Using Feminist Critical Policy Analysis in the Realm of Higher Education

The Case of Welfare Reform as Gendered Educational Policy

Policy analysis is never value-neutral. However, it is often silent on the issue of gender. As a result, traditional policy analysis results in “partial and perverse understandings” of the ways in which women’s lives are affected by policy (Harding, 1986). In a recent critique of educational policy research, Catherine Marshall (1999) makes the argument that educational policy analysis systematically “has ignored or marginalized the feminist critique” (p. 1). Yet, as Marshall goes on to point out, gender is not an afterthought in the formation of policy itself. In fact, the state has a clear role in gender politics even when it is not overtly discussed in official documents (Apple, 1994).

This critique is also directly applicable to research on higher education policy and practice. Many higher education policies, such as those regarding tuition, degree programs, and transfer policies, would appear to be gender neutral if analyzed within a relatively narrow framework that does not acknowledge broader economic, social, and political factors. Yet large-scale shifts in the global economy, along with major changes in national social policy, can have distinct and far-reaching effects on the practices and policies of colleges and universities, and in turn on the lives of the women who work in them and/or attend them. Recently, several researchers have provided evidence to support the argument that broad economic and political factors do indeed intersect with institutions of higher education and that they have a clear and consistent effect on women (Slaughter, 1999; Glazer, 1999).
A recent and very relevant example of how broad social policy can function as a barrier to higher education for women can be found in the 1996 welfare reform legislation. Welfare reform is not generally perceived as higher education policy. The Department of Education had no formal role in its development, and most of the rhetoric surrounding welfare reform has focused on economic, rather than educational, issues. As a result, welfare reform has received relatively little attention among higher education researchers. However, this piece of policy has drastically reduced access to postsecondary education for welfare recipients (Jacobs & Winslow, 2003). Not incidentally, nearly all of these citizens are women, and most of them are single parents. Yet when viewed through a traditional policy analysis lens, both of these facts are obscured to most of the higher education policy research community.

This article is an attempt to provide a partial corrective to more traditional analyses of higher education policy that most often obscure broader social factors that contribute to unequal power relations and educational outcomes related to social class, gender, and race/ethnicity. In this article I focus specifically on gender issues and employ a feminist critical policy analysis framework. As I explain in more detail below, feminist critical policy analysis challenges the positivist assumptions on which most policy analysis rests and employs methodological tools that provide a more complete understanding of policy from the perspective of both policymakers and those affected by the policy. I have chosen to utilize the 1996 welfare reform legislation as a case study to illustrate the usefulness of this methodological and analytical approach to policy analysis.

The article begins with an overview of feminist critical policy analysis, placing it within the context of more traditional approaches to the study of policy and providing a rationale for its use as an alternative lens through which to examine policy. Second, I illustrate the usefulness of this analytical tool by employing it to uncover the gendered nature of one piece of federal public policy, namely, welfare reform. In particular, I utilize feminist critical policy analysis to examine the discourse that surrounded the development of the policy and that surrounds it now, as early research regarding its implementation and outcomes emerges. Finally, I utilize the words and experiences of welfare recipients enrolled in college to illustrate, through their eyes, how this policy affects their ability to obtain postsecondary education.

In utilizing feminist critical policy analysis on this “test case” of welfare reform, I hope to provide an example of the ways in which this particular analytical tool can be used to analyze and examine higher education policy in ways that reveal both the intended and unintended effects
such policies have on women. I argue that because the dominant discourse surrounding welfare reform focused on such gender-neutral and seemingly innocuous concepts as “self-sufficiency” and “work first,” employing critical feminist policy analysis is particularly useful in uncovering the ways in which dominant policy discourses can obscure the very gender-specific effects of a particular policy. The implications of this analysis, as well as the applicability of feminist critical policy analysis for the examination of other higher education policies, are discussed in the final section of the article.

Feminist Critical Policy Analysis: Through a Different Lens

Feminist critical policy analysis has been most clearly articulated in the work of Catherine Marshall, whose two edited volumes both lay out the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this approach to policy research and also provide examples of the ways in which it can be used to examine both secondary and postsecondary education (Marshall, 1997a, 1997b). Feminist critical policy analysis melds critical theory and feminism in a way that is designed to challenge the traditional, mainstream approaches to policy analysis that have dominated policy research for the last fifty years (Marshall, 1997a). The methods and theoretical frameworks that dominate current policy analysis have been developed and implemented by those in power who, particularly in the world of policy formation and analysis, are overwhelmingly white, male, and well educated. Thus, traditional policy research has, according to Marshall, reflected the assumptions, worldview, and values of this group.

As is the case with much mainstream research in the social sciences, traditional policy analysis can be characterized by the following elements. Among the most important are a belief in a single concept of truth (truth with a capital “T”); the assumption that objectivity on the part of the researcher is both achievable and desirable; the assumption that all research subjects share the same relationship to their social environment, thereby rendering such particularities as gender, race, social class, and sexuality unimportant; and the practice of evaluating women on the basis of male norms (Bensimon & Marshall, 1997, p. 7–8). Since this positivist paradigm is so widely accepted in the policy world, it allows policy analysts to assume a dispassionate, objective stance and at the same time encourages the broader policy community to perceive the research enterprise in this way. Thus, traditional policy analysis willfully ignores the inherently political nature of all research, and policy research in particular. As Marshall states, “Traditional policy analysis is grounded in a narrow, falsely objective, overly instrumental view of ra-
tionality that masks its latent biases and allows policy elites and technocrats to present analyses and plans as neutral and objective when they are actually tied to prevailing relations of power” (1997a, p. 3).

In contrast, these power relations are exactly the target of feminist critical policy analysis. This approach to policy research is a variant of critical policy analysis, which focuses on the policies and structures that restrict access to power (Anderson, 1989, pp. 251). Critical policy analysis, when overlaid with feminism, results in sustained attention to the ways in which the interests of women and the interests of the state intersect and, most often, contradict each other. As Marshall states, “Policy analysis and feminism intersect over questions about what is public and what is private and who decides . . . . for social justice, what is the role of the state? Can the state be relied upon for analyses of inequities?” (1997a, pp. 18–19). Thus, feminist critical policy analysis directly questions the entire policy analysis process, from the formation of research questions to the development and use of methodology to the analysis and write-up of results. It assumes that policymakers (i.e., the state) will act in ways to sustain and build dominance in society. And by calling attention to this phenomenon, feminist critical policy analysts attempt to create sufficient pressure to alter these power dynamics.

What are the key tenets of feminist critical policy analysis? First and foremost, gender must be a central focus of the research, and must be conceptualized as a “fundamental category”—that is, as a way of understanding a person’s experiences in the world. Relatedly, the goal is not to develop a universal understanding of the human experience. Rather, feminist critical policy analysts focus on the ways in which context, gender, race, and other factors vary the effects of a particular policy. To that end, feminist critical policy analysts, like most feminist researchers, rely primarily on data collected on the lived experiences of women, as told by the women themselves, and they also utilize discourse analysis to uncover the ideologies and assumptions embedded in policy documents. Finally, feminist critical policy analysis is designed to transform the institution or arm of the state in question. As such, it is, at least in part, a form of action research (Bensimon & Marshall, 1997, p. 8), and its focus on power relations is drawn from critical theory. Thus, in direct contrast to conventional policy analysis, “feminist critical policy analysis is ideological, centers on gender, states a clear values base, and identifies the formal and informal processes of power and policy that affect women’s and men’s advancement and full development” (Marshall, 1997a, p. 7).

In short, it can best be understood as an approach to policy research that adopts the theoretical and epistemological assumptions of both critical theory and radical feminism. It is neither a new theory nor a new
methodological approach to the study of policy. Rather, it applies existing theories and methods to a new realm of inquiry—namely, policy analysis.

Although feminist critical policy analysis is not considered mainstream among the disciplines, analyses of social policy utilizing constructs similar to those outlined by Marshall have become somewhat more common in recent years, particularly in the disciplines of sociology and history. Kristin Luker’s examinations of the politics of abortion (1985) and teenage pregnancy (1997) illustrate the ways in which simplistic and negative perceptions of female sexuality have resulted in public policy based on the false assumption that poor morality, rather than poverty itself, is the cause of unintended pregnancy. Linda Gordon’s historical analysis of U.S. welfare policy focuses almost entirely on the gendered nature of the development of welfare reform, which was originally designed to address the needs of “deserving women” widowed during the Civil War, and became increasingly punitive as perceptions of single mothers turned negative (Gordon, 1994). The work of Frances Fox Piven and associates is also insightful on the intersection between gender and social policy (2002). And Saskia Sassen’s analysis of globalization illustrates the ways in which the global economy affects women—particularly poor women, and women of color—in disproportionately negative ways (1999).

Feminist critical policy analysis employed within the realm of education is considerably more rare. Utilizing critical ethnographic methods, Michelle Fine (1991) and Lois Weis (1985) trace the effects of globalization and de-industrialization on girls’ educational aspirations. And, more recently, Marshall’s edited books provide a variety of examples of the ways in which this framework can be utilized to examine educational policy issues. At the k–12 level, it can be used as a lens to examine curriculum (Yates, 1997; Adams, 1997), teacher training (Hollingsworth, 1997), and federal policies such as Title IX (Stromquist, 1997); and it can also be used to explore less obvious examples of educational policy, such as responses to teen pregnancy (Pillow, 1997) and the acquisition of computer knowledge (Singh, 1997). At the postsecondary level, affirmative action (Glazer, 1997), tenure and promotion (Acker and Feuerverger, 1997), and feminist pedagogy (Luke, 1997) are examined using feminist critical policy analysis, among other topics. Moreover, because this approach to policy research is concerned with the mechanisms through which power is developed and maintained, feminist critical policy analysis is a useful tool in examining the ways in which formal policy differs from the actual implementation of the policy (otherwise known as “policy slippage” (Marshall, 1997a)).
In short, while this approach to policy analysis directly challenges the dominant policy discourse and is therefore likely to be marginalized in many arenas, feminist critical policy analysis provides those interested in the intersection between power and educational policy a new tool with which to examine this dynamic. In the next section of this article, I utilize this analytical tool to examine the ways in which formal elements of welfare reform, a major piece of federal legislation, act to restrict access to education for poor women.

The Case of Welfare Reform as Gendered Educational Policy

Perhaps nowhere do issues of access and equity in postsecondary education intersect so clearly with gender than with regard to welfare reform (formally known as the Personal Responsibility and Workforce Opportunity Act, or PRWORA). Although not discussed as such by mainstream policymakers, welfare reform is clearly a gendered piece of social policy: at 96.4% of the caseload, women comprise the vast majority of the nation’s welfare recipients (Urban Institute, 2002). Moreover, nearly all of them have children, and most of these children (72%) are under school age. Eighty-five percent are single mothers (Urban Institute, 2002), 41% have not obtained a high-school diploma, and another 36% ended their formal education with a high-school diploma or a GED. Clearly, when we look at welfare reform through the lens of gender and class, we can clearly see that welfare recipients are, by and large, impoverished, poorly educated, single mothers.

Welfare reform is also clearly a piece of postsecondary education policy, although not officially so. Welfare reform was not formally conceived of as a piece of postsecondary educational policy; it is overseen by the Department of Health and Human Services, and it has generally been constructed by mainstream media and policy pundits as a piece of economic policy. As a result, it has been virtually ignored among academic educational researchers, particularly at the level of postsecondary analysis.

However, when viewed through a feminist critical policy analysis frame that focuses on gender, it becomes clear that reducing access to education and training for poor women is at the very heart of these reforms. This goal is driven by a “work-first” ideology that is based on the assumption that “rapid attachment to the workforce” is the surest route to economic self-sufficiency. This philosophy is enthusiastically embraced across both major political parties: Bill Clinton signed welfare reform legislation into law in 1996, and George W. Bush has enthusiastically endorsed its work-first philosophy as well. Indeed, in comments
directed at the bill’s reauthorization, Bush repeatedly asserts that work must be the “cornerstone” of all welfare reform, because “there’s no better way to earn dignity than to work” (CNN.com, 2002a). Education and training, by contrast, are seen as an inefficient use of federal and state dollars, a fact that is reflected in the President’s proposal to double the amount of time that welfare recipients will be required to work in order to receive assistance, and further limit the amount of time a recipient can pursue education or training.

This new system of welfare provision does not expressly forbid states from allowing welfare recipients to pursue postsecondary education. However, it does include a number of regulations that discourage states from enrolling recipients in college, and in degree-granting programs in particular. First, the “work first” philosophy often means that welfare recipients may be eligible for education and training services only after they have failed to find a job during a specified search period. Second, enrollment in school is capped at 30% of welfare recipients. Third, this education cap may include those seeking to complete high school or obtain a GED, thereby further limiting the number of those seeking to enroll in higher education. And finally, recipients enrolled in postsecondary education longer than a 12-month period are, for the most part, excluded from a state’s calculation of its work participation rates (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2002). Thus, a state receives no “credit” from the federal government for allowing recipients to pursue education and training rather than work. When taken together, these disincentives can greatly reduce a state’s ability and willingness to provide meaningful access to postsecondary education for welfare recipients.

Adding Gender to the Welfare Reform Equation

However, the full impact of welfare reform on access to postsecondary education for women cannot be understood unless we examine other elements of the policy that can affect recipients’ ability to pursue the education that might technically be available to them. Examining formal welfare reform policy through the lens of feminist critical policy analysis reveals it to be decidedly antagonistic to a woman’s ability or desire to utilize education and training to advance her long-term economic interests. Many of the barriers to education are explicit regulations regarding the amount of education that is available, as is discussed above. But another set of barriers are erected by policies that force women to choose between education and other factors equally if not more important in her life—income, child care, the risk of complete loss of benefits as lifetime time limits approach. While none of these follow-
ing elements of welfare reform can be defined in the strictest sense as educational policy, they have particular import when analyzed within the context of a poor, single mother’s life. Thus, when examined within the framework of feminist critical policy analysis, it becomes clear that they erect significant barriers to welfare recipients’ pursuit of postsecondary education and training.

The elements of welfare policy that are most relevant to the lived experiences of women are described briefly below.

- **Time Limits.** Nearly all states have adopted a five-year lifetime limit to welfare benefits. Thus, even in states that allow women to attend college while receiving welfare, a woman must engage in a gamble of sorts: should she let the time clock tick as she pursues education, or should she stop the clock by obtaining full-time employment whenever she can?

- **Rules on Exemptions for New Parents.** At this point in time, federal law permits but does not require states to exempt single parents from work requirements while caring for an infant up to one year old. However, the infant childcare exemption does not stop the five-year lifetime limit on welfare receipt (Weil & Finegold, 2002).

- **Benefits.** Monthly welfare benefits are quite small, with an average of around $500 for a family of three. While a proportion of the wages earned by women on welfare are garnered by the state, working additional hours still brings more money into the household than does attending school. Thus, because welfare benefits generally are not sufficient to provide adequate housing and childcare, women who decide to pursue postsecondary education are doing so at great economic sacrifice.

- **Childcare.** Perhaps most importantly, there is no guarantee of adequate childcare for the children of welfare recipients. The lack of high-quality, affordable childcare is perhaps the most significant barrier to pursuing either postsecondary education or employment for poor women with young children. According to the Welfare Information Network, women with childcare needs are among the most difficult to move off of the welfare rolls (Stagner, Kortenkamp, and Reardon-Anderson, 2002).

As a piece of formal policy, welfare reform obviously contains numerous regulations that would render the pursuit of education difficult for any human being receiving welfare. But these regulations are particularly onerous for the poor women who make up the vast majority of welfare recipients, because they are insensitive at best to the complexi-
ties of these women’s lives and their multiple roles as mothers, providers, and, at least potentially, students.

**Effects of Welfare Reform on Access to Education and Training**

As might be predicted, given the analysis of welfare reform presented thus far, this piece of legislation has had a devastating effect on the ability of welfare recipients—that is, poor women—to obtain the education and training necessary to become economically self-sufficient. Analyses of initial college enrollment data strongly suggest that overall access has been sharply curtailed, and, equally important, the type of education that is available has shifted away from degree-granting programs.

The National Urban League’s analysis of data from the 1997 and 1999 waves of the Urban Institute’s National Survey of American Families found a 20% drop in college enrollment of welfare recipients, as compared to other low-income women. And when comparing welfare recipients pre- and post-welfare reform, they found that while welfare recipients were 13% more likely than other poor women to attend college before welfare reform, they were 7% less likely to attend college than were other poor women after welfare reform (Cox & Spriggs, 2002, p. 6). College-going rates vary across states, but most states report a significant drop in access to college for welfare recipients in the wake of welfare reform. For example, enrollment of welfare recipients at the City University of New York dropped by 77% between 1996 and 2000 (Applied Research Center, 2001), and between 1995 and 1997, Massachusetts’ community colleges reported an average decrease in the enrollment of welfare recipients of 46% (Kates, 1998).

Importantly, the type of education available to welfare recipients has also shifted. To document this shift, Jacobs and Winslow (2003) obtained data from the 1996 and 2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Surveys (NPSAS). These are two large surveys of students enrolled in college, with over 30,000 respondents in 1996 and over 40,000 respondents in 2000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997; 2002). The NPSAS data allow an examination of the type of program students are enrolled in. Between 1996 and 2000, there was a sharp increase in enrollment in short-term, certificate programs. In 1996, 27.5% of welfare recipients were enrolled in certificate programs; by 2000, this percentage had jumped to 43% of welfare recipients enrolled in postsecondary education. This change occurred despite no overall change in the incidence of enrollment in certificate programs. (In 2000, 12.1% of all postsecondary enrollment was in certificate programs, vs. 12.2% in 1996.)
This growth was matched by a decline in the enrollment of welfare recipients in both Associate Degree programs (a 7 percentage point decline) and Bachelor’s Degree programs (a 6.7 percentage point decline).

Who Defines “Successful” Policy?

Despite the clear trends indicating a reduction in both the amount and quality of postsecondary education available to welfare recipients, according to the mainstream media and both major political parties, welfare reform is deemed a resounding success. This is due in large part to the fact that conventional policy analyses focus on outcomes that are important to the state, rather than outcomes that are important in the lives of women. As the Applied Research Center points out in a recent review of the literature (2001), mainstream policy analysts consistently fail to address quality of life issues when evaluating welfare reform, such as the ability to obtain living-wage jobs, to find adequate and affordable child care, or to access education and training to insure career development. Instead, most existing research focuses on the degree to which welfare rolls have been reduced or traces experiences within the labor market without examining the role that gender or race may have on employment outcomes (Applied Research Center, 2001). Thus, while welfare reform is considered successful when judged by the 50% reduction in caseloads, the success of this policy is far more questionable when judged by a different set of outcomes—outcomes that are more meaningful to the quality of life for the women affected by these policies.

Access to postsecondary education is a prime example of this. There exists clear and convincing evidence that education is a critical factor in insuring long-term employment stability and self-sufficiency for poor women. In a study of 4500 working mothers, Spalter-Roth and Hartmann (1991) found that a college degree increases hourly wages by $3.65 when compared with the wages of high-school graduates. Moreover, women receiving welfare who achieved a bachelor’s degree are far more likely to be employed 10 years after graduation than women who did not receive a degree (Gittell et al., 1990). A 1997 survey of AFDC recipients in Maine revealed that as the level of formal education increases, so too does the percentage of women employed and their median hourly wage. Whereas only 20% of those with a high-school diploma or GED were employed, 89% of those with a bachelor’s degree had found work (Seguino & Butler, 1998).

More recent studies of those who have left welfare (“welfare leavers”) suggest that, without additional education, individuals who leave welfare for work exist at or below the poverty line. For example, a 1999
General Accounting Office study reports that most welfare leavers have obtained work. However, most are working in low-wage occupations, which pay from $5.67 to about $8 per hour (GAO, 1999). Similarly, an Urban Institute study of welfare leavers reports an average wage of $6.61 per hour, which is just above the poverty line for a family of three. Moreover, welfare leavers are far less likely than other low-wage workers to obtain jobs with health insurance (Loprest, 1999).

Yet as Carnevale and Desrochers (1999) demonstrate, the types and amounts of education needed if welfare recipients are to earn a living wage varies by several factors, foremost among them the amount of previous education and skills development that they have obtained. The two thirds of welfare recipients with “competent skills” or “basic” skills (the equivalent of some college or a high-school diploma, respectively) require at least a semester of full-time coursework to obtain employment that will lift them above the poverty line. However, the remaining 1/3 of welfare recipients with minimal or no skills would require more than two full years of coursework to boost their income to the $15,000 to $20,000 level. This bottom third requires basic education and GED training before they are able to enter the postsecondary arena and, according to the authors, may be best served by immediate workforce entry, followed by education and training. Moreover, skill levels of welfare recipients break down along racial and ethnic lines. As Carnevale and Reich report, “While 51% of white women on welfare have competent, advanced or superior skills, only 17% of African American and 16% of Hispanic women on welfare do” (2000, p. 16).

Uncovering the Role of Gender Ideology in Policy Development

Given the overwhelming body of evidence that suggests that access to postsecondary education is critically important to the long-term well-being of poor women, welfare reform nevertheless restricts access to postsecondary education and is generally seen as a resounding success. Why is this? Did the designers of this policy actively set out to regulate poor women and their children to permanently occupy the lowest rung of the economic ladder? Or did the policy develop in a “gender-blind” manner, in which policymakers and analysts simply forgot or ignored the unique life circumstances of poor women? I would argue that welfare reform emerged in its current form in large part because traditional methods of policy development ignore the outcomes desired by the recipients of policy. Further, the policy community can continue to be blind to such factors because the majority of policy analysts ignore the context in which policy plays out—in this instance, in the lives of poor women.
In contrast, feminist critical policy analysis calls attention to the unequal power relations that exist within the policy world, and that can result in policy debates that effectively mask the gender politics that exist in such debates. Welfare reform is a particularly salient example of this dynamic. In this section of the article, I illustrate how feminist critical policy analysis reveals the underlying gender ideology that has driven the development of this policy. In doing so, I illustrate that welfare reform in fact reflects an unhappy marriage of sorts between two different ideologies regarding women—the gender-blind perspective that allowed for the development of a policy that simply did not take the lives of women into account, and a more explicitly gendered ideology that casts single mothers as dangerous to society and in need of direct control.

As Weaver found in his study of factors that influenced the emergence of welfare reform (2000), empirical research played a relatively small role in the development of this policy. This analysis is consistent with previous studies illustrating weak linkages between evaluation research and policy formation (e.g., Weiss, 1983, 1992). While many of the surveyed state policymakers had heard of rigorous evaluations of various welfare experiments like California’s GAIN program, their knowledge of the results was incomplete, and they pointed to a variety of other factors that, in aggregate, were seen to be more influential than such policy studies.

First, the move towards time limits and the work-first philosophy was driven in large part by the states themselves, whose welfare rolls had increased dramatically in the early 1990s and who saw an emphasis on quick movement into employment as a politically expedient cost-saver. In fact, the federal government encouraged states to experiment with welfare in the early 1990s, and several states (e.g., Michigan and Wisconsin) developed welfare policy that included a work-first philosophy. Yet the outcomes of such experiments were not of interest to policymakers (indeed, most did not conduct a systematic evaluation of the program’s effectiveness); rather, state policymakers were concerned with the model’s feasibility. This was due in part because work-first ideologies were already popular among governors, state legislators, and the general citizenry.

In short, the work-first philosophy present in federal welfare reform policy is not based on the results of policy analysis. Rather, it emerged as the result of a variety of factors, such as economic pressures and ideology, many of which have only a tenuous connection to empirical evidence. In the instance of welfare reform, policy analysis was used to support the ideological positions of policymakers who were already committed to a work-first ideology. Thus, only those pieces of research...
that supported a work-first perspective were seen as influential in the development of welfare reform.

One of the reasons that the work-first ideology became so quickly and broadly accepted is that it is framed as gender- and race-neutral. In mainstream debates regarding the efficacy of the work-first approach, little mention was made of the fact that the majority of welfare recipients are poorly educated, single mothers. Indeed, the language used in the 1996 welfare reform legislation, as well as the language used in debates among Democrats and Republicans regarding welfare reform as an economic policy omitted reference to women. Gender-neutral language such as “families” and “recipients” was favored, and when liberal Democrats decried the harshness of the proposed welfare reform legislation, their outcries focused on the children who were to be affected. When these facts are omitted from the debates, welfare reform sounds quite reasonable to the vast majority of Americans. Insisting that individuals who receive welfare must work if they are to receive benefits seemed, and still seems, reasonable enough to most Americans, and insisting as well that the route to steady employment is contact with the employment sector also has a rather “common sense” appeal to it. Feminist critical policy analysis reveals the implications of such beliefs when applied to the lives of poor women. However, this perspective was effectively closed out of public debates regarding welfare reform.

Yet there are other elements of welfare reform that deal explicitly, and quite punitively, with gendered issues—specifically, sexuality and reproduction. As the Applied Research Center (February 2001) points out, welfare reform actually combined the philosophies of two different groups regarding the root causes of poverty: those who looked to economic causes, such as employment history and labor force attachment; and those who looked to the sexual and reproductive behavior of poor women. In fact, PRWORA cites four major purposes. Two refer to the economic conditions of welfare recipients, and the other two refer specifically to reducing the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and encouraging the formation of two-parent families (Weaver, 2000).

In the case of the latter, debates and discourse have placed women front and center. Charles Murray, for example, whose books *Losing Ground* (1980) and *The Bell Curve* (Hernnstein & Murray, 1994) had an enormous impact on welfare reform debates throughout the 1980s and 1990s, insisted that “illegitimacy is the single most important social problem of our time—more important than crime, drugs, poverty, illiteracy, or homelessness because it drives everything else” (1984, p. x). Race, too, has influenced the development of this rationale, since illegit-
imacy is most closely associated with African Americans between both arch conservatives such as Murray, and neo-liberals as well (still best represented by the 1962 treatise of Daniel Patrick Moynihan). Thus “illegitimate” births, and the sexuality that caused them, became an increasingly strong rationale for the sanctions that were ultimately included in welfare reform legislation. This argument found its way into formal welfare reform policy. The preamble of the 1996 welfare reform legislation asserts that “marriage is the foundation of a successful society,” and states are required to deny benefits to teenage parents (that is, mothers) who live outside of adult supervision and may impose a family cap which denies additional benefits to families in which a child is born ten months or more after the beginning of receipt of benefits. And indeed, as welfare reauthorization is currently being debated, the President is proposing to devote over $300 million to the promotion of marriage (CNN.com, 2002a).

Thus, when examined through a feminist critical policy analysis lens, it becomes clear that welfare reform embodies two major elements. The first, which is designed to move poor women into the workforce (and predominantly low-wage jobs), has been discussed and developed as gender-neutral. However, the second element of welfare reform, which focuses on reproduction and marriage activities, is more explicitly directed at women and is designed to control their sexual, reproductive, and marital freedom. Yet both aspects of the policy work to constrain poor women’s autonomy and ability to make choices that make sense within the context of their lives.

*Experiencing Policy: Placing Women Front and Center*

Clearly, the formal elements of welfare reform policy are not designed to assist women in obtaining living-wage work via access to post-secondary education and training. In fact, as has been shown above, various aspects of the policy could be expected to erect significant barriers to either the ability or the willingness of welfare recipients to pursue postsecondary education. Moreover, an analysis of the ideology underlying welfare reform helps us to understand how and why such a policy was enacted.

But, while a critical analysis of formal policy is crucial to understanding how a piece of policy can affect access to higher education, an understanding of formal policy alone does not help us to understand the ways in which policy is being implemented, nor how policy is experienced by those who are most directly affected by it. One of the major tenets of feminist critical policy analysis directs our attention to the
experiences of those who are living under the conditions imposed by policy. In this way, we can understand the degree to which the interests of women and the state intersect and/or contradict each other (Marshall, 1997a). In the case of welfare reform, how do women on welfare who are attempting to pursue education and training struggle with the myriad of barriers that these policies erect to their pursuit of their educational goals? What information and insight might policy analysts and policymakers have had, if they had spoken to poor women about the conditions of their lives and about the feasibility of these policies in light of their lives? And, as welfare reform approaches reauthorization and President Bush pushes for a full 40-hour work week for welfare recipients (CNN.com, 2002a, 2002b), how might the experiences of these women inform, or at least bear witness to, our understanding of how these policies play out at the ground level?

The epistemological assumptions of feminist critical policy analysis—that neutrality and objectivity are neither achievable nor desirable; that traditional policy analysis ignores the contextual and the personal, as well as the underlying power structures that drive policy development—have direct implications for the methodologies used in conducting an analysis using this framework. Indeed, a feminist critical policy analysis of welfare reform and its effects on poor women’s access to education necessitates an examination of the ways in which these policies function in the lives of poor women. In policy terms, this means that it is crucial to identify where “policy slippage” occurs—that is, instances in which the rhetoric of the formal policy does not match the reality of policy implementation. As Lipsky (1980) has shown, the implementation of formal policy is not often a seamless process; those that implement the policies, otherwise known as street-level bureaucrats, possess and use a significant amount of autonomy in choosing which regulations will be enforced for which client. Thus, examining educational policy as those subject to it experience it is particularly critical. In the case of welfare reform, listening to the ways in which welfare recipients actually describe their experiences can help us to develop a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the ways in which this policy functions within the contexts of women’s lives.

Although a full analysis of welfare reform from the viewpoint of welfare recipients is beyond the purview of this article, below I provide illustrations of the ways in which women’s construction of their own lives, and of their lives on welfare in particular, can inform our understanding of the gendered nature of social policy in general, and welfare reform in particular. To this end, I focus my attention in the following section on how women on welfare talk about the barriers to pursuing
postsecondary education and the degree to which they have maintained access to it. These data were drawn from individual interviews and focus group interviews of welfare recipients in an array of states—Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. These interviews were conducted in 2000–2001 as part of a larger study of the ways in which welfare reform and the Workforce Investment Act are affecting the educational experiences of recipients within the context of the community college.

All of the 22 women interviewed as part of this study were enrolled in some form of education and/or training at a local community college. Thus, they are quite the opposite of a representative sample of welfare recipients, since the vast majority of such women do not gain access to postsecondary education. These women have already overcome a significant number of barriers to education, such as formal state policies, transportation and child care difficulties, and work requirements. Yet their connection to college is tenuous at best. As part of the interview protocol, they were asked explicitly to describe their experiences as welfare recipients enrolled in college and to describe their motivations, their challenges, and their hopes.

In analyzing these data, several themes emerged that shed light on the ways in which the complexities and variations of welfare reform as it is implemented and experienced “on the ground” combine to make it quite difficult for these women to continue to pursue postsecondary education. Significantly, the barriers to pursuing meaningful education and training that these women describe are not surprising. Indeed, one would expect that poor, single women with young children would encounter a number of barriers, especially when the complexities of their own lives intersect with the complexities of welfare reform regulations as they are currently written. As the following examples illustrate, it is very nearly impossible for welfare recipients to sustain college attendance in the face of these barriers. Thus, while access to postsecondary education is technically possible in many states under welfare reform, very few welfare recipients are actually attending college, as Jacobs and Winslow (2003) have shown.

**Logistics.** The most common difficulties mentioned are the sheer logistics involved in simultaneously working, going to school, and functioning as the mother of a young child or children. When asked what the most difficult part of sustaining these activities are, one woman from Pennsylvania said the following:

Balancing. I had to go to school, but I still had to do my paid work experience. And then there was like, um, going home and then having to take care
of the kids and then still finding that study time. You have school, you have work, then you have the children, you’ve got to cook, you’ve got to clean.

In this woman’s analysis of her situation, the difficulties encountered are not explicitly due to the system itself; her commentary is purely descriptive, although she does point to the multiple and often conflicting demands of parenting, work, and school that are inherent in her position as a single mother receiving welfare.

**Gatekeeping.** Yet most of the women interviewed were far more critical of the welfare system. Another woman, this one from Illinois, points to some of the same issues, but has a sharply critical analysis of her situation that points the finger of blame directly at her caseworker. She says:

> You have to be approved by your caseworker to go to school. Just basically, it’s kinda like they decide if you’re worthy or not. I just know that they did not want me to go to school. To get [daycare] and go to school? They’re just totally against that. I mean, it’s like you have to fight and fight and fight and fight. They would rather you went to work and not to school.

While this woman lives in a state that allows up to 36 months of post-secondary education and training, she nevertheless encounters a system that is quite reluctant to grant her that right and the child care support necessary for her to pursue that goal. This critique of caseworkers is a common theme among welfare recipients in all of the states included in this study—even states that purport to allow access to postsecondary education. As another woman from Illinois stated, “Public aid really doesn’t want to see you go to school. They just figure you can go out and get a job at Hardy’s, and as long as you’re working they’re not giving you anything and they figure that you can make it.”

The experiences of these women suggests that there is a disconnect—“policy slippage”—between formal policy and policy as it is implemented. Although the welfare law in the state of Illinois allows a significant amount of education (Illinois is one of about 15 states not considered a “work-first” state for that reason), the welfare caseworker nevertheless embraces the work-first ideology that has dominated the national debates regarding welfare reform. In doing so, she can deny access to postsecondary education for these women, forcing them instead to look for work, regardless of how low-paying.

**Child support.** Another theme that emerges consistently centers on child support. While ostensibly designed to help single mothers support their children, the child support provisions of welfare reform can antagonize men that these women have chosen not to live with, often for very good reasons. As one woman from Massachusetts says,
My baby’s father abuses animals, so I’m doing all I can to insure that he never gets unsupervised visitations. But the state is really active in pursuing child support. See, to me, my child is way more important than $270 per month, you know, but I can’t go to school unless I get that money. So I don’t know what to do.

This woman appears to be in the midst of making a choice between pursuing education to insure the long-term economic well-being of her family, and protecting her child from a man whom she perceives as a physical threat to her safety and the safety of her child. It is not difficult to see why, in this instance, the education that is technically available to this woman as per formal welfare policy is actually out of her reach.

Childcare. Childcare issues present similar dilemmas for women receiving welfare and attempting to pursue an education. A woman from Illinois who had been enrolled full-time in college for over a year but was now required to find work expresses her frustration in this way:

What I’m saying is that if they really want to see us succeed, you know what I’m saying; don’t put barriers like that up. You have to get a job when they say. If I didn’t find that job right this week, what was going to happen? They were going to take my childcare away from me. And then what? I wouldn’t be in school, I wouldn’t do anything. I would be at home.

Even if we are to assume that this portion of the state’s welfare policy is not explicitly designed to erect a barrier to women pursuing education, it is clear that shifting and increasing regulations which carry severe sanctions that affect the well-being of their children for women who do not comply are extremely threatening to welfare recipients.

State control of education. The types of education and job-training that women on welfare receive can also present problems that are unique to single mothers caring for young children. In the state of Massachusetts, for example, the few women who enroll in postsecondary education are not free to enroll in the program of their choice; rather, programs tied to the needs of the local economy are offered to them. While this arrangement seems to carry with it at least some semblance of rationality, inattention to the specific needs of new mothers has resulted in an untenable and frustrating situation. A focus group of women enrolled in a Certified Nurses’ Assistant (CNA) program yielded these insights:

Judy: After going through all this hassle and craziness to enroll in this program and put my kid in more daycare every day, you know what I just figured out? These jobs that we’re going to get are at nursing homes. They are at night. There’s no daycare at night! How are we gonna be able to keep these jobs? How in the world did anyone think they would work for a bunch of single moms?
Ayesha: I know. Why didn’t anyone tell us that before we got into this program?

Clearly, if anyone at the policy level had spoken to the supposed recipients of such a program, they would have quickly determined that this particular program would not have worked for welfare recipients, given that the vast majority are single mothers of young children. Yet because the women most affected by such policies were either not consulted or ignored, the state, the community college, and the welfare recipients involved in such a program lost a significant amount of both time and money.

The Benefits of Critical Feminist Policy Analysis

By nearly all accounts in the mainstream media, welfare reform is portrayed as a resounding success. Bill Clinton, who signed the legislation in 1996, has pointed to it as one of his greatest achievements, and current President George W. Bush is touting it as an American success story, eagerly embracing the “success” of the work-first ideology by attempting to increase the work requirements to forty hours a week. If such a bill is passed, forty states are likely to further cut access to postsecondary education and training to avoid financial penalties (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2002). Virtually no one is questioning this analysis of welfare reform, in large part because the only outcome that has received any real attention is the reduction in welfare rolls, which have dropped by as much as 60% in some states (Applied Research Center, 2001). When measured by this seemingly objective outcome, welfare reform can indeed be viewed as a success.

Yet the picture is quite different when welfare reform is analyzed through the lens of feminist critical policy analysis. Economic self-sufficiency, rather than moving off the welfare rolls, is a more appropriate policy goal for poor women, and obtaining adequate education and training is the surest route to long-term economic stability. If welfare reform is measured against this standard, its success is surely called into question, since access to postsecondary education has dropped dramatically, 1/4 of former welfare recipients live in poverty, and the poorest women became poorer following welfare reform (Sherman, 1998). Women who receive welfare are not, by and large, able to pursue education and training, and those who do have a tenuous hold on the educational process. Moreover, the type of education available to welfare recipients is short-term and nontransferable, a fact that renders it far less useful than more traditional forms of education.

Using feminist critical policy analysis, I have engaged in an exercise
to illustrate how policy formation and implementation can be understood as a series of disconnects between policymakers and mainstream analysts and the individuals whose lives are most affected by the policy. Utilizing welfare reform as a case study of broad social policy and its effects on access to higher education, this analytical lens has clearly revealed the ways in which various elements of policy can create particularly onerous barriers to education and training for poor women. Elements of formal policy clearly create enormous barriers to education. Limits on the amount and type of education available, an emphasis on rapid employment, lifetime limits on the receipt of welfare, and lack of access to child care create barriers to education so high that most women receiving welfare cannot overcome them.

Yet equally important is the policy implementation process. The informal elements of policy in action, such as the ways in which caseworkers, states and educational institutions respond to the policy with specific practices, can also erect enormous barriers to education. When combined, then, formal policy and informal elements of welfare policy implementation create a web of obstructions to education. In large part, these barriers are exacerbated because policymakers and implementers are blind to the unique context of the lives of poor, single mothers. And many of these barriers are simply not visible when welfare reform is examined using more conventional modes of policy analysis.

This article utilizes welfare reform as a case study in employing feminist critical policy analysis to policy that affects access to postsecondary education. As I hope my analysis has illustrated, this methodological and analytical tool provides a potential corrective to more traditional analyses of policy in general, and higher education policy in particular. This framework is self-consciously anchored by questions of whether particular policies will empower and democratize women (Kahne, 1994). As such, it is an analytical perspective that allows policy researchers to place gender at the center of analyses, and it allows as well the development of democratizing solutions to current policy conundrums (Marshall, 1999).

As the field of higher education continues to exhibit an increased interest in issues of power, representation, and social justice, feminist critical policy analysis can be utilized as an important tool with which to analyze emerging educational policies. This approach to policy analysis encourages us to understand the broader context in which policy is developed and enacted and to understand as well the particularities of the lives of those most affected by policy. Thus, for example, an examination of financial aid policy utilizing feminist critical policy analysis might focus on whether such policies disadvantage women, whose at-
tendance patterns or ability to pay tuition may differ from those of men because of familial or childcare responsibilities. Similarly, this lens can be used to determine whether articulation agreements between two- and four-year institutions may be biased against particular areas of study in which women are frequently overrepresented; and the movement towards workforce development, contract training, and other nondegree-granting programs could be examined through the experiences of women to determine whether such programs present particular difficulties or benefits for women.

Too, broader social policy can also be examined through a critical lens to develop a better understanding of how such policies may affect access to higher education generally, and for women in particular. Recent or potential changes in family leave and marital law, health care and insurance policies, and economic development policies may well be seen as unrelated to access to higher education, and as gender-neutral public policy. But, as this analysis of welfare reform has hopefully illustrated, such seemingly straightforward policies become much more complicated when examined from the perspective of women’s lives. Moreover, because such policies affect important aspects of women’s lives, they can affect the ability and willingness of women to pursue postsecondary education in a myriad of ways.

Ultimately, policy analysis that poses as “neutral” in any sense of that word is not only inadequate in developing a full understanding of educational policy. In addition, it can also obscure and dismiss as unimportant the differential effects of such policies on our most vulnerable populations. For these reasons, it is important that the field of policy analysis employ methods and theories that move beyond seemingly “neutral” analyses to directly address issues of power, status, and context.

References


