

Rural, Low Income Mother's Attitudes about Welfare

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Surprisingly, even those who are getting welfare benefits have negative attitudes about those who receive welfare. One explanation of how individuals validate dissonant feelings comes from psychological economics. Kahneman and Sugden (2005) hypothesize that we adapt to our situation—they call it “redeployment of attention.” Using this framework, a mixed methods approach was used to examine those who are welfare dependent and how they adapt their attitudes regarding their own situation.

This analysis uses data from the multi-state, longitudinal project known as “*Rural Families Speak*.” The following questions guide this analysis: (1) What are the attitudes of rural low-income mothers regarding welfare? (2) Are there difference among mothers who have been dependent upon welfare, those who have not, and those whose families were welfare-reliant when they were children?

Twenty-eight percent of these mothers had experienced TANF and had parents who had received welfare; 16% had gotten TANF but their parents had not; 22.8% had never gotten TANF but their parents had; the remaining 32.5% had no experiences with TANF. Differences among the groups were explored on demographic information and life and income satisfaction. While there were significant differences between marital status and ethnicity among the groups, there were no discernable patterns among the four groups regarding their satisfaction with their income over time or with their satisfaction with life over time.

A random sampling of the four groups found few differences in their attitudes regarding those receiving TANF: between 30-44% expressed negative attitudes, and 40-50% expressed mixed attitudes. A 23-year old mother of two, who had no welfare experience said, “...People on welfare don't want to work. Sometimes it true they don't spend their money the right way.” A 23-year old mother of 2 whose parents had received welfare had a mixed attitude: “There's two kinds of people that receive it. People that live off welfare and will never change, and then there's people that need it until they get on their feet.” A 20-year old mother of one with a positive attitude stated, “I need help so I get help. People don't understand what's really going on.” A number of those who had been welfare dependent spoke of the stigma of welfare. “It's embarrassing. People look at you funny” was a comment from a 30-year old mother of three who had experienced welfare. The mothers who used welfare differentiated themselves from “others” who abused welfare. “I think that the stigma of being on welfare is you do nothing, you sit on your butt, you just don't amount to anything. I'm not like that, but I actually know people, neighbors, who are like that, who have no ambition” said a 33-year old mother of three. “I'm not what I call a Welfarite. I do things with my life, like I'm going to school. My house is clean! [My neighbors are] just dirty...they're the epitome of what everybody assumes is welfare” was the comment from an 18-year old mother of one.

This group of mothers who have welfare experience spoke about the differences between why they *needed* assistance and others who were the “*stereotypical welfare participant*.” While there were not significant differences among the groups, it is evident those who were welfare dependent adapted their attitudes regarding their own situation while subscribing to the negative stereotypes about those receiving public benefits. Most of these mothers saw themselves as different from “those others” and indicated some level of satisfaction with their current situations.

References

Kahneman, D., & Sugden, R. (2005). Experienced utility as a standard of policy evaluation. *Environmental & Resource Economics*, 32, 161-181.

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