Published in final edited form as:
J Poverty. 2006 ; 10(3): 69–91.

“It Still Don't Make You Feel Like You're Doin' It”: Welfare Reform and Perceived Economic Self-Efficacy

Lorie J. Schabo Grabowski, Ph.D.

Life Course Center in the Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota.

Abstract

The massive federal welfare reform effort of 1996 contained an inherent assumption that welfare use negatively affected recipients' sense of self-efficacy. Little research attention has been given to examining this assumption. Using in-depth interviews, I explore economic self-efficacy perceptions of 31 young mothers who have experience receiving welfare. Financial *choice*, they said, was central to their perceptions of themselves as economic agents and therefore to their sense of self-efficacy. Findings presented here detail women's perceptions of their own economic abilities, as well as how welfare receipt, the character of work, and experiences related to parenting in poverty all affected women's opportunities for exercising agency.

Keywords

self-efficacy; welfare; welfare reform; poverty

This study examines poor women's economic self-efficacy perceptions. The present research applies self-efficacy research and theory (Bandura, 1977, 1997) to a welfare-recipient sample. Social psychological research on topics other than welfare use or poverty has shown that self-efficacy perceptions are malleable components of the self-concept that can help explain behavioral choice and motivation, including educational investment, career choice, health maintenance (Grabowski, Call, Mortimer, 2001; Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, and Connell, 1998; Betz and Hackett, 1986; Lent and Hackett, 1987; see Bandura, 1997), and of special interest here, work and welfare use (Stellmack and Wanberg, 2000). This paper explores the content and source of self-efficacy beliefs for women who have experience with the welfare system. Specifically, I examine women's *economic* self-efficacy beliefs regarding their finances and their economic futures.

Background

In 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Under TANF, the entitlement status of economic assistance to families was eliminated, meaning that a basic minimum level of

Direct correspondence to: Lorie J. Schabo Grabowski, Life Course Center, Department of Sociology, 1014 Social Sciences, 267 19th Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55455..

*Quote in title taken from respondent, Connie, who was speaking about her experience with welfare reform.

The author received financial support for this research from the National Institute of Mental Health, National Research Service Award “Mental Health and Adjustment in the Early Life Course”, as well as from the Department of Sociology, Bright Research Award. The Youth Development Study is supported by grants (titled “Work Experience and Mental Health: A Panel Study of Youth”) from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (HD44138) and the National Institute of Mental Health (MH42843). Sharon Preves and Jeylan Mortimer provided invaluable comments on paper revisions.

assistance no longer would be guaranteed to all families having income and assets falling below a set government standard. The welfare reform legislation included a 60-month lifetime maximum cap on federally financed benefit receipt, with recipients required to work after two years of receiving benefits. States were allowed to enact more strict time limits and work requirements into their programs. In Minnesota, the site for this study, the program was named the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), and the 60-month limit was upheld.

An assumption underlying the welfare reform effort was that AFDC diminished self-reliance and promoted dependence (Lewis, 1966; Mead, 1992; Murray, 1984). Welfare legislation was even titled “Personal Responsibility....” with this idea in mind. Mandated work was designed, in part, to correct character and social psychological inadequacies of welfare recipients. Research, however, did not demonstrate a welfare dependence mentality, but rather showed problems of low-wage work and parenting in poverty to be far more complex and structurally based (Edin and Lein, 1997; Harris, 1993; Hays, 2003). Scholars noted some social psychological consequences of welfare receipt but focused attention particularly on recipients’ self-esteem levels and their perceptions of stigmatization by the public, potential employers, and welfare bureaucrats (Edin and Lein, 1997; Horan and Austin, 1974; Jarrett, 1996; Moffitt, 1983; Rank, 1994; Rogers-Dillon, 1995), rather than on self-efficacy.

At the outset it should be noted that although self-esteem and self-efficacy are likely related (Gecas and Schwalbe, 1983), they are distinct concepts. While self-esteem refers specifically to one’s feelings of self *worth*, self-efficacy refers to one’s “*beliefs in one’s capabilities* to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p.3; emphasis added). Rosenberg (1986) notes that even if similar levels of self-esteem are found among more advantaged and disadvantaged groups, it is important to examine feelings of agency because the greater structural constraints disadvantaged people face may have a negative impact on their sense of control and mastery.

Women receiving government assistance live under constraints imposed by the welfare system as well as constraints related to poverty and the potentially conflicting role obligations of working and mothering, especially under welfare reform rules mandating work. Self-efficacy is likely to be impacted by the experiences one has in the social welfare system as well as in the world of low-wage work. Gecas and Schwalbe (1983) write that social contexts vary in the amount of resources, individual control, and autonomy they provide for efficacious action. As a result, self-efficacy research links the self-concept to the stratification system. Structural inequality creates differential efficacy-enhancing opportunities, and once efficacy perceptions form, they go on to shape individual actions, including those that affect socioeconomic attainments. For poor women who may have limited efficacy-enhancing resources or experiences, negative influences on self-efficacy may impact their decisions and performances as workers, parents, and students.

Bandura (1977), one of the most cited theorists and researchers on the concept of self-efficacy, states that feelings of personal self-efficacy in a given realm are based on four sources of information: personal performances (the most direct, and therefore, strongest source of the four), vicarious experiences (like-others’ successes or failures are used to infer one’s own capabilities), verbal persuasion, and physiological reaction. His theory and research demonstrate that self-efficacy is subject to influence, both from a person’s own performances and from their social contexts. These areas of influence can be seen in women’s experiences negotiating the welfare system and the low-income job market. By applying Bandura’s theory of efficacy-influences to a welfare-recipient sample, we can examine how everyday experiences for poor mothers may be affecting their senses of themselves as economic agents.

Bandura's work (1997) and other recent research (Grabowski, Call, and Mortimer, 2001) stress that self-efficacy is best understood, not as a general phenomenon, but within a particular arena of activity or domain. It follows that if one is interested in better understanding poor women's welfare use and work behaviors, one should explore self-efficacy beliefs within the *economic* domain specifically. Thus far, research on non-welfare samples has examined domain-specific self-efficacy with regard to academic achievement (Bandura et al., 1996), parenting (Ensminger, 1995 and Elder et al., 1995), and economic attainment (Grabowski, Call, and Mortimer, 2001). Stellmack and Wanberg (2000) use a welfare-recipient sample to examine a concept they call "self-sufficiency self-efficacy - defined as a person's confidence in his or her ability to keep a job, move up to a higher-paying job, and stay off of welfare." They find that the more self-sufficiency self-efficacy a woman showed, the longer she went without receiving welfare benefits from MFIP, the Minnesota version of welfare reform.

Although economic self-efficacy has been examined in these other studies, here I address gaps in the current state of knowledge in two important respects. First, I explore the meaning of economic self-efficacy in women's *own words*; I do not impose onto women a standard meaning of this self-concept component. A national panel convened to study welfare reform evaluations concluded that qualitative studies of recipient experiences are especially important during this era of program transition (National Research Council, 2001). Particularly for young mothers who are at or near the poverty line and often without partners, feelings of economic agency can take a different form than standard survey research or other quantitative measures allow. For example, establishing a residence independent of parent(s) may be more salient than home ownership to the sample of women I studied. Some of the women have never been able to afford to live independently, and many have had to move back in with parents when unable to make rent payments. Financial goal-setting itself may be inhibited when a woman lives check-to-check with no surplus money with which to plan for future investments. In addition, recording the perceptions welfare recipients have about how welfare programs impact their ability to act in various roles gives voice to a group of women often ignored in the welfare reform debate and in social science research more generally (Reinharz, 1992). While feminist research may be giving voice to women, the words of the poor, particularly welfare-recipient poor, are still often ignored. As Greene (1994) says "qualitative methods...can effectively give voice to the normally silenced and can poignantly illuminate what is typically masked."

Second, I address a gap in this research when I focus on the perceived *influences* on economic self-efficacy beliefs in a welfare-using sample of young mothers, influences unique to their economic position and experiences. Using Bandura's theory of efficacy influences, I examine women's perceptions of how their own experiences and their social supports affect their self-efficacy. Their social structural position exposes them to performance expectations and experiences, in terms of managing their finances and household, and interactions with welfare office workers, that others would not have. While Stellmack and Wanberg's work (2000) has looked at the *consequences* of economic self-efficacy for welfare use, this paper examines the *content* of economic self-efficacy beliefs for a sample of welfare users, along with perceived *influences* on those beliefs. Stellmack and Wanberg's research suggests the importance of self-efficacy beliefs for economic action and self-sufficiency; this research asks women what helps them to feel more or less efficacious as economic agents.

Sample and Method

This study explores the *perceptions* welfare recipients have about their abilities to affect change in their everyday financial lives. The research is based on in-depth interviews with welfare recipients. The 31 young women in this study were a subsample of an ongoing, longitudinal study of youth in the St. Paul, Minnesota public school system, the Youth Development Study (YDS). YDS began in 1988 with 1,000 ninth graders. Through surveys administered in school

during the high school years, and by mail since high school, YDS researchers have documented the study participants' living arrangements, family structures, and work and school participation over time. At the time of the interviews, the participants were 25-27 years old. Interviewing participants from the ongoing YDS had the advantage of offering a wealth of background information on the families, school, work, and living arrangements of the interviewees since their freshman year of high school. Most of the interviewees ($N = 18$), while in high school, were living in families with earnings that put them above the poverty line. Most were in two-parent families (during their freshman year of high school), and their parents' schooling ranged from less than high school to graduate education. At the time of their interviews, the interviewees' own educational attainment levels were also wide ranging, with some having less than a high school diploma, many having received a high school diploma or GED ($N = 13$), and about a third ($N = 10$) reporting some college education or completion of a bachelor's degree.

To select potential participants for this qualitative study, I used questions from the 1997 YDS survey asking about government assistance program participation and financial support arrangements since high school. Women were invited to be interviewed based on their report of having received government assistance in the form of AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children; pre-welfare reform) sometime within the five years prior to 1997. Because AFDC was a financial assistance program designed for low/no income *parents*, all of the women invited to participate were mothers. One hundred-three women were invited to participate through a mailed invitation letter; 31 interviews were obtained.

I compared the 31 women I interviewed with the 72 women who also were invited to be interviewed but who did not participate. The two groups were very similar in family of origin income, poverty history, parental education, and compositions; high school grade point average; and global and economic self-efficacy measures in the senior year of high school. The one variable where some difference was evident was in perceived global self-efficacy, as reported in their YDS survey four years after high school (1995). The women I interviewed showed a statistically significant lower global efficacy level at about age 22 than the other welfare recipient mothers in the YDS study. Global self-efficacy has been shown to be less predictive of behavior than more domain specific self-efficacy measures (economic, for example), and it was only this less predictive, global measure on which the two categories of women differed.

Interviews

Over the course of two and one-half months in 1999 (from mid-February to the end of April), I conducted 31 interviews with young women who reported some participation in the AFDC program. Twenty-nine of the 31 interviews were conducted in person; two were done over the telephone (one per interviewee request and one because the interviewee was living in another region of the country). Most interviews were conducted in the women's homes, but some took place in more public spaces, such as a restaurant or coffee shop. The interviews averaged about one and one-half hours each. Women were paid \$25 for their participation. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Before the start of the interview, each woman was asked to choose another name that she wanted to use for the purposes of the interview. In discussion of the interview findings, I refer to women using the names they chose for themselves. Emphasis women made in their speech is presented here by showing the text in bold.

All but one of the women interviewed were living in Minnesota at the time of the interview, and all those in Minnesota were living within one and one-half hours of the Twin Cities metro area. All but one had participated in AFDC in Minnesota at some time. At the time of the interview, seven women were receiving cash assistance through the Minnesota welfare reform program, MFIP. Eighteen women reported having received such assistance at some time. The

women interviewed were in a range of living situations, ranging from independent home ownership (with or without a partner) to continued residence in their parents' homes. Seven women reported being married; four women were divorced or seeking a divorce. The remaining 20 women were single, but some of those (about a quarter) were living with a partner. Their incomes at the time of the interviews were from a variety of sources including their own paid work, MFIP participation or other assistance programs (public or private), spouse/partner income, and other family support. Many combined a variety of sources in order to support their household. Within the interview sample, white, African-American, Hispanic, and Native American women were represented, but like the overall YDS sample, the interview sample was majority white. See Appendix A for a summary of respondent demographic characteristics.

I used interview techniques highlighted by Patton (1980; 1982). Drawing on the literatures on welfare use and self-efficacy that suggested some “guiding hypotheses” for research (Marshall and Rossman, 1995, p.36-37), the interview questions were used as a general guide, focusing on issues of identity in significant life domains. I coded and analyzed the interview transcripts following qualitative analysis guides in Lofland and Lofland (1971), Strauss and Corbin (1990), and Marshall and Rossman (1995) and using Atlas.ti (Muhr 1997) software for qualitative data analysis. Interviews were coded for key themes surrounding issues of identity, self-efficacy domains, perceptions of self-efficacy, welfare program experiences, particularly with caseworkers, and perceptions of work and welfare programs' effects on self-efficacy (and other reactions interviewees had to program participation). Valid capture of *perceived* efficacy was addressed by using interviewees' own words to define the perceptual categories and content of the data analysis. Careful notes on interview content, context, and interviewer thoughts followed each interview. During transcript analysis, repeat coding was done, particularly in the code origination phase of the work, to serve as a cross check of the coding scheme. Findings presented here will focus on women's perceptions of their own economic abilities.

Findings

Economic Self-Efficacy: Perceived Ability to Achieve Financial Goals

Most women talked about their main financial goal being to provide for their children's material needs, yet most went beyond this to include the ability to make ends meet with household expenses, to enjoy time spent at work, and more than anything else, to be able to make decisions about working, purchasing, and saving money. Many women talked about wanting to have money left over after meeting regular expenses, because this could offer them a kind of financial *choice* that is often unavailable to women on assistance or those who work at low wage jobs. In discussion of their economic desires, women talked about how experiences within welfare and work influenced their efficacy beliefs.

Welfare Experiences

Women told me their experiences while receiving welfare influenced their feelings of economic ability and agency both before and after welfare reform. Restrictive program characteristics and problematic worker interactions were present under MFIP, just as they had been under AFDC. Differences between positive and negative experiences were more evident when women were *in* the welfare system *versus out* of the welfare system than they were pre-versus post-reform. Many moms gave clear descriptions of how during their time receiving cash assistance, welfare program rules as well as welfare caseworkers served to block their financial planning or goal setting, limiting their successful economic performance opportunities and therefore, their economic self-efficacy. Some of this came from the structure of the system itself. Welfare “rules” were cited as limiting women, blocking their exercise of economic agency. While seeking an increase in personal responsibility, welfare legislation substantially limited the personal choices of recipients in terms of education, work, spending, and saving.

As Hays noted in her discussion of welfare reform, the impact of the welfare bureaucracy shows a “contradiction between demanding individual autonomy and exercising social control” (2003, p.48).

System Structure

Women repeatedly cited welfare program components that were detrimental to their feelings of economic efficacy, including low benefit levels, difficult check timing, and the assistance cut-off system for wage earners. All of these program factors made planning for one's financial future more difficult; they contributed to women's inability to set and to achieve financial goals. Low cash benefit levels, more so under AFDC but also since reform, factored into women's ability to attain economic independence and make economic choices and changes. As Lisa put it, “You're only getting \$500 a month. It's not enough, to survive. There's **no way** you can really make a... rent payment and stuff like that. I had to move home many, many times because I couldn't make rent... Move back with my mom.” Relatedly, the schedule for receiving assistance checks had an effect on women's ability to plan, pay bills on time, and make economic choices for themselves and their families. Much of their economic freedom was constrained when they had to wait an entire month between checks in order to do something they wanted or needed to do. Connie explained how one of the rewards of work for her was getting paid more frequently, and not having to wait for her welfare check.

The third problematic program component was the assistance cut-off system for wage earners. Several women talked about the way MFIP cut assistance as women became wage earners as being detrimental to their feelings of economic efficacy, even though MFIP had greater income disregards than were present under AFDC (Miller et al. 1997). For example, Jean said that the reformed welfare system was no help to her because she was cut off from benefits very abruptly. The welfare reform rhetoric of support for working women was inaccurate according to several of these women. Jean said, “The whole MFIP thing [support for working mothers] for me is just non-existent. It was non-existent. They really threw a monkey wrench in my whole situation.” “With MFIP they're supposed to wean you? I was not weaned, in any way, shape, or form. I was just, ‘smack!’” She said she started working two years earlier, “And... honest, they cut me completely off. And I was making... 7.50 an hour. I was working 26 hours a week, and going to school, with 2 kids. So, I don't understand how they cut me completely off.”

Central to the concern about being cut-off from benefits was the two-month delay in benefit reductions that happened with the calculation of cash benefit amounts. Benefit checks were adjusted according to a woman's earnings, yet the adjustment occurred to the check issued two months after the reported income. This delay in benefit reductions further complicated women's efforts at financial planning. Lisa said the delay in adjustments made budgeting from month-to-month very difficult. She said, “every month it was different,” and she said the uncertainty was “scary.” She said, “say August, you reported what you made for August. It would affect October's money. Yes. So if you're not working very many hours in October, you're really hurtin' if you made a lot in August. It was real hard.” As Connie said the welfare system “they still thinkin' you have two, two months' worth a money saved up somewhere when you're already behind.”

Several women talked about how the system was structured to treat all clients the same, yet clients' circumstances, problems, and needs differed and the uniform treatment often did not match the need. This perception was supported by a Minnesota Department of Human Services analysis of the MFIP program that stated, “surveys suggest that [employment] barriers differ widely and solutions are quite individual” (2001a, p.2). The Minnesota Department of Human Services 2000(b) report to the legislature suggested that one of the state's challenges was to meet these individual needs without creating an overly complex assistance system.

Some women I interviewed talked about how aspects of *reform* – specifically sanctioning and time limits - made them feel less efficacious in their financial lives. This is particularly notable given welfare reformers' explicit efforts to enable poor families to attain “increased independence and self-reliance” (Lewit, Terman, and Behrman, 1997, p. 10).

Women noted that sanctioning affected their feelings of efficacy. For example, unlike AFDC, Connie said MFIP had a series of workers to whom one had to report and from whom one could receive sanctions. It was this increased sanctioning system that Connie noted as detrimental to her own efficacy. She said,

That's the thing about MFIP. I don't even know, like, there's a-, these are all the people I have to report any changes to. There's my, um, job counselor, there's my daycare, there's my child support, an' then there's my financial counselor. So you have, four different people. Every time you change somethin' you gotta, call, write, whatever, just to let 'em know. That's the only thing that sucks. It seem like somebody else is, runnin' your life. And it don't feel like you're in, control of your own destiny. 'Cause you, just because I, I get some, assistance you guys wanna know, all this. “Do I work? Do I not work? Do I-?” I mean it's good, but it's, it still don't make you feel like you're, you're doin' it.

I asked if reporting to four or five people was any different from reporting to one. She said, “Yeah it make a difference! ‘Cause... each one of ‘em has the power to sanction us. So, if I don't do what the child care worker, said, but I'm doin' everything else, that these four over here want me to do, she still has the right to [sanction].” In addition to sanctions, time limits also negatively affected how economically efficacious some women felt, as they too constrained choice.

System Interactions: Caseworker Relationships and Economic Efficacy

Because the welfare system is experienced on a one-to-one level in welfare offices, an examination of the way recipients perceive those interactions provides insight into how welfare use relates to efficacy perceptions. Women said caseworkers both blocked efficacy-enhancing experiences and doled out negative verbal comments about women's economic abilities. I will not discuss differences in caseworker interactions from AFDC to MFIP because the differences women reported between workers were often said to be just that, differences between workers, not between systems (AFDC to MFIP). Women spoke of how a given program could be experienced differently by two recipients because of the ways two different caseworkers implemented it. For example, Damaiah explained how, “Well they [two assistance programs] might have the same **name** but their **operation** may be totally different.” She said that while some women were told they could pursue only a two-year degree, for her, “Well, the agency I was going through and the **worker** that I had, through her investigating and actually going that extra mile to find that out... found out that they **can, fund** you up until your **bachelor's** degree. Depending on where you go through.” As a result, Damaiah was pursuing a bachelor's degree in social work. She was doing so even after the change to MFIP that allowed only up to 24 months of education (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2001b). Some women told me similar positive stories of how supportive social service workers increased their economic self-efficacy perceptions by encouraging and supporting them in their pursuit of their own work and financial goals. By contrast, Toot had been pursuing her GED, but when she met with her MFIP employment counselor, he said, “**Work**. No school. **Work**.” She said she had worked in the past but then said to herself ““Ok, I'm gonna go on to school and get this GED so I can get a better job.”” After meeting with her MFIP employment counselor, however, Toot never went back to school. Toot could not pursue her GED, while Damaiah continued to attend college; both women were education-seeking participants in MFIP. This difference highlights how verbal encouragement versus discouragement can affect one's perceptions of

economic and educational possibilities. While a lack of support for educational goals was a problem reported by several women, program evaluators have not recognized how women perceive the MFIP system as being unsupportive of education. The MFIP Longitudinal Study Executive Summary referred to a lack of education in recipients as an “internal barrier”, rather than a “structural problem” (Minnesota Department of Human Services 2000a, p.4), yet as caseworkers set opportunities and constraints for recipients, they establish the welfare *structure* those recipients experience.

Welfare workers' negative influences on women's economic self-efficacy took three forms: overtly negative treatment, inaccessibility, and misinformation about programs or benefits. First, women talked about being treated badly by workers, how they encouraged feelings of powerlessness in clients rather than ability and agency. Both Lisa and Vivian said it is “the way they talk to you.” Damaiah explained it wasn't direct statements but rather more indirect treatment from workers that was degrading. Likewise, Alicia said she had been treated disrespectfully by some caseworkers, and the bad treatment came in the form of “Attitude. The body language. I don't specifically remember if it was anything she said or not, but I definitely remember the body language and the **attitude** about it.” Shay said some workers abuse their power over clients' lives, “they have a power fit. You know, [some caseworker have the attitude] ‘I **am** the one that has the power to give you this grant or not.’” Connie said when she was getting AFDC it was nothing to be “**proud of**”, but that “it's not because you're gettin' help, it's because they **view you** as gettin' help.” Such worker attitudes emphasized failures in women's performance histories; they were economically discouraging rather than encouraging. Morgan talked about an extreme example of negative treatment by a caseworker. The fear and powerlessness some women experienced were articulated when Morgan said that first worker she had would say things like, “‘well I'm just gonna cut you off, and your daughter's gonna starve.’ You know, that kinda stuff. But... who are you gonna report her to?! That's the person who controls your money.” She said she never reported the worker because “I think I was too afraid. It was my first year. I was only 18 years old. I was living on my own for the first time, with a child.”

Several women talked specifically about problem interactions with MFIP *employment* workers, particularly in terms of how these workers interfered in women's work environments. Sabrina spoke about how the MFIP system's employment counselors interfered with establishing herself as an independent worker. She said, “They give you that employment counselor thing or whatever, and **that** person is, pretty much tries to get in the middle, in-between you and your employer... They can be nosey if they want to ‘cause they're already got their foot in the door... They want to be in the middle.” Jean said, “They bug your employers, which is not good for you.” The welfare system required employers to fill out paperwork to verify hours and earnings, but this added to the payroll work an employer had, and Jean felt it could hurt a woman's relationship with her employer. Toot was very upset about the paternalism of the system when she learned her employment counselor had been contacting her employer. She said,

At first, he [the employment worker] started callin' my job. You know, I guess tryin' to see, you know, how I'm doin' at work or if I was there. When I found that out, you know, that kinda made me mad. “I don't need you checkin' up on me. I know what I need to do. I know how to get a job. I know how many hours I need to work. I don't need you callin'.”

Women who reported that their employment counselors had taken a more hands-off approach generally reported more satisfaction with the employment counselor experience. They appreciated the offer to call or come in if they needed additional employment help, but if they felt comfortable with their current situation and plans, they were not required to attend

appointments. Support, but not additional constraints, seemed to underlie the positive reports of employment worker experiences.

While negative interactions with caseworkers received the greatest attention in the interviews, the inaccessibility of workers was the second negative cue women received through the welfare system. While many women were surviving day-to-day in terms of finances, their questions, sometimes financially urgent, often went unanswered for days, and in some instances, longer. Navigating the bureaucracy was made more difficult by frequent caseworker turnover, making women's contact point with the system even more ambiguous and inaccessible. As Lisa put it, "It's real hard because... as soon as... you **know** your worker's name, you can figure out, you **know** their number, then all of a sudden they switch it. They **do** switch a lot." Angel, one of the moms having the most financial problems at the time of my interviews, said that just since fall (the interview was done the following spring), she had had four different MFIP caseworkers.

In addition to being physically inaccessible, caseworkers sent a third negative cue through poorly communicating resource options to their clients. By failing to provide financial tools, in the form of benefits, additional program resources, work options, etc., to women, workers conveyed to women an inability to change their financial status. One woman, Alicia, who was working with low-income parents through Head Start when I met her, believed caseworkers were simply not well-informed about aid that was available to their clients.

Work Experiences

While many women reported being paid too little to make ends meet on wages alone, for those women who were able to live at least in part on their own earnings, work improved their perceptions of economic agency. For example, Connie's economic self-efficacy perceptions improved when she was able to leave assistance for a time, because she was working full-time and earning enough to disqualify her for cash assistance. She had left her full-time fast-food job due to transportation problems and was receiving MFIP at the time of the interview. When we spoke, she was working only part-time as a daycare provider in her home. Despite her employment setbacks, she said, "You **can** get off AFDC! It's not impossible. It's **hard**, but it's not impossible." I asked what she thought made it possible to get off, to which she replied,

Day-to-day struggles, that you overcome, you know? Like, what made me, what made me **know** I can get off is because, when they [MFIP] cut me off in December, it was like, "Wow, they're not gonna give me **no aid**?! An' **no food stamps**?!" She goes on to say, "**but**, I had money. You know, I'm like, (she chuckled) it's like, I had no food stamps, I still had money to go get some food.

For her, it was her performance as a financially independent person that made her feel like she *could* be self-sufficient. The positive economic efficacy she attained while working lasted beyond her losing that job and reentering the MFIP program. Having *left* the system at *some* point, having crossed that mark, was a significant, lasting efficacy-influencing experience for her. Connie said that she thought women should be required to work in order to receive welfare benefits but that the requirement should be for part-time, not full-time work. She felt good about earning some of the money she used to pay household expenses, so that part-time work was enough to feel the increased economic efficacy effects. Similarly, Danielle noted that she felt "free" when she was able to live completely separate from assistance for a time. Jade felt that the money she earned by working bought her an independence she had not had while on assistance, when her checks did not cover her expenses. She said, "I don't have to ask my parents. I don't have to ask them for help. I can hold my head high. I did it."

A woman's level of economic success at securing livable wages and/or income supplements through assistance when she was working also affected her efficacy beliefs. When Jean

explained her experience with the transition from AFDC to MFIP, she stressed the need for adjustments in the way the program balances livable wages against government benefits. Jean felt that the rules of the new MFIP system did not realistically account for the amount of money a family needed to make ends meet. She explained that when she was switched from AFDC to MFIP, she was told “Well, if you get offered a minimum wage job, you have to take it”, even if the new job failed to approach the pay from her previous job or pay a livable wage. Augusta noted that wages were too low because although they may cover month-to-month expenses they were not enough to cover any unexpected expenses. While many of the women I interviewed had parents, grandparents, or significant other adults who helped them to make ends meet when their expenses exceeded their incomes, these resources tended not to enhance women's sense of personal economic efficacy. They were not stable or secure enough for women to use them in financial planning or goal-setting.

Taxes: An Efficacy Symbol

Women repeatedly mentioned tax paying as an influence on their perceptions of economic efficacy. Taxes were a recurring symbol of independence for workers and dependence for welfare receivers. Vivian said it was demeaning, “Hearing other people talk, a lot of people who are working, um, will say ‘Well that's what my taxes is paying for’ [referring to welfare].” Lynn said cashiers at stores “were kinda snotty to me,” saying “‘You're takin' the tax payers' money and even bein' on M-F-I-P they're takin' the tax payer money.’” Likewise, she and several other women noted the empowerment that came with *being* a taxpayer, by being a wage earner. She said that her response to the cashiers was, “‘Well excuse me. I worked and I paid taxes.’” Connie summarized the way taxes were used as a symbol against welfare recipients, as a tool in shaming, and as a tool for working women, as a symbol of pride. She said,

Regardless **what they say**, “Oh, I'm tired a payin', for your kids.” You don't feel like that now [that she is working]. You feel like, “Ok, any help that I **do** get, I'm payin' for it myself.” You know what I'm sayin'? “Feel free to take it outta my check. Anything you're gonna give me later on,” you know what I'm sayin'? ‘Cause... I'm not only a **mother**, but I'm contributing back.

Morgan said something very similar. She felt “thankful” to have benefited from the AFDC system when she was using it and was willing to contribute into the system now that she was paying taxes. She said, “You know, they can have all my tax money.”

Reimbursement and Sliding Fees

Feelings of economic control and capability arose very often and very dramatically in discussions of daycare. Mothers of preschool children had to secure daycare in order to work in the paid labor market, and as welfare evaluations have shown, secure childcare affects women's ability to gain employment and to leave welfare (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2000a). The availability, and above all, cost of that daycare shaped their decisions, their stresses, their labor market participation, and their day-to-day lives. As such, it limited women's sense of economic control, and this issue continues to be timely, as “large numbers of eligible children are not being served by current childcare assistance programs due to ongoing funding shortages” (Henry, Werschkul, and Rao, 2003, p.1).

One interesting and often unnoted difficulty poor working parents experience with daycare assistance is in the *reimbursement*-oriented programs. Daycare reimbursement, while seemingly financially helpful, was problematic for some women because it required that women have the childcare money upfront. Holly said daycare reimbursement programs' helpfulness was deceiving because “They said they **did** [pay for daycare], but they reimburse you. If you had all this **money**, you wouldn't be on the program anyways.” Teresa was not getting assistance for childcare, even though she would have qualified for it after she left MFIP,

because to do a daycare reimbursement program, “that was all the money up front. And, I didn't have the money to do that.” She instead was using more informal babysitters who cost much less than formal daycare.

Like reimbursement programs, daycare sliding fee programs, as well as sliding fees for housing, were designed to help low-income families make ends meet on less than livable wages. However, like reimbursement programs, women told me about problems with sliding fee systems; their comments directly address their economic efficacy, as sliding fees kept women from experiencing the success of “getting ahead” as their wages increased. By their nature, sliding fee systems increase a woman's expenses as her pay increases. Danielle, a working mother of one, was no longer receiving cash assistance, but her income allowed her to qualify for rental and daycare assistance. Despite the beneficial aspects of these assistance programs on the surface, Danielle reported that sliding fee assistance systems kept her from ever being able to truly “get ahead.” Danielle explained,

That's one thing about like my housing goes by your income. And her [daughter's] daycare goes by my income. And the thing is, anytime you get ahead, you're going like, one step back because it seems like my rent and daycare are going up more than what my raise was. But it's just like it's **so hard**, I mean, to **get ahead**, I mean. Even a **little**. They don't even give you an inch. And it's **so hard**. I-, I mean, I'm glad I don't have to pay as much as, you know, what we **could** be paying, but, it still is, really hard to, you know, try to make a living and do anything. I mean any kinda... reward you get, a raise, whatever, you're gettin' it taken away.

Discussion

These interviews provide evidence that economic self-efficacy perceptions are molded by a woman's welfare system experiences, her relationships with service providers, and her labor market experiences. Self-perceptions reflected women's access to individual control and autonomy, as well as their access to resources that enabled efficacious action. Overall, the women's causal attributions showed that they generally cited factors outside of themselves – welfare workers, employers, program rules, family resources, and more general economic conditions – in their economic difficulties, yet they also spoke in ways that suggested how their economic failures, *caused* by these social factors, at times negatively affected their sense of their own economic possibilities. To link this back to Bandura's work on perceived efficacy sources, women's successes and failures in their personal performances as family heads and workers shaped how they viewed their personal economic efficacy.

Gecas and Schwalbe say “efficacious action is not only dependent upon [social structural] conditions, but serves to reproduce them” (1983, p. 81). Here we see how structural inequality can be perpetuated through its influence in recreating economic self-efficacy beliefs. At times women felt less efficacious as their choices and actions were limited by their access to needed resources, and the perceived inability to take particular actions helped to perpetuate the socioeconomically disadvantaged positions that limited women's efficacious actions in the first place.

In addition to welfare and work *structures*, women highlighted the system *interactions* that negatively affected their sense of economic self-efficacy. In welfare office experiences one can see Bandura's personal performance and his verbal persuasion elements affecting women's economic self-efficacy perceptions. Workers conveyed negative attitudes to women and were often physically or intellectually inaccessible. Supportive workers, who bolstered women's economic efficacy, were those who offered encouragement and showed a willingness to assist women with additional resources. Information was important to the way women saw their abilities to navigate the system and acquire financial independence. Several women said that

support from workers in the form of emotional availability and respect was more important in their relationship with the system than was actual aid. This underscores the importance of perceptions of efficacy and agency for understanding how the welfare system might affect women economically. It was not just money or other material assistance that was sought but also encouragement and support for women's ability to be more independent economic agents.

Given the information provided here about economic self-efficacy beliefs in a small sub-sample of YDS participants, future research must explore similar issues with a larger and more demographically diverse sample. Like the population from which the original YDS sample (1988) was drawn, this sample was largely white and did not represent the racial diversity in the welfare-using population overall. Therefore, racial and cultural differences in efficacy formation and change are not examined here. In addition, this study, while notable in its depth, was a one-point-in-time snapshot of efficacy beliefs. A longitudinal look at economic self-efficacy beliefs and welfare participation would increase our understanding of how family formation, work experience, program changes, and the larger economic environment might interact to affect efficacy beliefs.

Several policy considerations arise from these findings. First, those seeking to truly understand welfare policy must examine the implementation of policy at the office level. Relatedly, voices of women recipients should be included in the policy evaluation process. The ways in which a program is implemented, in practice, may diverge from the program on paper and only qualitative examination of welfare offices and recipient experiences can illuminate policy in practice. Second, adequate household income was positively related to economic self-efficacy beliefs. As such, consideration should be given to eliminating the five-year limit on cash benefits in the cases where the benefits serve as income supplementation to earned income. Livable wages must be attainable, and if not, government supplementation should be considered. Finally, program rules were often too constraining to address individual-level variations in need for the women I interviewed. An analysis of only economic or hard asset indicators misrepresented women's situations and economic needs. Work could be done to write more flexibility into welfare qualification procedures. The balance between a firm, equitable structure and a flexible one is a difficult one to strike, yet it appears that efforts toward program reform in that direction could contribute toward more economically successful families.

Clearly, while a fairly wide variation was found in women's levels of economic self-efficacy and economic goal-setting, many women mentioned the exercise of economic *choice*, in how to earn, spend, and save money, as being significant to how they thought about themselves in financial contexts. They sought opportunities for economic agency, and those who had more of those opportunities seemed more secure in their economic self-efficacy. Welfare reform, with its increased focus on and support for work, was not a strictly positive, efficacy-enhancing change from the standpoint of the women living under new welfare rules. Rather, as one recipient, Connie, noted, increased mandates can decrease choice and therefore decrease feelings of economic self-efficacy in those targeted by reform. She noted that when someone else, someone in the welfare office, makes decisions about your work, family life, and goals, "it still don't make you feel like you're doin' it". Welfare reform limits economic decision-making for poor mothers while at the same time criticizing these women as dependent on the system. The language of reform is that of "opportunity" and greater "personal responsibility", yet in practice, welfare continues to strictly limit allowable economic "opportunities" and in so doing, constrains women's efforts at personal accountability. Insofar as demeaning and restrictive program characteristics are allowed to persist, they will affect recipients' perceived self-efficacy – and thereby, the very economic behavior that is targeted by welfare reform.

Appendix A

Respondent Demographic Characteristics							
Pseudo/ Name	Age	Race	Number of Children (Ages)	Education Level*	MFIP Cash Assistance Status at Interview	Work Status at Interview	School Status at Interview
Anne	26	6	4 (9,7,6,3)	HS	No	Yes	No
Lisa	26	1	2 (11,6)	Assoc	No	Yes	No
Kari	26	1	1 (4)	Some College	Yes	No	No
Vivian	26	1	2 (7,3)	HS	No	Yes	No
Lynn	26	1	2 (5,3)	Some College	No	No	No
Danielle	26	1	1 (4)	HS	No	Yes	No
Damaiah	26	2	3 (6,4,2)	Some College	Yes	Yes	Yes
Jenny	26	4	2 (6,5)	Some College	No	Yes	No
Shay	25	5	3 (7,5,1)	Some College	No	Yes	No
Alicia	25	1	1 (8)	Some Tech College	No	Yes	No
Connie	25	2	4 (7,4,3,1)	Some Tech College	Yes	Yes	No
Joanne	25	1	2 (8,3)	Tech Graduate	No	Yes	No
Jen	25	1	1 (7)	Some College	No	Yes	Yes
Penny	25	1	1 (7)	Bachelor's Degree, Nursing	No	Yes	No
Angel	25	1	2 (8,6)	HS	Yes	No	No
Monica	26	1	2+; step (5,4,na;6,3)	HS	Yes	No	No
Crystal	26	1	1+ (7)	HS	No	No	No
Bridget	26	1	2 (7,5)	HS	No	Yes	No
Morgan	26	1	2 (8,1)	Bachelor's Degree, Education	No	Yes	No
Holly	26	3	1 (7)	GED	No	Yes	No
Teresa	26	1	1 (5)	Grade 11	No	Yes	No
Melissa	26	1	3+ (7,5,na)	HS	Yes	No	No
Sabrina	25	2	3 (6,5,2)	Some College	No	Yes	No
Jean	25	2	2 (9,3)	Some College	No	Yes	No
Renee	26	6	1 (4)	HS	No	Yes	No
Ashley	27	1	2 (8,7)	Some College	No	Yes	No
Augusta	25	2	1 (9)	Some College	No	Yes	Yes
Toot	25	2	1 (8)	HS	No	Yes	No
Jade	26	1	2 (7,3)	HS	No	Yes	No
Dawn	26	1	4 (7,4,2,<1)	Grade 11	Yes	No	No
Angie	26	1	1 (2)	Bachelor's Degree, Nursing	No	Yes	No

* Notes: In "Race" column, 1=white, 2=African American, 3=Hispanic, 4=Native American, 5=mixed race, and 6=race not reported. In "Number of Children (Ages)" column, "+" = pregnant; "step" = stepchildren. In "Education Level", levels are as described by respondents during open-ended interview. "HS" = High school diploma; "Tech" = technical or vocational program.

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