

Chapter 1

Money and Morality

A NATION'S LAWS REFLECT A NATION'S VALUES.

The 1996 federal law reforming welfare offered not just a statement of values to the thousands of local welfare offices across the nation, it also backed this up with something much more tangible. Welfare reform came with money. Lots of it.

Every client and caseworker in the welfare office experienced this. New social workers and employment counselors were hired. New signs were posted. New workshops were set up. In Arbordale and Sunbelt City, the two welfare offices I studied to write this book, every caseworker found a new computer on her desk.* In small-town Arbordale, the whole office got a facelift: new carpets, new paint, a new conference room, new office chairs, and plush new office dividers. The reception area, completely remodeled with plants and posters and a children's play area, came to resemble the waiting room of an elite pediatrician's office more than the entrance to a state bureaucracy. Sunbelt City acquired new carpets, a new paint job, and new furniture as well. And all the public areas in that welfare office were newly decorated with images of nature's magnificence—glistening raindrops, majestic mountains, crashing waves, setting sun—captioned with inspirational phrases like “perseverance,” “seizing opportunities,” “determination,” “success.”

* Arbordale and Sunbelt City are pseudonyms for the two towns where I studied the effects of welfare reform. I gave them these fictitious names to protect all the clients and caseworkers who shared with me their experiences of reform.

As I walked the halls of the Sunbelt City welfare office back in 1998, situated in one of the poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods of a western boom town, those scenes of nature's magnificence struck me as clearly out of place. But the inspirational messages they carried nonetheless seemed an apt symbolic representation of the new legislative strategy to train poor families in "mainstream" American values. Welfare reform, Congress had decreed, would "end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage."¹ Welfare mothers, those Sunbelt signs implied, simply needed a *push*—to get them out to work, to keep them from having children they couldn't afford to raise, to get them married and safely embedded in family life. Seizing opportunities.

States were awash in federal funds. And the economy was booming in those early years of reform. Everyone was feeling it. There was change in the air. A sense of possibilities—with just a tinge of foreboding.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, the law that ended 61 years of poor families' entitlement to federal welfare benefits—the law that asserted and enforced a newly reformulated vision of the appropriate values of work and family life—provided all that additional funding as a way of demonstrating the depth of the nation's commitment to change in the welfare system. It provided state welfare programs with federal grants in amounts matching the peak years of national welfare caseloads (1992 to 1995)—even though those caseloads had everywhere since declined. This meant an average budget increase of 10 percent, before counting the tremendous amount of additional federal funding coming in for new childcare and welfare-to-work programs. Even though there was lots more money, most states did not pass it on to poor mothers in the form of larger welfare checks. In fact, only two states raised their benefit amounts, while two others lowered theirs at the inception of reform.²

Most of the welfare caseworkers I met were optimistic about the new law, at least in the first year of its enactment. "Welfare reform is the best thing that ever happened," was a phrase I heard frequently. A number of caseworkers, echoing popular sentiment, told me that "welfare had become a trap" and the clients had become "dependent." Some focused on the tax money that would be saved. Others pointed out that lots of caseworkers are mothers too, and economic necessity forces them to come to work every day and leave their children in day care, so it seemed only

fair that welfare mothers should be required to do the same. Still others emphasized that welfare reform provided caseworkers the opportunity to do what they were meant to do all along—it allowed them to “help people.” Eligibility workers in particular, who had long had the job of simply processing applications and pushing papers, told me that they had grown tired of just “passing out the checks.” Welfare reform, one such worker enthusiastically noted, offered the training and services necessary “to make our clients’ lives better, to make them better mothers, to make them more productive.” At the same time, some welfare workers, especially the social workers and employment counselors, worried about the long-term consequences of reform and wondered about how some of their clients would survive. But almost all caseworkers agreed that the old system was a problem and that the “self-sufficiency” and familial responsibility required by welfare reform were (at minimum) good ideas.

Welfare clients experienced the change from the moment they walked into the welfare office. It wasn’t just the new waiting room and the freshly refurbished offices. Things were different. The eligibility workers were still there, asking the same demanding and intrusive questions: “Do you have a savings account? How many people live in your household? What is the social security number of your child’s father?” But now there were also those newly hired or promoted social workers and employment mentors, referring clients to programs with new acronyms and talking in excited and upbeat tones about jobs and special services. They seemed helpful, solicitous. The word was out on the street and in the housing projects within a year after the law was passed—the welfare office was helping people with childcare, there were vouchers to buy gasoline for your car, they were paying for work uniforms and clothes for job interviews. Current and potential welfare recipients who were not well connected enough to hear the news on the street might see it on television—those stories of poor single mothers who had “made it” with the help of reform, pictured with their children or in their new workplaces, smiling, happy, redeemed.

But there were problems too. There was apprehension, anxiety, disgruntlement. At the federal level, some officials of the Clinton administration resigned their posts in protest of the passage of the Personal Responsibility Act, citing its punitive policies and inadequate supports. Liberal policy institutes expressed deep concern about the long-term

impact of denying a financial safety net to the poor. And children's advocates, feminists, and others pointed out that welfare reform specifically targeted women, children, and a disproportionate share of non-whites—thus adding to the hardship of those who already face widespread discrimination.³

For most welfare caseworkers and clients, I soon discovered, the problems and concerns they faced were much more immediate and seemed much more pressing. For caseworkers, the new law meant that there were lots of new rules to be learned. State procedural manuals, already incredibly unwieldy, were growing by leaps and bounds. The forms were multiplying apace. Job titles were created or changed, everyone had new duties, a vast amount of time was spent discussing the changes and how best to implement them. New computer systems weren't working properly. Caseworkers in Arbordale were being asked to input all information into two different programs in order to make certain that records were not lost. In Sunbelt City, the multimillion dollar computer system designed to accommodate the new rules and regulations of welfare reform was still not working two years after the reform was instituted. I heard jokes in the hallways that the time limits on welfare benefits would ultimately prove meaningless, since the computer systems would be unable to track recipients.

Caseworkers who had been in their jobs for over a decade were being told that they had to change their way of doing business. Previous welfare "reforms" they'd experienced seemed relatively minor compared to the massive shift brought on by the 1996 law. There were new quotas to meet, new protocols to follow. The pressure was on. Added to older concerns about "error rates," the mistakes in determining welfare eligibility and benefit amounts, were new concerns about "participation rates," welfare reform's requirement that ever-growing numbers of poor parents be placed in jobs or work-related activities. And there were those new, less flexible rules regarding the establishment of paternity, and the logistical nightmare of coordinating childcare placements. The Arbordale supervisor, Nancy, a 21-year veteran of the welfare system, worried about how her caseworkers would cope. She sent them all on a retreat that followed the logic of the "grieving process": believing that facing this kind of massive change was much like grieving for a lost loved one, the workshop illuminated the emotional process one can expect—anger, denial, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance. But the

changes just kept on coming. In Sunbelt City and Arbordale, there were major turnovers in welfare employees.

Welfare clients who had been in their “jobs” for years—many of them cycling back and forth between low-wage work and welfare-subsidized stay-at-home motherhood—were being told that they had to change *their* way of doing business.⁴ This included women who had long understood welfare as a place to go when they lost their jobs, when they desperately needed medical insurance, when their depression overwhelmed them, or illness or physical disabilities (their own, or their children’s) left them temporarily unable to work. It included mothers who found themselves on welfare when their boyfriend or husband became too abusive and just had to go, women who once made decent wages but were laid off their jobs and had run out of unemployment checks, and prostitutes who visited the welfare office when they were suffering from business woes. It also included poor, single mothers with young children and no marketable skills who had struggled for years to cobble together all available resources in order to make ends meet on their miserly welfare checks—\$354 a month for a family of three in Arbordale; \$348 for such a family in Sunbelt City.

At the inception of welfare reform, one in every eight children in the United States was supported by a welfare check.⁵ One in eight. Like all those before them, those children lived in families that were *desperately* poor. In order to be eligible for welfare benefits, applicants must prove that their household income is less than one-half of the federal standard for poverty. In 2002, that meant a mother with two kids must show an income of less than \$7,510 a year—but most prospective clients had much less than that.

All those mothers and their children faced a “new” welfare office. It was a welfare office that was much more demanding. It’s more “hassles” than ever before, welfare clients told me. Jessie, with a 13-month-old infant and a three-year-old son, found herself overwhelmed by the pace: “They’re always telling you to hurry up and go. ‘Get that form! Go to this workshop! Go over there! Come back here!’” Carey, who’d just returned to welfare after successfully juggling work and single motherhood for six years, explained, “It used to be a whole lot more peaceful,” but since reform the workers “are just too busy—there’s too much going on.” Some recipients emphasized the “huge number of ridiculous regulations” that made their lives miserable, a few even said that caseworkers

“don’t really want to help you anymore.” But most welfare mothers blamed “the system” for any problems they experienced and recognized that caseworkers were “just doing their jobs.”

More than that, those kinds of complaints often came from the very same poor mothers who told me that, overall, welfare reform was a positive change. Like caseworkers, almost all welfare recipients noticed the public enthusiasm for reform signaled by all the new programs, the influx of federal dollars, and the surge of media coverage that occurred in the first years of implementation. They clearly understood the language of “personal responsibility.” And many of them said that they thought it was about time that all those other welfare mothers they were hearing about, the ones who just “sit on their butts all day,” were reminded of their responsibilities to their children and to hard-working, tax-paying Americans. When they found themselves subjected to this pressure directly, however, it often felt improperly targeted or unfairly administered.

By the time I was completing my research, the Personal Responsibility Act along with the strong economy of the previous decade had resulted in a dramatic decline in the welfare rolls—from 12.2 million recipients in 1996, to 5.3 million in 2001. The rolls had thus been cut by more than half; yet during that same period, the number of people living in dire poverty had declined by only 15 percent. Although nearly two-thirds of former welfare clients had found some kind of work, half of those were not making wages sufficient to raise them out of poverty. The fate of those who were without jobs or welfare—over one-third of former recipients—remained largely unknown.⁶

As the economy stalled in 2001, it was evident that welfare reform had impacted poor families’ willingness to seek help as well as the government’s willingness to provide it.⁷ While 84 percent of desperately poor (welfare-eligible) families had received benefits prior to the passage of the Personal Responsibility Act, by 2001 less than half of them did. This meant that millions of parents and children in America were living on incomes lower than half the poverty level and not receiving the benefits for which they were technically eligible. No one was certain how all those families were surviving, but food banks, homeless shelters, and local charitable organizations were all reporting an increasing number of customers, and welfare offices were seeing some of the families who had left earlier, coming back again.⁸

What is welfare reform all about? Ask the caseworkers and clients who have faced it on a daily basis, and they'll say it's more rules, more hassles, more prying, a new maze of demands—fast paced, complex, confusing. Some will also say it's punitive, uncaring, or at least inadequate for the task at hand. Ask again. It's more services, more help, and has provided a much-needed change, I heard time and again, for all those welfare clients who had been dependent on the welfare system for far too long.

Is welfare reform a positive change? Though there have been signs of doubt and protest, overall, the resounding national reply has been yes. Despite the hassles, the inadequacies, the food lines, and the millions of women and children whose fate remains unknown, thus far the powerful symbolic message of welfare reform has triumphed.⁹

The Cultural Logic of Welfare Reform

A nation's laws reflect a nation's values.

Like all laws, the law reforming welfare operates as a mechanism of social control to deter would-be transgressors and to discipline those who are measured as deviant according to its standards. By punishing those who break a society's moral code and supporting those considered worthy, laws can also serve to strengthen and affirm the values prescribed.¹⁰ This is no less true of the belief that people should stop at stoplights than it is of Americans' affirmation that older citizens deserve Social Security and our collective condemnation of murder as the highest crime. Thus, the Personal Responsibility Act is much more than a set of policies aimed at managing the poor, it also provides a reflected image of American culture and reinforces a system of beliefs about how *all* of us should behave.

Of course our laws are an imperfect reflection of our values. In the case of welfare reform, for instance, it is clearly important to consider the power and financial resources of the politicians primarily responsible for designing the law relative to those who are its central targets. The content and form of laws are also constrained and shaped by the organizational practices and procedures of political and social life—the partisan bickering, the vote mongering, the committee negotiations, the language and structure of the legal system, the existing mechanisms for implementation and enforcement. And it certainly cannot be assumed

that the values legislated are fully shared, let alone regularly practiced, by all members of the society. Still, in modern democracies where politicians are charged with representing the interests of their constituents, it can be said without much doubt that there is a strong relationship between the nation's laws and more widespread cultural norms, beliefs, and values.

The purpose of this book is to explore the cultural norms, beliefs, and values embedded in welfare reform. While millions of dollars have been spent to track the outcomes of this legislation, and while scholars, politicians, and pundits have fiercely debated the effects of every policy contained within it, I want to focus attention on the broad *cultural* significance of this reform effort. What does the Personal Responsibility Act tell us about the values of our society? How have its moral prescriptions been translated into concrete practices? What message does it send to the poor and to the nation? In particular, I was interested from the start in determining just what welfare reform is saying about work and family life in American society today.

The Personal Responsibility Act can ultimately be understood as a social experiment in legislating family values and the work ethic.¹¹ All the controversy, uncertainty, and enthusiasm that attended its enactment are testimony to its experimental nature. And even now, after years of policy analysis and political celebrations of this reform's "success," there are continuing disagreements about its long-term consequences, and different audiences have interpreted its import in different ways. Yet few doubt that there were problems in the old welfare system, and nearly everyone recognizes that the reform of welfare is connected to widespread social concerns regarding the proper values of work and family life. The pages of this book are meant to tease out both the worthy principles and more disturbing realities from which those concerns have emerged.

Scores of books have been written on welfare. Scholars have rendered the history of welfare programs, charted the increasing animosity toward the welfare system and welfare recipients, illuminated the hardship of the poor, analyzed the efficacy of welfare policies from every possible angle, studied the shape of economic hierarchies, and systematically examined the gender and race inequalities reflected in and impacted by welfare laws.¹² All of this work informs my own. The most

popular studies of welfare, however, have been those that criticize the values of welfare recipients and the values perpetrated by the old welfare system.

The depth of public concern with the morality of welfare recipients and the welfare system is reflected in national opinion polls. Although those polls consistently demonstrate that Americans are in favor of providing aid to the poor and vulnerable, they also show that most Americans have been profoundly dissatisfied with the values of the old system of welfare. Over 90 percent believed that the system needed overhaul; over 80 percent favored welfare reform. In all these polls, Americans forcefully indicate that they are less concerned about the costs of welfare than they are about its effects on the morality of the people being served. When criticizing the old system, only 14 percent named costs as the central issue; over half, on the other hand, said that the old system encouraged people to “adopt the wrong lifestyle” (65 percent), discouraged people from working (80 percent), encouraged women to have more children (57 percent), and operated to keep people poor (51 percent). And over 70 percent of Americans believed that welfare recipients were both abusing the system and had become overly dependent upon it.¹³

The welfare recipients whose morality has been under attack are not just desperately poor. The vast majority of adult welfare clients—over 90 percent—are *mothers*. Most of these women are raising their children alone: just 7 percent of welfare cases are two-parent households; an even smaller percentage are single-parent households headed by men. Black and Hispanic Americans are also overrepresented on the welfare rolls, largely because they are more likely than whites to be poor: 38 percent of welfare recipients are black, 24.5 percent Hispanics, and 30 percent white. But the real face of a welfare recipient is the face of a child—children outnumber adults on the rolls by a ratio of more than two to one.¹⁴ As anyone who has ever spent time in a welfare office knows, it is a world of women, children, and diversity.

There is no question that the old system that served these poor families suffered from multiple problems. Its benefits were so dismally low that almost all recipients had to come up with additional sources of help just to cover the cost of their most basic needs. Its policies operated to make it all the more difficult to climb out of poverty, and its recipients were systematically stigmatized. Further, despite the crucial importance of paid work and family ties in American culture, the old welfare system

did very little to help recipients manage employment, to subsidize child-care, or to include poor fathers.

Conservative and liberal scholars have argued over whether money or morality was at the root of the problems involved. The conservative critics of welfare (including Charles Murray, George Gilder, and Lawrence Mead) offered the primary fuel for negative public sentiment. They accused welfare recipients of being lazy, promiscuous, and pathologically dependent, and they argued that the welfare system encouraged those bad values with overly generous benefits and “permissive” policies that provided incentives for family dysfunction and nonwork. According to these thinkers, the welfare system thereby not only perpetuated poverty but, by promoting laziness and single parenting, actually caused it to increase.

Liberal scholars (including Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein, William Julius Wilson, Sheldon Danzinger, and Kathleen Mullan Harris) have agreed that there were problems in the old welfare system and among the poor. But they have consistently argued that any problems of morality that existed among poor families were primarily the result, rather than the cause, of economic hardship.¹⁵ Hence, while conservatives claimed that the value-orientation of the welfare system and the welfare poor needed overhaul, liberals emphasized that welfare policy needed to focus on providing better economic supports for the poor. These are critical issues. Yet, whether the problems are framed as moral or economic, the solutions are always *both* moral and economic—they require decisions regarding the extent to which and the methods by which the nation will respond to its poorest citizens.

In this book, I join the conservative critics of welfare in focusing squarely on the question of values. In this case, however, I intend to not only scrutinize the allegedly “bad” values of the poor, but also to critically examine the allegedly “mainstream” values embedded in the newly reorganized welfare system. There are, in fact, fundamental tensions in the values set forth by the Personal Responsibility Act, and there is widespread disagreement regarding just what vision of the good society it should serve.

At the heart of welfare reform is a debate over whether individual self-sufficiency should be our nation’s central goal or whether, for women at least, the maintenance of “traditional” family values should remain central. This controversy, in its broader and more subtle forms,

extends well beyond disagreements over welfare policy. It speaks to foundational American ideals of independence and commitment to others, and it underlines just how precarious those ideals have become in the age of fragile families, social mistrust, rising economic inequalities, and an unstable global marketplace. Those tensions also reflect more immediate practical and moral dilemmas faced by vast numbers of Americans today as they struggle to both support their families financially and to care for their children and one another.

Welfare reform is one response to those problems. Although it offers the symbolic appearance of a solution to serious social concerns, its exclusionary assumptions, its rigid regulations, and its narrowly drawn and opposing images of the proper approach to work and family life raise many questions regarding whether this law can truly resolve the problems of the poor families it targets, and whether it actually offers a positive and valuable response to the cultural disagreements and practical troubles of the nation. With these issues in mind, my aim is to document the Personal Responsibility Act as it is played out in the language of policy, the procedures of welfare offices, and the lives of the millions of mothers and children who receive welfare.

The story begins like this.

Work, the Family, and Welfare

Welfare policy in the United States has long been closely connected to the nation's cultural vision of the appropriate commitment to work. Nineteenth-century poor laws established the moral distinction between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor—providing aid to those who were out of work through no fault of their own and punishing the "intemperate," "immoral," "idle" undeserving with placement in poorhouses, miserly aid, and forced work.¹⁶ From the start there were concerns about the (innocent) children of the undeserving poor, and some provisions were established to place such children in good homes where they could be properly cared for and trained as workers. But these anxieties regarding children did not, at first, translate into concern for protecting mothers or for maintaining family cohesion.

What we have come to understand as "welfare" today, however, was firmly connected to our values regarding family life from its inception. Its roots are in early twentieth-century state laws providing Mother's

Pensions, specifically aimed at protecting widows so that they might care for their children at home.¹⁷ These laws were expanded and made more inclusive when New Deal legislation instituted the program of Aid to Dependent Children in 1935.

The 1935 federal law establishing welfare followed directly from the American family ideal of a breadwinning husband and a domestic wife—if the husband was absent, the state would step in to take his place in the support of mother and children. The history of welfare makes it clear that, in practice, aid was denied to many women who were understood as not “virtuous” enough to be worthy of the family ideal.¹⁸ Yet the cultural message clearly asserted that *good* women should stay at home with their children. And by the late 1960s, increasing numbers of poor single mothers were using welfare for precisely the purposes for which it was originally intended—they were staying at home to care for their young children, just as the ideal of appropriate family life prescribed.

The ensuing rise in the welfare rolls that began in the 1960s and continued into the 1990s was a major propellant for the Personal Responsibility Act, and was also directly connected to a broad range of changes in American society, including the feminization of poverty, the increase in single parenting, and the changing shape of the workforce and economy. The size of the welfare rolls was also impacted by the 1960s focus on aid to the poor. That decade was marked by the War on Poverty, the formation of the National Welfare Rights Organization, a series of court challenges and legislative changes that equalized the giving of aid, and the creation of the federal poverty programs of food stamps and Medicaid. But even at that moment in history, when the nation seemed collectively dedicated to providing support for the poor and vulnerable, there was fierce disagreement about the best approach. And the rise of the welfare rolls, alongside the continuing rise in single parenting, caused increasing concern among politicians and the public.¹⁹

Numerous successive welfare “reforms” were enacted in hopes of stemming the tide. State welfare programs began decreasing their benefit amounts to make welfare less attractive. New federal rules were enacted throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Welfare mothers were encouraged to get training and go to work, a limited number of two-parent families were allowed to receive welfare benefits under stringent criteria, and the system of child support enforcement was linked to welfare. Relative to the changes wrought by the Personal Responsibility Act, how-

ever, these reforms were mere tinkering, leaving lots of loopholes and exemptions. Less than 10 percent of welfare recipients actually participated in the work programs by the 1990s, very few two-parent families qualified for aid, and only a small proportion of welfare clients actually received any child support. And throughout all these changes, the national guarantee of a familial safety net remained solidly in place.²⁰

Both the cultural logic and the practical reality of welfare changed dramatically with the passage of the 1996 legislation renaming welfare as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). The Personal Responsibility Act firmly established the absolute demand that mothers participate in the paid labor force, offering no exceptions to the more “virtuous” or more vulnerable women among them. The only indication of concern for the fate of (“innocent”) children within it was the provision of temporary subsidies for paid childcare. Most significantly, by ending the entitlement to welfare benefits, this law suggested that the nation no longer believed that women and children deserved any form of special protection.

From the moment I recognized this logic, it seemed to me a rather one-sided reflection of the nation’s values. Many people, after all, still think that children, at least, deserve some form of protection. And welfare reform’s demand that mothers take paying jobs occurs at a time when society as a whole is still expressing tremendous ambivalence regarding the labor force participation of mothers. Although 73 percent of mothers are now employed, and 59 percent of women with infants now work for pay, many Americans are still worried about the consequences of this change.²¹ In fact, the very same politicians who signed the law reforming welfare have continued to busily espouse the “family values” that had previously relied on women staying at home to maintain the warm hearth, provide for the emotional sustenance of family members, and shore up family ties. Similarly, scholars of family life continue to debate the problems of paid child care, women’s second shift, the time crunch at home, and the declining commitment to family and children said to be signaled by rising rates of divorce and single parenthood.²² The tensions between the values of home and the values of paid work are apparent in these debates. But the most widely hailed message sent by welfare reform appears straightforward—all mothers must be prepared to leave the home to find paying jobs that will support themselves and their children.

From this perspective, welfare reform might be said to represent the triumph of classical liberal individualism. That is, women are no longer seen as the dependents of men, properly embedded in family life. Instead, women are treated as genderless individuals and, just like men, they are understood as competent, rational, independent beings who can be held responsible for their own lives and their own breadwinning. Similarly, welfare reform could be interpreted as representing the success of liberal feminist goals in constructing a new vision of family life. Earlier welfare policies followed the logic of difference feminism, assuming that mothers should stay at home and practice a distinctively female ethic of nurturing care. The work requirements of welfare reform, on the other hand, seem to signal the expectation that women can and should join men in the public sphere of paid work, operating according to an individualistic ethic of “personal responsibility.”²³

All welfare mothers are now required to work, including those with infants and toddlers.²⁴ From the moment they enter the welfare office, they must be looking for a job, training for a job, or in a job. If they can't find a paying job or suitable short-term training, they are assigned to work full-time for a state-appointed agency in return for their welfare checks. But the provision of welfare reform that gives work requirements real teeth, and the provision that is in some respects even more harsh than nineteenth-century policies, is the federal time limits on benefits. After five years, all welfare recipients are expected to be self-sufficient—and no matter how destitute they might be, they will remain ineligible to receive welfare assistance for the rest of their lives.²⁵ Many states have chosen even shorter time limits, as is true of Arbordale and Sunbelt City. In both, after two years of aid, single mothers are barred from welfare receipt for two years; when that period is complete, they may return to the welfare office and repeat the cycle until their five-year limit is reached.

Given the power of the work requirements and the virtually airtight enforcement mechanism of time limits, should we understand the law as saying that male breadwinners are a thing of the past, and women should be seen as perfectly able to care for themselves and their children on their own? Has the cultural championing of individualism won out over the concern for children? Is the old family ideal dead?

As it turns out, the promotion of perfected individual self-reliance is not the only message sent by reform. Although the attention paid to

state efforts at placing welfare recipients in jobs has led many to believe that work requirements are the centerpiece of this legislation, a reading of the Personal Responsibility Act makes it appear that the intent of lawmakers was to champion family values above all else. It begins, “*Marriage is the foundation of a successful society. Marriage is an essential institution of a successful society which promotes the interests of children. Promotion of responsible fatherhood and motherhood is integral to successful child rearing and the well-being of children.*”²⁶

The law goes on to describe the problems of teenage pregnancy, out-of-wedlock births, children raised in single-parent homes, and fathers who fail to pay child support. Indeed, a reading of this statement of the law’s intent would lead one to believe that the problem of poverty itself is the direct result of failures to live up to the family ideal. Congress emphasizes the close connection between the rising number of births to unmarried women and the growing number of people receiving welfare benefits. We are told that these single-parent homes not only create dependence on welfare, they also foster higher rates of violent crime and produce children with low cognitive skills, lower educational aspirations, and a greater likelihood of becoming teen parents—who will then produce children prone to repeat the cycle and foster ever-higher rates of crime, poor educational attainment, teen pregnancy, and welfare receipt.

These problems, Congress proclaims, are responsible for “a crisis in our Nation.” To solve this crisis, the Act sets forth the following four goals:

- 1) provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives;
- 2) end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;
- 3) prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and
- 4) encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.²⁷

It should be noted that only one of these goals is directed at paid work. And even in this case it is set alongside marriage as one of the two proper paths leading away from welfare.

Read in this way, work requirements can be understood as a method of enforcing family values through their deterrent effect—as measures meant to discourage women from choosing divorce or single parenthood.²⁸ Single mothers on welfare are effectively punished for having children out of wedlock or for getting divorced. The punishment they face is being forced to manage on their own with low-wage work. But in this argument, the punishment of current welfare mothers is less important than the training of other poor, working-class, and middle-class women who, when they contemplate divorce or out-of-wedlock child-bearing, will learn to think twice before they decide to raise children without the help of men. Hence, removing the safety net and forcing welfare mothers to work is actually a way to reinforce all women's proper commitment to marriage and family.²⁹

This, the “family values” version of welfare reform, is also the basis for a second set of edicts contained in the Personal Responsibility Act. Congress offers, for instance, financial incentives to states for the development and promotion of programs of sexual abstinence education. It calls on the nation to “aggressively” enforce statutory rape laws. Our lawmakers insist that teenage welfare mothers live in adult-supervised arrangements in order to receive benefits. And above all, this version of welfare reform absolutely requires that all welfare mothers establish the identity of their children's fathers and work with child-support enforcement officials in demanding that fathers provide financial support.³⁰ These edicts are designed not only to regulate the reproductive behavior of poor men and women but also to convince men everywhere that if they should consider divorce or unwed parenting, they will be held responsible for the financial support of their progeny—and should therefore reassess their behavior and their options.

How, then, are we to interpret the message of welfare reform? Are marriage and family commitment the central concern? Or is the importance of individual self-sufficiency so great that the care of children can take a back seat to mothers' paid work? Are we reasserting the portrait of a nurturing mom and a breadwinning husband, or are we pressing for a world full of breadwinners?

There are, in fact, two distinct (and contradictory) visions of work and family life embedded in this legislation. For shorthand purposes (and to emphasize the disjunction between them), I have come to call these two visions the Work Plan and the Family Plan. In the Work Plan,

work requirements are a way of *rehabilitating* mothers, transforming women who would otherwise “merely” stay at home and care for their children into women who are self-sufficient, independent, productive members of society. The Family Plan, on the other hand, uses work requirements as a way of *punishing* mothers for their failure to get married and stay married. In the Work Plan we offer women lots of temporary subsidies, for childcare, transportation, and training, to make it possible for them to climb a career ladder that will allow them to support themselves and, presumably, their children. No longer dependent on men or the state, these women will make their own choices about marriage and children. According to the Family Plan, work requirements will teach women a lesson; they’ll come to know better than to get divorced or to have children out of wedlock. They will learn that their duty is to control their fertility, to get married, to stay married, and to dedicate themselves to the care of others.

If the Work Plan follows the logic of classical liberal individualism, imagining all women and men as equally competent individuals capable of competing in the market, achieving self-sufficiency, and utilizing market-based solutions to the problem of caring for children, then the Family Plan can be said to follow the logic of a certain form of classical conservatism. According to this model, systems of social connection, obligation, and commitment, epitomized by the operations of traditional family life, are essential to the maintenance of social order. Also crucial to social stability is the requirement that people conform to their proper roles within the social hierarchy.³¹ Hence, the Family Plan can solve the “problem” of where children fit by relying on an image of family life where women are subservient nurturers and men are financially successful heads of households.

As you might have noticed, however, welfare reform represents something more than a simple disagreement between liberals and conservatives. Conservatives are certainly not the only ones who worry about the fate of children and community and familial ties, and liberals are not the only ones who think that people should be able to achieve self-sufficiency. The two competing visions embedded in welfare reform are directly connected to a much broader set of cultural dichotomies that haunt us all in our attempts to construct a shared vision of the good society—independence and dependence, paid work and caregiving, competitive self-interest and obligations to others, the value

of the work ethic and financial success versus the value of personal connection, familial bonding, and community ties. These cultural oppositions also inform debates between liberals and communitarians regarding the primacy of individual freedom versus the centrality of moral community, and arguments among feminists over whether to stress women's independence or valorize women's caregiving. These oppositions also mirror the uncertainties we find in public concern over women's labor force participation, the costs and quality of childcare, the time pressures faced by dual-earner couples, and the problems of divorce and single parenting. And the tensions in the Work and Family Plans are tightly connected to a whole series of issues often treated as the result of declining family and community values—including latchkey kids, unsupervised teens, deadbeat dads, abortion, gang violence, drug abuse, rising rates of crime, declining civic engagement, and ever-lower levels of social trust.³²

As a reflection of our nation's values, welfare reform thus represents a powerful tug-of-war taking place in a society that is uncertain about the proper path. Rather than offering a single, coherent, and inclusive solution to problems of work and family life today, welfare reform offers us two narrow and opposing visions. It thereby simultaneously promises to solve all our problems, and promises to solve none of them.

Higher Values, Multiple Meanings, Cultural Distortions, and the Politics of Exclusion

Part of the reason that welfare reform has been so widely affirmed is surely because its two competing messages are able to satisfy two distinct constituencies. Depending upon one's angle of vision, welfare reform can be seen as a valorization of independence, self-sufficiency, and the work ethic, as well as the promotion of a certain form of gender equality. On the other hand, it can serve as a condemnation of single parenting, a codification of the appropriate preeminence of lasting family ties and the commitment to others, and a reaffirmation that women's place is in the home.

Further, it is certainly no accident that the primary guinea pigs in this national experiment in family values and the work ethic are a group of social subordinates—overwhelmingly women, disproportionately non-white, single parents, and of course, very poor. Politicians and welfare

critics have labeled them “wolves,” “alligators,” “reckless breeders,” and “welfare queens.”³³ They have become throwaway people. And those powerful stereotypes have made them readily identifiable symbols of societal failures in family and work life.

But there is more. The popularity of welfare reform has also followed from its ability to satisfy even more numerous constituencies, at the same time it arose from a much more widely shared set of higher moral ideals.

If you scrub off all the controversy and contradiction of welfare reform, at bottom you can find a set of honorable moral principles. The worthy ideals implicitly championed by this reform represent collective and long-standing commitments to the values of independence, productivity, conscientious citizenship, family togetherness, social connection, community, and the well-being of children.³⁴ There is nothing *inherently* contradictory in these principles. The reasons they emerge as contradictory and even punitive relative to welfare reform is that this legislation takes place in the context of massive changes in family and work life, deepening levels of social distrust, rising social inequalities, and an increasingly competitive and global capitalist marketplace. In a connected way, these higher principles were refashioned and debased through processes of cultural distortion and exclusion—processes that have translated social and moral complexity into simplified slogans and stereotypes that obscure the more difficult dilemmas and the more disturbing social inequities involved.³⁵

By the time our nation’s ideals were codified into the law reforming welfare, they had been passed through so many hands and been sifted through so many (often conflicting) interests, beliefs, and experiences that they were transformed almost beyond recognition. They had been tossed about by politicians seeking votes, policymakers hoping that their bright ideas would win out over others, states trying to trim their budgets, and scholars and pundits who sell books and make it big on the lecture circuit by providing simple, provocative, one-sided portraits of complex issues.

The values of independence, citizenship, connection, and community were similarly reinterpreted by a populace that includes members of the working and middle classes who have become increasingly worried about their chances of achieving or sustaining the American dream. Their concerns may differ depending on where they sit in the class hier-

archy, but Americans have good reason to be worried about global competition, trade wars, corporate downsizing, the technological revolution, declining real wages, rising home prices, the volatile stock market, the decline of trade unions, a precarious Social Security system, and the rising split between educated professionals and less-educated blue-collar and service workers, just to name a few.³⁶ When it comes to welfare reform, these worries get funneled into the condemnation of *those* people who are spending the nation's tax dollars while avoiding work and remaining apparently immune from all the economic woes faced by the rest of the country.

The principles of independence and commitment also took on different meanings for the growing numbers of working mothers who are struggling to juggle the demands of work and home. That welfare reform is a response to the widespread employment of mothers is a fact that is hard to miss. Working mothers today face not only glass ceilings, a sex-segregated labor force, and the “mommy track,” they also face intense demands on their time and energy, especially with regard to child-rearing.³⁷ If mothers choose to stay at home to avoid such pressures, like welfare recipients, they are often devalued and dismissed and their work at home is treated as inconsequential. Nearly all women recognize this. And like some mothers who work in the welfare offices of Arbordale and Sunbelt City, many working mothers imagine that welfare recipients have been spared from the intense demands and difficult choices they face. To many women, this seems unfair.

Long-standing national values took on a distinct significance for the many employers who have had trouble finding and keeping workers for the lowest paid jobs. Such employers couldn't help noticing the benefits of welfare reform. Work requirements and time limits throw millions of desperate women into the labor market and put them in a position where they must accept low wages, the most menial work, the poorest hours, with no benefits, and little flexibility. Thus, low-wage employers gain not only the benefit of this large pool of “eager” new workers, they arguably also gain greater control over their existing workers—who must now fear that if they don't accept their current working conditions, they can be replaced by former welfare recipients.³⁸

A further, and central, source of exclusionary images of welfare mothers is persistent racial tensions and continuing discrimination against nonwhite and immigrant groups. Race is so powerful in shaping

negative images of welfare recipients that when Charles Murray wrote his famous book attacking the welfare system, *Losing Ground*, he focused almost exclusively on blacks—ignoring the other two-thirds of welfare recipients. When Ronald Reagan immortalized the image of a Cadillac-driving “welfare queen,” it was not by chance that the story of fraud he chose to (grossly) exaggerate was a story of a black woman. In *The Color of Welfare*, sociologist Jill Quadagno forcefully argues that a central reason that U.S. welfare policies have long been less generous and inclusive than those of other Western industrial nations is precisely because of this country’s history of racism. And as Martin Gilens demonstrates in *Why Americans Hate Welfare*, the racial coding of welfare recipients shows up in opinion polls as a primary feature of Americans’ disdain for the welfare system.³⁹ Most people recognize that welfare has come to be associated with blacks, even though they have never been a majority of welfare recipients. Laying all the problems associated with poverty at their doorstep allows many people to feel smugly superior, and it also helps to perpetuate the cultural and economic underpinnings of racial inequality.

Finally, the process of distortion continues as our higher moral principles are continually tattered and corrupted by all these groups—that is, all of us—through the propagation of stereotypes and mythologies and slogans that speak to our particular interests and concerns and offer neat and tidy responses to complicated social problems.

The Work and Family Plans of welfare reform are both examples of distortion and exclusion. In the Work Plan, values of independence and productivity, once grounded in ideals of democratic citizenship and notions of collective progress, are reduced to a vision of calculating, self-interested individuals competing in the “free” market. This image provides no answer to who will care for the children, and leaves us to wonder just how we will care for one another or how we might be convinced to work together to build a better society. It implicitly suggests that we conceptualize children as relatively meaningless appendages and view our fellow citizens as merely potential rivals in the quest for success. And it ultimately excludes from full social membership all those people who fail to achieve middle-class economic stability.

The Family Plan, on the other hand, implicitly transforms the values of community ties and commitment to others—values that have long served to temper the rampant self-interest described in the work

model—with an extremely narrow and rigid vision of the “traditional” family. It thus excludes all those people whose families diverge from the 1950s Leave-It-to-Beaver model. And it implies that we simply turn back the clock on women’s movement into the paid labor force, failing to notice, apparently, that this movement is not only connected to the changing shape of the contemporary family but has also been crucial to women’s greater independence and to their claim to productive social membership.

By the time our worthy moral principles have made it through state policymakers and local welfare offices into the lives of welfare clients, they have taken further twists and turns, as I will show. Enforced at the local level, our collective commitment to healthy family life can, for instance, have the effect of pressuring women to enter into or maintain relationships with physically abusive, drug-abusing, or law-breaking men. Independence, in this context, often looks like a job on the graveyard shift at Burger King or Dunkin’ Donuts, a job that forces you to spend half your wages on substandard childcare and leaves you unable to buy winter coats for the kids.

A look at the process through which these more disturbing outcomes emerge and attention to the larger practical and cultural consequences that follow from them will, I hope, provide some basis for reconsidering the deeper meaning and importance of those original principles and for reevaluating the social changes and the political, economic, and cultural mechanisms that have distorted them.

Entering the World of Welfare

For three years, from December 1997 to January 2001, I visited welfare offices and the homes of welfare clients. Most of my time was spent in and around two welfare offices—one in a medium-size town in the Southeast I call Arbordale, another in a large metropolitan area in the West that I call Sunbelt City. I arrived in both these offices when case-workers and clients were still busy acquainting themselves with the new rules and procedures for the reform of welfare: Arbordale’s official start date for implementation was June of 1997; Sunbelt’s was December of that year. Given that both states established a two-year time limit on the receipt of welfare benefits—allowing two years on, two years off, two years on, until recipients reached the federal five-year limit—I was able

to witness the first full cycle of reform, watching the first groups of welfare families experience reform and observing the first groups as they hit their time limits.

During my time in Sunbelt City and Arbordale, I interviewed welfare caseworkers at all levels, I went to staff meetings, and I watched caseworkers carry out the series of routine interactions with welfare clients that fill much of their days. I went to the workshops that clients are required to attend; I read through all the forms that they are required to fill out. I spent hours hanging out in waiting rooms and observing the goings-on. I visited the homes of welfare mothers and interviewed them there. And I spent a lot of time in housing projects. In the end, I accumulated hundreds of pages of field notes, mountains of welfare forms and welfare manuals, and more than a thousand pages of transcriptions from the nearly 90 interactions and interviews that I had tape-recorded. I logged in over 600 hours of fieldwork, and I spent time with over 50 caseworkers and about 130 welfare mothers.⁴⁰ Taken together, my interviews, ethnographic research, and analysis of welfare policy provide a portrait of welfare reform as it is played out at the local level.

The Arbordale welfare office is located on two upper floors of a government building in the downtown area of a quaint, historic city that retains the feel of a small-town community, even though its population of over 100,000 marks it as an average-size city. The waiting room, as I've suggested, is quite plush, and nearly half the caseworkers' offices have views of the city. Although situations arise in this office that prompt concern and harried activity, and although there is always enough work to keep the employees busy, overall, the Arbordale welfare office has a relaxed and comfortable air. The receptionist has been at her job for years and greets many welfare clients by name. The waiting room is rarely full, and when it is, one can overhear conversations between clients who know each other and witness reunions of old friends and extended family members.

The only indication that dangerous situations are a concern in the Arbordale welfare office is the guard who polices the downstairs entrance and the locked doors between the welfare waiting room and the workers' offices that must be opened using a keypad, the combination of which is known only by caseworkers. Of course there are other clues that this office serves the poor, including, as I'll explain, a number of

signs outlining the rules and regulations of welfare reform. Yet, in general, the Arbordale office mimics the style of the town in which it is located, offering the feel of community and of a place where people know and trust one another.

The Sunbelt City welfare office, on the other hand, sits in the middle of an urban strip mall, surrounded by parking lots, discount stores, a beauty parlor, and fast-food restaurants. It is adjacent to a vast and run-down housing project. The streets of that project are considered so dangerous that one welfare mother residing there told me “even the police are afraid to come here.” The Sunbelt welfare office is fortified against the dangers of its neighborhood by barred windows, locking gates, and an armed guard who sits in the reception area underneath a large sign warning clients that knives and firearms are prohibited within the building.

Despite the office remodeling that came with welfare reform’s influx of federal dollars, the Sunbelt City welfare office retains the feel of a cold and impersonal state bureaucracy that serves the disadvantaged. It’s not just the gates, the guard, and the warning signs, or even the orange plastic waiting room chairs and the floors of dirty-gray institutional linoleum tile. It’s also the overcrowded conditions, the signs commanding “Wait Here,” “Take a Number for Service,” and “Authorized Personnel Only,” and the voices coming over the intercom announcing the number of the next customer to be served or calling on this or that caseworker. This office additionally has something of a prisonlike feel engendered by the seemingly endless rows of locking doors, each with its own number, leading into the tiny rooms where caseworkers conduct eligibility interviews with welfare clients. In all these ways—its impersonality, its overcrowding, its image of impending danger, and its treatment of people as mere “numbers”—the Sunbelt City welfare office seems to reflect the nameless, faceless, “suspect” status of the urban poor.

Overall, the welfare offices in Arbordale and Sunbelt City are both very peculiar and very average. That is, they simultaneously represent the diversity that one finds in welfare offices across the nation and, taken together, they provide something close to a vision of the “typical” operations of welfare offices under reform. I will tell you more about them as the story unfolds, but a few more introductory facts are in order.

The Personal Responsibility Act offered wide discretion to states in the enactment of welfare reform and in the use of welfare money. There are, therefore, notable differences in the policies of Arbordale and Sunbelt City. Arbordale's home state, for instance, has a "family cap" provision that disallows welfare benefits to children born when their mothers are already receiving aid; Sunbelt City's state does not. Sunbelt's state has a provision to identify (and potentially protect) welfare mothers who are the victims of domestic violence; Arbordale's state does not. Like most states, both of these permit mothers with infants to be temporarily exempt from the work requirements: Arbordale allows mothers to stay at home when their children are younger than 18 months old (a very generous provision relative to most states); Sunbelt City offers new mothers a lifetime maximum of 12 months of work exemption. Also mimicking wide variations among states, Arbordale and Sunbelt differ in the extent to which they are willing to use the federal "hardship exemption" that allows them to spare 20 percent of their cases from welfare time limits: Sunbelt City maximizes its use of these exemptions; Arbordale exempts almost no one.⁴¹

Both Arbordale's and Sunbelt's home states have, as noted, instituted two-year time limits on welfare, placing them among the 22 states that have similarly chosen shortened time limits.⁴² Although some states are allowing welfare clients the federal maximum of one year of training toward work and some states are relatively flexible in the speed with which they require their clients to get jobs, both Arbordale and Sunbelt City have instituted "work first" policies that emphasize the expedient placement of recipients in whatever jobs are available.⁴³ Relative to other states in the nation, neither Arbordale nor Sunbelt is particularly generous or particularly miserly in its welfare benefit amounts or in the number of programs they have instituted to aid welfare families.

Both Arbordale and Sunbelt City are located in states with very low unemployment rates, and both have a relatively low cost of living. In 1999, Arbordale was profiled in a national newspaper article for its extraordinarily low unemployment rate, though the report went on to emphasize that most of the jobs available were in high-tech, professional-level fields (and it was thus very unlikely that they would be filled by former welfare recipients). Compared to many cities in the nation, Sunbelt City tends to have higher paying jobs in the unskilled service sector (\$7 to \$9 an hour), thanks to a booming tourist economy and a

good proportion of wealthy local residents. Sunbelt is also located in a state with a number of strong unions, while Arbordale sits in an anti-union, “right-to-work” state.

Overall, the low unemployment rates and cost of living in these states mean that welfare families in both Arbordale and Sunbelt City are much better off than those in New York City, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, St. Louis, and many of the major cities of the Northeast and poor rural areas of the South.⁴⁴ Neither state has made the national news for its welfare program; neither has been named as particularly unique, innovative, or successful (although Arbordale’s state did receive one of many federal “high performance” bonuses for its work in getting people off the welfare rolls). These states are not especially noteworthy for their size or for great inequalities of wealth or skewed family values within them. Although all states’ welfare programs are unique, Sunbelt City and Arbordale sit somewhere in the mid-range on most measures.

During my years of watching welfare reform unfold in these two locales, I imagined my work as akin to observing a morality play on family values and the work ethic. But this was no made-for-television movie nor *Survivor* nor *Real TV*. So I spent a lot of time worrying about the consequences of what I saw. I was sometimes hopeful, sometimes amused, sometimes elated, but more often angry, depressed, frustrated, or confused. Of course I will try to persuade you to think about these matters in the same way that I do, but I will also try my best to be fair, and honest, and thorough, and to provide you with enough information to make sense of all this in your own terms. Throughout, my emphasis will be on uncovering the implicit and explicit message of welfare reform regarding work and family, dependence and independence, and competitive individualism and commitment to others.

Documenting the Experiment

The chapters that follow offer a journey into the world of welfare. I begin by taking you inside the welfare office. Chapter 2 examines the enforcement of the work ethic in this context, Chapter 3 looks at how the Personal Responsibility Act has been used to promote the congressional image of proper family life, and Chapter 4 considers the emerging responses of clients and caseworkers to these massive changes in the welfare system.

At ground level, the edicts of the Personal Responsibility Act meet up with the organizational framework of the welfare office and are translated into a set of rigid rules and routine procedures. These rules and procedures are sifted, in turn, through the practical concerns and moral ideals of welfare caseworkers. This complex mix of rules, values, and concerns then confronts the complicated lives of poor mothers and their children. Taken together, these realities make the outcomes of reform far less straightforward than policymakers or statistical renderings might lead one to believe. At the same time, an analysis of this process provides a vivid portrait of the practical tensions and moral dilemmas produced by this reform effort. Although caseworkers and clients face these dilemmas in a setting that is far removed from the daily lives of most Americans, the problems they encounter are, as you will see, ultimately familiar not only to the poor but also, in one form or another, to the majority of people in American society today.

The multiple patterns in the lives of welfare clients are the focus of Chapters 5 through 7. Welfare mothers, as I've noted, have been demonized for their promiscuity, their immaturity, their dependence, and their manipulative behavior. By those who are more sympathetic, on the other hand, welfare mothers have been portrayed as noble heroes or innocent victims.⁴⁵ Both these portraits are, in some respects, incomplete and inaccurate. In these chapters I'll tell you about women who are noble, women who are manipulative or unethical, women whom my students would describe as "clueless," and women whose moral standards and practices make many of my co-workers, friends, and relations look relatively shallow, self-serving, and lazy.

Welfare mothers weren't flown in from Mars, and they did not emerge fully formed from their mothers' wombs. Their lives, like our lives, are shaped by their experiences and by the economic, cultural, and political structures of this society. Chapter 5 explores the social and historical context of their lives, the roots of the feminization of poverty, the rise of single parenthood, and the exclusionary stereotypes that have made these mothers the contemporary targets of mistrust and disdain. Chapter 6 provides portraits of the lives of welfare mothers—portraits that tell a story of widespread patterns in American life today and contain a vision of the often-torturous pathway to single mothering, the difficulties in male-female relations, the pressures of low-wage work, and the hardships involved in raising children alone. Chapter 7 contin-

ues this tale by focusing specifically on the question of whether there is such a thing as a “culture of poverty” and pondering whether some welfare mothers are stuck in it, and whether we could or should extract them from it.

The concluding chapter considers the “success” of this experiment in family values and the work ethic. I examine the decline of the welfare rolls in the late 1990s and explain what we have actually witnessed and why many observers have already been celebrating. Welfare reform has not been without victories. It has offered helpful practical support as well as genuine hope to a large number of welfare families. On balance, however, its successes have been outweighed by its defeats. And its moral and economic costs, in the long run, will be paid not just by the poor, but by all of us.

As a reflection of the nation’s values, welfare reform ultimately operates to bury rather than solve the tensions involved in the creation of a balanced and egalitarian vision of the good society. The burying of these tensions is accomplished, in part, through the two central points on which policymakers implicitly agreed. First, ignored are the structured features of our economic, political, and cultural systems that are responsible for the large number of women and children living in poverty and the historically high levels of single parenting, divorce, and unwed childbearing. Instead, these phenomena are treated as if they are solely the result of personal choices and individual pathologies. Second, at the same time policymakers are actively engaged in legislating moral prescriptions for work and family life, they treat the work of raising children, the issues of wages and working conditions, and the problems of gender and race inequality as “private” concerns, appropriately negotiated by individuals in isolation. Our nation’s leaders thus make use of multiple meanings of “private” in order to avoid the very public and collective necessity for grappling with the tensions in the ideals of egalitarian citizenship, independence, and commitment to others.⁴⁶

The effect of this privatization and legislation is to deny social conflict, to implicitly hold individual women primarily responsible for the maintenance of family values, and to allow low-wage employers to treat people as if they were disposable commodities one might purchase at Wal-Mart. This cultural logic also allows politicians and others on both sides of the debate to simultaneously condemn the “dependence” of

poor woman and children on the state and celebrate their dependence on miserly employers or men.⁴⁷ All this is hidden in what appears at first to be the simple demand that welfare mothers be sent out to work.

The problems that welfare reform attempts to bury nonetheless reemerge, and take new forms, as states formulate policies to satisfy the federal requirements, as welfare offices attempt to carry out these provisions, and as clients and caseworkers attempt to make sense of the meaning of these edicts for how they should do their work and how they should live their lives. A closer look at this process can tell us much about the state of the nation, and about the practical and moral importance of creating a just and inclusive society that publicly recognizes our interdependence.

Agreement of Personal Responsibility

I understand that TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families] is a temporary assistance program and that I am responsible for:

- *Working to support my family and to become self-sufficient;*
- *Looking for and accepting employment;*
- *Participating in assignments from my case manager;*
- *Notifying my case manager immediately of any changes in my circumstances;*
- *Keeping appointments with my case manager in a timely manner; and*
- *Arranging child day care and transportation that allows me to participate in the Employment Program.*

I understand that it is my responsibility to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the Program. By taking advantage of these opportunities, I will help my family in becoming self-sufficient.

If you choose not to sign this Agreement, your TANF benefits will end.

*Signature required of all welfare clients, Arbordale.**