

Washington and Lee University

**Excessive Individualism and the Rhetoric of Poverty:
How *Personal Responsibility* and *Dependency* Do Not Teach a Man to Fish**

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Abstract

We live in a world where institutions can't be trusted, individualism is one of the highest shared values, and we miss a sense of community. How does this atmosphere and outlook on life affect our discussion of poverty? It affects the rhetoric. The words used to describe poverty have been shaped by our excessively individualistic mindset, which in turn shapes the way we think critically about issues pertaining to poverty. How can we accurately address issues of poverty when our language skews and limits our perception of poverty?

Excessive Individualism and the Rhetoric of Poverty:***How Personal Responsibility and Dependency Do Not Teach a Man to Fish***

“At every turn, they [liberals] try to substitute government largesse for individual responsibility. Dependency is death to initiative, risk-taking and opportunity. Dependency is a culture-killing drug. We have got to fight it like the poison it is.”

- Mitt Romney 2008¹

Dependency: politicians harp on it, upper- and middle-class Americans complain about it, and the people who are labeled ‘dependent’ – the ones with the most interest – don't seem to have much of a place at the table. Mitt Romney, a presidential candidate in 2012 and a potential candidate in 2008, spoke of dependency as if it was death. He literally called it a poison that kills culture and is akin to death. On the other end of the spectrum, he fought for individual responsibility, claiming that this value is what

¹ Speeches to Conservative Political Action Conference, found through OnTheIssues.org.

Americans should be aiming towards. How do these words elicit so much emotion, and even more concerning, actions that stem from those extreme connotations and fierce emotional reaction? The connotation associated broadly with the word ‘dependency’ is typically negative. When ten Washington and Lee students² were asked what they thought of after hearing the term ‘dependency,’ they replied with: “negative,” “bad,” and one student even applied it to a personal characteristic, calling that person “a leech” (Various W&L Students). Contrarily, think of the term ‘personal responsibility.’ Similarly, the term ‘personal responsibility’ elicits a positive response, and people often associate it with trustworthiness. It is usually deemed beneficial for an individual and associated with empowerment and success. These terms are heavily weighted with specific connotations that affect our perception of them.

In today’s society, we use those highly provocative terms to describe issues related to poverty. As seen above, Mitt Romney uses ‘dependency’ – in exactly the negative way we will examine – in political discourse to a room full of powerful politicians. Personal responsibility is seen most explicitly in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Both of them are also used, not as formally, in colloquial speech to define and characterize other people. Each term has its own extreme connotation, one that elicits emotions and actions from those who hear it. The terms ‘dependency’ and ‘personal responsibility’ pepper our discussions of poverty

² Please note that Washington and Lee University serves a small demographic of students ages 18-22, whose primary racial background is Caucasian and whose primary socioeconomic status level is above average and well above the poverty line. Out of the ten students who answered questions about the connotations of these terms, only two said they had personally experienced poverty related issues first hand. This question was only meant to show that there are real, existing people who connect these terms with specific connotations.

and the issues associated with poverty, but because of their extreme connotations, they do not fully or accurately capture the picture of poverty in the US today.

Excessive Individualism in the U.S.

How have these terms come to have the extreme connotations we associate with them today? I argue that our excessively individualistic society – a society that values individual rights, choice, and action above all – has shaped the words we use today. We live in a ‘me, me, me’ society, which affects the way we talk and interact with the world around us. I chose to study the terms above because of their relevance to discourse and discussion about poverty today. They are visible. The public is aware, at least minimally, of their association with the discussion of poverty. However, I could have chosen an array of terms; I had few rhetorical limits because nearly every term we use today has been shaped and influenced by our excessively individualistic society. I argue that these terms are problematic primarily because their extreme connotations have been created by a biased and one-sided perception: excessive individualism. So what exactly is excessive individualism?

Institutions have a long history in conjunction with human existence. Where there are groups of people, there are institutions. Ask any sociologist, read anything by Emile Durkheim, or simply look around at your surroundings, and the constant weighty presence of institutions is undeniable. Even the most secluded person – even a hermit – was once part of the familial institution (it is impossible to be born without a biological mother and father), which helped shape and cultivate him today. Institutions are powerful

and influential in every person's life. Although institutions are always there, that does not mean they are always appreciated.

The authority associated with institutions is often disliked and discredited. Because institutions structure and systemize relationships between people, they must necessarily restrict some actions and some persons. Realistically, not everyone has agreeable values, and when pluralism exists within a community, restrictions must exist in order to establish community relationships. Philip Rieff, a twentieth-century sociologist, describes the role of institutions as "setting as internalities those distinctions between right actions and wrong that unite men and permit them the fundamental pleasure of agreement" (Rieff 4). Ultimately, Rieff believes that institutions give us the nos in life. Institutions give us the restrictions necessary in a pluralistic community, but those restrictions tend to sound like a list of rules and regulations. He gives the example of the early Christian church, whose institutional power was "embedded in a consensus of 'shalt not'" (Rieff 15). He goes on to explain that, at the time of the early church, Christians wanted that distinction and restriction. Early Christians found that Christian asceticism and control was in accordance with positive asceticism.³ However, the Christian religion as a controlling institution no longer works today because we no longer see the list of 'shalt not' as freeing; instead, we see the 'shalt not' as a restriction of our freedom.

Just as we have questioned and even rejected Christianity's list of 'shalt nots,' we have also rejected many other institution that restricts our freedoms, namely, all large and

³ Asceticism is the practice of self-discipline. There is negative and positive asceticism. Negative asceticism is the list of 'shalt nots.' According to Rieff, positive asceticism is the opposite; it is the belief that the only 'shalt not' is 'shalt not,' implying that the only true wrong is denying yourself. Positive asceticism sounds very similar to today's individualistic conception of freedom.

powerful institutions. In fact, many people today are trying to take a step back from and extract themselves and their lives from strongly institutionalized groups. Instead of giving us a healthy and appreciated structure, institutions have become the Negative Nancys and no-sayers. Rieff sees this downward spiral when he states, “the death of a culture begins when its normative institutions fail to communicate ideals in ways that remain inwardly compelling” (Rieff 18). We do not find the ‘nos’ to be compelling, only restrictive and negative. Because of the negativity that stems from institutions’ inherent nature of restriction, we, as the entire U.S. society, have tried to distance ourselves from institutions. Rieff argues that there is a pervading, even hostile, distrust towards institutions among Americans. He argues the primary reason why we have that distrust of institutions is their inherent nature of restriction. This distrust, as well as a general desire to extract oneself from institutions, has led people to take a step back from institutions. Homeschooling has grown in popularity⁴ because parents distrust the public school institution. The mass media is rarely trusted, and people have begun compiling their own news, thanks to technological commodities such as Twitter. Political parties foster some of the most hate and distrust humans can possibly muster. Surely, you have seen *House of Cards*.

Arguably, it is only the most powerful and controlling institutions that we have begun to distrust. The previous three examples are some of the largest, most powerful, and most monopolistic institutions found in the U.S., so the idea of *all* institutions being distrusted may be biased. According to many sociologists, the family is an institution. However, it is smaller and often generously takes into account all the needs and welfare

⁴ “The increase in the percentage of home-schooled students from 1999 to 2007 represents a 74 percent relative increase over the 8-year period and a 36 percent relative increase since 2003” (*The Condition of Education 2009* quoted by Joel Spring in “American Education”).

of each member of the institution. Does their generosity make them more trustworthy and liked? Is it the small scale in which they exist that make them more preferable? I argue that it is the largest and most powerful institutions that have pushed us away from harmony with institutions. The institutions that cannot or do not take into account the well-being of every member – those institutions too large and powerful to concern themselves with something so small as individual well-being – are the distrusted and hated institutions. But because of their strength, they have pushed us into the opposite direction with much more force than we could have imagined.

Rieff contrasts institutions with individuals, claiming that individuals are yes-sayers. Individuals are concerned with what is best for them. They create their own world, and reject or ignore the world created by institutions. They believe the power to do and be anything lies in their hands. They are proponents of positive asceticism, personal freedom, and self-fulfillment. Instead of trusting institutions, they trust themselves. Ultimately, we have rejected the value of institutions and replaced it with the value of individualism. We can see that the U.S. values individualism over almost all else in everyday realities. We live in a society of decadence, immediate satisfaction, and a ‘me, me, me’ attitude. Although a biased demographic, being surrounded by college students, I hear the constant talk – and coinciding action – that college is a time for self-exploration, that it is literally a full four years dedicated to only thinking about oneself. The liberal mindset of many young Americans also reiterates the individualism because their most significant political value is individual freedom. Through and through, we have proven to be Rieff’s individualistic yes-sayers.

Individualism in the Rhetoric of Poverty

As individualism has taken the U.S. by storm, it has influenced the power and meaning of our language. Language reflects and reproduces culture; the sociologist Peter Berger wrote,

The fact of language, even if taken by itself, can readily be seen as the imposition of order upon experience. Language nomizes by imposing differentiation and structure upon the ongoing flux of experience... every empirical language may be said to constitute a nomos in the making. (Berger 20)⁵

Berger is explicit in the power and influence he attributes to language. It orders and colors our experiences. It gives stability and meaning to experiences. It allows us to build our worldview. With so much strength and power, we must tread carefully with language, because it has shaped our thoughts, the way we view the world, and our understanding of life. Language is an incredibly important, arguably the most important, tool we have for understanding the world around us. The language used to describe poverty – the issues and persons associated with poverty – is no different. Poverty language is powerful in reflecting and reproducing perceptions of poverty, and it is influenced by our excessive individualism. Individualism has added new meaning to certain words, such as personal responsibility and dependence. Why do these words have specific connotations? Our excessively individualistic society has charged these words with meaning, so that they cannot escape their burden of either a positive or negative connotation. Before we look at the burdens and problems associated with these words, we must first study the context in which they are used in our excessively individualistic society.

⁵ The noun “nomos” is a term created and used by Berger and is defined by him as the values that give order to the human experience. “Nomizes” is the verb form and can be considered philosophical world-building.

Personal Responsibility in Poverty Rhetoric

In particular, one term that has not escaped the extreme coloring of excessive individualism is ‘personal responsibility.’ The idea of personal responsibility comes from an individualistic mindset; even simply the term ‘personal responsibility’ is inherently individual, with the emphasis and subject pointing towards one person and their individual actions. It is referring to a person and their particular responsibility. Iris Marion Young, a professor and academic of political science, describes its rhetorical language as individualistic when she poses this question: “What does the ‘personal’ in the phrase ‘personal responsibility’ do? It emphasizes that the responsibility you have is for yourself and your family” (Young *Responsibility for Justice* 10).⁶ It is a self-centered term, directed at individuals, for individuals.

Through our individualistic mindset, personal responsibility seems inextricable from success. It is a word often associated with positivity (however, we will later discuss that it is not a positive term for everyone). Excessive individualism prides itself in personal responsibility, making it a success story. Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill describe the correlation between poverty and success – and therefore personal responsibility – by saying, “debates about what the rest of society owes the less fortunate are often based on underlying assumptions about why people are rich or poor, successful or unsuccessful” (Haskins and Sawhill 85). Poverty discussions revolve around personal action. As I mentioned earlier in regards to Rieff, each person must create his own worldview, his own success story. It is his personal responsibility to build his world; “life is individual. Well-being is a delicate personal achievement” (Rieff 50). No one else can

⁶ She expands individualism to the family, and although I’ve chosen not to, she has valid and visible points. I did previously address the fact that the family, at the very least, is not meant to be seen as one of the mistrusted institutions.

create your well-being or your successful world for you. Instead, the personal responsibility has made it, well, personal, and it is up to the individual to build a successful world. Personal responsibility becomes necessary for each person to attain a life of well-being. It is necessary for a person to live, or so it seems. Their life, worldview, and success are reliant on their drive for personal responsibility, at least according to the values of excessive individualism.

This individualistic ideal of personal responsibility can be seen in the United States' politics and policies. Young recognizes the political emergence of the personal responsibility rhetoric, claiming that it "has gained ascendancy as a rationale for current policies all over the world" (Young 9). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (also known as PRWORA), instituted Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and was heralded as the "reassertion of America's work ethic."⁷ The Act itself is titled in such a way that emphasizes personal responsibility, and its component's title, TANF, emphasizes only temporary assistance in an effort to eliminate long-term dependency: "All of these programs [under PRWORA] provide only temporary placement – the objective is always to channel people into unsubsidized employment" (Rose 286). The goal is to get them into the labor-market permanently and encouraging independence. The contrast between TANF and the act TANF replaced replaced, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), shows the transition of seeing dependency as a negative thing, and needing something temporary to 'fix' it. Even just the wording of the titles of the political acts reinforce the individualistic rhetoric.

⁷ From the *U.S. Chamber of Commerce* according to *Wikipedia*

The content of the policies, with their ties to workfare, independence, and individual success, also promote personal responsibility. The reform policies implemented “a range of activities designed to push recipients into the wage-labor force” (Rose 382). This idea of encouraging, or even forcing, working in the wage-labor market in order to receive government benefits is the central concept of workfare. Within PRWORA, most programs, such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) which includes Food Stamps, have a work requirement. There are exceptions to forced labor; able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWD) are expected to work, but

Individuals are exempt if they are: (1) under 18 or over 50; (2) medically certified as physically or mentally unfit for employment; (3) a parent or other member of a household with responsibility for a dependent child; (4) otherwise exempt under subsection (d)(2); or (5) a pregnant woman. (SNAP)

The idea of workfare as being beneficial and promoting personal responsibility has caught fire in politics. Many current anti-poverty policies, especially within PRWORA, have incorporated workfare into the mandates; “work has been central to the reform, as the idea that poverty could be solved by wage-labor – or marriage – gained credence over the past three decades” (Rose 382).⁸ The so-called solution rests on the belief that workfare holds recipients accountable for their personal responsibility. They are personally required to be responsible, active, and engaged citizens in order to reap the benefits of the government.

Lawrence Mead, a professor and academic of politics, believes that personal responsibility, especially in the form of the workfare mandates in PRWORA, has been beneficial for Americans. He sees personal responsibility practically as workfare because,

⁸ Although marriage is an important part of the issue, it is not our main focus.

through mandated work requirements, individuals are actively taking responsibility for their lives, their monetary success, and their labor-market productivity. They are becoming active and engaged citizens, worthy of government reciprocation. He correlates work with success, individually and on a national level. Individually, “after 1967, a welfare mother was judged employable after her children turned six. Under FSA that age dropped to three, under PRWORA at most to one” (Mead 176). On a national level, the success of the policy was made clear in statistics when the “work levels among poor families rose sharply” (Mead 173). In the eyes of Mead, the idea of work levels rising substantially has a similar movement to a beehive, with a constant commotion, always busy and productive, and a low hum of satisfaction. Of course, in this particular beehive, none of the bees work together, share their honey, or support communal success. For Mead, the productivity of an individual bee is more important than the communal effort. In reality, we see work defined as the equivalent of individual success and fully embracing personal responsibility, and because of that definition, PRWORA is seen as successful.

Dependency in Poverty Rhetoric

Another term frequently used in poverty discourse that has been affected by our excessive individualism is ‘dependency.’ Dependency has become a negative characteristic, as seen in the one W&L student who associated it with “a leech,” and another student who claimed that dependency was “the inability to function” (Various W&L Students). Both of these perceptions dehumanize the dependent person – one student refers to the dependent person as one of the most base and lowly animals (it might even be lower than all animals if an insect isn’t considered an animal), while the

other student is basically describing a dead person, or a person without life. Similar to the second student, as seen previously, Mitt Romney associated dependency with death. Dependency is the most extreme sense of failure and inability, and not only that, but *personal* failure and inability, ultimately leading to a kind of death.⁹

Dependency is unacceptable for successful adults. Unless you are a child or a disabled person, dependency is seen as a sign of failure. You are only dependent if you are unable to be independent or if you have tried to be independent and have failed; it is a last resort. PRWORA has set apart dependent people by defining individuals who are expected to be independent, such as ABAWD in SNAP, as mentioned earlier. For Eva Feder Kittay, independence exists in the labor-market in which “the participation in a relation of reciprocity between the production of wealth and its consumption... is marked first and foremost by labor that is compensated in wages or salaries” (Kittay 191). It is a narrow definition of independence, and yet, all able-bodied adults without dependents are expected to be independent, to be able to work, to be able to contribute or function in some way. They are set apart as individuals who should be capable to stand on their own (read: independent), and also who need to be independent in order to be successful or even just live a minimally attaining life. Dependency, even if only partial, often does not even meet a sufficient standard of life because our current society and our current laws focused on personal responsibility restrict our ability or freedom to depend on others. Kittay describes dependency as a “scar” and “a characterological flaw” (Kittay 193). PRWORA expects independency and excludes the opposite by defining dependents as children and persons with disabilities. Ultimately, those two exceptions are the only

⁹ One kind of death might be akin to social death or social exclusion as outlined by Caterina Ruggeri Laderchi in her working paper “Does it matter that we don’t agree on the definition of poverty? A Comparison of Four Approaches” starting on page 20.

people who are allowed to be, or who can successfully attain well-being, by being dependent.

Politicians often harp on the fears and inadequacies of dependency. Generally, they pose arguments based in conserving money or funding, but they are also concerned that dependency will perpetuate poverty. Ronald Reagan believed that dependency could lead to the “danger of creating a permanent culture of poverty as inescapable as any chain or bond” (Reagan). More recently, right before the presidential election in 2012, CNN posted an article titled “Why the U.S. has a Culture of Dependency,” which criticized, not welfare programs, but the way in which those programs encourage “relying on handouts” (Spalding). The article expresses its fear of dependency and what the author believes to be the affect of such dependency: “Under a culture of dependency, poverty becomes a trap, and recipients get stuck. Long-term welfare recipients lose work habits and job skills and miss out on the marketplace contacts that lead to job opportunities” (Spalding). The author supports workfare, and generally believes that welfare dependency opposes the values and work ethic of the U.S. The rhetoric of dependency has been used in light of welfare programs, and the political rhetoric, through media outlets such as the CNN article, has crept into public and colloquial discussions. People in the U.S. are constantly referring to welfare dependency as a drain on the economy, and even bad for the dependents. Their public argument tends to be akin to the proverb: If you give a man a fish, he will eat for a day; if you teach a man to fish, he will eat for a lifetime.

This proverb goes back to workfare. If that man is able to work and earn his own consistent income, he can live his own life, without help from the government. The opposite of dependency is, yes independence, but also being able to function and work in

society without needing support from others, namely the government. Just as personal responsibility can be achieved through work, dependency can be eliminated through work. PRWORA tried to kill two birds with one stone, reaping the supposed benefits of workfare. We have seen that policies and the general public agree that work is essential to ridding ourselves of dependency; Mead supports this argument, saying that because of work enforcement, “government has set about enforcing an obligation that, studies show, most Americans think is essential to full membership in the society” (Mead 174). Mead explicitly claims that the value and civic membership of a person is based on whether they can work. If work is considered an opposite of dependency, and work is also considered a primary indicator of value, then, through their transitive relationship,¹⁰ dependency is the opposite of value. It is neither valued nor valuable. A person’s worth is based on how dependent or independent he or she is. We have tied up identity with dependency, and yet dependency is automatically a negative perception, making people inherently less valuable. Our language not only fails to capture the complexities of our conversations about poverty, it also perpetuates or even exacerbates the submission of dependency and exaltation of personal responsibility in a social structure hierarchy.

The Other Understanding of Poverty Rhetoric

These two terms – personal responsibility and dependency – have been strongly influenced by our strongly held value of individualism. It skews the terms to the point of them being biased and an unrealistic way to address the problems associated with poverty. The terms and their current connotations do not reflect actual human interactions because their extreme sway towards excessively individualism doesn’t take into account

¹⁰ A math property states: if $a=b$ and $b=c$, then $a=c$.

necessary human and community relationships. Theologian Robert M. Franklin adamantly states, “We are not autonomous, detached moral agents. In this sense, Immanuel Kant and John Rawls got the moral anthropology wrong. Humans are fundamentally interdependent and responsible for the fabric of society that is shared by all” (Franklin 240). Young, in a different book than the one we have previously mentioned, reiterates that “it is foolish to deny the reality of groups” (Young “Faces of Oppression” 47). Even Haidt, a believer in individual self-preservation and “promoting our own interests,” believes humans are simultaneously also groupish, meaning “that our minds contain a variety of mental mechanism that make us adept at promoting our group’s interests” (Haidt 485). Haidt also discusses the benefits and values of grouping together, claiming, “The tribes that were more cohesive generally won” in regards to competition with other groups. Cohesiveness, working together to support each other, is more successful. Whether or not we want to believe it or use rhetoric to reflect it, we are a relational species and a reliant on communal support.

The Problematic Rhetoric of Personal Responsibility

The first term of contention, personal responsibility, is problematic because it creates a hierarchy of power and potentially oppression. Personal responsibility is only used to refer to individuals who don’t have personal responsibility. It follows actions that are deemed irresponsible. One W&L student, when asked described a situation she imagined the term ‘personal responsibility’ would be used in colloquial speech, said, “when a child is being scolded by her parents, when she doesn’t have personal responsibility, but needs to get it” (Various W&L Students). Another student describes similar situations, claiming that ‘personal responsibility’ is used in “classroom speech” to

chide children or “when a coach is reminding her athletes to do something” (Various W&L Students). Personal responsibility is a term used by people in authority (supposedly responsible people) to put powerless or even oppressed people (supposedly irresponsible people) in their rightful place at the bottom of the totem pole.

Young agrees with this hierarchy and acknowledges that personal responsibility is used primarily in relation to “the attributes and behavior of poor individuals” (Young 4). She claims that the concept of personal responsibility is unfairly only used in regards to impoverished people. Poor people are much more threatened by the discussion of personal responsibility because “the personal responsibility discourse attempts to isolate the deviant poor and render them particularly blameworthy for their condition” (Young *Responsibility for Justice* 23). No upper- or middle-class people have policies concerning their well-being under the title, or mask, of personal responsibility. Despite the fact that “many relatively privileged people behave irresponsibly in all kinds of ways,” they rarely suffer the same standard of repercussions that an impoverished person would (Young 25). No upper- or middle-class people have their character traits challenged through the rhetoric of a policy act, but lower-class Americans are often chided and even punished because of their lack of personal responsibility.

PRWORA is a perfect example of how personal responsibility is specifically only geared towards impoverished individuals. It is a policy for the poor, and yet it is filled with stipulations, punishments, and the feeling of being scolded. TANF requires that recipients work and it has a time limit; it encourages independence through being a part of the labor-market and through not ‘depending’ on benefits for too long of a time period. However, because of these individualistic and independently centered stipulations, “over

the last 18 years, the national TANF average monthly caseload has fallen by almost two-thirds — from 4.7 million families in 1996 to 1.7 million families in 2013 — even as poverty and deep poverty have worsened” (Floyd and Schott). In Lexington, VA, despite the fact that nearly 13% of the population lives under 50% of the poverty and therefore financially qualify for TANF, less than 0.5% of the population actually receives TANF, primarily because they are not deemed independent enough or personally responsible through time limits and work requirements (“Lexington, Virginia”). The political rhetoric of personal responsibility affects real lives through PRWORA’s stipulations and definitions.

Another problem with the term personal responsibility is the assumption that the situation in which the irresponsible person is in is the fault or responsibility solely of that person. That is not the case. We live in a complex, interconnected world in which all of our situations have been influenced on some level by other people, whether by close-knit communities or larger institutions. The society-individual relationship, defined on a philosophical level, is that “culture is objective in that it confronts man as an assemblage of objects in the real world existing outside his own consciousness” (Berger 10). Berger believes that every human inherits the world around him and begins and ends life within a specific social context. Sociologist John Iceland is concerned we don’t recognize the complexity of poverty-related issues by saying, we perpetuate “the overwhelming emphasis on individual-level attributes as the ‘causes’ of poverty, an emphasis that avoids recognition of politics, institutions, or structural inequality” (Iceland 71). This view could potentially be pushed too far one direction, claiming the people have no free will and are only subject to their surroundings. However, Young brings it back to a

complex but accurate inclusion of both communal and individual: “constructing structural causation and personal responsibility as mutually exclusive ways of accounting for poverty presumes the targeted nature of a liability conception of responsibility” (Young *Responsibility for Justice* 18). Personal responsibility, and as we will see, dependency, does not adequately address the issues and causes of poverty because it is too encompassing of one side of the argument: the excessively individualistic side that refuses to acknowledge our complex structural and institutional – ultimately communal – creation and perpetuation of poverty.

The Problematic Rhetoric of Dependency

Dependency, especially in terms of work and self-value, is a controversial topic. Mead’s claim that work is the basis for value and civic membership has a potentially extreme ethical component. It implies that lack of work, as well as dependency, is therefore stripping persons of their value and civic membership. Following this bold claim, Mead then must make exceptions and justifications for people who are not able to work. He excuses disabled persons – people who “can prove themselves physically or mentally unable to work” – but that proof is blurry at best (Mead 176). What defines a disabled person? Certainly they can do certain jobs that are not labor intensive or require high levels of thought. He also excuses children, but does the cutoff age for child-labor laws reflect the abilities of children? By making value dependent on work, Mead is on a slippery slope.

Mead also doesn’t excuse plenty of people. His idea of who can be dependent and who must work in order to gain independence is based primarily on PRWORA’s

ABAWD. He leaves a lot of vulnerable people out of the equation. What about a person who has been constantly searching for a job, but cannot find one because of the economy, or the jobs he can find are such low-paying and disrespected jobs that he is being exploited by taking that job? Menial jobs – the jobs available for low-income, low-educated people – often exploit and oppress the employees “because workers suffer material deprivation and a loss of control, and hence are deprived of important elements of self-respect” (Young “Faces of Oppression” 49). This man is trying to be a productive member of society, but either can’t or by doing so, he would be sacrificing his dignity. Those people aren’t the only ones negatively affected by defining the need for independence through workfare. A student or trainee who does not have the time to work are working towards being a productive member of society – one of Mead’s primary values and goals – but because it is not a traditional job within the labor-workforce, it doesn’t count as work. Similarly, untraditional jobs such as motherhood don’t count as work. A mother who is raising children and caring for her home – arguably one of the most intensive ‘jobs’ – does not constitute as working, and therefore, not independent or valued.

When these nontraditional jobs do not count as work, it not only is ethically charged because it questions the value of a person, it is also visibly harmful to those individuals. This argument can’t solely exist in ethics; it affects real people. First, we will make the assumption, although controversial especially in light of the recession, that “there are always some job openings, because people move frequently in and out of the labor market and also in and out of jobs, opening slots for others” (Haskins and Sawhill 95). If there are jobs available, the most prominent reason for not taking a job, and

therefore not receiving benefits through workfare, is the idea that they are actually working, just not in a job that is located in the labor market:

When asked why they did not work in the previous year, only 11 percent of poor men and 4 percent of poor women ages eighteen through sixty-four said it was because they “could not find work.” Much more important were such factors as being ill or disabled, going to school, retirement, or taking care of home or family (the last-mentioned being especially true for women). (Haskins and Sawhill 95)

Motherhood and caring for a home are certainly hard work, yet Mead and our current policies do not view it as a job. A parent of children over six years of age can only receive TANF if she works over 30 hours per week, and that is only one of the stipulations and hoops to jump through (“Characteristics and Financial Circumstances of TANF Recipients, Fiscal Year 2010”). On top of that, I question the actual reasons and motives behind arguments of dependency. Many people who fear welfare dependency claim to do so for the well-being of the dependent, but I believe that argument is a thin veneer to cover their actual reasoning: money. I think most public officials and politicians who claim that welfare dependency is bad for the personal growth of the dependent are actually arguing that welfare dependency is bad for the economy. They are, through the oppression and exploitation of others, supporting the labor-market by forcing people to work for it. They are putting the health of the economy over health of persons.

Lastly in regards to dependency, I want to argue that the term dependency is seen in a more negative light when it is applied to already-impoverished persons than when it is associated with middle- or upper-class persons. This argument parallels Young’s discussion of personal responsibility being geared only towards those who are not

deemed responsible. For example, a middle-class American – let’s say, a privileged white woman attending a top university – goes to a job fair or seeks networking opportunities in order to get a job after graduating. She is seen as someone who is taking charge of her life and using the resources given to her. Now an impoverished individual – let’s say, a lower-class, uneducated black woman – attempts to find networking opportunities. She is viewed as someone who is incapable of finding a job on her own, she is lazy, and she is dependent on the help of others. Meanwhile, in a realistic world, the white woman finds a job while the black woman is left, not only stigmatized, but also jobless. Dependency is almost exclusively used to refer to impoverished individuals, and is, even just in that context alone, considered a negative term. Overall, dependency has been a term tainted with personal failure and inability. It goes hand-in-hand with personal responsibility. The two terms have been used solely to describe an excessively individualist society, and because of their skewed connotation, they cannot fully contribute to the complex discussion of poverty-related issues.

Conclusion:*Awareness of Community (and Partial Rejection of Excessive Individualism)*

The definition of welfare, as given by Google, is “the health, happiness, and fortunes of a person or group.” First, it is ironic that the definition of welfare includes a communal aspect – it includes the group level – yet our popular concepts of personal responsibility and dependence on welfare imply that welfare is a singular endeavor. Also, it is ironic that our popular political notion of welfare is an endeavor, which implies that it is actively sought out and worked towards. Contrarily, the Google definition does not

attribute it to an action, but claims it is a state of being. I'm not necessarily advocating for the Google definition or claiming that it is the only right definition of welfare, but I want to point out that there are other ways to look at the definition of welfare and its relationship to personal responsibility and dependence. Welfare, personal responsibility, and dependency only go hand-in-hand today, not because of a dictionary definition of the two of them, but because of the way our individualistic culture has influenced them. Somehow, the popular idea of welfare – of having an adequate well-being – is not dignified enough in itself to simply be given it. An individual must work for welfare, for his well-being, so much so that he must be completely personally responsible and cannot be overly dependent on the help of someone else. Why isn't well-being simply a human right? Why does it have to be worked for? And why do we make it more difficult to obtain well-being by frowning down upon any help in that endeavor?

In sharp contrast to our extremely individualistic rhetoric, anti-poverty policies can actually better address the well-being of all people through community ties. Dependency, if paired with encouragement and teaching, can be incredibly beneficial. Dependency could truly complete the proverb of teaching a man to fish. The proverb stated earlier – if you give a man a fish, he will eat for a day; if you teach a man to fish, he will eat for a lifetime – may in theory sound like a good idea, but our current policy is not doing any teaching. It is requiring every man to fish and then giving one fish to a small percentage of the few unlucky and therefore starving fishermen. Even that simple metaphor is generous to the disastrous, complex, and cyclical harm structural poverty has perpetuated over the years. Instead, we need to change our rhetoric; if we aren't teaching a man to fish, let's not claim we are. If we want to teach a man to fish, let's work together

as a community to give him those opportunities and resources. Studies actually show that having strong social ties and communal involvement can help increase welfare and well-being. Ultimately, the goals of personal growth, responsibility, and sufficiency (obtaining a fish or two) can all be fostered and cultivated through dependency, or at least some acknowledgement that communal ties and relying on others is healthy and positive.

I am not, however, advocating for a politician to whole-heartedly embrace more communal language, such as ‘working together,’ ‘collaboration,’ or ‘helping your neighbor when they are down.’ It sounds like the natural solution, but I worry that it could easily go awry: a politician with community-centered language could sound as if he is a hippy or a communist, at least according to the general US population if the culture around such language hasn’t changed. The culture must change first. I think it needs to be a grassroots movement, something that the Average Joe latches onto. In this instance, the culture changes the language, not the language changes the culture. I am advocating for awareness. With the 2016 Presidential election just around the corner, the terms of ‘dependency’ and ‘personal responsibility’ will be used frequently, especially in regards to welfare policy. The term ‘Beyoncé Voter’¹¹ has already entered campaign discussion, and is arguably the contemporary continuation of the ‘Welfare Queen’ (Plank). Do not let campaign rhetoric negatively define a word, or worse yet, a population. Dependency does not equal laziness or a leech, and all humans are somewhat dependent, not just the impoverished.

¹¹ The Beyoncé Voter is a demographic primarily associated with and supporting Hillary Clinton. A Beyoncé Voter is a strong, independent young woman. However, some people, primarily from the right, are claiming that this so-called independence is really just depending on the government (for birth control, healthcare, etc.) instead of depending on a husband. Check it out on YouTube.

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