

CHAPTER 7

Queens, Teens, and Model Mothers

Race, Gender, and the Discourse of Welfare Reform

HOLLOWAY SPARKS

Are you trying to get people off welfare by solving problems or are you punishing them for the choices that you disagree with? If you are trying to solve the problem, go back to the drawing board, and listen to people like me.

—Tandi Graff, former welfare recipient,
to members of Congress, 1995



For democratic theorists and other scholars interested in theorizing the promise and pitfalls of citizen participation in the contemporary public sphere, the welfare reform debate surrounding the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) provides an emblematic case study. In the period preceding the passage of the PRWORA, a lively public discussion on the shortcomings of the welfare system and Congress's proposed solutions filled the airwaves and other venues of public communication. Strikingly absent from this debate, however, were the voices of welfare recipients themselves. Congress and the media showcased the arguments of welfare administrators, politicians, business lobbyists, academics, and pundits, but welfare activists and other critics of “the end of welfare as we know it” often had a difficult time getting their views heard. Marginalized at congressional hearings and mostly ignored or discounted by the press, welfare recipients ended up primarily on the sidelines of this critical dialogue.

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In their absence, commentators regularly invoked racist and gender-biased images of “welfare queens” out to cheat taxpayers and of irresponsible teenage girls bearing children out of wedlock as the quintessential justifications for punitive welfare reform. The only seemingly positive public role for recipients during this debate was as a “welfare to work” success story. Politicians and journalists delighted in telling rags-to-riches morality tales about “model mothers” whose compliance with the new welfare regime meant they could leave the welfare rolls, provide better lives for their children, and become “respectable” citizens. Welfare recipients who opposed any part of the reforms, in contrast, were portrayed as troublemakers, not as citizens who might have important insights into public policy.

The exclusion and stereotyping of welfare recipients during the PRWORA debate reveals a serious distortion in the contemporary American public sphere. In spite of widespread assertions that the United States enjoys one of the most open democratic societies in the world, it nonetheless remains extraordinarily difficult for poor people to participate in democratic decision making. The fact that the absence of the poor was not widely questioned during the PRWORA debate only confirms the pervasiveness of the problem. The result of this distortion is that some citizens’ voices are consistently amplified in the context of democratic discussions, while others are muffled or silenced altogether.

This distortion, moreover, has racist and sexist contours. Although the discourses of personal responsibility and citizenship used to frame the reform debate appeared neutral on the surface, these discourses in fact masked the racially specific content of the stereotypes about welfare recipients that so influenced this debate. The stereotypes, furthermore, were not simply negative images of people of color, but were primarily negative images of *women* of color. The portrayal of poor women of color—and particularly African American women—as abusers of the system, immoral, and badly in need of discipline essentially destroyed their ability to appear as legitimate and authoritative participants in democratic deliberations about welfare. Since nearly one-third of all African American women are poor, and women of color and their children account for half of all welfare recipients (Albeda and Tilly 1997, 24–28), such stereotyping meant that the citizens with the most at stake in this policy discussion were the least likely to have input. For democratic theorists and others concerned about the legitimacy of our political institutions, such exclusions should raise fundamental questions about the quality of democratic life in the United States.

This essay analyzes the welfare reform debate of 1995–96 as a case study of public deliberation, and pays particular attention to how the construction of racist and sexist stereotypes affected the political participation of the poor. My argument has five steps. To ground my analysis, I begin with some contemporary theories of citizen participation and democratic discourse prominent in the field of political theory. Second, I explore the racist images and stereotypes of the poor invoked during congressional discussions of welfare reform in 1995–96 that undermined the meaningful participation of poor citizens. In the third section, I examine the unsuccessful efforts of current and former welfare recipients to introduce an alternative understanding of welfare into the PRWORA deliberations through congressional hearings. Fourth, I analyze the contractual theory of citizenship that helped justify the withdrawal of rights from poor women of color. And finally, I reflect on the lessons that scholars and activists might draw from this analysis in the service of reframing the public discourse on race, welfare, and citizenship in the future.

Democratic Theory, Citizen Participation, and the Contemporary Public Sphere

In recent years, democratic theorists have explored how we might encourage and expand citizen participation in settings where individual rights, regular elections, and representative democracy have already been institutionalized. One of the most influential versions of this project comes from theorists attentive to what Jürgen Habermas and others call the “public sphere.”¹ In Nancy Fraser’s words, the public sphere

designates a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, and hence an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction. This arena is conceptually distinct from the state; it is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state. The public sphere in Habermas’s sense is also conceptually distinct from the official economy; it is not an arena of market relations but rather one of discursive relations, a theater for debating and deliberating rather than for buying and selling. (Fraser 1997, 70)

Theorists drawing on this idea have defended a conception of democracy variously termed *deliberative democracy*, *discursive democracy*, or

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communicative democracy (Benhabib 1996; Cohen 1989; Dryzek 1990; Fishkin 1991; Habermas 1996; Mansbridge 1992, 1993; Young 1996, 2000). Deliberative theorists generally accept the continued necessity of representative institutions given the large size of most modern democracies, but as a complement to these institutions, they insist that democracies should promote significant citizen participation in public sphere deliberation about matters of common concern.

In spite of the participatory principles embodied in these theories, some deliberative democrats have given inadequate attention to the barriers to public sphere participation confronted by marginalized citizens. Activists, dissidents,² racial and ethnic minorities, and particularly poor citizens are regularly excluded from both decision-making and deliberative venues, but this problem is often sidestepped in the mainstream theoretical literature by theorists who downplay the effects of social and economic inequality on public participation (see, e.g., Barber 1984; Cohen 1989; Dryzek 1990). The claim that we can effectively bracket inequality in the public sphere, however, has been strongly criticized recently by a group of theorists explicitly concerned with problems of democratic inclusion. These scholars, including James Bohman (1996), Nancy Fraser (1997), Jane Mansbridge (1991, 1999), and Iris Young (1993, 1996, 2000), have emphasized the fact that formal political equality does not guarantee equal authority in or even access to the public realm.

Iris Young, for example, has identified two forms of exclusion that prevent citizens from fully participating in democracies. What she calls *external* exclusion “names the many ways that individuals and groups that ought to be included are purposely or inadvertently left out of fora for discussion and decision-making” (2000, 53–54). External exclusion can be as blatant as deliberately failing to invite certain groups to important meetings, or can take more subtle forms such as the way economic inequalities affect access to political institutions. As Nancy Fraser has noted, in societies like the United States in which the publication and circulation of political views depends on media organizations that are privately owned and operated for profit, those citizens who lack wealth will also generally “lack access to the material means of equal participation” (1997, 79). This criticism has obvious salience for families living on welfare budgets. On a more basic level, money and time are also necessary for participation in putatively “free” political institutions. Poor parents with young children, for example, might not have the resources to purchase child-care in order to attend a town council meeting at which important political decisions are made.³

Internal exclusions, in contrast, “concern ways that people lack effective opportunity to influence the thinking of others *even when they have access* to fora and procedures of decision-making” (Young 2000, 55; emphasis added). Citizens may find that “others ignore or dismiss or patronize their statements and expressions. Though formally included in a forum or process, people may find that their claims are not taken seriously and may believe that they are not treated with equal respect” (55). Internal exclusion can take the form of public ridicule or face-to-face inattention (Bickford 1996), but it can also stem from less obvious sources, such as the norms of articulateness, dispassionateness, and orderliness that are often privileged in political discussions (Young 2000, 56). As Young observes,

In many formal situations the better-educated white middle-class people . . . often act as though they have a right to speak and that their words carry authority, whereas those of other groups often feel intimidated by the argument requirements and the formality and rules of parliamentary procedure, so they do not speak, or speak only in a way that those in charge find “disruptive.” . . . The dominant groups, moreover, often fail entirely to notice this devaluation and silencing, while the less privileged often feel put down or frustrated, either losing confidence in themselves or becoming angry. (1996, 124)

Since “unruly” forms of speech tend to be used primarily by women, racial minorities, and working-class people, large groups of citizens face the devaluation of their political participation.

Young’s solution is what she calls “communicative democracy,” a form of deliberative democracy that expands the range of legitimate speaking and argument styles to include not only traditional arguments, but also practices such as the use of rhetoric and storytelling (1996, 129–32; see also Young 2000, 57–77).⁴ Young’s hope is that making room at the democratic table for narratives that exhibit “experience and values from the point of view of the subjects that have and hold them” (1996, 132) will mitigate the problem of internal exclusion. During public deliberation about welfare programs, for example, this might mean that legislators and other citizens would welcome and value (as opposed to dismissing or merely tolerating) poor people’s narratives about the sources of poverty, the dilemmas created by the welfare system, and their views on acceptable solutions.

Other political theorists, however, take a somewhat more skeptical

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view of the power of disadvantaged citizens to command meaningful public attention with narratives. These theorists, including a wide range of feminist, postcolonial, queer, and other theorists influenced by post-structuralist and postmodern theory, view the consciously used narratives and rhetorical strategies that Young discusses as part of a broader and more complex category of communicative practices visible when we turn our attention to political discourse (see, e.g., Fraser 1989, 1997; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Naples 1997; Phelan 1994). These theorists suggest that discourse, or the language, concepts, idioms, vocabularies, narratives, and social practices used to “construct what is taken to be real, natural, and true” (Schram 1995, xxiv), helps create and reinforce the power inequalities that affect participation (and thus inclusion).

While some discourses are hegemonic, officially sanctioned, and uncontroversial, others are nonhegemonic, officially discounted, and hotly contested (Fraser 1989, 165). In the context of welfare policy, for example, a discourse that constructs children as the innocent victims of poverty has remained solidly hegemonic for most of the twentieth century. In contrast, the discourse that constructs poor mothers who raise their children alone as noble heroines has almost disappeared under the recent onslaught of hostility directed at welfare recipients. Because such discourses both reflect and constitute power relations among the people who use them, and especially because they position “the people to whom they are addressed as specific sorts of subjects endowed with specific sorts of capacities for action” (Fraser 1989, 165), discourses deeply influence the forms citizen participation in the public sphere can take.

One particularly powerful way that discourses enter public sphere discussions is through stereotypes, or what Patricia Hill Collins has theorized as “controlling images” (2000, chap. 4; see also Lubiano 1992). Controlling images, Collins suggests, are socially constructed images “designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (2000, 69). The examples Collins discusses—mammies, matriarchs, welfare queens, and hoochies—objectify and subordinate black women.⁵ These images serve as a kind of shorthand for interpreting, shaping, stigmatizing—and thereby controlling—the actions of marginalized groups. For example, Collins notes that single black women who work outside the home to support their families are called “matriarchs,” and instead of being praised as good providers are blamed for driving their men away and for not being home to supervise their children adequately. Single black women who do stay home to supervise their children are stigma-

tized as “welfare queens” and are viewed as lazy rather than as good parents. In both cases, the controlling image constructs the woman as the problem, which draws attention away from structural reasons for poverty, and from the gender, race, and class discrimination that hinders the ability of black women to support and care for themselves and their families in the first place (2000, 72–84).⁶

Controlling images and stereotypes are used in turn to reinforce larger, overarching narratives about social and political issues. For example, as I discuss in the next section, controlling images of welfare recipients as loafers and drug addicts have supported a narrative that portrays poverty as the result of individuals’ bad decision making and learned “dependency.” This narrative in turn supports policy programs that sanction participants for failures of “personal responsibility.” If a controlling image is widely taken as true, then opponents will have more difficulty challenging either the discourse or the policy prescription that has been constructed to solve the “problem” posed by the stereotyped group (Naples 1997).

For democratic theorists concerned about citizen participation, attending to the discourses and controlling images used in the context of public sphere discussions clearly augments approaches that attend to more obvious practices of exclusion. The power to construct potent controlling images and discourses about other citizens, if unchallenged, not only shapes the way those citizens’ speech is heard, but also affects whether they even try to speak in the first place. Such power can thus significantly affect who participates and how in public sphere discussions. While some advantaged citizens have an easy time both with gaining access to political discussions and being heard as authoritative once there, others face nearly insurmountable challenges on both fronts. The result is a public sphere in which some citizens have a far more powerful voice than they should.

As I show next, such inequities played an important role in the welfare reform debate of 1995–96. I begin with the controlling images that dominated congressional and media discussions of the poor and undermined the participation of poor citizens during the PRWORA debate.

Wicked Queens, Unwed Teens, and Deadbeat Dads: The Discourse of Welfare Reform in the 104th Congress

As one of the most popular features of the Republicans’ “Contract with America,” welfare reform was one of the first items on the agenda of the

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104th Congress. Capitalizing on President Clinton's 1992 promise to "end welfare as we know it," Republicans pledged to "revolutionize the system from top to bottom" and "make the tough decisions that must be made" (House 1995b, 7). The dominant narrative about welfare reform they subsequently presented framed the "problem of welfare" as first and foremost a problem with "welfare dependency." According to this discourse, welfare recipients were poor primarily because they were individually lazy and irresponsible, not because of a lack of child-care options, job shortages, racism, or other forms of discrimination.⁷ The solutions to poverty offered as a result focused on reforming the behavior of the poor.⁸ Republicans and Democrats alike agreed that welfare recipients—and especially welfare mothers—needed discipline, or what some legislators preferred to characterize as "tough love" (House 1995b, 675). Left to their own devices, these legislators argued, welfare mothers would refuse to work, continue to bear children without regard to their ability to support them, and continue letting the fathers of their children off the financial hook.

This discourse vilified all welfare recipients, but specifically relied on and reinforced racist views of people of color in general, and African Americans in particular, as unmotivated shirkers, drug addicts, and irresponsible parents. The scapegoating of poor women of color took several forms in this discourse, but one of the most influential controlling images presented was that of the "welfare queen."⁹ Countless legislators and witnesses portrayed welfare recipients as black (or occasionally Hispanic) women who avoided paid employment, spent their welfare checks on drugs and liquor, and neglected their many children.¹⁰ Legislators repeatedly referenced "people who refuse to work" and people "who think they are owed the money for doing nothing" when advocating strict new rules for welfare recipients (see, e.g., *Cong. Rec.* 1995, H3581).¹¹ Senator Phil Gramm told a cheering Texas crowd he wanted "able-bodied men and women riding in the welfare wagon to get out and help the rest of us pull" (Yepsen 1995).¹²

Legislators also portrayed welfare queens as cheaters. Representative Nick Smith (R-Mich.) encouraged House members to end the "widespread abuse" of the Supplemental Security Insurance program by welfare mothers who coached their children to mimic the problems of "slow learners" so they could collect disability payments along with their regular welfare check (House 1995b, 671–73). Others argued vehemently against expanding the food stamp program because of rampant "waste, fraud, and abuse" (see, e.g., *Cong. Rec.* 1995, H3742).

Legislators and welfare experts also repeatedly linked welfare use by poor women with drug abuse. As former drug czar William Bennett told a House committee:

I think any police sergeant in the country will tell you that the day the welfare checks go out is a big day for drug buys. . . . When I was Drug Czar, . . . I would ask to be taken to the worst place. The place I almost always ended up was public housing . . . There were no men there [on a regular basis except] . . . the drug predators who were waiting to make their easy hits. (House 1995b, 163)

In talking about welfare recipients this way, Bennett indiscriminately portrayed welfare recipients as drug addicts and further reinforced the popular perception that most welfare recipients are African Americans living in “drug-infested” public housing (see Gilens 1996 and chap. 4, this volume).

Drug use by welfare mothers was also linked to child neglect. Representative Nancy Johnson (R-Conn.) blamed “parents’ drug addiction, subsidized with taxpayer [welfare] dollars” for the high turnover rates in urban schools that compromised poor children’s education (*Cong. Rec.* 1995, H3581). The view of welfare recipients as unfit mothers was also supported by high-profile media stories about child abuse. In 1994, for example, CNN, ABC, and most of the major national papers extensively covered a story about five African American welfare mothers and one African American man accused of neglecting and abusing nineteen children found in a Chicago apartment during a drug raid (Williams 1995, 1164–66). The influence of stories like these was immense, since many news outlets repeatedly used the “Chicago 19” as backdrops to stories about Republican and Democratic welfare reform proposals throughout the PRWORA debate (Williams 1995, 1166).¹³

Another way that welfare mothers were portrayed as harming their children was by “refusing” to get married. Commentators criticized not only the number of children welfare recipients (supposedly) had, but the fact that they had children by multiple men and were rarely married to them.¹⁴ Poor unmarried mothers were also censured for the fact that children who grew up in households without fathers seemed more likely to be suspended from school, have emotional problems, and display antisocial behavior (see, e.g., the testimony of James Q. Wilson, House 1995b, 151–52). In addition, women who had children out of wedlock were portrayed by many as the primary *cause* of poverty. The House Ways and

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Means Committee, for example, held an entire day of hearings called simply “Causes of Poverty, With a Focus on Out-of-Wedlock Births” (House 1996a). Although some legislators challenged the argument that illegitimacy caused poverty and not the reverse, influential congressional witnesses like Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation argued that the only real solution to the poverty problem was “marriage and reducing out-of-wedlock births,” not “training and putting a lot of people in the labor force” (U.S. Senate 1995a, 30).¹⁵

The overwhelming concern with what many called “the crisis of illegitimacy” (U.S. Senate 1995a, 46–47) greatly influenced the construction of a second but closely related set of scapegoats in the dominant discourse about welfare during the PRWORA debate: teen mothers. As Senator Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.) told the Senate, “There is an avalanche of teen pregnancies in this country, and too many of them end up on welfare and are unprepared to take care of children” (*Cong. Rec.* 1996, S8076). The number of unmarried teen mothers actually receiving AFDC in 1994–95 was extraordinarily low (less than 0.5 percent of the total caseload, and just 2 percent of all parents on AFDC [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1995]), but legislators repeatedly cited studies showing that unmarried teens who had children were far more likely to get on welfare and to stay on welfare for longer than average periods of time.¹⁶ As a result, “children having children” loomed large in the discourse surrounding welfare reform.

Republicans and Democrats alike chastised unmarried teens for having sex at all, for failing to use birth control properly, and most of all, for intentionally becoming pregnant. Delaware Governor Thomas Carper, in his testimony before the House Ways and Means Committee about ways to “turn off the spigot” of teen pregnancy, argued that “we have a situation where a lot of young girls need and want somebody to love them and the idea of having a baby who will love and want and need them is desirable” (House 1995b, 15). David Burgess, a father’s rights advocate, criticized teenagers who deliberately got pregnant because it was “in,” and who used pregnancy as a way to get attention and love (House 1995b, 1245–63).

Like the welfare queen stereotype, this controlling image was also racialized, both because the average citizen wrongly assumed most teen welfare mothers were African Americans, and because legislators often closely juxtaposed statistics about teen pregnancy with statistics on illegitimacy in the African American community (see, e.g., House 1995b, 133–34). The proximity of such figures elided the fact that the majority of

all nonmarital births (69 percent) occur to older women, not teens, and that white teens are responsible for 70 percent of all teen births (Albeda and Tilly 1997, 193). But with legislators portraying unmarried, apparently African American teen mothers as the driving force behind “a tangle of social pathologies, including school dropout, welfare use, unemployment, drug addiction and crime” (House 1995b, 134), lamentations about teen mothers easily fed racist stereotypes about welfare, crime, and sexual promiscuity.

Some legislators were equally critical of male teens who fathered children out of wedlock. In fact, “deadbeat dads” emerged as a third category of welfare miscreants during the PRWORA debate. As Senator Dorgan told the Senate, “There is an army of deadbeat dads in America, men who have babies and leave. . . . Guess who pays for that child? The American taxpayer” (*Cong. Rec.* 1996, S8076). Young deadbeat dads were particularly criticized for engaging in reckless virility rivalries with other teens. William Bennett advocated stigmatizing the young men “who think it is a show of macho maleness to impregnate five women” they cannot support (House 1995b, 170). Senator Joe Lieberman and others advocated particularly harsh penalties for the men over twenty who preyed on teen girls, then failed to financially support them or their babies (*Cong. Rec.* 1996, S8409).

A fourth category of welfare recipients portrayed as cheating the welfare system were “noncitizens.” Robert Rector, one of the original advocates of the exclusion of legal immigrants from welfare, testified in the Senate about how elderly noncitizens, particularly from southern China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, were coming to the United States and living on welfare. “The United States taxpayer,” he argued, “simply cannot allow the U.S. welfare system to become a deluxe retirement home for elderly people from the Third World” (Senate 1995a, 22). Senator Phil Gramm (R-Tex.) made this point more succinctly: “I want people, when they come to America, to come with their sleeves rolled up and not their hands held out” (Yepsen 1995).¹⁷

Perhaps the biggest villain constructed by the dominant discourse on reform, however, was the welfare system itself. No one was satisfied with the welfare system as it was, but Republicans in particular portrayed the AFDC program and the federal welfare entitlement (with their Democratic heritage) as fundamentally responsible for the dependency of millions of welfare recipients. Notably, this framing of the welfare problem was the only context in which adult welfare recipients ever appeared as

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victims. In Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison's (R-Tex.) words, "What we have created . . . is a self-perpetuating monster that sustains the most distressing ills of our society—illegitimacy, the disintegration of the family, weakening of the work ethic, and crippling dependency. Indirectly, it feeds ever-rising levels of functional illiteracy, violence, and juvenile crime" (*Cong. Rec.* 1995, S11754). This monster "savaged" the poor (House 1995b, 80), and repeatedly "lure[d] young mothers and fathers into creating a family they cannot support" (House 1995b, 134).

The solution to this nightmare was to cut "ensnared" adults free from the "welfare trap," and to reinstate their natural independence (*Cong. Rec.* 1996, S8076). Representative John Mica (R-Fla.), argued this point by way of a controversial analogy:

I represent Florida where we have many lakes and natural reserves. If you visit these areas, you may see a sign like this that reads, "do not feed the alligators." We post these signs . . . because unnatural feeding and artificial care creates dependency. . . . Now, I know people are not alligators, but I submit to you that with our current handout, nonwork welfare system, we have upset the natural order. . . . We have created a system of dependency. (*Cong. Rec.* 1995, H3742)

These portrayals of poor adults as helplessly stuck in the "vicious cycle of poverty" helped justify the "tough love" of the PRWORA, and removed them from the category of people who needed to be consulted as competent, full citizens with a legitimate stake in public policy.

Although the most visible victims constructed during the welfare reform debate were the children who suffered from their parents' mistakes and the savagery of the system (see, e.g., *Cong. Rec.* 1996, S8073–74), another group of victims created by the dominant discourse on welfare were taxpayers, working people, and "decent middle class Americans." These citizens were cast as the unsung heroes of America paying for a system that cheated them out of their hard-earned money. As Representative Robert Walker (R-Pa.) argued during a House debate:

Do you agree with the present system that robs working people of the treasure of their work in order to support people who refuse to work? . . . It is immoral to take money from decent, middle-class Americans who work for everything they have and give it to people who think they are owed the money for doing nothing. (*Cong. Rec.* 1995, H3581)

These taxpayers were portrayed as wanting to give the poor “a helping hand,” but as impatient after “30 years and \$5 trillion” spent on a system that rewarded immorality and indolence (*Cong. Rec.* 1995, H3398).

Given the controlling images of welfare recipients that dominated congressional and media discussions of welfare, it is little wonder that few poor people were able to or perhaps even interested in joining this public sphere debate. The prevailing stereotypes of welfare recipients in effect created a hostile environment; recipients who wished to participate in the public discussion about welfare risked being heard only as the loafers, lawbreakers, and immoral mothers portrayed by the dominant discourse. It is likely no accident, then, that most of those who did participate were *former* recipients, women who could claim the same hard-working self-reliance as middle-class taxpayers. These women could legitimately speak about welfare in the public sphere only because they had rejected and then conquered the system.¹⁸

Legislators enjoyed citing these success stories as support for their reform plans, and typically celebrated two kinds of model mothers. First were the plucky heroines who had bucked the old system and outsmarted the welfare trap. These recipients were often women with middle-class backgrounds, good educations, and marketable skills who rebelled against attempts to steer them away from paid employment or further education. In an irony not lost on critics of the PRWORA, many of these women had benefited from programs that the PRWORA would disallow, including programs that allowed women to draw welfare while attending college rather than immediately forcing them to search for paid work (see, e.g., House 1995b, 178–95). Nonetheless, these women were effusively praised by legislators for “their tremendous show of courage” in resisting the welfare system’s best efforts to trap them into poverty (House 1995b, 180; Senate 1995b, 4).

The second group of success stories were the new model mothers, the women who overcame bad habits, complied with new state-based “welfare-to-work” programs, and became self-sufficient for often the first time in their lives. Three of these women, including a nurse, a welder, and receptionist, appeared in a hearing called simply “Welfare Reform Success Stories” (House 1995c; see also Senate 1995c). Legislators also sometimes read media accounts of success stories into the record during debates (see *Cong. Rec.* 1996, S8073). Other welfare-to-work model mothers appeared at press conferences held by welfare administrators (Tumulty 1994) or on morning news shows (“People on Welfare” 1995;

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“Chicago Program” 1995; “Welfare Mom Works Hard” 1996; “From Welfare to Work” 1996).

These women sounded sincerely grateful for the opportunity to work for wages, and seemed generally satisfied with the welfare-to-work programs in which they participated, even if they criticized remaining glitches. Several of the former recipients who testified before Congress, in contrast, expressed far more serious reservations about the changes in welfare law proposed under the PRWORA. I turn next, then, to the counterdiscourse of reform put forward by welfare mothers themselves.

“Everyone Needs Help Sometimes”: Welfare Mothers
Go to Washington

Hearings on welfare reform were held by more than a dozen committees and subcommittees across the House and Senate and gave hundreds of people an opportunity to talk to legislators about welfare reform. Committee members heard from Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala, more than 160 members of Congress, a dozen governors, a half dozen mayors, two dozen welfare administrators, at least 60 academic experts, more than 75 representatives from nonprofits, 100 business representatives, and a host of other interested groups. Of the nearly 600 witnesses, however, only 17 were welfare recipients.¹⁹ Even this figure overstates the participation of welfare recipients because just four of these witnesses were actually still receiving AFDC at the time of their testimony. Four more were receiving transitional benefits such as child-care assistance, and the remaining nine were former recipients. This latter group included one member of Congress, Representative Lynn C. Woolsey from California.

The fact that so few welfare recipients participated in congressional hearings would not have mattered as much if the testimony these women provided had been attended to more seriously. The counterdiscourse that they offered was unique. It expanded the list of reasons women needed welfare, argued for the continued necessity of a “safety net” for poor women and their children in distress, and challenged the stereotypes about welfare recipients so common in mainstream discussions about welfare reform. Their analysis of the welfare system, however, was mostly dismissed or simply ignored by defenders of the dominant discourse, perpetuating the patterns of external and internal exclusion apparent in the broader public sphere debate.

Like many Republicans and Democrats, the welfare mothers who did testify were highly critical of the administrative catch-22s that made it hard for women to escape the “welfare trap.” But most of these women also condemned legislators for misunderstanding the reasons women needed welfare in the first place. Some recipients, for example, criticized the PRWORA for failing to include stiff child support enforcement mechanisms. As former recipient Pamela Cave put it, “Every AFDC case is a child support case” (House 1995b, 1213). Cave blamed her welfare stint on an irresponsible husband who left without warning, and the legal system that made it nearly impossible to collect the child support he owed across state lines. A few recipients supported garnishing fathers’ wages, mandatory work programs, or even prison time for “deadbeat dads” (House 1995b, 181), but most of the mothers simply advocated better enforcement of already existing laws.²⁰

A second strand of the counterdiscourse emphasized that many women needed welfare because of domestic violence or abuse, a fact that only rarely made it into the welfare reform discussion by way of legislators or expert witnesses. In fact, in one of the few flashes of protest evident in weeks of welfare hearings, two young welfare mothers were “escorted” from a hearing room after interrupting testimony from high-profile welfare experts who failed to acknowledge the high percentage of welfare recipients trying to exit abusive relationships (see House 1995b, 173–77). In a later hearing, former recipient Tamara Elser described leaving Florida to escape her abusive ex-husband, and discussed how welfare programs in Vermont “provided a bridge from destitution and abuse to independence and safety for my children and myself” (Senate 1995c).

Welfare mothers also strongly contested the view that simply getting a job—any job—would end women’s need for welfare. Mother after mother told legislators that they wanted to work, but that too many jobs failed to pay a living wage, and the high cost of child-care meant that going to work often harmed the family rather than helping it. As Karolin Loendorf, a former welfare recipient from Montana, put it, “If you choose to try and regain your self-worth, self-esteem, dignity and self-respect and go out and become a tax paying citizen, you then also choose to take food out of your children’s mouths, provide less clothing, [and] create more stresses in the home” (House 1995b, 1217). Cheri Honkala, a recipient and welfare activist from Philadelphia,²¹ pointed out that job hunting required money that welfare mothers often didn’t have, but the real trick for poor women was keeping a job once they had it:

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The low-paying jobs I've gotten don't have health care benefits or sick days and don't pay enough to cover the costs of decent child care and transportation to work.

. . . If your kids get sick, you have to miss work. If your child care provider gets sick, you have to miss work. I know many women who were fired when they missed work because of an ill child or a sick elderly parent. (House 1995b, 1113)

In trying to take care of their responsibilities as both caretakers and wage earners, these women maintained, they were repeatedly caught in no-win situations.

Given these sorts of obstacles, welfare recipients argued, the safety net that the old welfare system provided had to be preserved. Representative Lynn Woolsey made this argument on the floor of the House:

Twenty-eight years ago, I went from being a married woman with complete health care coverage for my children to being a single mother with three small children receiving no child support. . . . Thankfully, I was able to turn to Medicaid and other forms of public assistance to add to my salary so I could provide my children with the health care, child care, and food they needed. Mr. Chairman, that safety net is what helped my family get back on their feet. But I will never, not for 1 minute, think that just because my family made it, so can the millions of families who are in similar or worse situations than we were today. (*Cong. Rec.* 1995, H10781)

The real point of welfare reform, Woolsey insisted, had to be reducing "the need for assistance, not the availability of assistance" (House 1995b, 698). In the words of Pam Harris White, "If it had not been . . . for the system being there, even in the condition that it is in, how would I have fed my kids? How would I have been able to support them? What would have happened to their medical needs? It is a need, it is definitely a need" (House 1995b, 189).

For White, Cave, and a few others, the safety net was necessary to temporarily protect traditional women (those who had gotten married and been stay-at-home mothers) until child support payments began. Other welfare mothers argued that the safety net had to give women with children the time and help they needed to achieve *permanent* self-sufficiency. As a result, these women argued strongly against what they viewed as the "one size fits all" model contained in the PRWORA. They were particularly troubled by the two-year time limit on education and

training mandated by the bill. Karolin Loendorf, Tamara Elser, Amy Hendricks, and Tandi Graff all testified that two years would not have been enough time to gain the skills or degrees necessary for the living wage jobs they now held (see, e.g, House 1995b, 191, 695, 1227). Lynn Woolsey made the same argument on the floor of the House: “We must be flexible about transition from welfare to work. It took me 3 years to get off welfare and I was educated, healthy, and working” (*Cong. Rec.* 1995, H3742).

The welfare mothers who testified in the House and Senate saved some of their strongest criticisms for those who stereotyped welfare recipients. As welfare mother Lea Higashi wrote to the House Ways and Means Committee:

For 18 years I was a decent, responsible middle class American. I stood tall in the knowledge that my tax dollars helped provide a safety net to families. . . . Now that I need a hand up, I am labeled a deadbeat, lazy, unmotivated, un-willing to work, looking for a free ride, irresponsible, this is not true! What I need is a time frame that fits the *NEEDS* of my family. Not a[n] arbitrary 2-year time limit created by someone who has little *understanding* of the realities I face. (House 1995b, 1511)

Tandi Graff criticized members of Congress who claimed welfare recipients were living the high life: “I challenge you to hand in your paychecks for 1 month and live on welfare. You will discover that it is not a luxurious lifestyle” (House 1995b, 695). And Cheri Honkala took on people who characterized welfare recipients as bad mothers:

You may look at me that think that because I’m on welfare there must be something wrong with me, that somehow it’s my fault that I’m poor. I am here to tell you that there is nothing wrong with me. I am a hard working person and a good mother. Everyone needs help sometimes. (House 1995b, 1108–14)

For these welfare recipients, the true model mothers weren’t only the women who had outsmarted the welfare monster or complied with new welfare-to-work programs. They were also women who believed, like Tamara Elser, that their top priorities were “proper parenting,” self-respect, and self-sufficiency (Senate 1995c). But even though these individual women were sometimes commended and applauded by the legislators who heard them speak, their counterdiscourse was nonetheless

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overwhelmed by the discourse of dependency and the stereotypes of recipients they tried so earnestly to dislodge.

Gender, Race, and Contractual Citizenship

Why was the dominant discourse on welfare so hard to displace? Deeply entrenched views about welfare recipients as part of the “undeserving” poor certainly played a role (Fraser and Gordon 1993), but an additional factor was the discourse of citizenship invoked by supporters of the PRWORA. One of the main sources of this discourse was political scientist Lawrence Mead’s influential books *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship* (1986) and *The New Politics of Poverty* (1992). Mead’s basic argument was that the “most vulnerable Americans need obligations, as much as rights, if they are to move as equals on the stage of American life” (1986, 17). In Mead’s view, “federal programs that support the disadvantaged and unemployed have been permissive in character, not authoritative. That is, they have given benefits to their recipients but have set few requirements for how they ought to function in return” (1986, 1). Mead suggested that requiring employable recipients to work in return for support would help those recipients “function better,” and would also allow them to meet their social obligations to other citizens (1986, 1; see also chap. 11).

Here we find the basic outline for the contractual relationship constructed by the PRWORA. In Mead’s words, “The idea is that parents are responsible in some sense for themselves and the families they have brought into being” (1986, 244). Those who make “an honest effort to support their families” and abstain from “moral offenses” such as “nonpayment of child support, and fraud or abuse of programs by recipients” (244) are judged to have met their social obligations to other citizens. Those who fail to comply with these obligations should face strong sanctions.

Mead explicitly acknowledges the paternalism that would be required to run programs that force the poor and unemployed to work and be “moral” in exchange for support (246). In the context of experimental welfare-to-work programs in the states prior to the PRWORA debate, however, Mead’s ideas were translated almost exclusively into the language of contract. Governor John Engler of Michigan and Governor Thomas Carper of Delaware, the first two witnesses on welfare reform before the House Ways and Means Committee in the 104th Congress, proudly told their audience about the “social contract” that Michigan

and Delaware now required AFDC recipients to sign. Carper described this “social contract of mutual responsibility” in detail:

I am the welfare recipient, you are the State. For example, you, the State, offer to do certain things to help me, the welfare recipient. For example, you will help me with my education, to get my high school degree, help with job training, with job placement, maybe help me with some transportation to the job, some child care for my kids and make sure that we still have health care.

. . . My responsibilities would be to take advantage of the education, take advantage of the job training, take the job that is presented to me, even a minimum wage job, make sure my kids are in school and once I have a job, to work, not to quit the job. If I do, I will face sanctions. In some cases, I will face the complete total lifetime cut-off of AFDC eligibility. (House 1995b, 16–17)

Other aspects of Delaware’s new welfare regime required that both parents support their children, and encouraged the “maintenance and sustenance of two-parent families” (17).

The debt to Mead’s argument is clear, but the portrayal of this relationship as one of contract (a portrayal resonating, of course, with the language of “The Contract with America”) is problematic. In most contexts, a contract implies that there is a free exchange between equals, and that both parties can either negotiate the agreement to their satisfaction, or can walk away if they don’t like the terms. The social contracts of Michigan and Delaware, however, were hardly transacted between equal partners. On one side was the state, with the power to determine the contours of the “agreement,” to judge compliance, and to unilaterally withhold resources. On the other side was the welfare recipient, usually lacking even the most basic means of subsistence, and positioned only to say yes or no to the “agreement” (Fraser and Gordon 1993, 63–64). The result was at best a lopsided contract, and perhaps more accurately, an illegitimate contract.

These social contracts, however, clearly served as models for the legislators who crafted the PRWORA. The resulting contract constructed by the PRWORA could be abridged as follows:

*If work
And morals
Then rights.*

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In other words, if a poor person works for pay (or in the case of a woman, is supported by a man who works for pay) and behaves morally (is heterosexual, monogamous, law abiding, and preferably married or formerly married), then that person will be granted respect and the full rights of citizenship (including procreative rights, privacy rights, vocational liberty, and political participation rights). If a poor person does *not* work, or does *not* conform to the moral standard, then he or she will not deserve or be granted the respect or rights that other citizens enjoy. Senator John Ashcroft made this contractual view of citizenship clear during one of the final debates on welfare reform in the 104th Congress:

I think it is time for us to limit the amount of time that people can be on welfare. It is time for us to provide disincentives to bear children out of wedlock. It is time for us to provide powerful incentives for people to go to work. It is time for us to say that, if you are on welfare, you should be off drugs. It is time for us to say that, if you are on welfare, your children should be in school. . . . You have to be responsible for what you are doing. We are not going to continue to support you in a way in which you abdicate, you simply run from, you hide from, *your responsibility as a citizen*. (*Cong. Rec.* 1996, S8081; emphasis added)

A central problem with this contractual account of citizenship and rights, however, is that it's a selectively applied contract. In spite of being framed in the universalist language of citizenship, this contractual discourse is in fact gendered, raced, classed, and heterosexist. There are, for example, significant gender differences in how the "work test" part of this contract plays out. As Gwendolyn Mink has argued, the caregiving work women do for their own families is generally not accorded economic value, but in the case of poor single mothers, that work "*is not considered work at all*" (Mink 1998, 134). This is evident in the line used incessantly by legislators from both sides during the PRWORA debate: "Our plan puts welfare mothers to work" (see, e.g., *Cong. Rec.* 1995, S19154). To count as real, valuable, productive work, in other words, "work" has to be paid work. Since women consistently perform far more unpaid work than men do, a contractual account of citizenship that privileges paid work seriously disadvantages women citizens.

The exceptions to the requirement that valuable work must be paid work reveal the racial and heterosexist dimensions of this contract. There are women whose unpaid work in the home *is* publicly supported: widows. Mothers with children in the Survivor's Insurance (SI) program

receive both unstigmatized *and* far more generous benefits than mothers with children in AFDC (now TANF) programs. As Mink observes, “Where the welfare law tells unmarried mothers to get to work outside the home, SI underwrites the widowed mother’s decision to devote herself to the care of her children” inside the home (1998, 124). SI’s liberal earnings exemption also means widows can choose a combination of paid work and caregiving work as they see fit. It is no coincidence, Mink suggests, that SI recipients have been disproportionately white and AFDC/TANF participants have been disproportionately black (28).²²

Another example of how the value “assigned to mothers’ work inside the home has depended on the class and color of the mother” (Mink 1998, 28) is shown in Congress’s decision to grant wives who work at home the right to establish their own Independent Retirement Accounts (IRAs). In an ironic twist, this new law, which allows stay-at-home wives to set aside a portion of their “earned income” for retirement, was passed the same week as the PRWORA (Mink 1998, 28–29). Again, the women this publicly financed tax break benefits are far more likely to be white, well-off, and married. The bottom line is that primarily white widows and middle and upper-class wives are allowed to stay home with their children without stigma and are not required to relinquish their procreative autonomy or their privacy rights even though they don’t “work.” Poor women are not given these options.

The morals test in the PRWORA contract is also selectively applied. Poor women (and more recently, poor men) who have children out of wedlock are judged to fail the morals test and are sanctioned with the loss of income, privacy, and autonomy. Wealthy heterosexual men, in contrast, do not face the same penalties. As an example, Jesse Jackson might well lose moral clout for fathering a child outside of wedlock, but he is unlikely to lose rights in the way that poor welfare recipients do under the PRWORA. Most wealthy heterosexual women enjoy the same ability to retain rights when they fail to pass the morals test.

Both the “work” test and the “morals” test of the PRWORA’s contract thus help justify a racist, sexist, heterosexist, and classist withdrawal of rights from welfare recipients. As Uma Narayan has argued, such contractual models of rights and citizenship ultimately stem from the view that rights should depend on one’s contributions to public life (1997). Whether this contribution comes via waged work (Shklar 1991) or unwaged care-work (Mink 1998), Narayan suggests that we should instead “insist that dignity, worth and social standing matter to all who are *participants* in national life, that is, *who are part of the national com-*

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munity, independently of how they *contribute* to it” (Narayan 1997, 52). Such a view of rights and citizenship as based on participation rather than contributions might well help displace the paternalistically constructed obligations that some powerful citizens have been able to impose on others through the Personal Responsibility Act.

Conclusion

How do the insights of discourse analysis and democratic theory help us better understand the politics of race and welfare in the United States? In an age when direct appeals to racism have lost their acceptability in most public venues, analysis of the seemingly neutral discourses used in public sphere debates remains a critical tactic for unmasking the indirect appeals to racism that still influence public policy. Although the discourses of citizenship and responsibility clearly resonated with many Americans during the welfare reform debate, they were buttressed by racist and sexist stereotypes. By portraying welfare recipients as drug-addicted, immoral, inner-city welfare queens and unwed teenage mothers, the dominant discourse reduced the complexity of American poverty to a simplistic, racist caricature. Practitioners of discourse analysis can reveal the continued salience of racism and sexism in the public discourse about welfare, and can aid in the effort to usefully complicate public understanding of the welfare system and its participants.

Democratic theorists, in turn, sensitize us to the patterns of political exclusion that such caricatures reinforce, and encourage us to keep a watchful eye on who actually participates in decision making in established democracies. Welfare recipients ultimately had little effect on the dialogue about reform in spite of their firsthand experience with AFDC and their immediate interest in the outcome of the reform process. The hostility toward welfare mothers generated by the dominant discourse and its attendant stereotypes certainly might have encouraged some recipients to remain silent, but even when recipients like Tandi Graff challenged legislators to “listen to people like me,” those demands were easily (if arbitrarily) dismissed. Democratic theorists remind us that the passage of a policy like the PRWORA without the meaningful participation or consent of the poor represents a failure of democracy.

The barriers to poor people’s authoritative participation analyzed here should raise distressing questions for a society that claims to be democratic, and suggest at least one potential goal welfare recipients and

their allies might pursue in future efforts to revamp the U.S. welfare system. Although the provision of an adequate income and the protection of individual civil rights are critical measures of the success of any welfare program,²³ democratic theory suggests a third criterion: the meaningful political participation of the poor in democratic deliberation and decision making, particularly regarding the welfare system. We should not submit to the argument that poor people lack the moral standing or competence to participate in political life, nor should the joys and burdens of participation in democratic life become the exclusive privilege of the wealthy.

NOTES

I am grateful to the editors, Maxine Eichner, and Marnina Gonick for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay, and to George Davis and Challen Nicklen for outstanding research assistance.

1. Two other groups of scholars who have advocated increased citizen participation are theorists of “participatory democracy,” including Carole Pateman (1970) and Jane Mansbridge (1980), and civic republicans such as Hannah Arendt (1958) and Benjamin Barber (1984). Participatory theorists have generally argued for the expansion of democracy to areas of life *beyond* formal political institutions, while civic republicans have concentrated on making those formal political institutions themselves more participatory.

2. I have examined the political participation of activists and dissidents in more detail in Sparks 1997.

3. Some of these issues could obviously be addressed with better institutional arrangements (e.g., free on-site child or elder care), but few public institutions have made such accommodations.

4. For additional perspectives on the political importance of storytelling, see Disch 1994; and Lara 1998.

5. Although Collins does not make this point explicitly, other subordinated groups clearly confront controlling images as well. African American men, for example, have encountered the controlling image of the violent, oversexed would-be rapist.

6. Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram have made a parallel but more general argument about the “social construction of target populations” (1993).

7. This discourse drew heavily from older “culture of poverty” arguments first developed in the 1960s (e.g., Moynihan 1965; see also Mead 1986, 1992). For more detailed critiques of the discourses of poverty used in the transition to TANF, see Mink 1998; Naples 1997 (discussing the 1987–88 reforms but also applicable to TANF); and White 1997.

8. See Naples 1997 and Stoesz 2000 for analyses of the individualist and behaviorist assumptions built into mainstream views of welfare reform.

9. My discussion relies on the work of feminist scholars who have carefully

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analyzed both the gendered character of U.S. welfare programs and the inseparability of race and gender in the context of welfare politics. See especially Abramovitz 1988; Albeda and Tilly 1997; Gordon 1990, 1994; Mink 1998, 1999; and Quadagno 1994.

10. Ronald Reagan is often credited as the original author of the “welfare queen” stereotype. In numerous speeches in the late 1970s and early 1980s, he told the story of a “Chicago welfare queen” (apparently an African American woman named Linda Taylor) who supposedly drove a Cadillac, bought thick steaks with food stamps, and vacationed in resorts on taxpayer funds. Reporters found many discrepancies between the facts of the case and Reagan’s story (see, e.g., *New York Times*, January 9, 1977, 39), but the image proved extraordinarily resilient.

11. The term *welfare queen* itself was not invoked all that often during the 104th Congress; there are less than a dozen references during the floor debates. Those who did use the term had two quite different purposes. One group invoked the label in order to argue that they weren’t stereotyping recipients but were dealing with “real problems.” Their listing of recipients’ failings, however, would then closely track the welfare queen stereotype. See, for example, the speech by Senator Dorgan (*Cong. Rec.* 1996, S8094). A second group of legislators explicitly criticized the welfare queen stereotype as a myth. See, e.g., the speech by Representative Coyne (*Cong. Rec.* 1995, H15530).

12. Although some legislators spoke as though the welfare rolls were full of able-bodied men, adult men accounted for just 4 percent of the AFDC population in FY 1995. The vast majority of welfare recipients then as now are in fact children; they accounted for 69 percent of all welfare recipients in 1994–95 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1995).

13. Lucy Williams has analyzed the one-sided character of much of the news coverage of the Chicago 19 case and similar situations to criticize both how the media creates an image “which is not false or exclusive, but is dissembling in its uniqueness—and the public’s selective gravitation to that image in order to validate its own race and gender perceptions” (1995, 1161).

14. The average welfare mother had only two children (Department of Health and Human Services 1995).

15. Even legislators who noted that out-of-wedlock births were on the rise in most Western democracies and that the phenomenon certainly wasn’t limited to poor people often agreed that the “disastrous” results of illegitimacy justified sanctions against poor women who had children outside of marriage (see, e.g., Senate 1995b). This is a rather remarkable reassertion of the norm of the heterosexual nuclear family in a context in which fewer than half of American families now adhere to this idealization.

16. The average welfare stay for all AFDC recipients in the years prior to the passage of the PRWORA was just over two years, but women who had their first child while a teenager were three times as likely to be on welfare for ten or more years (Senate 1995b, 4).

17. Although many legislators objected to the fact that the PRWORA eliminated benefits for virtually all legal aliens (including refugees from Cuba and other politically sensitive groups), the final version of the PRWORA included stricter sponsorship requirements and higher barriers to welfare support for legal

immigrants. For a more detailed analysis of the racial politics of welfare reform and immigrant communities, see Fujiwara 1999.

18. Compare also Mead's argument that most Americans believe only *workers* have the right to press claims for equality against the government or their employers (1992, 60).

19. Two of the recipients appeared twice, for a total of nineteen appearances. This figure is based on a search of the published hearings of the 104th Congress. Since former welfare recipients were often listed with their new job title, it is possible that a few have been missed. Three additional recipients submitted statements to committees for inclusion in the record. All of the recipients were adult women.

20. Pamela Cave was one of the most conservative welfare recipients to testify during the PRWORA debate. She described herself as an "avid" Rush Limbaugh listener, even though she criticized his regular practice of saying "good morning" to "those welfare recipients who are just getting up" several hours into his broadcast (House 1995b, 1210).

21. Cheri Honkala appears to be the only welfare activist who actually testified during 1995–96; two other participants in a welfare rights organization submitted letters to the House Ways and Means Committee (see House 1995b, at 1511 and 1709).

22. See also Soss 2000 for a fascinating study of how the different designs of AFDC and SSDI (Social Security Disability Insurance) affect the political marginality of different welfare populations.

23. See also Schram and Soss 2001 for an analysis of the political construction of "success" in the context of welfare policy.