Women's Transitions from Welfare to Paid Work and Education: Learning to Navigate the Systems

Cynthia Lee Andruske
University of British Columbia

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Abstract:The purpose of this research is to highlight women's strategies for navigating their transitions from welfare to paid work and education.

Background: Within the North American context, governments, politicians, and the general public demand welfare roles be slashed quickly to reduce costs and "dependency." The response in the United States has been to implement workfare for welfare. Canada is beginning to follow the U.S. to reduce deficits and streamline social programs. In 1993, the British Columbia provincial government began its response through a Premier's Summit to create the Ministry of Skills, Training, and Labour by combining elements from the Ministry of Social Services, Ministry of Labour and Consumer Affairs, and the Ministry of Advanced Education and Training and Technology (Premier's Summit, 1993) to implement the Skills Now Program. In consultation with labour, education, business, and communities, government created Skills Now to meet the demands of the 21st Century so British Columbians would not be "excluded from full participation in the BC labour force because they do not have the right kind of skills demanded in today's labour market" (Year One Report, 1995, p. 3). To provide skills, training, or post-secondary education for the global and technological market, Skills Now sought to create a "seamless learning system" linking high school, workplace, post-secondary education, retraining in communities, and welfare to work force and education. However, government's new policy direction did not take into account other structures and systems that women on social assistance would need to navigate in order to take advantage of the seamless learning system.

Purpose: At first glance, a seamless learning system would appear to resolve access, relevance, cost, and accountability questions. It would also prevent drop out; promote life long learning; provide retraining for displaced workers; and integrate into the work force welfare recipients. However, a system attempting to be all things to all people, especially welfare recipients, and, in particular single mothers on welfare, may not necessarily take into account women's actual needs as they attempt to leave social assistance. For example, start up costs (clothing, extra food, and transportation) for work and education often strain women's already tight budgets, and government subsidies, when available, by no means cover the extra costs. Commencing in August, 1998, the BC government now requires that people, except mothers with children under 7, sign up for a government approved training program after attending an information session even **before** they may apply for welfare. Again, this policy discounts women's needs, for they may not have food or shelter, and they may be wasting time sitting in an information session, especially if their circumstances are dire. This just seems, in part, like another punitive measure directed against those in need.

As government requires attendance in some form of training or career program, more and more program providers appear in the community, often leading to duplication and program redundancy. Frequently, when mandated to enter these programs, women find their skills and needs are not acknowledged as they attempt to gain access to welfare monies in an effort to improve their lives and those of their children. To better understand how women leave welfare, I am exploring women's perspectives of how they navigate structures and systems in their attempts to make transitions from welfare to paid work and education. My goal is to listen to women's realities as they reveal strategies, dispositions, practices, or knowledge they learn in their transitions while navigating structures as active and creative agents, not as victims, to avoid welfare's "revolving door."

Theoretical Framework: Government policies, agencies, and pre-employment and training programs create tension between women's lived realities and systemic demands upon them. Often government agents and programs are caught in a tug-of-war between fulfilling government quotas and acting as advocates for women. Staff find themselves in a dilemma between taking clients most ready as opposed to those in most "need" who may benefit greatly from the programs. However, these women may not fulfil the statistical requirements of government in "getting a job - any job." Furthermore, government employees fluctuate between helping women by releasing information, creating "dependency," or disillusionment.

Agencies, programs, institutions, groups of women, families, friends, and support networks form different social fields. These may overlap. In their everyday lives, women occupy and operate within dynamic fields of forces or symbolic sites where collective symbolic struggles occur for position (Harker, Mahar, & Wilkes, 1990). According to Bourdieu (1977), within social fields, we learn "the rules of the game" to navigate systems and fields and find our places with dynamic social relationships. We enter into these social fields with cultural capital (education) and symbolic capital (status). We are admitted entry into the fields based on dispositions (manners, incorporated possibilities) we display and the types of "capital" we "possess." Also, we may be born into social fields and already have a disposition for certain types of behaviours and capitals. Within fields, individuals strategize for position and power depending upon the individual's set of dispositions (habitus), social capital (networks), cultural capital (education), and symbolic capital (prestige). Moreover, we know when someone belongs to our group, status, or class by virtue of mannerisms and language spoken. Individuals are stigmatized, kept out, or are made to feel uncomfortable within these groups through unspoken "rules of the game" or forms of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu's theory of social practice provides a backdrop for understanding women's transitions from welfare to paid work and education.

Research Design: Since the purpose of my research is to explore women's transitions and learning within their everyday worlds, I am collecting data through thematic life history interviews. These include: welfare, education, work, family, children, and transitions. Life histories link women's lived and unlived lives, experiences, and relationships to social structures over time (Alheit, 1994; Bertaux, 1981). This approach highlights structural influences and women's abilities to plan their lives while instigating changes on institutions through dispositions they discover learning to navigate life experiences. Women's life histories provide a learning ground for their future transitions (Alheit, 1994). Individuals' life histories link their everyday experience and the ways they learn through their patterns of practice (Bertaux, 1981). These, plus social relations, are further connected to socio-structural relations of micro and macro structures. Institutionalized relations underlie socio-structural relations linked to individuals through social relationships bound across time, space, and embedded within historical time frames and events (Bertaux, 1981). Thus, life histories can link women's everyday subjective experiences to larger structural influences impinging upon them and may act as vehicles for individuals to observe self-transformation.

To explore these themes, I am interviewing women. However, the interviews are more similar to conversations where the interviewees become conversational partners (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Unlike survey interviews, through conversational interviews, the interviewer and interviewee develop a more cooperative experience and "work together to achieve the shared goal of understanding" (p. 11) by exploring themes or emerging themes "to provide the thick description that builds toward an overall picture" (p. 11).

To date, since this work is still in progress, I have interviewed 5 women on welfare age 40 and older and 3 single mothers with children under age 7. I chose these women, for they often "fall between the cracks of programs" since pre-employment program criteria is written primarily for the 19 to 25 age groups. Trainers seem to prefer individuals in their thirties, so I have included this group in my study to compare their responses and needs with the others. So far 2 women in this age group have joined my study. To date, only 1 woman declined, after initially agreeing, to participate in my study, for she said,"My life is going really great now, and I just don't want to dredge up the past right now." The recruitment process is ongoing through snowball sampling where each woman suggests another participant. In the meantime, I am setting up interviews with another 10 women. My plans are to interview approximately 30 women (or less depending

upon when information becomes saturated) for a year with follow-up interviews at 3 month intervals. I have chosen to follow women for a year to watch their process of transitions as they learn to navigate various systems and structures affecting their paths from welfare.

All women, except one, are mothers of at least one child. Two women grew up in very affluent homes while others grew up in low income working families. Only one woman was raised on welfare, and her mother later left welfare for paid work. Before resorting to social assistance, two women indicated that the combined income with a partner surpassed $100,000 a year, and another woman was quite well off. All women have a GED (General Education Diploma) or Grade 12, and 1 woman is one credit short of Grade 12, but she has attended college. Currently, 3 are enrolled in college (2 have student loans, and the other is on a special opportunities grant), 3 are working (1 collects a childcare subsidy, and 1 is on medical and dental benefits from welfare), and 4 are on assistance (2 of these are seeking disability, and 2 are working part-time on and off).

The recruiting process has been interesting and very time consuming. Initially, I invite women for coffee to explain my study, see if they are interested, and determine when I may make a follow up call to see if they will participate. Sometimes, I have had to make 3 or more appointments with women before we actually meet, for they are extremely busy as they continue their transitions from welfare by working, taking courses, or looking for work. Once I interview women, I transcribe the taped conversations and return the first one to them so that they may review it. To date, I have met with women for 1 to 3 intensive interviews to discuss the major themes of my research. During other interviews, we review my questions regarding previous interviews, new topics I have learned from other women, and "how's it going" for the women.

Findings to Date: Government agents and policymakers seem to believe that leaving welfare is as easy as attending a program, renewing or learning skills, desiring a job, and finding a job. However, from the initial transcribed conversations with women of their experiences attempting to leave welfare, these transitions are longer, more difficult, and more complicated than they or government might anticipate. Five themes emerged from the women's conversations with me illustrating how they begin to navigate their transitions from welfare: "just smile," "juggle the budget," "ask for permission," "know what you're entitled to," and "learning."

"Just Smile." According to Bourdieu (1977), individuals are stigmatized, excluded, or made to feel they don't belong through unspoken "rules of the game" or forms of symbolic violence to distinguish the social, cultural, and symbolic capital they possess. Many of the women I have spoken with feel this symbolic violence from some frontline staff as the women are "treated just like a number, just like an animal" as they are forced to wait in long line ups for their welfare checks, to ask a question, or to request a food voucher when they have no food. Often, they are told to go home and contact their workers by phone only to wait another day or two before the worker might have time to return the call. Also, the general public tends to impose symbolic violence on women through assumptions that "I'm a drug addict, alcoholic, a welfare bum, lazy," or "Just keep popping out babies." Little does the public know that before some women resorted to welfare to feed their children, they too came from comfortable middle class marriages.

Despite the humiliation and degradation of being on welfare, women try to overcome these feelings. One woman pointed out that the workers and clerks were "just trying to do their jobs." Some stated that some nice people can be found behind the counters although "It's not necessarily the people but just personalties, so I look past that" in order to maintain. Another woman commented that no matter how rude the person behind the counter is to her she tries to be nice, and "I just smile." This helps her cope and get what she needs for herself and her son.

"Juggle the Budget." Government wants women off welfare; however, if they go out to work, women may only keep 25% of what they earn, so financially they are not much better off. Money is extremely scarce, and no money is available for luxuries, such as brand name foods like Campbell's soup or Del Monte fruit. I was stunned to learn that women actually go hungry so that their children may eat. Additionally, their children are

often discouraged from having peers over, for when children come over it means snacks must be provided. Sometimes these snacks are the family's meals. Again, symbolic violence occurs to cut people off from one another and stigmatize through less symbolically desirable foods, such as the name brands.

Since money is extremely scarce, women strategize how to survive. They must be very astute at determining the bargains. One woman told me that one brand of toilet paper may seem cheaper; however, "You must count the sheets of toilet paper because the two brands may not have the same number of sheets in the package although one is cheaper." Another maintained that it is hard to live on the "support" or food money, for often it must be reallocated for emergencies, a child's birthday, gas or transportation, or expenses for job preparation. Through juggling the budget, women manage to survive even though they may be hungry. However, women tell me that sometimes unforseen expenses force them to ask for a food voucher so that they and their children may eat. Often, women experience symbolic violence, for they are made to feel that they cannot budget their money if they are asking for what is deemed as "extra" food.

"Ask for permission." Probably one of the most humiliating forms of symbolic violence is when grown women must "ask for permission" to make a decision. For example, one woman wanted to take a course because she felt it would help prepare her to leave welfare. However, the worker made the woman research all sorts of other courses, run around town investigating them, and provide proof that the course would be beneficial before the worker "Gave me permission to take the course." Another woman pointed out: "They want control of every decision you make. It's emotional and financial blackmail because I have children to feed, so I must do what they say."

Women push back in subtle ways. For example, one commented, "I'm not going to give up and give them total control." Another conceded that "If they don't fill out the paper, it won't happen, so I hold my tongue because they have control." However, this woman says that despite having to hold her tongue, she ultimately gets what she wants which will help her leave the system. Women learn "the rules of the game" to get what they want, and they go on to learn their rights and entitlements as illustrated in "know what you're entitled to."

"Know what you're entitled to." Through their own research, reading pamphlets, networking with others, and other strategies, women mange to accrue social, cultural, and symbolic capital. They accomplish this by creating social networks with other women as well as through government agents, past job experiences, and advocates and mentors outside government where they obtain helpful information for navigating the system. For example, one woman had worked for Human Resources a few years before she had to resort to welfare. During that time, she acquired information and knowledge about financial entitlements that were not divulged to women. She was able to access some of these resources, for she had the strategies and cultural capital to do so. She commented: "It's not like I'm asking for anything I'm not entitled to if I go through the proper channels."

Another woman managed to establish some social networks with others in a welfare office when a promised check failed to come through to help her move into another house while her furniture was sitting on a front lawn waiting to be moved. While sobbing about her predicament in the welfare office, other recipients shared information and passed on the local Member of Parliament's telephone number and other authorities that could help her.

Additionally, many women acquire forms of cultural capital by educating themselves through research and reading about their rights and entitlements. Some have told me that most people ignore the brochures and pamphlets; however, these women pointed out that many of their rights and entitlements were available if people would just read the available information.

Finally, women earn symbolic capital, even if it is grudgingly given, by knowing their rights and entitlements. Another woman stated: "It's knowing the politics of the system. Nobody wants to share information. You have to play the system." Another woman told me that she had been trying to get

information about the different disability acts. I passed on this information to her because I had finally managed to obtain the documents. The catch I told her was that a person had to know the exact title of the act or regulation that one wanted. Once she had this, her quest for the material would be easier. As time passes, women learn their rights and entitlements. Many indicated that they wanted to participate in my study so that their experiences could be shared with other women so that they would become aware of their rights and entitlements sooner.

"Learning." By strategizing, the women told me that they are learning to navigate the system. Through different programs, their dispositions are changing. For example, women pointed out that they were learning to communicate differently. They were learning to listen instead of interrupting people or being aggressive. They learned to look differently so that people would not stereotype them by their dress or appearance. Thus, their dispositions did not fit those of a woman on welfare. In fact, one woman was on welfare, and her friend was not; however, other people always thought the friend was on welfare because she looked unkept. Many of the women felt they were learning to budget even more effectively. Most of the women are learning that they are able to navigate the system to learn their entitlements and rights. Furthermore, they are learning "That's what you have to learn to do - play the game."

Overall, despite the challenges, stresses, and set backs, the women are learning to navigate the system by strategizing how to use their dispositions and through the acquisition or reawakening of different capitals. They are articulating the "rules of the game," and they are returning the symbolic violence they have endured by learning how to demand their rights and entitlements. It is a long, complicated, serendipitous, and courageous walk for the women from welfare.

Implications for Adult Education: One of the most significant contributions of my research is that the women's voices and experiences may be heard as they recount the impact government and educational policies have on their lives. Perhaps, too, my study will highlight the need to train government workers about the relationship between education and how they too are, in a sense a form of adult educator. Ultimately, my goal is to influence education, training, and government policies for women seeking to make transitions from welfare to paid work and education so that their needs will be examined holistically instead of just providing them with a "quick fix."

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