DAILY ACTIVITIES AND SELF-PERCEPTIONS ABOUT PRODUCTIVITY AMONG SASKATCHEWAN WELFARE RECIPIENTS

Luc Thériault

Angela Leski

Luc Thériault is associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of New Brunswick. Angela Leski is caseworker at Matheson House, Ranch Ehrlo Society, in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. A previous version of this paper was presented at the 2004 conference of CASSW held at the University of Manitoba.

Abstract: The history of social welfare shows longstanding public antipathy against those who rely on social assistance to meet their needs. With welfare comes the stigma of irresponsibility and laziness, labels that have persisted throughout the history of the welfare state. Findings from interviews with 30 social assistance recipients in two urban centres in Saskatchewan show, however, that the common perception of welfare recipients as unproductive and inactive falls short of the reality of their day-to-day lives. Participants noted parenting, volunteer and advocacy work, helping family and friends, and some participation in the labour market among their daily activities. The research also explored respondents’ own perceptions of productivity and of their role and place in the community and the larger society. While researchers occasionally observed signs of low self-esteem, participants’ stories generally revealed a high degree of personal strength and resourcefulness and values consistent with those shared by the rest of society. These results emphasize the importance of recognizing both the paid and unpaid contributions of welfare recipients to family and community well-being and to productivity.

THE HISTORY of social welfare shows longstanding public antipathy against those who rely on social assistance to meet their needs (Burman, 1996; Swanson, 2001). With welfare comes the stigma of irresponsibility and laziness, labels that have persisted throughout the history of the welfare state. Whether or not a person is considered productive is dependent on one’s relationship to the paid labour market, or how one “earns one’s keep.” To be on social assistance then, is to be considered unproductive and, from the standpoint of neo-liberal welfare reform, excluded from society.

A descriptive and exploratory research study utilizing interviews with Saskatchewan welfare recipients offers a clearer picture of their paid and unpaid involvement in the home, community, and labour market. The study illustrates the day-to-day activities of these welfare recipients and explores their perceptions of the meaningfulness of these activities in terms of the contribution to their families and to society. The findings help us to gain a better understanding of the contributions of welfare recipients to social well-being and to productivity.

Defining dependency and productivity

Implicit in arguments that welfare recipients are unproductive is that, by nature of their exclusion from the paid labour market, they contribute nothing to the functioning of the economy and the betterment of society. This argument underpins the shift toward a
welfare state that demands responsibility on the part of social assistance recipients and
that ties paid employment to citizenship and inclusion in society. In Saskatchewan, as in
other provinces across Canada, a renewed emphasis has been placed on ensuring social
assistance recipients are working, or at least looking for work (Gorlick & Brethour,
1999). Hunter and Miazdyck (2003) note that supporters of welfare reform use the
argument that “old left” models of social welfare did not demand social responsibility
from welfare recipients and that welfare use burdens the economy.

Public perception and acceptance of social assistance has changed over time in
relation to recognition of the factors leading to dependency. Early efforts to provide
assistance to the dependent poor were based on the assumption of public responsibility
for assisting those in need (Guest, 2003). Poverty, while common during the colonial
period, was viewed as unavoidable for some, and the church was called upon to respond
through the implementation of workhouses and homes for the young and sick (Guest,
2003). Negative perceptions of dependency grew stronger during the industrialization
period, when waged work became equated with independence, and the dependent status
of others was attributed to such characteristics as reliance and neediness (Michaud,
2004). By the early 1900s, however, public perception of dependency changed again as
widespread unemployment and poverty led to the recognition that factors other than
laziness contributed to unemployment (Guest, 2003).

By the 1970s public attitudes shifted yet again as the economy worsened and
welfare recipients became a target for public criticism. In Saskatchewan, Wardhaugh
(2003) found that newspaper stories increasingly placed a negative spin on welfare users,
and the poor were progressively blamed for the province’s economic woes. Welfare
recipients tended to be viewed as “lazy, irresponsible and ultimately unproductive” (p.
42), in spite of arguments to the contrary from welfare users themselves stating that they
were willing to work but there were simply not enough job opportunities available.

Indeed, despite negative public attitudes toward welfare recipients that persist
today, research has found no indication that use of the welfare system stems from lack of
interest in paid work. Rather, people choose welfare over work for a myriad of reasons,
including lack of good jobs that pay a living wage, health problems, and the belief in the
value of parenting their own children, despite the inadequate and intrusive system of

According to Marks (2004), the majority of Canadians who make the decision
between paid work and family are women, and this choice puts their identity as citizens
at risk. She cites Fraser and Gordon as pointing out that women who choose parenting
over work, even when work makes no economic sense, “have their relations with public
assistance associated with pathology” (cited in Marks, 2004, pp.).

Waring’s (1999) pointed critique of the system of National Accounts illuminates
how policy makers choose not to measure unpaid work and activities that are socially
necessary, ensuring the continued invisibility (except as a welfare problem) of those who
are economically invisible. Marks (2004) questions whether, by linking women’s
equality to paid work, feminism has inadvertently contributed toward acceptance of the
belief that workplace participation is a better option than stay-at-home motherhood, and
she argues that society must recognize and respond to the differing needs of women and
their choices.

Recognition of the value of unpaid work is a central premise of many feminists
who argue that all socially productive activities, including raising children and volunteering, must be included in measures of productivity. Luxton (1997, 1998) and Waring (1999) call attention to how unpaid caring, household, and subsistence production work is socially essential and critical to the well-being of community and society. Numerous scholars have argued for a broader conceptualization of work and productivity that places value on opportunities to contribute to society, both inside and outside the formal labour market, and that demands supportive policies (Hayden, 1999; Kovel, 2002; Luxton, 1997; Mulvale, 2001; Nichols-Caseboldt, Krysik & Hermann-Currie, 1994; Waring, 1999). Waring (1999) recommends triangulating time-use studies (disaggregated against variables such as gender and age) and physical environmental descriptors (inter-generational environmental consequences) against more traditional measures of economic growth (GDP and GNP modified to better reflect actual costs of production) to gain a more accurate measurement of growth and production. Based on this approach, how individuals use their time, including domestic and volunteer work, would factor prominently in the overall measurement of productivity.

Method
Much of what is written about social assistance recipients is not based on systematic, empirical information obtained from welfare recipients themselves. Therefore, the view taken in this study is that researchers need to speak directly to welfare recipients. Yet gaining access to people on welfare for the purpose of a research interview (and doing so in an ethical way) is not a simple endeavour. The researchers turned to local community agencies to identify research participants, after failing to secure the active cooperation of the Saskatchewan Department of Community Resources and Employment (formerly Social Services).

After receiving ethics approval from the University of Regina, the researchers approached two community-based organizations working with low-income individuals in Regina to seek their collaboration. The Welfare Rights Centre (WRC) and the Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry (RAPM) both agreed to participate after discussion regarding ethical treatment of the study participants. The general clientele of the two organizations are slightly different—WRC administers trusteeships to assist welfare recipients in managing their finances, while RAPM advocates on behalf of and with the poor and disadvantaged toward the eradication of poverty. Both organizations approached potential interviewees and explained to them the general purpose and process of the interview. Only potential participants who agreed to volunteer for the interview were referred to the researchers. Data collection, in the form of interviews with 19 participants, began in November 2002 and was completed in April 2003.

A similar process was followed in Prince Albert, with the West Flat Citizen’s Group and Family Futures agreeing to participate in the study. The West Flat Citizen’s group is located in the northwest part of Prince Albert. Average family income in the West Flat is below the national average (Human Resources Development Canada, 2002). Family Futures supports low-income individuals in successful parenting and personal development. Data collection for the Prince Albert site occurred in December 2002 and May 2003. Eleven interviews were conducted: six through the West Flat Citizen’s Group and five through Family Futures.

We therefore used for this study a nonprobability, purposive (or judgmental)
sample that is not representative of the entire welfare population in Saskatchewan and that was not intended to yield statistically significant results that could be directly generalized to other welfare populations in Canada. While the small sample of 30 cases does not enable us to say that our findings would be found in similar proportions in other (and larger) welfare populations, it does act as a revealer. That is, it allows us to uncover and understand realities about welfare recipients that remain largely unknown, hidden, or misunderstood. The exploration of this small welfare population can potentially shed light on problems experienced by other welfare recipients elsewhere. In other words, while a statistical induction to a larger population, based on a wide generality of findings, is not possible, an analytical induction identifying some characteristics that are of key importance is possible. We may presume that, because these characteristics are important in the small sample, they should also be found elsewhere in similar cases.

In sum, as in any social science research, this study has limitations. The use of a purposive, non-random sample with some probable self-selection bias may have led to involvement of individuals who are more active in the community than the average welfare recipients. Even so, it is the opinion of the researchers that the 30 in-depth interviews provide valuable insight into the lives of social assistance recipients, which in turn adds to our understanding of welfare recipients’ contributions to family, community, and society. Furthermore, it is important to note that, while the majority of research participants were of Aboriginal descent, the study itself did not attempt to elicit whether the experience and perspective of Aboriginal participants was distinct from that of the non-Aboriginal participants. Further study would be necessary to determine whether differences exist between these populations.

The questionnaire used in the study had two main parts. The first focused on questions regarding daily activities and was divided into six sections covering demographics, daily activities, care to children and the elderly (with or without disability), labour market activities, and non-domestic unpaid work such as volunteering. The second part contained questions about how “productive” the respondents perceived themselves to be.

The interview instrument used both open-ended and close-ended questions. Questions were transcribed verbatim from the tapes of the interviews with crosschecks made to the notes taken by the interviewers. For the close-ended questions, we used the SPSS program to perform a descriptive univariate analysis, as well as an exploratory bivariate analysis using contingency tables, correlations, and comparison of means to describe relationships. For the open-ended questions, we performed a qualitative thematic content analysis, examining answers of the respondents to extract common themes and to identify trends.

**Profile of respondents**

Personal face-to-face interviews were conducted with 30 social assistance recipients residing in two Saskatchewan urban centres. Nineteen respondents were interviewed in Regina, Saskatchewan’s capital city with a population of close to 200,000 people. An additional 11 respondents were interviewed in Prince Albert. Located approximately 400 kilometres north of Regina, Prince Albert is the largest city in the northern half of the province, with a population of just over 41,000 (Government of Saskatchewan, 2003). In sum, about two thirds of our sample was from Regina and one third from Prince Albert.
In terms of age distribution, 20 respondents, or two thirds, were under 40 years of age and 10, or one third, were aged 40 and over. By comparison, available data for social assistance in Saskatchewan show that, for the entire province, roughly 61 per cent of adult recipients are under 40 years of age, while 39 per cent are aged 40 and over. The two age distributions are therefore fairly similar. However, a large majority (24 out of 30 or four fifths) of respondents in the sample were women. In the provincial social assistance caseload, women represent the much smaller majority of 53 per cent.

Overall, the age of respondents was weakly associated with their sex, as two thirds of the men (4 out of 6) were 40 or older, while three quarters of women (18 out of 24) were under 40 years old. Twenty-two respondents (or about three quarters of the sample) identified themselves as Aboriginals (First Nations or Métis), and only eight or about a quarter of the respondents identified themselves as White persons. In comparison, just under 40 per cent of the entire provincial social assistance caseload is composed of Aboriginals. Therefore, Aboriginal people are over-represented in this purposive sample.

The large majority of the respondents (23 out of 30 or three quarters) were housed in the private rental market. Only four respondents owned their housing units and another three were in public housing.

Of the 30 respondents, 21 reported having dependents, generally one or two. In total, these 21 respondents were caring for 39 children, close to an average of two children per respondent with a dependent. Moreover, three Regina respondents who did not have dependent children at home stated that they did things to support their older, more independent adolescents.

All 11 interviewees from Prince Albert reported having at least one dependent. Having dependents at home (including children) was, perhaps not surprisingly, strongly related to age. Almost all respondents below the age of 40 (17 out of 20 individuals) had at least one dependent, while this was true for fewer than half of the respondents aged 40 and over (4 out of 10 individuals).

**Daily activities**

Contrary to some stereotypical views, being out of the formal labour market does not mean a life of inactivity. For many welfare recipients, daily life includes caring for children or older adults, looking for work, or volunteering.

**Caring for children**

As mentioned above, 21 of the 30 respondents (all women) were caring for children at home. In a majority of cases (12 out of 21), caring for children’s needs occupied most of the day (defined as seven or more hours per day). However, we found 8 out of 21 respondents for whom child care took less than five hours per day.

Caring for children takes two basic forms: activities with children and household tasks. Respondents had little difficulty speaking about the wide range of activities they carried out on a daily basis to attend to their children’s basic physical and emotional needs. These included feeding, bathing, and playing with children, taking them to the park, reading to them, and walking them to and from school. Furthermore, respondents enumerated a range of household tasks that occupied their time, including cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, washing dishes, and similar tasks.
The availability of affordable day care centres is a concern for many working parents, especially those working non-standard hours (Foster & Broad, 1998) and is a barrier to employment for many welfare recipients (Thériault, 2002). In terms of the use of local day care resources, availability was of greater concern for respondents in Prince Albert than for those in Regina. Several respondents spoke of having to travel out of their neighbourhood, sometimes across town, to bring children to day care. The inflexibility of day care was also raised as a concern. For instance, the difficulties of finding day care for young children (younger than 18 months), for several children (three or more), or that accommodated shift work were all raised as issues in Prince Albert. Among respondents from Regina, the situation was less of a concern as several respondents reported that they were not currently in need of day care services.

As is the case with many Canadian families, some respondents could count on family members or nearby relatives to assist them with caring for children, but other respondents stated that they did not have family close by or that family members were close but did not assist. Informal help with care for children is not always available, and this can more significantly affect low-income families (such as those on welfare) because of their financial incapacity to compensate by purchasing support services on the market.

**Elder care and care for disabled persons**

While no respondent reported caring for an elderly person at home, two respondents spoke of relatives living elsewhere for whom they spent time caring. This care included not only home support help such as shovelling walks, but extended also to personal hygiene care (giving showers).

Five out of 30 respondents were in the situation of caring for a person with a disability living in the home. Two of these five respondents were caring for more than one disabled person. In addition, we found that three respondents were themselves persons living with a disability. In a majority of cases (four out of five) the respondents said that they cared for disabled dependent(s) for seven or more hours per day (full time). The type of disability reported varied, ranging from degenerative arthritis and fibromyalgia to Crohn’s disease, epilepsy, and cerebral palsy. Care for these individuals included administering medications, cooking meals, and, in some cases, providing constant supervision. While friends or a babysitter could sometime help with these tasks, they were generally assumed solely by the respondents. Not only was little informal help available, but respondents also spoke of respite services being severely curtailed, especially once a disabled child reaches 18 years of age.

**Paid work and transportation to work**

Given that we studied social assistance recipients, very few respondents in this study reported working for pay. Three respondents worked as salaried employees and two reported self-employment activities (but one of these two also reported working for pay). Hence, only four different individuals (about 13 per cent) claimed income based on participation in the labour market. In three out of four cases, these respondents reported working fewer than 25 hours per week.

While few respondents were working for pay, 12 out of 30 said that they were currently looking for work. Aboriginal respondents were less likely to report this (6 out of 16) than were non-Aboriginal respondents (6 out of 8). As for education, about one
fifth of respondents (6 out of 28) were attending school on a full-time basis, except for one respondent who was attending part time.

We were also interested in learning how respondents travelled to work and whether they considered themselves to have a transportation problem. Transportation has been cited as an issue in American studies on welfare recipients (Thériault, 2002). Driving private vehicles, taking the bus, and walking were the transportation methods cited by the four respondents who travelled to work in 30 minutes or less. While three of the four respondents found their transportation arrangements to be convenient, the one respondent who had to walk to work (taking from 20 to 30 minutes) found this inconvenient. These results are only anecdotal, but they tend to support the view expressed in the literature on social assistance stating that access to a private vehicle, or to an efficient public transit system, is an important factor in enabling the start of a transition from welfare to work.

Volunteering, attending school, and other unpaid activities
About two thirds of respondents (19 out of 30) volunteered with a formal organization. There was no notable difference in this proportion according to age, sex, ethnicity (Aboriginal versus White), or location (Regina versus Prince Albert). Half the respondents (16 out of 30) reported providing informal assistance to other people such as neighbours or friends. In one third of cases (10 out of 30), respondents were involved in the community by serving on the board of a non-profit organization. Again, these proportions were not affected by the main demographic variables mentioned above.

Volunteering took many forms in the community and, interestingly, was often centred on food security. Volunteering activities also had an important socialization aspect for respondents. For example, they described their volunteer work at food banks as a social activity, an opportunity to meet a community need, and a way to stretch their own food budget: “It helps me out with a little bit of food because if I volunteer my time, I can go there and have a meal or send food home, which has helped me....” Other respondents were involved as volunteers in their children’s schools.

Eighteen respondents also reported “other” regular unpaid activities outside the home, such as helping family and friends with chores, babysitting, and other forms of informal support. Respondents were more likely to report these unpaid activities if they were older (40 and over), from Regina, male, and had no dependents. Although the sample is small, there is some suggestion that younger women with children, especially those from Prince Albert, had less time or opportunity to get involved in such activities.

The majority of respondents reported spending five hours or more a week on unpaid activities outside the home. Age was a factor here, as older respondents (40 and over) tended to spend more time each week on unpaid activities than younger respondents. Walking and taking the bus were cited as the means of transportation most often used to get to unpaid activities outside the home.

Perceptions of productivity:
How welfare recipients view their place in society
Many of the daily activities performed by persons on social assistance are not very different from those that occupy other members of society. A more subjective question is how welfare recipients perceive themselves, particularly in relation to various dimensions
of productivity. In Part II of the questionnaire, we offered eight psychology inspired Likert-Type statements designed to measure how “productive” the respondents felt about their lives. The statements were as follows:

1. I feel that most of my everyday activities are meaningful.
2. I feel that I have much to offer my family.
3. I see myself as someone who has something to contribute to society.
4. I wish that my contributions to society were more acknowledged.
5. Although I am on social assistance, I feel I am a productive citizen.
6. I see myself as a person of worth and deserving of respect.
7. I feel a sense of purpose in my life.
8. I feel that I am a successful person.

For each statement, the answer categories were “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree.” In turn, this could be transformed into a scale from 1 to 4 in which 1 is “strongly disagree” and 4 is “strongly agree.” Except for question 4, a higher score (towards agreement with the statement) indicates that the respondent felt that his or her life was meaningful, productive, and purposeful.

Perhaps due to self-selection bias, we found that respondents revealed quite positive perceptions of their lives. Overall, in terms of scores, the statements about deserving respect and having a sense of purpose in life generated the highest levels of agreement. The statements about having much to offer to one’s family and wishing to have one’s contributions more acknowledged were those generating the lowest levels of agreement. Differences between the statements can be seen in Table 2.

Respondents largely agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I feel like my everyday activities are meaningful.” A consistent theme that emerged was the respondent’s commitment to family and looking after children. Respondents described their family responsibilities as a full-time job and emphasized the importance of “being there” for their children: “I want them to be looked after and that’s what I do,” stated one respondent. Other meaningful everyday activities described by respondents included helping out with grandchildren, community and advocacy work, and helping neighbours and friends with day-to-day errands and child care.

There was also perhaps a degree of defensiveness in respondents’ comments, in that several respondents made a point of speaking about how their days were consumed by day-to-day tasks for which they were responsible, including laundry and housework. Four of the respondents interviewed described how they sometimes felt they were unable to accomplish much during the day, and that their success depended on how they were feeling, how much they had been working, and health concerns. Another participant expressed concern about the perceptions of other people toward her—whether she was “taken seriously” because she was on welfare and lacked formal credentials to work in the workplace.

Interestingly, the respondents’ opinions were somewhat mixed regarding the statement “I feel that I have much to offer my family.” Respondents who strongly agreed with this statement readily identified the many contributions they made to family life, including providing support and guidance and attending to the day-to-day tasks of raising a family. Respondents spoke of their role as mentors and role models, and a sense of
pride was evident in many of the respondents’ answers with respect to giving their children a good start to their lives. There also appeared to be a relationship between the sex of respondents and their feeling of having much to offer to their families. Women (average score of 3.35 out of 4.00) were more likely to agree strongly with this statement than were men (average score of 2.67), with 11 out of 23 women reporting that they strongly agreed, compared to one out of six men.

On the other hand, 4 of 29 respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had much to offer their families. They felt that what they could offer was closely tied to their financial circumstances, and being poor and on welfare meant they were not able to offer as much as they felt they should: “I don’t feel like I have the financial means...I just don’t feel like I’m doing enough.”

Respondents spoke of their contributions to society in largely positive statements, describing their roles as social activists, community volunteers, and providers of support to friends and neighbours. As well, they spoke to their future career goals and aspirations. Respondents spoke of having “insider” knowledge of the struggles that low-income people face, and how this knowledge was an asset in terms of helping other people and making a contribution to society. In the words of one respondent: “When you’ve lived the life and walked the talk, you can understand where people are coming from.”

Interpreting the question on whether society acknowledges the respondents’ contributions is more difficult. Seventeen of 26 respondents (two thirds) said that they did wish to see their contributions more acknowledged, suggesting that they were unsatisfied with the recognition they received for their contributions to society. A commonly expressed sentiment was the belief that “other people” did not understand how they spent their time, and that the common perception was that they were “watching TV or sitting reading a book.”

Several respondents also remarked that income security workers within the Saskatchewan Department of Social Services thought that welfare recipients had nothing to do. As one respondent put it:

People like social workers, and, well, not social workers in general, but financial workers, when you go to see them, they question you: “Well, what did you do during the day, are you contributing anything to society, why aren’t you looking for a job?” And they give you the third degree, and I don’t know if they even realize what goes on during someone’s normal routine day. Most of it, you know, is just surviving.

Even those who agreed with the statement expressed a certain degree of humility and modesty. It was noted by one respondent that everyone likes to feel his or her contributions are noticed. Yet, as another respondent commented, unpaid work “doesn’t count” in the eyes of many. At the same time, several respondents indicated that the approval of others was not an important issue for them, or that they were not comfortable being in the spotlight. As one respondent commented: “I’m not comfortable taking credit for things...but I contribute.”

Through a bivariate analysis we found that views on the need to receive more acknowledgement were related to age. Older respondents (those over 40 years of age) tended to agree more with the statement (average score of 3.33) than younger
respondents (average score of 2.59). Therefore, older interviewees indicated they would like greater recognition for their contribution to society than younger interviewees. When asked if they felt like productive citizens even though they were on social assistance, the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. Many responses suggested strong feelings and defensiveness regarding how the general public perceives people who are on welfare. Respondents were well aware of the stigma and stereotypes attached to being on welfare, as one noted: “I think a lot of people look at those on welfare as people that don’t want to do anything with their lives and that is not always the case. A lot of us are trying to get work and trying to get off [assistance].”

One participant who volunteered time at the local school noted that people come down hard on welfare recipients, yet people like herself play an important role in the community. Some spoke of welfare as a temporary, transitional phase while they worked through other things in their lives and were eager to explain their situation with respect to what contributed toward them being on assistance. They noted that being on social assistance “doesn’t mean I’m any different than anybody else.”

Respondents were also eager to counter the notion of welfare recipients as “freeloaders” by describing their paid and unpaid work activities, schooling, and other community activities, or noting that their family commitments took precedence over employment: “Being on social assistance doesn’t mean that you can’t be productive. I think even people that choose to be stay-at-home moms are definitely productive members of society. Not being a stay-at-home mom, you’re looking at having your child raised by someone else.”

The location of the respondents appeared to be related to their perception of being productive citizens. Respondents from Regina (average score of 3.67) tended to agree more with this statement than those from Prince Albert (average score of 3.0). Specifically, 12 out of 18 respondents from Regina (two thirds) “strongly agreed” with the statement, as compared to only 2 out of 11 in Prince Albert.

All respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “everyone deserves respect” and that people should be respected for who they are. At the same time, several respondents noted the difficulty of living in a society that tolerates a great deal of disrespect toward welfare recipients. Respondents stressed that they were working to improve their life circumstances and were concerned about teaching values of respect to their own children.

Similarly, all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt a sense of purpose in their lives, though some respondents acknowledged that they had difficulty determining this purpose. Not surprisingly, family was a prominent focal point in the lives of respondents. Respondents described their roles as supporters and mentors to their children and grandchildren. As one respondent put it: “I feel that I’m going to have to be there for my son no matter what and back him up one hundred per cent and look out for him because I’m probably the only one out there.” Other factors that contributed toward a sense of purpose included volunteer and advocacy work, getting an education, and giving back to the community and to other people.

Finally, respondents commented that their feelings of success were based on their own assessment of how far they had come. For some, this meant leaving past circumstances that were harmful. For others, it meant focusing on family life. Getting sober, upgrading their education, or attending career planning workshops were also described. Respondents were acutely aware of the emphasis society places on paid
employment and material wealth as a measure of success, and several respondents questioned whether society in general would also view them as successful. Yet they demonstrated a strong belief in self-determination and a desire to define success on their own terms: “I don’t think success is measured by material things, monetary things. It comes from within you.... I try to show my children the best way I know how.” The perception of feeling successful was also related to age. The older respondents were, in this case, less likely than younger ones to “agree” or “strongly agree” that they felt successful (average scores of 2.9 versus 3.4).

Discussion
The research findings suggest that the popular perception of welfare recipients as unproductive and inactive falls short of the reality of their day-to-day lives. The individuals interviewed for this study spoke of the many ways in which they participate in society, including through parenting, volunteer work at schools and at local food banks, helping family and friends, advocacy work, and some participation in the formal labour market. Their stories reveal a high degree of personal strength and resourcefulness, as they work to create the best life they can for themselves and their families. Contrary to common perceptions, the study suggests that the respondents share values very much consistent with those shared by the rest of society, including the importance of family and community, of helping others, and of self-improvement and personal growth.

While we occasionally observed signs of low self-esteem, we did not find many indicators of a “culture of dependency” or very different values or beliefs than those promoted in the society at large. Similar to O’Grady’s (1994) findings in his study of unemployed youth in Newfoundland, it does not seem that the problem of these Saskatchewan social recipients is one of “culture” or “value systems.” The respondents spoke of welfare being where they are, not who they are. They acknowledged the significance society places on paid employment and the pressure put on them to leave welfare. Despite this pressure, they continued to make choices that they felt had the best potential outcome for their families and for themselves, and their views of their own productivity in these areas were high.

This study also affirms the importance of speaking directly with social assistance recipients to articulate an informed discourse about their lived experiences. There is a dearth of scholarly work that examines how individuals with low incomes negotiate the demands that emerge from balancing the various areas of their lives (Neysmith & Reitsma-Street, 2000). Furthermore, the media contribute to the stigma of welfare recipients by providing little distinction between what is believed about welfare recipients and the reality of their day-to-day lives (Wardhaugh, 2003). The respondents in this study spoke strongly against common societal misconceptions that portray welfare recipients as irresponsible freeloaders. Respondents made it clear that they wished to be acknowledged based on who they are, where they have come from, and their daily choices and actions, rather than on the basis of their source of income.

The many contributions welfare recipients make to family, society, and community, as well as the immediate and potential benefits of these contributions, support the argument that a broader definition of productivity, such as that proposed by Waring (1999), is needed. Despite evidence of growing numbers of the working poor and
an increase in jobs in the low-paid, short-term, service economy (Broad, 2000), current
directions in social assistance reform do not recognize unpaid work in the home and
community, but rather equate social and economic contributions solely with participation
in the paid labour market. Lightman (2003) points out that this position also risks altering
our social priorities to the extent that only programs that enhance employability are seen
as legitimate. Further consideration must be given to how both paid and unpaid work
contributes to societal well-being, and how contributions in both of these areas can be
acknowledged and rewarded. Failure to recognize productivity in all its forms trivializes
the importance of unpaid caring and volunteer work to the well-being of family and
community. Any serious assessment of productivity must take into account contributions
made in all spheres of one’s life, rather than simply paid employment.

NOTES

1. The questionnaire is available from the authors.
2. Note that, according to the 2001 Census, Prince Albert has the highest proportion
   of Aboriginal people in Canada (29.2%) among cities with a population under
   100,000 (Tkach, 2003).
3. By comparison, information provided by an official from the Department of
   Community Resources and Employment shows that, at any given time in
   Saskatchewan, 5% to 6% of heads of households in social assistance cases are
   employed, another 7% to 8% are in training programs (where they can receive
   some form of allowance), and an additional 4% to 5% are in sheltered workshops
   for the disabled, where they receive a small wage.
4. Because our sample is small, we used a 4-point scale instead of a 5-point scale to
   force a choice by eliminating the undecided and those with no opinion. This
   approach is reasonable when the researchers have good reason to believe that
   virtually all participants have an opinion and do not want participants to “cop out”
   by indicating they are uncertain.
5. In this study, this refers to the use of comparisons of means, contingency tables,
or both to explore the relationship between two variables.

REFERENCES

‘Motherwork’.” Atlantis 28, no. 2, 51-60.


Workers. Regina: University of Regina, Social Policy Research Unit.

Fraser, N., & L. Gordon (1997). “A Genealogy of ‘Dependency’: Tracing a Keyword of
the US Welfare State.” In N. Fraser, ed., Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections

Council on Social Development.


