

POOR WOMEN'S MORAL ECONOMIES OF NONPROFIT SOCIAL SERVICE USE: CONSPICUOUS CONSTRAINT AND EMPOWERMENT IN THE HOLLOW STATE

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ABSTRACT: *This article explores the moral economy through which poor women apply shared understandings of what is fair, just, and appropriate to their use of nonprofit services. The findings suggest that such women perceive that others are needier than they, avoid undeserving opportunist labels (yet apply them to others), and complain that nonprofits routinely violate their moral obligations by withholding services or not affording respect. These views lead to "conspicuous constraint," or service use only in the direst of circumstances, in which women claim to reject help, in part, so that needy others might receive aid. The author argues that this allows them to construct an image of themselves as self-reliant, morally empowered, benevolent actors in line with neoliberal rhetoric. Given that the public welfare system has transferred more responsibility for delivery of services to the nonprofit sector, the very sector that many poor women avoid, their well-being is of great concern.*

Keywords: social safety net, nonprofits, moral economy, poverty, neoliberalism

Scholars have argued that the state has become "hollow" as it increasingly contracts public services to third parties and abdicates its responsibility to provide public benefits (Milward and Provan 2000). Indeed, the government's role in providing public welfare and welfare-related services has dwindled markedly over the last 15 years. Federal entitlements to social welfare benefits, for instance, ended in 1996 with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), and benefits are now largely contingent on labor market attachment (Breitkreuz 2005). Decisions regarding welfare rules and procedures have also devolved from federal to state levels, and governments increasingly have contracted welfare-related services and administration to nonprofit and for-profit

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Sociological Perspectives, Vol. 55, Issue 1, pp. 189–211, ISSN 0731-1214, electronic ISSN 1533-8673.

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parties. Furthermore, the expectation is that those that the hollow state leaves un- or under-served will turn to local nonprofits for help in meeting their varied needs. All in all (and in line with neoliberal principles¹), privately provided assistance and services aimed at empowering poor individuals are considered to be the most efficient and appropriate solution to the poverty problem, with the government (particularly at the federal level) taking a limited role (Allard 2009; Katz 2001; Smith 2010). What was once a system focused on federally administered entitlements has thus been transformed into a highly devolved, work-based safety net with a large emphasis on social services provided at the neighborhood level (Allard 2009). Accordingly, nonprofit organizations, which always have played a role in the welfare state, "are more prominent in public policy and the delivery of public services than ever before" (Smith 2010:621).

Despite the increased salience of nonprofits in the hollow state and the importance of neighborhood institutions in providing resources to the socially isolated more generally (Small 2006), we know very little at the micro-level about how poor women think about such organizations or how those beliefs may affect their use of them. In this article, I advance previous work in this area (Kissane 2003) by offering a broad conceptual framing that integrates different explanations for nonuse and elucidates the moral universe in which poor women consider nonprofit organizations. Notably, organizational dimensions of urban life (and vice versa) are understudied in general (Marwell 2004; McQuarrie and Marwell 2009; Small 2006); and certainly, how the urban poor interact with nonprofit social service organizations, in particular, is under-researched. Admittedly, the social safety net has been investigated in moral terms previously, but often from the standpoint of administrators and the public at large and almost entirely in reference to the use and provision of public benefits. Here, I study the moral economy through which poor women apply their shared understandings of what is fair, just, and appropriate to their use of nonprofit services offered under a neoliberal regime and, I argue, reject help, in part, to construct an image of themselves as self-reliant and morally empowered, benevolent actors. Overall, the findings suggest that we should be concerned about the well-being of these poor women, given that the public welfare system has given over more responsibility for delivery of services to the very sector that many report avoiding.

Moral Economy as a Framework for Understanding Nonprofit Use

"Moral economy" refers to the idea that economic processes and transactions are embedded in shared moral dispositions, assumptions, beliefs, values, and norms (Arnold 2001; Mau 2004; Sayer 2004; 2007). The concept was popularized by the historian E.P. Thompson in his investigation of peasant food riots of the mid-18th century in England. Thompson (1971) argued that peasant villagers held deeply ingrained notions of what was fair and just and that these beliefs were at odds with the budding market ethos. In essence, the peasants expected their society to function according to a moral economy—to operate "within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, banking, etc." (Thompson 1971:79). Within this worldview, selling

corn or flour for more than what people could afford, especially in times of dearth, was illegitimate and, moreover, reason for outrage. When this essential moral obligation regarding a "fair price" was not met, overt acts of resistance—often in the form of riots—resulted.²

Overall, one can conceptualize moral economy as the "collective sense of the appropriateness, or inappropriateness, of certain social practices" (Mau 2004:69). Groups of individuals (or societies) share a sense of what are legitimate practices when goods or services are exchanged, as well as how social goods should be allocated (Arnold 2001; Mau 2004). Within a given "moral universe," individuals monitor their own behavior and that of others to ensure that the moral economic order is maintained (Sayer 2004). Thus, to understand fully economic behavior, one must comprehend the cultural underpinnings of the actors—"that is, their sense of propriety, justice, obligation and the like" (Arnold 2001:87).

While much of the work on moral economy focuses on pre-market or traditional societies, scholars have attempted to apply the general concept to a range of other contexts, such as cultural industries in the United Kingdom (Banks 2006), everyday crime (Karstedt and Farrall 2006), and racism in sport (Long and McNamee 2004). Moreover, Dodson (2007:274–75) interprets the actions of contemporary wage-poor mothers in light of the moral economy framework. She argues that given the sizeable gap between minimum wage and what is adequate to support a family, along with the concomitant changes in the welfare system that require that poor mothers work, such women rebel by crafting

daily habits that defy the fundamental norms of work. ... They become adept at ducking "under the radar" as they come and go, they use theater to jolly supervisors and avoid sanctions, they take their children to work and hide them, and they develop their own version of flexible work schedules. ... They try to repossess parts of their lives even as poor wages demand more of their time.

These relatively hidden acts of resistance, Dodson (2007:275) argues, follow in line with a long history of "everyday acting up" among poor workers (e.g., slowdowns) in response to perceived unjust conditions that "erode their humanity." Such defiance, however, often comes with significant costs—poor mothers in this case are often characterized as subpar workers (instead of committed parents), disciplined at work, or fired (Dodson 2007).

Additionally, an expanded notion of the concept includes the pursuit and acquisition of goods and services via the welfare state. Undoubtedly, researchers have long argued that welfare transfers and social service provision involve evaluative judgments of the moral worth of would-be clients, as well as expectations regarding their responsibilities and obligations (Gilens 1999; Gordon 1994; Hasenfeld 2000; Hays 2003; Katz 1995; 1996; Lipsky 1980). Such work, though, rarely invokes the concept of moral economy explicitly and frequently focuses on the views and practices of administrators regarding the deployment of public benefits. These studies reveal that "street-level bureaucrats" and employees of human service agencies utilize various classification schemes, rules, regulations, and practices to ensure that the "right" people receive assistance and to uphold dominant societal values regarding appropriate behavior (Binder 2007; Hasenfeld 2000; Katz

1995; 1996; Lipsky 1980; Watkins-Hayes 2009). Thus, Hasenfeld (2000:329) argues, human service agency staffs' actions do not just involve the delivery of particular services and assistance to clients but also confer "a moral judgment about their social worth, the causation of their predicament, and the desired outcome." As the moral economy perspective highlights, such exchanges have "normative attendants" and are not merely resource transactions (Mau 2004:68).

Much has also been written about the negative stereotypes and stigma associated with the receipt of means-tested public welfare (Gilens 1999; Horan and Austin 1974; Kerbo 1976; Loewenberg 1981; Rogers-Dillon 1995; Seccombe, James, and Walters 1998; Stuber and Schlesinger 2006). In line with the perspective of "rugged individualism," both the public at large and welfare recipients themselves attribute women's receipt of welfare to "their laziness, drug use, lack of human capital, personal choice, or other personal shortcomings or irresponsible behavior" (Seccombe et al. 1998:855). Accordingly, women who receive welfare (especially black mothers) encounter treatment stigma in their everyday lives, as various others (e.g., family, friends, acquaintances, welfare administrators, and members of the public with whom they must deal) condemn them for their seemingly undeserving use of public benefits in subtle (e.g., a reproachful glance) or not so subtle ways (e.g., disparaging comments or questioning) (Cleaveland 2008; Rogers-Dillon 1995; Seccombe et al. 1998; Stuber and Schlesinger 2006).

Identity theory suggests individuals with stigmatized social identities may engage in "identity work" to protect and project an "actual or desired conception of self" (Snow and Anderson 1993:43; see also Chowdhury 2006; Goffman 1963; Lamont 2000; Latimer 2006). In essence, people seek to resolve the incongruence between their social identities and their personal identities and, subsequently, relieve any related distress that incongruence causes (Burke 1991; Stryker and Burke 2000).³ Identity management strategies might include constructing similarities and differences between oneself and others (or performing "boundary work"), thus drawing "the line that delimits an imagined community of 'people like me'" and people not like me (Lamont 2000:3). Accordingly, one might distance oneself from stigmatized others or associate with those better off who have positive social identities. They also might offer accounts of behaviors that counter deleterious stereotypes regarding their character or promote themselves in ways that demonstrate their competence and worth (Latimer 2006). Indeed, studies of public welfare recipients repeatedly demonstrate that they engage in such strategies to construct and project more positive self-images (Latimer 2006; Rogers-Dillon 1995; Seccombe 1999).

All in all, the extant literature has repeatedly demonstrated that *public assistance* exchanges involve moral assumptions, beliefs, values, and obligations that result in stigma for those participating in such programs; yet scholars have focused much less on the moral dimensions of another and increasingly significant component of the welfare state—nonprofit social service organizations—especially from the vantage point of those using them (for exceptions, see Fothergill 2003; Kissane 2003).

Between 1995 and 2009, the number of nonprofits in social services almost doubled (NCCS 2009, as cited in Smith 2010), while public transfers dwindled as cash assistance became time-limited and more contingent on attachment to the labor

market after welfare reform. In fact, reliance on cash assistance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), has dramatically declined since 1996; caseloads have decreased by over 50 percent and declines continue even after the recession. Importantly, upwards of 20 percent of welfare leavers have no identifiable source of support, and many continue to struggle to make ends meet and suffer material hardships (for review, see Edin and Kissane 2010). With neoliberal policies constricting the federal government's role in the safety net, the expectation is that local, private nonprofit organizations will be there to support these families and provide them with job-related services (often as subcontractors of the state) to help them move towards self-sufficiency. Given these changes, scholars assert that women now largely experience the social safety net at the local level through nonprofit social service organizations (Allard 2009). Yet many questions remain unanswered in the research on the local, private social safety net. How, for instance, do moral obligations impact poor women's use of nonprofit social service agencies? How do they evaluate others who utilize such agencies and the procedures of the agencies? How might their understandings serve to protect or re-imagine their own identities?

Studying Moral Economies from the Standpoint of Poor Women

To investigate these research questions, I analyze interviews that I conducted between 2001 and 2002 with forty women who were living in the Kensington section of Philadelphia, a formerly vibrant working-class industrial neighborhood that had poverty rates exceeding 50 percent in those areas where most of my respondents lived (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). Typical of other high-poverty neighborhoods in Philadelphia (see Twombly and DeVita 2000) and rust-belt inner-city neighborhoods more generally, Kensington is home to many nonprofit social service agencies that serve poor families across a number of service domains, including (but not limited to) youth and childcare services; basic needs assistance; housing and community development; education and computer classes; job readiness, occupational skills training, and job placement; case management; domestic violence services; physical and mental health services; and life skills and parenting classes. In fact, at the time of the interviews, there were over eighty nonprofit social service providers in the area, and the study respondents, as a group, were able to identify seventy of these (see Kissane 2010 for more details on this neighborhood).

Similar to Edin and Lein (1997), I recruited respondents for the study through a nonrandomized, snowball method. More specifically, I initially identified potential respondents by way of referrals from local nonprofit social service agencies. In all, nineteen respondents were found via these agency contacts. I then used referrals from these initial respondents to find an additional twenty-one individuals to interview. No source (whether an agency or individual) contributed more than two respondents to the sample. Thirty-nine of the forty women I interviewed had used services at one or more nonprofit agency within the 5 years prior to our interview, with the average woman having used six different types of services over this time period. The most commonly reported used service was some sort of food assistance (i.e., eating at a soup kitchen, receiving food from a food pantry,

or receiving a holiday food basket, turkey, or ham). Importantly, though, despite having considerable need and meeting eligibility requirements, only 60 percent of the women had used *any* food assistance program over the past 5 years. Moreover, even with frequent hardships, only 40 percent had used any utility assistance program, only 25 percent had taken advantage of free clothing programs, only 12 percent had used basic health services, only 10 percent had used basic housing-related services (e.g., help with basic repairs or shelter), only 7 percent had used emergency cash or transportation assistance, and a mere 5 percent had received free toiletries.

Those respondents found through agency referrals did not differ in their service knowledge or use from those I recruited by way of the other respondents. However, given that almost half of the respondents were recruited from local service providers (and given the network ties within the sample), it is likely that the women in this study took advantage of *more* social services (and perhaps had more favorable attitudes towards using them) than a random sample of poor individuals living in the community might have yielded. Moreover, service providers may have been more likely to refer "model clients"; thus, as about half the sample was found this way, this study may overrepresent the views of individuals who "play by the rules."

Because, for the larger study, I was interested in welfare reform's effects on poor women and their children, I only interviewed individuals who had received TANF at some point in the previous 5 years (since the 1996 passage of the welfare reform legislation) and who were currently poor. To allow for comparisons, I also evenly divided the sample between the two largest ethnoracial populations residing in the neighborhood—non-Hispanic whites (who represented approximately 30 percent of the local population) and Hispanics (about 50 percent of the local population).⁴ The sample included women from 20 to 49 years of age (the mean age was 31). All of the respondents were mothers, with two or three children on average, and most (65 percent) were receiving TANF at the time of the interview. The women were typically undereducated and unemployed—70 percent had achieved less than a high school education without receiving a GED and less than a quarter (23 percent) was employed on either a part- or full-time basis. They also were overwhelmingly single parents—88 percent were single, divorced, or separated mothers.

I interviewed most of the women in their homes (often over a couple of sittings). These qualitative, open-ended, and tape-recorded interviews ranged from 45 minutes to upwards of 4 hours in length. In the interviews, we discussed a wide array of topics related to the use of public assistance, nonprofit organizations, and network-based aid. While I used a semi-structured interview guide (available upon request) to ensure that I talked through certain issues with all of the respondents, the interview format and the topics discussed were flexible. This sort of data gathering allows the researcher to explore topics in depth from the point of view of the respondent. Additionally, the use of open-ended questions allows for unexpected responses to emerge and for the researcher to ask probes and follow-ups.

A grounded theory approach, in which the lived experiences of respondents are emphasized and theories are "'grounded' in the data themselves" (Charmaz 2006:2), directed my analyses of the interviews. First, I imported the transcribed

interviews into a qualitative data analysis program (NVivo). Then, I began examining them for statements related to the women's experiences and accounts of public benefits and nonprofit social service organizations. As I sorted through these accounts, I created a series of analytic codes (e.g., "nonprofit stigma") to capture the themes that I was observing until I reached theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Throughout the process, I returned repeatedly to previously coded interviews to ensure consistency in coding across cases, gathered additional data to verify and refine the analytic codes that were emerging, searched for patterns across codes and cases, and wrote analytic memos to develop an overall theory that would accurately portray the women's point of view and experiences. Thus, the process was largely inductive, as I built "levels of abstraction directly from the data" and not from predetermined hypotheses (Charmaz 2006:3).

The Moral Economy of Service Use from the Standpoint of Nonprofit Service Consumers

Contrary to assumptions of neoclassical economy theory, moral economies balance the pursuit of self-interest and profit against "rules of fairness, and offset differences in power by protection for the weaker party in market exchanges" (Karstedt and Farrall 2006:1029). Reflecting on the interviews, I observed that poor women operated with similar perceptions about what was fair and legitimate when it came to service use, particularly the use of basic needs services. They perceived a set of moral obligations and responsibilities for themselves, other nonprofit users, and the agencies with which they came in contact. In line with their moral economy, these women, who, remember, likely represent those *most likely* to use services and to have favorable attitudes toward them, would only turn to agencies for help when they were genuinely in need (often desperately in need), because, otherwise, others who were more disadvantaged than they might be harmed. They also would disparage those whom they believed were "abusing" agencies, thus helping to maintain the moral economy. In return, they expected that the staff at the agencies to which they went for services would treat them with respect, would minimize the hassles, and would provide them with actual aid or services.

Underlying this moral economy is the belief that self-worth and independence can be demonstrated through constraining service use (what I call "conspicuous constraint")—a claim based on two assumptions: (1) that others in the community are significantly worse off than the potential recipient and (2) that there is not enough assistance to go around among nonprofit providers. The former assumption boosts the sense of self of poor women relative to the other welfare poor; the latter assumption boosts a sense of self in reference to organizations whose staffs routinely do not accord the women the respect they believe they deserve. By denying herself access to services and rejecting the organizations as inadequate providers, a poor woman believes she is enabling another more needy woman to get help from an insecure source of assistance and can construct an empowered sense of her own virtue and stability.

Conspicuous Constraint and Constructing Self-Reliance: Using Services Only When Truly Needy. Repeatedly, the women referred to a moral ethic regarding service use—they were obligated to restrict their use of agencies to when they were genuinely in need. They valued acting responsibly and harshly criticized those whom they felt “abused” agencies by using them when they were not desperate enough or in legitimate need. Using services under such circumstances was “unfair,” “unjust,” and morally “wrong,” as the women believed destitute others in the community may fail to receive services as a result. This value system diverges significantly from popular depictions of welfare-reliant individuals in which they are, at worst, lazy, insatiable “moochers” trying to get over on the system (see Cassiman 2008; Hays 2003 for summary) or, at best, “rational” actors trying to maximize their gain of resources (Murray 1984).

Repeatedly, the women articulated that when thinking about using services (particularly basic needs programs), one must reflect on the extent of one’s need and consider the welfare of others in the community. Perceiving a limited amount of resources, they argued that no one should be “greedy” or “take advantage” of available services and programs—one must employ “conspicuous constraint” by forgoing use of services until one is desperate for help. According to this worldview, violating these standards would be socially irresponsible and morally repugnant, as it would be similar to stealing from another in need. In discussing why she restricted her use of available services, Amy, a welfare-reliant mother of one, posed the question, “Why are you goin’ take from somebody else that doesn’t have nothin’?” Likewise, Delilah, also a welfare-reliant mother of one, asked me, “Why should I go [to a food bank]? ... I know some people is more in need, I let them go.” Grace, a mother of three employed part-time, similarly revealed that she avoided getting free food from local agencies because there were other “people out there that need it more than me, so I’m not gonna take it [from them].” Lastly, Tracy, a mother of two working part-time, explained, “I want to be strong, and I want to be able to support myself. I don’t use any service unless I need it, ‘cause there’s people out there that really needs it.”

While often the women described a generalized other that was needier than they were and whose needs they felt should be met before their own, at other times, they described particular subgroups of people that they worried would be hurt if they received services. Some, such as the elderly, those with disabilities, or children, have been broadly identified as the “deserving poor” (Katz 1995; 1996). For example, Eileen, a mother trying to support five children on a minimum wage job, explained why she limited her use of services to when she was absolutely “desperate”:

“I mean there are senior citizens that actually have nothing. I mean it is only fair to let someone else get in there and try to do what they got to do. ... Why exhaust some kind of a service [by going when not desperate]? ... Then it would go away ... [and] a lot of people in the community would be hurt.”

Margie, an unemployed mother of two who no longer received TANF and had no identifiable means of support, also limited her use of food programs because she thought not doing so would hurt deprived children. She questioned, “Why take it

[food] out of somebody else's mouth that can use it? ... [Using the program is] taking food out of some other little kid's mouth." Similarly, Jessica, a welfare-reliant mother of four, claimed she would not use services because "I would feel like I'm taking it away from somebody who really needed it more than me. ... Somebody who doesn't have any food for their kids."

This concern over exhausting the resources of providers (which is repeated in subsequent quotes) is one key area in which use of nonprofits differs from use of public benefits. While the women frequently alluded to others' having to "do without" if they (or others) failed to constrain their use of nonprofits, they did not worry in the same way about their use of public assistance.⁵ Certainly, they knew they (and others in need) may be denied public assistance (especially post-welfare reform), but they did not think this would occur because of a *lack of funds* (it might occur, for example, because one failed to comply with welfare-to-work rules or procedures). Their reliance on welfare, therefore, would not prevent another "needier" person from receiving such aid—only one's own behavior mattered. For example, Margie, quoted above, argued "it don't matter" if people abuse public assistance because welfare caseworkers "call you and give it [assistance] to you if you really need it." Similarly, Ruth, who restricted her use of nonprofit services so others reportedly needier than she could have them, claimed, "If I went into the line in welfare, and they said that only one more person can have it, and it was either me or the next person ... I would turn around and say, 'Give it to her. I don't need it that bad, she does.'" When asked, though, if such a scenario could occur with public assistance, she replied quickly, "No."

In contrast, many of the women could provide specific instances where they (or people they knew) had been denied nonprofit services or given less aid because, as they argued, such agencies did not have enough to go around. It seems likely that nonprofit staffs themselves may propagate this view as a justification for turning away needy individuals or rationing aid. Indeed, in interviews with directors of nonprofits located in this neighborhood (data not presented here), the notion that they do not have the resources to meet demand frequently surfaced and was often linked to the hollowing of the state. Perceiving increased demand for their services, resulting from the state's abdication of its responsibility for providing public benefits, but not significant increases in resources, directors here and elsewhere (see Abramovitz 2005; Alexander, Nank, and Stivers 1999; Sommerfeld and Reisch 2003) have cut programs and rationed services. In this context, it makes sense that poor women might interpret their use of nonprofit services (but not public assistance) as directly impacting what others might be able to receive.

What was particularly striking in the interviews was the strength of the women's conviction that others in the neighborhood were needier than they, even though they were facing enormous difficulties making ends meet. Remember, the respondents had incomes that placed them below the poverty line, and most were receiving TANF. Moreover, all of these women had repeatedly suffered severe material hardships in the years prior, and the majority was suffering at least one such hardship at the time of the interview. Most frequent were stories of food-related hardships and difficulties paying utility bills (over 75 percent experienced each of these

hardships). Grace, quoted earlier, shared some of the struggles she had undergone and noted that, even in difficult times, she did not reach out for help:

"It's gotta be a real bad situation for me to go [to a food bank]. You know, to be honest with you, I don't even think a bad situation, because I've been through a lot of bad situations [and haven't gone]. ... They cut my gas off in the winter and [I] didn't have any food ... I was struggling to pay my rent, and we did not have not even a heater in the house. And they cut the gas off. And I did not even have, I didn't have anything ... Milk and Quick, that's all we would eat all night ... a whole month just giving my kids milk ... I didn't went to nobody [for help]."

Amy also recalled multiple times when "there was nothing to eat in the house ... *nothing*." But she was clear that during each of these times of hardship, she did not go to any agencies for help. She related about one such incident: "I got unemployment but the unemployment never kicked in or whatever. And I waited and waited, until I seen myself broke, the bills wasn't paid ... I had no food in the fridge. Nothing whatsoever. And I said, 'I'm not asking nobody for nothing.'" Korja, a welfare-reliant mother of four, mentioned that she was currently low on food, but still had not reached the requisite point of desperation to justify using a food pantry:

"Like right now I'm low on food, but I do have to feed them [her children]. Not probably what they want to eat or enough of it, but it's food. ... When I see I'm to a point where I'm actually out of food, and I have no other means of feeding my kids, then, yes, I will go [to a food pantry]. I guess I have to be to the point where I know I can't in any way get any help, [because] you don't want to take away from someone else that needs it."

Likewise, when asked if she goes to food pantries, Pebbles, a welfare-reliant mother of five, after admitting that, on average, she runs low on food three times a month, replied:

"I will go if I really, really needed it, but sometimes the food is real low, and I will stretch it as much as I could. Like breakfast, the main thing, breakfast. They [her children] will not eat dinner, but they will eat breakfast, they will eat breakfast, definitely. ... [If I had absolutely nothing,] then that will be a different story, that's when I will go and ask somebody or go to a food bank. But not 'til then. Why should I take from others?"

The women's troubles were not relegated to the areas of food and utilities. They also recounted how they spent time homeless or were forced to double up with others (about half of the women), how they went without medical care and health insurance (about a third of the women), and/or how they lived without basic appliances, furniture, and clothing (about a quarter of the women). Notably, these estimates likely *underestimate* the extent of their hardships, as I did not ask them explicitly about each of these various adversities. Many lived under deplorable housing conditions as well; my observation notes were ripe with descriptions of water-damaged ceilings; gaping holes in walls and floors; infestations of roaches, rodents, and flies; exposed wiring; and crumbling plaster and staircases.

Despite these and other problems, some still refused to go to local agencies for help because they believed others were more in need than they were. Ruth, a mother of one receiving workers' compensation and representative of this group, claimed that she *consistently* only ate one meal a day to make sure that her son had enough food. Remarkably, she still perceived others as being more in need of food programs than she. She explained:

"They can give that [aid] to the people that really, really need it. I don't think I really need it that bad, to tell you the truth ... I don't care if I eat, as long as my son eats, that's all that matters to me. ... [They should give the food to] the homeless people, or there's people out there with twelve kids or six kids and they're on welfare and welfare ain't giving them enough. ... I think there's more people out there that are way worse than I am off. They need it. Let them have it. Let them use the programs."

The women seemed to be making what outsiders would likely consider microscopic distinctions between their own level of hardship and that of others, but this continual reference to others being "worse off" serves a purpose. Not only could these women point to the fact that others in the neighborhood were lower on the social ladder, but they also could demonstrate their own self-reliance, self-discipline, and resiliency—core components of neoliberal rhetoric in the hollow state—by refusing services. Reflecting this theme and the related stigma of service use, Amy claimed that using nonprofit programs (especially food assistance ones) would be "telling me that I'm homeless. And I never want to get to that far [down]." Similarly, Hailey, an unemployed mother of two who was no longer receiving TANF, stated that using nonprofit services would mean that she had "failed at things," at which time she began to cry and elaborated, "It's all about being responsible ... welfare is there when you need it, but it is harder to get to the point where you need to go there [to a nonprofit]—[then] you know you are screwed and there is absolutely nothing you can do to pull yourself out of it." Kelsey, who also was unemployed and off of TANF, thought that going to food banks meant "I can't do the job that I'm supposed to be doing." Likewise, Lisa, a working mother of two, emphasized how her visions of self-sufficiency limited her service use:

"I'm more the type of person that likes to depend on myself and I really don't like to lean on people, and that's the reason why [when] I went to welfare, I tried to get off as quick as I could because I don't feel good about myself. I feel like I'm not doing it on my own, and I should be. I'm a grown woman, I should be doing it on my own. ... I couldn't see myself do that [going to basic needs nonprofits for help]. ... I feel like that makes it seem like you're really low and down, that you can't pick yourself back up."

Pebbles, quoted earlier, summed up many of the women's views when she claimed she avoided getting "charity" because "I just want to do things on my own. I want to be independent."

Thus, while living under the dictates of conspicuous constraint certainly deprived the women of needed services, doing so helped to construct an image

and account of themselves as benevolent, empowered actors and dissociate themselves from other poor individuals. To be poor in America “is not only to have fallen to the bottom of the status system; it is also to be confronted with gnawing doubts about self-worth” (Snow and Anderson 1993:198). Being able to constrain their service use provided a signal that they, unlike others in the neighborhood, had not yet hit rock bottom—they still had some degree of self-efficacy and independence where others did not. They may be receiving public benefits, but they had not sunk so low as to need nonprofit services. Notably, the women held firmly to this account even as they retold countless stories of their difficult economic circumstances, material hardships, and unmet needs. As Lamont (2000:2–3) argues in regard to working-class men, these women similarly found “their self-worth in their ability to discipline themselves and conduct responsible yet caring lives. ... These moral standards function as an alternative to economic definitions of success and offer them a way to maintain dignity.”

Undeserving Opportunists: Perceived Deviance among Other Nonprofit Service Users. Moral economies involve not only the regulation of one’s own behavior but also the monitoring of others’ actions. Many of the respondents compared their use of nonprofits to others in the neighborhood and criticized those they perceived as not sharing their values regarding service use. Reminiscent of what others have reported concerning perceptions of public welfare abusers among welfare recipients (Cleaveland 2008; Seccombe et al. 1998), these women frequently described people who violated the local moral economy of nonprofit use by selling the goods (e.g., the food) they received from agencies, by using certain services so they could “hoard” their money, or by using services when they really did not “need” it.⁶ Such illegitimate practices threatened the moral economy and potentially the well-being of others in the community.

While typically the respondents could not name any individual they personally knew who had abused services, the belief that many did so was pervasive. Drawing on multiple anecdotes of “abusers,” the women demonstrated their own moral worth and demarcated the appropriate behavior within the system. Michelle, a welfare-reliant mother of three, for example, criticized those who violated the norms regarding service use:

“I think some people use them [agencies] that don’t even really need them. ... Like, there’s people that got good jobs, make enough money, and still have money left over and they still use these agencies ... to keep more money in their pocket ... I don’t like it ‘cause other people really need that food that they give.”

Similarly, Victoria, a welfare-reliant mother of four who chose to go without adequate food on numerous occasions instead of using a food bank, argued:

“A lot of people that do go to agencies, having their refrigerators full of food and still go. I think that’s such a disgrace. ‘Cause you know how many people really need it. I know people that would rather starve [than go to an agency for help]. I can say I did that ... because others might need it more.”

Often, the women assessed whether one was abusing agencies based on appearances. Amy, for example, complained that some of the people in the waiting room at a large multi-service agency that she used for help getting birth certificates "shouldn't even be there, getting help from there." When asked to explain, she responded, making clear her disapproval:

"There [were] a couple people there in business suits and stuff so I said, 'Oh, they must be representatives or something.' No. They were there to get help. ... You shouldn't be here. You don't look like you need no help. ... They know they have clothing on their backs, they know they have food in the refrigerator, but it's like, they can't get enough. They are perfectly fine, and I'll hate for them to take people's things—when there's desperate people who really need something, need assistance, and there's nothin' there for them. I think a lot of people take advantage. A lot ... I don't do that. That's selfish and greedy ... I think that is so wrong."

A few respondents had more direct information that people were engaging in behavior that they deemed morally corrupt. Jessica knew someone who abused a Christmas program:

"I think some people ask for services that they really don't need. ... I know one lady, who did the Operation Santa Claus thing, puts extra kids down so she gets extra things ... she has a daughter that passed away, and she still puts that daughter down. ... I feel as though it's taking away from a baby that would probably really benefit from having something, that really wouldn't have anything for Christmas."

When detailing these rare instances when they knew directly of abuse, the women were quick to distance themselves from these morally bereft individuals. Hope, a welfare-reliant mother of three, disapproved of her grandmother's taking her nieces to a local soup kitchen. She explained, "That's for people who really need it, and my nieces are not the ones that need it. She's [grandmother's] a moocher, that's what she is. She is, she is a moocher and I don't, I just can't be around people like that." Likewise, Victoria stopped interacting with a couple of friends after she overheard a conversation about taking advantage of services: "I don't speak to [them] anymore. ... [I heard them saying,] 'Oh we can get from this program and that program, we get all these gifts.' I'm like, 'Uh, huh. Do you mean you'd take from kids that really need?' That's the last I heard from them."

Snow and Anderson (1993:215) argue that "when individuals have to enact roles, associate with others, or utilize institutions that imply social identities inconsistent with their actual or desired self-conceptions, they often attempt to distance themselves from those roles, associations, or institutions." For those women who reported using services, distancing themselves from other users may allow them to preserve their self-worth and project a positive identity. Indeed, in a few instances, the women claimed that *they* were the "needy" persons who had followed the rules but failed to get help because of the inappropriate actions of others—others with whom they forcefully disassociated themselves. Such experiences reinforced

that there was not enough nonprofit aid to go around. Anna, a welfare-reliant mother of five, thought that staff at a nonprofit agency had turned her down twice for utility assistance because others (who were not in need) had exhausted the agency's funds:

"There's people out there who [are] using these services that can get them that really don't need them. Now, I'm in need of them, and I can't get help ... I've seen it, okay. I've witness[ed] it, okay. With all of those people using the agencies not needing it, [they] just don't want to pay their bills and what not, you know, and get away with it. And people that really need it right now, that can't pay their bills, like just can't get it."

Toni, a welfare-reliant mother of three, thought that she did not receive much food from a food cupboard because others, whom she believed did not need the help (based on their appearance), had already taken a large share of the available food. She talked at length about her experience:

"People are so nasty, I am sitting down with [a friend at the food cupboard], and we ain't even got a pair of shoelaces between us, and these people [other clients] are coming in from church, dressed up and taking advantage as usual. ... It is not fair because they are walking out of there with the stuff that could have went into [my friend's] cupboards ... by the time he [the man who ran agency] got to us he was running low—he ain't got no meat left; other people walk out with laundry detergent, shampoo, and all, and we were lucky if we got a loaf of bread or anything extra. ... We were the poorest folk there. ... How people get over on the system, it is terrible. Then it makes it hard for everybody else. ... The funds are lower for people, and it affects the needy because it takes longer for the people that need it to even get theirs, and there is less help when other people are using up all the resources. There is people out there who need it."

Toni and her friend did not go back to the food cupboard after this incident, in part because Toni was worried that her friend would get into a fight with one of the "abusers":

"We didn't go back ... because of the fact that people were lying ... plus I had to keep [my friend] calm from telling people off. She was like, 'I don't believe this fucking shit, go out and look at her car, go out and look at her car, Gucci shoes!' She is going on and on and on, and she can't fight, right, and she is going on and on and on, she is going to get me [in] a fistfight with these people, with this black lady with her dress up shoes, she is going to beat me in the head with her shoes ..."

Notably lurking under the surface of these accounts are likely stereotypes regarding racial and ethnic minorities. More specifically, the respondents may be more likely to view blacks as being undeserving and abusers of *nonprofit* services than other ethnoracial groups, just as they are judged harshly in reference to public benefits (cf., Gilens 1999; Quadagno 1994). Unfortunately, the available data do not allow for an investigation of this particular issue, but other research in this neighborhood has revealed that subjective understandings of the immediate environs and the ethnoracial groups that live there influence service use (Kissane 2010).

In addition, it is noteworthy that despite the fact that the women generally thought that there were numerous service abusers out there, only one of the forty respondents admitted to behavior that the other women would probably have considered "abuse."⁷ This finding in some ways highlights the strength of the moral economy, as either the women really did not use services unless they were truly in need or desperate (which the findings from the larger study seem to support) or, at least, they recognized that such behavior would be so morally unjust that they should not admit to it, even to a researcher holding their confidentiality in strict regard.

Self-Discipline in Return for Nonprofit Obligation. The institutional logics and practices of nonprofit staffs in which "unworthy" individuals are weeded out during the service delivery process defied the women's sense of the moral economy. Contrary to popular accounts that judge poor individuals as rational, self-interested actors that exploit resources provided by the welfare state (see Murray 1984), the women to whom I spoke revealed that rarely did they act in ways that would maximize their receipt of goods and services. According to the women, many nonprofit staff (like their counterparts at public assistance offices), however, seemed to approach them not as if they were "public-spirited citizens" committed to making sure that their poorer counterparts could receive assistance but as if they were "rational calculators" favoring "situations from which they themselves benefit" (Mau 2004:55).

All in all, the women argued that if they followed the rules (i.e., only turned to agencies for help when in genuine need) that agency staff should treat them with respect, minimize the hassles involved in receiving services, and actually provide them with services. Some of the respondents did not believe that agency staff lived up to these standards. To be sure, the women were not naïve—as previously discussed, they understood that agencies often were resource-strapped and could not provide services to the entire community (in fact, this was the main reason why they claimed they would only seek help in times of genuine and overwhelming need). The women did not feel, however, that being resource-strapped justified staff's disrespecting them, not providing them with aid or services, or wasting their time with excessive paperwork, prying questions, and other administrative hassles.

In particular, many of the women complained about the detailed questioning and paperwork that they had to endure to receive services—aspects of the service delivery process that to many were offensive since they would not seek services unless they were truly in need. Jessica described the process of receiving help at two agencies, both of which she now avoided:

"You had to do a big application of why you think you needed their help. ... [They asked] 'Why you think you need it? What do you pay for rent?' ... I wouldn't be calling you for help if I could buy the stuff myself ... I had to show rent receipts, I had to show birth certificates, Social Security numbers for everybody in the house, proof of income, I mean it was just that whole big like process, which was like really, really like ridiculous. ... If I'm coming to you for help [I need it]—I won't ask anybody for anything if I can help it."

Speaking more generally about agencies, Jessica complained:

"They just put you through the ringer to get a little bit of help. ... I would always give [to] anybody that needed anything, I would give to anybody in a heartbeat. ... I wouldn't ask questions, and it's just certain things, like if I go to help for one thing, why are you asking me about something else that has nothing to do with [my getting help]? ... They shouldn't get too personal."

Similarly, Gerry, a welfare-reliant mother of two, complained that staff at the referring agency for a food cupboard that she once used (but no longer did) was rude and questioned her need. She claimed:

"The person who takes the information and tells you what you need in order to get food—[she's] very nasty. ... She just asks you, you know, 'What do you need the food for? Why do you need the food?' ... You need to do to prove that you need the food, you know. If I didn't need the food, I wouldn't be here, you know?"

Likewise, Page argued that staff at nonprofits were "nosy." She alleged:

"They [nonprofit staff] really wanted to know what was your background, and what you do in spare time and all these questions, questions that ain't really suitable to ask a person. I said, 'Jesus, you all want to know what I do in my spare time?' ... It's like they ask more questions that they don't really need to be askin'."

Additionally, the women suggested that the nonprofits failed to live up to their side of the moral economic bargain when they failed to provide them with the services they needed or only provided them with modest aid. Delilah explained how she went to an agency 2 years ago for a household repair program but never heard back:

"I went over there because they have a program that they help with fixing the houses, but I didn't get no help in there ... they never called me ... you go over there, they tell you things that you think is going to happen, but when you look back [nothing happens]. ... They lied, that is the first thing they do, they lied to you."

Kelly, a welfare-reliant mother of two, signed up for a Christmas program but Christmas came and went without her receiving any of the gifts she thought staff had promised. She explained:

"They [agency staff] never delivered, they never came. They sent me a letter in the mail and told me to put the thing ["Operation Santa Claus" sign] in my window, and we waited and they never came ... Christmas Eve and [we] didn't get it ... maybe they couldn't find the street, but I don't, I don't know what happened. We never did get it ... I was never able to get a hold of anybody [at the agency]. ... We went back several times and never got any response [as to what happened]."

Instances such as these influenced some of the women to stop seeking help at nonprofits overall, as they no longer trusted staff actually to provide them with services (and fulfill their end of the moral economic bargain), even when promised. They also served as a reminder that agencies might not have enough resources to

serve everyone in need and, thus, bolstered their conspicuous constraint. Grace, who seemed to experience problems hearing back from agencies more frequently than other respondents, claimed she would not use *any* services at *any* agency in the future. She simply argued, "Most of them [nonprofit agencies], ain't none of them no good." Page also avoided nonprofits, in part, because, as she succinctly claimed, "If you go to some agency for help, there's a fifty-fifty chance that you won't get turned down."

All in all, the women "rebelled" against what they considered unjust treatment (i.e., their not being respected, trusted, or adequately served) by withdrawing from nonprofits even more and, hence, by sacrificing the potential benefits they could have accrued from these agencies' services. Moreover, if these agencies were well-connected "resource brokers" (Small 2006), they may have missed out on other resources that flow through such agencies but which are not directly provided by them. Certainly, this sort of complaining about social service providers may represent a form of identity talk. Similar to what Snow and Anderson (1993:218) found among the homeless, disparaging "caretaker" organizations may help to create "psychic distance from the self implied [by using such agencies] and secure a modicum of personal autonomy." This "institutional distancing" and the subsequent avoidance of derogated agencies, though, seems to represent a largely invisible and passive form of protest that bears them little fruit beyond, perhaps, bolstering their self-image as self-reliant, self-sacrificing mothers.

Social Insecurity and the Silent Crises of the Needy in the Hollow State

Much of the literature on neoliberalism and insecurity has focused on pervasive quiescence and adoption of self-discipline regimes among newly "flexible" workers throughout the labor hierarchy: from upper managers (Ozkan 2008) to middle-class workers (Ehrenreich 2005) to workfare recipients (Krinsky 2007). At the same time, scholarship on the administration of social services under neoliberalism has emphasized the increasing abnegation of public accountability accompanying the devolution of social service administration to local nonprofits in the hollow state (Bardach and Lesser 1996; Heinrich, Lynn, and Milward 2010). This article investigates the moral economy of nonprofit social service use from the standpoint of poor women who occupy extremely perilous economic and social positions. By investigating the perspectives of those who, by all accounts, have suffered the fate that many neoliberal workers fear, we can better evaluate the extent to which increased economic suffering, job loss, and social service use in the current financial crisis may produce alternate framings of rights and responsibilities and the grounds for grievance construction that could lead to mobilization among the poor.

I find that, far from opposing the dominant morality (and despite their marginal status in the labor force), these women seem to have absorbed dominant lessons of neoliberalism wholeheartedly—in particular, its self-regulating rhetoric of individual accountability. Briefly, to sum, the women reported that the fair allocation of *limited* resources *from nonprofits* obligated them to seek aid (particularly in the realm of basic needs services) only when extremely desperate and to condemn

the perceived opportunism of other users. Certainly, the women were engaged in some identity work, and admittedly, this study cannot definitely discern how much of their claims reflected their actual behavior. But they most assuredly did not embrace the roles and identities typically assigned to welfare recipients nor did they provide accounts that could justify their exploiting available resources (e.g., "I've paid my dues" or "the system screwed me"), as some poor individuals have (Hays 2003; Snow and Anderson 1993). Instead, through their "conspicuous constraint" and condemnation of "abusers," they likely sought to construct an image of themselves as self-empowered, self-disciplined actors worthy of respect and disassociate themselves with the spoiled identities of the poor. Accordingly, when they did seek aid, they expected that nonprofit staff would treat them with respect, understanding, and actual assistance. Since the women often encountered staff who did not act in line with their expectations (probably because of resource limitations but also, perhaps, because of their own moral assumptions—where poor women are self-interested, economizing actors or needy because of individual character flaws⁸), social service interactions were strained, leaving the women insulted and even less willing to utilize nonprofit services in the future.

These findings suggest that poor women—even these respondents who likely *overrepresent* users of services—have adopted a condition of self-discipline that leaves them in situations of extreme denial. Not only do they deny themselves aid that might be of great benefit to them and their children, but they also deny the objective conditions of their lives that position them at the bottom of the social strata. While certainly these women seem to offer an opposing worldview concerning some key tenets of neoliberal thinking—specifically that private organizations are more efficient and effective in delivering services than public entities—their actions ultimately support neoliberal policies by decreasing public administrators' perceptions of demand—making it seem like local nonprofits can handle the prevailing needs of their communities and/or that poor women are successfully managing their own problems and moving towards self-sufficiency after devolution and welfare reform. Thus, unlike the reactions to perceived violations of moral economies highlighted in much of the historical literature, where riots ensued or workers protested in hidden ways (e.g., slow-downs), the women, here, "rebelled" by withdrawing and self-sacrificing whatever gains might be reaped from nonprofits and, in so doing, actually became less visible. Withdrawal such as this does not seem to offer much promise for altering the practices of the nonprofits, unlike the hidden protests or social movements of wage-poor individuals previously or currently (Chowdhury 2006; Dodson 2007).

Injustice frames "are interpretations of experiences or conditions that support the conclusion that some moral principle has been violated and ought to be redressed" (Levitsky 2008:556). Here, poor women unequivocally saw injustice within the system, as they criticized presumed abusers of nonprofits and those nonprofits that they felt treated them unfairly. It is hard to make an argument, however, that they had adopted an injustice frame that would lead to political mobilization or the redressing of inequalities and insecurities present under neoliberalism. Levitsky (2008:569) in her examination of unpaid family caregivers argues that "the state was not a natural target for blame" for the hardships and

dilemmas these caregivers experienced, in part because of longstanding cultural norms and beliefs that care and dependency are not the responsibility of the state. Here, too, outrage and disappointment was not focused on larger systemic forces or the state. The women failed, for instance, to recognize the retrenchment of government-provided benefits and the increasingly precarious nature of low-wage work; they also did not connect these forces or other larger issues to why nonprofits might be operating in an environment of limited resources. Moreover, nonprofit staff, who are increasingly overwhelmed and stressed since welfare reform (Abramovitz 2005; Bischoff and Reisch 2000), do not seem to be assisting in introducing an alternative framework for interpreting these poor women's situation and, perhaps, may not be even aware of how many are constraining their use of services. The consequence is that policymakers, providers, and the public may not be aware of the degree to which the safety net is frayed. Without such knowledge, we cannot devise policies that best reach disadvantaged populations.

Certainly, corroborating these findings in other research sites and among different populations of poor individuals is needed, as devolution makes generalizability difficult, and studies indicate that place influences service use in numerous ways (see Kissane 2010). Studies on how men use and understand available social services are desperately needed (what research that exists typically focuses on women, largely because nonprofit agencies—and the welfare system more generally—primarily target their services at women and their children). Other ethnoracial groups (e.g., African Americans) may also understand service use differently. Furthermore, the current economic recession may alter how people think about using nonprofit services, and there is indeed evidence of increased use of food banks and homeless shelters in the last year (Feeding America 2009; Markee 2009). Based on this study's findings, however, I would posit, though cannot substantiate with my data, that poor individuals are still restricting their use of agencies until they are in dire need, in line with the moral economy described here. In fact, if they were not, service providers would likely be *even more* overburdened, given the extent and duration of the economic crisis (Edin and Kissane 2010).

All in all, this moral economy seems to punish those who abide by it (by obligating poor women to make do without needed services) and benefit its perceived violators—for example, those “abusers” who, without the competition, may then be more likely to receive what aid is available from resource-strapped nonprofits. Encouraged by feeling marginally better off than others in the surrounding area and recognizing the limited pool of nonprofit resources, poor women will likely continue to struggle to manage on their own. Though not, perhaps, the self-sufficiency that some proponents of neoliberal reforms envisioned, individualization of responsibility is maintained. The cost, however, is that many poor women will remain in desperate need and avoid the very sector that our nation now relies more heavily upon for delivery of public welfare services.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank Michael Katz, Caroline Lee, and David Shulman for their suggestions for improving and conceptualizing the ideas in this paper.

NOTES

1. Briefly, neoliberal principles (based on economic theories) emphasize the primary importance of the free market for wide-ranging affluence, minimize “costly and inefficient” government, and stress a notion of citizenship that focuses on personal responsibility (rather than shared responsibility) for economic well-being (Krinsky 2007; Peck 2001; Ridzi 2009).
2. Similarly, Scott (1976), studying peasant uprisings in the early 20th century in Burma and Vietnam, argues that the economy was “embedded in a moral universe in which justice (construed as the right to subsistence) is central, as is also the notion of a just price” (Booth 1994:654). As in Thompson’s case, when the market opposes this “governing right-to-subsistence ethos,” moral outrage and uprising may result (Booth 1994:654).
3. “Social identity” here refers to an identity imposed by others, often based on stereotypes or information inferred from one’s appearance, actions, or affiliations. “Personal identity” consists of “the self-attributions or designations imposed by people on themselves” (DeWard 2007:5).
4. African-Americans, unlike in other high-poverty inner-city neighborhoods, represented a relatively small proportion of the local population, about 13 percent, at the time of the data collection.
5. As all of the respondents were selected, in part, based on their having used public assistance in the last 5 years, this group of respondents may have more favorable attitudes regarding public assistance and rationalize their use of such aid differently than others.
6. I should note that the women also complained about abusers of public benefits in the interviews—most frequently, criticizing those that they thought were too drug addicted or lazy to get off of TANF. As previously mentioned, however, while viewing them as morally repugnant, the women did not tend to see these abusers (or even themselves) as preventing needy others from receiving public aid because they drained public funds, as they did with nonprofit services.
7. Kristina, a welfare-reliant mother of two, used a Christmas program that she claimed she “didn’t need” “that much” (because she and other people in her family had already bought her two children “lots” of stuff). She claimed that she felt “bad that there are other people, a lot of other people I know that really needed help”—demonstrating that even violators are aware of the moral economy of service use. Notably, abuse seems to be much rarer in practice than assumed within the community.
8. While an analysis of the moral assumptions of nonprofit staff and directors is beyond the scope of this article, recent scholarship (and my own interviews with providers in the neighborhood) suggests that many social service providers are not immune to common stereotypes regarding the poor and view poverty as resulting from individual character flaws (Reingold and Liu 2009).

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