Qualitative approaches to the study of poverty and welfare reform: Current challenges

This conference, held in Madison in March 2005, brought together scholars from around the country who are doing state-of-the-art qualitative research, practitioners in policy evaluation firms, and IRP's own substantial group of qualitative researchers. The presenters examined four areas in which qualitative researchers have made contributions and face challenges: the mapping of complicated family networks, the documentation of livelihood strategies, the dynamics of welfare provision, and analyses of neighborhoods and local organizations.

The past ten years have seen a remarkable increase in the use of qualitative research methods to answer public policy questions about poverty. Ethnographers from the disciplines of Sociology and Anthropology have long studied people living in poverty, and many of these studies have influenced policy debates. Qualitative research methods have recently attained a new prominence in studies of poverty and welfare reform. Researchers have provided insights into how caseworkers interpret and implement welfare policy and into the dynamics of service provision. Others clarify how poor families negotiate and actively construct aspects of their neighborhood environments. Through the use of a wide range of techniques, qualitative researchers have generated an understanding of poverty as it is experienced and of the complex web of ideas and practices that surround policies designed to eradicate it.

The qualitative articles that appear in this issue represent recent work by researchers who participated in the conference.

Complicated families

Poor families, like other segments of the American population, have complicated family networks. Questions facing ethnographic researchers in this area include: What are the best strategies for documenting the kin and nonkin relationships that structure how resources and care circulate among the members of poor families? What combinations of interview-based and observational methods have proven most useful? What challenges do we still face in mapping these family relationships? How can we determine whether an extended kinship system is serving to protect its economically vulnerable members?

Sherri Lawson Clark (Pennsylvania State University) "Why Don't You Just Move? Documenting Family Networks in Small Rural Communities"

Waldo Johnson (University of Chicago) "Paternal Involvement in Poor, Urban Families: Qualitative Insights on Family Structure and Functioning"

Livelihood strategies

Questions facing researchers studying livelihood strategies include: What are the best ways to gather income and expenditure data? Are there ways to gain reliable information about these issues that are less expensive and time-consuming than a household budget study involving many visits to the family? What types of income and expenses are most difficult to document? How has welfare reform changed the kinds of questions we should be asking? What types of analysis, beyond simple income and expenditure calculations, can be used with these data?

Lisa Dodson (Boston College) "Motherwork in Wage-Poor America: You Choose Your Child Over the Job"

Margaret Nelson (Middlebury College) "Ongoing Challenges in the Exploration of Rural Livelihood Strategies"

Dynamics of welfare provision

As the philosophy behind welfare provision shifted to a welfare-to-work model in the late 1990s, so did the locations of service delivery and the types of services delivered. Questions facing researchers working in this area include: What special dilemmas concerning confidentiality face researchers who observe caseworker-client interactions? What combinations of observation and interviews work best in these contexts? How can the multiple perspectives of high-level administrators, caseworkers, and clients be accounted for in analysis?

Susan Gooden (Virginia Commonwealth University) "Observing Caseworker-Client Interactions in Qualitative Poverty Research"

Sandra Morgen (University of Oregon) "Iron Fists, Velvet Gloves and Rose-Colored Glasses: Welfare Administrators and Welfare Restructuring"

Neighborhoods and organizations

Ethnographers have done much to clarify the kinds of local organizations, networks, and neighborhood structures that provide support to individuals and the kinds of environments that offer few resources. Research on this topic is confronted by difficult questions of sampling: How do sampling strategies influence the view of neighborhood dynamics that is developed? What are the best strategies for gaining entry into neighborhoods? What are the advantages and disadvantages of network-based sampling?

Celeste Watkins-Hayes (Northwestern University) "The Baggage We Carry, The Tools We Use: Race, Class, and Gender in Institutional Ethnography"

Jeff Maskovsky (Queens College) "The Civic Life of the Poor: Accountability, Trust and Responsbility in the New Inner City"

After welfare reform: You choose your child over the job

Lisa Dodson

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"They pushed and pushed [me] to get a job. Yeah, like all of us here. But I don't see how it's going to work. I have this job, OK, but at the end of the month, there's no way I can do it [cover all bills] it doesn't go that far."

"That's not their problem, that there is your problem."

"Yeah, well I got a big problem because this don't work out and I can't feed my kids on this."

(From a transcript of a discussion with employed mothers who had previously relied on public assistance.)

For decades, low-income families in the United States used public assistance programs as an economic fallback to meet family needs because they did not have access to the resources that higher-income families use, such as savings from previous employment, spousal income, or access to family wealth.[1] After welfare reform, the use of public assistance for this purpose was greatly constricted, as employment became a primary focus. Lack of child care no longer justified absence from work, even while publicly funded child care served only a fraction of all eligible families.[2]

In this article, I argue that wage-poor mothers are guided by a version of "moral economy," the idea that a job should provide a livelihood that, above all, allows them to take care of their families.[3] When work does not meet this lowest bar, mothers choose children over jobs and by doing so, challenge contemporary U.S. norms of appropriate work behavior. In this research, which examined different types of low-wage jobs, in different areas, among diverse demographic groups, there emerged similar problems and some common strategies that reflect a critical view of society driven by "rational" economic customs. Working in retail, fast food, hospitality, cleaning, office, and health care services, mothers described ongoing conflicts between ensuring their children's care and safety and completing the requirements of their often family-unfriendly jobs. I argue that in wage-poor America, many parents reject societal norms that put a premium on devotion to work, but they do so quietly, developing alternative work norms that value care and protection of children above all else.

A mandate to choose the market over children

Mothers using welfare faced a complicated set of tasks to meet the new social mandate to go "from welfare to work" or from performing daily motherwork to performing in the low-wage labor market. The new and more stringent requirements of public aid might well mean that mothers had to leave their children in inadequate and low-quality child care or with family members who faced equally harsh economic circumstances. But, as this research reveals, many parents refused to cooperate with a market-driven society that they believed did not ensure the safety of their children.

In contemporary American society the traditional wage debate over the value of "a fair day's pay" has been transformed into a debate about the new service economy and a global "race to the bottom."[4] The gap between a federally approved minimum wage and a wage that covers basic human needs continues to grow, while the longstanding "motherhood exemption" from employment that poor mothers used to raise their children was lost with welfare reform. Poor mothers who had developed complex ways to survive through a combination of intermittent employment, social welfare programs, social networks, and informal entrepreneurial ventures saw a large part of their resources disappear.

Much has been written about how poor mothers, particularly mothers of color, make use of social networks and underground capital for survival; mixing public assistance with wages, help from family members, and informal as well as legal work. In this article I extend this discussion to illustrate how poor working mothers, faced with more restricted choices, have imported these creative habits into the workplace.

Findings from interviews and interpretive focus groups

The qualitative data used here come from three studies undertaken between 1998 and 2003 focusing on the daily lives of low-wage parents and used mixed (quantitative and qualitative) methods.[5] While the studies varied in other ways (and included other groups of informants) each included open-ended interviews with low-wage mothers, and together provide a sample size of over 300.[6]

Care and protection of children

> *"I'm always afraid for my kids."* (Mother of two school-age children, working in a wholesale store in Boston)

The most common topic brought up by respondents was the care and protection of their children. Mothers spoke of poor and unavailable child care, children who had intermittent and chronic health problems, their goals and fears for their children's futures, children's schooling needs, and the need to monitor older children's activities to keep them from "running with the wrong crowd." Nearly half of the mothers mentioned that at times their children had been (or were currently) in poor care arrangements; they spoke of overcrowding, disturbing incidents, questionable caregivers, or lack of control over their children's care needs.

Difficulty negotiating special care needs in understaffed child care arrangements was common. A mother spoke of her son's allergies: "My son has special needs … he has severe allergies to all milk and dairy and everything, and so that's part of the reason why I work these night shifts, because I don't want anybody else ... I mean, his throat closes up and everything. And so now when I ask for help [from state children's agencies] finding special needs daycare, they send me three numbers and two of them is already disconnected… I need to know that my son is going to make it through the day." While pediatricians, school nurses and teachers were pressuring mothers to attend "responsibly" to children's special needs, overburdened and low-paid child care workers might treat extra demands as nuisances.

Another concern was having younger children in mixed age settings. A Denver mother of three said, "I seen a little incident in that daycare center in the bathroom with one of the older boys. I decided in that moment [my daughter] was not going back there and whatever else happens … she was not going back." In the two weeks it took her to find another child care arrangement, she lost her job.

Fears about children included concern about what would happen if negligent or risky child care arrangements were discovered by child welfare authorities, although these fears were not usually volunteered. Mothers often described their child care arrangements as adequate but then, when discussing their key anxieties, poor child care and thus problems "with the state" emerged. On the one hand children were thought to be unsafe but on the other, hiding risks to children was regarded as critical to avoid child welfare intervention and thus to keeping families intact. In the view of some respondents, given that "no one wants to see what's going on," hiding risky child care conditions may motivate parents to collude with what they view as a general disinterest in their children.

Many mothers reported that they resorted to children's self-care; children left alone or with siblings. Mothers acknowledged that these arrangements were risky; neighbors or relatives who were supposed to be checking up on children sometimes did not—or worse, they themselves proved to be threats to the children. Children sometimes made poor decisions and didn't come home when they were supposed to or brought home friends whom mothers considered inappropriate companions.

Many respondents felt that their children were in risky care arrangements and that, as their mothers, they were responsible for ensuring children's safety, setting their motherhood obligations in opposition to job demands. The studies did not systematically explore the emotional impact of this chronic worry, but many mothers referred to being depressed and angry about their care dilemmas.

Asserting the right to parent and defying "anti-child" jobs

> *"You have to choose and what mother's choosing this job over her child?"*
>
> *"They think they got you. But I say, I will always get another job but I can't get another son."*
>
> *"I think that they made it just about impossible to be a good mom. You have to weigh everything, every move. This is going to cost you this and this is going to cost you that. You have to choose."*

As these and other comments from mothers reflect, many saw the culture of the low-wage labor market as anti-child. In response, they discussed strategies to take care of children yet also to try to keep jobs.[7] The practices varied greatly, but all relied on an underlying belief in the right of mothers to reject work rules that kept them from protecting their children. Some of these strategies were more successful than others; and some, unsurprisingly, led to job termination. In some cases respondents suggested that a supervisor might be aware of what they were doing and "look the other way"; this was considered a key attribute of a good boss. However, the most common arrangements were represented as half-hidden or entirely underground, with mothers assuming that asserting their right to care for children would be seen by their employer as a violation of the terms of work.

> *"He's coming with me and that's all there is to it."* (Boston mother of a five-year-old son)

Many mothers spoke of efforts that blurred the lines between caring for children and fulfilling job requirements. One example was designing work in a way that allowed mothers visually to monitor children while on the job. Two women described working in shopping malls specifically because children could be brought into the job "under the radar," blending in to the mass of customers. One mother worked in the food court and could easily watch her children from the station. The other worked in a large retail store enclosed by floor-to-ceiling glass windows so she could observe her children from most of the stations at which she worked.

Some mothers worked in jobs in which bringing children with them was not an option, so they would resort to "phone parenting," often surreptitiously. Many mothers reported using their own cell phones to monitor children's activities throughout their shifts, although this was against rules that required them to be completely attentive to customers or clients. Other mothers would use phones in their place of work even though this was explicitly against company policies. One mother in Boston explained that she would call her teenaged son every 30 to 40 minutes just to be sure he was staying home with the younger one. If the older boy left she wanted to be sure that only a short time passed before she was on her way home.

> *"I make my own [flex] time."* (Mother of two in Milwaukee)

Flextime has become an important approach to managing job demands and family needs across income levels and job types. But mothers in retail, service sector, and other low-wage jobs face the least flexible work circumstances and frequently have schedules that interrupt or conflict with family care. Mothers often spoke of orchestrating their schedules based on children and family needs; working evenings so they could be home to take children to school, or working nights so they could be home when their children were awake. Yet low-wage mothers admitted that this meant their children might well be alone at night. Those who were juggling work and care with a spouse might alternate shifts with caring for children. For example, a taxicab driver in Milwaukee drove around with his son asleep in the car, unbeknownst to the cab company, and dropped him off at his wife's workplace when she completed her shift.

Few mothers reported officially negotiating flexibility with employers other than exchanging shifts with coworkers, when permitted. Rather, some simply created their own "flextime" schedules. Self-styled flextime was often a bone of contention; supervisors were described as routinely interpreting mothers' efforts to meet children's health, school, or child care needs as tardiness, unexcused absenteeism, or truncated shifts. A mother working in an office in Denver argued with her supervisor about taking time off. "I call them and let them know. I call into work and let them know that I can't be in; I have a sick child. They cannot go to day care because what if the stuff that she has is infectious? Look ... I don't care about 'do I have sick time … do I have vacation time'—I got a sick child [and] I'm not coming. If you can't understand that, fire me. My child comes first."

A retail worker in Boston tried to rearrange her work schedule so she could get home within half an hour of her daughter's arrival from the after-school program. Working overtime was common in that store and often unplanned. Her supervisor claimed he couldn't accommodate her need to leave but she simply left the store, ignoring his threats. Eventually she was suspended. "He wasn't going to hear about my problems so I did what I had to do and just ignored him." She abruptly quit the job one day when she found another that had a better schedule. "I didn't owe him no 'notice' no how, no way." Defiance of what were described as anti-child work rules contributed to the considerable job turnover reported by mothers in this research.

Sometimes mothers described their self-styled flextime as a kind of appropriation of "mother time" as they considered the job to be unreasonable in confiscating so much of their attention and energy when children needed it. Jobs, one mother explained, do not support you. "Any job nowadays is not enough to live regularly. You gotta always have a little hustle plan, or a little back-up or something, something to help you. You just can't do it otherwise." In discussion groups mothers exchanged their "little back-up plans" assuming, correctly it seemed, that everyone was doing them; the trick was successfully integrating them into their jobs.

A Denver mother working as a cleaner in private homes explained that her interpretation of a responsible job was producing a clean house. She described this as a professional consultant might describe a product, the quality of which could be evaluated by the client, but the production process of which was up to her. However, some homeowners insisted that she should work a certain number of hours; they "would sit me down and say 'now, you work here four hours … right?' I say 'is the house clean?' I work fast to get home for an hour or two [to see her preschool child] before my next job …the house is clean so it's up to me how I spend that time." She pointed out that one homeowner made time in *her* workday as a lawyer to "come watch me" and monitor the cleaning hours, and argued that type of job flexibility should apply to a cleaner as well as a lawyer.

> *"Trying to keep my health..."* (A nurse's aide near Boston, mother of two sons)

A few of the mothers in this research described designing work strategies to try to stay healthy and strong, anxious that overwork would lead to illness, job loss, and an inability to care for themselves and their families. Extracting rest from work hours was not easy. A nurse's aide near Boston described working two full-time shifts every day (from 7:00 AM to 3:00 PM and then from 3:30 to 11:30 PM) to support her two sons and mother, who had moved in to care for the three-year-old. She admitted that she would take naps at the second job whenever possible since there was no supervisor on the evening shift. While she reported that in her view no resident had suffered from her rests, she considered the arrangement an unfortunate but necessary reaction to chronic exhaustion that was affecting her health. "I got to rest more and … get less stress. I support four people; everyone counts on me. I have to look out for myself and my children."

"You want me to leave my babies all alone?" (Mother of three in Boston)

Over the studies several mothers talked about using public displays and even lighthearted banter as a way to bend rules openly. One respondent in Denver reported she would say to her supervisor, "Oh I know you don't mean that. I know you wouldn't fire me just because my bus is late…" This avoided overt confrontation and presented the issue of lateness in her own terms. A mother working the day shift in a retail store that stayed open until 9:00 PM took a similar approach to avoid being asked to stay late if someone called in sick. If approached, she would cut the supervisor off quickly saying, "Now I know you aren't going to ask me to leave my babies *all alone,*" framing the impending request as an unfair thing to ask of a mother.

"She's been there so she looks the other way." (Milwaukee mother, referring to her supervisor)

Most mothers had experienced one supervisor who made an effort to be flexible and understanding. In some discussion groups their names and business addresses were passed around as treasured information. Sometimes these people were described as having personal insight into the hardships of being poor or they were identified as being understanding because of their own race, ethnicity, or single-parent status. In some descriptions they were simply seen as decent people, as a working mother in Milwaukee put it, "he told me he was going to work with me as hard as he could … so I could keep [the job]." After many months she became a postal worker, a job that created a dramatic change in her family's status and that she attributed to both her own effort and the support of this supervisor, who "should have fired me half a dozen times" based on rules alone. In cases like this, the choices that individual employers made were seen as distinct from the company rules. Still, poverty wages, rigid job structure, and little room for advancement frequently trumped individually tailored accommodations. Even with a "good boss," jobs often turned over or mothers were sanctioned for absences, losing pay and promotions.

Contemporary moral economy and family care

In this research, as in other studies, most of the respondents had a positive attitude toward having a job and interacting and socializing with other adults, as well as a desire to be earning their own way. But, caring for family emerged as the guiding force whenever children were in jeopardy. The strategies they used for survival also functioned as small protests against a wage system they considered indecent. Viewing their jobs in such a light, ordinary people may begin to regard everyday acting up as legitimate, a righteous response to an immoral economy.

I found that many mothers expected that in a moral economy wages should provide a living. But they demanded more than that. Believing that a moral economy should go beyond market terms, they asserted the right to a *moral society*. In such a society working parents will contest unfair wages, but even before that resistance starts, a parent's choices will be guided first and foremost by her child's best interests. To many mothers this means that a mother has the right to refuse the terms of the labor market, the job schedule, the hours of work, and employers' work rules if they threaten the safety of her children. A few mothers argued that contemporary work and family policy for low-income parents, particularly women of color, demands their collusion with a perceived societal lack of concern for their children. Again and again, many parents actively refused such terms.

Of course, there is a price to pay for this refusal; working-poor mothers are often described, not as devoted parents, but as deficient workers and people lacking a work ethic who are known for tardiness, absenteeism, and inability to stick to the job. Many of the participants in this research had been disciplined at work and many had lost jobs. But although this ascription of cultural deficiency and character flaws to the poor is prevalent in our culture, another social history is quietly underway. It is the narrative of those low-wage parents who regard much of contemporary work structure as anti-child, inhumane, and thus immoral, and who strive to defy this structure however they can.[8] ■

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[1]The ideas discussed in this article are developed at length in L. Dodson, "Wage Poor Mothers and Moral Economy," *Social Politics,* forthcoming.

[2]Mezey, J., R. Schumacher, M. Greenberg, J. Lombardi, and J. Hutchins, "Unfinished Agenda: Child Care for Low-Income Families Since 1996," Policy Brief, Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2002.

[3]For a full discussion of moral economy see E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* no. 50 (1971): 76–136; S. J. Oliker, "Examining Care at Welfare's End," in *Care Work: Gender, Labor and the Welfare State*, ed. M. H. Meyer (New York: Routledge, 2000).

[4]L. Mishel, J. Bernstein, and S. Allegretto, *The State of Working America,* Economic Policy Institute (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

[5]The three studies are the Welfare in Transition study, the Across the Boundaries study, and the Lower-Income Work and Family Initiative.

[6]Respondents included mothers who were making less than 200 percent of the national poverty threshold (but most made less than 150 percent) and were currently working. The large majority had used various kinds of public assistance over the previous five years. The combined sample was composed of African American (48 percent), white (24 percent), and Latino (21percent) respondents with 7 percent who identified themselves as Asian, African, Caribbean, Native American or biracial/cultural. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 48 years; most mothers reported having two or three children in their care.

[7]None of the studies included a specific question about informal or underground child-protection strategies. This construction of the dilemma facing respondents came from the data, over time. Had the inquiries placed care and protection of children at the center of the studies as most mothers did, rather than focusing on welfare reform, job efforts and economic strategies, more may have been learned.

[8]The author is grateful to Ellen Bravo and 9to5 National Organization for Working Women for their collaboration, as well as all the people of the former Radcliffe Public Policy Center.