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'WELFARE DEPENDENCE': THE POWER OF A CONCEPT

Marion Smiley

ABSTRACT While the concept of welfare dependence as now formulated is logically muddled, it is very powerful in shaping our view of both the welfare state in general and the requirements of welfare reform in particular, as well as in reinforcing a variety of norms, beliefs, and interests that are harmful to both welfare recipients and the community at large. But we are not generally aware of these aspects of our concept of dependence as so formulated. Hence, we continue to use the concept as so formulated in practice and, in doing so, bring about a series of negative – and in many cases unintended – consequences, including the maintenance of a set of artificial class distinctions between dependents, i.e. welfare recipients, and the rest of us, the shutting down of serious debate about welfare reform, and the reinforcement of anti-statist values that themselves preclude the development of a democratic mode of collective protection. I set out below to bring these consequences to our attention and to show how they follow from our prevailing concept of welfare dependence. I do so by exploring the concept of welfare dependence as now formulated in depth with respect to both form and content.

KEYWORDS dependence • dependency • welfare • welfare dependency • welfare reform

While social and political concepts may not determine social and political reality for us, they do clearly shape our sense of particular social and political practices, as well as reinforce those norms, beliefs, and interests embedded in them. Since they are abstractions from social and political practice, rather than a set of practical rules, they do not do so directly, say, by forcing us to act in a particular way. Instead, they do so indirectly by focusing our attention on particular phenomena, rather than on others, and by describing these phenomena from a particular social and political point of view that is itself steeped in a variety of norms, beliefs and interests that get

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reinforced whenever we invoke the concept as so formulated in practice. In other words, they do so with enormous subtlety and in ways that are not at all obvious to us.

The concept of welfare dependence provides us with a very good example of this kind of subtle power. As now formulated, it associates welfare dependence not with all dependence on the state for well-being, but with particular kinds of welfare dependence, and describes such dependence from a particular point of view that is both class-based and anti-statist. Moreover, in the hands of those who invoke it in practice, the concept reinforces this particular point of view, disempowers those construed as dependents, namely, welfare recipients, and shuts down serious debate about welfare reform. But it does not do so directly, say, by providing us with a set of instructions for how to disempower particular individuals or to shut down a particular kind of debate. Instead, it does so indirectly within a conceptual framework that is highly abstract and, as it turns out, logically confused. In other words, it does so in ways that, while highly effective, are hard to get at and very difficult to demonstrate.

I set out in this article to get at and demonstrate the concept's power by showing how it operates in social and political practice as what I call a 'powerful abstraction'. In part I, I explore the concept of welfare dependence as it now governs arguments about welfare reform in both the US and elsewhere. I argue in part II that the concept of welfare dependence as so formulated does not, as we are led to assume, simply draw on the act of reciprocity. Instead, it brings the act of reciprocity together with a variety of highly contestable social and political phenomena – ranging from negative moral and psychological traits to socially and politically ascribed identities and class distinctions to a presumed need for paternal authority. In part III, I trace the negative consequences that the concept of dependence as so formulated has when it is invoked in practice.

I

While there are clearly those who resist using the language of dependence to talk about welfare reform,¹ a surprisingly large percentage of those who now participate in the welfare reform debates rely on the concept of dependence extensively. Michael Novak, among others, proclaims that 'at the heart of the poverty problem is the problem of welfare dependence' (Novak, 1987: 9) Daniel Patrick Moynihan goes further than Novak by translating the primary 'problem' of welfare into the primary 'issue' of welfare. According to Moynihan, 'the issue of welfare is quite simply the issue of dependency' (Moynihan, 1986: 3) Both men acknowledge that the problem of poverty is still with us. But they do not treat it primarily as an economic problem. Instead, they treat it as a problem of individual behavior – 'dependence' or 'dependency' – that we can associate with reciprocity itself.

Very few of those who use the term 'dependence' in their arguments about welfare define the term itself. But they do make clear that welfare dependence is at least two things: the receipt of a particular kind of welfare assistance, namely, that associated with poor people's programs, and dependent behavior on the part of recipients. Likewise, they hint that while such behavior is individual, it is shared by an entire class. While this class of individuals is composed almost entirely of those who accept poor people's assistance, it is frequently referred to as 'the dependent class' and distinguished from 'functioning citizens' who are ostensibly independent. Lawrence Mead, among others, is not shy about associating this class directly with the problem of welfare dependence. According to Mead, '[t]oday the social problem is not mainly the destitution of functioning citizens and their families but widespread dependency, with millions of Americans, including many working-age adults, subsisting on Federal benefit programs' (Mead, 1986: 19).

Novak, Moynihan, and Mead are all conservatives. Hence, we should not be surprised to discover the central place that they give to the notion of welfare dependence. But they are not alone in placing welfare dependence at the center of our attention. Since the mid-1980s both conservatives and liberals alike have bemoaned the problem of welfare dependence and have placed their concern for it at the center of both general political diatribes and key pieces of legislation. Moreover, they have done so not only in the US, where the language of dependence – and the focus of attention on independence – remains strongest, but in the UK, Australia, Canada, and other political communities that place value on 'independent citizens' and/or have been strongly influenced by US political culture.

While the language of dependence has taken hold in welfare reform debates in much of the English-speaking world, it does not of course register complete agreement on the subject. Proponents of the welfare state continue to call for greater assistance in at least designated areas and associate the term 'dependence' with different meanings than their anti-statist counterparts do. Hartly Dean and Peter Gooby Taylor, for instance, speak of powerlessness rather than laziness or weakness of will in their discussions of dependence (Dean and Gooby Taylor, 1992: 551–83) and feminists who write about the welfare state talk about the 'dependent class' as not only powerless but subject to a patriarchal state or 'substitute father'.² In other words, there are many minority voices among those who decry welfare dependence, many of which self-consciously avoid blaming victims.

But the language of welfare dependence nevertheless prevails, even among those who are generally open to welfare assistance. Moreover, it does so in both public debate and academic research. As Sanford Schram shows very effectively in *Words of Welfare*, the language of welfare dependency persists not only among 'New Democrats' but among left-leaning scholars of the welfare state who incorporate such language into their economic analyses.³ According to Schram, by the 1990s, social scientists of poverty

were compelled not only to ask key questions about poverty in the language of dependence but to construe welfare recipients as members of 'the dependent class' for purposes of research.⁴

Moreover, even progressive historians of the welfare state frequently treat 'welfare recipiency' and 'welfare dependency' as interchangeable terms of analysis and associate both with AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) and other poor people's programs. Interestingly enough, in doing so, they generally forgo the moral and psychological traits that are often associated with welfare dependency in public debate, e.g. laziness and weakness of will. But they do not generally forgo the association between welfare recipiency and a class of welfare dependents known as 'dependents'. Nor, with several important exceptions, do they include in this class recipients of social security or other middle-class welfare programs.⁵ Instead, like most everyone else, they focus their attention on recipients of poor relief and refer to them as the dependent class.

Since the language of dependence is so widely accepted, we might want simply to let it go. But, as I suggest in part III, the concept of dependence as now formulated has a host of negative consequences when invoked in discussions of the welfare state, consequences that follow not only from the intentions of those who use the term, but from the concept's own formulation. Hence, in order to grasp these consequences fully and prevent their reproduction in the future, we need to ask: what does the concept of dependence as now formulated entail? How is it formulated? I address both of these questions below within a more full-blown analysis of the concept of dependence as now formulated.

II

While the language of dependence pervades public debates about welfare reform, moral, social, and political philosophers do not, with several major exceptions, bother to analyze the concept of dependence.⁶ Instead, they assume either that dependence is the antithesis of a term that they do explore at length, namely, autonomy, or that dependence as we now know it is a purely factual matter and as such not in need of conceptual analysis. In other words, they assume either that the term 'dependence' will be analyzed implicitly within their studies of autonomy or that dependence is a subject for social scientists, rather than conceptual analysts, by virtue of its empirical content.

But dependence is not simply the opposite of autonomy of the sort that we are supposedly concerned about in discussions of welfare dependence. Nor is it a purely factual matter independent of social and political practice. Instead, it is, as now formulated, a conflation of four significantly distinct and normatively charged phenomena that are related to each other in complex ways that are rarely made explicit (and usually obscured). Hence, we cannot

assume, in Michael Novak's words, that '[w]e all know what dependence is and why it is wrong' (Novak, 1987: 98). Instead, we have to uncover its present meaning and structure from common usage before going on to critique it and ask what a better formulation of dependence might look like.

Two things become apparent as soon as we set out to uncover the meaning of dependence that prevails in contemporary welfare discourse. First of all, the terms 'dependence' and 'welfare dependence' are frequently used interchangeably, either because we assume that 'welfare dependence' is a subset of 'dependence' or that only welfare recipients, along with children, are dependents. Not surprisingly, the latter assumption does not hold up under scrutiny, unless of course we are willing to acknowledge dependence as a purely ascriptive, rather than causal, matter. Moreover, the former suggests that we cannot justifiably use the two terms interchangeably after all. But we nevertheless do use the two terms interchangeably and, in doing so, suggest that 'dependence' is 'welfare dependence'.

Likewise, we frequently go back and forth between two other terms that would appear to have significantly different meanings, namely, 'dependence' and 'dependency'. I argue shortly that we cannot really treat the two terms – 'dependence', which refers, among other things, to physical reliance on others for well-being, and 'dependency', which is used to refer to a state of being and now refers to a lifestyle – as if they are the same thing, especially since the latter is now (unlike in its traditional formulation) supposed to follow from the former as a consequence. But we do nevertheless go back and forth between the two terms and do so as part of our meaning of dependence.

What, then, do we mean by dependence/welfare dependence/dependency/welfare dependency? At one level, we understand the phenomenon as the sheer acceptance of welfare assistance of a particular sort, namely, poor people's programs such as that which used to be called AFDC in the US. Hence, economists and policy analysts can talk about 'discovering' dependence by counting up the number of individuals receiving assistance for X, Y, or Z weeks.⁷ In other words, they can treat dependence as a purely quantifiable matter, even though they, too, often present it as a moral and political problem. Likewise, the rest of us can assume that 'dependence' occurs when individuals receive such assistance for the designated number of weeks.

But of course dependence cannot be for us simply a matter of such recipience, since it would not be construed as a 'problem' in the way that even progressive economists and policy analysts in the US now construe it. Nor does it now appear to signify what 'dependence' generally means in the biological sciences, namely, the necessary reliance of individuals (or other beings) on a source outside of themselves for either survival or the achievement of a particular level of well-being. For, if it did, we would presumably be asking, not 'How do we get rid of dependence?', but 'What kinds of assistance, if any, are necessary for individuals to thrive at level X,Y, or Z?'

While we generally avoid the language of necessity when discussing dependence in the context of social and political relationships, with the major exception of discussions of childhood dependence,⁸ we are generally more than willing to couple the basic fact of recipience with a host of moral and psychological traits that all supposedly register the absence of autonomy and personal responsibility in the lives of 'dependents', as well as a lifestyle, 'dependency'.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan provides a typical sense of the 'subjective side' of dependence.

Dependence is not just poverty. To be poor is an objective condition; to be dependent, a subjective one as well. . . . Being poor is often associated with considerable personal qualities; being dependent rarely so. Dependence is an incomplete state in life: normal in the child, abnormal in the adult. In a world where completed men and women stand on their own feet, persons who are dependent – as the imagery of the word connotes – hang. (Moynihan, 1986: 10)

Moynihan expresses the 'subjective side' of dependence here as a state of being or lifestyle. But he clearly also wants to signal a set of moral and psychological traits associated with welfare recipience, since he goes on to stress that dependence involves not just 'the state of childhood' but weakness of will, incompetence and the inability to take care of oneself (Moynihan, 1986: 18). Likewise, he joins the vast majority of those now writing about dependence in viewing these traits, not only as the absence of autonomy and personal responsibility, but as their very antithesis. 'Dependence is the antithesis of autonomy and responsibility, as well as the denial of one's responsibilities as a full member of the community' (Moynihan, 1986: 18).

At the outset, the 'subjective side' of dependence is presented as a set of negative consequences that *follows from* AFDC recipience. Likewise, welfare assistance is viewed as *leading to* a variety of problems for individuals, such as the undermining of their autonomy and the isolation of them within a state of dependency. In other words, there is a causal relationship posited between the two clusters of phenomena. Richard Nathan offers one among many identical analyses.

Policy experts from both major parties agree that welfare dependency is bad for people, that it undermines their motivation to support themselves, and isolates and stigmatizes welfare recipients in a way that over a long period feeds into and accentuates the underclass mindset and condition. (Nathan, 1986: 5)

But very rapidly both the lack of autonomy and the 'underclass mindset and condition' that Nathan and others cite as a consequence of dependence on welfare becomes an aspect of dependence itself. Michael Novak offers a representative definition here.

Dependency includes attitudinal factors such as a sense of alienation from society's norms and values, sometimes aggressive and exploitative behavior towards others and what Thomas Pettigrew calls 'learned helplessness'. (Novak, 1986: 36)

Novak goes on to view such 'learned helplessness' not only as a set of behaviors but as a lifestyle: welfare dependency. (As we shall see, it is the conflation here of the 'fact' of recipience, a set of behaviors, and a lifestyle that enables us to treat 'dependence' and 'dependency' as interchangeable terms of discourse.)

For a significant portion of recipients, their dependency is not a short-lived circumstance engendered by fortuitous events beyond their control, but rather is a long-term condition arising from behavior for which they might appropriately be held accountable. (Novak, 1986: 36)

While Novak refers here to a 'significant portion of the recipients', rather than to all recipients of AFDC, he, like many others, feels free to talk about all recipients of AFDC as a class: the dependent class or the underclass. In doing so, he brings recipiency together with a set of both moral and psychological behaviors that all members of the designated class (AFDC recipients) share and couples such behaviors with a set of 'common lifestyles', including pregnancy out of marriage, non-work outside of the home, alcoholism, and drug use.

What is distinctive about welfare dependence is its moral or attitudinal component, manifest in an inability to cope on the part of many able-bodied adults. . . . Such individuals are frequently to be found in female headed households. (Novak 1986, p. 94)

Novak makes clear that these individuals form a specific class.

There seems to be today a significant number of citizens whose behavior is putting them, and keeping them, in dependency upon the public purse, and, worse still, in an inward dependency, which prevents them from coping well with responsibilities to themselves. Alcoholism and drug use are obvious manifestations; others are dropping out of school and failing to pursue long-term goals of self-development. . . . A significant number of the underclass exhibit these tendencies. (Novak, 1986: 98)

While such rhetoric pervades the writings of welfare state critics, the structure of the concept is not absent from those who support a welfare state in one form or another. Indeed, even defenders of the welfare state in the US frequently accept the association of dependence with the absence of autonomy and personal responsibility among 'dependents'. But they frequently reject the highly racialized and sexist images now associated with dependency as a lifestyle and insist that the absence of autonomy and personal responsibility in the lives of 'dependents' is not, as Novak and others suggest, the fault of welfare recipients themselves. Likewise, they go on to

define the absence of autonomy and personal responsibility associated with dependence as a state of weakness forced on individuals by, for example, a patriarchal state.⁹

What is the concept of dependence that emerges from these discussions? Not surprisingly, the major components of the concept are easier to pinpoint than the concept's very messy structure. Hence, let me start with the question of content. While those now writing about dependence do not formulate their concept of dependence explicitly, they do, as we have seen, bring together into one ostensibly factual discovery of dependence at least four very different phenomena, all of which can in one way or another be couched in the language of dependence.

The first is the simple acceptance of AFDC or other poor people's grants. The second is a set of moral and psychological traits that ostensibly follow from such recience under particular conditions, all of which are supposed to register a lack of autonomy and personal responsibility. The third is a lifestyle – dependency – that ostensibly captures the lives of those who share the above traits and embraces also a variety of non-autonomous activities that reflect personal irresponsibility, e.g. having babies out of wedlock, quitting school, or doing drugs. The fourth is a social class – dependents – who are endowed with a special status that renders them less than full citizens (which in its contemporary context usually means 'bad citizenship' rather than 'non-citizenship').¹⁰

While these phenomena are themselves relatively straightforward, the relationship between them is not. Indeed, as we have already seen, there are at least two (mutually exclusive) relationships now posited. While the first views dependence as *undermining* or *eroding* autonomy, personal responsibility and full citizenship, the other treats dependence as the logical *antithesis* of these three capacities. In other words, while the first is a causal relationship between the four phenomena in question, the second is an identity relationship that ostensibly enables us to bring the four phenomena together into a single notion of dependence.

As several of the passages quoted above suggest, the convolution that takes place when these two relationships are brought together is often covered up by talk about the supposed 'subjective' and 'objective' sides of dependence. But, once we take a closer look at these two perspectives, we find the same causal and identity relationships reproduced in them. On the one hand, the 'subjective side' of dependence ostensibly follows from the 'objective side' in a causal relationship. (In other words, the 'objective' act of receiving welfare ostensibly causes the negative moral and psychological traits, as well as the degenerate lifestyle, associated with the absence of autonomy and personal responsibility.) On the other hand, they are presented as two 'sides' of dependence and hence are presumed to be part of the same phenomenon.

In the end, those now writing about dependence often take the causal

relationship between the four phenomena in question, as well as the 'objective side' of dependence that it places at the center of our attention, for granted in both public and academic discussions of dependence. Likewise, they generally treat our choice to focus on a particular 'objective' dependence relationship, namely, welfare recipience, rather than on any number of other 'objective' dependence relationships, such as those associated with family, the economy, or civil society, as natural, i.e. as not a choice at all. Hence, they find it very easy to treat dependence as a set of individual behaviors, as well as a lifestyle called dependency.

Since the sense of dependence that emerges here is very complex and spans all the way from mere recipience to moral and cultural degeneracy, it might appear to be very difficult to discover in practice. But we do not appear to have difficulty in doing so now. For, while all of the negative attributes, behaviors, and identities associated with dependence are ones that we supposedly discover, we need not, as long as they are packed into the 'fact' of recipience, discover them directly. Instead, we can locate them indirectly by asking a more straightforward empirical – and in many cases quantitative – question: Has the individual in question received welfare assistance for X, Y, or Z weeks?

III

Not surprisingly, the concept of dependence as so formulated turns out to be logically confused. Three difficulties should have become apparent already. The first concerns the interchangeable use of the terms 'dependence' and 'welfare dependence'. The second concerns the omission of 'particular circumstances' from the formulation of the supposed consequences of welfare recipience. The third concerns the inclusion of what were originally supposed to be consequences of dependence, namely, the absence of autonomy and personal responsibility, as well as the lifestyle called dependency, into the definition of dependence itself, or, in other words, the absorption of these phenomena into the 'fact' of dependence, namely, welfare recipience.

The first move, equating 'dependence' with 'welfare dependence', does not hold up under scrutiny, if only because the characteristics associated with welfare dependence are particular to welfare recipients. Nor can those who use the two terms interchangeably respond by saying that the only dependents are welfare dependents. For, children are also dependents from their perspective and, in any case, the only way to view the two groups as co-extensive is to derive the description of dependence in general from an exclusive focus on the very group that is supposed to be identified on the basis of that description. In other words, the only way to view the two groups as coextensive is to be methodologically circular.

The second and third moves are equally troubling. While those who

use the concept of dependence might be justified in generalizing about the consequences of welfare recipients under particular circumstances, they cannot justifiably drop the 'under particular circumstances' when it comes to their definition of dependence without committing the fallacy of false generalization. Likewise, while they might be justified in treating the absence of autonomy and personal responsibility, as well as a lifestyle called dependency, as consequences of welfare recipients under particular conditions, they cannot fold the latter into the former, i.e. treat the four phenomena cited above as part of the same definition of dependence, without committing the fallacy of absorbed consequences.

While these may appear to be 'mere logical mistakes', they are not small or insignificant mistakes, since all three of the moves associated with them would seem to create havoc for empirical scholars of dependence. (What, for instance, is supposed to be the starting point for empirical research, the act of recipients or the behavior of welfare mothers?) Nor are they politically neutral mistakes either. For, like the concept of dependence of which they are a part, they shape social and political reality in a variety of ways that are frequently damaging to both particular individuals and the community as a whole. In other words, along with the concept of dependence itself, they have important social and political consequences in practice of which we are not generally aware. Let me turn here to several of the most important among these consequences.

'The' problem of welfare designated

Since the concept of dependence as now formulated defines dependence as the absence of autonomy, personal responsibility, and full citizenship, as well as the need for paternal care, dependence comes to be defined from the outset as a problem. Moreover, since at the core of dependence is the recipients of welfare assistance of a particular sort, we are led to assume not only that dependence is a problem but that welfare assistance (of this particular sort) is a problem too. In other words, we are led to view 'the problem of welfare' as 'the problem of dependence', and 'the problem of dependence' as one of the individual behaviors of those who accept AFDC or its equivalent.

Not everyone of course is willing to except such a formulation of the 'problem of welfare'. Indeed, Joel Handler, Francis Fox Piven, and many others have made clear that they have no intention of accepting such a formulation since, among other things, it blames victims and ignores economic issues. But the formulation nevertheless remains dominant in the US and is taking hold within efforts to dismantle welfare abroad. Moreover, given the prevailing notion of dependence, it is difficult to dismiss the 'problem of dependence' as now formulated without downgrading the importance of autonomy, personal responsibility and non-paternalism, values which most advocates of the welfare state themselves share.

The solution to 'the problem of welfare'

Since the focus of so much attention is the absence of autonomy, personal responsibility, and full citizenship among individuals who are presumed to be in need of paternal care, we might expect participants in the contemporary welfare debates to place these values at the center of our attention and ask: under what conditions can autonomy, personal responsibility, and a non-paternalistic welfare state be realized in practice? What kinds of institutions, both public and private, would be helpful? But, with several important exceptions, they do not ask these questions. Instead, they place dependence itself at the center of our attention and ask: how do we get rid of it?

Moreover, they answer this question with predictable uniformity: get individuals off welfare (AFDC). Not surprisingly, such a response does not get us very far in establishing the conditions of autonomy and personal responsibility. Nor is it clear that once off welfare individuals will be any more autonomous or personally responsible than they were before. Indeed, they might in some cases be considerably worse off, depending on what other institutions (e.g. the family or the economy) they can depend on.

But those who have formulated our prevailing concept of dependence are nevertheless able to assert the answer to 'the problem of dependence' as that of getting rid of a particular kind of welfare. For, they have associated dependence with one particular kind of welfare assistance and then defined it, not just as the consequences of AFDC under particular circumstances, but as the 'antithesis' of personal responsibility, autonomy, and citizenship. As such, they can assume, quite falsely, that autonomy and personal responsibility will be realized once individuals are not dependent on a particular kind of welfare assistance.

The shutting down of serious debate

One of the most powerful features of the concept of dependence as now formulated is its determination of the questions asked, and not asked, by participants in our so-called welfare reform debates. As we have already seen, the primary question that we now ask concerns how to get rid of dependence/welfare. What kinds of questions can't we ask? What kinds of questions are precluded by the prevailing notion of dependence? Since we presume that dependence, which we define partly as a matter of receiving welfare assistance, is the antithesis of autonomy, personal responsibility, and citizenship, we cannot, without seemingly contradicting ourselves, ask: what kinds of welfare assistance might enhance autonomy, personal responsibility and citizenship? Nor can we take a comparative perspective on particular dependence relationships with respect to these three capacities. Likewise, since we write the need for paternal care into our definition of dependence, we cannot, without seemingly contradicting ourselves, ask: how might we develop forms of welfare assistance that are not paternalistic?

In both of these cases, we are precluded from asking questions about how the state might enhance subjective capacities that are positive by virtue of the negative subjective capacities that are included in the definition of dependence itself. In other cases, we are precluded from asking questions about the 'objective side' of dependence by virtue of the way in which the concept of dependence as now defined both attaches itself to one particular 'objective' relationship of dependence, i.e. that associated with AFDC, and then takes the 'objective side' of dependence for granted so as to focus on the more important 'subjective side' of it.

What questions get left behind in the context of these two moves? Not surprisingly, we do not ask about the value of those dependence relationships associated with other kinds of welfare assistance, i.e. those associated with social security, home mortgage supports, and aid to the blind. Nor do we ask about the value of other dependence relationships such as those associated with the family, civil society, and the market. Nor do we take a comparative perspective on all of these dependence relationships together in the way, say, many of the American framers did when confronted with the need to redistribute dependence relationships in post-monarchical society.¹¹

Moreover, values other than autonomy, personal responsibility, and full citizenship are made out to be irrelevant to discussions of dependence. Take, for instance, the values of fairness, efficiency, and communal harmony. While those arguing most vociferously against dependence in the US context frequently let out that welfare is, from their perspective, unfair to taxpayers and a threat to communal harmony, they do not incorporate these claims into their discussions of dependence itself. Nor could they do so without focusing on the 'objective side' of dependence, rather than its supposedly 'subjective' nature.

As the recent welfare debates in the US have demonstrated very clearly, without the ability to ask such questions, we cannot pursue welfare reform seriously. In particular, we cannot distinguish normatively between acceptable and unacceptable dependence relationships or ask how dependence might be restructured so as to enhance particular normative values. Instead, we are forced to concede the critic's starting point, which presumes the disvalue of welfare, if we want to talk about dependence. Not surprisingly, many supporters of the welfare state choose not to enter these debates and in many cases reject the importance of dependence as a topic of normative inquiry, which, I argue below, is itself unfortunate.

The re-enforcement of anti-statist values

While we shut down debate about welfare reform in this context, we do not do so in a neutral fashion. Instead, we reinforce anti-statist norms not only by equating the recipient of welfare assistance of a particular kind with dependence construed as the antithesis of autonomy, personal responsibility, and full citizenship but by assuming that dependence on Federal welfare

assistance is interchangeable with the welfare state per se. Likewise, we reinforce the legitimacy of non-state, private, relationships of dependence, e.g. those associated with the family and private charity, by failing to acknowledge them – or their economic counterparts – as dependence relationships at all.

Moreover, by labelling recipients of poor people's programs, and not the rest of us, 'dependents', we not only marginalize these individuals and justify our paternalistic treatment of them, but downgrade the particular dependence relationships in question. Likewise, we create invidious distinctions in society between dependents and the rest of us who are presumed to be independent and reinforce the sense that 'welfare' is a matter of poor people's programs only, rather than a much larger set of programs benefiting those from different sectors of society. Not surprisingly, the historical association between dependence and non-citizenship becomes particularly troublesome in this context, since it leads us, when talking about dependence, to distinguish between more and less full citizens.

Dependence as weakness and need for paternal care

The concept of dependence as now formulated in the context of welfare debates reinforces – and leads us to accept without knowing it – a notion of dependence that is not as neutral as its ostensibly factual status would suggest and that obviously has its roots in older, explicitly patriarchal formulations of the term. As we have seen, this notion construes dependence as a matter of weakness, inferiority, and need for paternal care, and merges it with a status associated with those who are less than full citizens and classified as such. Moreover, it does both of these things as if they are natural to dependence itself, an assumption that has its source in much earlier sensibilities concerning the naturalness of dependency within a hierarchical world view. Hence, we do not generally bother trying to reformulate dependence as a more neutral construct – which I do not take to be all that controversial as a project – but instead assume that dependence *is* weakness.

Non-paternal dependence relationships?

The retention of a such a notion of dependence, i.e. one that construes dependence as a matter of weakness, need for paternal care and low social status, is not without its consequences. Indeed, by viewing dependence as such, we are led, even if do not want to be, to distinguish between dependents and non-dependents and to associate the former with both the need for paternal care and bad citizenship, if not non-citizenship. Likewise, even if we do not want to do so, we are led to conjure up images of weakness and subordination every time we acknowledge dependence in our own lives and those of others.

Moreover, by associating dependence in general with weakness, inferiority, and the need for paternal care, we take away from ourselves the

ability to develop relationships of dependence that are not paternalistic. In other words, we leave ourselves with a notion of dependence that implies the need for both paternal care and paternal authority. Hence, we cannot even ask ourselves what a non-paternalistic, i.e. democratic, mode of collective protection might look like. Instead, we are forced – if we want to embrace collective protection in the form of, say, social security or national health care – either to concede ‘justified paternalism’ for the population as a whole or to ignore the fact that collective protection involves dependence relationships at all.

Not surprisingly this latter consequence clearly effects our ability to develop non-paternalistic welfare programs, as we now use the term ‘welfare’. But welfare reform is not the only thing that suffers. Indeed, once we expand the realm of welfare programs to include social security, health care, the regulation of consumer goods, and other sorts of collective protection, we see that we are faced with a very large problem. While we may want to institute non-paternalistic modes of collective protection, we do not know how to do so. For, we are not able to distinguish between paternalistic and non-paternalistic dependence relationships in general.

CONCLUSION

Since the concept of dependence as now formulated has such negative consequences when invoked in practice, we might, like other critics of the term ‘welfare dependence’, want simply to leave the term ‘dependence’ behind altogether. But to leave behind the term ‘dependence’ – as distinct from the term ‘welfare dependence’ or the category of ‘dependents’ – is not the right answer, for everyone else will continue to use the term ‘dependence’ as now formulated and in doing so create the kinds of difficulties cited above. Instead, we need to reconstruct the concept of dependence by focusing our attention on all dependence relationships, rather than just those associated with welfare recipients, and to separate out from these relationships the host of negative moral and psychological traits, socially and politically ascribed identities and class distinctions, and assumptions of weakness and subordination that now create the kinds of difficulties cited in this article.

What – in a more positive vein – is to be gained by developing such a pared-down version of the concept of dependence? First of all, such a concept would presumably enable us to underscore the various dependence relationships that are not now picked up by our prevailing concept of dependence, e.g. the dependence of husbands on their wives in the family and the dependence of the wealthy on the state, and, in doing so, to challenge the artificial – or at least greatly overdrawn – distinction now in place between ‘dependents’, i.e. welfare recipients, and the rest of us, as well as to bring to light those various unacknowledged forms of assistance that the relatively powerful in society now receive.¹² In other words, it would provide us with

a picture of dependence that is both more realistic and fairer than the one that we have now available to us.

Second, no matter how distorted the concept of dependence now is, the fact is that there are unhealthy dependence relationships in the world that need to be remedied. While some of these relationships take place between individuals and the state, others take place within the family and *require* welfare assistance to relieve them. Likewise, while some of these relationships are unhealthy by virtue of their effects on particular individuals, others are unhealthy by virtue of their effects on the larger community, e.g. because they cost too much or because they break down necessary boundaries between private and public spheres of life. What are we supposed to do about these relationships?

While these relationships may be associated with economics, e.g. with the inability of individuals to find adequate employment or to move out of abusive relationships, they are not purely economic relationships. Nor do they arise out of poverty or unemployment alone. Instead, there is something about the particular dependence relationships that is unhealthy. Hence, we cannot move immediately into economics as if it were, once again, the root of all problems. Instead, we have to understand what makes some relationships of dependence unhealthy and others not by exploring, among other things, the various ways in which they undermine autonomy and personal responsibility, as well as disempower those involved in them and reassert the need for paternal authority.

Finally, while the notion of welfare dependence as now formulated discourages us from exploring dependence in the family, civil society, and the economy, as well as from invoking the values of fairness, justice, efficiency, security, trust, and communal solidarity in discussions of dependence, dependence does in fact exist in these spheres of life and needs to be argued about in terms of these values, as well as in terms of the values of autonomy and personal responsibility. How can we do so? I argue elsewhere that to do so requires not only that we develop a pared-down concept of dependence of the sort I have suggested here but that we open up the normative terrain of dependence beyond a mere focus on individual behavior (Smiley, forthcoming). In this essay I have concentrated on showing what happens when we allow the concept of dependence as now formulated to go uncontested.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Mink (1998), Handler (1995), and Katz (1989).
2. See, for example, Ann Orloff and Renee Manson (1996), Helga Hernes (1984), and Annette Borchorst (1994).
3. Schram (1995).
4. Schram argues that the incorporation of such language of welfare dependency into left-leaning economic analyses is not coincidental but instead a reflection of the extent to which welfare research is now tied to policy initiatives. According to Schram, 'the welfare policy researcher is relegated to the position of an underlaborer supplying research findings in predetermined topics such as welfare dependency' (1995: 9).
5. Linda Gordon provides one such important exception in *Pitied But Not Entitled; Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (1994). Gordon argues that 'welfare' could 'accurately refer to all of a government's contributions to its citizens' well-being, including paved streets and sidewalks; highways; public transportation systems; schools; parks; public water; sewerage treatment; garbage collection; food and drug regulation; building inspection; and driving licensing'. 'But', she adds, 'even if we label as welfare only those programs that provide cash to citizens, we could include home mortgage tax deductions, business expense deductions, medical expense deductions, farm subsidies, government college scholarships and loans, capital gains tax limits, Social Security and old-age pensions and Medicare' (1994: 2).
6. There are several important exceptions here, including Goodin (1998), Fraser and Gordon (1994a, 1994b), Meyers (1989), Mendus (1990), and Ackelsberg (1994). While Michael Walzer does not address the concept of dependence explicitly, he does in his discussion of security and welfare in *Spheres of Justice* (1983) go far in reformulating mutual dependence as a positive value.
7. The difference between X, Y, or Z weeks should not be underestimated or treated as insignificant here, since economists and policy analysts frequently use 'how many weeks of assistance' to determine whether particular recipients are 'dependents'. Interestingly enough, in disagreeing with each others' criteria, they make clear that their quantitative discoveries of dependence are mediated by more purely normative assumptions about, among other things, how much support individuals should be able to expect from a state funded by taxpayers.
8. This exception is itself very telling, for it suggests that when the particular dependence relationships in question are ones of which we approve, we are willing to focus on the (positive) element of necessity.
9. See, for instance, Abromovitz (1988), Hobson (1990, 1994) and Pateman (1988).
10. Interestingly enough, the traditional concept of dependence, which equated dependence explicitly with non-citizenship, has had to be modified since universal suffrage by refocusing attention on the quality of 'citizenship behavior' rather than on whether or not one is actually a citizen.
11. For an excellent discussion of the way in which early American political actors debated how to distribute dependence between the family, civil society, and the state, see Wood (1991).
12. I take it that this is what Nancy Fraser has in mind when she asks us to 'out' the dependence of the wealthy and powerful on both the state and those subordinate to them (Fraser, 1993).

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