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African-American Women and Welfare: 
A Qualitative Study of African-American Women Receiving Public Assistance

A Thesis 
Presented to 
the Faculty of the Department of Sociology 
Western Kentucky University 
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment 
of the Requirements for the Degree 
Master of Arts 
by 
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This thesis is dedicated in the memory of my father—Jerry Lee Randolph who had a very quiet nature but encouraged me to pursue my dreams.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I was so profoundly affected by the study I conducted on African-American women and welfare that at times I had to stop researching because of the emotional and sisterly ties I felt with the women I interviewed. I found myself becoming very involved in these women's lives due to the fact that I, too, am a mother and a single parent struggling to find myself in a very vicious and unfair world. The unique aspect of the study was that the women I interviewed were not ordinary women but women with their own personal stories to tell. Although reluctant at first, these women spoke about their everyday life experiences with vibrancy. The tears I witnessed were tears of pain but also tears of relief because these women were able to discuss issues related to their own existence.

I could not afford to pay the women I interviewed, but other exchanges took place. In exchange for interviews, I was asked to obtain literature about admission to Western Kentucky University and also asked to help fill out an admission application and financial aid paperwork. I received nothing but complete gratification from this experience because to help another sister is empowering, and knowledge is power. I was also asked by some of the women to have lunch just to talk or engage in camaraderie by “going out on the town” just for the sake of getting away from work and home.

The study has been such a learning experience that it will always be cherished as an unforgettable era in the life of Michelle Randolph. I hope that I
will be able to expand on the study later, but for now I shall focus on the rest of my life. I would like to say thanks to my family, especially my mother and daughter, who put up with me throughout this whole journey. I must admit I was very evil and hard to live with. I would also like to say thanks to my very young, but inspiring, sister Kim who came by my office many times flashing a smile that lit up the entire room. Also, my other two sisters, Diana and Angela, we are going to see you through also. Last, but not least, I must thank God for the spiritual strength I received throughout the research process. I sat in my office so many times humiliated, disgusted, tired, tears flowing like a river, but thank God I made it. Now what can I do for you?

Last, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my Dad, Jerry Lee Randolph, who took a spiritual journey in 1995. I miss you dearly and heaven only knows the pain I feel when I think of your being away; however, the things you and mom instilled in me are kept close at heart, and they help me to survive from day-to-day. I love you daddy.
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AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN AND WELFARE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN RECEIVING PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

Michelle Lee Randolph July 12, 2002 80 Pages

Directed by: Dr. Joan Krenzin, Dr. Steve Groce, and Dr. Anne Onyekwuluje

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Using information obtained from interviews of a sample of fifteen African-American women from two counties in a border state, the overall perceptions of women receiving public assistance and the labels and stigmas (i.e., welfare checks, food stamps, and medical cards) associated with receiving public assistance were examined. Research findings indicate that there is stress associated with receiving public assistance, and the stigmas associated with public assistance influence people in the public domain to brand recipients socially. The findings from the interviews produced results indicating that the perceived differences and mistreatment felt by welfare recipients were, in part, the result of welfare stigma symbols (i.e., welfare check, food stamps, and medical card). The respondents felt that race exacerbated labeling and stigmatization.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Slices of life must be looked at in microscopic ways to illuminate the existential experiences of dailiness—the patterns that are present, the "nuts and bolts" of suffering and survival. (Polokaw 1993)

When thinking about gender roles and gender specifics in the family household, an individual must think about the past in relation to the present. So many contradictions persist, making the term "family" subject to multiple interpretations, especially when the race comes into play. The family ethic or the ideology of the home being equated with woman and work equated with man has controlled women’s contact with the family unit, the labor market, and the state through time. According to the family ethic, “proper women marry, bear and raise children, manage the household, depend on men for economic support, and accept a subordinate position in the home” (Abramovitz p. 25). Although there is an increasing number of single parent families in the United States today, African Americans are disproportionately represented among them.

The so called modern family ethic appeared during the Industrial Revolution as the manufacturing industry drew excess labor from the home; thus, there was a need for people to work outside the home for wages and for someone to stay at home to nurture, tend to domestic duties, and be submissive to the will of the breadwinner (i.e., the man). Springing from the era of industry,
the family ethic ideology is still somewhat in effect today and is enforced and reinforced by the laws and actions of the state. If a woman fulfills the terms of "the family," she is considered feminine and respectable as a woman and is recognized as such by society. If the woman steps outside her social place for whatever reason, she is penalized and considered an outcast for stepping outside of that role.

The family ethic along with its shaky ideologies of the family was de facto in origin and institutionalized when slavery was still in existence. It reflected the racial and class make-up of the social network that created it. The ethic was certainly flawed because "while glorifying and protecting the family roles of white, middle-class wives, this society gave no such recognition or support to the family roles of women of color. Rather than protection, the families of women of color were routinely assaulted and often torn apart" (Abramovitz 1992, p. 26).

Women of color were denied the luxury of the home and were forced to exploit themselves as laborers rather than mothers who often denied their own families to tend to the needs of others' families. As a latent consequence of the family ethic, women of color were fully denied their own womanhood. True womanhood at the time would have necessitated their staying at home with their children. However, economics demanded that they work outside the home.

When welfare and welfare reform is focused on as basically an African-American phenomenon, the above mentioned facts must be considered by those who are quick to judge African-American women as unconcerned about social matters other than receiving a monthly check.
The recent 1996 welfare reform has sparked heated debates and arguments that have led scholars to focus on the issue of single parenthood. One of the interesting elements of the reform is the five-year lifetime limit placed on cash assistance—an element of the reform that has caused people to question the morality of the decisions of policy makers—which in turn should increase employment and decrease child poverty for those individuals receiving government assistance. However, policy makers who view welfare reform as a panacea fail to take into consideration that the imposition of a stringent work requirement may not, logically speaking, be a guaranteed avenue that rids the country of poverty. For example, in 1996 over 2.7 million children (19 percent of all poor children) lived in households with incomes below the governmental poverty threshold, even though the breadwinner of the family worked full time for a full twelve months (Wertheimer 1999, p. 1). The harsh reality is that despite tireless efforts by parents to change their social scenario, there is still a very high chance that poverty-stricken families’ situations will remain the same.

One of the consequences of the welfare reform is the fact that women, in general, are the focus, but the media often display images of the recipients as African-American women whose children continue receiving assistance after they become adults. These images influence the opinions of both the general public and the policy makers. Policy makers are exhausted by their efforts to contribute tax monies in order to feed and clothe individuals who are highly capable of obtaining employment. Their solution to the problem is to end welfare altogether.
This solution brings up the question of value. What are society’s values or who does society value?

According to Lieberman (1998)

Americans’ understanding of, and sympathy for, the American welfare state has been severely compromised by the relentless and narrow focus on a small slice of the poor—the urban “underclass.” So defined, welfare is frequently the object of racially focused antagonism and resentment, directed particularly at the apparent conditions of life in our decaying inner cities—idleness, immorality, family decay, and crime. (p. 4)

Welfare, according to popular image, seems to generate threatening and detrimental consequences for American society, particularly African-American women. A well-known image is

of a program that pays young, unmarried black women in decrepit, violent, [government owned], drug infested neighborhoods, to have [as] many children [as they want] by different men, none of whom they marry (Lieberman p. 4).

Despite the above picture painted by Lieberman being mostly false, this picture has a particular effect on the minds of most Americans. Sociologically speaking, African-Americans are increasingly more isolated, both geographically and economically, in areas that offer poor services, very few high-skill jobs, and offer poor settings in which to rear children. The dense concentration of people of color in American cities (regardless of location) makes these individuals more visible; therefore, they are the primary targets of the media, public policy makers, and those who choose to make pathological accusations.

Efforts to preserve “the traditional family” through policies that control the socialization process are not new. They continue the historic pattern of state intervention in family life on behalf of “social reproduction,” that is, the capacity of families to carry out their socially assigned caretaking tasks in socially prescribed ways. Contrary to laissez-faire doctrine, which promotes minimal government and family privacy, the state has historically
regulated the lives of families by rewarding traditional two-parent families and punishing families that it views as not complying with prescribed family norms. (Ambramovitz 1992, p. 24)

Looking at welfare from the functionalists’ perspective (e.g., Parsons 1951), social order rests on values that are held collectively by societal members and groups. Such values are translated into moral commitments that societal members carry out through internalization of beliefs to which the majority consent. From this perspective, it can be argued that the values present in today’s society fail to take into consideration that what applies to the dominant society may not apply to other members or groups in society. Such a perspective also fails to take a critical look beneath the surface and focus on the true underlying causes of welfare dependency. It also fails to take into consideration the children of these mothers who unconsciously internalize their mothers’ subordinate status as welfare recipients as well as the ridicule projected by other societal members and policy makers.

This research will take into consideration the subordinate status placed on women in general with a specific focus on the experiences of African-American women who are presently receiving public assistance. These women have been the focus of the media for quite some time, making them the target of public policy and the recent welfare reform. The focus on these women has caused many individuals to view them as different or deviant from the rest of society.

Lorde (1972) focuses on the experience of being an African-American woman by stating:

Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such
an economy, we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate but we have no patterns for relating across human difference as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion. (p. 496)

Policy makers claim that education is the solution to all social ills, but the question remains as to what are the educational requirements needed to get these women off the rolls. Empowerment and self-actualization will surely be the key to getting women off welfare. These are factors that the recent welfare reform has failed to take into consideration.

The goal of this research was to focus on the welfare and its relation to dependency. Based on Erving Goffman’s (1963) theory of stigma as well as the theory of labeling, this research focused on the self-perception of welfare recipients and how they perceive their treatment by the welfare system and the rest of society. In order to find the answers to these questions, I interviewed 15 African-American women and focused on how they view themselves in relation to the welfare system. I also focused on these women’s overall perceptions of being labeled negatively by individuals in society and by policy makers.
CHAPTER II
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

To be African-American and a woman is a harsh reality to accept in America. This particular group of individuals is often faced with covert racism, crime in their communities, discrimination, lack of social acceptance, and negative stereotypes portrayed by the media. As a result, these individuals are forced to internalize self-perceptions that harshly affect their well-being. The consequence of all these negative perceptions is an "impression of self which may impede their ability to realize their personal and academic potential" (Cosby 1994, p. 7). The real dilemma is that this group is often charged with disrupting societal norms, relying on the government's assistance in order to maintain a household and, moreover, not abiding by the American work ethic that is woven into the fabric of this country. Therefore, these women are labeled negatively and often stigmatized. The particular group of African-American women to be studied is welfare recipients.

Paraphrasing Goffmanian sociology, Collins and Makowsky (1993) focused on the social self and stated:

A person is not an isolated thing, but an image carved out of the whole life space of his or her interactions with others. A being alone is an animal; only in the society of others does a person acquire essential humanness. Each person's self is a reflection of the responses of others, and each
person gives others parts of himself in return. (Collins and Makowsky 1993, p. 239)

From the Goffmanian perspective, two theories will be approached: labeling and stigma.

Goffman (1961) gave much impetus to labeling theory with his work on the inner workings of a mental facility in his book *Asylums*. In the case of the patients housed in the mental facility Goffman studied, the social sources that reflected the self were degrading. Therefore, they offered the patient no privacy and no escape into alternative audiences who are not conscious of his or her shortcomings. Such an analysis can be applied to welfare recipients who are in the care of the government.

In today’s society, welfare recipiency is considered a devious act that strips society of monetary resources that could be applied to much needed areas. Rather than labeling the act of recipiency as deviant, the government and societal members as well label the women who are receiving public assistance.

Howard Becker elaborated on the theory with his thoughts below:

Social groups create deviance by making rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders....The deviant is one to whom that label has been successfully applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label. (Becker, 1963)

The theory of labeling does not attempt to explain the “causes” of deviant behavior. Rather, the focus is on the labeling that may follow acts considered deviant by societal members.

Labeling, therefore, is a socially constructed definition of a person, applied to that person by a social audience who engages in the act of defining based on
their perception of the individual or group of individuals. The goal in understanding the labeling process is to understand (1) who is labeled, (2) who applies the labels, and (3) the underlying implications or the consequences of labeling. Welfare recipients are the subjects of inquiry in terms of labeling. Policy makers and societal onlookers are the individuals applying the labels. An important implication of such labeling is internalization of the labels that cause psychological distress, stigmatization, and societal charging of these women as being lazy and incompetent. A key element of the theory is that the characteristics of the “offender” are more crucial than characteristics of the act, which means that a deviant label can occur more frequently without the actual occurrence of a deviant act.

Age, race, sex, social class, and power are key variables that influence the outcome of labeling. A criminal/deviant label can thus spark severe consequences for those being labeled. Examples of such consequences include closure of opportunity, movement into deviant subcultures, development of a deviant identity, or acceptance of a deviant career.

In the case of welfare recipients the closure of opportunity can be seen through the lens of the recent welfare reform that places a five-year, lifetime limitation on cash assistance. Society has already charged welfare recipients as being part of a deviant subculture, an image that is often displayed in the media. The deviant identity can also be seen through the medium of television that most often displays images of welfare recipients as African-American, oftentimes
illiterate women who readily adopt the label as part of their true identity.

According to Dickerson (1995):

Misconceptions about African-American single mothers and their families are insidious and deeply entrenched. They are stereotyped as inferior, nonproductive, and dysfunctional for themselves and society. Typical research about them has been pursued through conventional paradigms based on models and concepts of the dominant culture that have created many myths and distorted portrayals. (Dickerson 1995, p. ix)

A deviant career is one that is also displayed by the media through policy makers who claim that welfare recipients are intergenerational and thus lack motivation to move forward and off the welfare rolls.

Another theory that applies to the examination of welfare recipients is Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma. Again, deviant behaviors rather than deviant identities are the focus of Goffman's work on stigma. Goffman defines stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (p. 3). A stigma is a characteristic, a behavior, or a social experience that may cause the owner to be shamed or rebuked by others. Goffman specifically mentions two categories of stigmatized individuals, the discredited and the discreditable. The discredited are those who visibly vary from "ideal" humans. These visibilities can range from abominations of the body to blemishes of individual character that are:

perceived as weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty, these being inferred from a known record of, for example, mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, unemployment, suicidal attempts and radical political behavior. Finally there are the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion, these being stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family. (p. 4)

In today's society, welfare recipients should be added to this list of the discredited.
The discreditable are those individuals who secretly vary from ideal humans and, if their inhibitions or inner secrets were known, would be rejected by other people with whom they interact. This process also applies to welfare recipients who receive benefits without others’ knowledge. The others may include family members, employers, friends, and so forth who might look down on them if their identity were revealed.

Each type of stigma, thus, has a distinct effect on a stigmatized individual’s overt behavior. Discredited individuals may try to compensate for the loss of status from a particular audience, whereas a discreditable person may worry about losing his or her front stage appearance. Inability to have that front stage appearance accepted would cause the individual to be subject to the control of those who may discriminate against the individual based on their value judgments.

Goffman (1963) sums up the argument of stigma by stating:

By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce life chances. We construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain inferiority and account for the danger he/[she] represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class. We use such terms as cripple, bastard, moron in our daily discourse as a source of metaphor and imagery, typically, without giving thought to the original meaning. (p. 5)

Such was the case when Europeans first came in contact with Africans. African-Americans continue to hold that stigma for many generations. Charging individuals as “different” can spark social stigmatization and cause a long-term effect in terms of societal members’ views of the discredited individuals such as
today’s welfare recipients. One maintains the identity regardless of his or her behavior.

Schur (1983) focused on the acts and individuals who engage in deviant acts that are not so intrinsically deviant; rather, they acquire their “deviantness” through a process of meaning-attachment (p. 5). According to Schur, “In many respects, then, how people perceive and react to a given behavior or condition is what really ‘counts most’ socially” (p. 5). This reality is dependent upon the interpretation by different people.

Based on Goffman’s (1963) ideas there are three elements of importance to the study of stigma: social information, visibility, and personal identity. These three elements will be approached briefly.

**Social Information.** This information is about individuals or more or less the abiding characteristics, as opposed to the intentions at a particular moment in time. Goffman focused on symbols in terms of the discredited and the discreditable, which he labeled stigma symbols. Stigma symbols are “signs which are especially effective in drawing attention to a debasing identity discrepancy, breaking up what would otherwise be a coherent overall picture, with a constant reduction in our valuation of the individual” (p. 43).

**Visibility.** Here Goffman focused on the “visibility” of a particular stigma: that is, how well or how badly the individual adapts to the stigma that provides a means of communication. Visibility is a crucial factor. That which can be told about an individual’s social identity at all times and by all persons he or she encounters therein will be of value to the individual (p. 48).
**Personal Identity.** In order to consider the situation of the discreditable, Goffman took into consideration the issue of identification. Personal identity has to do with “the assumption that the individual can be differentiated from all others and that around this means of differentiation a single continuous record of social facts can be attached, entangled...becoming then a sticky substance” (p. 57). The sticky substance mentioned by Goffman (1963) can then fall prey to other biographical facts that can become attached.

Both theories, labeling and stigma, will be applied to the study on African-American welfare recipients. Labeling theory will be used as a window through which to focus on the way in which women are labeled as deviant by their social counterparts. The theory of stigma will focus on the effects of the subsequent labeling. Does the individual form a definition of the self that is unfavorable as a result of labeling? Does the stigma or social mark of disgrace that follows the label cause long-term social effects for the individual? I will address these questions as well as other questions that might indicate that societal labeling of welfare recipients may cause the individuals labeled to form an unfavorable definition of the self due to the reflection they are receiving from other members of society. Both theoretical frameworks will be used as a base to find out how welfare recipients perceive themselves in relation to the welfare system.
Welfare recipients in the United States are misrepresented by media images depicting them as lazy, incompetent women who rely heavily on the government for food, clothing, shelter, and even monetary assistance. Despite this public view, underneath the surface of all this rhetoric there are real women who are caught in a system that was not designed well from its inception. In fact, these women are actually caught in a catch-22 that traps them not only physically but emotionally and mentally as well. Thus, attention should be focused on the reality that receiving welfare assistance can potentially have a great social-psychological impact on the women receiving it.

The Social-psychological Impact of Welfare

Those who receive cash assistance are faced with choices that challenge everyday living. Some of the challenges faced by these women often force them to deal with odds that other society members may not have to face. These are the residual effects of being on welfare. "For women on welfare everyday life is a series of small Sophie's Choices, a painful, bitter humiliating juggling act" (Withorn 1996, p. 496). To add to this problem, "to be poor in the United States today is to be confronted day in and day out with impossible choices" (p. 496). These choices may include paying one bill and sacrificing another; scraping up
enough change to do laundry but giving up cab or bus fare for an important
doctor’s appointment; buying one child diapers or sending the school-age
children on a class trip. In addition to making sacrifices that take a toll on the
mind, such women have to deal with the social stigma associated with being on
welfare.

**Problems Faced by Low-income Women**

In order to get a real glimpse of people receiving welfare in the
United States the “real” lives of poor women should be studied. Research has
indicated that low-income women are faced with such burdens as low economic
resources, residential instability, lack of support networks, and higher rates of
violence. As a result of these burdens, these women tend to have higher rates
of depression, stress disorders, substance abuse and various medical problems
(Salomon 1996, p. 486). Such an enlightening view shatters the image of the
welfare mother as a couch potato who has nothing better to do than to collect
from taxpayers and reproduce children just to receive assistance each month.

Rank (1994) also focused on the social-psychological impact of welfare
recipiency and found concrete data emphasizing that welfare life is no easy life to
live. Life on welfare can be explained by one very intense word—struggle. This
study included cases ranging from single-parent households to households that
were male-headed. Each case had its own unique story to tell, but the focus was
on the residual effect left behind by welfare and its mark of disgrace. As with
Welfare recipients’ hopes and dreams are molded—and sometimes destroyed—
by the experience of living in poverty and on public assistance. Rank brings up
the issue that public assistance is sure to be coupled with poverty, a reality that is hard to accept in the modern technological world in which we live. Everyone wants a “piece of the pie” and wonders why he/she cannot have an equal slice. Sometimes individuals are left to make the best of what they have, and sometimes what they have is not what they dream for or desire, which turns what used to be a dream into nothing more than hope. But most of the recipients interviewed by Rank reported that they had little left to hope for.

**Chronic Burdens Faced by Women Receiving Welfare**

Research exploring the long-term impact of holding a lower social class status and receiving public financial assistance indicates that welfare recipients have far more chronic burdens—including ill health and perceived ill health. Another area of research—intergenerational welfare—indicates that women who grew up receiving public assistance were more likely to report higher levels of distress and lower self-esteem later in life when compared to nonwelfare recipients. Education, well being, and psychological well being were all correlated with welfare recipiency. Psychological distress may explain the direct association of welfare recipiency with a sense of personal failure (Ensminger 1995, p. 348).

According to the research found on the psychological impact of welfare (e.g., Kingfisher, 1996; Rank, 1994; Salomon, 1996; Withorn, 1996), most people are typically caught up in a situation that is easy to get into but hard to break away from. The focus, therefore, should be placed not on the recipients in isolation but on the recipients in the midst of a dynamic social structure. The
focus should also offer a glimpse not only of the psychological impact but also of the full-range of social stigma that weighs heavily on the minds of Americans as well as on the minds of the recipients themselves.

**Social Stigma**

In close relation to the psychological impact of welfare is the social stigma associated with welfare recipiency. The focus is not on the recipients themselves but on participation in such programs (Jarret 1996, p.368). Recipiency alone is just enough for these individuals to hold deviant work orientations and fall victim to discrediting labels for participating in programs that offer assistance. In order to understand the stigma associated with welfare recipiency it should be noted that in recent years, relative to other family assistance programs, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), now Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), has been the most stigmatized program of all. Originally, it was a program to aid widows and their dependent children. However, according to Guadagno (1994) "it has shifted from a focus on divorced and separated women and their children to include never-married African-American women and their children" (p. 368). It was the inclusion of single unmarried women that paralleled the view that AFDC increasingly serves the undeserving, particularly women.

Society views mothers without husbands as cheap, obviously deserving less (Polakow 1993). The assumption is that, if such women are abandoned, divorced, or unmarried to a member of the opposite sex, they constitute a shaded area and are categorized as deviant and labeled undeserving. Widowhood is viewed as a twist of fate, while the choice to bear children while single warrants
state suspicion. Politicians have historically argued that single parenting thus has been a disruption to the social order. In a sense some believe that mothers who receive assistance from the government are beggars. As a result, they are stigmatized and labeled. In today’s context:

It is not the scarlet letter that we now affix to the bosoms of errant women; rather, it is the discourse of “benefits”—food stamps that brand her, visibly humiliate her, in the supermarket, welfare offices that regulate her sexual relationships and judge her as a mother at risk. (Polakow 1993, p. 48)

Many women are poor for the same reasons that their male counterparts are poor—lack of education or marketable job skills, demographics, or racial status. Nevertheless, women are oftentimes poor because they both nurture and provide for the needs of their dependent children and because of their disadvantaged status in the labor market, especially that of women of color (Polakow 1993, p. 61).

Cahn (1997) focused on race in relation to public assistance and found that public perceptions of welfare are, in fact, race-based and specifically target African-American single mothers through stereotypes and prejudice. Requirements that enforce cooperation with the system overshadow individuals’ needs when they apply for and receive welfare assistance. A woman who has children while unmarried or has children by more than one father is stigmatized and forced to follow rules that require her to discuss personal matters pertaining to her situation.

The requirements contained in welfare policy revealed the overall perceptions in past and present welfare debates that fuel the Great American Welfare Reform (Cahn 1997, p. 965). One concern indicated by researchers is
the public perception that the typical welfare recipient is Black (Cahn 1997; Ensminger 1995), and that African-American women have had to deal with the stigma associated with welfare on a much larger scale (Guadagno 1994). This perception alone is indeed a label and a stigmatization factor that not only affects the target group but also society as a whole. In essence,

Regardless of the actual impact of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) regulations, their implementation is perceived as affecting blacks, even though this perception does not reflect reality. Indeed, welfare can be seen as an attempt to control poor black women. Thus, although welfare is not explicitly raced, it is implicitly a raced issue. (p. 967)

The focus on African-American women as undeserving is an issue that needs to be challenged because, despite public perceptions of women in general, Black women have always worked outside the home.

Establishing programs such as workfare simply institutionalizes images of black women as workers rather than mothers. It also punishes black women for seeking to enjoy some of the prerogatives that white women have traditionally enjoyed, such as the luxury of not working because of the necessity of caring for the children. (967)

But as long as individuals like Charles Murray (1993) (author of The Bell Curve) believe that “restoring the stigma to illegitimate pregnancies will resolve the welfare problem” (Murray 1993, p. A-14), there will always be a tendency to overlook the long-term damage that stigmas are designed to inflict.

Welfare and crime have become the most common political issues on which policy makers focused. Many politicians see welfare receipt as a violation of social norms, and African-Americans are compared to the “ideal” type or those who do not receive welfare (Hurwitz, Peffley, and Sniderman (1997, p. 31).
Women in the Workforce

Regardless of the labels and negative connotations attached to women receiving public assistance, the majority of women receiving public assistance have worked in the labor force; it is unfortunate that, these women are forced to apply for public assistance “when men and the labor market fail to provide income support for family maintenance” (Polakow 1993, p. 62).

Women are, in fact, trapped by a system that was supposedly by design a method that would enhance rather than hinder social progress. Research has also indicated that women receiving welfare experience feelings of “humiliation,” “difference,” and “oddness.” Most women are embarrassed by the fact that they have to rely on the public dole and describe assistance such as food stamps as “horrible” and “degrading.” Women tell stories of challenging looks received from cashiers and derogatory remarks made by other customers finding that the two most common settings where these events took place were the grocery store and the welfare office (James, Seccombe, and Walters 1998; Kingfisher 1996).

Kingfisher made the point that:

While a United States one dollar bill has photographs of George Washington, the Great Pyramid, and the American eagle and flag, a $1 food stamp features the Declaration of Independence and the Liberty Bell, as if to illustrate those great American values and principles that recipients should be striving for, but have failed to attain. (p. 32)

The point is that because of the negative social label attached to an object as minute as a $1.00 food stamp, the food stamp coupon has enough power in itself to intimidate an adult who is fully competent and capable but has to rely on the public for a piece of paper that is by design a symbol of inferiority.
The majority of proponents of welfare believe that those receiving welfare are responsible for their own poverty. Whereas they may have compassion for the homeless, most people view welfare recipients as people who lack motivation and, thus, should suffer the consequences of their own actions.

The culture of poverty ideology has become the most popular theory to explain why women become welfare recipients and remain poor. Some of the most common ideas about why welfare recipiency has continued in America include: career welfare women, intergenerational welfare use, unmarried teens who choose welfare instead of school or work, women who have additional children to obtain additional grant funds, and the creation of housing projects (Seccombe, James, and Walters 1998, p. 8). Most people use these ideas to justify welfare recipients behavior but fail to recognize that these ideas imply that the system allowed and even promoted this kind of behavior. Another area on which little attention has been focused is that American society pays only $5.15 an hour for a worker with little or no skills. With these kinds of wages it is hard to be able to afford daycare, reliable transportation, and all the other vital necessities that it takes to make it in today's society. As a result of their status as welfare recipients many women internalize the stereotypical constructions created about welfare mothers, eventually evaluating their own situation as different from others in society.

**Strategies for Dealing with Stigma**

Despite the grim reality mentioned above, welfare women have developed strategies that counteract public response; yet, these strategies can still have a
disturbing effect on the mind. Such strategies as lying, impression management, manipulating, and long rambling anecdotes tend to be coping devices that women employ in order to capture some control over their lives (Kingfisher 1996).

Some women package income to make ends meet in today’s society (Mirramme 1998). Some of the various ways women package income include gifts or support from men, the labor market, state funding, and assistance from family members. The argument coincides with that of pro-welfare activists. The argument implies that, if the government would allow for some discretion on behalf of welfare mothers (i.e., allowing them to supplement their income in ways that would aid them to get out of poverty) by accepting the reality of income packaging and incorporating it into welfare policy, then, maybe, the stigma associated with welfare recipiency would be drastically reduced. In turn, over time, women would less likely be dependent upon welfare benefits as additional security for the family (Mirramme 1998, p. 11).

One could summarize up the argument about welfare reform by describing the following societal views:

Mothers without husbands are [considered] cheap; they deserve less and if deserted, divorced, or unmarried constitute a gray and dubious category of the undeserving poor. While widowhood occurs through a tragedy of fate, the choice to live and bear children without a spouse engenders state suspicion and historically has threatened the moral order, from the Puritan patriarchy of England to the welfare state with its mothers who “take our hard-earned tax dollars in the 1990s. (Polakow 1993, p. 48)

Welfare recipients are viewed as unworthy, immoral heathens that lack self-control and self-worth. However, these women are measured by dominant
images that are Western in origin and very Eurocentric in terms of tradition. Is it fair to measure people based on a particular standard that is used as a rule of thumb for all?

**Welfare and Its Effect on Children**

The 1996 welfare reform affected many areas of life for those who received benefits. Those receiving benefits were placed on strict time limits, subject to sanctions for noncompliance, and forced to obtain employment or enroll in a welfare-to-work program. Not only did these changes affect the recipients but they also affected the children of these recipients in many different ways. Proponents of the reform believe that working will be an avenue that leads a family out of poverty.

Money from the Earned Income Tax Credit increases family income and may cause the family income to be raised above the poverty level. The argument is that homes with productive routines will result in the mothers being viewed as positive role models, increase the mothers self-esteem, and have a positive impact on children's school achievement and behavior. Conservatives argue that welfare creates a deviant subculture whose ideas and values are transmitted to children from one generation to the next. According to the proponents of welfare, a stricter, time-limited system is the key to breaking the vicious cycle that welfare has created.

On the other hand, opponents of welfare have argued that the reforms that sparked a sudden change in the daily routines and lives of those affected will place overwhelming stress on parents, pull families deeper into poverty, cause
parents to have to place their children in state regulated day care centers, and cause older children to be left unsupervised at home. Opponents also argue that work schedules that allow parents little or no discretion over their work hours will harshly affect daily family routines. As a result, the psychological stress of the mothers would increase, which in turn would lead to less attentive and responsive parenting and interfere with socialization patterns for children.

Effects of Welfare on Children’s Academic Achievement

In theory, parental welfare recipiency may have a negative effect on children’s academic achievement and educational attainment. The level of family income is a common predictor of children’s social outcome. The more money parents have to invest in their children’s future, the more likely the children will obtain a secondary education. On the other hand, if a family does not have the monetary means to invest in the children’s future, the family will be more likely to rely on a fixed income provided by the state. Thus, the family who relies on welfare has little money left to supply the extras that will help a teenager to stay in school.

Welfare promotes a different set of rules; the freedom of independence ideology is never developed or is blurred the longer families remain on welfare, and the invisible line of responsibility established when children are born becomes the responsibility of state agencies (Murray 1993). Children of welfare recipients are not socialized to become productive citizens, and they are less likely to develop the ideas about the importance of obtaining a higher level of education (Mead 1992). Welfare may also have an impact on future educational
attainment by damaging children's self-esteem. Because of a lack of interaction with others in society, except for those in their neighborhoods, welfare children are isolated from children who are motivated to succeed in school. Some studies have even concluded that welfare children are also subject to the same stigma given to parents, exposing children to labels that can have a negative impact on their future outcome (Ellwood 1994; Goodban 1985). Other researchers have argued that the welfare system deprives families of the opportunity to take control over their lives, and these ideas unconsciously are passed on to the children, thus affecting their educational achievement (Rutter 1987; Gottschalk 1990; Rosenberg, Schoole, and Schoenbach 1989).

In comparison to other families, those coming from welfare families are more likely to bear children as teenagers, which results in lower educational attainment, poverty, and welfare use (Corcoran 1995; Gottschalk 1990; Hayes 1997; Plotnick 1992; Rank and Cheng 1995). The act of mothers bearing children at young ages and having lower levels of education than others in their cohort, whether or not they make the choice to work, may determine their later socioeconomic status.

Hill (1998) brought to light some very important reservations about impoverished parents and their dependent children:

How can parents and children ever survive if impoverished parents do not have, and the welfare system does not provide them with, adequate means to make the necessary investment in their children to lift them out of a life of poverty. The types of investments in human capital that are both most important and most likely to be inadequate for impoverished children include nutrition, health care, and education. The inadequacy of these kinds of investments in the human capital represented by
impoverished children condemns them to lifelong poverty through succeeding generations. (279)

Hill makes a very necessary and concrete argument about the welfare system and projects it toward policy makers who tend to look at welfare mothers through eyes other than those of welfare mothers, as well as social and public policy scholars who have studied the lives of welfare recipients firsthand.

Public Policy and Its Effect on African-American Welfare Recipients

While there are numerous factors that drive attitudes on such controversial issues, few would fail to deny the fact that the perception of African-Americans is an important contributing factor that moves individuals to negatively stereotype Blacks as “lazy” or “violent.” This perception of African-Americans is also an important issue that drives public policy. Such perceptions may explain why such individuals are more likely to oppose welfare payments or support “get tough” policies on crime, especially when blacks are the targets in terms of policy.

The literature in relation to welfare and stigma focuses on several areas all within the context of welfare recipients. The focus of most research has been not on the system itself but the recipients who are involved in the system and the negative labels and marks of disgrace that are associated with being a welfare mother.

Salomon (1996) indicated that President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 during the time she was conducting her research study. The results of the act were shocking for many, especially those receiving public assistance. The nation now faced a
radically altered system of public welfare. This new law marked the end of a sixty-year Federal commitment to guaranteed assistance (cash) for impoverished women and children. It eliminated altogether the Federal entitlement program of AFDC and turned welfare over to the states through a new block grant titled Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. The program enacted strict time-limited benefits: Federal funds can be obtained for a total of only five years, but the Federal government is encouraging the states to exercise control that would possibly decrease the time limits for assistance. Such a program also increases work requirements but without taking into consideration new job creation (p. 486). Another feature of the act affects legal aliens; they are deemed ineligible for means-tested public benefits during their first five years of residency in the United States.

Policy makers ignore the emotional aspects and the investment involved in raising dependent children and choose to ignore how being a parent or caregiver can hinder a woman's ability to move upward socially (Seccombe et al. 1998, p. 3). Men are not subject to the same consequences. They are forced, in some cases, to pay child support; but, in reality, the mother remains the one with the sole responsibility for the child.

In summary, seven major programs are affected by the recent welfare legislation: Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Food Stamps, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), School Lunch and other child nutrition programs, Foster care, Social Services Block Grant, and Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) (Rector 1998).
The review of the literature in terms of policy points in opposite directions. On the one hand the literature focuses on the negative effects of welfare on recipients; on the other hand the literature focuses on the recipients as the cause of the dismantling of the welfare system. The review will focus on this dichotomy.

Gordan (1994) asked the question, “What is welfare?” The reply was that

In two generations the meaning of welfare has reversed itself. What once meant well-being now means ill-being. What once meant prosperity, good health, and good spirits now implies poverty, bad health, and fatalism. A word that once evoked images of pastoral contentment now connotes slums, depressed single mothers and neglected children, even crime. Today “welfare” means grudging aid to the poor, when it once referred to a vision of the good life. (p. 1)

The turn in implication has led many policy makers to begrudge a system that was once considered a vision for the future.

In order to combat some of the incredible stereotypes imposed on Black women, Spaights and Whitaker (1995) took a look at the socioeconomic status of African-American women by speaking from the perspective of the past. Policy makers continue to widen their perceptions of the equality gap between Blacks and Whites, particularly women, despite Black women’s continuous labor force participation. According to historical overview:

Inequalities imposed on Black women in the labor force are not of recent origin. Historically, institutional racism has been imposed on Black women physically, psychologically, occupationally, and economically as a means of maintaining the status quo, that of the dominant Anglo-Saxon society. (p. 284)

A major threat to Black women was the breakup of the Black family unit due to the sale of family members (Spaights and Whitaker, 1995). The United States labor market is not a user-friendly place in terms of Black women. Black
women who wish to participate are still forced to control their overt verbalness. Another interesting aspect of the research mentioned above was the researchers' glimpse into the everyday social life of low socioeconomic Black women who are usually characterized as young, not married with children, having lower participation rates, and less educated than their White cohort. Due to the conditions mentioned, these women are more likely to experience a high rate of poverty because of a series of difficulties: economic instability and unemployment, family responsibilities, lack of transportation, the fiction of welfare support, and impossible demands.

Political ideology about ending welfare includes the belief that we must prevent births to unmarried women. Seen as a moral issue, behavioral rehabilitation and reproductive control have become some of the most popular ideas among lawmakers (Thomas 1998). Policy makers are trying to control the sexual behavior of women much as did societies of the past (i.e., chastity belts worn by women so they would not engage in "unlawful" sexual intercourse).

The welfare system is unfair to all: taxpayers; society; the mediating institutions of community, church, and the family; and the poor who are "trapped in a system that destroys opportunity for them [welfare recipients] and hope for their children" (Tanner 1994, p. 1). Tanner and Lopez (1998) indicated the reasons for believing the welfare system is unfair to taxpayers include:

1. Illegitimacy. In 1960, only 5.3 percent of births were out of wedlock. Today, nearly 32 percent of births are illegitimate. Among blacks, the illegitimacy rate is over two-thirds. Among whites, it tops 23 percent. There is strong evidence that links the availability of welfare to the increase in out-of-wedlock births.
2. Dependence. Nearly 65 percent of the people on welfare at any given time will be on the program eight years or longer. Moreover, welfare is increasingly intergenerational. Children raised in families on welfare are seven times more likely to become dependent on welfare than other children.

3. Crime. The Maryland NAACP recently concluded that “the ready access to a lifetime of welfare and free social service programs is a major contributory factor to the crime problems we face today.” Welfare contributes to crime by destroying family structures and breaking down the bonds of community. Moreover, it contributes to the social marginalization of young black men by making them irrelevant to the family. Their role has been supplanted by the welfare check. (p. 1)

Moreover, welfare contributes to the social marginalization of young black men by making them irrelevant to the family. Their role has been supplanted by the welfare check (p. 1).

Tanner and Lopez (1998) also focused on welfare policy and welfare reform as a welcome change that will put an end to the peculiar institution of welfare although he feels the 1996 welfare reform actually needed to rid America of such a destructive program. In his view, the recently implemented bill has one important element: it ends welfare as an entitlement. The recent welfare reform has two important consequences: (1) it allows the states, not the federal government, to impose a variety of restrictions and conditions on the benefits offered, and (2) it makes welfare spending subject to annual appropriation of funds. Policy officials believe that a change of this nature is useful but the law is inadequate. An element of the reform that is viewed as tragic is the conditional “workfare”—participation in the labor force in exchange for benefits.

Contrary to popular stereotypes, there is no clear and present evidence that exposes welfare recipients as lazy (Tanner 1994). Most people just accept the
opportunity that is presented to them. For most people receiving public assistance, the combined free value of welfare benefits is often times equal to the income that an individual can earn at an entry-level or low-paying job. Tanner’s evidence is presented in Table 1. Based on the information documented by Tanner (1994), welfare appears to many as a more appropriate option than work (Tanner 1994).

Whether liberal or conservative, political party affiliation has an influence on how one thinks policies should be applied to specific individuals. Perhaps policy outcome is based on individual judgments rather than clear, concrete information that points to an area as being detrimental to the well-being of society, as is the case of welfare.

The call to go back to the drawing board is often couched in the argument, tacit or otherwise, that the welfare catastrophe was simply the result of a flawed program and that an earlier generation of liberal policy intellectuals is to blame for those flaws. We should have done things differently. We should have designed universal programs, not categorical ones. We should have emphasized jobs, not welfare. We should have constructed a political coalition that could override racial schisms. In short, we should have made a plan. (Cloward and Piven 1997, p. 525)

A good plan can, in itself, generate momentum that will lead to reform. A bad plan does just the opposite. The reasoning behind this assumption is that decisions about policy are highly important for many groups because legislatures tend to relay information to voters that they are proposing measures that the voters want (Cloward and Piven 1997).

Those who are interested in making a change often ignore the implications of fooling voting publics, according to Cloward and Piven, instead constructing a political landscape. Such a landscape is used as a control mechanism that
Table 1. Welfare vs. Work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Typical Monthly Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Welfare</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFDC</td>
<td>$460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Stamps</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicaid (est)</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gross Monthly [income]</td>
<td>952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less job-related expenses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less child-care costs</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Net monthly cash value</strong></td>
<td>$952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Minimum-Wage Job</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wages</td>
<td>$817 [monthly income]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Stamps</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicaid (est)</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-care grant</td>
<td>384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gross monthly cash value</td>
<td>$1574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less FICA tax</td>
<td>(62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less job-related expenses</td>
<td>(100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less child-care costs</td>
<td>(400)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Net monthly [income] value</strong></td>
<td>$1012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

serves the political arena rather than the voters whom the politicians claim to represent. Voters’ preferences are usually construed by false promises and inadequacies without looking to find out that it is not their interests that drive policy. Influencing and manipulating the voting public is usually the result. In the process of interaction between politicians and the general population, politicians tend to focus on areas that will appeal to the voters. For example, Cloward and Piven are skeptical of political behavior because politicians play on the negative attitudes voters have toward Blacks, toward women, and toward welfare. Sometimes politicians try to gain advantage by working to stir up these antipathies” (p. 526). Decision makers implicitly categorize individuals.

Our words about welfare help create the categories through which we define and organize our world. Our intellectual categories become reality, defining the ways in which people are treated in the policy arena. The actual welfare policies and practices influenced by this rhetoric also act to marginalize the poor, creating their own meanings, divisions, and categories. Thus while policy is shaped by prevailing meanings of “welfare” and “poverty,” it also helps to shape those meanings through its structure and procedures. (Peterson 1997, p. 427)

Peterson is referring to welfare policies that create a symbolism affirming the dominant views of work and family. The underlying implications of such policies, geared toward specific groups, is the fact that welfare policies mold and shape reality by deciding who receives assistance and who will be turned down, how assistance is distributed, what conditions will be recognized as legitimate, and what the benefit levels will actually be. Therefore, the “symbolic significance” of welfare is played out in the material world and manifested in the structure of welfare politics. In the United States this symbolism is evident in the categorization and stratification of income through the funnel of social insurance.
and public assistance programs. The symbolic view we have of welfare has influenced the total view of welfare that we have come to know (Peterson 1997, p. 428).

The argument against welfare has caused many policy makers to detest welfarism as a system that goes against the Protestant Work Ethic and the traditional family composed of a male breadwinner and a female with secondary or no income. It is almost immoral to receive welfare although assistance is offered to those who may need it, and those who choose to apply and actually receive benefits are stigmatized as being unfit mothers and a threat to the perfect society in which they live. Placing blame on the women for their poverty status and state of dependency describes their economic status, but does not give a clear indication of why they are impoverished (Mirramme, p.3).

African-American families experience poverty at a much greater rate than do European-American and other families (Schiele 1998, p. 424). One overwhelming feature of the act is that it reduces the amount of monetary assistance a family can receive if a family member is convicted of a drug-related felony. This feature of the act is a no-tolerance feature that will endanger the African-American community because African-Americans are more likely than their White counterparts to be convicted of a drug-related crime, actual or assumed.

The image of African-Americans as the number one group receiving benefits from taxpayers’ pockets can be used as a manipulation device by the media to target, maintain, and strengthen racial fear and hostility in an era of
ever-increasing racial scapegoating. The anti-tax sentimentality that government policy makers are imposing on the American public makes it seem as if tax dollars are being wasted on individuals who have the same social opportunities and unbiased exposure as do other groups (i.e., White Americans). With the majority of Americans being non-Hispanic whites and the rapidly changing face of American society (fallen wages, deindustrialization, relocation of companies overseas), racial scapegoating is one sure way that policy makers can explain away the true problems of America, thus getting rid of policies that pose an economic threat to society as a whole (Schiele 1998, p. 426).

Policy makers tend to disconnect their thoughts from reality when designing policies that will affect different segments of the population. They seem to be dimwitted in their approach to making life better for all people by designing policies that will eventually cause societal unrest due to the policy flaws that hinge on poor design. Michael Harrington (1963) wrote the following statement about certain members of society then, a statement that applies to the current society:

Yet, those who could make a difference too often refuse to act because of their ignorant, smug moralisms. They view the effects of poverty—above all, the warping of the will and spirit that is a consequence of being in breaking down this prejudice. (p. 17).
CHAPTER IV
METHODS

Much of science involves collection, organization, and analysis of information about the world space around us. Although different sciences refer to different subject matters and different methods of application, all sciences engage in some form of data gathering. However, the social sciences use diverse techniques in gathering information. One of the many techniques used by social scientists—qualitative—will be used in this particular study to explore the relationship between African-American women’s self-perception and welfare recipiency (Agresti and Finlay 1986, p. 4).

When employing a quantitative approach to inquiry, social scientists seek to answer questions by survey and analysis of gathered data from pre-established data sets. The comparison of variables is normally of a statistical nature. Variables are scrutinized by the researcher(s), analyzed, and interpreted by scientific questions (hypotheses) and other sample techniques that can be applied effectively to the general population through random samples. Using a quantitative inquiry allows researchers, as well as societal members, to get a glimpse of a social phenomenon as it occurs through the lens of sophisticated research techniques that are used to look at society from a secondhand approach.
Applying quantitative research to this study would yield a much more representative sample of the population. I could study the different age, gender, and race aspects pertaining to welfare recipiency, thereby obtaining research data that apply across different areas of social life.

On the other hand, a qualitative approach relies on description and detailed information usually obtained from respondents. Using a qualitative method aids researchers in understanding the everyday life-worlds of individuals by setting them apart from the population at large. When conducting a qualitative study, researchers are primarily concerned about gathering rich, detailed information pertaining to the everyday element of people’s lives. This method of understanding the collective actions of individuals and their “definition of the situation” through first-hand observation is a plus for the field of qualitative inquiry.

Qualitative research uses in-depth interviews and participant observations as a lens through which to view and gain insight about certain social phenomena. The in-depth interview method will be used for this study.

The goal of this study was to explore the everyday life-worlds of African-American women, with a dependent child or children, receiving public assistance. My goal as a researcher was to catch a sociological glimpse of how the women under question feel about themselves in relation to receiving public assistance. I explored how they deal with the social-psychological impact of welfare and explored how they handle the stigma often attached to welfare recipients.
The difference between the present study and other studies is that it took a more in-depth look at the lives of a group of women often charged with being the cause of social ills (i.e., African-American, welfare mothers). This angle allowed the women under study to tell the stories of their own lives.

From the interviews, I took an analytical approach in recognizing and making note of emergent patterns and themes. In doing so, I captured the lives of these women as holistically as possible, focusing on correlated aspects of these women's lives that helped me to piece the picture(s) of their lives together as coherently as possible. The interview guide can be seen in Appendix A.

**Sample and Data Collection**

A snowball technique was used for this study because of concerns that women might have if I tried to approach them through a social service agency. I began conducting interviews with women with whom I am familiar and asked the respondents to lead me in the direction of other individuals. During the interview, I allowed each interviewee to engage in conversational discourse and allowed her the liberty of discussing private matters with a complete guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality. My sample contained fifteen women. An interview consent form that stated my objective was provided to each individual. (See Appendix B.) Pseudonyms were provided for all respondents. (See Appendix C for demographic information on the interviewees.) Also, each interview was tape-recorded, transcribed, and coded by the researcher.
Limits of the Study

This study was created to explore a group of women whose lives have been given little attention by social scientists. It was designed to explore a small sample (n=15) of African-American women receiving public assistance. The sample used is quite small but, because of the sample size used, I feel I was able to capture a picture of the respondents’ lives in a way that will lead others to focus on this group of women when conducting research. In other words, this study represents just the beginning.

I chose not to include other groups of women from different racial backgrounds because of the lack of information in libraries, on the internet, and in the offices of social scientists pertaining to African-American women and their relation to the welfare system and other social areas.

One major limit of this study was not being able to contact the women interviewed at least six months later to see if their lives had changed at all because of the welfare reform. The reason why this lack of follow up is considered a limit to the study is because of the nature of the study and the time limitations place upon it. Conducting this study in a longitudinal nature could have implied several ideas about the new reform, especially where African-American women are concerned.

The research was coded by bringing together similar ideas and responses. Audible pauses and changes in tone of voice were even used to code individual responses. Illustrations of frustration and emotions were mentally noted during the interviews, and later used as codes to categorize headings and
subheadings such as “interpreting the reactions of others,” “others’ reactions,”
“treatment by professionals, and “treatment by caseworkers,” all of which
emerged as themes throughout my research
CHAPTER V
FINDINGS

Single parenting is a very demanding and difficult task for anyone who is thrust into the position to take on the role. There are socioeconomic barriers, worries, and problems; nothing seems to get better as the days, weeks, and months float away. Single parenting is not particularly a racial issue, nor is it a gender issue. The point is that it is a difficult task over which people have no real control. However, some groups in society have a more difficult time due to race and gender, and their life chances and lifestyles are affected by such variables. Such is the case of African-American single mothers receiving public assistance. This category of people are viewed as social outcasts, but in reality have the same dreams, goals, and aspirations as any other group in society, even if they are raising their children without a spouse.

Perceptions about Receiving Public Assistance

This research conducted found considerable evidence regarding a small sample of women (n=15) who have hopes, dreams, and future aspirations. Most were just in a catch-22 situation and trying to work their way out. Thus, the majority of the women interviewed were in the process of what Ebaugh (1988) calls role exit. The reason for exiting the role of welfare recipient can be explained in part by the new welfare-to-work program and the frustration
associated with the routinization of everyday life that comes along with being a welfare recipient. However, according to some of the women, receiving public assistance is a way to keep your family from sinking in an ever-changing world.

According to Lynn, a thirty-year-old single mother raising three boys, “It [public assistance] helps you to start out. As you move on, it helps you to try to better yourself.” The statement is a very common way of life for many African-American single mothers. This particular respondent received food stamps only and was able to feed her children because she was able to receive such assistance. For the most part, the women interviewed knew exactly what the word “struggle” meant. As Pam stated about her feelings toward receiving aid, “What else was I going to do? I don’t have no other choices; I had to.” The actual need for public assistance was addressed by most of the respondents, whether it was a temporary need to better the situation or a desperate need to make ends meet.

Rebecca’s feeling was that public assistance was a way to better hers and her daughter’s future after finishing high school. She responded:

At the time, I didn’t feel that there was nothing wrong with it [receiving assistance] because I was going to use it to go to college. That was the only reason why I was on it. And, at first, I was thinking “I can get a factory job,” but then I started thinking that factories lay off all the time. So my mother and father told me I had better go on and get an education because I graduated [high school] at the top of my class when I did graduate. So I am not stupid, so I went on and went to college. (Rebecca)

When asked whether the government should assist the respondents with their children, I received a plethora of mixed messages, obviously due to the
diverse situation of each respondent. One highly intelligent twenty-six year old woman responded:

I thought that they [the government] should [help] because I wasn’t just sitting at home watching stories. I just thought that they [the government] should be able to help me for a period of time. I even told them that maybe I could pay them back if they could just help me until I got my degree. I didn’t expect them to just take care of me. (Rebecca)

Rebecca was concerned about what most Americans are concerned about, hers and her children’s future. This woman’s situation is different because she offered to pay the government back for the assistance she receives, showing that responsibility to others is highly important to her self-concept.

Beverly felt that the government should assist her with her children because “I was working and paying my share of taxes and helping [take] care of other people so I felt they [the government] can help take care of me.” Each of the respondents’ situations warranted a different response, and every woman had a set of circumstances that prompted her to go to Social Services and apply for assistance. Whether it was for economic reasons, health reasons, or just a way to take the sting out of the situation, each had credible justifications for choosing the welfare avenue over work. Sue attributed her need for public assistance to her ill health at the time.

When I received it [public assistance], I felt that the circumstances were different from when I was growing up ‘cause I was sick at the time and not able to work. And, I used it as a crutch until I was able to go back to work. So, I didn’t feel as bad about it. But, it still has its embarrassing moments even then. (Sue)

Sue’s response indicated that she had previously been in the labor force but was forced out due to illness, which negates the assumption that all welfare
recipients choose welfare over work. According to all respondents the choice to apply for and receive public assistance was necessary and not due, even in part, to laziness. The reasons given for receiving public assistance were not just excuses and justifications. They were intelligent accounts of the reasons why people feel they have to start receiving public assistance. Such accounts are highly relevant to this study in order for the women studied to be looked at as not just “welfare” recipients but mothers and daughters of the human race who deserve just as much good fortune and prosperity as others in society. There must be evidence presented that represents them otherwise.

Some women were clearly unhappy about receiving assistance but had very few choices. For example, Mary is raising a son and daughter whose father was killed, and she is trying to take care of a sick mother. Her skepticism was evident in her response. “It’s [public assistance] all right. I wish I could get off of it…it ain’t doing nothing for me. They ain’t giving me enough.” The statement made by Mary may sound unappreciative to some, but those who understand the single parenting struggle should understand that cash assistance is barely enough to get by. For example, in Mary’s case, for two children the Kentucky Transitional Assistance Program (K-Tap) cash assistance monthly allotment is two hundred sixty-two dollars. (See Table 1 on page 32.)

The women’s responses indicated that none of the women was absolutely happy or sure about their situation. Their responses indicated that life without welfare would be painful but life with welfare is painful as well. Being on welfare in the midst of an ever-changing world full of technology is a self-esteem damper
because in today's society most people want to be able to fulfill the American Dream (i.e., having a sizeable income, owning a home, living debt free). The reality is, however, in today's society most employers want to hire individuals with some kind of pre-established skill(s). "It is not surprising that those who are least employable in terms of skills and training are least successful in avoiding welfare" (Wilson 1996, p. 166). Most employers consider a career welfare mother skillless.

The social and economic burdens coupled with single parenting and welfare can be cruel and unkind, especially from Rachel's perspective. "The money I get is just enough to pay my bills." Rachel is struggling to raise a one-year-old son and is receiving all the major welfare benefits: housing, cash assistance, food stamps, and medical assistance.

After asking the respondents about their feelings toward receiving public assistance, I asked the inevitable question, "Do you plan to continue to receive public assistance?" Each woman answered boldly, "No!" The overall response to that question was not surprising, considering that each woman was frustrated and ready to change her situation by whatever means she deemed necessary (i.e., education, employment). "I want to get out and get my own house, and I want to have a job so I can better my life and my child's life" (Rachel).

When asked to respond about their perceived differences, the majority (n=13) of recipients said they did not view themselves as any different from nonwelfare recipients. However, there were a couple (n=2) of responses that
indicated ambivalence. According to Pam, there was a definite feeling of
difference.

I looked at myself as different because most of the people that I have dealt
with have been on public assistance for a while so I had no ideas about
getting jobs and getting off it [public assistance]. My main goal was to get
done what I need to do and hurry up and get off of it. (Pam)

Wilson (1996) explains the challenge that people like Pam and others
face:

Neighborhoods that offer few legitimate employment opportunities,
inadequate job information networks, and poor schools lead to the
disappearance of work. That is, where jobs are scarce, where people
rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to help their friends and neighbors find
jobs, and where there is a disruptive or degraded school life purporting to
prepare youngsters for eventual participation in the workforce, many
people eventually lose their feeling of connectedness to work in the formal
economy; they no longer expect work to be a regular and regulating
force in their lives. In the case of young people, they may grow up in an
environment that lacks the idea of work as a central experience in adult
life—they have little or no labor-force attachment. These circumstances
also increase the likelihood that the residents will rely on illegitimate
sources of income, thereby further weakening their attachment to the
legitimate labor market. (p. 52-53)

Wilson offers a bold description of how Pam and others find themselves caught
in a web of welfare recipiency due to socialization. However, Pam’s eagerness
to be off welfare indicated she was willing to break the vicious cycle that welfare
had started. Pam’s vibrant attitude, excellent communication skills, and beautiful
personality make her even more marketable in the work force; therefore, I think
she knows that she can break her cycle of dependency and become a role model
for others who want to break the cycle as well. Pam’s confession strongly
suggests that if one is willing to change the situation in which one finds oneself, it
is possible, no matter how vicious the cycle.
Rachel did not, on the other hand, view herself as different because “I make sure he [her son] has a roof over his head and clothes on his back....I don’t care what people say about me....I’m doing it for my son.” All of the women were taking care of their children with whatever means (i.e., cash assistance, food stamps, medical cards) they were receiving. Like most nuclear families, all of the women manifested love for their children by providing a roof over their children’s heads, buying decent clothes and shoes for their children, and providing healthy and nourishing meals. None of the women interviewed looked at reality much different from most other members of society. After all, these women are products of the society in which they live. Each of the women wants to live the American dream of owning a home and having economic and social stability without barriers, but somehow this reality seems a bit more elusive, especially when one is a young African-American woman.

Labeling

When studying the reasons people commit deviant acts in society, scholars should not just look at why people commit such acts. They must also attempt to understand why certain groups are tagged with a deviant status while others are not. Scholars should also address the consequences associated with labeling people deviant and focus on how such deviant labels affect the individual or group to which the label is attached.

Looking at the perceptions people hold about the labels attached to them by others is critical because those to whom the label is attached may hold deviant orientations about themselves and the social world surrounding them. If
those being labeled consider the labels held by others as true, such perceptions may affect the individuals' labor force participation, social mobility, and ability to connect with or relate to others outside their social circle. Some may even lose the initiative to participate fully in the social world in which they live; others may wish to shed the negative label acquired by focusing on things that will rid them of their negative status (i.e., getting a formal education, acquiring a full-time job, or working their way off public assistance through a welfare-to-work program. See appendix D for a description of the welfare-to-work program.

Perceptions of Being Labeled

The reactions pertaining to outsiders' labeling of the women used for this study varied depending on the woman's outlook on life and future aspirations. I asked each woman if she views herself as an outsider because she receives public assistance. Only a couple (n=2) of them gave a response that indicated neutrality. Others (n=4) gave responses indicating a feeling of difference in relation to the rest of society.

Pam indicated that those without knowledge about the public welfare system are probably unfamiliar with what cash assistance check looks like.

People really don't know that [you] get K-TAP, which used to be AFDC, until maybe you go in [a grocery store] line and cash a check, and if they knew what it was then they probably received it too. Like standing in line with food stamps, people tend to look at you funny. Even the cashiers tend to be as if you were paying with cash. (Pam)

Other respondents' negative experiences with store clerks tended to be memorable. Cherelle's response indicated that she notices people's stares and
glares when she uses food stamps as a method of payment instead of cash when purchasing food.

You can see it. Like when you’re in the grocery store spending your food stamps, you can see how people look towards you. They look at you like you’re lazy and like, “well, she ain’t got no business buying this or that. She’s getting more food than I am, and I work.” But I work too. (Cherelle)

Another respondent’s knowledge about welfare guidelines aided her in coping with the negative reactions often related to receiving public assistance.

People don’t really know that you can have income and still get assistance. When people see you spending food stamps, they think you don’t have a job and are lazy and that they are taking care of you. But a lot of people don’t know that you can receive food stamps and a lot of public assistance and still have income. (Cherelle)

Rebecca equated her racial background with her mistreatment by those who are not knowledgeable about her everyday life.

Being a Black woman, first of all they think that all we do is just have babies just to keep assistance. So I really believe that was a problem right here. I was eighteen years old, and I guess they thought I was having a baby just to get a check. And that’s not what it was. (Rebecca)

One respondent explained her feelings toward people’s perception of public housing and AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children). “Public housing, they don’t say anything, but AFDC, a lot of people thought it was just because I was lazy and didn’t want to work.” (Paula)

Interpreting the Reactions of Others

Because of “sticky labels” attached by societal members, people or groups often internalize the labels or perceive themselves as different based on their interpretation of existing and subsequent labeling. “Lazy,” “shiftless,” “out of control,” “ignorant,” “incompetent, and “sexually promiscuous” according to Sue
“[are some] of the labels they give people who receive AFDC.” The list of labels goes on, but labels such as the ones mentioned are attached specifically to African-American women receiving public assistance. To capture a picture of the everyday world of the women interviewed, I asked each woman how she thought others look at her in terms of her social status as a welfare recipient. I also asked each woman to provide real-life examples, based on experience, that caused her to come to her conclusion about how others view her.

Lynn indicated in her response that some people do not focus on her social status as welfare recipient, while others look at her as if “she’s a welfare person. We’re paying her way and all that stuff.” Lynn tried to justify the reactions and indicated that by her response.

I guess because some people work and they’ve never had to rely on that [public assistance], and they look at you like you just lay around and do nothing while they are working. (Lynn)

Angie based others’ reactions on class or economic status.

Some of them look at you like you’re nothing when you go in a store with food stamps. And then some of them, it doesn’t bother them. I guess it just depends on how much money they have or don’t have. (Angie)

Her reason for people’s responses was that “…some of them probably never have had to get assistance, and they think that everybody that gets it is sponging off of them.”

Angie’s manner of thinking was a result of an encounter with a cashier at the grocery store she patronizes regularly.

I went in Kroger one time, and the cashier—I paid with food stamps—and she held her head down the whole time and didn’t even say thank you, and the person [who] paid with a check…they called by their name. (Angie)
Angie, like so many others, left the store with a sense of what it is like to feel invisible. This experience was familiar to almost all of the women interviewed. When a customer pays with a check or credit card, store clerks are taught to call the customer by their last name. “Thank you and have a good day, Mr. or Mrs.” with the surname to follow. Due to the norms and values used as a rule of thumb for all, inequality is created even in the grocery store in the society in which these women live.

The stares, the glares, and changes in facial expression, according to some of the respondents, were a direct result of people’s distaste for those receiving public assistance, and most of the respondents interpreted it as such. When Sue was asked if she thought others viewed her as different because she receives public assistance, she replied:

I think some people did. The people that knew me knew the reason I was using it. But people on the outside looking in, they didn’t know. They was like, “Lord, she’s getting a check” and stuff like that. (Sue)

The response made by Sue is interesting because people unfamiliar with someone’s situation may regard it as meaningless and, therefore, not worthy of attention. Those familiar with Sue knew her circumstance; she often has health problems, but others paid little attention due to their ignorance and unconcern about this respondent’s life. She was just another welfare mother to them. I learned a different perspective because I was able to go into the home of Sue, and Sue has worked hard to provide a good environment for herself and her daughter. One thing I learned is that her daughter is loved and will continue to be loved, regardless of how her mother views herself.
Another respondent’s interpretation of others’ views about her was based on events that occur in her social circle.

I think, for the most, the majority of people I associate with pretty much see me as the same. I have had incidents….because I don’t allow people to drink and use drugs in my home. So, that’s where I’m different from them, and that looks to them like I’m better than they are. And, if I should say so, I am….But, I think the majority thinks that they’re proud of me and I should continue to go the way that I’m going. (Malonna)

Most societal members try to instill in their children strong morals against such things as drinking and drug use. According to Malonna, African-American mothers receiving public assistance are no exception to the rule. Malonna’s response questions the image that most people have of African-American women receiving public assistance: they have loose morals and little desire to work. In fact, Malonna recently graduated from a program for small business owners that will allow her the liberty of owning her own business if she desires to do so. This program, the respondent hopes, will provide her the break she needs to lift her and her family above poverty level and off public assistance.

Others’ Reactions

The women interviewed had interesting stories to tell about their experiences with insensitive people. Whether the women were in a doctor’s office or in the grocery store buying food, each had had a bad experience. Sue had an experience in the doctor’s office on one occasion and in the grocery store on another.

If you went to the doctor’s office, you’d have to bring out that medical card. They might be talking to you friendly before; and then when you pull it [medical card] out, their whole attitude changes. Like, “I’ve been sitting here, and I’ve got to pay, and she ain’t doing nothing but sitting at home all day and getting a free doctor’s visit and this and another.” And then if you
went into the grocery store, if you got ready to pay for your things, they’d holler, “we’ve got a check over here.” And just making a big scene out of it and bringing all the attention to you. You’re already feeling bad enough, and you have to stand there and be humiliated. (Sue)

Sue’s response to such negative occurrences seemed to show anger, embarrassment, and humiliation. When she felt someone mistreated her:

It made me react. If they react negative towards me, then I’m going to act this way towards them and be defensive about it. Not realizing that they might [have] needed help in the past too. But it just makes you defensive. (Sue)

Sue’s anger about her mistreatment by others is obvious by the tone of her responses. The Medicaid card and food stamps are both very stigmatizing objects because when people see them, they automatically assume the holder to be an out-of-work welfare recipient. But, people like Sue will not and cannot accept the negative reactions from other people, and she will respond if she feels she is being objectified or mistreated by someone who does not know her situation.

Unlike Sue, Pam did not allow others’ reactions to make her feel herself to be any less than she felt she was. “It [people’s reactions] didn’t make me feel any less of a person than I knew I was. It didn’t make me feel no smaller than they were. It didn’t make me feel bad at all.” Pam refused to allow others to make her feel small; instead, she viewed the labelers as small and insignificant. She used a survival strategy that allowed her to live her life without concerning herself with the negative labels people try to attach to her. However, Angie stated:
It makes you feel bad when they do that stuff [react negatively] because you feel like just because you receive assistance, that people push you off to the side and you’re a nobody. (Angie)

Malonna attributed people’s insensitive reactions to her situation as a typical response because she is not an active labor force participant. She found that people respond negatively.

Especially when people ask you where you work at. Well, that pretty much sums it up. “Well, you don’t work, and how many children do you have?” Then they’ve already stereotyped me to who I am. So yeah, I do think that a lot of times people do label you as just a welfare recipient or just somebody just standing in line for a handout. (Malonna)

Cherelle noticed people’s reactions and wrote them off because, according to her:

They [store clerks] act snobby. Just like I said, they don’t think you should buy certain things. People in the store think you’re not supposed to buy steak because you’re buying it with food stamps….Yeah, they kind of act funny and have an attitude and act snobby. Especially the young white females. (Cherelle)

The statement made by Cherelle is interesting because you can attribute the young white, usually middle-class, female’s actions to lack of experience. A woman who happens to be a mother with several children should understand the struggles of motherhood, even if she has a spouse. But a young female who is still hiding under the wings of her parents does not know the meaning of struggle until she becomes a mother herself. Realistically speaking, there is no clear-cut excuse because “there ain’t no sense in it, in acting that kind of way. Because they never know, they may end up on ‘em [food stamps]” (Cherelle).

Cherelle understands what it is like to experience hard times, and she also knows that anything can happen to alter an individual’s life temporarily or forever.
The respondents’ willingness to openly discuss their personal situations was a clear-cut indication of their need to talk about themselves. The tears that came to the surface of the eyes but never fell, the quivers in the voices, the changes in facial expression when discussing their mistreatment seemed to indicate the women's desire to discuss their daily lives. Most of them were overjoyed about someone who was interested in their lives, and I feel privileged to have been afforded the opportunity to show interest.

**Treatment by Professionals**

When people receive public assistance, they come into contact with different people related to the type of public assistance they receive. For example, if an individual receives cash assistance and Medicaid, there is a specific set of guidelines that require the individual to report to a caseworker any changes regarding income and household composition. Subsequently, the individual has to present a Medicaid card, issued monthly, to medical professionals when any kind of medical treatment is received. On the other hand, if an individual receives public housing, she has to report to those responsible for controlling government owned housing.

There is red tape with which an individual has to cope when public assistance is used as a means to an end. This section focuses on how the women interviewed for this study were treated by the professionals who aid in the distribution of cash and medical assistance as well as those who provide medical services.
Each woman perceived her treatment by medical professionals differently depending on the situation. Some of the women had positive experiences. Others had negative experiences that made them feel bad about the medical professionals they saw, as well as about themselves.

**Treatment by Office Professionals**

Not all of the women interviewed had a specific complaint or problem with the office professionals with whom they came in contact. For example, in Pam's case the health care professionals she chose to frequent often have patients that use a medical card as a method of payment. "Most of the doctors who participate, not all of them do participate, but most of the ones who do, most all their patients are Medicaid patients." Pam had no problems using her Medicaid card as a method of payment for medical services received. "I handed that Medicaid card out like it was a Visa or MasterCard or something." Pam took advantage of the fact that her Medicaid card allowed her and her three children the liberty of getting the medical services they needed. She saw no reason to feel embarrassed or fear the worst because, whenever needed, the Medicaid card was insurance that guarded against health insurance co-pays and up-front cash payments for service rendered. Beverly felt the medical-care professionals she chose welcomed the Medicaid card as an alternative method to cash or health insurance provided through an independent company such as Blue Cross/Blue Shield. "They [were] glad to get a medical card because they [were] glad to know they [were] gonna get paid." Mary noted that
Some of them will tell me, “Well, this is covered on the medical card and this one ain’t.” They’ll call the doctor to see if he can put it [services provided] on the medical card, and usually he [will] do it.

I do when I go get his [her son] medicine. I ask, “Will my medical card fill the prescription and stuff, and if it don’t, how much it [the prescription] will cost” (Rachel).

Rachel felt that discussing the services she and her son received with her medical providers probably does change how others view her.

Rebecca’s experience was different from Pam’s and Mary’s because the person working in her doctor’s office did not seem to be very friendly when she presented her medical card.

The first thing they stated was, “How are you going to pay for this?” “Do you have insurance or do you have the medical card?” And then when I pull out the medical card, they grab it and go over there and copy it and bring it back like it just seemed like it was different. Almost like her [the office worker’s] attitude was different.

Rebecca perceived the office worker’s attitude to be different because of her method of payment.

I don’t know. It just seems like when they see them blue or green cards, they would think, “she [Rebecca] is low or something.” But, if you had insurance, then you get waited on quicker. It seems like if you have a medical card, you have to sit there for two hours for them to wait on you just because you got that card.

Another respondent also believed that when a person receives a medical card and uses it to make visits to the doctor, the individual does not get the same type of treatment as individuals covered with health care insurance provided through an independent health care insurance company.

You could tell you wouldn’t get the best of treatment. They [the health care providers] just want to get you in there and get you out….It’s not a problem with the workers; it’s just the care that they give you. You don’t get the same treatment.” (Lynn)
As expected, the medical professionals the respondents encountered displayed a variety of different demeanors, but the professional’s demeanor was based on their professional outlook.

So far every doctor that I went to has never treated me any different….Usually at the pharmacy they [the staff] always converse with me and treat me like I am a regular customer." (Angie)

The respondent who indicated the greatest feeling of difference upon going to the doctor’s office gave the most extreme example of her and her son’s mistreatment by medical professionals.

They, oh gosh, it’s just terrible how they treat you because you know your child’s not really getting the service they deserve to be getting. And I have left the doctor’s office and went to another one and paid for it out of my pocket. (Cherelle)

Cherelle gave an example of a time when she and her son were neglected by medical professionals.

I remember one time my baby, he was like three or four months old then, and they had this really cold office. It was like thirty degrees in there, and we were there for like an hour before anybody came and did anything and I just left.

When referring to how she presented herself and others perceptions based on her presentation, Cherelle added, “...When I use any assistance I may receive, I just go in, and I don’t try to go in and be smart-mouthing anybody, and I don’t give them that look.” In saying this Cherelle means that she does not give people the demeaning look that they give her, especially when she uses her medical card. Cherelle tries to avoid replying to negative responses with negative actions by being completely cordial to those who choose to try to
demean her when she uses her Medicaid card. People who have a medical card because, they have seen it too often, easily recognize the “look.”

Rachel was indifferent about her treatment because none of the providers she went to had anything to say about her method of payment. “They don’t say nothing to me. They just ask what kind of insurance I have, and I give them the medical card, and they don’t say nothing to me.” When Rachel used her Medicaid card, she did not just settle for the medical treatment she received nor the medicine prescribed, especially when it came down to her son. She posed questions about medical treatment received.

**Treatment by Caseworkers**

In order to apply for and receive public assistance in the form of cash, food, or medical assistance, an individual has to be interviewed by a caseworker in order to be approved or denied assistance. A caseworker has to be knowledgeable about the different programs available to individuals and has to provide ways to help the individual successfully transition from welfare to work. However, there are instances in which some caseworkers view their clients as just case numbers that do not require much time, attention, or information.

Cherelle had no problems with her caseworker because she indicated, “We’re the best of buddies.” In fact, she never had any problems with her caseworkers or others at the Social Services Department. “They encourage me to go back to school and stuff like that.” Cherelle had several years of college, but the demands of work and children became overwhelming. Her social worker encouraged her to go back to finish college so she can equip herself for the job
market. Other respondents (n=9) discussed their caseworker’s demeanor toward them.

My caseworker, she is actually nice. When I first started going to her, she was kind of hateful, but now that I got to know her, she is friendly. (Angie)

At the time, I thought she [her caseworker] was nice. She is still here in the department today. (Rebecca)

They were very helpful. (Beverly)

Tina had a different story to tell about her caseworker. “She’s all right, if [she’d] ever get her job done.” Tina pointed to the fact that her assistance had been discontinued because her caseworker did not keep the appointment scheduled for her. There are rules and guidelines that must be followed. If you do not follow the rules, you risk getting your and your children’s assistance cut off. Tina felt that the information provided about jobs and educational opportunities by her caseworker indicated that her caseworker had some concern about her and her children’s future. This was evident by her response. “Yeah, she’ll tell you any jobs available or any school you can go to and stuff like that.”

Lynn had one caseworker she considered a good caseworker. The caseworker was reliable when it came to processing her case on time and providing information that was beneficial to her and her children. Lynn discussed some of the problems she had had with another caseworker.

When I first started on public assistance, my caseworker then she really was hateful. When I applied for my medical card, I was pregnant at the time. She asked questions that the lady at the welfare office said she has no business asking. She was really hateful.
Lynn went on to discuss the questions that she was asked to answer by her caseworker.

She asked me about the man I got pregnant by and was it a one-night stand and things like that. The lady [her supervisor] said that that was none of her business, and she had no right asking that.

Lynn felt the reason why the caseworker treated her negatively was

number one because I was not married and I wanted to receive assistance. And probably because she had never had to deal with anything like that [herself] so she had no idea what I was going through being a single person on my own. So, I guess she looked at me that way as being another African-American female coming in there for assistance.

Lynn has had positive and negative experiences when dealing with caseworkers, as indicated in her response

The one now doesn't [give information]. The one before, she was really nice, but she has too many cases to take care of. The one now, I have to ask her what is available before she will tell me. And then she will give me a number and tell me to call instead of her finding out what is available for me.

Lynn’s caseworker, based on Lynn’s response, seemed to have little or no concern for Lynn and her children’s future. “She says what she has to and tried to get it over with and says have a good day. She never asks me anything like ‘do I want to go to school’ or about my children.” Mary had a complaint about her caseworker similar to Tina’s. “She treats me good; she’s just always late on my stuff. It seems like she puts mine in the computer last.” Mary did not discredit her worker. Although she is always late on her paperwork, her caseworker encourages her by “telling me she knows I can make it and stuff.” A few of the respondents interviewed felt their caseworkers were on their side; however, several others had an opposite opinion. Paula seemed to be very angry about
the manner in which her caseworker treated her. She described her
caseworker's demeanor by saying

She was not nice... She was mean, she was just rude. I would go over
there [to her office] and you could tell she did not want to be there. She
didn't act like she enjoyed her job, I didn't enjoy being there with her. And
later on, I had took a couple of classes... and her daughter ended up being
in my class. So, when I would go back to see her, she had a different
attitude because she knew I was going to school when her daughter was
there. And, she kept up with her daughter through me, but I didn't let her
know anything. I went to there and got my business done and left, but she
was mean in the beginning. So, I mean, she just didn't seem like she
cared at all. It was like I was a burden and like that she was doing me a
favor. I didn't like her.

Paula found out about the different programs offered through relatives, not
her caseworker, and found out about the extra benefits and information she was
entitled to only "because I asked," as other respondents did.

No, I don't know why this is. I have had to ask questions of the
receptionist at the Social Services office. They usually have papers out
showing the different programs... I think she [asks] questions only
because she has to. Right now they are starting a program where your
children have to be in school and you have to get a job in a certain amount
of time. They have to tell you these things. (Angie)

They didn't tell me nothing that was available. Of course, I find out what I
want to know... They didn't ask questions... All they did was certified me
and sent me out the door. (Beverly)

No, they didn't tell me about the Kentucky Work[s] Program or something
like that. And they said that young people that are on it [public assistance]
have got to work so many hours per week. But you're not getting paid for
it, [it is] just to keep your check going. (Rachel)

Sue’s account of her mistreatment by caseworkers was by far the most
striking because Sue internalized her mistreatment, and it affected her both
socially and psychologically. She described her treatment as

Awful. They act like it's coming out of their pocket. They want to know
how you done this, how you do that, your life history. Some of the
questions they ask is ridiculous....Well, the last time I can speak of is right before I started working. I went to ask for some help. And they wanted to know how I bought dishwashing liquid, [and] how I bought soap. I mean just every little thing. And I just said, “This is ridiculous.” Now some things is private. And, you know, just little things like that. Just all the time trying to beat you down, beating your spirits down, and it just ain’t worth it.

Sue also commented about the information she received about available programs.

They tell a selective group. ‘Cause you hear about other programs from other women that either received them, or somebody else might of told them about them. They don’t tell you about [programs] and all that could aid you in getting an education. Like some of us don’t have transportation. There are things, but they don’t tell you about them. I guess they got their select few. I don’t know why they wouldn’t tell nobody else.

According to Sue, the concern her caseworker showed for her and her daughter was minimal. There seemed to be “no concern whatsoever. It was just a case number.” Sue summed up her feelings by discussing the physical and emotional distress she experienced when she had to go to her caseworker.

I would literally get a headache every time I would have to go. And sometimes it’s two or three months before you have to go back. But when the time rolls around, you’re just sick to your stomach. ‘Cause it’s just a vicious cycle. And, you can tell this because you’ll get this took away, and just all the time you have to watch what you say. And you just come out of there feeling like you ain’t nothing.

Sue’s response is very important because she perceived that withholding information is sometimes necessary in order to continue receiving assistance. If your income increases slightly, you risk losing all or part of your benefits. If you withhold information about financial aid from employers or if someone finds out about your income increasing and your information is reported, you risk being exposed as a fraud and losing all or part of your benefits. At times it seems like
there is no way out, but some people manipulate the system so they can maintain an economically stable household. Such was the case with Pam.

This is what happened the last time I received cash assistance. I was working forty hours a week. I had left the children’s father. I left him in December, and this was in June, and...I was working to pay childcare. It was like $100.00 a week. And, at the time, I was working a $5.15 an hour job. I didn’t have that much money by the time I paid rent and lights and everything. I was just working for childcare; I didn’t have any money left. So, what I did was I got fired intentionally. I came down here [Social Services] and applied for K-Tap and food stamps and everything. I got fired in June but didn’t apply until September. In September, I came down here [Social Services] and started volunteering. When you get K-Tap benefits, you got to volunteer so many hours. And I volunteered from September until December of 1996, and I got hired through the State of Kentucky in March 1998.

Pam’s manipulation of the system worked for her because she was able to gain information about public assistance through her volunteer efforts. She is one of the fortunate few because she was hired to work cases through Social Services and was still able to keep some of her benefits.

Yes, my childcare was paid, even now. And, see a lot of people are ignorant and just don’t know that you can have income, and it’s so much income, and still get assistance. Like right now, I still get childcare assistance. My childcare is based on my income. I pay $61.00 per week.

The responses given by some of the women were so moving that I could feel their emotions when I interviewed them and while I was writing about their responses. This study was intended to capture the true inner feelings of the social world surrounding these women as well as their feelings about themselves in relation to the welfare system. I think this chapter aided me in fulfilling that goal.
CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSIONS

This research project was an attempt to get a glimpse of the lives of African-American women receiving public assistance. This research was conducted, in part, to allow the women interviewed a voice. In other words, the research gave a small sample of women a chance to speak out about their inner feelings pertaining to their status as “welfare recipient,” as well as their perception of others’ views about their lives. The study was designed to investigate how women receiving public assistance feel about themselves because of their status as welfare recipients. The different labels applied to them, and their perceptions of the labels. With regard to themselves and their children, this study investigated some the different strategies the women in the study used to cope with their daily lives and the welfare system. With strict emphasis on labeling and stigma, these two variables were used to examine women’s perceptions of their receiving public assistance, the justifications for receiving public assistance, the labeling and stigmas associated with their receiving public assistance, the consequences of labeling and stigmas, and treatment by caseworkers and other professionals.

The findings in the research indicate that some of the respondents (n=4) felt as if receiving welfare was useful, especially when there were really no other options to choose from. These women went to apply for help and received it because the government offered it. They felt that, due to their individual

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circumstances, there was nothing wrong with receiving public assistance. Others (n=2) were clearly unhappy with their status. All the respondents (n=15) indicated that they did not plan to continue receiving public assistance because they had a different vision for the future for themselves and their children.

The majority (n=14) of the women did not view themselves as different from others in society. One respondent indicated that she did view herself as different from non-welfare recipients because she had always been on welfare.

The strongest factor that caused the women to feel stigmatized was the labeling associated with receiving welfare. While only a couple of the women (n=2) receiving welfare indicated neutrality, most (n=9) felt as if their welfare checks and food stamps were symbols of inferiority associated with being African-American women. It was not the receipt of public assistance that caused women to view themselves as different but how they interpreted the reactions of others. The stares and non-verbal gestures of store workers and customers caused the majority of women in the study to feel as if they were treated unfairly when they visited the grocery store.

The women also discussed their perceptions of the reactions of office professionals and caseworkers. A few (n=3) of the respondents indicated that office professionals (i.e., doctors’ and medical staff) did not react negatively because they were accustomed to patients receiving medical assistance. Others (n=5) felt, however, that health providers placed them in a separate category from others. This perception resulted from reactions to them when they presented their medical cards.
Some women (n=6) also found it difficult to communicate or deal with the caseworkers assigned to their individual cases although there were others (n=5) who indicated that their caseworkers were helpful. However, there were responses (n=6) that indicted that the women were made to feel odd when they were not given any information or their workers were rude. A couple of respondents had information about the system, and they used their knowledge to avoid the mistreatment others received.

The findings indicate that public assistance causes labeling and stigmatization of those receiving it. There were no indications that the women receiving public assistance were experiencing psychological problems or experiencing extreme amounts of strain as a result of receiving public assistance. All of the women used public assistance to better the lives of themselves and their children and viewed it as temporary fix and not a panacea.

Another shortcoming of the study is that I did not probe deeply enough to find out about the different survival techniques or coping strategies the women interviewed used in order to live their everyday lives and continue receiving public assistance. I feel that the different survival techniques used by social groups in society not only makes a statement about how, when, and why those using the techniques apply them but it also makes a statement about the society in which these groups of people live.

I feel that this study could have been approached from a participant observer's perspective, finding out about these women's daily lives, their habits, their patterns of interacting with their children, and how the women I studied
coped with their situations despite their single status. Spending more time with these women other than one hour could have sent this research in several different directions, but I am content with the results of this study.

**Limits of the Study**

This study was limited because of the time constraints. The ages of the participants in the study varied because of the snowball technique used to locate participants. The research conducted did not focus on long-term welfare use; therefore, the number of years participants received welfare was important, but this study did not take into account, for example, the effects of receiving welfare for 10 years or more. The study mainly focused on the effect that the welfare reform had on African-American women receiving assistance without a required number years suggested in order to participate in the research. The data found on African-American women receiving public assistance may not represent the total population of African-American women receiving public assistance; however, the women interviewed represent a subset of the target population. The research allowed for generalization based on the responses and emergent patterns found in the study. A longitudinal study would have permitted me to talk to the women about how they fared a few years later—whether they were on welfare or working, whether they were enrolled in a welfare-to-work program and had completed it, or whether they had chosen to exit the welfare system altogether. This study can be used as a springboard for future research.
Suggestions for Future Research

The next stage for this research can be suggested easily. This research dealt with women on welfare: the next stage should look at how the 1996 welfare reform has affected those who have reached their five-year lifetime limit. I would enjoy going back and meeting with these families because I thoroughly enjoyed the small amounts of time I spent with them during the interviews. Perhaps a compare and contrast study between those who are receiving benefits versus those who have worked their way off welfare would provide a glimpse of the way people are faring as a result of the welfare reform.

Another suggestion for the extension of this research would be to longitudinally track the progress of the children of mothers receiving welfare. The literature found suggested that some children do not progress as fast because their mothers do not have the financial means to be able to send them to the best daycares or schools. Tracking their progress would be a sure way to challenge this theory. It may also shed light on intergenerational welfare use.

In conclusion, the lives of women receiving welfare deserve attention. Although they may not carry the status of a professor or an attorney, they are still human beings. Compassion is what we lack in society. Even women receiving welfare deserve a chance. They do not deserve to be looked at as deviant because they make a choice. It is their choice. Women receiving welfare, I feel they may have made a wise choice because it is a choice that keeps the family from sinking after being bombarded by the strains society places on them.
APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age?
3. Are you a native of Kentucky? If not, how long have you lived here?
4. How many children do you have?
5. What are the ages of your children?
6. Are you married or have you ever been married?
7. Are you employed? If so, what do you do?
8. How many hours a week do you work?
9. How old were you when your first child was born?
10. Are you receiving public assistance? If so, what kind of assistance are you receiving?
11. How long have you been receiving public assistance?
12. Did your parents receive public assistance when you were growing up? If yes, what were your feelings toward that?
13. What are your feelings toward receiving public assistance yourself? Why?
14. Do you plan to continue receiving public assistance? If yes, how long?
15. Do you think the government should assist you with your children? Why?
16. Do you look at yourself as different from the rest of society because you receive public assistance? If so, how? If not, why?
18. Do you think people label you as an outsider because you receive public assistance? Why? Can you give me an example?

19. When people know you receive public assistance, how do they act toward you? Can you give an example? Why do you think this is so?

20. How do people's reactions make you feel? Why?

21. Do you think your children’s teachers know you and your family receive public assistance? If they know you receive public assistance, how do you feel about them knowing? Why?

22. Do you feel the children’s school principal and other school officials deal with you and your children fairly? Why or why not?

23. How do store clerks treat you when you cash a public assistance check or buy food with food stamps? Can you give me an example?

24. Are you aware that any of your neighbors are receiving any form of aid? If so, how do you feel about them?

25. How do the people in your neighborhood who are not receiving aid treat you? Can you give me an example of how they treat you? Do you think the way they treat you is because you receive public assistance?

26. Do you belong to any organizations? If so, what kind? Ex: church

27. Are you active in the organizations you belong to? If not, why?

28. How do others that belong to the organization(s) treat you? Do they offer you support? If so, in what way? If not, do you feel included in the organization?

29. Do you attend meetings at your child’s school? Ex: P.T.O. If not, why? If yes, are you an active participant?

30. Do you receive medical assistance in addition to cash assistance and food stamps? If so, does it cover all medical expenses, or do you have to pay the residual?

31. How do office workers treat you when you present your Medicaid card as a method of payment at the doctor’s office? Can you give me an example?

32. Have you ever noticed how other patients who see you present the card react to you? How do the reactions of others affect you?
33. How do you present yourself when you use your medical card (i.e., asking questions, conversing with the pharmacist, receptionist, and so forth)? Do you think that how you present yourself changes other people's perception of you?

34. How does your caseworker treat you? Why? Could you please give me an example?

35. Does he or she tell you about every program that is available?

36. Does he or she seem to be concerned about you and your children's future? What makes you think so?

37. Has your caseworker explained to you the five-year lifetime, limit that the recent welfare reform implemented?

38. How do you think this new welfare reform will affect your life? Why?

39. Do you believe five years is enough time to prepare for the future? Why?

40. How do you feel about individuals who think that welfare recipients are lazy?

41. Does this opinion affect your life at all? If so, how?

42. Does this view encourage you to get off public assistance? Why?

43. Do you plan on furthering your education? If not, why? If so, what kind of education do you think will help you gain the skills necessary to find quality employment?

44. Do you feel there are jobs in this area or surrounding areas that will pay enough for you to afford food, clothing, and shelter for your children?

45. Some members of society view all welfare recipients as poor. Do you feel as if you are poor? If yes, how does this make you feel?

46. Do you feel that some people understand or at least try to understand what it's like to be on welfare? If so, how do you know? If not, how does this lack of understanding make you feel?

47. Do you feel that being on public assistance allows you some control over your life? If so, how? How does this make you feel from day-to-day? How do you think you can regain some control over your life?
48. Do you have any friends who receive public assistance? If so, are they looking into ways that will get them off welfare? If so, does their behavior motivate you to get off welfare?

49. What are your plans for your and your children's future?

50. Do you think your plans will work to get and keep you off public assistance? Why?

51. Are you afraid of what the future may hold for you and your children? What makes you afraid?

52. Do you feel that life after welfare will be difficult? If yes, how so?

53. Does taking the step toward getting off welfare scare you? Why?

54. If you were forced to make a choice today, between welfare and work, which avenue would you choose and why?

55. Are you willing to make the sacrifice to get off welfare? If so, what preparations will you make? If not, why?

56. Do you feel that once you get off welfare you will not return? How can you be sure?

57. Do you feel discussing the welfare system in relation to yourself has helped in any way? If yes, why? If no, why not?
APPENDIX B
Completion of Master's Thesis
Western Kentucky University
1998

Respondent Consent Form

The purpose of this study is to explore the everyday life worlds of African-American women receiving public assistance. This project is in partial fulfillment to completion of a Master of Arts in Sociology.

The benefits to the respondents are the possibilities of further study of the subject matter and the positive information that may be produced from literature research and face-to-face interviews. A better understanding of how welfare recipients are affected by the welfare system may help them to become more aware of why they choose to receive public assistance, as well as ways that will aid them in thinking about bettering their lives.

You will be asked a series of questions about your role as a welfare recipient, and all responses will be audiotaped. Although some questions may be viewed as highly personal, answering such questions will not hurt, harm, or damage your reputation. Confidentiality is the duty of the researcher. Your names will appear nowhere in the final product, and you and the researcher will be the only ones to know your real name. Pseudonyms will replace your original name.
Participation in the study is completely voluntary, and, if you choose, you may refuse to answer any questions that you feel pose a threat. By participating in the research study, you grant the researcher the right to use any information obtained to complete her master's thesis and for future research.

I have a clear understanding of the fact that the interviews will be audio taped, and the recorded interview tapes will be kept by the researcher to be used for the study of African-American women and welfare. I am also aware of the fact that, if I choose, I can stop the interview process anytime I feel a question or series of questions is threatening. I also understand that the recorded tapes will be kept secure on campus for three years; thereafter, the tapes will be destroyed. I understand that I may request a copy of the consent form at any time. The researcher has explained to me what is involved during the interview process, and I agree to participate based on the information I have been provided. I may also request additional information by contacting Michelle Lee Randolph at (270) 586-6530 or (270) 745-5286.

RESPONDENT'S SIGNATURE

RESEARCHER'S SIGNATURE

DATE
APPENDIX C

Respondents’ Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>#/Age of Children</th>
<th>Type of Assistance Receiving</th>
<th>Length of Time Receiving Assistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angie</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4 (4,3,2, 11 mo.)</td>
<td>Food Stamps</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beverly</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2 (6, 9)</td>
<td>K-TAP, Food Stamps, Medicaid</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherelle</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4 (9, 7, 5, 9 mo.)</td>
<td>Food Stamps</td>
<td>9 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J’ Nora</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3 (11, 9, 8)</td>
<td>K-TAP, Food Stamps, Medicaid</td>
<td>9 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LaQuinta</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2 (4, 2)</td>
<td>K-TAP, Food Stamps, Medicaid</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3 (3, 3, 20 mo.)</td>
<td>Food Stamps</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malonna</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6 (16, 15, 13, 11, 10, 8)</td>
<td>K-TAP, Food Stamps</td>
<td>14 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2 (5, 3)</td>
<td>Food Stamps, Medicaid</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3 (11, 6, 4)</td>
<td>K-TAP, Food Stamps, Medicaid</td>
<td>4+ years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1 (7)</td>
<td>K-TAP, Food Stamps</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>K-TAP, Food Stamps, Medicaid</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2 (11, 2)</td>
<td>K-TAP, Food Stamps, Medicaid</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2 (3, 11 mo.)</td>
<td>K-TAP, Food Stamps</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1 (11)</td>
<td>K-TAP, Food Stamps, Medicaid</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3 (8, 5, 5)</td>
<td>K-TAP, Food Stamps, Medicaid</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


