

CHAPTER 8

Putting a Black Face on Welfare

The Good and the Bad

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“Everyone who knows anything about welfare knows that most recipients are white.” This is a common statement often made in conversation among people concerned about racist representations of welfare in the mass media. It often goes unchallenged. In fact, in recent years it seems to have taken on the status of an unquestioned truth among those who claim to know better than to buy into the myths in popular culture. This statement has been used repeatedly to undermine the prevalent notion that welfare is largely a “black program” needed because African Americans are trapped in a “black underclass,” mired in a “culture of poverty,” bereft of “personal responsibility,” and unable to break out of an intergenerational cycle of “welfare dependency.”

Yet this statement increasingly is factually questionable; and under welfare reform, it is politically problematic. In what follows, I argue that in debates about welfare reform, failure to acknowledge the racial composition of the welfare population compounds the problems social policies pose for people of color, African Americans in particular. I argue that such reticence will only “whitewash” the racial disparities in the U.S. economy that in recent years have increased the extent to which low-income persons of color rely on public assistance. Frank discussion is

needed because welfare discourse in recent years has come to be increasingly encoded with racial connotations (Schram 2000). It is important to recognize that, contrary to the conventional understanding, there are both good and bad ways to highlight the color issue in welfare.

In other words, analysis suggests that putting a “black face” on welfare is not as clear-cut an issue as it is often depicted.¹ There are pitfalls either way. Emphasizing the disproportionate numbers of persons of color on public assistance can reinforce attempts to denigrate welfare as a “black program” for those “other” people who are too irresponsible to conform to the standards of white, middle-class society. Yet going along with depictions of welfare that do not account for race leaves unchallenged the racial disparities reinforced by welfare policy. White or black, the face of welfare that we project poses political risks.

I will note recent scholarship that shows how racial representations of welfare undermine support for public assistance, but I also suggest that such scholarship can overlook the political complexities of race and welfare. In particular, it does not sufficiently examine the artificiality of racial categories, the political uses of different constructions of race, and the ways in which “race talk” about welfare—or the lack thereof—can be self-defeating. These problems spill over into questions of advocacy. I conclude that racial representations of welfare involve layers of political consideration and pose strategic problems for political activism. More stress should be given, not to the frequency of racialized depictions of welfare in the mass media, but to how prevailing modes of perception prime people to rely on tendentious racial categorizations to interpret issues of race and welfare (see Mendelberg 1997). My recommendation is not to avoid racial categories in discussions of welfare but to deploy such constructions in politically sensitive ways. Putting a black face on welfare risks reinforcing racial stereotypes, but only by acknowledging the disproportionate numbers of persons of color relying on welfare can we challenge racial inequality in the economy.

I undertake this line of inquiry to suggest that understanding the racial dimensions of welfare can promote racial justice. To get more racial justice, we need to ask hard questions and break with conventional wisdom. Because racial connotations are encoded in welfare discourse, we need to call them out. Because welfare reform has disproportionately affected persons of color, the need to highlight the racial dimensions of welfare has intensified. Taking race into account is more necessary now than before.

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The Moynihan Problem

Breaking with the conventional wisdom on racialized depictions of welfare has its own pitfalls. The risk here is the “Moynihan problem”; that is, looking into welfare along racial lines may be associated with Daniel P. Moynihan’s controversial work on the subject, *The Negro Family* (1965). This short (78-page) internal U.S. Department of Labor report, emphasizing the then well-accepted theme of pathology among economically marginalized African Americans, was leaked to the press by Moynihan himself (Lemann 1991, 171–72).

The report’s distinctive claim was that welfare dependency among single-parent African American families was starting to spiral out of control due to a breakdown in values in black communities. While the number of families on welfare historically had tracked the black male unemployment rate, in the early 1960s, Moynihan suggested, the welfare participation rate for African Americans was becoming “unglued.” The link between the black male unemployment rate and welfare caseloads was becoming weaker. Black poverty was turning into an autonomous problem disconnected from the status of the economy, indicating that the black family was becoming wrapped in a “tangle of pathology” (Katz 1989). To underscore its importance as a finding of social science, Moynihan would in time proudly call this phenomenon the “Moynihan Scissors” (Moynihan 1985). His analysis has been criticized on methodological grounds for tying the unemployment of black males with the welfare caseload for all races, and subsequent research has shown the correlation to be unsubstantiated (O’Connor 2001, 205–6). The report reached bad conclusions on the basis of bad research.

Moynihan may have intended to highlight racial unfairness in the broader society (O’Connor 2001, 203–10), but that is not how his effort was received. Instead, the report was criticized for essentializing racial differences, reinforcing racist attitudes, and promoting the idea of a self-created “culture of poverty” in which low-income African American families were mired—making them personally responsible for their own plight. In particular, the report was condemned for stressing racial background as the key factor in producing poverty among African American families and neglecting its political and economic roots. Although Moynihan was rarely labeled a racist, his work was seen as “blaming the victim” (Ryan 1971).

The report deserved such interpretations, in its effects if not intention. Conservatives appropriated it to justify cutbacks in public assistance on

the grounds that it promoted “welfare dependency” and undermined “personal responsibility” among African American families (O’Connor 2001). The Right campaigned on this theme for three decades, finally ending welfare as an entitlement in 1996. In spite of Moynihan’s own pained resistance to that disentanglement, the seeds for the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 were sown in the Moynihan report (Katz 2001).

William Julius Wilson (1987) has trumpeted Moynihan as a prophet who was unfairly castigated for pointing out the growing problems of social breakdown among the “black underclass.” Wilson believes that criticism of the Moynihan report may have induced self-censorship among social scientists who feared being labeled racist for discussing family formation among African Americans. Adolph Reed and others have questioned whether this self-censorship really happened (Reed 1999, 93; Schram 1995, 31). A better explanation may be that in the wake of the controversy over the Moynihan report, researchers avoided the canard that low-income African American families were the source of their own poverty. Researchers instead sought to understand how poverty could create conditions that made it difficult to adhere to conventional moral standards of personal responsibility. Rather than speculate that an underclass had come to indulge in a culture of poverty, researchers found ways to understand the causes of what was previously called “pathology.” The Moynihan controversy therefore was not, as Wilson suggested, a cautionary tale about the premature dismissal of good research that predicted the demise of the traditional nuclear family among low-income African Americans. Instead, it showed that emphasizing race as a factor in welfare may be correctly interpreted as blaming the victim.

The Negro Family provides a reminder of the dilemmas associated with raising issues of race and welfare: there are good reasons to be sensitive about introducing race into one’s analysis. Yet there are problems in the other direction as well. Analysis of the disproportionate use of public assistance by African Americans cannot be left in the dust, for there are pitfalls to *not* putting a black face on welfare, as I demonstrate in the following.

Myths about Myths

In 1996 the PRWORA ended welfare as an entitlement. As part of the battle to prevent this outcome, efforts were made to inform the public about

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the real facts on welfare. Most of this work was quite good in correcting popular misunderstandings. Yet analyses that were sound in other respects often mischaracterized the racial composition of the welfare population. These studies added fuel to the tendency in informal conversation to claim that “most recipients are White.” An instance is *Welfare Myths: Fact or Fiction? Exploring the Truth about Welfare*, published in 1996 by the Welfare Law Center. Even this scrupulously researched and clearly presented publication parsed its statistics on race and welfare in a problematic way.

MYTH: Almost all of the families receiving AFDC are Black or Hispanic.

FACT: Many more White families than Black families or Hispanic families are helped by the AFDC program.

In the Internet version, to the left of “MYTH” is a button to push for “More Info.” That additional information turns out to be statistics that cover the “facts,” such as the percentage of Black families and of Hispanic families that receive cash assistance is larger than the proportion of White families who do, as is the proportion of Black and Hispanic families that are in poverty. Yet, the main point emphasized is that even though poverty forces African Americans and Latinos to rely on welfare more frequently than whites, whites make up a majority of welfare recipients. The factual basis for this claim is reported as follows:

A study of families receiving AFDC between January 1990 and June 1992 found that less than 3 in 10 women receiving AFDC for the first time were Black and 1.6 in 10 were Hispanic. Looking at all families receiving aid during a given period of time, White families still outnumber Black families, although the percentage of Black families in the total caseload is higher than the percentage among first-time recipients. White families make up 38.3% of the caseload, Black families 36.6%. Hispanic families account for 17.8% of all families receiving aid while Asians and Native Americans amount to a total of 4.2%.

There are numerous problems with this “myth vs. fact” presentation. First, the study from which supporting calculations are drawn is cited nowhere in the publication. Second, the primary statistic used by the report is about the percentage of first-time users of welfare; this measure neglects to count people who are reapplying after having been off. These recyclers are left out of this statistic and are not counted at all. This mea-

sure also does not count people who are still receiving assistance they initiated before the start of the time period studied. In short, this statistical claim that most recipients are white is highly selective.

There are many ways to measure the racial composition of the welfare population. While none is perfect, several are an improvement over looking at first-time users. One common approach is to examine the racial composition of the rolls in a representative month (say January or June, or better, the average monthly breakdown for 12 months in that year). This approach is reported in figure 8.1.

The data in figure 8.1 are the more commonly reported data from the federal government and indicate that for the decade before welfare reform, roughly equal proportions of recipients at any one time were white or African American, with Latinos at a lower but increasing rate during the 1985–99 period. These data are by no means consistent with the popular claim often made in political discussions that most welfare recipients are white, indicating as they do that whites and blacks received welfare in approximately equal numbers for most of the years since 1985 and the number of Hispanic recipients was somewhat lower. Data on the number of recipients indicate that since the mid-1990s, the number of recipients for all three groups has declined, fastest for whites and slowest for Hispanics, so that blacks were the largest group by the end of the 1990s. It deserves emphasis that a major part of the explanation for the disparity between these data and those reported in *Welfare Myths* is that the federal government data include the people on the rolls at any one point in time, regardless of whether they are using assistance for the first time.

The federal government, however, is excluding people who have gone off the rolls but had received welfare during that year. Therefore, we may want to try still another method, which estimates the racial composition all family heads that received any assistance during a calendar year, regardless of whether it was their first time or not. Table 8.1 presents data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) on the racial breakdown of welfare recipients. The PSID is a national longitudinal study with a sample population in any one year exceeding 2,000 families.² The data are weighted to ensure representativeness by race.³

The figures in table 8.1 are from the annual PSID waves for selected years 1970–93.⁴ The figures presented are the percentage of all the PSID married women or independent female heads of households with children who indicated receiving any amounts of public assistance at any time during the preceding calendar year. In these figures, blacks outnumbered whites in 1970. Whites slightly outnumbered blacks in 1975 and

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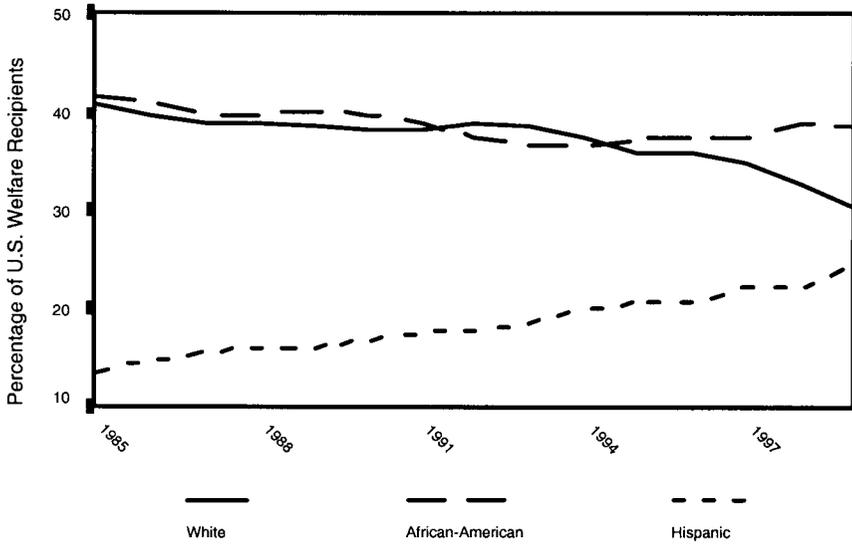


Fig. 8.1. Distribution of U.S. welfare recipients by race, 1985–99. (Data from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <<http://aspe.os.dhhs.gov/hsp/leavers99.race.htm#tab2>>).

TABLE 8.1. Welfare Receipt by Race, 1970–93

	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1991	1992	1993
Black	46	44	46	50	54	57	53	50
White	45	50	50	49	45	42	43	46
Other	9	6	4	1	1	1	4	4
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	281	361	350	304	301	302	314	292

Source: University of Michigan, Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), annual waves. Calculations provided by Thomas P. Vartanian.

Note: Married Mothers and Independent Female Heads of Households Who Received Welfare During the Calendar Year (in percentages).

1980. Blacks outnumbered whites in each year after 1980. For 1991, 57 percent of all the mothers who indicated receiving any public assistance were black, 42 percent were white, and 1 percent were other races. In 1992, 53 percent were black, 43 percent were white, and 4 percent were other races. In 1993, 50 percent of recipient families were black, while 46 percent were white and 4 percent were other. These calculations sort by race identification alone, so Latinos, for instance, are sorted into either

black or white categories, and the “other” category refers to Native Americans, Asians, and other racial groups designated neither white nor black. The calculations are based on all the married women and independent heads of households who had children and had received any welfare benefits in the preceding calendar year. Therefore, this is an inclusive sample that maximizes the chances of counting even a middle-class, suburban woman who received only a partial welfare benefit for one month while, say, making the transition from being in a marriage to being divorced. This calculation therefore does not systematically exclude whites. Still, the percentages indicate that *in each year examined from 1985 on, more black than white women received assistance.*

These larger PSID numbers for blacks were for essentially the same time period covered by *Welfare Myths* data. During that time period, the average number of whites and blacks receiving welfare at any one point in time (e.g., in any one month) was essentially the same according to government statistics (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000). Yet, according to the PSID data, the total number of blacks who had received assistance during the calendar year exceeded the number of whites.

These data are therefore different from both the *Welfare Myths* data and those reported by the federal government. Part of the explanation is that the government and the *Welfare Myths* data report Latinos separate from race. Another difference that is important for the contrast with both the *Welfare Myths* and federal government data is that the PSID data account for recycling back onto welfare, while still only counting each family only once. Looking only at first-time users ignores the fact that compared to whites, African Americans who have left public assistance are more likely to return later as second- or third-time users (largely due to lower marriage rates) (Edin and Harris 1999). Therefore, presenting a racial breakdown of the first-time users, as is done by *Welfare Myths*, cuts out more African American than white families. In the case of the federal data, not counted are all the people who are not currently receiving assistance, including recyclers who are disproportionately nonwhite.

Another difference with the *Welfare Myths* data is that by only concentrating on people who initiate the receipt of welfare, those data miss people who began using welfare before the time period covered. This leaves out longer-term users who are already welfare recipients. According to available research, these people are more likely to be nonwhite (Blank 1997, 154; and Duncan, Harris, and Boisjoly 2000). This is critical especially since long-term use has for years been the main source of con-

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cern about welfare in the mass public. Therefore, looking only at first-time receipt or only at who is on welfare at any one point in time takes the focus off the more controversial, long-term welfare population, which happens to be even more disproportionately nonwhite.

The PSID data, however, do not fully solve these problems. These data produce a small sample, making their generalizability suspect. In addition, the inclusion of anyone who receives welfare for even the shortest period of time and the smallest amounts fails to address the claim that longer-term users are the more significant population. An even better estimate would weight the population by how long each family received welfare and how much they received. When this is done, the racial composition of the welfare population would in all likelihood be even more heavily skewed toward persons of color because, as mentioned, various studies have indicated that nonwhites are likely to have longer spells of welfare receipt (Blank 1997, 154).

Therefore, I would suggest that the data on the racial breakdown of those receiving welfare is subject to much debate. One thing is clear: in the run up to welfare reform it was questionable to claim, as many did, that most welfare recipients were white. This claim operated as its own unquestioned myth among those seeking to repudiate the equally suspect notion that welfare was a “black program” for those “other” people who were not conforming to white, middle-class work and family values.

There was, however, a good rationale for the myth-busting about race even if it was factually suspect. Martin Gilens (1999) has effectively demonstrated that beginning in the 1960s, the mass media—both print and electronic—began to overrepresent African Americans in negative stories about poverty and, to a lesser extent, about welfare. Gilens also notes that beginning at that time, the mass public began to regard welfare as a “black program” that coddled low-income black families and rewarded them for not adhering to middle-class work and family values. Gilens goes on to demonstrate persuasively that both the mass public and journalists were likely to grossly overestimate the proportion of welfare recipients who were black. There came a need to challenge the highly racialized image of welfare recipients that was and continues to be ascendant in the culture and among the people in positions to influence opinion.⁵

Gilens’s work is important in highlighting the role of the mass media in providing a racially distorted image of the welfare population. He effectively suggests that media representations encouraged the denigration of welfare as a program for “other” people who did not adhere to white middle-class work and family values. Yet there is a need to go

beyond discussing whether mass media depictions are affecting attitudes toward welfare (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). We need to recognize that the problem transcends such racialized depictions. What do we do when these depictions become accurate because the welfare population has in fact become disproportionately nonwhite? We need to ask: Why is the mass public reluctant to see black welfare recipients as deserving? In other words, we need to examine why some segments of the white population are predisposed to looking negatively upon blacks receiving welfare and are therefore already primed to respond negatively to media depictions of them (see Mendelberg 1997).

As the “most recipients are white” mantra of popular discourse cited at the outset becomes a more and more popular myth-busting claim among antipoverty advocates, less attention is given to how welfare recipients are “different” in racial composition and other ways, especially in how society treats them. As a result, less attention is given to how this relatively distinctive group came to require assistance. The lure of “Most recipients are white” is the prospect of unracializing welfare, of “whitening” it. If that can be accomplished, an opportunity is created for more equity in the treatment of welfare recipients. Further, if advocates can make the case that the racial composition of the welfare population is no different from that of the society overall, there is a stronger empirical base for insisting on more equitable treatment of recipients because they do not need to be treated as an alien group to be singled out for distinctive treatment under a punitive welfare system. The goal of equitable treatment is laudable and well established among advocates for a more progressive welfare state. But trampling over basic demographics and creating a distorted image of the racial composition of the welfare population is a doomed strategy. It will founder on the shoals of factual disputation, which will not help realize the larger goal of equity.

In addition, while we may want to downplay race as socially constructed, it has real consequences as a way of organizing social life (Loury 2002). Ignoring the racial composition of the welfare population on the grounds that race should not count unfortunately overlooks that it does. Therefore, we need to recognize how it counts, and deal with the consequences. As much as we want to sweep the fictions of race into the dustbin, they continue to haunt social life. A disproportionately black welfare population is a subject that needs to be addressed for no other reason than to resist racist interpretations of welfare. When the welfare population becomes so disproportionately nonwhite that the myth-busters’ myth can no longer be sustained, where are we then?

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One answer is: the present. That is exactly where we are right now. Today, we confront the prospect of arguing for equity on grounds other than the distorted image popular in advocacy discourse that the demographic profile of welfare recipients mirrors the general population. It has not for a long time, and it increasingly does not. While during much of the 1980s whites and blacks were about equal in the government's monthly tabulations of welfare recipients, they no longer are. As Michael Brown in this volume and others have emphasized, with welfare reform in 1996, the welfare rolls declined dramatically through 2000, with whites leaving welfare faster than other groups, making the welfare population even more disproportionately nonwhite and creating an even greater prospect that welfare will be marginalized as a "black" program for "other" people (also see Neubeck and Cazenave 2001).

The main source for tracking this change has unfortunately been the aforementioned federal government's statistics on the characteristics of the welfare population (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000c). These data combine race and ethnicity to report not only on "whites" and "blacks," but also on "Hispanics," which is not a racial designation. Nonetheless, these data supply the evidence that, since welfare reform was enacted in the mid-1990s, the proportion welfare recipients who are nonwhite has increased rapidly, even if one makes the conservative assumption that about half of Hispanics on welfare are nonwhite (Grieco and Cassidy 2001). In 1985, for the average month, 40.8 percent of adult recipients were white, 41.6 percent black, and 13.6 percent Hispanic. In 1999, the percentage of whites had fallen sharply to 30.5, while the percentage of blacks had only dropped to 38.3 and the percentage of Hispanics had risen to 24.5 (Lower-Basch 2000). (See table 8.2.) The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services noted in its report on these figures:

The racial composition of welfare families has changed substantially over the past ten years. In 1990, it was 38 percent whites, 40 percent blacks and 17 percent Hispanics. In 1999, however, it was 31 percent whites, 38 percent blacks and 25 percent Hispanics. In addition, the small percentage of the welfare population which is Asian has grown slowly but steadily over the period from just under 3 percent to about 3 and one-half percent. Viewed over the decade there has been a shift from white to Hispanic families which is consistent with broader population trends. This shift has been accelerated since 1996 and is particularly pronounced in California, New York and Texas. Thus, in 1999, 70 percent of all His-

panic welfare families were in three large States (California, New York and Texas), as compared to 65 percent in 1996. In California, the proportion of Hispanic welfare families increased to 46 percent in 1999 from 38 percent in 1996. In addition, black families which had been a declining proportion of the caseload have trended up slightly since 1996. The upshot of these changes is that the proportion of welfare families that were minorities has increased from three-fifths to just over two-thirds over the decade, primarily driven by the growth in Hispanic families. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000c)

Given the racial diversity of the Latino population, we can conclude that part of its growth as percentage of recipients adds to the increase in the nonwhite proportion of the welfare population. With welfare reform, blacks have increasingly been established as the largest group, and non-whites as the overwhelming majority, of recipient families at any one point in time. (See table 8.2.)

These figures, however, point to an even less discussed dimension of the issue. Comparing these figures to raw population numbers, we can suggest that the probability that African Americans rely on welfare is much greater than it is for whites. We can estimate that on average, in any single month in 1999, 1 out of 100 whites and 8 out of 100 blacks were receiving welfare, an eight times higher probability of using welfare.

What are we to do now, under these circumstances, with a welfare population as racialized as this one? The welfare population remains diverse but increasingly composed of nonwhites. Arguments by advocates for equity based on a distorted image of the welfare population as largely white or like the population overall were always questionable; now they are irrelevant.⁶ How are we now to build the case for equitable treatment of welfare recipients? For a long time, equity arguments should have been made on other than the misleading grounds that most welfare recipients are white; for a long time, they needed to be made not by

TABLE 8.2. Percentage Distribution of TANF Families by Race, October 1998–September 1999

Total Families	White	Black	Hispanic	Native American	Asian	Other	Unknown
2,648,462	30.5	38.3	24.5	1.5	3.6	0.6	1.0

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000 (last updated on 08/27/2000). Figures are for the average month.

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neglecting race but by explaining why African Americans in particular, but other racial minorities as well, were more likely to be living in poverty and in need of public assistance at higher rates. Equity arguments need to be urgently made now that take race into account, indicating that there are good reasons why African Americans and Latinos need to rely on public assistance more frequently and that they *should* be seen, if only in this regard, as “different.” They confront different circumstances, often facing greater need, and more often requiring the assistance of welfare. The situation is critical since research indicates that blacks constitute a large majority of the recipient families that will be affected by the new time limits under welfare reform. Greg Duncan, Kathleen Harris, and Johanne Boisjoly (2000) estimate that blacks constitute over two-thirds of the families who will reach the newly imposed 60-month federal limit for the receipt of welfare. Taking race into account is now an unavoidable necessity.

As long as advocates cling to the myth of a white welfare population, we will neglect the problems of racism, the issue of racial barriers, the extent to which race-related differences need to be addressed (Loury 2002). Such neglect is dangerous; it can ignore the systemic sources of poverty for low-income families of color. Yet this failure is not just a conservative deficiency but part of a pattern of political inadequacy among liberals unwilling to discuss what they see as troubling facts about welfare recipients.

While this gentility is understandable, it is also harmful. The unwillingness to address more forthrightly the racial composition of the welfare population springs in part from a fear that conservatives will use such information to reinforce their arguments that welfare recipients are “different.” This reticence extends to discussing the “differences” associated with all single mothers on welfare, black or white, thereby often leaving the field open to conservatives to decide how differences are interpreted.

There are many parallels for this sort of reticence. For years liberals were reluctant to examine seriously what was alleged to be “welfare fraud” when recipients were not reporting all of their other small sources of income. For years, the topic was dominated by conservative viewpoints that led to the development of obsessive practices by states to hunt down and punish violators who failed to report all of their income even if it was minimal. “Welfare fraud” became another way to harass economically distressed welfare recipients and depict them as undeserving. Finally, after decades of a crackdown on these alleged abuses of welfare, studies such as the one by Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein (1997) offered an

alternative perspective, showing that low benefits left recipients no choice but to supplement their welfare checks with unreported income. Unfortunately, by the time that Edin and Lein published their findings in 1997, the campaign to combat fraud and withhold aid from “cheaters” had held down welfare benefits for over two decades so that they had on average declined in real value by over 40 percent since the early 1970s (Moffitt 1992). The prior failure to join the discussion about the issue of “welfare fraud” was therefore at best unhelpful. At worst, this lapse in political courage provided an opening for conservatives to frame the issue of unreported income in the worst possible light as “welfare fraud.” This in turn enabled states to tighten access and reduce benefits, in effect punishing people in most cases for trying to survive by combining inadequate welfare benefits with small amounts of unreported income.

Reluctance to discuss particular issues about welfare and poverty can have its negative effects. But the whole point of getting involved and discussing potentially difficult issues about welfare and poverty is to prevent those issues from being framed in tendentious ways. Talking about the disproportionate numbers of nonwhites receiving welfare does not have to involve Moynihan’s “tangle of pathology” perspective. Yet, if only the Moynihans of the world get involved in highlighting the racial composition of the welfare population, that is just what may happen. Others need to engage these issues, not just to check the facts about the racial composition of the welfare population, but more importantly to address how the facts are being framed and how assumptions of otherness inform the interpretation of those facts.

Visualizing Race

The issue of racialized depictions of welfare recipients is not just a problem of numbers. It is perhaps an even greater problem when we turn to visual culture. For a long time, there has been a great concern that showing pictures of African Americans on welfare reinforces the stereotype that welfare is strictly a “black” program. Such pictures inevitably risk reinscribing the notion that only blacks use welfare because there is something in their personal characteristics, behavior, and culture that leads them to rely on welfare. These images reinforce the worst racist stereotypes about why African Americans use welfare.

A cultural dynamic underlies racialized images. The denigration of “black” supports the privileging of “white.” The socially constructed

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designation of “black” is continually manufactured and given life largely to sustain the privileges associated with the category of “white.” Therefore, if “black” had not existed, then in the quest to validate “white” identity and culture, something else would have been created. Hortense Spillers has stated: “Let’s face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. . . . ‘Sapphire’ . . . or ‘Black Woman at the Podium’: I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have been invented” (quoted in Lubiano 1992, 323). In a more abstract register, Slavoj Žižek has pointed toward how the “black welfare queen” has been constructed out of need for an “other” to legitimate the middle-class white man of virtue who practices personal responsibility and has no need for assistance from the government. Žižek adds:

[E]ach universal ideological notion is always hegemonized by some particular content which colours its very universality and accounts for its efficiency. In the rejection of the social welfare system by the New Right in the US, for example, the universal notion of the welfare system as inefficient is sustained by the pseudo-concrete representation of the notorious African American single mother, as if, in the last resort, social welfare is a programme for black single mothers—the particular case of the “single black mother” is silently conceived as “typical” of social welfare and of what is wrong with it. . . . Another name for this short-circuit between the Universal and the Particular is, of course, “suture”: the operation of hegemony “sutures” the empty Universal to a particular content. (Žižek 1997, 28–29)

Žižek emphasizes that the abstract categories need to be filled with content from the experienced world of social relations. The idea of a welfare queen is one of black single mothers who rely on public assistance, making the abstract idea seem more credible and consistent with real life. Yet most women on welfare are not as the stereotype depicts—that is, they are not lazy, unmotivated, irresponsible, promiscuous, and so on. They are often actually “heroes of their own lives,” exercising initiative and independence by putting themselves on welfare in order to make the best of a bad situation and provide for their children (Gordon 1988). Furthermore, most white middle-class “men of virtue” rely on the government for various tax advantages, subsidies, and other forms of assistance. Nonetheless, the contrast between “black welfare queen” and “white

middle-class man of virtue” resonates very strongly in popular culture, scholarly critiques notwithstanding.

Images of women on welfare reinforce this biased distinction and reinscribe black inferiority and white supremacy. The history of depictions of African Americans in the United States has created a reservoir of racist iconography, and the exploitation of black images to access white privilege is a recurrent pattern in our culture. We need reach no farther than the now repudiated practice of white entertainers performing in blackface, beginning in the 1840s in minstrel shows and becoming popular first among Irish, and eventually among Jewish, entertainers.

Blackface is a form of cross-dressing, in which one puts on the insignias of sex, class or race that stands in binary opposition to one’s own. . . . Assimilation is achieved via the mask of the most segregated; the blackface that offers Jews mobility keeps blacks fixed in place. Rabinowitz turns into Robin, but the fundamental binary opposition nevertheless remains. That segregation, imposed on blacks, silences their voices and sings their names. (Rogin 1996, 30, 112)

Blackface facilitated assimilation for white immigrants, demonstrating their whiteness—after all, they needed to paint their faces to look black. The Jew was white because he was not black until painted. In this way, the cultural dynamic of invoking black in order to privilege white is enacted once again.

The creation of whiteness via the denigration of blackness is an immense topic that has only begun to receive serious study by white scholars in recent years (Roediger 1991; Frankenberg 1993; Ignatiev 1995). Yet African American intellectuals have been commenting on it for decades, highlighting that becoming white was the goal of many immigrants. This made the American Dream something that was inaccessible to African Americans. James Baldwin once emphasized:

No one was white before he/she came to America. . . . It took generations and a vast amount of coercion before this became a white country . . . There is an Irish community. . . . There is a German community. . . . There is a Jewish community. . . . There are English communities. There are French communities. . . . Jews came here from countries where they were not white, and they came here in part because they were not white. . . . Everyone who got here, and paid the price of the ticket, the price was to become “white.” (1984, 90–92)

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The use of “black” to legitimate “white” has in recent years remained prevalent. In a controversial photograph, Christie Todd Whitman, former governor of New Jersey, was caught on film frisking an innocent black man, for what purpose remains unknown. One possible explanation is the imbrication of race and gender: a female Republican governor felt the need to prove she was as tough as some of her white, male conservative party members when it came to cracking down on crime. In the photo Whitman is dressed in white, frisking a black male, underscoring her claiming access to white male privilege. As a woman, she was adopting the traditional role of the white male overlord. She was exploiting a black man to prove she was tough enough to be like a white man herself. She erased her gender on the back of a black man.

With this visual display, her wish to be not just Governor Whitman but also Governor *Whiteman* was fulfilled.⁷ In the process, she unwittingly ratified the practice of racial profiling by the New Jersey state troopers. The systematic stopping and harassing of African American motorists on the New Jersey Turnpike was to continue even after the state settled out of court in a controversial case on the matter. In that case, the state all but admitted responsibility for the shooting of two black and one Latino young males. Sufficient evidence had been produced, including the picture, about the state’s willingness to allow racial profiling to continue (Peterson and Halbfinger 2001). The racist practices of the state police were not to be repudiated until Whitman left to assume the head of the federal agency that was dedicated to making our environment clean. The racial connotations, from white clothes to clean environment, make the Whitman photo all the more troubling.

Therefore, racialized images have a long history of reinforcing white privilege in the broader society and not just in welfare. This history makes thoughtful people understandably reluctant to put a black face on welfare. The photograph in figure 8.2 is on the cover of Martin Gilens’s book on the racialization of welfare promoted by the media from the 1960s. His editors probably did not put an African American woman on the cover in part because his main thesis is that beginning in the 1960s, the overrepresentation of African Americans in stories and accompanying pictures about welfare led to increased opposition to the welfare program.

Yet Gilens’s cover suggests that something else is at work as well. The hand shown is ambiguously multishaded, forcing viewers to make their own judgment about who is taking welfare and why. In this sense, the photograph is what W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) calls a “metapicture”—a representation that refers not so much to a visualized object but more

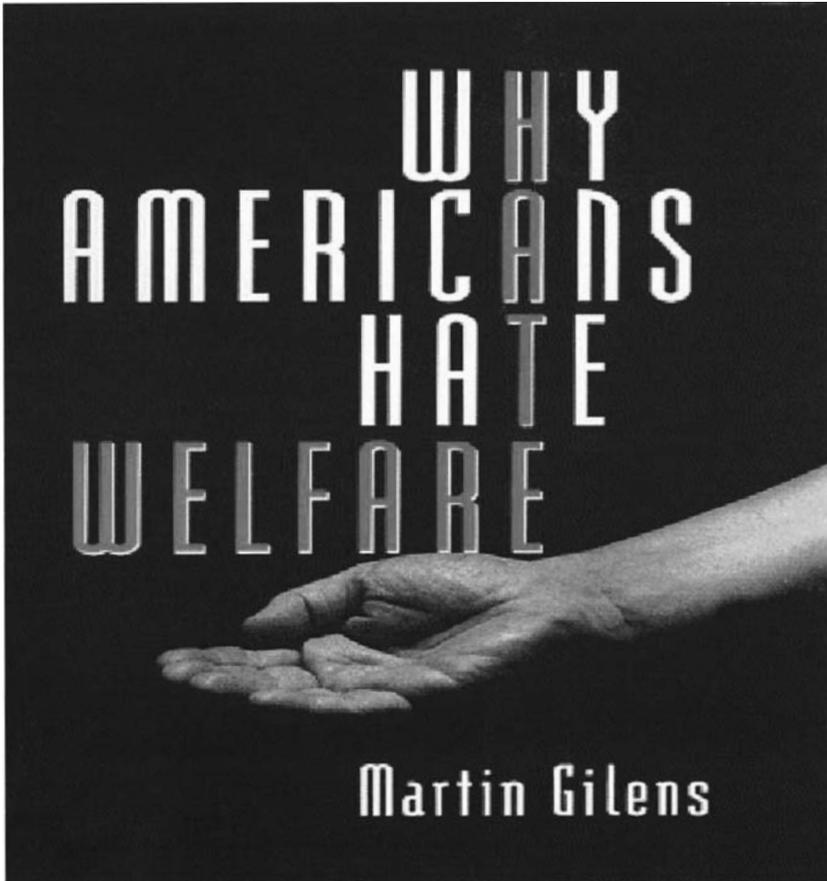


Fig. 8.2. The cover of *Why Americans Hate Welfare* by Martin Gilens (1999).

importantly to the process of visualization. This metapicture suggests that all representations require the work of viewing subjects to make the viewed object coherent and that these judgments are to varying degrees grounded in the prevailing culture.⁸ White viewers were often thinking negatively about persons of color on welfare even before reading slanted news stories. As it turns out, the racially ambiguous hand proved to be too troublesome an image and was removed from the cover with the publication of the paperback version of the book (Tryneski 2001).

Racialized images of women on welfare are often interpreted in ways that reinforce prevailing biases against persons of color, women, and

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public assistance (Schram 2000). Such images are critical to reinforcing white privilege in society. Yet my major point is that these pictures do not do this all by themselves. They require an act of supplementation. Paul de Man (1986) once defined reading as supplying what is missing to a text. Texts are inert until they are read; reading breathes lives into them, making them interpretable. The net result is that each reading supplies its own text, making the idea of one objective reading of any text unattainable and the definitive meaning of any text something that is infinitely deferred and ultimately undecidable. And we are in turn shaped by texts in less than predictable ways. The same is true with pictures. Pictures are nothing until they are seen. What we see is an act of visualization, as multivalent and polyoptic as texts are undecidable. Every picture produces as many visualizations as the number of people who see it. Maybe more. This is Mitchell's point about what the metapicture tells us. It teaches us about visualization in the abstract, overall, in general; and part of that act of visualization is its unavoidably subjective character inevitably destined to produce multiple readings that loop back to influence their viewers in multiple ways.

A larger point here is that visualization is a dynamic process; it is not one in which pictures impose their imagery on passive viewers. Viewers must be enlisted into the viewing process in order for visualization to occur. Pictures of black women on welfare do not in and of themselves mean anything in particular. They need to be visualized; they need viewers to interpret them before they can become meaningful representations. And when viewers draw on the rich cultural traditions of reconstructing white privilege on the backs of black people, then pictures of African American women on welfare take on an added significance, signifying black inferiority in the name of consolidating white supremacy (see Mendelberg 1997).

Therefore, we need to go beyond Gilens's analysis. It is not enough to emphasize that the mass media exaggerate the extent to which the welfare population includes African Americans. We need also to explain how our culture primes people to read news reports and images in a certain way. Of one such image that appeared in the press in the wake of welfare reform, I have written (Schram 2000):

The woman depicted . . . had in 1997 been sanctioned to the point where she was being removed from the welfare rolls. Reduced to cooking family meals on an outdoor grill, she sits outside and stares blankly away from the camera while her teenage son looks on. She seems to be an

enigma, refusing to work and claiming undetectable maladies, though not even trying to defend herself against a welfare bureaucracy that rejects her story. Her inscrutability creates doubts in our minds, allowing us to decide that she is incorrigible in her insistence on taking welfare. Her passivity becomes a form of active defiance. Her blank face is a blank slate on which welfare discourse can write its stigmatizing story of the welfare queen. Her body language is therefore not of her own making but a discourse that reads her a certain way. Simply being there, in poverty, on the welfare rolls, in the backyard, cooking on the grill, she is open to being read by welfare policy discourse. Without knowing anything about her life, her personal experiences, or her hopes and fears, welfare policy discourse appropriates her body and judges her passivity as a willfully chosen dependency. (54–55)

Therefore, it is important to emphasize how the prejudices operating in society prime people to read racialized images of welfare recipients in particular ways. I also want to highlight how the prejudices of the culture not only reinforce negative views of welfare-taking by persons of color but also necessitate the greater frequency with which persons of color are forced to rely on public assistance. I feel it is necessary to put a black face on welfare *and* to make more visible how those biases are operating and to what effect.

Such pictures appropriately framed and placed may have several redeeming features. They can highlight in politically constructive ways how race and welfare are often connected. They can also if done in a sufficiently self-reflective fashion remind us that the act of viewing demonizes welfare recipients at least as much as the picture itself. If such photos even when they show women of color in uncritical ways are frequently read as telling the same old tendentious tale of black insufficiency, then we need to ask how and why these photos are read in such a demonized way. The answer, one suspects, will be found more in our hearts and in our heads than on the page or in the photo. And until we are willing to interrogate the rich cultural reservoir that funds such prejudice, the manufacturing and demonizing of black welfare queens will surely continue.

Putting a Face on Advocacy

The issues of representation spill over into questions of advocacy. A common dilemma among advocacy and welfare rights groups is who should

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represent welfare recipients in public forums. One response is to choose white, single mothers who have been divorced, who have only one or two children, who are in transition from welfare to work (Brenner 2000). The goal is often to suggest that welfare recipients are not different from the average middle-class family and that all families should be supportive of welfare because it is really a program for all of us, and all our families may need to rely on it at some time in our lives. This of course is not true. Most families will never need welfare, even during divorce. Many women do go on welfare for short periods of time during divorce; however, they do not comprise a majority of divorcing families, let alone all families, nor do divorced families make up a sizable proportion of welfare recipients (Duncan and Hoffman 1995; Hoffman and Duncan 1991).

Yet, there are more serious problems than the factual misrepresentations. Putting a white face on welfare and then pretending that recipients are just like middle-class families risks encouraging policymakers to reform welfare on the basis of that assumption. Then, we face the prospect that welfare policies will be even less attuned to the real circumstances and struggles that the families who need welfare actually confront. If we represent welfare mothers as people who are “job ready,” who are only going to need to rely on welfare for a short period of time while they transition to paid employment, then we are more likely to get public policies that are insensitive to the fact that some mothers will need to rely on welfare for extended periods of time. Our policies may then neglect that many are not able or ready to secure employment that can pay them enough while they maintain full responsibility for their children on their own. This is exactly the kind of welfare reform we have been getting—reform that seems to be oblivious to the realities that most welfare mothers, of any color, confront. Presenting the welfare population as being just like the middle class leads to public policies that assume that welfare mothers can begin acting middle class tomorrow, when in fact many mothers on welfare confront dire circumstances that make that assumption ludicrous.

The more effective responses lie in recognizing the diversity of welfare recipients. Neither white nor black, divorced or unmarried, “job ready” or not, will do. Only when we begin representing welfare families in all their diversity, in all their colors, highlighting how many of them are confronting numerous social and economic obstacles, will we begin to understand the barriers they confront and can we begin to convince others to join us in trying to remove those barriers. In particular, we need to highlight that large numbers of welfare mothers are in very difficult cir-

cumstances that are often the result of having been marginalized by class, race, and gender discrimination. They are not ready to act middle class because the structure of society has ensured that their inequitable access to education, their lack of opportunities to form traditional families, their lack of economic opportunities, and their overall poverty were not of their own making but a result of being left out of the mainstream of society. Only when welfare recipients in all their diversity get to articulate in their own voices that they have been marginalized will we begin to see how putting a full face on welfare is a better alternative than white-washing the welfare population with strategic misrepresentations.

Conclusion

The United States has a bifurcated welfare state (Nelson 1990). In this bifurcated state, citizens qualify for the more generous social insurance programs on the basis of their participation in the labor market, requiring others to settle for the inadequate benefits of public assistance programs. The privileged under this system can qualify for retirement benefits, survivor benefits, disability insurance, and unemployment compensation; those who have not worked enough in the right jobs or were not married to someone who worked enough in the right jobs must rely on welfare.

This bifurcated welfare state is based on invidious distinctions, socially constructed to achieve the political effect of privileging some families as more deserving than others. The deservingness of top-tier families is not the result of politically neutral, fair economic processes. Instead, the distinctions between deserving and undeserving are politically suspect, reinforcing long-standing class, race, and gender biases about which types of people and families are more appropriate for our social order. The traditional two-parent family with a “breadwinner” and a “homemaker” is privileged, especially families where the breadwinner worked in an appropriate job long enough to qualify for benefits. This privileged status was more often accessible to white middle- and upper-class families. It is no surprise, then, that the bottom rungs of the welfare state are disproportionately populated with low-income, non-white single-parent families where a mother is left to do the double duty of being a breadwinner and a homemaker for her children, in ways that make her less likely to qualify for top-tier benefits.

Writing about the conservative push for welfare reform in the early 1980s, Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward wrote:

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[W]hen the several major policy initiatives of the Reagan administration are laid side by side, something of a coherent theory can be detected. . . . [T]he coherent theory is about human nature, and it serves the class interests of the Reagan administration and its business allies. It is the archaic idea the people in different social classes have different human natures and thus different basic motivations. The affluent are one sort of creature and working people are another. It follows that these different sorts of creatures require different systems of incentives and disincentives. The affluent exert themselves in response to rewards—to the incentive of increased profitability yielded by lower taxes. Working people respond only to punishment—to the economic insecurity that will result from reductions in the income support programs. (1982, 38–39)

There are therefore institutional roots behind the concern of reinforcing the idea that welfare recipients are these “other” people (Rank 1994). Highlighting that welfare recipients are different in any relevant way, including their racial composition, is at risk of being appropriated in service of the right-wing agenda to construct welfare recipients as these “other people.” This easily slides into more ambitious attempts to “other” welfare recipients as deviants who fail to conform to white middle-class work and family values. Focusing on difference between welfare recipients and others can reinforce attempts to blame welfare mothers for their own poverty, allegedly attributable to their failure to try to be like the rest of us.

Yet, there is also the risk that if we fail to indicate how welfare recipients are different and why, those differences will not be taken into account when fashioning welfare reforms. Social policy becomes even more obtuse than it normally is, imposing an intensive set of assumptions on recipients and expecting them to live up to them immediately. Welfare reform becomes focused on enforcing work and family values on welfare recipients when they are not always ready immediately to take a job and work their way off welfare and out of poverty. Obtuse welfare reform that fails to account for difference can end up insisting that welfare recipients be “job ready,” make “rapid attachment” to the labor market, take paid employment, and so on, without noting that recipients may, for instance, face race and gender biases and barriers in the workforce and on the job. In fact, that is what we have today: obtuse welfare reform that in its ostensible neutrality masks the extent to which it reinforces racial inequities. Such a racially encoded welfare policy fails to account for difference, fails to understand why the welfare population is disproportion-

ately of color, and fails to try to do anything worthwhile to address the racial dimensions of our social and economic life that make race the salient reality of welfare today.

We need to learn to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time. One would think we could do that. We need to learn to see the difference among welfare recipients, including the racial difference, but not be so blinded to immediately assume that traits specific to these different individuals account for their being on welfare. We need to challenge how we see and how we think. Otherwise we will remain blind and ignorant.

In other words, it takes more than numbers and images to create racism. It takes more than statistics and pictures of black women on welfare to reinforce that they are undeserving. The racist premises that inform such interpretations must already be available before these pictures can do their work. Yet, given that those prejudices are there, racial representations of welfare need to be sensitive that they will possibly tap those reserves and reactivate such tendentious interpretations of why some people need to use public assistance more than others.

There is a need to acknowledge that race does figure into the use of welfare. The difficulty is in introducing such topics in a culture that is predisposed to talk about such issues in the worst possible ways, serving to further reinscribe the prejudices and racial barriers that create the racial injustice in the first place. Yet, until we find ways to talk about race and welfare, the predicament will continue. Persons of color, African Americans and Latinos in particular, will continue to be overrepresented in the welfare population; however, our willingness to openly discuss the racism and racial barriers that put them there will remain off the public agenda. The dilemma is that if we take race into account, we risk reinscribing racial prejudice; however, if we do not, we risk not calling such prejudice into account for the crimes of poverty that it has inflicted on some groups more than others.

Under welfare reform, as the welfare population becomes increasingly nonwhite, the dilemma intensifies. To get equity for welfare recipients, we need to begin highlighting their differences and their often inequitable situations. We cannot afford not to talk about race. In particular, we cannot afford not to talk about the assumptions about race that infiltrate discussions of welfare. Just as it takes more than numbers and images to create racism, it takes more than numbers and images to undo it. Examining these assumptions, more than waging wars of images and numbers, becomes critical to advocacy for racial justice in welfare in particular and in social relations more generally. As Paul Gilroy (2000)

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has suggested, to be “against race,” we need to account for and take responsibility for it in explicit terms.

NOTES

1. Linda Williams (2001) uses Leslie Fiedler’s distinction to suggest that in the United States historically race relations have unavoidably been dramatized in melodramatic terms of either “Tom” or “Anti-Tom” (as in “Uncle Tom”). Williams suggests that the entirety of race relations is always at risk of being discussed melodramatically in ways that do real injustice to its subject matter. She suggests that Americans to a great degree cannot talk about race but in melodramatic terms. Americans are continually talking about race melodramatically if for no other reason than that race itself is a melodramatic construction of questionable politics. This makes the choice to take race into account or not to fraught with political pitfalls that must be negotiated.

2. “The PSID is a longitudinal survey of a representative sample of US individuals and the families in which they reside. It has been ongoing since 1968. The data were collected annually through 1997, and biennially starting in 1999. The data files contain the full span of information collected over the course of the study. PSID data can be used for cross-sectional, longitudinal, and intergenerational analysis and for studying both individuals and families. The PSID sample, originating in 1968, consisted of two independent samples: a cross-sectional national sample and a national sample of low-income families. The cross-sectional sample was drawn by the Survey Research Center (SRC). Commonly called the SRC sample, this was an equal probability sample of households from the 48 contiguous states and was designated to yield about 3,000 completed interviews. The second sample came from the Survey of Economic Opportunity (SEO), conducted by the Bureau of the Census for the Office of Economic Opportunity. In the mid-1960s, the PSID selected about 2,000 low-income families with heads under the age of 60 from SEO respondents. The sample, known as the SEO sample, was confined to Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSA’s) in the North and non-SMSA’s in the Southern region. The PSID core sample combines the SRC and SEO samples. From 1968 to 1996, the PSID interviewed and reinterviewed individuals from families in the core sample every year, whether or not they were living in the same dwelling or with the same people. Adults have been followed as they have grown older, and children have been observed as they advance through childhood and into adulthood, forming family units of their own.” See <http://www.isr.umich.edu/src/psid/> (accessed June 9, 2001).

3. The PSID’s representativeness is subject to some debate since some families over time leave the study and the PSID did not include new immigrants arriving after its start in 1968. Yet, John Fitzgerald, Peter Gottschalk, and Robert Moffitt (1998) found “no strong evidence that attrition has seriously distorted the representativeness of the PSID . . . and considerable evidence that its cross-sectional representativeness has remained roughly intact.”

4. The calculations in table 8.1 were graciously provided by Thomas Vartanian.

5. Boisjoly, Harris, and Duncan (1998) find, using the PSID, that the percentage black of all children receiving welfare in any one calendar year gradually moved upward from 1973 to 1990 from the low 40 percent range to 52 percent, suggesting that the black proportion of the welfare population was lower back when the press began to overrepresent welfare as a “black program” in the 1960s and 1970s.

6. For an alternative perspective, see Clawson and Trice 2000. They provide evidence that the mass media continued to overrepresent blacks in news stories about poverty and welfare in the 1993–98 period when welfare reform was being debated and assessed. While this is certainly correct for poverty, it is less so for welfare, if we compare their calculations to the various data presented in this chapter.

7. Steven Levine provided the point in conversation that Christie Whitman suffered from *e* envy. Lacking an *e* in her last name prevented her from being a *Whiteman*.

8. Michel Foucault (1973) has emphasized that pictures only become coherent by virtue of a “cycle of representation” whereby a circuitry connects a picture to interpretations by the viewing subject that are needed to visualize the viewed object. Foucault goes on to stress that the cycle of representation necessarily combines the *image* of a picture with the *text* of interpretations to make the viewed object that is therefore better conceived as a text/image, or what Foucault calls a “calligram.”