friends and acquaintances provide evidence of their ubiquity in American society. (In all cases, the individuals were responding to the topic of this research.)

1. A former public health nurse comments that people on welfare "don't need to have call waiting, they don't need to have TVs," adding that it's frustrating to see people living in filthy houses and using their welfare money to buy cigarettes and pop (5/19/89, Madrid, MI).
2. A waitress in a working class bar tells of a woman she knows who is on welfare but who managed to take a trip to Las Vegas for the weekend. She says that she believes welfare makes people lazy (5/19/89, Detroit, MI).
3. An apprentice hair stylist tells a similar story: his friend's mother takes weekend trips to resort areas in Florida with her welfare money. Moreover, she will not allow her son to get a job because she doesn't want to lose any of her welfare grant (2/7/91, Madrid, MI).
4. A female educational researcher quips, "if I have another baby, I won't have to work at all" (10/10/89, Palo Alto, CA).
5. A social worker tells the story of a woman on welfare whose daughter got in an argument with her about money and said, "well, I'll just go out and have a baby so I can get a check of my own." (9/89, Madrid, MI).
6. A financial planner states that women need to be more responsible for their reproductive behavior; he is in favor of developing welfare programs that financially penalize women who give birth after they have registered with the welfare department (10/91, Albuquerque, NM).²⁴

²⁴ The key issue in all of these examples is abuse of the system. Examples (2) and (3) portray a flagrant abuse of funds intended for basic necessities. Trips to resorts, moreover, represent the unfulfilled desires of
(continued...)

Women's Responses to Negative Stereotypes

The women responded to negative stereotypes of welfare recipients in three ways: by categorically denying their reality; by admitting their reality, with the qualification that the stereotypes didn't apply to them; and by admitting that they themselves engaged in the activities characteristic of certain negative stereotypes, but that it was their association with the welfare system that taught them -- or forced them -- to behave in such ways.

Denial: The Convenient Ideologies Argument

The first approach to dealing with negative stereotypes was that of categorically denying their reality. This approach was most clearly articulated by Louise, who held that negative stereotypes of poor people

²⁴(...continued)

many working people (thus such reactions as, "I can't afford to do that and I'm working!"); since the money that welfare recipients receive ultimately comes from "us," it is an abuse not only of the welfare system, but of the individuals who support the system. The protagonists in the resort examples, as in examples (4), (5), and (6), which refer to the abuse of reproductive capacities, are women. Only example (1), which refers to a less flagrant but nevertheless inappropriate abuse of welfare funds, is gender neutral.

were little more than transparent and convenient ideologies used by those in power to maintain the status quo. She argued, first, that the legislators who determined the state budget had their own financial priorities that did not include taking care of poor people, despite their awareness of the hardships suffered by their impoverished constituents:

L: they know, there's no doubt in their mind what's going on

C: so what are they doing? I mean--

L: they're deciding that the state of Michigan has some priorities and those priorities are increasing, and one of the things Wenger²⁵ talks about, increasing tax expenditures, increasing tax write offs for businesses, that is extremely important

C: so that's, their list of priorities doesn't include

L: that is what they're gonna continue to be, and when they do that, they will let a certain number of, at this point, black, primarily black youth between eighteen and twenty-five, die

C: right

L: there is no problem with that

C: right

L: they will have, a certain number of children who are born to poor people who will die, or who will be permanently disabled as a result of living in poverty, and that is acceptable to them

C: that's incredible

L: that's the choice they make

[Louise, 9/7/89, side 1, segment 390-406]

²⁵ A liberal State Representative.

Later in the conversation, Louise states that legislators' claim that they are trying to provide opportunities for the "underclass" through their JobStart program is a "straight out lie" [Louise, 9/7/89].

Not only were legislators aware of the plight of the poor and of the fact that they would suffer and perhaps die as a result of budget priorities, but they drew on negative stereotypes of welfare recipients in their efforts to make these facts more acceptable, to both themselves and the general public. Politicians, according to Louise, invoked a "crisis of morals" -- meaning a crisis in individual morals or in family structure -- or distinctions between worthy and unworthy poor, in order to justify leaving "whole groups to die." In the following segment, Louise begins by referring to recent proposals to cut the welfare budget:

- L: it's incredible the attack, [whispering] it's incredible the attack
- C: is it--that's what you were saying the other night, is it's so fast, this stuff is moving so fast, I don't hear about any of this stuff, they don't publicize it
- L: they don't talk about it
- C: they don't talk about it
- L: they don't talk about it, and their traditional human services people, it's real, what they do is, it's just real interesting, and I don't know, but the move is to saying, is to maybe picking some kind group that they think is deserving and protecting that group, which means that
- C: everybody else suffers

L: that it's okay to kill folks
C: right
L: that's it's okay
C: right
L: to leave whole groups to die
C: yep
L: and that that has become okay and acceptable, and they call it, you know, [] being politically realistic, or something like that

[Louise, 9/7/89, side 1, segment 618-630]

The false distinction made between worthy and unworthy poor was all the more salient for Louise given her "conversion" from someone who had been unsympathetic to welfare recipients to -- after her own experiences of being on welfare -- someone fighting for welfare rights.

As noted above, Louise felt that many of the prevailing ideologies did little more than serve the interests of those in power. This view is illustrated in the following exchange between Louise, Naomi, and Bobbie. Bobbie had been telling a story about her encounter with an African American worker who had been "real snippy with me," to whom she had responded by asking, "what the fff do I have to do? Paint myself to be a nigger?" This remark was challenged by Naomi, who argued in favor of greater integration. Louise then interjects her claim that racism is a divisive tactic used by the powerful to keep the poor

from uniting against them. (See Appendix A for transcript conventions.)

L:	the way that they get Over with trying	1
	to FEED us all these CUTS is trying to	2
	do exACTly that same THING, is trying	3
	to separate this BLACK-WHITE stuff	4
	[	5
N:	that's what they're doing	6
L:	and they TRY to get us to BUY it	7
	[	8
N:	and if you go into a big city, like	9
	[	10
L:	but we	11
	HAVE to say	12
	[	13
N:	Chicago, it is riDiculOUS	14
L:	we HAVE to say=	15
N:	=it is AWful in Chicago	16
	[	17
L:	EVERybody	18
B:	right	19
L:	²⁶ EVERybody	20
	needs enough money to live on, if YOU	21
	[tap] can't give us jobs	22
B:	right	23
L:	WE [tap]	24
	have to live, WE [tap] have to feed our	25
	kids, WE [tap] have to have a house to	26
	live in, #NObody in this country needs to	27
	die in the street# and that means ALL of	28
	us	29
B:	right	30
L:	whether anybody's black white=	31
B:	=and green purple	32
	[	33
L:	old young, WHO CARES, *nobody	34
	needs to die in the street* and WE need	35
	to be about saying that	36

[MWRO, 3/7/90, side 2, segment 354-362]

In this exchange, Louise argues that, by thinking that some people deserve more help than others, poor people are

²⁶ In the following phrase, Mary taps her pencil on the table for added emphasis: EVERy[tap] body [tap] needs [tap] enough [tap] money [tap] to [tap] live [tap] on [tap], with the taps occurring simultaneously with the words. Remaining taps are indicated in the transcript.

adopting the views and thus serving the interests of those in power. Both Louise and Naomi have strong feelings about racism, as their overlapping speech in lines 4-18 indicates; the two women speak simultaneously, each making her point in seeming disregard of what the other is saying. What one hears in listening to the tape (and what I heard at the time), however, is a chorus saying the same thing, namely, that racism is a bad idea. Although their speech overlaps and sounds confusing, the message is clear. As soon as this chorus is over, moreover, Bobbie, the speaker to whom Louise and Naomi are addressing themselves, pipes in in agreement. Not only does she begin to say, "right, right," but she eventually adds to the argument against her by producing some of the standard features typically listed when referring to the range of human variation (e.g., "whether you are brown, purple, green, yellow....") [line 32]. Louise and Naomi together produce an anti-racist message, then, in which Bobbie eventually participates by correcting herself.

The argument Louise makes at lines 18-36, alternately speeding up and slowing down for added emphasis, is a "bottom line" argument: everybody has the same needs (food, shelter), and everyone has the right to have those needs met. To accept any of the stereotypes about people on welfare -- or even to buy into ideologies that ostensibly have nothing to do with welfare, like racism --

is to collude with those in power to deny certain people the right to live.

The Bad-People-Exist-But-I'm-Not-One-Of-Them Argument

The second approach to negative stereotypes of welfare recipients -- the approach that claimed, "good-for-nothing-people-exist-but-I'm-not-one-of-them" -- was the most prevalent one, especially among LIFE membership. The good-for-nothing people referred to were those who were lazy, those who wanted something for nothing, or, in the case of the first exchange discussed below, those who were reproductively irresponsible. Women used this approach not only to exempt themselves from negative stereotypes, but also to argue against welfare policies that seemed to them to be constructed on the basis of these stereotypes.

The following exchange provides a good example of the working out of this position. The topic is forced sterilization. Note how the good recipients/bad recipients dichotomy the participants construct illustrates precisely the kind of thinking that Louise argued against in the exchange on racism discussed above. The participants are Susan, Janet, Marge (Janet's mother), and myself.

J:	um, I've heard it before, I've heard	1
	rumors of this before of women who've	2
	had sum--certain amount of kids	3

S: I have 4
 too= 5
 J: =and been forced to have a tubal 6
 litigation, NOW-- 7
 S: well, Debbie, my, my uh, 8
 ex sister, well she's my sister-in-law, 9
 she had six kids and they MADE her tie 10
 HER tubes 11
 M: [who made her] 12
 S: their 13
 welfare did, either she tied 'em or she 14
 didn't get benefits, and that's in 15
 Georgia {2} *six is enough for the 16
 welfare rolls,* but, THIS woman 17
 literally DID, she IS a welfare 18
 [degenerate], when she was fourteen, 19
 she started having BABIES, she never 20
 finished SCHOOL, her MOM, it was 21
 generation down 22
 M: you can unders-- 23
 S: and 24
 her kids is also gonna be welfare 25
 [26
 M: well 27
 S: agAIN, 28
 and that's how they were raised 29
 M: that, 30
 they'll use that kinda instance to justify 31
 it 32
 S: yeah they do 33
 [34
 C: yeah exactly 35
 S: they do 36
 M: and ARE they 37
 justified in it? that's-- 38
 S: no NO because 39
 the majority of us out there on it is NOT 40
 like that, I bust my ass trying to get off 41
 M: yeah 42
 S: I don't want to be it no, no more, no 43
 more than I have to, but when it, when I 44
 HAVE to be on it, I don't want to feel like 45
 some 46
 M: yes 47
 S: you know CRUD coming in the door 48
 M: I know 49
 S: or leavin' the door= 50
 J: =or feelin' 51
 like-- 52
 S: or not being able to DO so--you know 53
 GET off of it, I don't LIKE that 54

Susan's story about her sister-in-law in Georgia brings to life the negative stereotype on which policies of enforced sterilization are potentially built. Not only is Susan's sister-in-law Debbie an irresponsible baby-maker, but, as Susan rhythmically lists them, she exhibits a range of negatively stereotyped behavior: she started having babies when she was only fourteen, she didn't finish school, and her mother was also on welfare. Debbie's reproductive behavior includes the reproduction of welfare dependency as well as of human beings (thus the phrase "generation down" [line 23]).

In her phrase "six is enough for the welfare rolls" [lines 17-18], spoken slowly and in a low voice, Susan indicates agreement with the welfare system's ultimatum -- in Debbie's case. By not calling into question the legitimacy of forcing Debbie to have a tubal ligation, Marge's comments immediately following the story [lines 31-33] support Susan's evaluation of her sister-in-law's case. No one, in other words, questions that the welfare department has the right to coerce a woman such as Debbie to be sterilized. That Susan is using a "real life" instance only serves to make any possible challenges more difficult.

What is challenged is the idea of transforming the legitimate application of forced sterilization in Debbie's case into a generalized policy applicable to all women on

welfare. As Marge points out at lines 32-33, the welfare system will use cases like Debbie's to justify creating such policies; a position with which Susan and I agree. In her next turn, during which she asks "and ARE they justified in it?" [lines 38-39], Marge provides the opportunity for rebuttal. Susan takes this opportunity (interrupting Marge in the process -- but not until she has finished asking the key question), arguing that most women on welfare are not like her sister-in-law, that she herself has been working hard, and that she is not willing to accept the stigma of being placed in the same category as her sister-in-law. In making this argument, Susan invokes "working" as something to be respected and rewarded (as opposed to simply producing a lot of babies), and opposes not only a policy of forced sterilization, but also the stigma that would be attached to her and others as the result of such a policy. Marge's comments at lines 43 and 48 help Susan along in this argument. Janet's bid at lines 52-53, although unsuccessful, also serves to reinforce Susan's position insofar as she seems about to name another negative feeling to back up Susan's feeling like "crud." Together, then, the participants in this exchange reinforce existing stereotypes (Debbie), and criticize both the application of such stereotypes to themselves and the construction of policies based on stereotypes.

In the following segment, Dara, a close friend of Susan's who never received welfare, invokes the category of the "undeserving" poor -- of those who abuse the welfare system because they are too lazy to look after themselves. Susan responds by agreeing that such people do exist, but that they represent only a small proportion of welfare recipients. The participants are Dara, Susan, and Meg; three other people are present but do not participate in the exchange.

D:	I understand the people that have kids,	1
	and that can't get a job, yes I under-	2
	stand, but I [don't] understand people	3
	that CAN get a job and that are on	4
	WELfare	5
S:	yep	6
D:	you know	7
S:	well that's what	8
	[	9
D:	that's, you	10
	know, I go, you you LOOK AROUND and you	11
	[	12
S:	we're HERE for	13
D:	see these people driving	14
	these nice cars and you know damn WELL	15
	they're on welfare because of the way	16
	they LIVE	17
?:	*yeah*	18
	{2}	19
D:	you know damn WELL, or	20
	they've TALKED about it with you, so how	21
	the hell'd you get this nice CAR if	22
	you're such a you know, on WELfare, who	23
	are YOU screwing [laugh] you KNOW=	24
S:	=that's	25
	IT, that's it	26
D:	and I don't agree with that,	27
	hell no, I don't [laugh]	28
S:	I don't either,	29
	but see that's, THAT'S just a FEW out of	30
	the	31
D:	oh yeah	32
S:	you know	33
	{1}	34

M:	the, they're gettin'	35
	[away with--]	36
	[	37
S:	there IS gonna be, there's fifty percent	38
	working, working welfare moms, there's	39
	twenty-five percent I think that would	40
	LIKE to work but they don't have no hope	41
	and then we've got the twenty-five percent	42
	that just don't GIVE a damn, go out there	43
	and do it FOR me, you know	44
	[	45
D:	[] bullSHIT, huh	46

[LIFE, 5/6/90, tape 2, side 1, segment 485-499]

The most noteworthy feature of this segment is how long it takes for anyone to challenge Dara. Susan, usually quick to jump into a conversation, especially in response to negative remarks about welfare recipients, doesn't really respond to the image Dara is creating -- an image that draws on stereotypes of both welfare abuse and promiscuity -- until lines 29-30, even though there was a clear opportunity to do so at line 19. Indeed, since no one else starts a turn at the pause at line 19, Dara continues her turn, more or less repeating what she just said. Nor did any of the other four people present offer a challenge (Meg's bid at lines 35-36 is unsuccessful, and provides insufficient basis for speculation).

When she finally does challenge Dara, Susan argues, in scientific parlance, that the ones who "don't give a damn" -- the ones who don't deserve to get welfare -- make up only one quarter of all recipients. A full fifty percent of welfare recipients are working; they are, moreover, also mothers ("working welfare moms" [line 39]).

A prevalent criticism of the undeserving category of welfare recipients was that they made it harder for everyone else (the deserving). As Susan argues, those who work, and those who want to work (Susan's twenty-five percent who have lost hope) are deserving, and should not be penalized for what the twenty-five percent who "don't give a damn" do (or, more significantly, don't do²⁷). Her claim, again, is that the undeserving are a numerical minority [line 30]. Meg made this same argument at a Senate hearing, when she said, "you got your percentage of some welfare people that are lazy...but...the majority are not lazy" (LIFE, 5/8/90).

As illustrated by the segment on forced sterilization, the women did not object to punitive policies -- only to the misapplication of punitive policies. Some women went even further to suggest punitive policies that could be applied to segments of the population not normally covered by such policies, most notably men. Susan, for instance, reacted strongly to a television documentary entitled "Stuck on Welfare," which focused on a program in Wisconsin that forced welfare mothers to work or attend school on penalty of losing

²⁷ This is similar to the argument Mary made about food stamp abuse in the discussion of the hyper-truth approach discussed under the theme, The Requirements of Structural Constraint, above. It is not clear, however, that Mary would consider welfare cheats to be in the minority.

their benefits. Susan, whose children had been sexually abused by baby sitters when she was forced to go out and work, felt strongly that women should be permitted to stay at home and raise their children. In her view, much of the problem rested with men who were delinquent on child care payments. Nothing was done to punish these men, however -- the targets of punitive policies always seemed to be women. To hold men accountable for the children they fathered, Susan proposed that they be placed in half-way houses, required to work, and forced to wear wrist bands that would alert the police if they wandered off [LIFE, 5/27/90].

Not only did the women object to paying the physical price of being categorized with the undeserving poor (benefit cuts, forced surgery); they also resented the stigma they suffered as a result of what they considered to be an inappropriate lumping of the deserving and the undeserving. Partly as a challenge to this stigma, the women produced constructions of themselves that drew on culturally desired qualities, such as hard work and motherhood. How women drew on mainstream models of women's roles and economic success is discussed below.

In sum, then, the bad-people-do-exist-but-I'm-not-one-of-them approach entailed both a deprecation of the people who fit the stereotypes and a critique of welfare policy. In deprecating people who fit the stereotypes,

the women were acknowledging the validity of the stereotypes and thereby reproducing them; the one qualification was that they applied to people other than themselves. In some cases, a particular stereotype was extended to a group of people normally not included in the stereotype, as illustrated by the women's complaints about irresponsible fathers (i.e., men, too, can be irresponsible baby-makers).

The critique of welfare policy entailed by this approach was based on the notion that only a certain segment of the welfare population engaged in the activities typical of the stereotypes, and that to base welfare policy on these stereotypes was to punish innocent recipients. Just as the bad-people-exist-but-I'm-not-one-of-them argument did not question the validity of the stereotypes per se, so the critique of policy generated by the argument did not question the appropriateness of punitive policies per se; they just had to be applied to the right people.

The Welfare-Made-Me-Do-It Argument

The third response to negative stereotypes about welfare recipients consisted of admitting to engaging in certain stereotyped behaviors, with the proviso that such

behaviors were the outcome of a relationship with the welfare system.²⁸

A common stereotype about welfare recipients is that they are dishonest. "Welfare cheat" is ubiquitous in both everyday conversation and in official debates about welfare reform. Its ubiquity is further evidenced by the presence of welfare fraud hotlines in many cities, and by the efforts of certain welfare rights organizations to challenge the stereotype. In 1972, for example, the Milwaukee County Welfare Rights Organization published a book entitled Welfare Mothers Speak Out: We Ain't Gonna Shuffle Anymore, in which an entire chapter is devoted to challenging myths about welfare mothers. One of the myths is "most welfare recipients are cheaters."

The women in this study were also well aware of the stereotype of dishonesty. The following exchange illustrates the most common response the women had to this stereotype; namely, that although it went against their character, the welfare system itself forced them to lie.²⁹

²⁸ Note how this fits in with certain aspects of the conservative case against welfare, e.g., that welfare creates dependency and poor spending and work habits.

²⁹ This is one version of the argument that welfare is structured in such a way as to create welfare cheats. The women's response implies a latent structure of the welfare system: in order to survive you have to lie; and if you try to get ahead by doing what you're supposed to do -- such as get a job -- the system will punish you by taking away a portion (if not all) of your grant. (See the theme, The Requirements of Structural Constraint, above.)

Immediately prior to the exchange, Susan had been talking about her inability to lie to her boyfriend; she then introduces the topic of lying and welfare. The participants are Susan, Rita, and myself.

S:	I don't lie to people, unless I ABSolutely	1
	HAVE to lie I don't lie	2
C:	uh huh	3
S:	I just avoid	4
	the question or go around it another way	5
	[laughs]	6
	[	7
C:	[laughs]	8
S:	I don't actually LIE lie [laughs]	9
	[	10
C:	[laughs]	11
R:	that's what I tell her--I won't LIE for you	12
	[	13
S:	yeah []--	14
R:	but I	15
	won't tell 'em EVERYthing	16
C:	right, weasel	17
	your way outa the question	18
S:	that's it,	19
	if you're gonna to pin me to the wall	20
	you better make sure you ask it just	21
	the right way, 'cause I'm going to go	22
	AROUND it [laughs]	23
	[	24
C:	[laughs]	25
S:	if there's any way I	26
	CAN, but HELL, you learn that from welfare	27
	{1}	28
C:	ah ha:h	29
S:	yep {2} my aunt told me that one	30
	time, years and years ago, 'cause I always	31
	[	32
C:	[]	33
S:	wondered how could she, get every--you	34
	know, things	35
C:	uh huh	36
	[	37
S:	that I couldn't get,	38
	#and this was in Georgia and she said	39
	Susan you don't go in there and tell	40
	them the truth# ya ASShole you know	41
C:	oh,	42
	so someone actually sat you down and	43
	said when you go to welfare you don't	44
	tell them the truth? {2} did she then	45

like tell you what to say and what not 46
to say--I mean-- 47

S: no 48

C: how do you know 49
what's okay to say and what's NOT okay 50
to say? 51

S: you don't, you take your chances 52

C: [you mean] you wing it 53

R: yeah, exactly 54
[55

C: so so 56
you don't so you don't 57
[58

R: after SO many times of going in 59
there and talking to them you just 60
sorta get a fee:l for the situation 61
[] 62

C: uh huh 63

S: like what they're going to 64
ask next 65

R: yeah, yeah 66

C: I mean, do you have 67
like an idea in your head of {1} I mean 68
i--is it like, you don't tell welfare 69
certain things you tell them certain other 70
things, or is it, depends on the case 71
worker or, is it different? or [] 72
[73

S: you only 74
tell them what they ask 75

C: uh huh 76

S: if they 77
don't ask you don't offer no free infor- 78
mation 79

C: so did you before your, was it 80
your aunt or someone, sat you down, 81
before that, did you tell 'em stuff they 82
didn't ask? 83

S: well, even when I got up HERE 84

C: uh huh 85

S: I was still had the problem `cause 86
I don't like to LIE I was raised never to 87
LIE 88

C: so-- 89

S: but then after I ended up HOME- 90
less that time I decided well it's time 91
it's time, so so would you tell 'em 92
things that they didn't ask you for? 93

S: =oh 94

hell no, I don't offer NO-- 95

C: no I meant 96
before when your aunt said 97
[98

S:	oh YEAH	99
C:	you would	100
	tell 'em:	101
S:	anything they wanted to know	102
	you know, a::nd they always assume you're	103
	LYin,' when you're telling the truth so	104
	why not lie anyway? {1} you know if they	105
	think you're LYin' go ahead and LIE, it	106
	ain't gonna hurt you no MORE	107
C:	they ain't	108
	gonna believe you anyway?	109
S:	that's it, but,	110
	I don't know you just, after a while like	111
	my case worker you know if she don't ask	112
	me point blank got me in a corner <u>I'm</u> not	113
	gonna ANswer it you know I'm just gonna	114
C:	uh huh	115
S:	like Fred, if anybody was to ever	116
	call up on me about Fred, hey he comes over	117
	here on the weekends, he goes to school at	118
	night, da da da da da da da, <u>I</u> ain't gonna	119
	admit he's livin' here	120
	[	121
R:	did you take the chicken out?	122
	[	123
C:	uh huh	124
S:	no, but it's all right, the	125
	oven's off	126
R:	oh, okay	127
C:	uh huh	128
S:	I just, it's	129
	a SHAME to have to do that you know, it	130
	really IS	131

[LIFE, 4/20/90, tape 1, side b, segment 472-520]

As the exchange continues, Rita talks about how lying isn't in her nature either, and how she despises lying as much as she despises people lying to her. Susan dislikes lying so much that she didn't even listen to her aunt's advice; she had to learn from her own experience of ending up homeless before she could bring herself to lie. She concludes by agreeing with Rita: "I don't like lying either, but, you gotta live. That's it in a nutshell."

The stories about learning to lie or engage in some other negatively valued behavior usually followed the same format: when I first got on welfare, I told my worker everything (I was honest). Pretty soon, however, I figured out that that didn't pay (I was penalized for telling the truth), so I got smart (started lying). This was usually followed (or preceded) by some evaluative remark to the effect that the teller believed lying was wrong.

A second area to which the welfare-made-me-do-it argument was applied concerned spending habits. According to received stereotypes, people on welfare don't know how to spend their money: they do not budget wisely, they spend money on things they cannot afford,³⁰ and, like children, they are incapable of deferring gratification.

In response to these accusations, the women claimed that the welfare system itself breeds poor spending habits: when you don't know when you'll get your next check (that is, if you get one at all), or how much it'll be for, you tend to spend money while you have it.

In sum, women who drew on the welfare-made-me-do-it argument took accusations against themselves as recipients and transformed them into accusations against the welfare

³⁰ This is part and parcel of the notion that welfare recipients have items that working people can't afford: How come they have color TVs and VCRs when I can't even afford them?

system. It was not they who were abusing the system; rather, in forcing them to engage in behavior they would not normally engage in, the welfare system was abusing them.

Positive Constructions

Women's responses to negative stereotypes of welfare recipients in general and of women on welfare in particular sometimes included counter-constructions, constructions of themselves as clearly not lazy, undeserving, promiscuous, and the like. In so doing, the women constructed themselves as victims of the system, and as ordinary women trying to do "the right thing." These two constructions often co-occurred to make a point such as, "I'm doing my best to be an appropriate woman and mother and to take care of myself and my family, but the welfare system will not allow me to succeed." In other words, the women believed in the American values of motherhood, the nuclear family, and hard work, but saw all their efforts to fulfill those values as futile in the face of the constraints of the welfare system.

In constructing themselves as ordinary women trying to do "the right thing," the women drew on mainstream values concerning gender roles and the achievement of economic success and security. Their appropriation of specific values was based on the more immediate task of

resistance to the welfare system. In what follows, I discuss the women's constructions of themselves as working people, and as typical women.

Hard Workers

A very powerful counter-construction to the lazy welfare recipient stereotype was that of a hard worker. All the women claimed that they worked hard, and that if they didn't presently have a job, it was not for lack of wanting one. Janice, for instance, in her testimony at a Senate hearing, described how she had tried to work two jobs while raising three children, but had been unable to make ends meet because of child care costs (LIFE, 5/8/90); this echoes the theme of "work as expensive" discussed in the first section of this chapter.

In the following exchange, Susan, Meg, and Janet are discussing how the system makes it impossible for people to succeed. Susan had just been recounting how she had been homeless for five months because the welfare department would not provide her with any assistance. As the segment opens, Meg and Janet agree with her point that "there's no right to live here [in the U.S.]." Janet then brings up the topic of work, which, along with the topic of being stuck on welfare, provides the focus for the remainder of the exchange. The participants are Susan, Janet, and Meg and myself.

S: they are refusing us a right to live 1
 [2
 M: right to live 3
 J: right to live, and that's not saying 4
 that that we're not working 5
 S: that's 6
 IT= 7
 J: =you know, that's just IT you know= 8
 S: =I work harder than anybody I KNOW of 9
 J: uh 10
 huh 11
 B: and to to be on ADC [laughs] 12
 [13
 J: yeah 14
 S: I mean 15
 you know I pull some hellacious hours 16
 J: uh huh 17
 C: sounds like it 18
 S: there's no getting 19
 off of it 20
 J: exactly [] 21
 [22
 S: if you get off it 23
 what're you LOOKing for, there's no help 24
 out there 25
 [26
 ?: [] 27
 J: and and talk about you know 28
 that's just IT you know they think well 29
 you're lazy this or that you know, like 30
 well where's my, um, where's my time that 31
 I've gone out and partied all night? you 32
 know 33
 S: that's it, they think we have such a 34
 wild life you know 35
 J: yeah 36
 S: we're single moms 37
 we're hot in the ass [laughs] 38
 [39
 ?: [laughs] 40
 S: [laughing] I 41
 mean that's what they SAY, we can get some 42
 money, you know, but yet we get out there 43
 and try to MAKE money we get arrested, oh 44
 WOW there goes ours kids bye-BYE 45
 J: right, 46
 exactly 47
 [48
 M: m::: huh 49
 S: you know, but you HAVE to do it, 50
 you have to 51
 J: [to child] are you eating 52
 that? 53

S:	so you're breaking one law after	54
	another trying to make it	55
J:	RIGHT	56
S:	and which	57
	is basically your right, as a tax payer if	58
	nothing else as a human BEING	59
J:	well you know	60
	a lot of times people will say things like	61
	well this person you know like u:m, some of	62
	the, u:h, like Vietnamese and things like	63
	that	64
S:	yeah	65
J:	that come over and they start	66
	with nothing, and they work and work and	67
	get things done--well YEAH, they work and	68
	they, GET somewhere okay--	69
S:	they're also	70
	quote a mino::rity	71
J:	yeah	72
	[	73
S:	they get a lot a help	74
	me and you aren't even QUALified for	75
	[	76
J:	that's true and I DON'T	77
	even think they have to pay TAXES #not	78
	[	79
S:	none	80
J:	that I'm saying this is WRONG or anything,#	81
	BUT, it's not saying that we you know	82
S:	it's	83
	wrong in the aspect that they can get it	84
	and we're not eligible for it and it's our	85
	own damn COUNTRY	86

[LIFE, 3/11/90, side 2, segment 206-237]

This exchange illustrates the women's constructions of themselves as hard workers, and of welfare as a system that makes it impossible for them to succeed financially despite their work efforts (thus Susan's comments that she works hard "to be on ADC" [lines 9-12] -- in other words, that despite her hard work, she remains on AFDC -- and that "there's no getting off of it" [lines 19-20]). Janet participates in Susan's claim to hard work by debunking

the stereotype of "lazy" welfare recipients: "where's my time that I've gone out and partied all night?" [lines 31-32]. Susan makes the transition from "partying" to another negative stereotype; namely, that of the promiscuous welfare mother. Not only does she laugh at this stereotype [lines 37-38]; she also turns it against the welfare system by claiming that women on welfare are forced to engage in prostitution in order to survive [lines 50-51, 54-55]. The final focus of the segment is on "foreigners." Janet brings up the stereotypical hard-working Vietnamese for a reason that she is unable to voice immediately (later it comes out that what she was trying to say was that she is also industrious); instead, Susan uses Janet's example to complain about "minorities" who get more help than white Americans do -- a perspective that reinforces her claim that she and the others present are victims. In sum, the interpretation that Susan and Janet produce in this exchange is one that portrays women on welfare as victims: despite their efforts to fulfill the work ethic, they cannot get out of the system; and they continue to suffer from stereotypes that in no way represent their actions or desires.

As Abramovitz (1988) has pointed out, the work ethic is a crucial aspect of welfare ideology; welfare policy and efforts to deter people from seeking public assistance have been based, both historically and in contemporary

times, on various aspects of this ethic (see also Katz 1986; Piven and Cloward 1971). In their claims to be hard workers, then, the women in this exchange are in keeping with this ideology.

Just Ordinary People/Women

Many of the women also stressed that they were just like anyone else: they had the same dreams and aspirations as everyone else, and did the kinds of things that anyone else would do to fulfill those dreams. The "anyone else" referred to was, as can be gleaned from the aspirations and dreams discussed, a white middle-class woman; and the dreams had to do with marriage, motherhood, and economic security. Abramovitz (1988) has argued that the new family ethic that developed with the rise of industrialism in the United States -- namely, one that linked "the separation of household and market work to a sexual division of labor," and that "elevated marriage, motherhood, homemaking, and the overseeing of family life to new ideological heights" (1988:111) -- has been difficult for working class, poor, and ethnic minority women to fulfill. It has, nevertheless, been "encoded in all societal institutions and...[has] exercised considerable ideological power" (ibid.:112). As such, it provides good illustration of Ehrenreich's (1989) point

that in American society, the white middle-class model becomes the "standard" model.

The women in this study often invoked cultural models of marriage, motherhood, and economic security when discussing claims that women on welfare are promiscuous. For instance, when discussing a hearing during which a Senator had accused people on welfare -- meaning women -- of being reproductively irresponsible, Rita described how she did everything the "right" way:

the thing that got me at the hearing was, "why do they have these children if they can't afford to raise 'em?" I was married. Sure my husband--he's 45 years old, 45 or 46--he ought to be working a decent job and making a decent living... well I figured I could work and he could work together, you know, we could raise a family, we could have, you know, the little nuclear family, and everything would be hunky dory... [LIFE, 4/1/90].

Rita's approach to doing things the "right way," then, included following a model that says one should have children within marriage, and that the nuclear family is the best place for a woman. If the traditional model of husband-as-bread-winner couldn't be followed, then husband and wife could both work to maintain the family. In either case, the model was culturally appropriate, and no one could accuse Rita of either irresponsibility or immorality. She was only trying to do what a good woman should, and only wanted what other women wanted.

Susan and Meg also drew on the model of the nuclear family when they testified at a legislative hearing. In

the following segment, they work to make the point that people are not on welfare because they want to be, but because of unfortunate circumstances. (The transcript begins at mid-turn.)

S:	because something happens in their life,	1
	not because you wanna be, you have your	2
	kids #you meet your husband you get	3
	married you have your kids or whatever#,	4
	you got the KIDS what'd ya wanna DO?	5
	[	6
	[audience laughter, various comments]	7
S:	just, you know? it's it's not like	8
	you're TRYing to have kids to stay on	9
	welfare it's not like that	10
M:	no, no, no	11
S:	bu:t	12
M:	you GOT your percentage of some	13
	welfare people {1} [that] that	14
	[	15
S:	that ARE lazy	16
M:	ARE lazy,	17
	o.k.?	18
Sen:	yeah	19
M:	[but you maJORity]	20
	[	21
S:	but that's not the maJORity	22

[LIFE, 5/8/90, side 2, segment 004-018]

There are two interesting features of this segment. First, Susan, who is trying to make the point that women end up on welfare through no fault of their own, starts off on the wrong footing when she says, "you have your kids" [lines 2-3]. She quickly catches herself, however, and repairs her presentation by contextualizing how one acquires children; speaking very quickly now, she recreates the scenario: you meet a man, get married, and then have children -- you don't have children out of wedlock, and, as she points out at lines 8-10, you don't

have children just to stay on welfare. The audience laughter and commentary at line 7 is a response to this blunder.

The second interesting feature of this segment is the implicit connection being made between women who use their reproductive capacities to stay on welfare and laziness. Producing babies to stay on welfare is -- despite the work involved in raising children -- a "lazy" survival strategy. Note how Susan and Meg draw on the bad-people-exist-but-I'm-not-one-of-them argument in making their case. This is not an easy argument to make because they have to admit that some people on welfare do fit the stereotype. Meg pauses for a moment at line 14, as if hesitant. Susan then steps in to help her, and then they both state that some people on welfare "ARE lazy." Meg raises her intonation slightly at line 18, as if to say, "o.k., we admit that some people are lazy...now--" Although this is not the first time that a speaker has raised her intonation in this way [see lines 5, 8], it is the first time that one of the Senators responds. In this case, he says, "yeah," in apparent agreement with the stereotype that Jan and Susan have just invoked. Having admitted to the existence of lazy people is only the first part of the bad-people-exist-but-I'm-not-one-of-them argument, however, and Susan and Meg immediately go on to present the second part of the argument, namely, that

"that's not the maJORity" [lines 20-22]. The overlap between lines 20 and 22 perhaps indicates the pressing need that Susan and Meg feel to get this piece of the argument out on the table, and to distance themselves from the stereotype.

In sum, according to Susan and Meg, most women on welfare have their children the way women are supposed to have their children -- through marriage. Moreover, as discussed in more detail in the preceding section, most welfare recipients are hard workers. In this view, women on welfare are simply ordinary citizens, both hardworking and morally upright, who have suffered some set-backs, such as desertion by a husband, as Susan implies in the above segment.

Constructions of "Them"

Recipients' constructions of "them" sometimes referred to a particular category of person (as in workers), and sometimes referred to an amorphous group that shared some characteristic (such as extreme self-interest). In this section, I focus on the women's constructions of welfare workers, and of politicians, the rich, and men.

Workers

Although the women's views of workers ranged from workers as caring and helpful to workers as inaccessible, ignorant, lazy, and "bitchy," by far the most frequent characterizations of workers were negative. Attributes assigned to workers included the following (listed in order to frequency): workers are arbitrary; they don't explain things; they are nice and helpful; they punish you if you confront them; they are lazy; they are concerned with their own status; and they are inaccessible, ignorant, and always say no.

Workers were most frequently characterized as arbitrary; in this sense, they practiced the type of personal domination discussed by Scott (1990): although their official authority was based on their status as representatives of the welfare system, and although they invoked rules over which they ostensibly had no control, from the point of view of recipients workers were unpredictable. This sentiment was reflected in remarks to the effect that "it depends on who your case worker is," and "discrimination against personality, that's a major problem" [LIFE, 4/29/90, side 1].

Women often related incidents illustrating workers' arbitrary and unpredictable behavior:

When I got cut off, the reason why I got cut off is because I went down to the food stamps three times and she couldn't fix the, couldn't get my name into the computer so she just told me I was cut off. It

was ten dollars, but I went down there three times, which is more than ten dollars worth of food stamps, just to get cut off [LIFE, 4/20/90, side 2, segment 300-455].

The assumption here is that the worker at the food stamp office could not figure out how to work the computer and so at her whim just decided to dismiss the case.

The segment discussed in the section on "welfare made me do it," about learning to lie, also illustrates the view of workers as arbitrary:

C: how do you know
what's okay to say and what's NOT okay
to say?

S: you don't, you take your chances

C: [you mean] you wing it

R: yeah, exactly
[

C: so so
you don't so you don't
[

R: after SO many times of going in
there and talking to them you just
sorta get a fee:1 for the situation

[LIFE 4/20/90, tape 1, side 1]

The impression here is clearly not one of a fixed, immutable system that can be learned and accordingly manipulated. Rather, the image is one of an unpredictable and arbitrary situation (interacting with workers) that one has to "get a feel for."

One reason why women may have felt that their workers were arbitrary was that when they compared experiences -- a common occurrence at welfare rights meetings -- they discovered considerable discrepancies in grant levels. Why did a woman with one child get almost \$200 per month

in food stamps while another woman with three children got almost the same amount? One explanation was that the welfare system -- and by extension the workers who represent the welfare system -- was arbitrary.³¹

Another frequent complaint against workers was that they didn't explain things: they didn't explain what various forms were for, and they didn't provide information on the various programs and options available to recipients, such as vendoring.³² This view is illustrated in the following exchange between Janet and Rita (the beginning of Janet's turn is not included on tape):

J:	with um, case workers being much less than	1
	helpful	2
R:	yes, not {1} being, I don't know,	3
	I I I won't say dishONest so much, just	4
	not telling me everything	5
J:	well they	6
	won't--it's like they won't tell you ANY,	7
	you know (sighs loudly)	8
	{11}	9
R:	um, like {2}	10
	it, the RULES, seem to CHANGE, um, I	11
	mean it, it's all the same RULES but, the	12
	case workers don't tell--aren't honest	13
	with you, they don't, they aren't HELpful,	14
	they um {1} they don't tell you that you	15

³¹ Another approach that could have been taken to understand this phenomenon would have entailed comparing other features of the cases in question, such as levels of earned income. I never encountered this approach, however.

³² Vendoring refers to a process whereby the welfare department pays a provider (e.g., the gas company) directly for services rather than giving money or refunds directly to recipients. The most typically vendored items are rent and utilities.

[LIFE 4/13/90, tape 1, side 2, segment 000-030]

One of the interesting aspects of this exchange is the length and frequency of pauses [lines 3, 9, 10, 15, and 18]. Janet and Rita seem to be somewhat confused. Perhaps this reflects the lack of clarity they encounter in their interactions with their welfare workers.

Although rare, recipients also told stories of workers who were "nice," or who went out of their way to be helpful. Leslie, an occasional participant in LIFE meetings, for instance, told of a worker in another Michigan city who processed her food stamps immediately and who gave her more than she had originally asked for [LIFE, 5/23/90]. On another occasion, Stephanie made a similar point, stating that she never found her worker anything less than very helpful [LIFE, 8/19/90]. In both cases, however, these stories were told in the context of discussions focused on the negative characteristics of

workers. Interestingly enough, they seemed to reinforce the view that workers were unpredictable.

Politicians, the Rich, and Men

Although members of MWRO and LIFE discussed welfare workers, by far the greatest emphasis was placed on politicians, the rich, and men. This reference group included both specific categories of people, such as politicians, and people who shared similar characteristics, such as extreme self-interest. I have grouped politicians, the rich, and men together because welfare recipients themselves often either grouped them together in some fashion (i.e., politicians are usually rich men concerned with maintaining their own power; rich male politicians help other men out before addressing the needs of women), or used them interchangeably (i.e., "politician" and "rich" often referred to the same set of characteristics).

The following exchange at an MWRO meeting illustrates recipients' constructions of (rich and male) politicians. The women are discussing legislative hearings on budget allocations for the welfare department. The exchange opens with a reference to the kinds of negative stereotypes of recipients invoked by legislators, from which the women move on to construct their own stereotypes

of the politicians. Participants are Louise, Donna, Rita, Debbie, Sandra, Harry, and myself.³³

L:	Senator Jones is the one who wanted to	1
	totally eliminate General Assistance four	2
	years ago, [I mean] he comes up with some	3
	re::al BAD proposals, and if you, and if	4
	you SAY stuff to him, you know, he will	5
	CHALLege you, if you sa:y	6
Do:	[background	7
	comment; inaudible]	8
L:	[pounding on table	9
	at each word marked +] I've been trying	10
	to get a +JOB, I can't get a +JOB, I	11
	deserve enough money to +LIVE, my kids	12
	are +HUNGRY, kids are +STARVING, we, you	13
	know we need to do better for 'em, he will	14
	SAY to you, well why don't you do some-	15
	thing about it? why don't you get off your	16
	lazy butt? he will aTTACK, Henley, Henley	17
	won't do as much, but they ARE an	18
	aggressive kind of GROUP, they will--you'll	19
	be aMAZED at the kind of things they will	20
	SAY, I mean they will come out with ALL of	21
	the myths that you think that only ignorant	22
	people have about welfare, these people	23
	will come OUT with, you know, so,	24
	so it's not	25
	[	26
Do:	attack 'em back	27
L:	YEAH, well, TALK	28
	[	29
?:	[laughs]	30
Do:	how	31
	much do they take--	32
L:	even when--huh?	33
Do:	how much	34
	will they take if you attack him right back?	35
H:	[]	36
	[	37
De:	[you plan] what you're gonna say	38
	[	39
L:	well	40
	you know you just, you only get a couple	41
	minutes it's not, if there's too many,	42
	I've, I've SEEN them, if there's too	43
	many recipients in the room they will	44

³³ General Assistance is public assistance for single adults without children. The program was eliminated in fall 1991.

just not have the meeting, we had a 45
 [46
 Do: [well they must] 47
 cause they still got paid, don't they? 48
 [49
 L: whole lot a people [] sure, 50
 they say well, we have to cancel the 51
 meeting for awhile here until 52
 [53
 H: gotta get a drink 54
 of water 55
 L: people went back to Detroit and got 56
 outa town and then they had their meeting 57
 again, they don't really like it too much-- 58
 they NEED to hear it, they need to hear it 59
 [60
 Do: but they, it's 61
 not, it's more they DON'T wanna hear 'em, 62
 all of 'em are set for THEIR nice fancy 63
 housing THEIR nice fancy [gardens], they 64
 don't WANNA hear about ANYthing else, 65
 that's ONE thing I learned with [] 66
 [67
 S: they have their real 68
 nice meals three times a day 69
 Do: OH YEAH, and 70
 have everything served to 'em on TOP of it 71
 De: well if they're saying all the ignorant 72
 [73
 L: but they, but they need 74
 [75
 De: myths then they 76
 must be 77
 Do: ignorant 78
 De: ignorant 79
 L: they NEED, they 80
 need to hear some other stuff though 81
 De: mm huh 82
 L: I mean somebody needs to be there 83
 and tell 'em about it, or somebody needs 84
 to be there and just, even LOOK at 'em, 85
 even just SIT there 86
 [87
 De: what time does that meeting [] 88
 L: and TALK 89
 about it, one thirty to five o'clock, and 90
 you can FEEL the difference in the ROOM, 91
 when you have reCIpients there, when you 92
 have people and you don't look at 'em 93
 [94
 ?: [] 95
 L: and say, I bet 96
 that suit cost 300 dollars, you know, I 97

[uh] the FEELing is different 98
 [99
 Do: that would be enough to pay my 100
 RENT and my car payment and 101
 [102
 L: and you can do--you can, 103
 you can have an impact, JUST showing 104
 up and WATCHin' 'em, just showing up and 105
 WATCHin' 'em gets 'em nervous, I've seen 106
 Nancy sit there and stare Jones right in 107
 the back 108
 [several laugh] 109
 L: #and this man, he is just 110
 kept, TRYING TO MOVE AWAY FROM HER YOU 111
 KNOW 112
 [everyone laughs] 113
 [114
 De: alRIGHT 115
 L: BECAUSE HE'S TALKIN' ABOUT ALL 116
 THESE CUTS AND HE LOOKS AROUND AND SHE'S 117
 JUST DEAD LOOKING AT 'EM# his WHOLE HEAD 118
 just turns red, *right, he gets real 119
 NERvous about it* 120
 Do: ALL of 'em do, you should-- 121
 R: was 122
 he the one was hollering about well, why 123
 don't they stop having babies? 124
 [125
 C: no 126
 L: NO that was a DIFFerent one 127
 [128
 C: that was Bradley 129
 L: that 130
 was, that was Representative Bradley 131
 [132
 ?: [] 133
 L: yeah Jones is the 134
 same 135

[MWRO, 5/2/90, side 2, segment 120-183]

The way legislators invoke negative stereotypes of recipients is brought up early in the segment, when Louise (lines 14-17) quotes a legislator as saying, "why don't you get off your lazy butt," and then goes on to characterize the legislators as an "aggressive kind of group" that will "come out with all of the myths that you

think that only ignorant people have about welfare" (lines 19-23). Donna responds by bringing up the possibility of attacking back [line 27]. The discussion of how to confront the legislators and the construction of stereotypes about them unfolds throughout the remainder of the segment.

The participants in this exchange clearly feel that legislators have no interest in hearing what recipients' lives are like -- a desire the women connect with the legislators' wealth (thus the references to fancy houses and gardens and nice meals [lines 63-71], and to \$300 suits [lines 96-97]). Legislators get away with not listening by not allowing recipients to speak; thus Louise's story about meetings being canceled when there are too many recipients present [lines 42-45].

Even "friendly" (liberal) legislators get uncomfortable when confronted by the realities of recipients' lives, as Donna points out later in the conversation:

...you go in there [to see Representative Wenger, a "friendly" representative] and you have a complaint, he'll sit right there, and you would've swore somebody put a snake in his pants. All of 'em are like that. They're real itchy to get away from it, they don't wanna hear it [MWRO 5/2/90, side 2]

The entire segment is characterized by tones of outrage and indignation -- intense emotions indicated by overlapping speech, raised (and alternately accusatory or sarcastic) voices, and variations in the speed of talk

[lines 110-120]. As much as words, then, the extralinguistic features of this transcript serve to indicate that the participants deny the validity of the stereotypes invoked by the legislators, and that they find their avoidance tactics transparent. Together, the participants manage to debunk the legislators' strategies and enhance their own.³⁴

In sum, the segment provides a clear example of how the women worked together to both criticize politicians' negative stereotypes of recipients and, in turn, to construct their own stereotypes of politicians, who are, from the perspective of these women, uncaring, rich, and (it is assumed) male. While the focus in this section is on women's constructions of "them," it is significant that constructions of "us" and "them" co-occur.

In addition to a certain callousness, rich male politicians were considered to support the interests of men in general over those of women. This view was held

³⁴ The background to the references made to Representative Bradley [lines 122-131] illustrates the women's abilities to do this in an actual hearing. During the incident referred to, Representative Bradley, a conservative advocating increased budget cuts, pulled his wallet out of his pocket, and, waving it in the air, demanded (paraphrase), "why do these people keep on having babies if they can't afford them? I carry a condom in my wallet. Don't they know how to use birth control?" In the uproar that followed, Susan and Rita pulled condoms out of their pockets, and waved them back at Bradley, saying (paraphrase) "we do use them, honey, let's see yours," (Bradley had not actually pulled out a condom, but only his wallet). The audience responded with fervent applause to Susan and Rita's question.

particularly by members of LIFE. In their view, men of different classes colluded. Men in power, for instance, enabled other men to get away with not paying child support. The reasoning behind this was clear. As Susan put it:

This world is, men's GOT it, man. Look how many men we got in the White House. Why ain't there more women up there?--'cause they don't want us, they don't want to SHARE with us [LIFE, 4/1/90, tape 1, side 1, segment 428-430].

The following exchange between Susan and myself occurred later during the same meeting:

- S: they're HARD on us, they're hard on the WOMEN, they're easy as hell on the MEN
- C: why do you think that is?
- S: because there's MEN up there running this COUNTRY and they don't GIVE a shit
- C: mm huh
- S: if they can pay you two hundred dollars to get in your damn pants buddy, while their wife don't know about it, they'll d::o it
- C: mm huh
- S: beLIEVE me they'll do it
- {2}
- C: [phew]
- S: it's not RIGHT, they're sitting up there making deCisions on US
- C: yeah

[LIFE, 4/1/90, tape 1, side 1, segment 540-546]

Because men in power were "easy as hell" on men, women were left with full responsibility for children -- a

responsibility that often forced them onto the welfare rolls. This is why the women were angered by the Wisconsin program (discussed in the section on the women's responses to negative stereotypes, above) that forced women to either attend school or work; the children's fathers were given no responsibilities under the program. The idea of placing men in half-way houses and forcing them to work to support their children grew out of this anger [LIFE, 5/27/90].

Many of the men who were neither rich nor involved in politics -- in other words, the men who reneged on their fatherly responsibilities -- were considered less than useful. Thus Janet's comment that, "I'd STILL be on welfare with my kid's dad" [LIFE, 4/1/90]. Men, moreover, sometimes tried to take advantage of the women's financial vulnerability. For instance, Janet once told of a man who approached her for sex after she had purchased some milk at a convenience store. She felt that her food stamps had signalled the man of her potential availability:

I paid for my...milk with food stamps...and that was the only thing I could see that might have led him...to believe that I would've done anything for some money [LIFE, 4/29/90].

On another occasion, Rita spoke of sleeping with her landlord in order to avoid eviction [LIFE, 4/1/90].

In sum, the women felt discriminated against by the people in power because they were rich and thus had no

interest in the trials and tribulations of the indigent. In addition, men in general, whether rich or not, had little feeling for the needs of women, or for their own responsibilities as fathers.

Discussion: Empowerment
and Welfare Rights Groups

The purpose of welfare rights groups is activism: the goal is to organize recipients to take specific actions in order to change the system. Participation in welfare rights groups also potentially provides women with the opportunity to work on their own identities, to counteract negative stereotypes that blame recipients for their own poverty by replacing them with theories that blame the system instead (Hertz 1977, 1981; Pope 1990). As such, work that removes blame from recipients and places it elsewhere can be called empowering. At the very least, participants may develop a sense that they are in the "right" -- that they are doing their best, or even that they hold the moral high ground. Since many of the debates surrounding welfare are focused on moral issues, being able to occupy the moral high ground is a considerable accomplishment. Given the negative valence of welfare and of welfare recipients in U.S. society, the accomplishment of such a stance on the part of recipients is noteworthy.

Welfare rights groups meetings provided women with an opportunity to "compare notes," as it were, and to work together to produce explanations for their hardships that countered the personal deficit explanations put forth by the welfare department and by society at large. To defy mainstream explanations and stereotypes while standing with others is a less fearful enterprise than to do so while standing alone; to see one's own personal misfortune as tied to that of others is to move from internal explanations of character defects to external explanations of structural failings, and to recognize the relationship between what goes on in the larger social system and what goes on in personal lives -- what Mills (1959) refers to as the "sociological imagination."

A comparison of the exchanges that occurred in the context of welfare rights meetings with those that occurred in the context of interviews uncovers differences in both tone and content. The tone of welfare rights meetings was clearly more animated -- an artifact, perhaps, of the number of people present and of their shared circumstances. This animation is evidenced by the frequency of overlaps, and by loud and sometimes speeded-up speech. The range of emotions expressed also differed. Although the women expressed anger as well as sorrow and shame when speaking in interviews, at welfare rights

meetings the women were more likely to express indignation and to speak in sarcastic tones.

This difference in the range of expressed emotions mirrors a difference in content. Although there were some similarities -- for example, in both interviews and in welfare rights groups meetings, lying was declared a necessity engendered by the welfare system -- the differences are noteworthy. Stigma, for instance, played a large role in the interviews, and, with the exceptions of Mary and Dee, was often referred to with words such as "humiliation." This was not the case in welfare rights meetings, during which participants were much more likely to speak in tones of indignation when referring to negative stereotypes of recipients -- or sometimes to scoff at them outright (unless, of course, they were using the bad-people-exist-but-I'm-not-one-of-them-argument, in which case they were applying stigma to others). In the interviews, women seemed resigned to stigma. Although they resisted it in their own ways (i.e., "dressing up" to go to the grocery store), they did not, with the exception of Mary and Dee, question its validity.

Another difference in content had to do with perceptions of welfare workers as arbitrary. As I have already mentioned, this may have been the result of discovering, during the course of conversations with other recipients, that people were being treated differently.

Finally, how women talked about employment and "hard work" also differed in the two contexts. Although efforts to accommodate the work ethic and critiques of how the welfare system prevented success with employment were evident in both contexts, there was a greater emphasis in the welfare rights meetings on how hard the women worked -- on their identities as "hard workers." This reflects a greater focus in the welfare rights meetings on what I have referred to as mainstream values and ideologies, e.g., views of motherhood and the work ethic. The exception here is the "education is the way out" theme.

The appropriation of mainstream values by women in welfare rights groups may reflect a strategy of manipulating dominant values -- the values most often used against welfare recipients -- to their own advantage. Again, it was the welfare system that was not allowing women to fulfill their obligations as mothers (by forcing them to find employment), that was forcing them to engage in illegal behavior (e.g., prostitution), and that was keeping them from securing financial independence (by penalizing them when they reported employment income). Rather than reflecting an internalization of mainstream ideologies, the women's expressions of these values may perhaps reflect a strategy of resisting their position in the social system with the tools (values, ideologies) provided by those in power (Scott 1990).

The following exchange supports this point, and exemplifies the kind of indignation and moral posturing that occurred in the context of welfare rights meetings. Susan, Rita, and myself are the participants; we are discussing a meeting that Susan and Rita had had with the aide to a local legislator.

S:	I told him, I said EVERY chi::ld NEEDS a	1
	safe environment, NOT the rich, NOT the	2
	middle-class, but ALSO WELfare mothers	3
R:	yep	4
S:	and we're having to leave our kids with	5
	ANYbody and everybody that'll take 'em	6
C:	yep	7
S:	that's not right	8
C:	no, it's not right	9
S:	that's	10
	[]	11
	[	12
R:	'cause they're our FUTURE	13
S:	ye--THAT'S WHAT	14
	I TOLD 'EM too [laughs]	15
	[	16
R:	THESE CHILDREN, these children are	17
	growing up after being abused and, uh=	18
S:	=sexually assaulted	19
R:	YEAH, and	20
S:	you know	21
R:	and=	22
S:	=the HELL with that	23
R:	there IS gonna be	24
	no future	25
C:	right	26
S:	[+ indicates pounding on	27
	table] and for the +first time in my	28
	+entIRE life, I +ACTually +sat +down in	29
	front of this +high honcho and asked--	30
	+deliberately, came right out and told him	31
	the truth, I said you know what really	32
	burns my ass is that ya'll spending all	33
	this money on this drug shit and gettin'	34
	women off the streets and stuff, we HAVE	35
	to be there	36
C:	you said that to him?	37
R:	he--she	38
	told him she prostituted	39
	[	40
S:	I told him that whole four	41

months, yes SIR, that welfare didn't help 42
 me= 43
 C: =what did he say about it? 44
 S: he just, 45
 [laughs], you know 46
 [47
 C: whoa 48
 R: yep 49
 S: he just didn't know WHAT to say, 50
 he didn't realize that THIS shit is going 51
 on you know 52

[LIFE, 4/20/90, tape 1, side 1, segment 190-209]

In this exchange, Susan and Rita make their claim that welfare mothers are equals of, and therefore have the same rights as, members of the more privileged classes. They also make general moral statements about right and wrong -- it's "not right" to leave the care and upbringing of children to just anybody, because "they're our FUTURE" [line 13]. The "our" in "our future" refers to society as a whole; in other words, if we don't take adequate care of all of our children, we will all suffer the consequences.³⁵ The concern, then, is not just an individualistic one, but a societal one. This clearly provides some moral standing. Susan's recounting of how she confronted "this high honcho" with the reality of the situation -- which includes misguided policies and forced prostitution -- and the way in which she tells it --

³⁵ Similar arguments were made by welfare reformers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly by those reformers who advocated removing children from the home so that they could be raised properly. Some have argued that calls for the proper raising of children were in actuality calls for the proper training of a docile work force (Abramovitz 1988).

pounding on the table with each word for added emphasis -- provides evidence of her conviction that she holds the moral high ground [lines 28-36]. The entire segment is characterized by tones of both indignation at the state of affairs, and accomplishment at having confronted a representative of the system.

The kind of empowerment expressed in the above exchange is also evident in the segment from the MWRO discussion of legislative hearings (see section on the women's constructions of politicians, the rich, and men, above). The women in the group manage to find some power for themselves in the face of both legislators' interest in their own wealth, and the power that they have to silence recipients' voices. Not only can recipients see through legislators' attempts to invoke negative stereotypes and turn right around to characterize the legislators as "ignorant" [lines 72-79]; but -- by virtue of the fact that the legislators have to work so hard to avoid recognizing recipients' plight -- recipients also have the power to make them squirm. This comes out in lines 104-106 when Louise talks about making legislators uncomfortable just by being present and staring at them. Louise speeds up and raises her voice when she tells her story about Nancy and Senator Jones, while the others participate by laughing at this joke on the legislator.

What happened when women got together, then, was different from what happened when I spoke with women alone. When being interviewed, the women were relating their experiences to an outsider -- to someone who had no idea of what it was like to be on welfare. When the women got together at welfare rights meetings, however, they were sharing their experiences with others who did know what it was like. At the meetings, therefore, there were expressions of solidarity with other recipients that were not evident in the one-on-one discussions, regardless of my partisan position. To be sure, this sense of solidarity had its boundaries, as when women divorced themselves from other categories of recipients that were not as worthy as they; but when they met at welfare meetings, the women were able to pull together in the face of much more powerful opposing forces, and managed to make themselves look better than their adversaries. That their efforts to make themselves look better were based on moral issues and principles is reasonable and strategic, given that it is precisely on such bases that they are most often condemned by those in power.

In sum, the welfare rights meetings allowed women to compare notes and to construct and voice particular conclusions reached by means of such comparisons. While a number of the women I interviewed were also participants in welfare rights groups, there was something unique to

the setting of the meetings that provided an opportunity to produce certain perceptions and understandings. It was the immediate context of the meetings, then -- of being in the presence of other recipients -- that provided the means of expression and joint empowerment.

ACCOMMODATION AND RESISTANCE AMONG RECIPIENTS AND
WORKERS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF WOMEN AND WELFARE

By

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CHAPTER 4

WELFARE WORKERS

Having examined welfare recipients' constructions of themselves, key others, and the welfare system, I now turn to the views of women who work for the welfare department as Assistance Payments (AP) workers.

As pointed out in Chapter 2 (Methods), the nature of the data collected on workers differs from that collected on recipients. In the case of workers, all material was gathered at the welfare office; I had no separate relationships with the women outside of the office, and the short interviews I conducted with them occurred there. This contrasts with the longer and more involved interviews I conducted with recipients in more private settings. Moreover, the interviews with workers were often informal, taking place in contexts defined by the workers as "conversation" rather than "interview," and there was often more than one worker involved. The division between "interviews" and "everything else," and between "private" and "public" interactions, was thus blurred in the welfare office.¹ This blurring of

¹ Perhaps the lack of a significant difference between personal (one-on-one) and public (group) talk was related to the public nature of all talk in the welfare office. When workers were in private offices,
(continued...)

boundaries is reflected throughout this chapter in the inter-mixing of segments of talk in which a worker and myself are the only participants, and exchanges in which multiple workers are participating.

The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first, I explore two key themes in Assistance Payments work. The first concerns the workers' view that they were "trapped" in AP work. The second theme, related to the first but extending into the day-to-day practice of AP work, concerns workers' perceptions of powerlessness, of having little sense of control or influence over their lives in the welfare office. In discussing powerlessness, I explore workers' constructions of themselves, of management, and of their relationship with management.

I devote the second section of the chapter to a discussion of workers' constructions of welfare recipients, since recipients, along with management, were key others in workers' lives. In addition to exploring the various characteristics the women assigned

¹(...continued)

the doors to their offices were rarely shut, and workers spoke with each other across the hallways between their offices. When workers moved to cubicles, the public nature of their talk was even more obvious; cubicle dividers did not reach the ceiling, and conversations occurring in one cubicle were easily overheard by individuals in neighboring cubicles.

Thus far, I have referred to women on welfare as welfare recipients, since this, along with "welfare mother," is how they preferred to refer to themselves. In this chapter, I follow the practice of workers, who referred to recipients as "clients." It is significant in this regard that, in the context of the welfare system, "client" implies a relationship of dependency not implied by the term "recipient" (Wineman 1984).

As in Chapter 3, the transcript conventions outlined in Appendix A are used in those cases where the focus is on the joint construction of particular views.

Themes in Assistance Payments Work

Background

Spatial and Social Organization of Workers

At the beginning of my research at the welfare office, the AP workers occupied two separate sections -- what they called wings -- of the building. These two sections were on either end of the waiting room; behind both sections were the sections for clerical workers and for workers in child protective services.

The physical separation of the two sections was coupled with an attitudinal difference between their inhabitants. While one section had a "positive" attitude towards management and AP work, the other had a

"negative" attitude.² In their own characterizations, those on the "positive" side did the best they could given what everybody recognized as a "formidable" workload (one worker's term, appropriated from the office director), and those in the "negative" group, who dubbed their area "Blues Boulevard," spoke up and complained. Workers both took pride in their own group and looked down on the other, with members of "Blues Boulevard" being derided for their "negativity," and workers on the "positive side" being characterized as "Pollyannas."

The break-time activities and language of the two groups reflected their attitudinal differences. While the "positive" workers went walking for exercise (there was even a chart on the wall in the hall-way on which individual workers could keep track of how many miles they were accumulating), the "negative" group sat outside, smoked cigarettes, and told jokes or complained about work conditions. Language differences focused on the use of curse words, which were significantly more frequent and acceptable among the "negative" crowd.

The division between the two groups, however, was not absolute. There was some cross-over, and there were several workers who were not aligned with either camp.

² When I first negotiated access to the welfare office, I was placed in the "positive" section.

Moreover, those on "Blues Boulevard" were not the only ones to express dissatisfaction with their work life; all of the workers, regardless of their orientation, had problems with management, work loads, clients, or all three. The difference between the two groups was that, while the "positive" workers tried to look on the bright side of what everyone considered a difficult situation, the "negative" workers were more inclined to face reality, as it were, and to voice discontentment, rather than acquiescence or resignation.

Two weeks prior to the end of this study, the AP workers were moved out of their private offices and into cubicles located in the center of the building. The two wings -- and thus workers holding "positive" and "negative" approaches to AP work -- were merged into one location. Workers' reactions to this change, and a more detailed discussion of the "Pollyanna" and "Blues Boulevard" perspectives, are discussed below.

Economic and Social Imperatives: Workers' Educational and Employment Histories

Contrary to the claim that AP workers are chronically underpaid (Ehrenreich and Piven 1984), AP workers in Kenyon County were rather well paid. The majority of the workers -- eleven -- earned \$30,000 or more per year; five earned between \$24,000 and \$28,000

per year; and one new worker was earning \$20,000 per year. These rates of pay were high relative to what the women might otherwise have been able to earn, given their backgrounds and credentials. With the exception of Fran, whose prior wages were comparable to those of an AP worker, all of the women experienced a marked jump in wages upon becoming an AP worker.

As outlined in Table 2, only three (18%) of the 17 workers, Colleen, Emma, and Fran, had B.A. degrees.³ This is similar to the state-wide statistic for B.A. degrees (less than 20%) among AP workers (Wertkin 1990). Two workers (12%), Sherry and Valerie, had attended three years of college, and an additional four workers (24%), Sally, Diane, Peggy, and Ann, had studied for two years in college. One worker, Edith, had attended college for one year, and another, Debbie, had gone for six months (6% each). Finally, two workers (12%), Karrie and Gilda, had attended technical-vocational schools (business, secretarial) for two years and six months, respectively. The remaining workers (24%), Harriet, Nora, Becky, and Judy, had high school diplomas.

As will be further discussed in Chapter 5, the workers in this study were subject to some of the same

³ Emma was not quite finished by the end of the research.

social and economic constraints experienced by recipients. As indicated in Table 2, the majority of the workers had held clerical or other service type jobs prior to becoming AP workers. If they had not turned to AP work, then, some of the women might have found themselves facing restrictions on their income similar to those suffered by the women discussed in Chapter 3.⁴

Most of the workers came from working-class backgrounds, having had parents who were factory workers, cashiers, truck drivers, waitresses, shop workers, farmers, mail deliverers, bookkeepers, kitchen workers, clerical workers, and building constructors. Only five of the 17 workers (Sally, Diane, Colleen, Sherry, and Valerie) had parents who held what are typically considered to be middle-class jobs in management, education, and business.

In addition to class and educational background, four of the workers, Becky, Karrie, Sherry, and Debbie, shared with clients the dilemmas of single motherhood.

By virtue of their affiliation with the State, then, the AP workers included in this study earned more money than they probably would have otherwise. The

⁴ In addition to AP work, most of the women in this group were married, and thus from two-income families. As will be further discussed in Chapter 5, their relationships with income-generating men comprised a second significant difference between workers and their clients.

TABLE 2: ASSISTANCE PAYMENTS WORKERS

Name	Age	Education	Marital Status	Number of Children	Years in AP Work	Previous Paid Employment
Peggy	32	Two years college	Married	2	5.5	Clerical worker
Judy	51	High school diploma	Married (one divorce)	3	18	Clerical worker
Gilda	44	High school diploma; six months technical-vocational school	Divorced	None	1	Fast food server, government crop reporter, tax worker
Emma	42	B.A.	Married	2	17	Data coding operator
Harriet	59	High school diploma	Married	3	18	Data coding operator
Fran	42	B.A.	Married	3	6	Computer operator, nurse, electronics technician
Sally	42	Associate's Degree	Married (2 divorces)	2 stepchildren	15	Clerical worker, cafeteria worker, library aid, domestic worker
Diane	35	Two years college	Married	3	14	Clerical worker
Edith	43	One year college	Married (one divorce)	None	16	Clerical worker
Colleen	38	B.A.	Married	2	15	None
Becky	34	High school diploma	Single	3	14.5	Bakery worker, clerical worker
Karrie	40	Two year secretarial school	Married (one divorce)	2	17	Waitress, clerical worker
Sherry	25	Three years college	Married	None	2	Bookkeeper
Valerie	26	Three years college	Married	None	1.5	Preschool teacher, store manager, receptionist
Nora	50s	High school diploma	Married (one divorce)	2	16	Cashier, factory worker, dry cleaning worker, community aid
Anne	40	Two years college	Single	None	5	Clerical worker
Debbie	48	High school diploma; several college courses	Living w/partner (3 divorces)	5	15	Safety officer, janitor, clerical worker, day care worker, cook, waitress, bartender, factory worker

women's awareness of this fact is illustrated in the first theme discussed below, "Trapped in AP Work."

Themes

"Trapped" in Assistance Payments Work

With the exception of Fran, who had been able to earn good wages elsewhere, all of the AP workers believed that they would be unable to make comparable wages elsewhere given their backgrounds and credentials. The following set of exchanges between two workers, all occurring during the course of one conversation, illustrates this perception. Prior to the first exchange, Sally and Ann had been explaining to me how the structure of their job prevents them from doing good work: they can't keep up with all the paper work, which means that they can't give all their clients sufficient or appropriate attention.⁵ I responded to this set of complaints by asking them why they stayed in AP work.

C:	what keeps you in AP work?	1
S:	the security	2
C:	job	3
	security?	4
S:	mm, it's real close to the last	5
	thing I'd like to do for a living but,	6
	[well]	7
C:	what is the last thing you'd	8
	[like]? [laughs]	9
S:	I was a motel maid one	10
	summer in college [laughs]	11
A:	a wife	12

⁵ For example, processing applications in a timely fashion.

	[	13
C:	that's like	14
	my, that's like my secretary	15
	[	16
A:	and a house, a HOUSE-	17
	keeper, a HOUSEmaker	18
S:	I'd do that in a	19
	minute right now	20

[DSS, 8/3/90, tape 2, side 1, segment 316-322]

In discussing the other kinds of jobs available to them, Sally and Ann refer to low status, low paying jobs typically held by women. Throughout the segment, Sally speaks in a low monotone, giving an impression of defeat.

In the next exchange, Sally and Ann point out that their educational credentials leave them "trapped" in AP work, despite the fact that they have developed as much expertise over the years as anyone with a Bachelor's degree.

S:	I don't have a four year degree either, I	1
	have real limited options I have a STUpid	2
	two year degree which is the same as the	3
	other guys with a diploma	4
C:	hey	5
S:	or a GED	6
C:	PhD in	7
	anthropology is gonna to get you about as	8
	[	9
S/A:	[laugh]	10
C:	far	11
S:	so my options are [I, you know--]	12
A:	I	13
	think that might be part, of everyone's	14
	PROblem, is you are	15
	[	16
S:	reSEntment	17
A:	trapped	18
S:	yeah	19
A:	we can't go ANYplace and get paid as much	20
	as we get paid, out of the benefits and the	21
	job security	22

S: mm huh 23
 [24
 C: uh huh 25
 S: and quite frankly I 26
 think fourteen an-and a half years doing 27
 this is the equivalent of a college degree 28
 and I'm sorry to say that 'cause the 29
 [30
 C: it's the 31
 equivalent of 32
 [33
 S: amount of TIME= 34
 C: =MORE 35
 S: you put in= 36
 C: =than that 37
 S: the experience I've, I've gleaned from this 38
 is more than-- 39
 [40
 A: we have to KNOW so much about EVERYthing 41
 [42
 S: mm hmm 43
 A: a little 44
 bit a LAW, a little a, you know, how-- 45
 marketing values 46
 [47
 S: un huh 48
 A: and EVERYthing 49
 C: uh huh 50
 A: [] 51
 [52
 S: you have to MANage people 53
 A: uh huh 54

[DSS, 8/3/90, tape 2, side 1, segment 329-341]

In this last exchange, Sally expands on what she and Ann mean by "trapped," making specific reference to issues of "choice," which both women find inappropriate given their limited opportunities.

S: that resentment is there though like Ann 1
 said before, we're tied here by--sure, it's 2
 our choice, you can, you can say to someone 3
 oh it's your choice to [be] here-- 4
 A: I can go 5
 work at K-Mart if I want to 6
 [7
 S: yeah 8
 A: but I don't wanna 9
 [do that] 10

	[	11
S:	conSIDer the alTERnatives	12
C:	right	13
S:	and I used to	14
	have a job that I hated, that paid like	15
	half what I was earning when I started	16
	this job, so, if you wanna hate a job you	17
	might as well hate it for twice the money	18
	and the security	19
C:	that's a good point	20
S:	and I	21
	have these dreams of, you know I I would	22
	die to go to school and I SAY it but I	23
	don't DO it, 'cause I have these dreams of	24
	being in debt, being years without a salary,	25
	getting a job that I THINK I want but it's	26
	STILL work and it still involves people in	27
	what [one way or the other]	28
	[	29
A:	and you'll be starting at the bottom	30
	of the ladder	31
S:	yeah, yeah	32
C:	you got it	33
S:	what a	34
	life [sigh], and I--I 've been poor, I, you	35
	know, not by choice [laugh] though every-	36
	thing is supposed to be your choice, and I	37
	was good at it but I'm not going back to it	38
	again	39

[DSS, 8/3/90, tape 2, side 1, segment 369-381]

The cooperation between Sally and Ann (and, to a lesser extent, myself) in the presentation of their perception of being "trapped" in AP work is evident in all three segments. In the first segment, we all contribute to producing a list of undesirable jobs: maid, wife and house-maker, secretary [lines 10-18]. Similar contributions can be seen in the second segment; Sally and Ann help each other verbalize the meaning of being "trapped" [lines 17-22], and we all participate in establishing the notion that Sally and Ann's lack of

educational credentials is an inadequate reflection of their abilities [lines 26-41]. Finally, in the last segment, although Sally is the primary speaker, Ann contributes both illustrative and supportive statements. Her phrase, "I can go work at K-Mart if I want to" [lines 5-6], serves to illustrate the general claim Sally is making concerning the insidious nature of the notion of "choice." She also supports Sally's line of argument later in the segment when she adds to the list of beginning a new career her comment about starting "at the bottom of the ladder" [lines 30-31].

As stated, other workers also felt "trapped" in their jobs. Edith, for instance, regretted the decision she made 15 years ago (in 1975) to move from clerical into AP work. Although the pay was better, she found that in AP work there was "no more [career] ladder." She could apply to be a supervisor or trainer, but those positions were "almost impossible to get anymore" [DSS, 8/24/90]. Judy also felt stuck: "I don't have a college degree and I couldn't earn this type of money [in another job]" [DSS, 8/24/90]. Gilda claimed that "I cannot afford to quit the job" [DSS, 8/10/90]. Others, like Karrie and Diane, felt that AP work provided the only lucrative employment in Creekville; because of their child care concerns, they both felt compelled to

work locally, rather than commute 30 miles to Madrid [DSS, 8/13/90; 8/17/90].

With two exceptions, all the women said that they initially got involved in AP work because of the money. Emma, for instance, first took the job because it was close to home and paid well; money is also what kept her in the job for seventeen years [DSS, 8/13/90]. Debbie, a single mother when she applied for AP work, took the job because she needed job security and a good benefits package [DSS, 8/17/90]. Women who had been single mothers when they first started AP work, and those who had young children at the time of the study, mentioned their children as key reasons for starting or continuing AP work.

The women's economic motivations for entering and remaining in AP work had several components. The first, already mentioned, was that the women could not earn the money that they were earning in AP work in other employment sectors. As stated, this was a reflection of the women's educational credentials, which placed limits on their employment opportunities. This was also a reflection of (or at least was accentuated by) the women's geographic location; regardless of their educational credentials, Creeksville, a small rural town, offered little in the way of economic opportunity. In addition to salary, however, the women had

considerations related to their roles as mothers. Although still limited, the women may have been able to find somewhat lucrative employment in Madrid, 30 miles away. Distance, however, was a consideration, especially for workers who were concerned with child care costs, and who wanted to be able to go home to have lunch with their children and to be close-by in case a child fell ill. The women's decisions concerning AP work, then, reflects the intersection of economic and role (motherhood) concerns and responsibilities. The goal, in other words, was to get the best job possible, and the best job available locally.

One artifact of the women's economic motivations for seeking AP work was that many of them had had no idea of what AP work involved before they took the job. For instance, Emma "never knew nothing about it when I came into it" [DSS, 8/13/90]; Diane "had no prior interest in it" [DSS, 8/13/90]; and Valerie "knew nothing, nothing, nothing about this job at all when I took it" [DSS, 8/13/90]. Valerie, moreover, along with Gilda, told me that she had simply taken the first State job she could get, just to get her foot in the door. The workers I spoke with at the training session I attended echoed this view: when queried, they said that they wanted to work for the State because the money was good; if nothing else, AP work was a stepping stone to

more attractive administrative positions, either in the welfare department or elsewhere in the State system [ENP training, 7/17/90-7/19/90].⁶

Public service, then, was clearly not the primary motivator for getting involved in AP work. Indeed, for those women who knew nothing of AP work before they started their jobs, public service had not even been a consideration. The women's primary considerations were economic; their economic status, in turn, was related to their status as women and as mothers.

The two exceptions to this were Nora and Harriet, both of whom stated that they took jobs as AP workers because they wanted to help people. Prior to becoming an AP worker 16 years ago (in 1974), Nora had worked for the Office of Economic Opportunity as a community aid and home maker (helping women learn home economics skills). Although she, too, was interested in the pay for AP work, she was also interested in helping people -- she saw herself as a "people-oriented person" [DSS, 8/10/90]. Harriet, a deeply religious woman, had strong convictions about helping those in need. She was already working for the State when she took the AP job, and because of the overtime she had been able to put in in her previous job, she actually took a cut in pay when

⁶ I was able to discuss this issue with only five of 25 trainees.

she moved into AP work. This was okay with her, however: "I really thought it would be something [new] and I would be helping people" [DSS, 8/13/90].

Nevertheless, although Nora and Harriet were the only workers who chose AP work out of a desire to help people, many of the other workers did claim that being able to help people was one of the rewards of AP work. Although not as frequent as references to money, I did encounter comments such as, "every once in a while you actually feel like you do some good" [Debbie, DSS, 8/17/90], and workers did take pleasure in helping someone who they really felt was in need. Again, however, the need to support themselves and their families, and to maximize their economic potential in the face of limited opportunity, was key to the women's decisions to pursue AP work.

In sum, the women's educational credentials left them with limited economic options, the most lucrative of which was AP work. In addition, AP work allowed some of the women to work close to home and thus accommodate their roles as mothers. Although a "choice," most of the workers felt that there were few viable options to AP work. The compelling need that they felt to remain in their jobs was reflected in the sentiment of being "trapped."

Powerlessness

In a survey of 364 AP workers throughout Michigan, Wertkin (1990) explored various dimensions of AP worker job satisfaction. Although not addressed as such, indicators of what may be viewed in terms of power and powerlessness -- of feeling or lacking a sense of control or influence over one's work life -- provided the major focus of the study. A number of "satisfaction items" were rated by the workers in the study. Those with which workers reported greater satisfaction than dissatisfaction were salary, safety, office space, job challenge, orientation (introduction to the job), evaluation, administrative support (clerical staff), and job structure.⁷ Those with which workers reported more dissatisfaction than satisfaction were reasonable job expectations, input into policy changes, professional treatment, and job prestige. With the exception of office space, about which the workers in this study were extremely unhappy, my data support Wertkin's.

Although Wertkin's study benefits from a large sample size, his data are statistical in nature and thus

⁷ This item referred to whether or not workers were responsible for all phases of all financial assistance programs, or if they were divided in terms of phases or programs. In the Kenyon County office, workers were "generalists," meaning that they were responsible for all phases of all programs.

do not tell us very much about what satisfaction and dissatisfaction look like at the ground level. In this section, I outline the parameters of powerlessness and the shape of dissatisfaction as expressed by the workers in the Kenyon County office. My focus on dissatisfaction reflects the workers' talk; as was the case with clients, workers' expressions of satisfaction with the welfare department were rare.⁸

"Dissatisfaction," however, is somewhat euphemistic. As illustrated in the following exchange I had with Ann -- indeed, in all the transcript segments in this section -- "powerlessness," "helplessness," and "frustration" are more apt descriptors of the women's views as expressed in their talk.

A: it'd be really interesting to, to find out when you get all through with this

C: mm huh

A: if a profile of an AP worker and a profile of a client are very very much alike

C: you were the one, that was you who said you wanted to know the

A: right

C: similarities, uh huh

A: like

C: yeah

⁸ This may be a reflection of the workers' conviction that I was there to collect their complaints and report them to powers higher up. See Chapter 2 for further discussion of this issue.

A: a whole, all over, overwhelming sense

C: right

A: of powerlessness

C: right

A: and we in a sense are as trapped as they are

[DSS, 6/28/90, tape 2, side 1, segment 264-271]

In what follows, I discuss four areas of the women's work lives in relation to which they felt powerless: work loads, policy, relationships with management and clients, and the mundane details of day-to-day life.

Work Loads

One problem that all the workers complained about was the size of their case loads. Such complaints are best understood within the context of actual work loads. Following are some figures for the months of June and July 1991. During these two months workers averaged:

- Ongoing (continuing) case loads of 169 and 168, respectively. While many ongoing cases lay dormant most of the time, they are cases for which workers may be called upon to work on at any time.
- Ten new applications or dispensations per month. Applications entail interviewing clients and processing their paperwork; dispensations involve processing paperwork.
- Six reviews per month. Reviews refer to annual redeterminations of eligibility to receive assistance, and are similar in procedure to initial eligibility determinations (clients have to fill out new

applications, and workers have to interview and process them as if they were new applicants).

- Twenty-four income reports per month. Clients whose income changes must file income reports. In response, workers must run new budgets for the cases and alter assistance allocations accordingly.
- Seven emergency needs applications per month. The process is similar to that for new applications, with, however, additional time pressures.

When one considers that it takes from twenty minutes to over an hour to interview clients, that it takes approximately four hours (and often longer) to process each application or review,⁹ and that workers are subject to frequent interruptions and must be available to respond to clients' telephone inquiries for one hour per day, it becomes evident that workers have extremely strenuous work loads. According to Wertkin, current case load expectations for AP workers exceed 130% (1990:E-5; see also Prottas (1979), who claims that all street-level bureaucrats have more work than they can contend with).

⁹ These are the estimates provided by workers when I asked them for averages [DSS, 8/3/90]. As Prottas (1979) has pointed out, however, the AP worker job contains a considerable amount of unpredictability with regard to how long interviews with clients take. Clients in unusual or complicated situations will invariably take longer to interview; their paperwork may also take longer to process.

Comments such as, "it's just physically impossible to keep up" [Harriet, DSS, 8/13/90] were ubiquitous in the welfare office. Workers often complained about the difficulties of managing their work loads, and expressed feelings of frustration and incompetence when they couldn't. As Emma, an AP worker of 17 years, put it:

I really liked it in the beginning, but...I can't handle all this paper work and manual changes....I don't like to say I'm a perfectionist, but when it is something, I like to do it right, and I just don't feel that I'm doing it right now, before it seemed like I was [DSS, 8/13/90].

I just can't keep up with [changes in the policy manuals] anymore. I just [don't] have the time to sit down and read all that material when I'm trying to do everything else, and it...really makes you feel incompetent [DSS, 8/13/90].

Planning for vacations put particular pressure on workers, as they frantically tried to get even more done so that they wouldn't return from vacation only to find that they were even further behind than before they left. Nora, for example, stopped me in the bathroom one day to complain about having to come into the office on the weekends in order to prepare for a one-week vacation she was taking in three weeks [fieldnotes, 6/13/90].

Policy: Knowledge, Input, and Appropriateness

Workers expressed feelings of powerlessness with regard to their relationship to various aspects of welfare policy. Welfare policy changes constantly, as

evidenced by the frequency with which workers receive policy updates.¹⁰ One result of this was that, as pointed out by Emma, above, workers couldn't keep up with policy changes and were left feeling ignorant and incompetent. Edith, a worker of 15 years, lamented her loss of knowledge over the years:

There's too many manuals, you...can see all the manuals we deal with and we're supposed to know all the programs when we virtually can't. Budgeting is so complicated now that you can't look at something and--before we could look at something and sorta know if they were eligible or not, now you can't [DSS, 8/24/90].

Edith was referring to what Wertkin (1990:4) calls "proletarianizing," which reduces the skills required of workers to perform their jobs. The process of proletarianizing began in 1972, when, by federal mandate, social services were separated from income maintenance programs -- a separation that was maintained in Michigan despite rescission of the mandate in 1975 (ibid.:3). The outcome of this separation has been the deprofessionalization and deskilling of AP work: workers are required to meet fewer educational and training standards in order to qualify for the position, and they are given little official lee-way in

¹⁰ Although I have no figures for the period of this study, Wertkin refers to a study reporting that in 1976, workers received an average of 22 pages of interoffice memo or new policy material each week (Wertkin 1990). Given the increasing complexity in policy since that time, it is reasonable to assume that that number has increased.

interpreting or implementing policy or office procedures.¹¹ Rather than making assessments themselves, based on their knowledge of policy -- something that Edith remembered doing within the last 15 years -- workers have become dependent on computers to figure cases out for them, and increasingly unfamiliar with what the computer does with the numbers they give it. This has effectively removed knowledge and understanding from workers, who have become mere executioners of policy.

Coupled with a lack of knowledge and understanding of policy was a sense of being excluded from the construction of policy, and a sense of management as ignorant of both workers' needs and their expertise.¹² Debbie, a worker for 12 years, felt strongly that current policies were not responsive to either workers' or clients' needs. When asked what, if anything, she would change about the welfare system given the

¹¹ This is reminiscent of Braverman's (1974) description of the manufacturing division of labor in capitalist economies. Skills are divided into steps or operations and then assigned to different individuals. In this case, the job of seeing to the overall needs of a welfare client are divided among different workers: one worker addresses a client's financial needs, another addresses her psychological needs, and yet a third addresses her employment, educational, and child care needs.

¹² The management being referred to here is not the immediate office management, but state-level management.

opportunity, she replied as follows. (Although her focus is on clients' needs, she also indirectly refers to workers' needs, insofar as workers are responsible for processing the paper work involved.)

D: the policy itself is very, um, what do I want to say, how do I say it, um, I would cha--try to change policy

C: uh huh

D: the programs are, um, inconsistent, uh, there is [sigh], how do I say, um, if you happen to be one of the people that doesn't fall into the norm

C: uh huh

D: you, you can fall through the crack and not be eligible for anything

C: like that woman who was here

D: right

C: insurance¹³

D: there's people that need help that can't get it because the policy says if you're not this and this and this then you don't meet the requirements

C: uh huh

D: but they still need help

C: uh huh

¹³ The case being referred to here concerned a young woman who was ineligible for health insurance coverage because she was too old to qualify for AFDC under her parents' case, was not yet 65, and was making too much money to qualify for General Assistance (the welfare program for single adults under 65, terminated in fall 1991). There is no policy, in other words, that responds to the needs of adults between the ages of 18 and 65 who are working yet cannot afford health insurance.

- D: and I think there is, um, a tendency to force people to separate, um, married couples, because of the, uh, unemployed father policy
- C: uh huh, uh huh
- D: um, I th--it's not equitable, I believe in what they call flat grants
- C: uh huh, uh huh
- D: if you have this number of people in your family and your income and assets are below this limit, you get this amount of money
- C: right
- D: regardless of how much your rent is, how much your, uh, expenses are, I think th--it would be much simpler for workers to implement
- C: uh huh
- D: it would be much simpler to determine eligibility, and it would be more equitable, er
- C: right
- D: if they chose to live in an expensive place and they were only getting this amount of money, that's up to them
- C: their choice, uh huh, uh huh
- D: or
- C: right
- D: they could try to economize
- C: right
- D: and, and, so, that's one thing I'd try to change, I would change if I could
- C: uh huh
- D: um
- C: uh huh, yeah, and that's something that would hit, that hits policy, that hits fairness, that hits work load

D: right, right

C: all those things

D: it would help everybody all the way around

C: right, right

D: and that's been suggested several times but the uh the consensus seems to be that that would cost too much, to implement even though in the long run

C: uh huh

D: it would be cheaper, it would save money, but they don't want to get into that

[DSS, 8/17/90, tape 1, side 1, segment 182-222]

In this exchange, Debbie is claiming that policy is impractical: it is not financially sound, it overloads workers unnecessarily (the greater the number of programs, the more paperwork workers must process), and it is inadequate to the needs of the population it is designed to serve. Debbie also implies that, as a worker at the ground level, she has gained some insight into the needs of the welfare population and of how to best approach satisfying those needs. She knows more about the situation than policy makers do, a feeling echoed by other workers in the office.

From the workers' point of view, then, policy was not grounded in their expertise concerning the indigent, and was often inappropriate to their needs. Moreover, over time the welfare department had constructed a rigid division between the work involved in designing policy, and that involved in its execution -- in other words,

between management and labor. As Emma and Edith claimed above, workers were left ignorant of the workings of policy, and yet responsible for its implementation.

Managers and Clients

According to Prottas (1979), street-level bureaucrats (the low-level employees of public service bureaucracies who routinely interact with the clients of those bureaucracies) are boundary workers, whose job is to mediate between clients and the organization. Unlike other employees of public service agencies, street-level bureaucrats are in regular face-to-face interaction with clients; they respond directly to -- and may often feel the tension between -- client demands and organizational demands concerning the assessment and treatment of clients (Erickson 1975a; Erickson and Shultz 1982). AP workers, along with, for instance, emergency room clerks in hospitals or police officers, are classic examples of street-level bureaucrats. The AP workers in this study clearly felt the press of the overwhelming and sometimes competing demands of management and clients.

A common belief among AP workers, alluded to above, was that management, the people in charge, "really don't know what it's like" to do AP work. There were two features of this view: (1) people in management have it easy, i.e., have "cushy cushy jobs [...] where people

are sitting there doing nothing" [Harriet, DSS, 8/13/90], and (2) managers have no idea of the stresses suffered by AP workers and thus make decisions that only serve to place additional burdens on the workers. Workers who left AP positions to work on policy, it was felt, soon forgot what AP work entailed, and eventually took the side of management in claiming that AP workers had nothing to complain about [Sherry and Harriet, DSS, 6/13/90].

The women felt that their clients, as well, "don't have a real good picture of what goes on," especially of the work entailed in processing applications [Sherry and Harriet, DSS, 6/13/90]. Workers felt pressed from both ends, then -- from the administrators who structured their work, and from clients who required their services. Workers felt, however, that neither group fully understood the demands of AP work.

The following exchange I had with Fran (and with Peggy, who pipes in from across the hall to make a point), illustrates workers' perceptions of powerlessness in their relationships with both their managers and their clients. Fran begins by discussing a

client hearing,¹⁴ and then moves on to discuss stress-related illnesses.

F:	see that's, this, the--this this whole	1
	thing, uh, this whole hearing business just	2
	really--I, I was ticked off about it all in	3
	the first place 'cause this is [] the	4
	hearing, where I already had clients	5
	scheduled for yesterday afternoon for	6
	reviews and stuff, okay?	7
C:	mm huh, mm huh	8
F:	and this is the one where, all of a sudden	9
	we get this hearing time for this, [super-	10
	visor] called	11
C:	and that's it, you can't change it	12
F:	and they wouldn't let--wouldn't reschedule	13
	it or anything	14
C:	uh huh	15
F:	they wouldn't move it, nothing at all,	16
	right, so I had to move all these clients,	17
	cancel 'em reschedule 'em, whatever,	18
C:	so you can go get frustrated [laugh]	19
F:	yeah, and, and, all it would've taken is for	20
	that client to call and asked to be	21
	rescheduled, for whatever reason, I don't	22
	care, because she fell down and scraped her	23
	knee and it would've been rescheduled	24
	immediately	25
C:	so you have--sounds like you just have no	26
	power at all ¹⁵	27

¹⁴ Clients can file for a hearing if they feel that their worker has made an erroneous or unfair decision regarding their case. The process goes through several stages, culminating in a hearing at which the worker, her supervisor, the client(s) and a judge are all present.

¹⁵ This statement looks like a leading question. However, by the time Fran and I had this conversation, I had been going to the welfare office on a daily basis
(continued...)

F:	I have nothing, I am worse than nothing	28
C:	uh huh	29
F:	and it's, it's, it's, you wonder why I have ulcers	30 31
C:	you have ulcers?	32
F:	oh yeah	33
C:	really	34
F:	oh yeah, I've got two of them	35
C:	[phew]	36
F:	I keep waiting for the one to perforate, I know it's getting close [laughs]	37 38
C:	so you on medication, a special diet and stuff?	39 40
F:	yeah I'm on Zantac, taking three hundred milligrams, four times a day	41 42
C:	is this something that developed after you started working here?	43 44
F:	mm huh	45
P:	[calling from her office across the hall] yeah, she needs to know this	46 47
F:	[ho]	48
P:	ninety percent of us are on drugs	49
C:	are you on drugs too?	50
P:	yeah	51

¹⁵(...continued)

for almost a month, by which time I was familiar with workers' complaints about management, and with the form that such complaints took. My remark, "sounds like you have no power at all," is, in this context, more a reflection of my participation in the culture of the welfare office, than of a leading question uttered by an outsider trying to verify her own hypotheses.

C: recreational or medical? 52

P: medical [] 53

F: I take, I take, I take [micraining] for, 54
for migraines 55

C: you get migraines too? 56

F: yeah, I take Desyrel for my, to help 57
elevate my mood when I get when I get so 58
depressed I can't stand the sight of 59
anything 60

C: uh huh 61

F: um, I take Zantac for my ulcer 62

C: oh Jesus 63

F: um, I got Tavist-D for my allergies, oh, 64
you know, and I have Valium for occasional 65
problems and when, when my ulcer starts to 66
hurt too badly I have Dem--Demerol at home, 67
I pop a couple to kill the pain, to get me 68
through 69

C: phew, how long have you been an AP worker? 70

F: five years 71

C: five years, I'm doing-- 72

F: but I worked in central office ten years 73
before that 74

C: doing what? 75

F: computer operation 76

C: oh, that's right, you told me that 77

F: a lot of bullshit down there, the problem 78
is that nobody down there knows what's going 79
on, 'til you're actually out here nobody has 80
the vaguest idea 81

[DSS, 6/28/90, tape 2, side 1, segment 120-171]

Prior to this exchange, Fran had been describing
how her supervisor had given her no support whatsoever

during the hearing in question; her account of events was given little weight, and she felt publicly humiliated. As if to add injury to insult, Fran didn't even have any control over the timing of the hearing, as she indicates in the opening lines of the transcript [lines 1-14]. Someone higher up set the time for the hearing, and she was forced to reschedule some of her appointments. She even has less power than clients, as she indicates at lines 20-25: a client would have been able to reschedule the hearing for any reason, no matter how trivial. Fran considers herself powerless, then, in her relationships to both management and clients.

At lines 30-31, Fran introduces the topic of stress-related illness, which is the focus for the rest of the exchange. With her phrase, "you wonder why I have ulcers," Fran connects her lack of power and control to her illnesses, which include migraine headaches as well as ulcers. She then goes on, in list fashion, to enumerate the various drugs she takes [lines 41-69]. At the end of the exchange, she reiterates the connection between working conditions and illness by pointing out that "nobody down there [central administration] knows what's going on," meaning that they have no idea of the stresses to which workers are subject [lines 79-80].

Other workers as well claimed to suffer from work-related illnesses. It is significant that Peggy, who joins the conversation from her office across the hall, points out that I need to know about workers' illnesses -- it indicates that she considers illness a regular feature of the job [lines 46-53]. Peggy, in AP work for five and a half years, suffered from irritable bowel syndrome and migraine headaches. Lucy, a former AP worker who took a demotion to clerical work because she was no longer willing to tolerate the stress of AP work, had also suffered from irritable bowel syndrome. Judy, an AP worker for 18 years, attributed her high blood pressure to the job. Finally, Sally often made jokes connecting her illnesses (pneumonia, flu) to job stress. Work-related stress and its physical tolls was a common conversational topic among workers.

Stress leave, associated with the mental repercussions of AP work, was also a factor in the welfare office. During the course of the study, I knew of four workers who were receiving counseling (provided by the welfare department). Three months after I concluded the research, Fran's ulcers flared up and she went on stress leave for over two months. Unfortunately, there are no statistics available on stress-related leaves or on the number of AP workers who make use of counseling services. My point here,

however, is that workers considered many of their physical and mental problems to be a reflection of their work situations.

As already noted, the exchange above also illustrates workers' perceptions of powerlessness vis-a-vis their relationships with clients. This claim was frequently voiced by the workers, and took the form, as illustrated above, of complaints concerning clients' rights, or of the constraints faced by workers in their interactions with clients. Two examples to be discussed below serve to illustrate this claim. In the first, policy specifications permitted a client to assert that she did not share meals with her live-in boyfriend, thereby effectively eliminating his income from her welfare budget -- the end result of which was that she received more food stamps than she otherwise would have. The worker, Sherry, was convinced that the two people did indeed share their meals but could not do anything about it because "I have to take it for what they say" [DSS, 6/19/90]. In the second example, another worker, Harriet, was convinced that a client was abusing her children; rules of evidence, however, prohibited her from fully pursuing the case [DSS, 6/19/90; see section on Constructions of Clients, below, for transcripts and discussions of these examples]. There were constraints, then, on workers' decision-making powers; even when they

were convinced that a client was cheating, there were limits to what they could do about it.

Workers also expressed frustration when they encountered constraints but wanted to do more for a client than policy would allow. Learning that she could not help everybody was difficult for Harriet:

I... will never forget when I went into, uh, Orange County, I had, I had this, when I hadn't been there very long and this woman and her son came in, and I think--I don't remember if I had to deny her or she didn't like whatever I said, that she went, she just tore out of the building, well, I went tearing out after her, and this one woman said to me, "yeah, you came in here like a big bird thinking you were gonna take everybody under your wing, but you can't do it".... I still, I feel frustrated, I can't... when I can't help `em, and yet I know that sometimes people are not, are suffering because I haven't gotten the cases open, and it's the--but there are people that ah, they're old people out there that don't ever apply, that should, and that get, you know, maybe they got a little too much in assets and they're not eligible, so I'm, I'm beginning to think, and I've always been against socialized medicine, totally against it, but I'm beginning to think that the money they pay us to sit here and say you're eligible, you're not eligible, if that money was put into medical care for people I think it would be good, because I'm sure there are people that... like I said, probably do without medications and do without things they need because they can't afford it [DSS, 8/13/90, tape 1 side 1, segment 461-482].

Harriet was in tears as she told me this story; she later excused herself by saying, "I think I'm tired, that's why I'm so weepy."

Even in cases where policy allowed for some flexibility, however, such as emergency needs,¹⁶ workers' decision-making powers were constrained by those of their supervisors. In the following exchange, Karrie tries to convince Ester, her supervisor, to ask Central Office for the money to repair a trailer roof for Myra, a 76-year-old client who spends her time taking care of 30 abandoned dogs. As Karrie discovered when she made a home visit, the trailer was falling apart and was in need of other repairs in addition to the roof. Nevertheless, Karrie felt that Myra could get by with just a new roof -- which was all that Myra had asked for. Ester, however, didn't want to put money into a "bottomless pit." The following exchange takes place after Ester has asked Karrie a number of questions about Myra's situation and the condition of the trailer.

E:	I don't know {1} if there's anything we	1
	can do to save someone like that {1} u::m,	2
	from themselves {2} 'cause I can't see us	3
	pouring the money in	4
K:	mm huh	5
E:	and the fact	6
	th--	7
K:	Y::ET, wh--when you were go:ne, we	8
	spe:nt, close to two thousand dollars on	9
	a migrant family, but, you know, #they	10
	came up here, looking for a job, they	11
	didn't have any job, they didn't qualify,#	12
	because they're, were not legal aliens, we	13
	spent close to two thousand dollars just	14
	putting them up for a week and sendin' 'em	15
	back to Texas where they came from	16
E:	because	17

¹⁶ See footnote (17), Chapter 3, for a description of emergency needs.

they, they meet the, criteria 18
 K: yeah 19
 E: right 20
 [and] 21
 [22
 K: and she's falling through the cracks 23
 [24
 E: falling through the cracks, and 25
 [sigh] {1.5} if we can get--what's the land 26
 lord sayin'? 27
 K: [name of landlord] 28
 E: yeah, what 29
 she's saying is to? 30
 K: she said that she'd be 31
 willing to give her a life lease on the 32
 trailer but not the land, but she's not 33
 going to pay any legal expense [] {3} 34
 she's not putting ANY more money into it 35
 than what []-- 36
 [37
 E: I don't BLAME her 38
 K: I mean, 'cause it's, 39
 [I mean] she's got 40
 E: MAYbe-- 41
 K: the land free and 42
 everything 43
 E: maybe THAT'S what {5} I, you 44
 know, I'll tell ya, I'm not real thrilled 45
 about putting the MONEy in it, mySELF 46
 K: {2} 47
 I don't know you got a human respONsibiLity 48
 [laughs] I mean she's a human being out 49
 there and, and-- 50
 E: I underSTAND that, but 51
 she's also making ch--chOIces 52

[DSS, 6/27/90, tape 2, side 2, segment 292-328]

Karrie and Ester are arguing two opposing
 perceptions of Myra's case. Ester, who feels that Myra
 (and the welfare department) would be better off if she
 gave up her dogs and moved elsewhere, claims that Myra,
 rather than the welfare department, is responsible for
 the choices she is making; thus her statements that "I
 don't know {1} if there's anything that we can do to

save someone like that" [lines 1-2] and "she's also making ch--ch0Ices" [line 52]. Karrie, on the other hand, thinks that Myra's project with the dogs is both laudable and necessary to her health and happiness and feels that Ester should at least try to convince the welfare department to fix her roof: "I don't know you got a human responsibility [laugh] I mean she's a human being out there" [lines 48-50]. The only thing the two women agree on is that Myra is "falling through the cracks" [lines 23-25].

Karrie's hesitancy in confronting Ester is evident at lines 8-12: she cuts in on Ester's turn, voice raised, but then falters as she starts to make her argument; once she gets going, however, she speeds up, as if trying to get it all in before Ester can reclaim the floor. Karrie's hesitancy might have been related to the fact that Ester was her supervisor, to the fact that she felt strongly about this particular case,¹⁷ or to the fact that she was fully aware that the welfare department would be highly unlikely to fulfill her request (Karrie is not arguing with the department here, however, but with Ester's willingness to try to push the case through). For her part, Ester's frequent pauses

¹⁷ After the meeting, I followed Karrie back to her office to ask her how she felt about her conversation with Ester. She was visibly upset, and cut me off abruptly, saying that she was not interested in talking about it.

[lines 1, 2, 3, 26, and 44] might also be indicative of a certain hesitancy, perhaps related to her understanding of the limits to welfare policy, to her discomfort with the moral force of Karrie's position, or to the fact that I was present.¹⁸

The Day-to-Day

The above exchanges illustrate workers' expressions of frustration concerning their lack of control over the mundane day-to-day aspects of their work lives. From case loads to hearing schedules, from policy changes to decisions in particular cases, workers expressed frustration, anger, and sometimes sadness over their lack of control. From their point of view, attempts on the part of management to control their work lives could reach ridiculous extremes:

Peggy broke two of her toes, and consequently was wearing slippers to work. During a cigarette break outside, she announced to the other workers that Edna, her supervisor, had told her that her slippers were inappropriate attire for work, and that she should at least wear a regular shoe on her other foot. The workers laughed heartily at this, one of them calling Edna a "chicken shit" because when she had had to wear special shoes for health reasons, she had brought in a doctor's note to justify it. Edna's focus on shoes seemed ludicrous to the workers (as judged by their hearty and derisive laughter). To me, the incident pointed to the extent to which managers try to control even the most mundane aspects of office life (field notes, 8/1/90).

¹⁸ I did not interact with supervisors on a regular basis.

On a more serious note, the women felt that the office move which occurred in August 1990 epitomized their powerlessness. Prior to the move, workers had private offices, complete with windows and doors. In July 1990, however, management decided to move the child protective services workers into the private offices, and to place the AP workers in cubicles in the center area of the building. The official reason for this was that protective services workers needed more privacy.

The women were unanimously angered by this decision. The decision was made without them and they had no control over where in the cubicle section they would be placed. The only choices they were given concerned office furniture, all of which was used, and much of which was damaged and stained. They were being moved from larger, more comfortable, private offices to smaller, cramped, and noisy cubicles.

The workers felt that the move had something to do with their status relative to the child protective services workers, who were classified as "professionals." Although management argued that protective services workers needed private offices in order to maintain confidentiality, the AP workers were quick to point out that the majority of services workers' interactions with clients were conducted away from the office. In the workers' view, official

rationale for the move was vacuous; the move had more to do with status and power than with real need. Nora, for example, claimed that management would not have treated the workers so poorly if they had college degrees [DSS, 7/13/90]. The move, from their perspective, was just one more example of their low standing in the welfare department, and of the extent to which management controlled, with impunity, every aspect of their work lives. As Judy commented in exasperation one day when I asked her why she thought AP work made people physically ill:

well, just the...constant rushing and paper work, and, and when you stop and think of it, this really is the lowly job in DSS, because the clerks [sort of] control what you do, the people above you control what you do...you are given all this responsibility and yet you don't really have any rights, I mean...you're responsible for this and you're responsible for people eating, and...paying their rent, and yet you really have no say in anything that goes on in the department, you have less say than any person in this department [DSS, 8/24/90].

Constructions of Clients

In Chapter 3, I explored clients' views of welfare workers. It is reasonable to assume that, by and large, women on welfare develop their stereotypes of workers in the course of their interactions with them, and, as I have demonstrated, in the course of their discussions with each other concerning these interactions. With the

exception of certain pieces of academic analysis and social criticism (e.g., Piven and Cloward 1971; Sidel 1981), negative stereotypes of welfare workers seem to be confined to populations that receive welfare (and perhaps also to workers' supervisors). Clients, then, draw primarily on their own and each others' experiences in constructing views of workers.

This situation does not hold true for workers and their stereotypes of welfare clients. As discussed in Chapter 3, negative stereotypes of welfare clients -- and of women welfare clients in particular -- are ubiquitous in the literature, in the media, and in everyday conversation. Accordingly, I take as a working assumption that AP workers are aware of these stereotypes when they begin their work at the welfare office, and perhaps believe them to one degree or another. On this basis, the focus of interest becomes the extent to which and the ways in which workers, in their interactions with clients and with each other, reproduce or challenge such stereotypes.

In their constructions of clients' characters, workers in this study drew on numerous character traits. In order of frequency, clients were most often depicted as dishonest, suspicious and manipulative, lazy, smelly and dirty, irresponsible, abusive, demanding, promiscuous, ungrateful, cute, nice, and hardworking.

Many of these traits co-occurred (e.g., clients could be both dishonest and lazy). In what follows, I discuss how workers invoked and applied the most frequently used (negative) character traits, following which I explore workers' positive evaluations of clients, what character traits made for a "good" client, and what traits were considered non-client. I conclude with two specific examples of workers' constructions of clients.

Negative Constructions

Clients as Dishonest, Suspicious, and Manipulative

The most frequently made claim about welfare clients was that they were dishonest and manipulative; as a result, workers often spoke of approaching their clients with a certain amount of suspicion.

In the workers' view, clients' dishonesty -- an outgrowth of their attempts to manipulate the system -- took various forms, from outright lying to playing by the letter, but not the spirit, of welfare policy. In the following exchange, Sherry and Valerie discuss clients' attempts to manipulate the system in order to increase their benefits. Both cases they refer to concern women who were living with men but who tried to

manipulate the rules so that the men's incomes would not be included in the grant determination.¹⁹

S:	old case workers that, or case worker	1
	relative cases, I hate worker relative	2
	cases, from other counties	3
C:	'cause they,	4
	they know the?	5
S:	well I had one little girl	6
	that came in, this one always makes me mad,	7
	Valerie's heard the story a million times	8
V:	what?	9
S:	I had this girl come in to, not too	10
	long ago and her sister's a new case worker	11
	in Golden county, and she came in, she	12
	didn't even know how or sys--how her, or	13
	her cousin is, or how her cousin answered	14
	the applicAtion, she's living with a boy-	15
	friend and pregnant, and she says they	16
	don't prepare food together, which I think	17
	is a bunch of crap but	18
	[	19
C:	mm huh	20
S:	I, take it as--	21
	you know I have to take it for what they	22
	say, THEN, HE's been living there in this	23
	apartment for four years, she's eighteen	24
	and just moved in, now they're claiming	25
	the rent's three fifty, they're claiming	26
	that she pays the full three fifty	27
V:	oh I	28
	hate that	29
	[	30
S:	and that--YEAH, and that she pays	31
	completely for heat and utilities, now he's	32
	been there for four years, now I KNOW that	33
	he's been--	34
V:	that's what this one that I was	35
	doing was closed for fraud, she claimed she	36
	paid FULL rent, she claimed she paid heat	37
	and utilities and the heat and utilities	38
	were VENDored in her name	39

¹⁹ What this means is that the man's income, although in reality a part of the household income, was not counted as such by the welfare department. For example, if a woman claimed that she and her partner (who had no legal ties) ate separately, his income would not be included in a food stamp budget, regardless of how much money he made. The difference in the food stamp allotment could be considerable.

S:	yeah	40
	[	41
V:	the WHOLE amount	42
S:	yeah, so that they can get the full amount	43
	[	44
C:	hmm	45
S:	of, you know they don't have to, we don't,	46
	see we, we would mark a household of two	47
V:	I'm gonna go find Colleen and tell her	48
	[	49
S:	if they were split	50
C:	mm huh	51
S:	but, in this case she will get the	52
	full amount	53
C:	[phew]	54
S:	even though, and he's	55
	WORKing, he's got a goo:d job	56
C:	mm huh	57
S:	but	58
	we can't count his income or ANYthing, I	59
	think he was making like, um, sixteen	60
	hundred dollars, he works at a [], I	61
	wanna see if he [] but I can't remember,	62
	SILLY, silly things, those are IRRitating	63
	sometimes, frustrating	64
	[	65
C:	mm huh mm huh mm huh, I imagine	66

[DSS, 6/19/90, tape 2, side 1, segment 490-508]

Sherry begins the segment with a generalization about clients who either used to be or know someone who is a welfare worker. This generalization is a commentary on a story Valerie just told, about a former worker-turned-client whose case was just closed for fraud. The point, as Sherry goes on to relate in the story she then produces, is that people who know the system can -- and often do -- manipulate it. Evidence that workers consider this kind of manipulation common is provided in lines 7-8. Sherry states, first of all, that "this one always makes me mad," indicating that the

forthcoming story is a recurring phenomenon rather than a unique event. Her next sentence, "Valerie's heard the story a million times," reinforces this notion -- especially since Valerie has been a worker for less than a year. Although Valerie's inquiry at line 9 doesn't lend much support to Sherry's contention, since it indicates that Valerie doesn't know what Sherry is talking about (or that she hasn't been paying attention), by lines 28-29 Valerie does know what the point is, as indicated by her reinforcing comment, "oh I hate that." Once she has gotten the hang of what's going on, Valerie is able to contribute her own story, which draws on the case Sherry was reacting to in the opening of the segment. This exchange, then, may provide an example not only of the concerted construction of types of clients and types of client behavior, but of how a relatively new worker learns to participate in such constructions.

One outcome of their view of clients as dishonest and manipulative was that workers often expressed suspicion towards clients. On one occasion, for instance, Karrie had asked a potential General Assistance client about any assets that he might have, to which he replied that he had none. Later in the interview when the client said that he had been living in his car, Karrie jumped in and asked, "a CAR? I

thought you said you didn't have a car?" When I later asked Karrie about this, she told me that she had been "burned" by several clients before, and so was quick to be suspicious [DSS, 6/6/90]. A week later, Karrie received a rental form from another client on which a man's name had been crossed out. She immediately called the landlord to inquire whether the man in question had actually moved out of the apartment. Although the landlord could not verify the case either way, Karrie decided that things looked suspicious and denied the case on the basis of insufficient information [DSS, 6/14/90].

As Karrie's reference to being "burned" indicates, workers often reacted to a client's dishonesty as if it were a personal affront, rather than, for example, an attempt to manipulate the system so that they could make ends meet. As Fran put it, "I'm empathetic to all my clients 'til they lie to me. Once they lie to me I hate them and I won't give them anything" [DSS, 8/10/90]. Fran's use of "I" and "me" is noteworthy, and is in keeping with general pronoun usage among workers; in their own phrasing, it was the workers themselves who paid clients' rent, who processed their food stamps, who stopped the gas company from turning off their utilities. Perhaps this habit contributed to the

workers' feelings of being personally cheated or lied to.

Clients as Lazy

According to the workers, one of the reasons why many clients were on welfare, and why they were dishonest and manipulative, was that they were lazy, that they wanted to get something for nothing. The following exchange illustrates how workers constructed clients as lazy. The participants are Sherry, Valerie, and myself. The segment is lengthy, but I have included it because it illustrates one of the major character traits that workers used to make sense of clients' behavior.

C:	is it true that you're having a review	1
	appointment this morning?	2
S:	ye::ah	3
V:	[laughs]	4
S:	you want to sit in on it?	5
C:	I'd LOVE to	6
S:	oh	7
	good, you'll like this one	8
C:	[laughs]	9
	[	10
S:	this is one of my LEAST fave--well, she's	11
	not my least favorite client, she's just	12
	LAZY lazy lazy lazy lazy []	13
	[	14
C:	[laughs]	15
S:	well, I mean it's like this,	16
	[	17
C:	uh huh	18
S:	she, her review appointment wasn't for today	19
C:	uh huh	20
S:	it was FOR, uh, nine o'clock on the	21
	SEventh, but that wasn't the first one	22
	[	23
	[	24

V: that's too 25
 early wasn't it 26
 [27
 S: no that's the second, that's the second one 28
 V: that's too early wasn't it? 29
 S: Cindy Smith's 30
 first appointment was for the fourth, at 31
 eight-thirty on the fourth, then she called 32
 and said, Miss Swenson, Miss Swenson 33
 V: [laughs] 34
 S: my case is going to close, I want 35
 a new appointment, I said okay no problem 36
 V: [laughs] 37
 S: nine o'clock on the seventh 38
 [39
 C: on the seventh 40
 V: she 41
 didn't, did she not show up? 42
 S: she did not 43
 [showed] up, and she never called UNTIL 44
 MONday, when she said, Miss Swenson, Miss 45
 Swenson, I missed my appointment on 46
 Thursday 47
 [48
 V/C: [laugh] 49
 S: I said you DID? 50
 C: you DID? I didn't 51
 know that 52
 S: WOW! she said, and I just got a 53
 closure letter and my case is going to close 54
 she said, on the nineteenth, I said, YOU are 55
 corrECT, it will close on the nineteenth 56
 [57
 V: so you're not going 58
 to [leave any] negative action, are you 59
 gonna delete it today? 60
 S: I'm not deleting it 61
 until she comes in today with those 62
 appointment papers [] 63
 [64
 C: 'til she's physically, 65
 yeah 66
 S: yeah she said, if I, she said, well 67
 can't I mail the stuff in? I said Cindy, you 68
 don't WORK, I said 69
 V: what do you DO? 70
 S: you are 71
 COMing IN, you HAVE to come in for this 72
 appointment 73
 C: mm huh 74
 S: it's not, a thing, we 75
 only ask you to do it once a YEAR 76
 C: mm huh 77

S: and she said, well I don't have some of my papers, I said, those were sent to you on the twenty-second of MAY 78
79
80

C: uh huh uh huh 81

S: and I said, so I would like to know what the DEAL is, then she said, but I will be in there [], I said if you're not here at nine o'clock I'm not gonna to see you and you and I will NOT have an appointment, and [] 82
83
84
85
86
87
88

V: I have one, I have one that was supposed to come in on [] 89
90
91

C: I think she'll show 92
93

S: I don't KNOW 94
95

V: 'cause I have, I like to see my reviews, like the first couple days of the month, or [] the first couple days of the next week, and I had one scheduled for like the fourth, she called me and said, well, I have to change it because, bla bla bla, and this and that so I changed it, to last week, and I said, I really do not like to see my appointments this late because you know, if you don't get all your papers in, you know and this and that, you're case is gonna CLOSE 96
97
98
99
100
101
102
103
104
105
106
107

C: mm huh 108

V: so, um, she said, well, I have exams next week, and well, I, can I come on Monday? I just thought, oh boy, so if she doesn't have her papers in today 109
110
111
112
113

S: I know 114

?: [] 115

S: that's just like Barrie Teton was [dealing with it], she had two appointments in the beginning of the--or on the fourth, and the fifth, and, then on the fourteenth, she called all scared, and had, you know, and I said, no problem, just come in 116
117
118
119
120
121
122

C: mm huh 123

S: so, I said, come in at, you know, one-thirty, but be prompt because my, I don't like afternoon appointments, I said, I'll be honest with you, I do NOT make afternoon appointments because it breaks up my day too much 124
125
126
127
128
129

V: mmm 130

S: I said, 131
 she said well Miss Swenson, I have--and 132
 [you know] she doesn't work or anything, 133
 I said, alright, one-thirty, but that's 134
 the best I can do for you 135

C: mm huh 136

S: and she 137
 said okay, so what happens? she didn't 138
 wanna come in at one-thirty, she wanted 139
 to come in at TWO-thirty, so that's the 140
 one that DID, she just be-bopped in a 141
 little after two-thirty, about two-thirty 142
 five 143

C: eeww 144

S: YEAH, so I made her wait till 145
 three-thirty 146

C: eeww 147

S: and then, she came in, 148
 she said, #MISS SWENSON# would you like 149
 to remind me what time my appointment was? 150
 I said, yeah I would, your appointment was 151
 at ONE-thirty and you wasted an HOUR of MY 152
 TIME, because I don't want to get anything 153
 out of my desk 154

C: yup 155

S: until you get a chance 156
 to, you came in here, and I said, then, 157
 when I found out you were here at two- 158
 thirty, I said #I didn't know if you were 159
 coming or NOT, this is the THIRD appoint- 160
 ment# 161

C: mm huh 162

S: I didn't know if you were 163
 coming so 164
 [165

C: mm huh 166

S: I [brought my stuff] and said 167
 you wasted an hour of MY time, so I wasted 168
 an hour of YOURS 169

[DSS, 6/18/90, tape 1, side 1, segment 185-249]

Sherry's cynicism toward the client she is about to see is evidenced at the beginning of the segment when she says, sarcastically, "you'll like this one" [line 8]. She then immediately goes on to characterize the client as "LAZY lazy lazy lazy lazy" [line 13]. In the

remainder of the segment, Sherry illustrates what she means by "lazy." First, clients who repeatedly reschedule appointments are lazy. During the course of the exchange, Sherry refers to two clients, and Valerie refers to one, who cannot manage to keep their appointments. Not only are the two women Sherry refers to missing their appointments, but they're missing them even though they seemingly have no other obligations: in both cases, Sherry points out that the women do not work ("I said Cindy, you don't WORK" [lines 68-69]; "you know she doesn't work or anything" [line 133]). If the women are not employed, there is no reason for them to miss their appointments. Valerie underscores this sentiment when she asks, "what do you DO?" [line 70], implying that the women don't do anything; and when she refers to a client's reason for wanting to reschedule an appointment with the words "bla bla bla" [lines 101-102], as if clients could not possibly have good, substantive reasons for wanting to reschedule appointments. If they are missing their appointments, it is, simply, because they are lazy.²⁰

Throughout the exchange, Valerie and Sherry sarcastically imitate their clients, using whiny tones.

²⁰ Interestingly, Valerie's client, who is going to school, isn't immune to this characterization. In most cases, women who were trying to "better themselves" were given extra consideration by workers.

Sherry and Valerie speak in their clients' voices ten times in this exchange [lines 33-35, 45-47, 53-55, 67-68, 78-79, 83-84, 100-102, 110-111, 132, 149-150]; in six of them, they speak in high whiny tones [lines 33-35, 45-47, 53-55, 67-68, 78-79, and 110-111], and in one instance [lines 149-150], Sherry feigns an angry tone. These clients, in other words, are simply making excuses.

As with lying, the workers in this exchange take clients' laziness personally -- especially since workers work so hard. When relating what they say to their clients, Sherry and Valerie take on stern tones, as if speaking to children [lines 68-73, 79-80, 84-86, 103-107, 125-129, 151-169]. Sherry's story at the end of the exchange, of how she made a client who was late wait an hour, expresses a sense of indignation at clients who do not fulfill their obligations. Again, laziness is the reason why those obligations are not fulfilled -- whether it takes the form of missing appointments, not completing paper work, not being employed, or -- the focus of the following section -- not showering before going into the welfare office. Indeed, after her appointment with Cindy, Sherry commented that if she could take a shower before seeing her clients every day, her clients should be able to take showers before seeing

her, rather than just tumbling out of bed and rolling into the welfare office any old time.

Clients as Unclean

Although it was not referred to as often as dishonesty or laziness, uncleanliness on the part of clients was particularly repugnant to the workers. It was also the subject of jokes about clients. For instance, on one occasion, I accompanied Karrie and Valerie on a visit to Myra's home; Myra, it will be recalled, lived in a trailer with 30 dogs. Not only did both women bring a change of old clothes, but Karrie brought along a can of spray disinfectant. She displayed the can to the other workers as we were leaving the building and upon our return; the workers responded with jokes about the "dog lady." Despite the displays and the jokes, however, Karrie never used the spray [DSS, 6/27/90].

Unlike Karrie, who had brought in the can of spray disinfectant specifically for the purpose of her visit to Myra's trailer, Fran kept a can in her desk. On one occasion, as we discussed a client who had just left her office, she sprayed disinfectant around the chair in which he had been sitting [DSS, 7/3/90].

Sometimes uncleanliness co-occurred with other traits, as pointed out in the discussion of laziness,

above. In the following, Nora tells me about two clients who had come in for a pre-hearing conference.²¹ In this case, uncleanness co-occurred with stupidity.

Too bad you...weren't here yesterday when we had a ...pre-hearing conference. Empty, absolutely empty. Vacuum. I mean...they're both barely able, they smell, they had a very strong odor, and what they were complaining [about] had nothing to do with policy [DSS, 6/14/90, tape 1, side 2, segment 554-560].

Positive Constructions

While discussions and analyses of negative stereotypes of clients pervade the literature on welfare, positive characterizations of clients are notably absent. Although negative characterizations predominated in the Kenyon County welfare office, however, positive characterizations were not unheard of. Instead, what I found was a wide and complicated spectrum of characterizations and stereotypes, ranging from positive to negative, and taking different shapes and forms in different contexts with different clients. On occasion, then, workers did evaluate their clients in a positive fashion. In these cases, the evaluation tended to relate to one of two factors: either the clients in question failed to display the negative

²¹ During a pre-hearing conference, the client(s), their worker, the worker's supervisor, and sometimes a departmental representative, meet to see if they can address the problem without recourse to a legal hearing.

traits typically associated by the workers with people on welfare, or they exhibited traits that were positively evaluated in and of themselves, regardless of whether or not one was a welfare client.

At the broadest level, there were certain criteria that seemingly applied to every client, such as age, ethnicity and gender. Age, for instance, was a very important criterion, and an older person was almost always assured the sympathy of the worker, if not her positive character evaluation. These criteria, however, were not always equally weighed, and their import could be suspended in a particular case if something else waxed more important.

For instance, an African American woman in her early 20s, with two children and pregnant with a third, who had never been married, whose children had separate fathers, and who had never held a job, would, on an abstract level, be placed by the workers in this study in the category of "undeserving" poor. On the other hand, if she came in looking as if she had just showered, was "positively" engaged with her children (i.e., was not yelling at them to "shut your mouth and sit down," but rather coaxed them in middle-class fashion -- "here, Johnny, here's a toy for you, now do you think you could sit there nice and quiet for mommy and the nice lady?"), the negative weight of her

ethnicity, her young age, her "questionable" moral standing, and her poor work history could be minimized. In other words, age, gender, and race -- or, in the broadest sense, difference -- did not determine a worker's evaluation of a client, but rather provided resources that could be drawn upon in making an evaluation; the evaluation remained a negotiated phenomenon (Erickson 1984; Hymes 1981).²²

Rather than classifying all clients in a negative fashion, some workers had favorite clients. As noted above, a key factor contributing to such positive assessments was that, for some reason or another, the clients in question did not fit any of the negative stereotypes. In these cases, positive evaluation reflected an absence of negative characteristics, and thus in a sense clients were guilty until proven innocent; their innocence depended on a demonstrated lack of negative character traits. As already pointed out, many workers were suspicious of clients -- many had stories of trusting and going out of their way for clients only to get "screwed" in the process.

²² This is speculation based on my observations of worker-client interactions. Solid evidence for this claim, however, and insight into the shape that such negotiations took on a daily basis, would require detailed analysis of a number of actual worker-client interactions. Although one analysis of a worker-client interaction is included in this chapter, detailed and systematic analysis of multiple worker-client interactions is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

The positive characteristics most frequently assigned to clients can be summed up under the umbrella of "trying to make something of herself." This most often took the form of going to school. In other words, the client wasn't getting a "free ride" from welfare, but was working so that she could improve her circumstances and, by extension, those of her children. Such behavior -- going to school or receiving other work-related training -- was in marked contrast to the manipulation and laziness workers so often perceived in their clients, as described above. A second, and related, feature of this kind of positive evaluation was a strong impression on the part of the worker that the client wouldn't be on welfare "forever."²³ Valerie, for instance, once described a mother of three who was working towards a college degree as one of her "good" clients, because she seemed to be going somewhere, rather than sitting around doing nothing -- she would not, in other words, make a "career" of being on welfare [DSS, 6/20/90]. On another occasion, Edith expressed frustration over not being able to provide medical care for a client who was no longer working but was not yet 65 years of age. In her complaints about the system,

²³ Indeed, workers often made a point of showing me their thickest files, representing clients who had made a "career" of being on welfare.

she pointed out that the client had worked steadily for 26 years [DSS, 7/5/90].

Workers also made positive assessments of clients who followed departmental procedures -- who filled out their forms on time, provided their workers with timely notification of any changes, and so on. Nora, for instance, praised a client for getting in all her paper work on time; during her interview with the client, she told her that she had enjoyed working with her, and that she found her very cooperative [DSS, 6/29/90]. As in the case of clients who were going to school, clients who followed departmental procedures stood out from the crowd; in contrast to the clients discussed by Sherry and Valerie (see section on Clients as Lazy, above), these clients were not late for appointments, they did not try to reschedule appointments for flimsy reasons, and did not provide unconvincing excuses for not submitting required forms on time.

As stated, in addition to failing to display negative traits typically associated with welfare recipients, clients sometimes displayed characteristics that were positive in and of themselves -- in other words, traits that workers might have evaluated positively in any person, not only in welfare clients. Workers, then, sometimes simply liked their clients as people, because they were nice or friendly. Nora, for

instance, kept pictures of one of her client's babies in her wallet. The client in question, Shelly, was pregnant with her third child, and although she was transferring to another welfare office, she promised Nora that she would bring the baby to the Creekville office after it was born. "That made me feel good," Nora stated, later adding that Shelly had "a good head on her shoulders" [DSS, 6/29/90].

When workers felt that someone was "deserving" (my label, not theirs) -- either because they failed to display any negative characteristics or because they were simply "nice" -- they would go out of their way to help them. For instance, Shelly, Nora's client mentioned above, lived in Madrid, 30 miles from the welfare office in Creekville. At the end of their meeting, Nora made a tour of the office to see if she could find a ride for Shelly so that she would not have to wait for the bus. Karrie's efforts on behalf of Myra, the elderly woman who took care of stray dogs, provides another good example of this [see pp.203-204]. Harriet, who had previously worked with Myra, had, on one cold winter evening, invited Myra to spend the night at her house because she felt that Myra would not be able to keep warm in her trailer.

Finally, in addition to clients who evidenced traits not typically associated by the workers with

welfare recipients or who were nice and friendly, on one occasion I encountered a potential client, Sara, who, from her worker Peggy's perspective, "did not belong on welfare" -- she was deemed non-client. Indeed, as the interview progressed and Sara realized the extent to which her privacy would be intruded upon, she decided to withdraw her application for assistance. In our discussion after Sara left, Peggy said that she felt Sara would get on her feet soon, and that she would be just fine. She felt that Sara had withdrawn her application for reasons of privacy, and again, reiterated that "she didn't belong here." When I observed that Sara had seemed strong and dignified, Peggy agreed, and another worker, Ann, added that people like that (strong, dignified) weren't "client material" [DSS, 7/6/90].²⁴

This was the only instance of a non-client that I encountered during the course of my research at the welfare office. From Peggy's (and Ann's and my own) perspective, Sara appeared too competent to be on welfare -- an evaluation that implies that many people on welfare are in some way or another incompetent. Again, as with many positive constructions of clients,

²⁴ Although Sara as strong and dignified was my construction, Peggy and Ann agreed with it immediately, indicating that it was not incongruent with their view of Sara as non-client.

the construction of Sara as non-client was a construction in opposition to the norm.

The Social Construction of Clients' Characters: Two Examples

As Prottas (1979) points out, it is the business of welfare workers, as street-level bureaucrats, to construct clients from otherwise significantly more complicated human beings, a process sufficiently involved as to require trained workers. Workers, in other words, do not indiscriminantly apply ready-made stereotypes to their clients; rather, workers are actively engaged in interpreting clients' actions, in the course of which they may variously draw on, invoke, modify, and perhaps dismiss received stereotypes.²⁵

In what follows, I present two examples of workers' joint constructions of clients. In the first example, workers extrapolate from a particular case to make a generalization about all clients; in the second, a

²⁵ As Erickson and Shultz (1982) point out in their work on encounters between junior college counselors and students, there are limits to what can be attended to in any encounter, with the result that certain phenomena or attributes are stressed while others are ignored. Which are stressed and which are ignored is related to the institutional context of the encounter, and to the exigencies of the interaction. What workers paid attention to in their encounters with clients, then, reflected both the context of the welfare system and the negotiated aspect of the interaction itself.

worker draws on the data she has on one client in order to construct her as a particular type of person.

A General Case: Clients as Criminals

The following exchange between three workers (Judy, Becky, and Sherry), took place on the morning after a local stabbing had occurred in which clients were involved. The man who was murdered was one of Judy's clients, and the apartment in which the murder took place belonged to one of Sherry's clients. In their discussion of the case, the workers move back and forth between clients and criminals, often conflating the two.

B:	I thought they were probably down on the	1
	street, and he was just calling him names,	2
	and then they, they said he stabbed him	3
	right in the heart with kitchen knife	4
J:	as	5
	I say, they will all eliminate each other	6
	sooner or later so just let `em keep	7
	going TO it	8
C:	oh, you're talking about that--	9
S:	the stabbing last night	10
	[	11
C:	murder	12
B:	yeah	13
C:	in Grandville?	14
B:	[]	15
	[	16
C:	first one in four years or something they	17
	said? first one in the county in four years	18
	[	19
N:	[] I thought there	20
	had been one since then, you know, it don't	21
	seem like it's been that long	22
	{2.5}	23
S:	I guess	24
	they DO, I mean, he is just, he's just the	25
	SCUZ of the EARTH, and I mean, and there's	26
	no loss to ANYthing, not to ANYbody	27
	[	28

B: well, the county cop 29
told [son] to go down to the funeral home 30
and spit on him [laughs] 'cause [son] said 31
[32
?: [] 33
[34
J: he just got out 35
of jail in June, I just added him to the case 36
[37
B: he was 38
looking forward to kicking his ass and now 39
C: oh this 40
guy was on your case? 41
[42
B: [he's dead so he can't] 43
J: who's that? 44
C: the guy 45
who committed the murder? the guy who got-- 46
[47
S: all three of 'em 48
are 49
J: the guy who [], the guy who's DEAD, 50
I have to BURY 'em today 51
S: the one who did the 52
murdering probably just got out of jail and 53
[is on some case load] someplace 54
B: mm huh 55
S: I 56
wouldn't be a BIT surprised 57
J: you know, 58
that's just like [] 59
[60
S: it happened in MY client's 61
apartment, and her client got killed 62
[63
J: I know it sounds really cold hearted, but 64
you know, that's just like all those drug 65
gangs [] 66
[67
C: wait a minute, it happened in your 68
client's apartment 69
[70
S: apartment, [it was her client] 71
[72
C: it was your client that 73
got killed, now does anyone, is the guy who 74
killed anybody's client? 75
S: oh probably 76
[77
J: probably 78
S: we just haven't, yeah 79
J: they tend 80
to run with other clients, um, but that's 81

	like those drug gangs=	82
B:	=too bad they don't	83
	know when they have these parties, then they	84
	could just BOMB the houses	85
J:	yeah [laughs]	86
B:	you know [laughs] [	87
	[	88
C:	that's a little extREME	89
	[laughs]	90
J:	but, you know, like the drug	91
	gangs, if, if INNOCENT people didn't get	92
	killed	93
B:	yeah	94
J:	you know, I, I don't want	95
	innocent people getting killed, but if	96
	[	97
B:	yeah	98
J:	they just got, I mean, WHY BOTHER with the	99
	tax money for trying to STOP 'em? [laughs]	100
B:	yeah	101
J:	LET them do it, a, they're just killing	102
	each OTHER [laughs]	103

[DSS, 8/3/90, tape 1, side 1, segment 000 - 175]

In this segment, Judy, Sherry, and Becky move from discussing a particular group of clients to discussing all clients as particular types of people. Although I never heard such negative traits being attributed to clients in other contexts, in this context "criminal" and "client" are interchangeable. The workers are excited and agitated, as indicated by the frequency of overlapping speech, and -- with one exception early in the exchange [line 23] -- by a total lack of pauses either between or within turns at talk.

Early in the segment, Judy suggests that "they will all eliminate each other sooner or later so just let 'em keep going TO it" [lines 6-8]. The "they" in this phrase refers specifically to people like those who were

involved in the murder; but perhaps (again, in this context) it also refers to clients in general. Evidence for the equation of criminals and clients is provided at line 48, when Sherry suggests that it is reasonable to assume that all three of the men involved in the stabbing are on welfare, despite the fact that the workers are only sure about two of the men. At lines 52-54, Sherry again suggests that the murderer is also a client; and at lines 76-78, after I ask if the person who committed the murder was a client of one of the workers in the Kenyon County office specifically, Sherry and Judy say, in unison, "probably." The workers seem to be claiming that many clients are criminals -- or at least that many criminals are also welfare clients. As Judy points out, clients "tend to run with other clients...like those drug gangs" [lines 80-82].

Following the above exchange, Sherry goes on to describe her ideal prison, in which the worst criminals would be locked up with no guards, and given some food, water, and weapons. They would then kill each other off, and the prison could be plowed over and a garden planted in its place. Although Judy makes a comment about my possible reaction to the content of this conversation ("boy, Cati is going to wonder..."), both she and Becky go along with Sherry's description ("let 'em kill, kill each other," "like Lord of the Flies").

Shortly afterwards, when Ester, a supervisor, walks in, Becky and Judy explain to her what we have been talking about:

B: we're discussing variables in clients

J: we're discussing if all these clients just eliminated each other what a wonderful world we'd have, but then we'd have to look for another JOB

[DSS, 8/3/90]

Again, clients and criminals are the same here, and Sherry's story about putting criminals in prison and letting them kill each other off could be applied to clients as well as to murderers. The movement from client to criminal and then back again is smooth and unmarked. Moreover, in her vehemence, Judy later declares that she will take steps against the murdered man's wife: "and I didn't know he worked, so now I'm gonna charge his little wife and two children with a FRAUD." The wife, tainted by her husband, is now also a criminal.

Although negative talk about clients was common in the welfare office, such a venomous tone was rare. As pointed out above, Judy felt compelled to comment on what I might be thinking of what they were saying. Both she and Ester addressed the issue again later in the exchange. After Becky told Ester that the murdered man had previously been involved in assaulting her son, and that her son and the county police officer had joked

about going down to the funeral home to spit on the corpse, Judy turned to me and said:

J: this job makes you cold in the heart Cati,
it makes you a HARD person

C: [laugh]

E: it is--you gotta laugh at it or you, you go
nuts

[DSS, 8/3/90]

The exchange concerning the murder provides one example of workers' joint constructions of the people with whom they interacted on a daily basis. In this particular context, the categories "client" and "criminal" overlap, and the behavior of several people is generalized to encompass an entire group. In the following case, rather than extrapolating from a particular case in order to make a generalization about all (or a large segment of) clients, the worker extrapolates from various pieces of evidence to construct one particular client as a child abuser.

A Specific Case: Client as Child Abuser

Harriet had been having trouble with her client Lana, an overweight African American woman who wanted emergency needs funds to move to a new apartment. The trouble started, according to Harriet, when Lana wouldn't be straightforward with her about where she was currently living, and lied about having paid rent at her

last address. Harriet and Lana had several telephone conversations concerning this matter, during which hostilities were exchanged (i.e., Harriet accused Lana of lying, Lana expressed feelings of persecution). The trouble came to a head when Harriet discovered a recording on her message machine that sounded to her like Lana telling someone to hit and kick one of her babies. Apparently, Lana had been unaware that the machine had started recording. Harriet accidentally erased the tape segment, but was extremely upset by the incident and felt obliged to write a referral to the child protective services unit.

The following exchanges all occurred on the same day. During the course of this day, Harriet enlisted first myself, then another worker, and finally a child protective services worker in her efforts to construct Lana as a child abuser. In what follows, I trace these constructions, drawing on exchanges between Harriet and myself, Harriet and Lana, and Harriet and Sherry.

In this first exchange, Harriet tells me about the recording on her answering machine.

C:	was that yesterday?	1
H:	yes, after you called,	2
	it was in the afternoon, and I, I was	3
	gonna play it back, you know, to be sure	4
	I had the right phone number, and when I	5
	played it back on my machine, there was	6
	ANOTHER instance of her being on, appar-	7
	ently she had tried to call and my, #'cause	8
	I asked her about it when I did get a hold	9
	of her, I said, did you try to call twice,	10
	and she said, yes, they put me through but	11

your machine didn't give any message, # well, 12
all there was was her and the, you know, I 13
could hear a child crying in the background, 14
and SHE was saying "HIT 'EM! KICK 'EM! KICK 15
'EM! HIT 'EM!" 16

C: NO:: 17

H: {1} ye:s, and so {1} 18
you know, later I wanted, er, I, I went 19
to a protective service worker, to [name of 20
worker] and asked him to come listen to the 21
tape, think I could FIND it? I must have 22
accidentally ERASED it 23

C: o::h 24

H: so, I'm, I 25
talked to him though and, and I told him 26
[27

C: mm huh 28

H: that, you know, he just kinda GLOSSed over 29
it--"well the woman's under a lot of pres- 30
sure"--and, and "we don't know that it was 31
[32

C: uh huh 33

H: an adult doing it," you know, that she was 34
talking to, I said, adult or CHILD, what 35
kin--what mother, TELLS somebody to kick 36
[37

C: mm huh 38

H: and hit, because this child was rea:lly, 39
[40

C: uh huh 41

H: rea:lly CRYing in the background, and when 42
[43

C: [ttt] 44

H: I DID talk to her, I said, uh, Lana, did 45
you try to call me earlier? and she, that's 46
when she said yes, she had waited for, for 47
the tape, and I asked her what was going on 48
and she didn't say, so, I, you know, I want 49
to write OUT my protective service referral 50
this morning 51

C: mm huh 52

H: but he said he would 53
talk to her, when, she comes in 54

[DSS, 6/19/90, tape 1, side 1, segment 000-040]

In this first conversation of the day (it took place in the office lounge while Harriet was preparing her morning cup of coffee), Harriet tells me about the

recording on her answering machine. She begins by establishing that it was indeed Lana's voice on the machine, and then describes what it was that she heard: a crying child and Lana saying "HIT 'EM! KICK 'EM!" [lines 13-16]. My response at line 17, an emphatic and incredulous "NO::," supports Harriet's claim that what she heard on her machine was indeed noteworthy. Harriet then goes on to report both her conversation with a protective services worker, and how the protective services worker failed to take the situation as seriously as Harriet would have liked. My listening responses at lines 28, 33, 38, and 41 help Harriet along in her reporting, and my (ttt) at line 44 functions similarly to the "NO::" at line 17. Now the child is not just crying in the background, but is "rea:lly, rea:lly CRYing in the background" [lines 39-42]. At the end of the segment, Harriet points out that Lana wouldn't tell her what was going on when Harriet asked her about the message; this provides Harriet with an additional justification for writing a child protective services referral.

Later, when Harriet and I had returned to her office, Harriet tried once again to retrieve the message on her answering machine. She was unable to do so, however, although all the other messages she had received several days prior to and since Lana's call

were intact. Since she could not produce the actual message, Harriet chose to reiterate the distressing nature of what she had heard:

H:	I don't see, I, I guess I erased it	1
	[	2
C:	uh huh	3
H:	accidentally, you know	4
C:	hm::	5
H:	and I, he [protective services worker]	6
	didn't sound all that interested in,	7
	hearing it either but I, I just thought	8
	[	9
C:	huh	10
H:	it'd give him a better idea because	11
	it was, it was an AWful sound	12
C:	uh huh	13
H:	and it was {1}	14
C:	uh huh	15
H:	not a chi--it	16
	didn't sound like a child crying because	17
	they're upse:t or because they're, ANgry	18
	at something	19
C:	uh huh	20
H:	it sounded like a	21
	child that was being hurt	22
C:	o:::h	23
H:	and then	24
	to have, her standing there saying "HIT	25
	'EM! KICK 'EM!"	26
C:	uh huh	27
H:	"HIT 'EM"	28
C:	uh huh, so	29
	you're gonna write a referral then	30
H:	yes	31

[DSS, 6/19/90, tape 1, side 1, segment 328-339]

Again, Harriet clearly feels that the child whose crying she heard on her answering machine was being abused. Harriet is more specific here than in the first exchange concerning the nature of the crying that she heard; whereas in the first exchange she describes a child who was "crying", and, later, who was "rea:lly,

rea:lly CRYing" (i.e., seriously crying, as opposed to crying over something trivial), in this exchange, the crying sounds like that of a child "that was being hurt" [line 22]. And again, as in the first exchange, Harriet expresses shock at a mother who could encourage someone to hit her child.

Shortly after this exchange, Harriet presented further evidence for her interpretation of Lana's comments on the answering machine by citing the fact that Lana had lost custody of a child before. Although this had occurred seven years previously, when Lana was 16 years old, and for reasons unknown to Harriet, Harriet concluded, "so she's been abusive in the past."

Harriet's conviction that Lana was a child abuser, well-established by this point, is evident in the following interaction she had with Lana later the same morning:

H:	okay, and I, um, you are, I DID want you	1
	to talk to another gentleman in the office	2
	this morning	3
L:	who?	4
H:	okay his name is [name of	5
	child protective services worker]	6
L:	who is	7
	he?	8
H:	okay, he IS with protective services	9
	[	10
L:	I'm not	11
	talking to 'em	12
H:	okay, the reason a--the	13
	reason I DID it is because of that phone	14
	message yesterday	15
L:	WHAT phone message?	16
H:	okay,	17
	when I played my tape	18
L:	o:h, 'cause a some-	19

thing you heard in the background 20
 H: mm huh 21
 L: oh I'm not talking to him, I will NOT talk 22
 to him {1} and you can't make me I refuse 23
 to talk to him {1} I will not talk to him 24
 [25
 H: okay, WHY would you 26
 refuse to talk to him Lana? 27
 [28
 L: because I REFUSE to talk to him, 29
 #I will not talk to any protective services 30
 worker#, I have one child already gone, they 31
 will NOT get the twins 32
 H: okay, well they would 33
 have no REASON to take the twins= 34
 L: =#I don't 35
 wanna TALK# to him 36
 H: {1} okay, I guess TALKing 37
 to him would pro:bably-- 38
 L: #talking to him 39
 won't do any good#, #I will NOT talk to 40
 protective services# {1} I will NOT 41
 H: {1.5} mm 42
 kay, he'll assume that there's something to 43
 HIDE then probably-- 44
 L: #let him assume whatever 45
 he WANTS to assume, they have to FIND me 46
 first if they wanna to talk to me I will 47
 NOT talk to him, all he's going to do is 48
 say "what did you--" what difference does 49
 it make what you heard in the background of 50
 a conversation?# 51
 H: {1.5} okay, well I guess 52
 he'd wanna KNOW what was happening= 53
 L: =WHY is 54
 it his business "what is happening"? WHY is 55
 it his business "what is happening"? you 56
 know, TV, you know, some of the kids were 57
 watching wrestling, people HAVE VCRs 58
 H: mm huh 59
 L: people LIKE wrestling, people LIKE boxing, 60
 people LIKE sports, but NO, #everybody 61
 assumes 'cause you have kids and they hear 62
 somein' about kick and hit that# somebody's 63
 abusing children, I WISH I could go inside 64
 people's minds, and really find out where 65
 they're coming from= 66
 H: =I GUESS the reason I 67
 thought it was because it sounded like 68
 your VOICE 69
 L: it WAS my voice 70
 [71
 H: saying the "kick 72

	'em" the "hit 'em"	73
L:	oh, I LIKE boxing, and	74
	I like wrestling, I have, you know, friends	75
	who have VCRs who watch, who tape, you know,	76
	WWF DOES tape their matches, I get very in	77
	to it	78
H:	{2.5} well, I just thought I should	79
	explain to you WHY I did it, WHY I made the	80
	referral	81

[DSS, 6/19/90, tape 1, side 2, segment 267-302]

Nothing that occurs during this exchange convinces Harriet that she should withdraw her protective service, referral; in fact, Harriet and Lana are clearly at loggerheads, and neither is willing to accept the other's point of view. When Harriet mentions that she wants Lana to talk to "another gentleman in the office" [line 2], Lana is immediately suspicious, and as soon as Harriet admits that he is a protective services worker, Lana cuts in to declare her refusal to speak with him [lines 9-12]. Lana reaffirms her position an additional 10 times by line 41 (in less than one minute); she also speeds up her speech a number of times during the exchange, indicating her anxiety (she had, after all, had a child taken away from her before), and her need to literally "cut things off at the pass" [see lines 30-31, 35-36, 39-41, 45-51, 61-63]. Harriet construes Lana's refusal to talk to the protective services worker as an attempt to hide something ("he'll assume that there's something to hide" [lines 43-44]). This puts Lana in a difficult position, to which she responds by confronting

Harriet's "evidence." Although Lana had questioned Harriet's "evidence" earlier on [lines 19-20], the line of questioning she begins at lines 49-51 and 54-55 is more forceful. Not only does she in effect accuse Harriet of being unreasonable, Lana also recounts her version of what it was that Harriet overheard. Harriet, however has no response to Lana's story, despite her indication at lines 52-53 that an explanation from Lana was what was being sought. Instead, she summarily closes the topic.

After the interview, Harriet sent Lana out to the waiting room to wait for a bus pass to Madrid. It was at this time that the protective services worker approached Lana and more or less forced her to go to his office to talk. Prior the following segment, Sherry, another worker, had been describing to Harriet and me the interaction between Lana and the protective services worker; Harriet then reports to Sherry what Lana had claimed about the answering machine:

H:	...she just, you know, said that it, er,	1
	was probably the TV in the background and	2
	so forth that I heard which is a bull, you	3
	know	4
S:	bunch a bull?	5
H:	"I like, I like boxing"	6
	[	7
?	[]	8
S:	that's what she said?	9
	[	10
H:	[] yeah, so	11
S:	you shoulda	12
	said, #"you should like boxing, that's fine,	13
	but not on your KIDS"#	14
H:	well, she's trying to	15

	[	16
S:	you can't say	17
	that	18
H:	she was saying "hit 'em, kick 'em, hit	19
	'em, kick 'em" because of the boxing thing,	20
	but [you know] the little kid was	21
S:	bull	22
H:	crying in the background {1} BUT {1} so	23
	[	24
S:	so	25
H:	you know, I'm glad she didn't just get up	26
	and take off []	27

[DSS, 6/19/90, tape 1, side 2, segment 636-643]

Although I have no evidence, I am confident that, given Harriet and Sherry's relationship, they had previously discussed this case. This exchange, however, is the first recorded instance I have of Sherry's participation in the construction of Lana as a child abuser. As evident in the exchange, Sherry is an active participant in this construction. After clarifying Harriet's use of the word "bull" (Harriet, being a Christian fundamentalist, rarely used such words and thus tended to use them inappropriately) and hearing Harriet's report of Lana's version of the story, Sherry suggests what Harriet might have said to Lana [lines 12-14]. Sherry is clearly in agreement with Harriet's assessment of the situation, and shows her support not only at lines 12-14, but also at line 22, when she gives her assessment of Lana's story: "bull."

Later in the morning, Harriet spoke with the child protective services worker who had interviewed Lana. He claimed that he found no evidence on which to base an

investigation, and that all he could do was offer Lana counseling services on a volunteer basis. He did, however, state that Lana was "an accident waiting to happen." Harriet was not at all happy with this outcome; she had wanted a full investigation. As far as she was concerned, the child protective services worker had provided no evidence to contradict her assessment. A cursory look at the twins was insufficient in Harriet's eyes. Confused about the ability of an investigator to discern abuse on an African American child (at one point, she wondered out loud if bruises would be visible on dark skin), Harriet had wanted a thorough examination. This lack of evidence, along with Sherry's active support and my lack of challenge, contributed to Harriet's efforts to construct Lana as a child abuser.

Accommodation, Resistance,
and the Exercise of Power

In section 1 of this chapter, I outlined workers' perceptions of powerlessness. In section 2, I explored how workers construct their clients (either individually or as a group) as particular types of people with specific character traits. The concerted efforts of workers to construct their clients' characters indicates that they were not totally powerless, but had the

ability to create and impose meaning in the world in which they live. The workers' views of themselves and their managers included in the first section of this chapter also illustrate this creative ability.

In this section, I explore issues of power and powerlessness in more detail. I begin with a discussion of the "Pollyanna" and "Blues Boulevard" perspectives alluded to in the introduction to the chapter, following which I focus on workers' exercise of power. My concern is with how workers accommodated or resisted the oppression of their work worlds, and in what ways the power they exercised reflects accommodation or resistance to the constraints of AP work.

"Positive" and "Negative" Attitudes

As stated earlier, the workers in the Kenyon County welfare office were divided into those with "positive" and those with "negative" attitudes. Withorn (1984) claims that divisions among welfare workers are common. Factors she lists as contributing to division include work loads, client demands, and conflicting views of workers' roles (ibid.:44). In the case of the Kenyon County office, I suspect that the difference in AP supervisors may also have contributed to the division between "positive" and "negative" workers. Although all the workers complained about their supervisors, the

supervisor for the most vocal and notorious members of the "negative" group had a reputation for intrusion and sarcasm that was not shared by the other supervisors in the office. In addition, the workers felt that she was unwilling to confront management on their behalf.

As described above, the workers in the negative category situated themselves in "Blues Boulevard," a location name both chosen by the workers in that category and recognized by the other workers in the office. Those workers characterized as having a positive attitude had no name for themselves that I was aware of, but simply characterized their attitude as "positive." From the point of view of the workers on "Blues Boulevard," however, the other workers were "Pollyannas" -- overly cheerful optimists who played into the hands of management. Following is a description of how workers expressed these two attitudes in their talk.

The "Pollyanna" Perspective

The following exchanges I had with Sherry, both taken from the same conversation, illustrate the "Pollyanna" approach to powerlessness, the main features of which are an accommodation to and acceptance of situations that one feels powerless to change, and a focus on internal attitudes rather than external circumstances. Prior to this exchange, Sherry had been

describing the attitude differences between the "negative" unit and the rest of the workers. I then asked her to speculate on what would happen if the workers from the two camps were seated together after the move to cubicles that was planned for later in the summer. The following is her response:

S:	I figure it this way, I know Harriet is very	1
	upset, and a lot of 'em are, but as far as	2
	I'm concerned, the problem is that services	3
	is whining and those--they're gonna get	4
	those offices, and I could really make	5
	myself get upset and work myself up over	6
	this, thinking it's very unfair and I don't	7
	like it	8
C:	mmm	9
S:	and it's miserable and everything, and I've	10
	sat in cubicles and they're terribly loud	11
C:	yeah, I don't like 'em either	12
S:	in Golden county, but, um, so I could get	13
	myself worked up over this	14
C:	mm huh	15
S:	I could be really upset about it, if I	16
	wanted to, but then I have to ask myself,	17
	is it gonna do any good	18
C:	right, mm huh	19
S:	is making myself worry and sick and bitching	20
	about it and everything, taking all the time	21
	it takes to discuss it and everything, is	22
	that going to do any good?	23
C:	mm huh	24
S:	or are they still gonna put us in cubicles?	25
C:	mm huh	26
S:	and what I basically come to conclude is	27
	that basically they'll put us in cubicles no	28
	matter what we say or do	29

C: mm huh, mm huh 30

S: and um, even writing a proposal, it, it 31
 would be a good attempt but it's not gonna 32
 stop them from putting [us in them] putting 33
 us in cubicles 34

C: mm huh 35

S: so um I can either make myself sick by 36
 worrying about something that's going to 37
 happen anyway 38

C: mm huh 39

S: or I can just accept it and say, they're 40
 gonna do it 41

C: mm huh 42

S: and there's nothing I can do about it 43

C: mm huh 44

S: and um, it's just the way it is 45

C: mm huh 46

S: and, shit happens, and we don't like 47
 everything that happens to us, nobody said 48
 this job would be fair 49

[DSS, 6/29/90, tape 2, side 1, segment 627-641]

In the context of describing how much the "Blues Boulevard" workers "bitch" and complain (although Harriet, mentioned at the beginning of the exchange, was a member of the "positive" camp), Sherry presents herself as accepting reality: she has no control over management's decision-making -- "basically they'll put us in cubicles no matter what we say or do" [lines 28-29] -- and getting herself all "worked up over this" [line 14] is not worth the effort. Sherry reiterates

workers' lack of control or influence a number of times in this segment: "they're going to do it" [lines 40-41], "there's nothing I can do about it" [line 43], "it's just the way it is" [line 45], and "nobody said this job would be fair" [lines 48-49]. Her emphasis, then, seems to be on facing and accepting reality.

In this next exchange, Sherry recounts a confrontation she had with some of the "negative" workers in the computer room in which workers process clients' budgets (referred to as the LOA). Sherry tells the story in contemplating the possibility of having to sit near a "negative" worker after the move.

- | | | |
|----|--|----|
| S: | but I know, I get tired of it, and some- | 1 |
| | times I say stuff just off the top of my | 2 |
| | head, I don't know, how, if anybody else | 3 |
| | is like this, but one day I'll just have | 4 |
| | had enough, and I'll just be, like one day | 5 |
| | I was in the LOA--this was when they were | 6 |
| | real negative | 7 |
| C: | uh huh | 8 |
| S: | and they were just on and on and on and on | 9 |
| | and on, about the county and about this and | 10 |
| | that and they [can], you know, and they | 11 |
| | change these things, and I was tired of it | 12 |
| C: | uh huh | 13 |
| S: | and I was having a hard day anyway and it | 14 |
| | was clients and everything else--last thing | 15 |
| | I wanted to hear [was] them bitching | 16 |
| C: | uh huh | 17 |
| S: | and, I don't know, I was tearing out the | 18 |
| | paper [], something hit me at the right | 19 |
| | time and they said, yeah, they said, | 20 |
| | I don't remember what they said, they said | 21 |
| | something, somebody walked into the room and | 22 |
| | I said "hi, how are you?" and they said, | 23 |

they all looked at me as if I just said	24
somethin--they were all talking, not saying	25
a word to me	26
C: huh	27
S: and when I, this person walked in I said	28
"hi, how are you doing?" you know and stuff,	29
and they said "this is just our little	30
LOA," they all looked at me as if I'd done	31
something wrong	32
C: [sigh]	33
S: and they said, "how can you be so happy in	34
this miserable place?"	35
C: uh huh	36
S: and I said "you, if you're miserable, you	37
make yourself that way"	38
C: uh huh	39
S: and I said "if you are miserable your whole	40
life is miserable, you're miserable	41
everywhere"	42
C: uh huh	43
S: and I said "and I'm not gonna sit here and	44
listen to you make me miserable and sound	45
as shitty attitude as you sound"	46
C: uh huh	47
S: and I said "I have a family, I have people	48
who love me, I have a job, I get paid every	49
week"	50
C: uh huh	51
S: every other week, and I said, "I get, I	52
make fairly good money"	53
C: uh huh	54
S: and I said "I don't," I said "I'm sick of	55
it"	56
C: uh huh	57
S: I said "so just shut up, if I want to say,	58

hi, or sound cheery even if things miserable 59
in here 60

C: uh huh 61

S: that is my way of bringing myself up, it's 62
easy to sound down, it is harder to sound 63
happy" 64

C: uh huh 65

S: and I said "so if you wanna sound miserable, 66
do it on your Saturday" 67

C: [laughs] 68

[DSS, 6/29/90, tape 2, side 1, segment 644-663]

Having accepted the reality of her powerlessness vis-a-vis management, then, Sherry doesn't want to worsen the situation by cultivating a bad attitude -- which is exactly, in her view, what the "negative" workers do. Instead, people should be thankful for what they have in life and make the best of whatever circumstances they find themselves in. Although she was angered by the move, and felt that management had been deceptive in their dealings with the workers, Sherry felt constrained to count her blessings: "I have a family, I have people who love me, I have a job, I get paid every week" [lines 48-50].

Although she acknowledged the office hierarchy, Sherry seemed to remove responsibility for a "miserable" atmosphere from management -- the people who actually made the decisions about how the office would be run -- placing it instead on the shoulders of the workers, who

could decide, as individuals, to have a good or bad attitude. As such, the "Pollyanna" approach to the position of AP workers provides an example of accommodation to the hierarchical relationship between workers and management, and an acceptance of less than optimal working conditions.

The View From "Blues Boulevard"

Although none of the workers in the Kenyon county office were happy -- or even neutral -- about the move, the workers in the "negative" category -- most of whom were formerly located on "Blues Boulevard" -- were more vocal about their displeasure. For instance, after a staff meeting concerning the workers' move to cubicles, Fran, Ann, and Judy discussed possible strategies for undermining the move. One strategy consisted of recommending that all clients request official hearings, on the grounds that they could no longer be provided a guarantee of confidentiality; another consisted of situating clients' chairs so that they would intrude into the walk-ways between the cubicles, to make the point that cubicles were not large enough to accommodate interviewing needs [DSS, 7/13/90]. Given the powerlessness of their position, it was not surprising that the strategies of resistance these workers chose to

discuss were indirect ones, rather than ones in which they would confront the system directly (Scott 1990).

To the best of my knowledge, neither of the two strategies described was ever implemented. They illustrate, however, resistant perspectives, and resistant ways of speaking. Other forms of resistance discussed by the workers ranged from advising clients to request hearings and call their legislative Representatives to protest against policies that workers disagreed with; to derisive comments about supervisors and other managers; to plans to use the results of this study to help with union bargaining; to symbolic gestures, such as bringing toilet plungers to the office, as indicative of the "shit" workers had to wade through.

In the following exchange, Blues Boulevard workers debate two approaches to "telephone hour," the hour in the morning during which workers were required to remain at their desks in order to consult with clients over the phone. Prior to the exchange, Fran, Sally, and Peggy had been discussing time constraints in the office.

C:	plus you have phone hour	1
F:	well, some of us	2
	do, some of us ditty bop in and out anytime	3
	they feel like it [laughs]	4
C:	[get] that T-	5
	shirt on Fran ²⁶	6

²⁶ I am referring here to a T-shirt Fran had been given by several of her co-workers; the shirt had BAD ATTITUDE written on it.

F: I know it [] 7
 [] 8
 S: #I stay at my 9
 desk during phone time because that's 10
 what I'm ordered to do and when people call 11
 me and they need me to run to the computer 12
 and check on something# 13
 [] 14
 F: that's 'cause you're a sucker 15
 S: I SAY, 16
 I say 17
 [] 18
 F: [laughs] 19
 S: I'm not allowed to, I'm only, I 20
 can only answer the phone between eleven 21
 and twelve [] those are the rules 22
 [] 23
 F: that's 'cause you're a suck-ass 24
 S: NO:: because that keeps OTHER people 25
 [] 26
 F: suck right UP to 'em, do EVERYthing 27
 they tell you to 28
 [] 29
 S: from trying to call 30
 P: man when I got 'em on 31
 the phone I find out what the problem is, 32
 [] 33
 F: [laughs] 34
 P: and I tell 'em right THEN, I don't wanna 35
 call them back, I do it RIGHT then, I don't 36
 like calling people back 37
 S: I don't EITHER, 38
 but I tell 'em I'm, I'm not allowed to 39
 leave my desk [] 40
 [] 41
 F: I'm not gonna be LOCKED to 42
 my desk for an hour simply because my boss 43
 says I have to be 44

[DSS, 8/3/90, tape 1, side 2, segment 470-479]

This exchange is particularly interesting because it illustrates two contrasting approaches to resistance. Fran, who tends towards outright confrontation rather than subterfuge, finds Sally's more subtle form of resistance -- playing by the rules to such an extent that productivity and efficiency are undermined --

contemptible; in fact, she considers it a form of accommodation -- "you're a suck ass" -- rather than of resistance [line 24]. Sally, however, resists management by playing by their rules; her quick speech and sarcastic tones [lines 9-22] indicates that her seeming respect for office rules is not meant to be taken literally.²⁷ Peggy, on the other hand, does appear to be speaking literally, and seems less interested in issues of accommodation and resistance to management than in doing things in a manner that is comfortable for her; she takes care of each problem as it arises not because she wants to resist management, but because that is her preferred way of dealing with her work [lines 31-37]. Perhaps this is a form of resistance, however, insofar as Peggy does not seem to care if her preferences suit the needs of management; indeed, in claiming to deal with clients on the spot, she implies that she leaves her desk during phone hour (e.g., to work on the computers, which are located elsewhere).

In contrast to the "Pollyanna" approach, then, the members of "Blues Boulevard" tended to focus on external

²⁷ She also indicates, as discussed in the section on powerlessness in section one of this chapter, that workers need to manage clients' demands as well as the demands of various administrative rules: following the departmental rules "keeps OTHER people from trying to call" [lines 25-30].

factors (management, office hierarchy), rather than on internal states of mind. In their view, if they were angry, it was not so much because they chose to be, as Sherry would argue, but because management gave them good reason to be. The "Blues Boulevard" approach resisted both the rules and regulations of the office, and management (and "Pollyanna") views concerning appropriate worker attitudes.

The Exercise of Power

Thus far I have shown that AP workers were actively engaged in constructing their clients' characters, and images of both themselves and their managers. In addition, I have pointed out that workers had, within limits, practical power over their clients in terms of information, time taken to process applications, and so forth.²⁸ This power was a reflection of the hierarchical relationship between workers and clients: workers were gatekeepers to the welfare system and had some control over clients' access to welfare benefits. In this section, I examine some of the features of this practical power. My concern is with both workers' negative exercise of power over clients (e.g., making

²⁸ As noted above in the theme on powerlessness, workers' power over their clients was limited by both policy and the decision-making power of their supervisors.

them wait before processing their applications), and with their attempts to exercise power on behalf of their clients. Although my focus to this point has been on discourse, in what follows I draw on both discourse and on my observations of workers' other actions.

One subtle way in which the hierarchical relationship between workers and their clients was expressed was in the control of the agenda in their meetings. Workers' interviews of clients were routinized; when interviewing potential clients, conducting reviews of ongoing cases, or addressing emergency needs, workers followed routine sequences: they repeatedly asked the same questions and processed the same forms. Although routines varied from worker to worker, each individual worker had her own set of practices. One outcome of this routinization, and of the hierarchical relationship between workers and clients, was that workers controlled the agenda. The following transcript of the first few minutes of Fran's interview with a new applicant, Sandy, illustrates this phenomenon:

- | | | |
|----|--|-------------|
| F: | okay, scanned through your app., um, you're pregnant, is that the reason why you're applying for medicaid? | 1
2
3 |
| S: | mm huh | 4 |
| F: | and [] I'm looking at medicaid for you, without your husband? | 5
6 |
| S: | right | 7 |

F:	okay {2} applying for food stamps [leafs	8
	through application] {3} okay, if you're	9
	eligible for food stamps, do you want some-	10
	body else to be able to pick them up for	11
	you? besides you?	12
S:	no, I can do it	13
F:	okay, [shuffles through some papers] {1.5}	14
	okay, your driver's license, social	15
	security cards for you and your husband?	16
S:	I have his numbers	17
F:	do you have his card?	18
S:	no, I don't have his card	19
F:	does he have his card at home?	20
S:	yes	21
F:	okay	22
S:	I don't have a social security card, I know	23
	the number, that's all	24
F:	guess what? [laughs] you're going to go and	25
	apply for a social security card then	26
S:	okay	27
F:	{3.5} [gathers papers, hands them to Sandy]	28
	you can [] complete, one through seven-	29
	teen {3} and what I'll do is make a copy of	30
	that stuff	31
C:	when you're ready I can do the xeroxing for	32
	you	33
F:	okay, sounds good, Brian is your husband,	34
	correct?	35
S:	yes, Brian is my husband	36

[DSS 7/2/90, tape 1, side 1, segment 519-535]

This segment lasted approximately 1.5 minutes. Fran does not tell Sandy why she needs to know if Sandy can pick up her own food stamps [lines 9-12], or why she

needs the various forms of identification she requests [lines 15-16]. Although it is not a complicated issue to ascertain why Fran is asking the questions she asks, the point is that she says nothing to Sandy about why she is doing what she is doing (e.g., that the law requires Fran to verify clients' identities in particular ways; that whether or not Brian is Sandy's husband is significant for her grant determination). The interview continues in this vein for another 10.5 minutes, during which Fran asks numerous questions, and stops for long periods of time to write things down and gather the necessary forms. Finally, 12 minutes into the interview, Fran stops and explains to Sandy what the various forms she is providing are for, and how she will be approaching Sandy's application.

Workers also exercised negative power in more overt, or intentional, ways. These included manipulating the rules so that clients got the poorest service possible. This was particularly the case when a worker felt that a client had done something wrong, (e.g., lied) or had a major character defect (e.g., manipulative). The stabbing incident discussed above provides a good example of this. Judy, it will be recalled, was so disgusted by her murdered client that, since it turned out that he had had a job (obviously without feeling constrained to inform his welfare worker

about it), she decided to charge his wife with welfare fraud [DSS, 8/3/90].

Workers' reactions to clients who they felt lied is illustrated in the following exchange, which occurred during a break-time discussion of whether or not I would make a good AP worker. In addition to Fran and Sally, one of the AP supervisors, Edna, is present. The segment opens with Edna listing the characteristics of an effective AP worker.

E:	the only thing you have to be is	1
	intelligent, fast, organized, and, a	2
	medium line between empathy and hate	3
C:	[laughs] a medium line between empathy and	4
	hate=	5
F:	=you gotta add the ARROgance too, this	6
	job isn't any fun without a little touch of	7
	arrogance	8
E:	you have to know when to be	9
	empathetic and when to, get out your whip	10
F:	I already know that, see? I'm, I'm	11
	empathetic to all my clients 'til they lie	12
	to me, once they lie to me I HATE them and	13
	I won't give them anything [laughs]	14
E:	WHOA	15
	[laughs]	16
S:	[sarcastic tone] not reVENGE [oh	17
	yeah]	18
F:	yes it is [laughs]	19
E:	[sarcastic tone]	20
	you're supposed to do a TRAINING process	21
	with them, [regular tone] make them over-	22
	VERify but still give them what they're	23
	entitled to	24
F:	oh they get it evENTually	25
E:	okay, don't say you won't give it to `em	26
	[	27
F:	unfortunately they just	28
	have to--	29
	[	30
C:	[laughs]	31
	[	32
E:	just say that they have to JUMP MORE ROPES	33
	to get it, that's OKAY	34

F:	they just, they just	35
	have to wait a while	36

[DSS, 8/10/90, tape 2, side 1, segment 514-524]

This exchange illustrates one of the key ways in which workers can exercise power over clients -- namely, by making them wait.²⁹ Although Edna, the supervisor, feels compelled (perhaps by my presence) to point out that in the end clients get what they are entitled to, even she has no problem with the idea of making clients "jump more ropes to get it" [lines 33-34]. Making clients wait, or making it more difficult to get what they are entitled to, are considered legitimate responses to inappropriate behavior, in this case, lying. What workers mean by waiting in this segment concerns the official time periods during which applications must be processed. An application for AFDC, for instance, must be processed within 45 days of receipt. When Fran says, "oh, they get it eventually" [line 25], she means that she will wait until the end of the 45-day period to process an application from a client who she believes has lied to her.

²⁹ Waiting -- whether sitting in the welfare office waiting to see a worker, or waiting for food stamps to arrive in the mail -- was a ubiquitous feature of clients' interactions with the welfare system, and one that they often complained about.

Suspected character defects also provided justification for making clients wait, as illustrated by the following entry from my fieldnotes:

While I was in Becky's office discussing a case she had just been working on, Sherry came in to ask Becky what to do about a new client, Marie, who was waiting in her office -- Sherry wasn't sure what program to process her for. While asking for advice, Sherry told us a little about Marie: her first child was living with her mother in Washington, and she was one month pregnant with her second child. The reason her first child was with her mother was that protective services had removed the child from Marie's home on grounds of child abuse. When Sherry asked who had done the abuse, Marie claimed that other people living in the house had done it, but that the child was taken away from her because she had been there while the abuse was going on. Although it was not clear to me exactly what that meant, to Sherry and Becky it indicated that Marie had been physically present while her child was being abused. Sherry made a comment that we (the welfare department?) should simply open up the woman's belly and remove the second child from her womb. Becky commented that Sherry should at least make her wait the 45 days before processing her application [DSS, 8/8/90].

Finally, less serious behaviors, such as pestering or making demands of workers, provided additional reason for making clients wait. Sherry, for instance, said that when a client harassed her by repeatedly calling to check on the status of her case, she put the case at the bottom of her pile, even if she happened to be working on it at the time [DSS, 6/28/90].

Making clients wait was not the only way in which workers exercised negative power. A more sinister exercise of power consisted of not telling clients about the various programs they might be entitled to.

Clearly, not telling clients about programs to which they might be entitled (such as, for instance, transitional day care, a new program that contributed to clients' day care costs for up to one year after they stopped receiving AFDC), could have a considerable impact on their financial well-being. At the end of the exchange about lying discussed above, Fran added, "I won't offer them extra" -- the "extra" here referring to information regarding other programs or supplemental benefits. Clients who did not arrive at the welfare office already informed of the various programs for which they might apply might then not receive assistance to which they were legally entitled. This was especially the case with newly implemented programs that required considerable work on the part of workers.³⁰

While workers' exercise of negative power over clients was the most common, there were occasions on which workers attempted to exercise power on behalf of their clients. As pointed out above, when a worker felt that a client was deserving of help, she often would go out of her way to provide assistance, whether it took the form of looking for a ride for a client so that she wouldn't have to wait several hours for the bus; arguing

³⁰ This indicates that workers' various characterizations of clients were part and parcel of their attempts to manage and control their work loads (Protas 1979). See below for further discussion.

with supervisors to try to get exceptions for particular clients; telling clients about other programs and providing information on how to gain access to them; or, in Harriet's case, offering to house a client on a cold winter night.

Discussion

According to Prottas (1979), welfare workers, like other street-level bureaucrats, are overloaded with demands from both the organization for which they work, and the clients the organization is designed to serve. In addition, given their roles as gatekeepers, workers are subject to the tension between their role in serving the interests of the institution, and serving the interests of their clients (Erickson 1975; Erickson and Shultz 1982). Since workers cannot accommodate all the demands made of them, they inevitably must devise means to make their situations more manageable (Prottas 1979:109-110). Discretion in the application of certain departmental rules (e.g., those that aren't closely monitored by the department, or that need to be decided on a case-by-case basis), and unsanctioned categorizations of clients are two approaches taken by workers to help them maintain control and autonomy in a work environment in which they are given few official discretionary powers, and in which they are continually

bombarded by more -- and often conflicting -- demands than they can meet (ibid.: 93-4, 123). Following Prottas's logic, then, it could be argued that, just as the structure of welfare forces recipients to "cheat" in order to survive, so the structure and organization of the welfare bureaucracy forces workers to take short-cuts, among which are included unsanctioned categorizations of clients and the manipulation of information. Workers relationships with clients, then, must be viewed within the context of their relationships with the welfare department.

Situating workers' actions towards clients in the context of their place in the welfare hierarchy may provide some insight into the relationship between workers' exercise of power and issues of accommodation and resistance. On the one hand, workers' exercise of negative power may be a form of resistance to the constraints of AP work. From the workers' perspective, they are powerless; they have no say over policy or over the organization and conduct of work in the welfare office. The only place in which they may exercise their will is in their interactions with clients, despite the fact that in those interactions as well they are expected to follow departmental procedures. Their exercise of negative power over clients may be a product of this situation -- of their need to control their work

loads (negative characterizations of clients may reduce work loads by providing workers with justifications for not pursuing other programs or entitlements), and of their need to exercise autonomy and discretion wherever it is available.

While resistant to client demands and departmental control in the day-to-day, however, workers' negative exercise of power over clients may also serve to accommodate the hierarchical nature of the welfare bureaucracy. As discussed in Chapter 1, the welfare system has an interest in making welfare an unpleasant affair for clients. Accordingly, welfare workers are taught, in both subtle and direct ways, to be suspicious of clients. Their own constructions -- based on interactions with clients, on the stereotypes they bring with them to their work, and on the views of the welfare department as expressed in policy and training -- seem to reinforce this perspective. Another way to view workers' exercise of negative power over clients, then, is to consider it as both a reflection and reinforcement of the hierarchical nature of the welfare system. This is in keeping with Scott's (1986) claim that negative actions directed at subordinates (as opposed to superordinates) constitute accommodation rather than resistance; and Wineman's (1984) claim that oppressed

people often have access to and engage in some form of oppression against others.

As pointed out, however, workers also exercised positive power in behalf of their clients, albeit less frequently than they exercised negative power detrimental to their clients. As Prottas's (1979) has pointed out, welfare workers have a notion of what constitutes their "proper" role, a notion that includes doing a good job -- i.e., providing services to clients. Going out of their way to help clients who they believe are deserving of aid is one way of doing a good job, of making sure that the system works for those for whom it was designed. However, workers' attempts to exercise power in behalf of their clients often entailed resistance to the welfare system, confronting the constraints of both policy and management. In her confrontation with Ester concerning Myra (the "dog lady") for example, Karrie made a moral argument in her attempt to influence her supervisor so as to benefit a client. In another instance, Harriet decided not to process a recoupment on a particular case because she didn't want to place any additional burdens on the family in question. She took it upon herself to make what she considered to be an appropriate decision concerning the humane application of policy [DSS, 8/13/91]. And Sally once discussed with me her desire

to change the date on a client's application so that the client could receive insurance coverage for a previous injury. She claimed that she had done this kind of thing in the past, but that in this particular instance it would be too easily detected. Sally was fully aware that such an action, if discovered by management, would place her job at risk [DSS, 7/30/90].

In all three cases, the workers attempted to (or did) bend the rules to benefit their clients. Indeed, both Harriet and Sally deliberately broke rules. Such actions could have had serious ramifications; Harriet could have been subject to departmental reprimand, and Sally could have lost her job. These acts clearly are not examples of accommodation to welfare policy and management; rather, they are examples of resistance to policies that the workers felt were inappropriate or inhumane in particular cases.

In sum, workers' exercise of power -- whether negative power over clients or positive power in their behalf -- may be interpreted in terms of accommodation and resistance to the details of the workplace, and to the hierarchical organization of the welfare bureaucracy. In the following chapter, I explore the relationship between workers and clients in more detail.

CHAPTER 5

COMEMBERSHIP

If there is a single distinctive genius to the American political/economic/social system, it has been its ability to create and sustain deep divisions among oppressed people (Wineman 1984:159).

The infrastructure of the welfare state...creates the basis for cross-class alliances among women....the welfare state has generated powerful cross-ties between the different groups of women who have stakes in protecting it (Piven 1984:18).

In Chapters 3 and 4, I explored workers' and recipients' constructions of each other. Although there were some positive constructions on both sides, the vast majority of recipients' and workers' characterizations of each other were negative. The data provided thus far, then, indicate that women receiving welfare and women working for the welfare system do not consider themselves to have much in common. This finding supports Wineman's claim, and has negative implications for the potential of cross-class alliances to which Piven refers.

In this chapter, I focus specifically on the issue of division and alliance between workers and recipients. The chapter focuses on similarities and differences in the women's backgrounds and views, and, in keeping with the emphasis in Chapters 3 and 4, on how the women talk about each other. I begin with a discussion of issues that seemed to perpetuate the divisions between recipients and

workers, following which I examine both potential bases for comembership and the extent to which those bases were recognized. As will be discussed, my data provide little evidence of expressions of comembership between recipients and workers.

Following Erickson (1975a) and Erickson and Shultz (1982), comembership is here being used to refer to a recognition of similarity and commonality, much as it was used in the discussion in Chapter 3 of welfare rights groups (see also Shultz 1975).¹

Issues Working Against Comembership

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, workers' and recipients' references to each other were often marked by hostility and distrust. This seems to be a common feature of welfare departments throughout the United States (Sidel 1986; Withorn 1984). Withorn (1984) outlines a number of factors that may contribute to the antagonism between

¹ Erickson and Shultz (1982:35) focus on comembership based on "attributes of shared status that are particularistic rather than universalistic;" in other words, those that are directly or indirectly determined by birth, versus those that are potentially achievable by anyone. Although I am using comembership here in the more simple sense to refer to the recognition by workers and recipients of any commonality, the dimensions of comembership I am most interested in do, in fact, concern particularistic attributes, such as gender and socioeconomic class.

workers and recipients, concomitantly militating against the establishment of comembership:

- departmental training, which, either intentionally or through the reinforcement of societal stereotypes of poor people, serves to distance workers from recipients.
- workers' roles as gatekeepers to the welfare system, which places workers and recipients in an unequal power relationship.
- professionalism, which "serves to reinforce dominant class and race differences and to disallow the politicized and personalized sense of one's work" (Withorn 1984:41).
- standard bureaucratic procedures.

In addition, Withorn emphasizes what she calls "woman-hating," an ideology of distrust that fosters distance between women. One form that this "woman-hating" takes relates to workers' judgments of recipients' life choices. In a society with particular views concerning what is realistic and appropriate for women to do, workers -- many of whom are both employed and responsible for care-taking in their families -- may negatively judge or feel threatened by recipients who "choose" welfare (ibid.:40). Similarly, recipients' need to assume "client" roles in their relationships with other women conflicts with societal views of men as authority figures, and with a view of women as allies (ibid.:42). According to Withorn (ibid.:43), "the need for women clients to get what they want from the system over which women workers have little power makes the underlying similarities fade away." In

what follows, I explore in more detail some of the factors that contribute to the divisions between workers and recipients.

Contrasting Views

Recipients and workers had a number of conflicting views of similar issues. While workers and recipients agreed that welfare engendered poor habits, for instance, they differed in their explanations of this phenomenon. Recipients believed that insufficient support provided by the welfare department was what lay behind the development of negatively valued behaviors, such as irresponsible spending habits and lying. In contrast, some workers contended that public assistance programs were often too easy on recipients, resulting in poor work and spending habits. While recipients believed that welfare payments were insufficient, workers believed that they were perhaps too high, or too accessible. Finally, while recipients felt that the system was structured in a way that prevented them from severing their ties to the welfare department, some workers felt that welfare provided recipients with few incentives to remove themselves from the relief rolls.²

² Interestingly, this set of contrasting views mirrors the stances taken by "left-wing" and "right-wing" participants in debates concerning welfare reform. As Piven and Cloward (1987) point out, the argument against
(continued...)

Structural Locations and Personalized Relationships

Women on welfare and AP workers are in structurally antagonistic positions. The business of recipients is to try to qualify for benefits, and the gatekeeper to these benefits is the AP worker. Recipients know that although there are rules and regulations, there is also considerable flexibility in the system: workers have 45 days to process applications; there are numerous programs that can be applied for; and workers have the option to apply for exceptions.³ What this means is that part of

²(...continued)

welfare made by the right during the Reagan administration claimed that welfare caused the disintegration of moral behavior (with regard to reproductive behavior, work habits, and family composition). This seems to be the stance of some of the workers: welfare is too easy on recipients, and fosters both laziness and irresponsibility. In the view of Piven and Cloward (1987:37), the perspective of recipients is more accurate:

It is not receiving benefits that is damaging to recipients, but rather the fact that benefits are so low as to ensure physical misery and an outcast social status. Even these benefits are given only under close surveillance...and are conditioned on modern rituals of degradation such as publicized "hot lines" encouraging relatives, friends, and neighbors to report information on welfare recipients -- all of which surely have disabling and demoralizing effects.

In other words, current welfare programs are "so punitive and stigmatizing that they [recipients] do indeed come over time to produce some of the demoralizing effects attributed to the fact of social provision itself" (ibid.:34).

³ As Prottas (1979) points out, these factors are probably not common knowledge among all recipients -- which is why a worker's decision to either provide or
(continued...)

the business of recipients is to enlist the help of workers.

The business of workers is not only to process applications, but also to manage out-sized work loads and keep from "being taken." The systems set up to deal with noncompliance and fraud ("sanctions" and "fraud referral") place considerable burden on workers to discern honesty and dishonesty on the part of recipients. Indeed, as Harriet explained to me, the in-house training session on "listening skills" that she attended focused not on empathy, but on learning to "read between the lines" [DSS, 6/25/90].

One result of this situation is that, although much of what goes on between workers and recipients is a manifestation of their locations in the system and of the imperatives of their respective situations, a great deal of what goes on between them is personalized. As discussed in Chapter 4, workers often experienced recipients' attempts to manipulate the system in order to survive as personal insults: recipients were lying to them, and trying to get extra money from them. On rare

³(...continued)

withhold information can have a serious impact on her client's well-being. While all (or most) recipients may be unaware of the various programs available to them, of exceptions, and so on -- in other words, of the details of workers' power -- it is nevertheless the case, as discussed in Chapter 3, that recipients are fully aware of the existence of workers' discretionary powers.

occasions (see below), workers contextualized recipients' behavior, viewing it in terms of poverty and desperation. More often than not, however, recipients' negative actions were viewed personally as affronts.

In addition, requests from recipients may also have been interpreted in somewhat personal terms; recipients' appeals for money or food were, after all, directed at workers. Evidence for a personalized view of requests comes from workers who spoke of a need to maintain some distance between themselves and their needy clients. Debbie, for instance, spoke of the need to develop a sense of humor and cultivate a certain distance from recipients:

you have to be able to detach yourself from a lot of this...or you can become very emotionally involved with the people, when they're in trouble, because we are kind of like the last resort, you know, and if you can't help somebody...there's no where else they can go, more or less [DSS, 8/17/90].

Judy and Ester made a somewhat similar point when explaining their callous approach to a recent stabbing that had involved welfare recipients:

J: this job makes you cold in the heart, Catí, it makes you a HARD person

C: [laugh]

E: right, it is--you gotta laugh at it or you, you go nuts

[DSS, 8/3/90]

There is a tone of responsibility in Debbie's comment, as if she has to struggle against feeling personally responsible for the individuals whose

applications she processes. Although such a stance is not immediately evident in Judy's and Ester's comments -- which were made in the context of a discussion in which clients were being equated with criminals -- they nevertheless reflect a need to be distant, a callousness developed of necessity. Consider the following entry from my field notes:

Today I introduced myself to Edna, one of the AP supervisors. She asked me to shut off my tape recorder and then began discussing the troubles that AP workers have. She talked about feelings of frustration over not being able to really help people because the money provided through the various programs is insufficient. She also spoke of the frustrations involved in having to deal with policies that provide money for those who don't need it (her example was of paying for hotel rooms for adolescents who are "homeless" because they don't want to abide by their parents' rules), while bypassing those who do need it (her example was of a man with five children who just lost his wife in a car accident). According to Edna, many workers suffer from "burn-out," the signs of which include ulcers, migraines, taking illegal drugs, and hostility towards clients [DSS, 6/11/90].

Workers, in other words, face sorrow and desperation on a daily basis; and although they are responsible for responding to it, they have little control over the mechanisms or the sufficiency of the department's programs. The hostility to which Edna refers -- like Debbie's detachment, Judy's cold-heartedness, or Ester's need to laugh -- may be a manifestation of this contradiction between responsibility and control -- a result which, in turn, works against the establishment of alliances between workers and their clients.

Sometimes the personalization of the worker-recipient relationship was less direct. In the following exchange, workers make a connection between their pay levels and welfare benefit levels. The exchange begins with workers discussing the possibility of using my final report to help bolster union efforts to get pay raises. By the end of the exchange, the workers are discussing how much money "they" send out to recipients in the form of welfare grants and food stamps. The participants are Peggy, Fran, Debbie, and myself. Peggy begins by pointing out that the union is fighting the welfare department's categorization of workers.

- P: 'cause they're fighting the decision that we were one of the, um, didn't agree with their little categorizing procedure 1
2
3
- C: uh huh 4
- P: and I don't see how they could, but the [thing is], but if they rated us too high they'd have to pay us, see? 5
6
7
- C: right 8
- P: so they, I'm sure they just deliberately scored us in the category they wanted us in 9
10
- F: of course 11
- P: because then they couldn't afford to give this many people [right] that kind of a raise 12
13
14
- C: uh huh 15
- P: but it's in court, right Fran? 16
- F: well, it's for the com--comparable work [law-suit] 17
18

D: how many AP workers are there state wide? got 19
any idea? 20

P: ten thousand? 21

D: is there that many? 22

F: I thought it was somen' like eight five, 23
eight seven 24

P: somen' like that, a lot 25

D: that is a lot 26

C: uh huh 27

D: when you multiply that by fifty thousand 28
dollars a month for [laugh] each person 29
[laugh] that we give away, I figure I give 30
away fifty thousand dollars a month 31

C: yeah? 32

P: at least 33

D: we send out a quarter of a million in 34
food stamps 35

C: from this office? 36

D: from this county, a month 37

C: a month? 38

D: yes 39

C: are you kidding? 40

D: no, I asked accounting about that 41

C: whoa 42

P: when I did food stamps I had a million 43
dollars worth of food stamps in my [socks] 44
at a time, in Mable County 45

F: that's, that's something that you should do 46
too, is talk to people in accounting 47

P: [can't decipher] 48

F: and find out what kind of emergency needs do 49
they process for us 50

C:	uh huh	51
F:	what kind of EP checks they process	52
C:	uh huh	53
F:	how much food stamps, all the other stuff	54
C:	pheh	55
D:	yeah, I asked accounting [how many food stamps a month]	56 57
F:	that would give you a little black and white stuff to add to your report, your, your thesis	58 59 60

[DSS, 8/3/90, tape 1, side 1, segment 349-373]

During the first part of the exchange, Peggy, Fran and Debbie are discussing the struggle between the department and the union over workers' pay raises. At line 19, Debbie asks if anyone knows how many workers there are state-wide. Her reason for asking this comes out at lines 28-31, when she makes a point about the ratio of workers to dollars given out in assistance. She herself claims that "I give away" \$50,000 a month in assistance [lines 30-31]. The remainder of the exchange is taken up with the issue of assistance levels: Peggy claims that she was distributing \$1,000,000 in food stamps a month in the county in which she had previously worked [lines 43-45]; and Fran encourages me to get figures on how much money is distributed via the various programs each month [lines 46-60] (putting the figures in my report would help to bolster workers' claims that they are responsible for an

inordinate amount of money and thus should be appropriately compensated).

The women's pronoun usage in the above is indicative of the personalized nature of the worker-recipient relationship. Debbie states that "I figure I give away fifty thousand dollars a month" [lines 30-31], and Peggy states that "I had a million dollars worth of food stamps in my [socks] at a time" [lines 43-45]. Fran also refers to workers when she suggests that I check with the accounting office to see "what kind of emergency needs to they process for us" [lines 49-50]. As noted in Chapter 4, this kind of talk is representative of general pronoun usage in the welfare office. On one occasion, for instance, Sherry was telling me a story about an "obnoxious" recipient: "she said, you have never helped me with rent, and I said, what do you mean? I never helped you with rent?" [DSS, 6/14/90]

Recipients also personalized their relationships with the welfare system. Although they on occasion interpreted workers' actions in the context of work loads or welfare policy, like workers, they most often interpreted the others' actions in light of their personality characteristics. They also often viewed the outcomes of

their interactions with the welfare system as artifacts of their relationships with their workers.⁴

Some examples of this approach were provided in Chapter 3. For instance: "it [what you get] depends on who your case worker is," and "discrimination against personality [on the part of workers], that's a major problem" (LIFE, 4/29/90). On another occasion, during an MWRO meeting, Bobby spoke of her encounter with an African American worker who she believed was being less than helpful; in her frustration, she challenged the worker: "what the fff do I have to do? Paint myself to be a nigger?" (MWRO, 3/7/90). While the other participants in the meeting confronted Bobby's racism, arguing that recipients cannot afford to be divided along racial lines, no one questioned the divisions and antagonisms between recipients and their workers.

In the following exchange, Leslie refers to the personal aspects of her relationship with her worker in attempting to explain an unexpected change in her food stamp benefits. Leslie had called me at home several days prior to an MWRO meeting to present her problem, and I had suggested that she attend the meeting in order to get more knowledgeable advice. In what follows, Leslie and I present her problem to the group.

⁴ As Prottas (1979:128) points out, "for the client, the bureaucrat's behavior is the behavior of the agency."

L: I've been living in, uh, Canterbury for almost three years--no it's been about two and a half years--and my food stamps were down to fifty-five dollars 'cause my rent's seventy-four, and I get child support most of the time, usually it's fifty dollars, but, [] my food stamps would be fifty-five, and it just didn't ever seem right, and then about four or five months ago, she upped it to eighty-nine and I was getting fifty dollar child support checks regularly at this time, then all the sudden for this mo--month, I get a hundred and one, I've never received a hundred and one, since I've lived there, I used--

C: in food stamps?

L: yes, that's the highest I've ever received, most of the time I lived there I got fifty-five dollars, a month, and all the sudden out of the clear blue sky, it went up

C: with no explanation?

L: nope, not, mm mm, and so I was like, there's something wrong, we don't get along, we don't argue, but, um, like when I first met her I told her I wanted to go to school full time, she asked me why, and I told her so I could have her seat, so I could sit where she's sitting, and she just looked at me like I had lost every little bit of sense I had, and so, we, from that day on, we never got along, 'cause I'm very, I speak my mind, and if I find something out that she's wrong about I tell her about it, and then I speak to her supervisor, and so, we don't, but if something needs to be raised, she'll never raise it unless I call her, if something needs to be dropped, it's dropped immediately, so, she doesn't, we just, you know, so I don't think there's something right

[MWRO, 3/7/90, side 1, segment 044-080]

Leslie's perception of her relationship with the welfare system as personalized is evident at line 9, when she states that "she" -- her worker, not the welfare

department -- increased her food stamp allotment.

Leslie's interpretation of this unexpected change in terms of her relationship with her worker is evident at lines 23-31: she moves from a description of the changes in her food stamps allotment to a description of her relationship with her worker, which she characterizes as hostile. When Leslie told her worker that she wanted to attend school full time "so I could have her seat, so I could sit where she's sitting" [lines 26-28], her worker "looked at me like I had lost every little bit of sense I had" [lines 28-30]. Their relationship had been unpleasant ever since.⁵ Although Leslie looks to her worker's actions (rather than to those of the welfare department) for an explanation of the sudden increase in her food stamp allotment, she is nevertheless suspicious: as she states at lines 34-38, her worker is quick to decrease benefits, but slow to increase them. Leslie concludes that "I don't think there's something right" [line 39].

The relationship between workers and recipients, then, was personalized -- they were, after all, frequently engaged in face-to-face interaction with each other. In the view of recipients, workers were not simply blind instruments of policy, but gatekeepers who chose, for their own idiosyncratic reasons, to help or hinder their

⁵ I suspect that what the worker took as a threat of usurpation, Leslie meant as an expression of a desire to have a job similar to or as good as that of an AP worker.

clients. Likewise, in the view of workers, recipients approached not the system, but individual workers, whether the approach consisted of appeal based on real need, or manipulation based on laziness.

This personalization of the recipient-worker relationship was, moreover, couched in primarily negative -- or at least distancing -- terms. Recipients' and workers' different positions, both in the world at large and in the welfare hierarchy in particular, were made evident in their face-to-face interactions; thus recipients' appeals based on desperation contrasted with workers' positions of relative economic comfort and their power over recipients as gatekeepers to the welfare system. In this context, recipients' efforts to manipulate the "system" in order to survive were transformed into attempts to manipulate individual workers. And processing applications for the welfare department became, for workers, an exercise in which they provided individual recipients with food stamps or AFDC checks. The nature of the encounters between workers and recipients, then, -- which was the primary expression of the relationship between the welfare bureaucracy and its client population -- served to accentuate the differences between these two groups of women.

Legitimizing the Other's
View: Towards Comembership

While relationships between workers and recipients are often marred by hostility, there is potential for women workers and recipients to develop alliances. The welfare system is, according to Withorn (1984:46), "centrally defined by women's roles and women's issues." Recognition of this by recipients and workers would provide the grounds for the development and expression of comembership. In this section, then, I focus on possibilities for and expressions of comembership.

Potential Bases for Comembership

- A: it'd be really interesting to, to find out when you get all through with this
- C: mm huh
- A: if a profile of an AP worker and a profile of a client are very very much alike
- C: you were the one, that was you who said you wanted to know the
- A: right
- C: similarities, uh huh
- A: like
- C: yeah
- A: a whole, all over, overwhelming sense
- C: right
- A: of powerlessness
- C: right

A: and we in a sense are as trapped as they are
[DSS, 6/28/90, tape 2, side 1, segment 264-271]

In this exchange, Ann, a worker, explains to me that workers and their clients have something significant in common. Ann places AP workers and recipients in the same category: both groups of women are trapped in the welfare system, and both suffer from an "overwhelming sense of powerlessness." How workers viewed being "trapped" in their jobs, and how recipients saw themselves as "stuck" on welfare, were discussed in the preceding chapters. The perception of being inextricably tied to the welfare system was thus common to both recipients and workers. Below, I explore some of the features of this tie.

Shared Backgrounds, Shared Constraints

As noted in Chapter 1, women are the principal subjects of the welfare system (Fraser 1989; Piven 1984; Withorn 1984). Both women who work for the welfare department and women who receive public assistance are tied to the welfare system through financial necessity. In brief, the AP workers in this study were dependent on the welfare department for their paychecks, which, as outlined in Chapter 4, they knew they would be unable to duplicate in any other employment sector. For their part, recipients were dependent on the department for their monthly assistance checks, which, given both the kinds of

jobs to which they had access and their child care needs, they also could not duplicate elsewhere. In what follows, I review in more detail some of the features of the women's backgrounds that contributed to this shared financial dependence.

A comparison of the backgrounds of the recipients and workers in this study reveals several similarities that may help to account for their financial ties to the welfare system. The most striking similarity concerns paid employment. As indicated in Table 3, the kinds of jobs that recipients had or were currently holding were strikingly similar to those that workers had held prior to becoming AP workers. The majority of the jobs the women held in common (with the exception of nurse, lab technician, and perhaps factory worker) were low-paid, low-status jobs. In addition to the ten common job categories, many of the job categories that recipients and workers did not share were nevertheless similar in terms of pay and status (janitor, bakery worker, dry cleaning worker, farm laborer, etc.). The difference between the two groups is that, in the category of jobs not shared, workers held more "professional" jobs in bookkeeping, teaching, management, and the like; in addition, workers did not report engaging in any illegal work activities, such as prostitution or check stealing. Nevertheless, the vast majority of workers had been clerical workers prior

TABLE 3: WORKERS' AND RECIPIENTS' EMPLOYMENT HISTORIES

Jobs Held in Common by AP Workers and Recipients

Restaurant worker (cook/waitress)
 Clerical worker
 Domestic worker
 Cashier
 Bar tender/server
 Factory worker
 Day care worker
 Nurse
 Lab technician
 Government reporter/inspector

Jobs Not Held in Common by AP Workers and RecipientsAP Workers

Community aid
 Safety officer
 Janitor
 Bakery worker
 Dry cleaning worker
 Data operator
 Computer operator
 Library aid
 Bookkeeper
 Teacher
 Store manager

Recipients

Carnival worker
 Farm laborer
 Street vendor
 Sewing (alterations)
 Gas station attendant
 Tutor
 Illegal:
 Check stealing
 Prostitution

to becoming AP workers (see Table 2, Chapter 4); and recipients, as well as workers, listed several "professional" type jobs, such as math tutor (junior college level), lab technician, and nurse. Despite the variations, then, and in terms of both income and status, the women's employment backgrounds appear more similar than different. Clearly, both recipients and workers suffered from the general economic oppression of women in U.S. society -- from occupational segregation, in which women are restricted to certain forms of work (Ehrenreich and Piven 1984), and from the attendant low level of women's earnings relative to those of men (Shortridge 1984).⁶

As discussed in Chapter 4, workers' educational credentials, with few exceptions, placed constraints on their income-generation possibilities. Only 18 percent of the workers in the Kenyon County welfare office had college degrees, which is close to the state-wide figure of 20 percent (Wertkin 1990). The jobs that the women had prior to becoming AP workers testify to the limited economic opportunities that accompany minimal educational

⁶ AP work, being in the "helping" professions, clearly fits into the category of "women's" work. As Wertkin (1990) has pointed out, the majority of AP workers in Michigan -- as in the rest of the country (Fraser 1989; Piven 1984; Withorn 1984) -- are women. The exception in Michigan concerns the high rates of pay that AP workers receive relative to those received by AP workers in other states (Wertkin 1990).

credentials. In addition, as pointed out in Chapter 4, the families from which the workers came were not, by and large, well-off. Indeed, one of the workers grew up in an AFDC family, and another had a sister who was currently receiving AFDC.

A similar situation held for the welfare recipients included in this study. Of the twelve women I interviewed, only four (25%) had college degrees;⁷ of the remaining eight, six had high school diplomas and two had not yet completed their high school education. And again, as with the welfare workers in Kenyon County, the jobs that the welfare recipients had held were primarily low-paid "women's" jobs.

There was a greater difference between the two groups of women in their relationships to men and children than in their educational and employment backgrounds. Of the welfare recipients, eight (67%) were divorced; and they were all, at one time or another, single mothers. In contrast, the vast majority of the workers were currently married (13 women, 77%); only seven (42%) had been divorced, and only four (24%) had been or were single mothers. As a group, then, AP workers were more protected from poverty, both because of their currently well-paid jobs as AP workers, and because of their marriages to

⁷ This figure includes Dee, who was close to completing her degree at the time of our interview.

income-generating men. The latter, according to Stacey (1990:341), is a major contributor to class differences among women:

In the emerging class structure, marriage is becoming a major axis of stratification because it structures access to a second income. The married female as "secondary" wage earner lifts a former working-class or middle-class family into comparative affluence, while the loss or lack of access to a male income can force women and their children into poverty.

"Marital instability," Stacey also states, "continually refuels a large, cheap female labor pool that underwrites the feminization both of the postindustrial proletariat and of poverty" (ibid.:351). The relevance of marriage (or some other close relationship with a wage-earning man) to recipients' initial contact with the welfare system was discussed in Chapter 3; divorce, or having a child without the financial support of the child's father, were the most common events underlying women's initial applications for public assistance. In addition, recipients' ongoing relationships with the welfare department often waxed and waned in response to their relationships with income-generating men. This relationship is less clear with AP workers, although two of them, Debbie and Judy, explicitly stated that they initially took their jobs in AP work because they were single mothers and needed good pay, good benefits packages, and some sense of stability for themselves and their children. In addition, as pointed out in both Stacey (1990), and Currie, Dunn and Fogarty

(1990), changes in the economy over the past two decades have increased families' needs for two incomes. Thus, while the AP workers, given their current incomes, may not be as dependent on their husbands as women on welfare potentially are, they nonetheless are subject to economic pressure. Again, most of the AP workers felt that they had few lucrative options other than AP work.

In addition, although there were differences between the two groups in terms of marriage and single motherhood, those workers who had been single mothers all mentioned the economic pressures they had experienced as a result of this situation. This is in keeping with the economic vulnerabilities suffered by single mothers throughout the United States; as Ehrenreich and Piven (1984:163) have pointed out, "forty percent of divorced fathers contribute nothing [for child support], and those who do contribute pay on the average less than \$2,100 a year." The financial troubles experienced by divorced mothers, then - - or at the least the lack of financial support they receive from their ex-spouses -- crosscut class. In addition, the majority of both workers and recipients mentioned children as a key element of their involvement with the welfare system: support for their children was a major factor in women's decisions to apply for AFDC, and being able to fulfill their roles as mothers (whether that meant earning high wages, or being physically close-by in

order to provide care) was part and parcel of workers' decisions to either seek or remain in AP work.

In sum, all the women in this study were subject to the constraints imposed by their limited educational credentials and by occupational segregation. In addition, marriage and motherhood played key roles in the women's lives and in their relationships to the welfare system. The difference between the two groups was that fewer of the AP workers had experienced single motherhood, and that, through their marriages, more of the AP workers had been protected from single motherhood, which is one of the greatest contributing factors to poverty among women in the United States. Through both their marriages to men who could generate good incomes, and their own abilities to acquire positions in the welfare department, the AP workers in this study were able to place themselves in a different class position from that of their clients. Although both their similarities in terms of economic background and their differences in terms of current economic situation were related to gender -- to occupational segregation, marriage, and motherhood -- the current differences between the women were, as will be discussed below, the most predominant feature of their relationship, and perhaps the greatest contributor to the lack of comembership either recognized or expressed by them.

Issues of Control: Shared Relationships
to the Welfare System

As Ann (an AP worker) indicated in the exchange presented earlier in this section, both recipients and workers were relatively powerless in their associations with the welfare department. Both, in other words, had little control over the intrusions of the welfare department into their day-to-day lives. Recipients, for instance, were intruded upon in terms of where they could live, what kinds of medical care they could receive, what kinds of relationships they could have with men, and what decisions they could make concerning employment and schooling. Recipients' relationships with the welfare system were thus not well demarcated; rather, welfare intruded upon and had ramifications for many significant aspects of their lives.

While the associations that AP workers had with the welfare department were more clearly delimited than those between recipients and the department, in the context of the welfare office itself the workers were relatively powerless. As outlined in Chapter 4, the welfare department claimed control over work space, work loads, work organization, knowledge, attire, and the like. Although the welfare department did not have the power to regulate intimate aspects of workers' lives outside of the

welfare office, then, its control over the daily circumstances of work life was considerable.

In addition to the shared backgrounds and economic constraints discussed above, the powerless nature of their relationship to the welfare system provides one basis upon which workers and recipients might express comembership and build alliances. When recipients' and workers' views concerning certain features of this relationship are compared there are a number of striking similarities:

- Both recipients and workers believed that the people in power (legislators in the case of recipients; managers in the case of workers) "had it easy," and were ignorant of what conditions (for poor people and AP workers) were really like. Both considered the people making decisions about their lives incompetent to make such decisions. At a legislative hearing, for instance, Susan, the president of LIFE, invited a legislator to come to her house and see for himself what living on welfare was like [LIFE, 5/8/90]. This is strikingly similar to Edith's comment that, "I would like to have a week of the people [management] coming down here to be on the front lines and maybe they'd understand a little bit more" [DSS, 8/24/90].
- Both groups questioned their "choice" to participate in the welfare system. Recipients contended that applying for assistance was not a matter of choice, but of financial necessity. Workers, for their part, claimed that they had little option but to continue working for the welfare department.
- Both workers and recipients believed that the welfare system undermined their efforts to succeed. In the case of workers, work was organized in such a way as to preclude them from doing a good job; in the case of recipients, the structure of welfare left them "stuck," and unable to remove themselves from the welfare rolls.

- Workers who considered themselves to have "bad attitudes" claimed that such attitudes were a result of the job, and recipients who admitted to negative behavior patterns (e.g., lying) claimed they were a result of their relationship with the welfare system. Negative behavior, then, was not a reflection of individual personality traits, but of the relationship between individuals and the welfare system.
- Both workers and recipients claimed the "overwhelming sense of powerlessness" to which Ann refers in the exchange presented earlier in this section. They both felt that they had little control over the day-to-day aspects of their lives.
- Both recipients and workers expressed a desire to be treated like "human beings."

Recognition of the shared nature of some of their views of the welfare system and their relationships to it would go a long way towards diminishing the typically hostile views that recipients and workers hold of each other. Indeed, one could even envision workers and recipients uniting against a welfare bureaucracy that oppresses them both, and, moreover, that oppresses them in somewhat similar ways. In what follows, I focus on the ways in which and the extent to which workers and recipients were able to recognize -- and perhaps make connections between -- their respective points of view.

Taking the Other's View

Sympathy and understanding for the other's perspective, if it does not entail expressions of similarity, does not constitute comembership. However, in the context of a relationship that is characterized (by both participants and observers) as antagonistic, hostile, and given to delegitimation of the other's view, the ability to see the other's perspective as legitimate or valid may be a step in the direction of comembership. Below, I explore workers' and recipients' expressions of understanding of the other's position or perspective.

As discussed in Chapter 3, recipients' expressions of positive views of workers were rare relative to their expressions of hostility towards workers who they considered to be unhelpful, arbitrary, or deliberately nasty. On those infrequent occasions during which recipients construed workers in a positive light, emphasis was placed on their helpfulness. At a LIFE meeting, for instance, during which workers were being criticized, one woman touted her worker as both knowledgeable and helpful: "Meg knows her way around every single one of those books....they could've cut my ADC off when Eric moved in if they really wanted to, but she [had] a way around that, and she took it" [LIFE, 8/19/90].

Such positive views of workers, however, provide neither examples of sympathetic understanding of workers'

situations, nor of comembership. Again, and as stated above, they are significant only insofar as they go beyond the usual typifications of workers (although they may be the exceptions that prove the rule). I have only two instances in my data that may be interpreted as examples of understanding or comembership. The first relates to work loads. Recipients sometimes expressed sympathy for workers' work loads -- referring to overburdened workers when explaining workers' errors (e.g., Dee, Mary) -- or for their need to hold on to their jobs at all costs [LIFE, 8/19/90]. The second instance, of which I have only one example, concerned LIFE's public demonstrations against the welfare department. Susan, Janet, and Meg were discussing handing out flyers on LIFE at the welfare office when Susan commented, "who knows, we might get a few people that work for DSS interested, once they know we're not head-hunting" (LIFE, 3/11/90).⁸ Nobody picked up on this comment, except to agree that LIFE was not in the business of head-hunting, and within a minute the women were again speaking of workers in a derogatory tone. Susan's comment, however, could be construed as an example of comembership; she may have been implying that workers

⁸ "Head-hunting" is being used here to refer to the activity of singling people out for attack. As mentioned in Chapter 3, however, members of MWRO and LIFE rarely singled out workers, but were much more inclined to want to direct any public attacks against legislators or welfare office directors.

and recipients had some shared interests in terms of their relationships with the welfare department.

In sum, recipients by and large were not sympathetic to or understanding of the constraints to which workers were subject, and they rarely situated workers' actions in the larger context of the welfare system (as opposed to in the workers' personalities). With the exception of Susan's comment, expressions of comembership -- of recipients and workers as an "us" -- were virtually nonexistent.

Workers' expressions of sympathy or understanding towards recipients were more frequent than those of recipients towards workers.⁹ The most frequent expressions of sympathy or understanding on the part of workers referred to recipients' desperation. Workers sometimes pointed out that people only came to the welfare office when they were desperate, often after having exhausted all other resources (DSS, 8/17/90; 6/19/90; 8/3/90). Such a view provided workers with a framework for making sense of behavior that was nevertheless on most occasions interpreted as "pushiness." Workers also expressed sympathy for recipients' problems with medical bills (DSS, 6/14/90). Such sympathy approached comembership insofar as it was provided on the basis of a

⁹ Again, however, the expression of such sentiments was rare relative to workers' negative evaluations of their clients.

potentially shared problem: anybody can fall ill and suffer severe economic hardship if they have no or inadequate medical insurance. Finally, some workers mentioned suggesting to recipients that they call their legislators to complain about certain aspects of welfare policy (DSS, 6/13/90), indicating that they perceived policy as unfair. In these instances, workers were able to stand in the other's shoes, as it were.

In the following exchange I had with Edith after she had interviewed a woman who was "falling through the cracks" -- who was ineligible for medical coverage because she was not yet 65 years old and had too much income -- Edith makes a connection between the state of the economy and the size of the welfare rolls. In the course of making this connection, Edith presents both herself and welfare recipients as subject to similar economic constraints.

E: if we had jobs available that would be a different matter, but we don't

C: how long have you been doing this job?

E: fifteen years

C: fifteen years?

E: uh huh

C: so you've seen the, the changes in Michigan's economy

E: oh yes, right

C: have, I mean, have you really noticed, the--?

E: oh sure, because we know when our case loads go up

- C: okay
- E: you know, somebody goes on strike
- C: uh huh
- E: Creeksville was hit pretty bad because, um, Eureka went on strike
- C: uh huh
- E: and then, they, they hired the scabs in and so all these people, even though they're still drawing strike pay it's only one hundred a week
- C: right, it's not enough
- E: you know, and it's just not enough to live on, so we, we got all those people in
- C: uh huh
- E: and are, most of them are, well, I shouldn't say most, but a lot of them are still on
- C: uh huh
- E: but some of them are finding jobs
- C: phew, boy
- E: but yeah, you, a, it's directly linked to the economy
- C: uh huh
- E: and it's just not getting much better

[DSS, 7/5/90, tape 1, side 1, segment 445-456]

In this exchange, Edith locates the cause of expanding welfare rolls in the economy, rather than in, for example, recipients' character defects: the jobs are not there, and when workers go on strike, the strike pay is insufficient. In the next segment, Edith discusses her and her husband's own economic vulnerability, pointing to their dependence on General Motors, a major employer in

the area that had recently instituted a number of lay-offs.

E: you know, GM supports a lot of people in our area

C: uh huh

E: and Madrid would be devastated [by lay-offs]

C: phew, boy

E: it is right now because I think they're back to fifteen years, if you don't have fifteen years in, you're not working

C: really

E: yeah, my husband has, is it twenty-one? twenty-two years

C: he works at GM?

E: yeah

C: uh huh

E: and he's just barely holding days with that and so

C: and I also heard that they're paying people off, they're giving people lump sums like, I don't know, forty, I th-- I heard forty thousand, they were giving up to sixty thousand to leave

E: yeah it depends on the years that you--

C: how long you've been there, uh huh, it just

E: Paul gets them all the time, we get them all the time, but

C: offers?

E: uh huh, by the time he would get, his was a sixty thousand dollar, and then we figured by the time the taxes it'd be forty thousand, he can make that in a year

C: right

E: he makes sixty thousand in a year if he works holidays, or he used to be when he worked all the overtime

C: uh huh, uh huh

E: but, it's not worth it to us

C: uh huh

E: what are we gonna do? I mean, that's a year by the time the taxes are taken out, that's just a year wages for us

C: that's not enough to do much with, you can't

E: we can't leave

C: start a new business

E: no

C: or live off of that for long

E: no

C: sure

E: absolutely not, you know, it would be nice to have that much money lump sum

C: well sure

E: but you've got to think of the long term, and you know, a lot of them took it, a lot of them took that buy-out, and a lot of them are back in applying for assistance

[DSS, 7/5/90, tape 1, side 1, segment 462-476]

Like other workers, Edith and her husband are unprotected from the vagaries of the labor market. Many of the workers who were unfortunate enough to accept General Motor's buy-outs were now on public assistance, as were workers who went on strike against Eureka. Edith and her husband have been lucky so far, but at the same time they have little choice but to remain where they are.

In the above exchanges, Edith is expressing comembership: her husband and other workers -- workers who are now on assistance -- are in many ways the same. Edith sees more similarity than difference between currently employed workers (herself and her husband) and this particular category of welfare recipient.¹⁰

The exchange I had with Ann concerning powerlessness, presented on page 286, above, is the best example of an expression of comembership provided in the data. Ann clearly places workers and recipients in the same category: they are both "trapped" in terms of their relationship to the welfare system, and both, she guesses, suffer from feelings of powerlessness. Ann makes no distinctions among types of recipients, but rather compares workers as a group with recipients as a group. Were such sentiments common to both workers and recipients, the relationship between them -- and potentially between them and the welfare system -- might look very different from that presented in the preceding chapters.

¹⁰ Although the \$40,000 to which Edith refers would represent considerable wealth from the point of view of a recipient, the comembership Edith is expressing does not concern the specifics of financial resources, but rather a shared vulnerability to the vagaries of the labor market.

Gender, Difference, and Comembership

In addition to pointing to bureaucratic factors that work against the development of comembership between workers and recipients, Withorn (1984) emphasizes gender as a key feature of the worker-recipient relationship. The fact that the people with authority are women is frustrating to recipients who assume that people in power are men and that women should be allies; similarly, workers are threatened by women who choose paths that differ from those that are traditionally acceptable for women in U.S. society (Withorn 1984:40-42). On the other hand, the welfare system is "centrally defined by women's roles and women's issues" (Withorn 1984:46), and, as such, provides opportunities for the formation of ties between workers and recipients. In Withorn's view, then, an adequate understanding of both division and alliance between workers and recipients depends on an understanding of ideologies concerning women's proper role, and of the appropriate embodiment and expression of power.

More frequent than workers' recognition of shared economic constraints or shared relationships to the welfare system was their recognition of shared concerns related to issues of motherhood. Workers who had given birth sometimes discussed issues relating to pregnancy with their pregnant clients, as Nora did when she gave pregnant women advice on how to deal with morning sickness

[DSS, 6/29/90; 7/30/90]. "Member-adds" -- meetings between recipients and workers that occurred for the purpose of adding new babies to recipients' cases -- were always pleasant and marked by chit-chat about baby matters.

In a somewhat related context, Debbie, a worker, spoke of the need to arrange welfare policy so that mothers could stay at home with their young children [DSS, 8/17/90]. She herself had been a single mother, and was well aware of the dual burden suffered by women who are responsible for both child care and the financial support of their families. As a counter-example, Karrie drew on her experience of single motherhood to accentuate the differences, rather than the similarities, between herself and her clients. Deserted by her husband three months after their child was born, Karrie was forced to move in with her parents and take a job. Since she had managed to both be a single mother and hold a job, she saw no reason why all single mothers couldn't work [DSS, 6/6/90]. For those few AP workers who had experienced it, then, single motherhood was a source for the expression of difference as well as comembership.

Pregnancy, which was one of the items workers looked for when scanning potential recipients' applications, also provided the grounds for expressions of comembership or difference. In some cases, as in the example of Nora

given above, pregnancy provided the grounds for expressions of comembership. In others, it provided evidence of, at worst, promiscuity, and at best, irresponsibility. On one occasion, for instance, Peggy expressed resentment towards a prospective client she had interviewed who had two children and was pregnant with a third. While, in Peggy's view, the woman in question didn't have to worry about support for her children -- it would be provided by the state -- Peggy herself couldn't afford to have a third child. Peggy felt, in other words, that she had to be responsible, while her client did not [DSS, 8/1/90]. On another occasion, Sherry gave a client a form that she needed to fill out in order to verify that the father of her child was not living in the home. When the client said that the father probably wasn't aware of his status as a father -- that it was just a "one night thing" -- Sherry made a face, paused, said "oh" in a condescending tone, and reached into her desk drawer for a different set of forms [DSS, 6/18/90].¹¹

Issues related to gender, then, -- and to pregnancy and motherhood in particular -- were central to workers' expressions of comembership with or difference from recipients. This was not the case with recipients, who,

¹¹ This was in marked contrast to how Sherry behaved when, for instance, a pregnant women came into the office with her partner. I should note, however, that on this particular occasion Sherry was already angry with her client for being late for the appointment.

as already indicated, seemed disinclined to express comembership with workers on any grounds.

Discussion

An examination of the data reveals scant evidence of either the legitimation of the other's view, or of comembership. Recipients expressed significantly more antagonism than understanding towards workers, and almost never expressed comembership. In contrast, workers were more likely to express an understanding of or sympathy for recipients' perspectives or circumstances, and they did, on occasion, express comembership with recipients on the basis of shared economic vulnerabilities and shared motherhood. Even workers' expressions of comembership, however, were rare when viewed in the context of the data as a whole.¹²

The lack of expressions of comembership on the part recipients and workers is significant insofar as it both reflects and contributes to the maintenance of the hierarchical relationship between them. To establish comembership, in other words, would be an act of

¹² Although some of the data used in this dissertation are derived from actual encounters between workers and recipients, the bulk of the data are derived from workers and recipients interacting amongst themselves. Clearly, analyses of actual recipient-worker interactions would be the next step in an investigation of comembership.

resistance, with potentially revolutionary implications for the welfare system. Workers, for instance, could collude with recipients to garner whatever benefits possible. If all workers followed Sally's desire to change the dates on applications so that recipients would qualify for more benefits, or if they all, like Harriet, "didn't have time" to process recoupment and fraud referrals, they would be working against the interests of the welfare department, and for those of recipients.¹³ At a more abstract level, recognition on the part of workers and recipients that they share a certain economic oppression could have potential implications for thought and activity outside of the welfare department. In what follows, I speculate on why there were so few expressions of comembership between workers and recipients, and on why workers were somewhat more inclined than recipients to both take the others' view and recognize commonalities.

Following Withorn (1984) and Wineman (1984), it is reasonable to speculate that power inequalities are at the root both of workers' greater inclination to recognize commonalities, and of the general paucity of expressions of comembership in the data. With regard to worker's recognitions of commonality, it may be the case, simply,

¹³ As discussed in Chapter 4, workers did engage in actions that worked to the benefit of their clients and to the detriment of the welfare department. Such activity was occasional, however, rather than systematic or routine.

that workers can "afford" it more than can recipients; being in positions of greater power, workers have more latitude than recipients, who are (or at least perceive themselves to be) beholden to their workers for their food and shelter. Concomitantly, the feeling of dependence and powerlessness that recipients feel in their relationships with their workers may do little to endear the workers to them, and may account for the virtual lack of expressions of comembership on the part of recipients.

In addition, the power that workers have to help their clients has the same source as their power to oppress them, which, as discussed in Chapter 4, was by far the more likely occurrence. As I pointed out, workers are awarded few discretionary powers by the welfare department; it is primarily in their interactions with clients that they have room to exercise the little discretionary power officially sanctioned by the department (e.g., formally seeking exceptions to general policy), and the unsanctioned discretionary powers that they claim for themselves (e.g., classifying clients as "deserving" or "undeserving" and accordingly going or not going out of their way to help them) (Prottas 1979). According to Wineman (1984:160), one of the key mechanisms for the generation and maintenance of divisions among oppressed groups is "the tendency of people who are oppressed in some ways to compensate for their degradation

by seeking other ways in which to exercise superior status and power;" this is especially the case in a "competitive society which teaches people to believe that coming out 'ahead' or 'on top' is the primary measure for personal value" (ibid.:183). One way that workers may compensate for their low position in the welfare hierarchy, in other words, is to in turn oppress the clients over whom they have a modicum of power.¹⁴ The practice of such oppression clearly works to enhance distance, rather than to foster recognition of commonalities.

The two key dimensions along which workers and recipients might have recognized commonalities and expressed comembership were gender and economic vulnerability. As outlined above, gender issues were explicitly recognized by workers, but not by recipients. Even with workers, however, gender was a resource that was drawn on as often to augment as to diminish differences between themselves and their clients. Economic backgrounds also contributed more to the maintenance of division than to the establishment of comembership, and may even have served to override the recognition of commonalities based on gender. As outlined above, there were some fundamental similarities in the economic

¹⁴ Interestingly, Wineman's (1984) claim that oppressed people oppress others sheds light on recipients' constructions of negative characterizations of other, less deserving, recipients, and of LIFERS' call for punitive policies towards men.

experiences of recipients and workers. However, these similarities were overshadowed, perhaps, by the current differences -- differences which, given workers' employment backgrounds and cuts in the work force currently being considered by Michigan's governor, may be more precarious than workers would like. In her efforts to gain insight into stereotypes of the poor, Leacock (1971:17-18) states that

It appears...that the closer a person's experience has been to that of his [sic] poorer brethren, the more strenuously he may argue that it takes will and ability to get ahead, and that the poor are poor out of laziness, stupidity, or lack of ambition. He thereby not only vindicates his own gains, and assuages, perhaps a lingering guilt that he does not wish to cast behind a helping hand, but he also reassures himself. It is important to him that his position should follow from an intrinsically greater worthiness; this helps protect him from the threat of social vagaries like the rise and fall of unemployment, the greater insecurity that comes with age..., the unpredictability of technological displacements, or the occurrence of serious accident or illness.

Their fundamental economic similarities, then, may paradoxically have contributed to the maintenance of distance, rather than to the formation of alliances between recipients and workers.

In sum, among the women in this study, there was little recognition of the basis for cross-class alliances to which Piven (1984) refers, or of the gender alliances to which Withorn (1984) refers. The potential is there, as both Piven (1984) and Withorn (1984) claim, but,

perhaps for some of the reasons outlined here, it remains unrealized.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS: REPRODUCTION AND CHANGE

Throughout this dissertation, my focus has been on workers' and recipients' talk. My concern with conversational interchanges reflects a theoretical approach that views conversation as one location for social construction, here being defined as the ongoing creation, transformation, and reproduction of social structures and meanings. Women on welfare and women who work for welfare are thus not simple carriers of cultural material, but are, rather, actively engaged in creating, invoking, modifying, or challenging cultural meanings and structures for their own purposes at hand. Even when received stereotypes are reproduced -- for example, when workers discuss their "lazy" clients -- they are being locally produced for specific local reasons and in response to locally perceived phenomena.

In what follows, I review workers' and recipients' accommodation, resistance, and comembership, as discussed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, and situate them in the broader context of the issues outlined in Chapter 1 concerning the production and reproduction of stereotypes, ideologies, and institutional arrangements. My focus will be on the extent to which the women's constructions served to

reproduce or challenge the hierarchical relationships between recipients and workers, and between each group and the welfare system. I will argue that, while their constructions had no discernible impact on the structure and organization of the welfare system, the women in this study were nevertheless actively engaged in creating meanings and self-images that in many cases countered dominant views. At the most, these oppositional views might provide the basis for future changes in the welfare system, or even in the larger social structural features within which the welfare system is embedded. At the least, the women's oppositional views indicate that the dominant structures and views associated with the welfare system are not smoothly reproduced; that there are contested terrains; and that the women in this study were not only victims of forces more powerful than they, but also were active agents engaged in exercising whatever power they had to create meaning in their worlds and, hopefully, to change them for the better.

Accommodation and Resistance

Grounds for Resistance

The resistance of the women in this study was firmly grounded in the specific nature of their participation in the welfare system, which, as discussed in Chapter 5, may be broadly related to the economic and social predicaments

of women in U.S. society. At the ground level, the women's resistance stemmed from an everyday self-interest (Scott 1986) with regard to both material and identity-related issues. As outlined in Chapter 3, the recipients included in this study were struggling to survive in the most literal sense. Both Susan and Pat, for example -- along with their children -- had experienced homelessness, and all of the women had, at one time or another, run out of money before receiving their next AFDC check or food stamp allotment; many of them ran short of food and money on a regular basis. In addition, recipients were battling for a positive image of themselves. Their confrontations with negative stereotypes of women on welfare reflected not only their attempts to garner sufficient material support for survival (by constructing themselves as "deserving"), but also their desire to feel more worthy than "crud," as Susan once put it.

The welfare workers in this study, although perhaps less materially desperate than recipients (e.g., having sufficient food to feed their families was not a pressing concern), were nevertheless struggling with the various oppressions of AP work outlined in Chapter 4: overwhelming work loads, competing demands from recipients and management, low status, and the contradiction of being responsible for implementing departmental policy yet

having severely limited official control over the design or outcomes of policy.

Both workers and recipients, then, were being oppressed by the welfare system. As outlined in Chapters 3 and 4, the women were aware of these oppressions, and thus had specific forces to resist.

In addition to the day-to-day issues of power and control, the objects of the women's resistance may be placed in the broader context of gender and economics in U.S. society. In relating what outside observers view in more abstract terms (e.g., class consciousness) to self-interest at the ground level, Scott (1986) allows for a connection between the personal and the political -- between, in this case, women's economic marginalization in U.S. society and their experiences with the welfare system -- the latter being inextricably tied to the former, and thus resistance to the one being part and parcel of resistance to the other. Thus, although the women in this study did not always explicitly refer to the various forms of oppression they were resisting in terms of gender or class, issues relating to class and gender were part and parcel of what the women were confronting and were, as I have shown in previous chapters, invoked in various ways.

Limits to Resistance:
Grounds for Accommodation
and the Production of "Hidden Transcripts"

There were limits, however, both material and ideological, to the women's resistance. The material limits to which the women were subject concerned their financial dependence on the welfare system. As discussed in Chapter 4, workers' backgrounds and educational credentials, along with (for some of them) the need to accommodate certain requirements of their roles as mothers, resulted in a situation in which AP work was their most lucrative option, producing a sense of entrapment. Even the members of Blues Boulevard, who had a reputation for resistance, were limited by their awareness of scant alternative employment opportunities. As far as I knew, none of the workers routinely side-stepped welfare policy, and there were no coordinated work slow-downs. Instead, three members of "Blues Boulevard" (along with one member of the "positive" group) were seeing therapists to help them cope with the stresses of the workplace; one of them, Fran, eventually took two months of stress leave. Workers' awareness of their limited options, then, served as a disincentive to open confrontation, and as an incentive to, at least on the face of things, accommodation to their place in the welfare hierarchy. Thus, although workers blamed their stress-related illnesses on the structure and organization

of the workplace, the limits to their resistance to these phenomena were such that, in the end, their "problems" were redefined in personal terms, and accordingly addressed through therapy or medical care rather than through structural change.

Recipients were even more dependent on the welfare system than workers, and thus had less latitude for resistance.¹ Again, what was at stake for them was their survival: the food stamps needed to feed themselves and their families, and the AFDC checks needed to pay for their shelter and utilities. As discussed in Chapter 3, this greater risk was reflected, in part, in the problems MWRO and LIFE had in recruiting and maintaining active memberships.

For both groups of women, then, open (direct, continuous, individual²) confrontation with the welfare

¹ Although workers felt "trapped" in AP work, the issue for them was not so much survival in the literal sense, but doing the best that they could given their needs and limited options; the price they paid for what they got out of AP work (good pay and benefits, geographic location) have already been enumerated. Again, however, losing their jobs, if they were single, or losing their jobs plus access to their husbands' incomes, if they were married, would have placed many of the AP workers in the Kenyon County office in economic predicaments similar to those of their clients. The point here is that they were not in such predicaments at the time.

² Both workers and recipients considered individual confrontation to be more dangerous than confrontation en masse. Thus workers entertained the notion of presenting a petition from all of the workers to management in order to protest the office move, an action that would serve to both indicate the scope of dissatisfaction and protect

(continued...)

system could have jeopardized their incomes, a risk that neither group entertained taking during the course of this study. As Moore (1988:180) states, "knowing when to give in is an integral part of knowing how and when to resist, if you happen to be poor and weak." Recall Maggie's statement (from Chapter 3) concerning the importance of impression management in recipients' relationships with workers:

AFDC mothers--ones I knew myself--would present that [compliant] face to them, like they're controlling us and regulating us, but when you go home, we make our own decisions about certain things, but it also is a matter of complying to get something, anything [Maggie, 5/26/89; emphasis added].

Despite the grounds for resistance outlined above, and although both groups of women belonged to oppositional organizations (a union, welfare rights groups), both workers and recipients had compelling material reasons for not engaging in sustained, overt confrontations.

In addition to material constraints, and as pointed out in Chapter 1, recipients and workers were subject to cultural constraints to resistance. Bourdieu (1977:165), for instance, claims that dominant systems have the power to "impose the principles of the construction of reality,"

²(...continued)
individual workers. Likewise, welfare rights groups focused on group activities as opposed to individual protests; even when recipients filed for hearings (an action that placed departmental focus on individuals), both MWRO and LIFE stressed the importance of having several group members accompany plaintiffs through the hearing process.

thus placing limits on what is available to think with (Smith 1987). Cloward and Piven (1979) add to this their claim that acts of resistance are limited by what is considered appropriate behavior for members of various classes, age groups, ethnicities, or genders. Thus, for example, violent rebellion was not an option entertained by any of the women in this study.

"Hidden Transcripts"

Despite the limitations, however, both groups of women in this study found ways to resist elements of their relationships with the welfare system. As Scott (1990) has pointed out, material limits to resistance (e.g., the threat of losing one's livelihood or life) do not simply deter resistance, but rather serve to channel it in particular directions. His concept of "hidden transcripts," or indirect forms of resistance engaged in in response to the dangers involved in more overt forms of confrontation, speaks to the need to balance resistance with material constraint. As discussed in Chapter 1, "hidden transcripts" refers to forms of resistance that are either carried out away from the view and hearing of the dominant group (thus protecting the identities of the culprits), or are disguised so that members of the dominant group cannot move beyond suspicion in interpreting their meaning (as in jokes).

Many of the forms of resistance engaged in by workers and recipients constituted what could be called "hidden transcripts." For example, while welfare rights groups argued, publicly and as groups, that AFDC grants and food stamp allotments were insufficient to meet their needs -- thereby engaging in open, direct, confrontation -- individual members resisted welfare policy in less visible ways, including not reporting extra income or other adults living in the household. They also joked and made derogatory remarks about welfare workers, politicians, and the like. Working to resist prevalent views of women on welfare and to create positive images of themselves provides another example of "hidden transcripts." Finally, as will be discussed in more detail below, recipients also drew on mainstream stereotypes and ideologies in making their arguments against the inequities of the welfare system. In their direct interactions with the welfare system, however, recipients were able to appear accommodating, as indicated by Maggie's reference to a compliant presentation of self, mentioned above.

Workers also engaged in "hidden" forms of resistance. As outlined in Chapter 4, these forms of resistance included engaging in derogatory conversations about their supervisors; "joking" about their relationship with management by, for example, bringing toilet plungers to

the office (symbolic of the "shit" they had to "wade through"); and participating in various everyday and small-scale resistances to office rules and regulations. The following exchange, for instance, analyzed in Chapter 4, illustrates a range of resistant approaches to the hour each day during which workers were required to take phone calls from clients. The participants are Fran, Sally, Peggy, and myself.

C: plus you have phone hour
 F: well, some of us do, some of us ditty bop in and out anytime they feel like it [laughs]
 C: [get] that T-shirt on Fran³
 F: I know it []
 S: #I stay at my desk during phone time because that's what I'm ordered to do and when people call me and they need me to run to the computer and check on something#
 F: [that's 'cause you're a sucker
 S: I SAY,
 I say
 []
 F: [laughs]
 S: I'm not allowed to, I'm only, I can only answer the phone between eleven and twelve [] those are the rules
 []
 F: that's 'cause you're a suck-ass
 S: NO:: because that keeps OTHER people
 []
 F: suck right UP to 'em, do EVERYthing they tell you to
 []
 S: from trying to call
 P: man when I got 'em on the phone I find out what the problem is,

³ I am referring here to a "BAD ATTITUDE" T-shirt Fran had been given by several of her co-workers.

[
 F: [laughs]
 P: and I tell 'em right THEN, I don't wanna
 call them back, I do it RIGHT then, I don't
 like calling people back
 S: I don't EITHER,
 but I tell 'em I'm, I'm not allowed to
 leave my desk

[DSS, 8/3/90, tape 1, side 2, segment 470-479]

As discussed in Chapter 4, Fran doesn't like being told what to do, and so manages to "ditty bop in and out" during phone hour. Peggy also leaves her office at will because she prefers to process one client request at a time (which necessitates leaving the office to work on the computer). Finally, Sally uses management rules to resist clients' demands. Again, none of these forms of resistance are highly visible or dramatic, and, if called to task by their supervisors or clients, all three workers would no doubt be able to produce "legitimate" justifications for their actions (e.g., Sally is only following the rules, Peggy is just trying to take care of her clients).

Ranges of Accommodation and Resistance

Workers and recipients were not restricted to "hidden" forms of resistance, however, but produced talk and conversation representing a variety of accommodating and resistant approaches to welfare and gender ideologies.

In this section I briefly review some of the approaches discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

The responses of welfare rights groups members to negative stereotypes of welfare recipients provide a range of examples of accommodation and resistance. The bad-people-exist-but-I'm-not-one-of-them argument, for example, in which recipients argued that, although there were people who fit the stereotypes, they could not be included among them, served to simultaneously resist certain aspects of the welfare system (e.g., the construction of stereotypes and welfare policies based on the aberrant behavior of only a few recipients), and accommodate and reproduce some of the very stereotypes that the women argued against in other contexts (e.g., laziness, irresponsible reproductive behavior). On the other hand, the denial and welfare-made-me-do-it arguments were more directly resistant to received ideologies. The first approach, denial, claimed outright that dominant views were false -- that they were designed to maintain the status quo. The second, approach, the welfare-made-me-do-it argument, took the blame and responsibility normally reserved for recipients and located it instead in the welfare system. In short, this approach appropriated mainstream values concerning honesty and frugality to claim that lapses in recipients' honesty and frugality were the direct outcome of welfare policy; the welfare

system itself, then, was held accountable for behavior that it condemned. Recipients' positive constructions of themselves also drew on aspects of the dominant ideology, and served to confront the system with its own contradictions concerning women's roles (as workers, mothers, dependents).

The comembership established among recipients at welfare rights group meetings was, in itself, an act of resistance. As stated in the conclusion to Chapter 3, resistance was more pronounced in welfare rights meetings than during interviews. Comembership among welfare recipients was established on the basis of shared critiques of the welfare system, and on the questioning of the views of the welfare system and of society at large concerning welfare recipients' responsibility for their predicament. At welfare rights meetings, participants jointly constructed views and interpretations in which some external force -- welfare policy, politicians, men -- was held responsible for their plight; such views were in opposition to dominant views in which responsibility for the women's plight resided somewhere in their personalities.

As part and parcel of these resistant views, the women also established comembership on the basis of particular positive views of themselves -- again, views asserted in opposition to prevailing ideologies, despite

the fact that they drew on prevailing ideologies (of, for example, motherhood). In contrast to stereotypes of laziness, dishonesty, and irresponsibility, the women worked to construe themselves as hard-working ordinary women trying to be good mothers. In coming together for the purpose of critiquing and proposing action against the welfare system, and in both challenging negative stereotypes and constructing positive self-images, the women in the welfare rights groups were thus engaged in resistance. The meanings created by the women fly in the face of officially sanctioned views, and provide the necessary grounds for any practical actions that might be undertaken.

The division of workers into the "Pollyanna" and "Blues Boulevard" factions is indicative of a conflict among workers with regard to how best to interpret and respond to the constraints of AP work. The "Pollyanna" group, as outlined in Chapter 4, tended to resign themselves to the various manifestations of hierarchy in the welfare office. Although they did occasionally complain about working conditions, they questioned neither the validity of their working conditions -- the work had to be done, however formidable -- nor management's claims over decision-making and the organization of work. The "Pollyanna" approach, by and large, was to "grin and bear it." As such, the approach was accommodating to received

structures and views concerning the appropriate division of labor in the welfare office.

The "Blues Boulevard" approach, in contrast, resisted rather than accommodated the welfare hierarchy. The inhabitants of "Blues Boulevard" questioned both management's control and wisdom, and gave fierce vocalization to their discontent. At the level of discourse, then, members of "Blues Boulevard" were clearly resistant to received structures. Again, however, as indicated above, even the members of "Blues Boulevard" were compelled to exhibit some forms of accommodation.

The exercise of power on behalf of their clients was another way in which workers exercised their autonomy and resisted their place in the welfare hierarchy. When Karrie confronted Ester with the department's "human responsibility" to care for Myra (the "dog lady"), for instance, she was confronting and resisting departmental policy despite her full awareness of policy limits.

In sum, the women in this study engaged in various forms of accommodation and resistance, "hidden" and otherwise, in the context of powerful forces that placed considerable constraints on their autonomy. In the following section, I explore the relationship between workers' and recipients' accommodation and resistance and reproduction and change.

The Relation of Accommodation and
Resistance to Reproduction and Change

As discussed in Chapter 1, in this dissertation I take accommodation and resistance to be key means whereby production and reproduction are accomplished. The ongoing process of production and reproduction includes possibilities for change as well as for reproduction in the narrow sense (i.e., of similar forms). In this section, I focus on accommodation and resistance in terms of the contributions they make to either the reproduction of or changes in structures and meanings.

Lack of Comembership between Workers
and Recipients: Accommodation and Reproduction

As illustrated in the preceding chapters, recipients' and workers' views of themselves and of each other did not coincide. Their public identities were contested terrain, and both groups of women devoted considerable energy to constructing views of themselves as well-meaning and hard-working victims of a system over which they had little control. This work entailed constructing views of "them" as well as of "us." As outlined in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, the views of "them" constructed by workers and recipients were more often negative than positive.⁴

⁴ This phenomenon may have been accentuated by the fact that this study was conducted in the aftermath of the Reagan era and at a time when, in Michigan, numerous cuts
(continued...)

Comembership between recipients and workers, had I found significant evidence of it, would have constituted resistance. In the welfare system, workers and recipients are in a hierarchical relationship to each other. The business of workers, while it includes providing recipients with access to assistance, is to carefully screen applicants so that only those who are eligible receive aid; thus the means-tested nature of the programs, the bureaucratic procedures applied to each applicant, and the emphasis placed on fraud detection and recoupment. Workers are gatekeepers to the welfare system, and their function is as much to weed people out as it is to recruit them in. The business of recipients, given both the restrictions on their access to assistance and the low levels of assistance they receive if they do qualify, is to manipulate the welfare system in order to maximize the outcome. Since recipients' interactions with the system take place by and large via their workers, the "system" that is being manipulated is, in effect, the workers.

⁴(...continued)

in both welfare grants and the numbers of welfare workers were being considered, and, in some cases, instituted. Although I believe that the negative views workers and recipients held of each other go beyond a reflection of economic times, there is some evidence that in more expansive economic and political times, relationships between workers and recipients -- or at least workers' and recipients' intentions for their relationships with each other -- have been less hostile than they currently seem to be (Hertz 1981; Piven and Cloward 1971; see also Withorn 1984).

By not establishing comembership, recipients and workers accommodate and reproduce the welfare hierarchy and their places in it. Their failure to fully and systematically recognize and act on their shared oppressions as subjects of the welfare system contributes to the maintenance of the system as it is. Their predominantly negative characterizations of each other, described in Chapters 3 and 4, are part and parcel of the hierarchical arrangements from which they both suffer.

The Appropriation of Dominant Views: Reproduction or Change?

In addition to situating forms of resistance or accommodation in the immediate context of the welfare system, it may be useful to examine them in terms of broader cultural contexts. Such an approach may provide some insight into the connections between accommodation and resistance and reproduction and change at the level of culture and society.

At a broad cultural level, oppressed groups' appropriation of dominant views, although useful in immediate contexts of resistance, may, in some cases, serve to reinforce cultural ideologies that contribute to the specific oppressions that are being resisted. In her review of research on resistance among female factory workers in the Third World, for instance, Ong (1991)

elucidates how resistance on one level may serve to accommodate and reproduce certain (detrimental) ideologies on another level. Workers in China, for instance,

routinely cited family and female reasons for taking time off work. Using the same categories management uses has allowed workers to negotiate some work conditions, but they also thereby reproduce aspects of the large culture, reinforcing the sense that women are inherently less productive than men (Ong 1991:300).

This argument is particularly relevant to the recipients in this study. As noted above, in their bad-people-exist-but-I'm-not-one-of-them argument, recipients appropriated, reinforced, and in effect reproduced received stereotypes of lazy, dishonest, and otherwise irresponsible welfare recipients. They did not question the validity of the stereotypes (as long as they were not included in the categories at issue); nor did they present any argument against the use of such stereotypes in the construction of punitive welfare policies (e.g., forced sterilization), as long as they were only applied to those who fit the stereotypes. Although extricating themselves from negative characterizations, the women's use of this argument left received views of welfare recipients intact. To provide another example, recipients' invocation of the work ethic may also be detrimental to their interests in the long run. It will be recalled from Chapter 3 that one of the ways in which recipients responded to stereotypes of "lazy" welfare recipients was to construe themselves as

hard workers -- they both believed and engaged in hard work. Although resistant to negative stereotypes, such expressions reinforce the dominant view that all able-bodied people should work, with the implication that those who don't work (for whatever reasons, including motherhood in the case of poor people ⁵) are undeserving -- a view (along with the need for cheap labor) fundamental to welfare work programs.

In appropriating dominant views, however, recipients were not simply serving to reproduce them. What is culturally available to think with is enabling as well as constraining (Collier and Yanagisako 1989), and provides opportunities for resistance as well as accommodation. In their confrontations with the dominant system, in other words, the women in this study were able to use the words, categories, and values of the dominant system against it -- they were able to appropriate aspects of the dominant views to their own advantage. This was an activity that both workers and recipients engaged in. Such acts are superficially accommodating, insofar as they partake of dominant views. Insofar as they appropriate dominant views for subversive purposes, however, they are acts of resistance.

⁵ As Abramovitz (1988) points out, middle-class views concerning women's roles as mothers have not always been equally applied to women of all classes, ethnicities, or marital statuses.

Weedon (1987), for instance, discusses "reverse" discourses, discourses that draw on the very vocabulary or categories of dominant discourses in order to make a case for oppressed groups. Welfare recipients' appropriations of the values of motherhood in order to make a case against the work requirements of the welfare department provide an example of reverse discourse. The contradictions inherent in the welfare system concerning women's role -- mother versus worker -- provide a discursive space within which recipients may challenge the system (Weedon 1987:109). This discursive space is perhaps where the struggle over "worldmaking" to which Bourdieu (1990) refers takes place.

In the following exchange, analyzed in Chapter 3, two recipients, Susan and Rita, discuss a meeting that they had with the aide to a local legislator. Throughout the exchange, they draw on dominant language and values. Note, for example, the emphasis on the "safe environment" required by every child, on children as the "future," and on the degradation suffered by women who are forced to engage in prostitution.

S:	I told him, I said EVERY chi::ld NEEDS a	1
	safe environment, NOT the rich, NOT the	2
	middle-class, but ALSO WELfare mothers	3
R:	yep	4
S:	and we're having to leave our kids with	5
	ANYbody and everybody that'll take 'em	6
C:	yep	7
S:	that's not right	8
C:	no, it's not right	9
S:	that's	10
	[]	11

[12
 R: 'cause they're our FUTURE 13
 S: ye--THAT'S WHAT 14
 I TOLD 'EM too [laughs] 15
 [16
 R: THESE CHILDREN, these children are 17
 growing up after being abused and, uh= 18
 S: =sexually assaulted 19
 R: YEAH, and 20
 S: you know 21
 R: and= 22
 S: =the HELL with that 23
 R: there IS gonna be 24
 no future 25
 C: right 26
 S: [+ indicates pounding on 27
 table] and for the +first time in my 28
 +entIRE life, I +ACTually +sat +down in 29
 front of this +high honcho and asked-- 30
 +deliberately, came right out and told him 31
 the truth, I said you know what really 32
 burns my ass is that ya'll spending all 33
 this money on this drug shit and gettin' 34
 women off the streets and stuff, we HAVE 35
 to be there 36
 C: you said that to him? 37
 R: he--she 38
 told him she prostituted 39
 [40
 S: I told him that whole four 41
 months, yes SIR, that welfare didn't help 42
 me= 43
 C: =what did he say about it? 44
 S: he just, 45
 [laughs], you know 46
 [47
 C: whoa 48
 R: yep 49
 S: he just didn't know WHAT to say, 50
 he didn't realize that THIS shit is going 51
 on you know 52

[LIFE, 4/20/90, tape 1, side 1, segment 190-209]

The moral force of Susan and Rita's argument is considerable; issues of the family, of society's future, and of right and wrong permeate their discussion.⁶

Workers, too, were able to appropriate dominant views for their own purposes. Again, Karrie's efforts on behalf of Myra, the "dog lady," provides a good example: in effect, Karrie appropriated the official moral mission of the welfare system (to care for those who are unable to care for themselves) in order to confront its own policies, and, in the process, resist her own powerlessness in the face of those policies. In other instances, workers spoke of their need to "do a good job" -- to be conscientious and thorough workers -- to argue against a departmental organization that made more demands on workers than they could reasonably accommodate. In their interpretation, workers were doing their best to fulfill management requirements that they work hard and honestly; in overloading them, however, management was encouraging sloppiness and the use of (often unsanctioned) short-cuts. As in the welfare-made-me-do-it-argument employed by recipients, workers were able to draw on

⁶ The use of moral arguments may not be uncommon among oppressed people. Ong (1991:299), for instance, found that factory workers in the Third World often "denounced workplace conditions in moral terms....instead of using the language of class or sexual oppression" (see also Scott 1990).

official departmental (and societal) approaches to work to accuse their managers of mismanagement.

Ong (1991:300) states with regard to women factory workers in Asia that:

...dominant images of women workers...are contested or used by factory women to their own advantage....By contesting hegemonic categories of human worth, factory women attempted "to seize language for their own purposes," engaging in "symbolic struggles over social position, identity, and self-determination" (Pred 1990:46-47). They thus found voices to validate their actual experiences, breaking the flow of meanings imposed on them, and thus directly defining their own lives.

In their appropriation of dominant views, of what was culturally available to think with, the women in this study also played an active role in defining meaning and identity in their lives.

Summary and Conclusions

In this study, I have been concerned with the relationship between human action and structural constraint (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Giddens 1984; Ortner 1984). Specifically, I have been concerned with the discourse of women participating in the U.S. welfare system, and with the extent to which their discourse is limited by, and serves to perpetuate or challenge the cultural and social systems within which they live day-to-day. In focusing on issues of accommodation and resistance in talk, I have worked to emphasize the dynamic

and contingent nature of social structures and systems of meaning (Collier and Yanagisako 1989; Erickson 1975a, 1976; Ortner 1984).

In the end, the institutional arrangements characteristic of the welfare system remain more or less intact. The hierarchical relationship that holds between workers and recipients, and between each group of women and the welfare system, is unchanged. Despite their various recognitions of the inequities of the welfare system, or, even more broadly, of gender and the economy, the women were unable to successfully challenge the structures that contribute to their oppression.

However, as Ong (1991:281) has pointed out, struggles over various forms of oppression are also "struggles over cultural meanings, values, and goals." Similarly, Alverson (1978) has argued that the material decimation of a culture (through colonialism) does not automatically constitute the destruction of people's abilities to create and control meaning and identity in their lives. In their endeavors to create oppositional views of themselves and their situations, the women in this study were successful. As cultural beings anywhere, they were engaged in the business of creating meaning. And as women participating in "the everyday struggle to survive and to change power relations in [their] society" (Morgen and Bookman 1988:8), they were engaged in politics. Although they clearly

accommodated and reproduced certain views and ideologies that may be detrimental to their interests (e.g., women's primary roles as mothers and welfare recipients as "lazy," although contested in some ways and in some contexts, were reinforced in others), they nevertheless exercised considerable power in the construction of their own meanings and identities.

Although their resistance had no discernible practical impact on either the relationship between workers and recipients or that between each group and the welfare system, both recipients and workers were actively engaged in what may be called counter-hegemonic projects - in the construction of views of themselves and the system that were in opposition to dominant views. As such, they may, by participating in the creation or maintenance of cultures of resistance (Ong 1991), be contributing to future possibilities for structural change. At the least, the women's engagement in the construction of their own meanings and identities precludes the smooth, unproblematic reproduction of the welfare hierarchy in its entirety.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

TRANSCRIPT CONVENTIONS

The following transcript conventions are adapted from Moerman (1988) and Mishler (1984). They are used only in those cases in which the focus is on process as well as content. In all other cases (i.e., discussion of interview data), only words are transcribed.

-] Overlapping speech.
- , Pause, as between phrases or sentences.
- {number} Longer silences, timed in seconds.
- = Connects two utterances produced with noticeably less transition time between them than usual.
- Cut off. Indicates that the preceding sound is stopped abruptly.
- : Indicates that the preceding sound is elongated.
- CAPS Indicates emphatic delivery.
- # Bounds passages said very quickly.
- * Bounds passages spoken softly and slowly.
- () Footnotes.

APPENDIX B

NOTES ON RESEARCHER PARTICIPATION IN PARTICIPANTS' CONSTRUCTIONS: EVIDENCE FROM THE TRANSCRIPTS

Although a participant in many of the exchanges presented in this dissertation, my contributions to workers' and recipients' constructions was minimal. Evidence for this claim is provided by the transcripts. Exchanges I had with the women in the study may be compared with exchanges the women had with each other. When the utterances produced by each participant are separated, the respective contributions of each participant may be evaluated.

The following example illustrates the difference between contributions that I made, and the work that the women did with each other in constructing interpretations and stereotypes. I have separated the contributions of each participant in two exchanges. In the first, Harriet, an AP worker, and I are the participants. It is evident that my contribution to Harriet's construction is minimal. This is not the case in the second exchange, between Harriet and another worker, Sherry. In contrast to my listening responses in the first exchange, Sherry produces substantive contributions to Harriet's construction of her client as a child abuser.

Harriet and researcher

Harriet

H: Yes, after you called, it was in the afternoon, and I, I was going to play it back, you know, to be sure I had the right phone number, and when I played it back on my machine, there was another instance of her being on, apparently she had tried to call and my, 'cause I asked her about it when I did get a hold of her, I said "did you try [to] call twice" and she said, "yes, they put me through but your machine didn't give any message," well, all there was was her and the, you know, I could hear a child

- crying in the background, and she was saying
 "hit 'em! kick 'em! kick 'em! hit 'em!"
- H: Ye:s, and so, you know, later I
 wanted, er, I, I went to a protective
 service worker, to [name of worker], and asked
 him to come listen to the tape, think I
 could find it? I must have accidentally
 erased it
- H: so, I'm, I talked to him though
- H: and, and I told him that, you know, he just
 kinda glossed over it, "well the woman's
 under a lot of pressure, and, and
- H: we don't know that it was an adult doing it,
 you know, that she was talking to," I said,
 "adult or child, what kind, what mother,
- H: tells somebody to kick and hit"
- H: because this child was really, really crying
 in the background
- H: and when I did talk to her, I said, "uh,
 Lana, did you try to call me earlier?" and
 she, that's when she said yes, she had
 waited for, for the tape, and I asked her
 what was going on and she didn't say. So, I,
 you know, I want to write out my protective
 service referral this morning

Researcher

- R: No::!
- R: O::h
- R: mm huh
- R: uh huh
- R: mm huh
- R: uh huh
- R: [ttt]
- R: mm huh

[DSS, 6/19/90, tape 1, side 1, segment 000-040]

Harriet and another worker

Harriet

- H: ...she just, you know, said that it [er] was
 partly the TV in the background and so forth,
 that I heard which is a bull, you know
- H: "I like, I like boxing"
- H: () yeah
- H: well, she's trying to

H: she was saying "hit him, kick him, hit him,
kick him" because of the boxing thing []
but the little kid was
H: crying in the background, but, so
H: you know, I 'm glad she didn't just get up
and take off []

Sherry

S: bunch of bull?
S: that's what she said?
S: you shoulda said, "you should like boxing,
that's fine, but not on your kids"
S: you can't say that
S: bull
S: so

[DSS, 6/19/90, tape 1, side 2, segment 636-643]

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