Who Defines Need?: Low-Income Individuals' Interpretations of Need and the Implications for Participation in Public Assistance Programs

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Existing research into participation and nonparticipation in U.S. public assistance programs is nearly all rooted in the assumption that people who meet a program's eligibility criteria are in need of that program's assistance. Based on in-depth interviews with members of 75 low-income households, this study argues that the failure to give low-income individuals a voice in defining their own need prevents researchers from understanding how and why these individuals choose to participate, or not participate, in public programs. The disconnect between individual interpretations of need and program eligibility standards pushes us to rethink the design of participation research and program implementation.

Key words: need, poverty, participation, welfare, public assistance, low-income households

Social science and social policy research consistently notes a discrepancy between the number of Americans eligible for participation in public assistance programs and the number that participates, such that millions of individuals who are income eligible for assistance do not receive it (Bentele & Nicoli, 2012; Burman & Kobes, 2003; Dubay, Guyer, Mann, & Odeh, 2007; Fusaro, 2015; Kenney & Cook, 2007; Plueger, 2009; Wolkwitz, 2008). Scholars have examined this phenomenon from several angles,

considering: the relationship between participation and individual or household characteristics, such as race and education; the impact of particular program features, such as benefit levels or application requirements, on participation; and the possibility that some individuals avoid participation because of the social stigma associated with receiving public assistance (Nicoll, 2015).

While existing research provides insight into possible reasons for participation and nonparticipation, it is nearly all rooted in the assumption that people who meet a program's eligibility criteria are in need of that program's assistance. In other words, participation researchers, and the policymakers and practitioners who rely on their work, take it as given that need is an objective measure of life circumstances and that the eligibility criteria used by public assistance programs equate with how individuals and families themselves define their need. This is true in spite of ample evidence that low-income families' perceptions of their situations are significantly more complicated than program eligibility assessments are able to measure (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Edin & Lein, 1997; Halpern-Meekin, Edin, Tach, & Sykes, 2015; Hays, 2003).

In keeping with the theoretical work of scholars like Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon (Fraser, 1987, 1989; Fraser & Gordon, 1992), this study was motivated by the idea that such assumptions made by researchers and policymakers "[impose] monological, administrative definitions of situation and need and so [preempt] dialogically achieved self-definition and self-determination" (Fraser, 1987, p. 115) on the part of those living in or near poverty. Based on in-depth interviews with members of 75 low-income households, I argue that the failure to allow low-income individuals to have a voice in defining their own need actually prevents us from understanding how and why these individuals choose to participate, or not participate, in public programs. If our antipoverty policies are intended to reach those in need, we must find ways to assess need that are driven not by researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, but by low-income individuals' own perceptions and experiences. This study takes an important theoretical and empirical step in that direction by identifying the ways in which low-income individuals interpret their own need and exploring the implications of this for their participation choices.

Defining Need Interpretation

Need has often been discussed, both theoretically and in the practice of establishing program eligibility standards, as a universal or objective concept. In this view, human beings have "natural" needs (food, shelter, etc.), and if societies are to survive and thrive, these needs must be met (see Hamilton, 2004; Robertson, 1998). While it may be true that human beings have objective needs, my respondents' narratives provide evidence that need is a much more complex phenomenon than can be captured in universal terms. In Michael Walzer's (1983) words, "People don't just have needs, they have ideas about their needs; they have priorities, they have degrees of need; and these priorities and degrees are related not only to their human nature but also to their history and culture" (p. 66).

What Walzer calls people's "ideas about their needs" corresponds, in part, with what I refer to as interpretations of need. I use the word "interpretation," rather than "idea" or "perception," in order to emphasize the active and ongoing nature of this phenomenon. My respondents' "ideas about their needs" are made up of retrospective, prospective, and comparative views of their lives as they recall past experiences, encounter new situations, and describe their circumstances in all of their complexities. Interpretation is a process through which my respondents not only narrate but make meaning of their experiences. This occurs both explicitly and implicitly, as they draw on every-day events as well as on "taken-for-granted assumptions" (Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. 92) that stem from "their history and culture" (Walzer, 1983, p. 66), including what I refer to as the U.S.'s hegemonic poverty discourse.

Numerous scholars have documented a dominant poverty discourse in the U.S., connecting American attitudes about poverty and public assistance to what are considered to be fundamental American values: a strong belief in the autonomy of the individual, the so-called Protestant work ethic, and a commitment to the patriarchal model of the family (Ellwood, 1988; Tropman, 1989). These values, it is argued, lead Americans to place primary responsibility for poverty on poor individuals themselves (Gans, 2009; Gilens, 1999; Hunt, 2004; Lens, 2002); to emphasize hard work as the ideal remedy for poverty (Handler

& Hasenfeld, 1997; Shipler, 2004); and to reject notions of economic or social equality while at the same time supporting civil and political equality (Bussiere, 1997; Fraser & Gordon, 1992; Gainous, Craig, & Martinez, 2008; Hochschild, 1981; Katz, 2001; Marshall, 1950; Nelson, 1984; Somers, 2008).

While U.S. poverty discourse includes "a multiplicity of discursive elements" (Foucault, 1978, p. 100), the elements described here constitute a *hegemonic* discourse. As described by Susan Silbey (2005), "hegemony is produced and reproduced in everyday transactions, in which what is experienced as given is often unnoticed, uncontested, and seemingly not open to negotiation … Although moments of resistance may be documented, in general subjects do not notice, question, or make claims against hegemony" (pp. 331, 333). The U.S.'s history of treating poverty as an individual problem and creating public assistance programs that are residual, at best, provides ample evidence that these discursive elements have become hegemonic.

According to Nancy Fraser (1987), the policies shaped by the U.S.'s hegemonic poverty discourse position help-seekers "as passive clients or consumer recipients and not as active co-participants involved in shaping their life-conditions" (Fraser, 1987, p. 115). This has long led to dissatisfaction with antipoverty policies and public assistance programs from all sides. Taking low-income individuals seriously as agents of their own lives and understanding how and why they make the participation choices they do has the potential to change this, but it requires careful listening to the narratives these individuals use to describe their own need. Rather than excluding those living in or near poverty from "the political conversations in which [their] needs are contested and defined" (White, 1990, p. 49), we must enlist them as drivers of those conversations.

Methods

The in-depth interviews at the heart of this study were guided by interpretive research methodology. Interpretive research is "closely, even intimately, empirical and concerned with problems of meaning, conceived of and analyzed hermeneutically or otherwise, *that bear on action as well as understanding*" (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. xii, emphasis in original). It is interested

in not only what people think, but how they develop and articulate those thoughts. My primary research question (how do low-income households make choices about participation in public assistance programs?) was asked out of an interest in not simply *why* people might not participate in programs for which they are eligible but *how* their lived experiences and context shape participation choices and what this means for both research and practice.

Sample & Recruitment

Using an IRB approved protocol, I began recruitment for interviews through four Head Start programs run by a single nonprofit organization in a Midwestern state. The four programs, while all in the same geographic region, were located in communities that varied in terms of racial and ethnic makeup, median household income, and locale (e.g., urban, suburban, exurban). Because Head Start programs are required to serve low-income families, participants are likely to be eligible for additional public assistance programs. According to previous research, however, Head Start families do not necessarily participate in all of the programs for which they are eligible (Aikens et al., 2010; Tarullo, West, Aikens, & Husley, 2008).

As a means of validating interview findings with respondents who did not have children enrolled in Head Start, I asked Head Start respondents for referrals to family members or friends who had children and were in similar economic situations but were not participating in Head Start. In total, I interviewed 75 individuals, 40 of whom had children enrolled in one of the four Head Start programs and 35 of whom were referrals living in the same communities.

My final sample consisted of 71 women and four men. Because more women than men live in poverty in the U.S., and because female-headed households make up the largest family type in poverty (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015), this is not particularly surprising. It is also possible that recruitment methods and my own gender contributed to more women being willing to share their stories with me. The sample was fairly evenly split between African American (47.5%) and White (42.5%) respondents, with a small number of respondents (10%) who identified

as Hispanic/Latino, Arab American, or multiracial. Additional sample demographics are included in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Demographics[1]

	% of Sample (n=75)
Gender	
Male	5.0
Female	95.0
Age (in years)	
22-29	35.0
30-39	42.5
40-49	15.0
50-55	7.5
Race/Ethnicity	
Black	47.5
White	42.5
Hispanic	2.5
Arab American	5.0
Multiple	2.5
Marital Status	
Single	40.0
Married	35.0
Separated/Divorced	22.5
Engaged	2.5
Number of Children	
1	40.0
2-3	50.0
4+	10.0
Highest Education Level Achieved	
>High school	12.5
High school diploma or equivalent	15.0
Some college (no degree)	42.5
Associate's degree	7.5
Bachelor's degree	15.0
Master's degree	7.5
Monthly Household Income[2]	
>$500	30.0
$500-999	22.5
$1,000-1,999	30.0
$2,000-2,999	15.0
$3,000+	10.0

[1]All demographic information was self-reported by respondents.
[2] One respondent declined to identify an income range.

Finally, it is important to note that every respondent in the sample had used at least one public assistance program at some point in time and that, at the time of the interviews, only half of the respondents were using all of the programs for which they were estimated to be eligible.

Interviews

Based in James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium's (1995) active interview approach, which holds that "all participants in an interview are inevitably implicated in making meaning" (p. 18), all interviews followed a single guide but were allowed to flow organically, encouraging respondents to narrate their experiences from a variety of perspectives. Because of the breadth and depth of material covered, I interviewed each respondent twice, separated by about a week. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and three hours each. The initial interview asked demographic and life history questions, including questions regarding the respondent's history of public assistance program use as well as questions about past and present financial circumstances and decision-making. The second interview employed both survey and conceptual questions related to the hegemonic poverty discourse, including questions that have been used in major national surveys and follow-up questions to illuminate the respondent's rationale in survey response choices (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

All interviews took place between April 2012 and April 2013, and the majority were conducted in respondents' homes. A small number of respondents preferred to meet at their child's Head Start site or in a public location such as a coffee shop. Interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of respondents and professionally transcribed. All respondents have been assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Analysis

Interviews were analyzed hermeneutically, taking into account both the narratives of respondents and their broader context (Crotty, 1998; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Mantzoukas, 2004). The initial round of analysis involved reading through each

transcript, highlighting quotes of interest. These quotes were used to create a list of themes, which, in turn, became codes used in NVIVO 10 software. Additional rounds of reading and coding led to new themes until a level of conceptual saturation was achieved (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The concept of "need" arose as a major theme early in my analysis, and thus the findings reported below are the result of many rounds of reading, coding, comparing, and interpreting more than 150 hours of interview material. The theory that respondents' interpretations of need impact their participation choices emerged from the data itself, though it is supported by the work of other scholars (Fraser, 1987, 1989; Fraser & Gordon, 1992; Nelson, 1980).

Results

My respondents' interpretations of need were neither as objective nor as static as the definitions of need used by public assistance programs and participation researchers. They were, instead, both multidimensional and contextual.

By "multidimensional," I mean that these interpretations were not simply based on financial circumstances but were embedded in respondents' broader interpretations of their lives. Like most of us, people living in or near poverty do not compartmentalize the various dimensions of their lives (finances, family, work, etc.) but think of them holistically, considering not only what they need in order to provide for their children's material well-being but also what they need to be good parents, to get and keep jobs that provide them with a sense of stability and dignity, and to contribute meaningfully to their communities and to society at large.

Respondents' interpretations of need were also "contextual," taking into account past and present experiences, expectations for the future, and comparisons with others. Respondents' narratives demonstrated that people do not develop interpretations of need in a vacuum; they draw on what they have experienced, what they know, and what they believe.

The results reported here highlight the multidimensional and contextual nature of need interpretation and point us toward new ways of assessing need in research, policy, and practice.

Multidimensional Interpretations of Need

Basic finances. Basic household finances were often the first life dimension my respondents discussed, focusing particularly on their ability to provide physical necessities (shelter, food, clothing, etc.) for their children. When asked about her circumstances, for example, Michele, a white single mother of one who made $750–999 per month at her job in a nursing home, said, "The most important thing to me was that my daughter always had food." Priscilla, a recently separated African American mother of one whose main source of income was her monthly Social Security Disability Insurance payment, said, "I have to keep a roof over my son's head … We can't be on the street." Finally, Danielle, a married African American mother of one whose monthly household income was just over $2,000, said, "Anything in the car, household, any kind of utilities or rent or schooling for [my son]—those are things that come first and foremost, because they're directly related to him, and I'll provide for him."

For these mothers—and for the 72 other parents with whom I spoke—making sure that their children had their basic material needs met came first. Their ability to meet these needs was not, however, the only dimension of life they considered in interpreting their family's need.

Parenthood/Motherhood. While basic finances were usually mentioned first, parenthood (usually motherhood) was the life dimension discussed in the most depth by my respondents. Every respondent talked about their children and their own role as a parent during their interview, and more than half of my respondents spoke about these topics in relation to their perceptions of need. This is not particularly surprising, given that ideas about motherhood are deeply embedded in the U.S.'s discourse about and response to poverty (Abramovitz, 2000; Gordon, 1994; Hays, 2003; Piven & Cloward, 1971). While the specific ideas have shifted from the Victorian image of the (white) mother in need of support and protection as she cared for her children (Hancock, 2004) to the contemporary standard of a wage-earning citizen who fulfills her own work responsibilities while also providing for the material and psychological needs of her children (Morgen, Acker, & Weigt, 2010; Soss, Fording,

& Schram, 2011), public assistance programs have long shaped and been shaped by society's image of the good mother.

This is not lost on those mothers who receive assistance from social welfare programs. Multiple studies indicate that "welfare mothers" are committed to fulfilling the role of "good mother" (DeParle, 2004; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Hays, 2003; Morgen et al., 2010; Rank, 1994), and my respondents were no different. From my poorest respondents, surviving on less than $250 a month, to those whose incomes were more than ten times that amount, interpreting need meant considering their role as a parent.

Caroline, a white single mother of two, found living on an income of $250–499 per month while pursuing higher education to be a challenge, but she did not view her family as being in desperate need, because she felt good about who she was as a mother to her children (ages 3 and 4). "I'm pretty fulfilled and happy in my life," she told me. "I want my kids to know that we don't need brand new … We don't need nothing fancy, we don't."

Elsa, on the other hand, a biracial mother of three, with an income of $750–999 per month, seemed to feel more in need than Caroline, despite having a steady job and more money:

> I feel like I'm stuck in between. I don't like my job, it don't pay that much, but it pays more than what state aid would give me. And then I have to work afternoons, so I'm really not spending time with my kids that much, so I don't really like it.

The fact that bringing home enough money to provide for her family meant sacrificing time with her children led Elsa to interpret her need differently than Caroline, who had less money but said that she spent "all of [her] time with [her] children." It was clearly important to Elsa that she was able to provide for her children's material needs, but this was not her only consideration in interpreting her family's need.

Other respondents expressed similar concerns. "You want to know that your kids are okay," said Dominique, an African American single mother of two with a monthly income of $1,000-1,499. "You want to be able to work, you want to be able to provide, make sure you're maintaining everything, but you want to make sure your kids are safe, too." Dominique had

recently made the decision to move from two jobs to one despite a significant cut in pay, in order to provide her children with what they needed, not only materially but also emotionally.

Alyson, a white single mother of one with a monthly income of $1,500–1,999, said:

> If it was just me, I don't care; I'll eat peanut butter and jelly for the rest of my life, you know? It's just me. But when you're responsible for another person, it's hard, because you're like, "I'm failing as a mom."

Need was not only a financial matter for Alyson but also related to how she saw herself as a mother.

None of these parents would deny that their ability to provide for their children's material well-being contributed to their interpretation of need, but they also made clear that dimensions of life not as easily measured by assistance applications weighed heavily in these interpretations.

Personal responsibility. In addition to parenthood and objective financial status, how well respondents perceived themselves to fulfill the U.S.'s ideal of "personal responsibility" and to comply with society's dominant work ethic also played a role in their interpretations of need. The ethos of personal responsibility was discussed by at least half of my respondents.

I interviewed Beverly, a single African American mother of three who was seven months pregnant with twin boys, in her hospital room. She had been admitted for monitoring and possible induction but insisted that she wanted to complete our interview. When I asked about her family's financial circumstances, Beverly told me:

> Part of me is like, "Okay, I'm blessed to have these boys," because I didn't have any boys … But it's kind of a headache, because I can't work, and when you can't work, you can't take care of your family the way you want to.

Beverly described herself as a hard worker, dedicated to providing for her family on her own. While she had received public assistance in the past, she quickly moved up the ladder at her current job: "I went from a second assistant all the way to store manager within a year, so they had told me I was making

too much money to get food stamps, which didn't bother me. It made me feel good." Because of this, she did not think of herself as being in need. When health concerns related to her pregnancy forced Beverly to go on unpaid maternity leave much earlier than she had anticipated, however, her interpretation changed. While she found ways to provide for her children with the help of family, non-profit, and government assistance, her inability to work for those resources herself led her to consider her family in more need.

Other examples of the personal responsibility ethos include respondents' descriptions of their efforts to attain higher education, which they viewed as a means of achieving long-term, sustainable self-sufficiency. Dave, a white single father of one who worked 38 hours a week at a job paying "a quarter more than minimum wage," described his education as a means of taking responsibility for his circumstances:

> I'm in school full-time to get out of [my current situation]. I always say I'm not happy with where I am right now, but I made the decision not to go to school when I was supposed to go, so [I'm] just trying to play catch up right now to get out of it.

Emphasizing his commitment to the fundamental American value of personal responsibility, Dave joined many other respondents in highlighting their efforts to "follow the rules of mainstream American culture" (Gans, 2009, p. 81), again using the hegemonic poverty discourse as a tool to structure interpretations of need.

Contextual Interpretations of Need

Just as my respondents' interpretations of need encompassed the many *dimensions* of their lives (provider, parent, responsible worker), they were also firmly embedded in the *contexts* of their lives, drawing on life experiences, expectations, and comparisons with others.

Retrospective interpretations. All respondents spoke in some depth about previous life experiences, particularly in relation to financial well-being. Thinking about these previous life

experiences led some respondents to interpret their current situations in a more positive light, explaining, at least in part, why individuals who appeared to be in difficult, if not desperate, circumstances, did not consider themselves in need. Shelly, a biracial single mother of three daughters (ages 6, 3, and one month), told me that, despite having been recently cut off from her cash assistance and having no income other than small amounts of assistance from family, "things are going okay." I asked Shelly if she had been through more difficult times in the past. "Oh yeah," she said. "There's been a few times where I've had pretty much nothing but myself and my kids." Compared to her own childhood, which she described as "not good at all," and to earlier times when she considered herself truly poor, Shelly's current situation, which included a stable place to live and assistance from SNAP and WIC (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children), struck her as "okay."

Alternatively, other respondents remembered better times in their past, leading them to interpret themselves as being in more, rather than less, need currently. Dawn, a mother of two pre-school aged children, remembered what her situation was like when the three of them and her boyfriend (the children's father) lived with her parents rather than on their own:

> We were pushed into living on our own [when my parents moved out of state], so we've had to struggle to make it work with bills and stuff. I liked it better before, 'cause I didn't have to pay a bunch of stuff.

Dawn and her boyfriend were both working when I met her, bringing home a combined monthly income of $1,000–1,499, but the added expenses that Dawn and her family faced living on their own made her report feeling *more* in need than she did when they lived with her parents. Dawn's family was in objectively much better circumstances than Shelly's, but comparisons between their current situations and past circumstances impacted each woman's interpretation of need.

Prospective interpretations. Many respondents (about one quarter of the total sample) also looked to their future—what they expected or hoped for—in describing their interpretations of need.

Sitting at the dining room table in her parent's suburban home, where she paid $300 a month for the bedroom she shared with her four-year-old daughter, Janet, a 27-year-old African American woman, told me that her financial situation was "stressful" and "sometimes sad." She was making $250–499 a month working part-time as a hairdresser while also going to school full-time to become a nurse. Despite all of this, Janet did not consider herself to be in great need, in large part because she was only a few months away from earning her bachelor's degree and anticipated getting a good job and moving out of her parent's house:

> I think, right now, some of the choices that I'm making are making it so that my future is going to be better. I realize that sometimes people have to struggle to get to where they're going, and I just think of it as like, I'm in that struggle, so when I do get that apartment next year, I'm more appreciative than the person whose parents paid for them.

Her conviction that life was going to improve in the near future, combined with her pride in having worked her way out of difficult circumstances, led Janet to feel that her current situation was not as bad as it might have seemed from the outside:

> I know a lot of people look at people who are low-income: Is it stressful? Yes. I can see how some people fold and get stressed out, but I'm not depressed at all, maybe because there's a light very close to the end of my tunnel.

Melanie, a 23-year-old white woman who also had a four-year-old daughter and made $750–999 each month at her job at a local grocery store, told me, "I struggle to pay my bills." At the same time, though, she was confident that her situation was going to improve. She had held her current job for three years and said:

> Next year I start getting nice raises, and I top out at quite a bit of money at my fifth year being there, which, doubled with my benefits through my insurance and the fact that it is union … it's a pretty decent job.

Melanie kept this in mind when interpreting her need, telling herself that if she could "just stick it out for a couple more years," she would be able to provide the life she wanted for her daughter.

Both Janet and Melanie were struggling to make ends meet, but they did not consider themselves to be in tremendous amounts of need, mainly because they viewed their situations as temporary. It is interesting to note the emphasis both placed on hard work as the basis for their anticipated success. Again, their interpretations of need, while drawing on the contexts of their own lives, also relied on their broader cultural context—one that considers hard work to be the ultimate, if not only, solution to poverty and need (Handler & Hasenfeld, 1997; Shipler, 2004).

Comparative interpretations. Although my respondents interpreted need in the context of their own life experiences—past, present, and future—the contextual factor that appeared even more frequently in their narratives was how they viewed themselves in comparison to others.

Dave, the 29-year-old single father quoted above, was temporarily living with his own parents until he could save enough money to rent an apartment. He paid his parents $100 per week for "room and board" for himself and his son, leaving him with limited money for other expenses. When I asked him whether he had sought out any public assistance, he said:

> I would assume that I would be eligible for [assistance], but right now I have a lot of help from my mom. I'm very lucky with that, so I'd rather not get on too much assistance from the government when somebody else could have it. Other people might need it.

The fact that he had family resources on which to draw made Dave feel less in need than he otherwise might, particularly when he considered other people who did not have such resources.

Likewise, Jackie, a white married mother of three with a monthly household income of $1,500–1,999, told me:

> I'm thankful for what I have, because it's always someone out there doing a lot worse … I know for sure my kids eat, they have clean clothes on, clean diapers, they are not wanting for anything … The next person could be doing a lot worse.

For some respondents, comparisons to others worked in the opposite direction, as they contrasted their own situations with those they considered to be in *less* need. Patty, for example, told me about the challenge of sending her children to a public school where most of the students came from much more afflu-ent families:

> At first I didn't really realize it, until I started getting to know a lot of the parents, and almost every single parent I know, both husband and wife are college graduates, and they've all had some type of good job … They don't know, but we live different, big time … And when it comes to, just football alone, there's a lot of extra things that people want you to put money into, and it's like, I don't want to tell them I can't do it.

If Patty's children went to school with others from similarly re-sourced families (her husband earned $1,000-1,499 per month for their family of six), she might have felt differently, but, as it stood, interacting with the parents of her children's classmates increased her sense of need.

Liz, a single mother of three, who made $2,000-2,499 per month, described similar experiences interacting with her co-workers:

> There's times when they're like, "Let's go here for lunch." I can't do that. Twenty dollars for me is gas in my car. Twenty dollars to me is groceries for half of a week … I don't think a lot of them can even fathom what it's like to budget the last twenty dollars or not know how you're gonna get groceries in a couple of days. They don't even get it. They will never get it. They're not from the same place.

While Liz had always considered herself to be "struggling" and accepted this as a part of life, recent interactions with co-work-ers highlighted her level of need. Like Patty, the reminders that others were providing themselves and their children with a lifestyle she could not afford helped to shape Liz's interpreta-tion of her own circumstances.

Discussion

Interpretations of need are not, in and of themselves, predictive of the choices people make regarding participation in public assistance programs. We cannot draw a causal arrow from an individual's interpretation of need to the choices she has made or will make. This is, in part, because these interpretations are unlikely to be static. Over the course of our conversations, as respondents considered various dimensions of their lives and the contexts in which those lives were lived, their comments demonstrated "changing roles, shifts in narrative positions" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 34). At one point in time, a respondent talked from her perspective as a mother, while later this same respondent expressed a seemingly different, even contradictory, point of view as she spoke from her perspective as a child growing up in a poor household.

Recognizing these different roles and narrative positions adds a layer of complexity to respondents' interpretations of need, as they seem to change not only over the course of the respondent's lifetime but even over the course of a single interview. Rather than making interpretations meaningless, however, these shifts provide us with the opportunity to understand the complexity of need, which, in turn, sheds new light on the relationship between interpretations of need and participation choices, pushing us to rethink the design of both participation research and program implementation.

If, as appears to be the case, families' interpretations of their own need do not equate with the objective measures that programs use to assess need, it is unlikely that these programs will be successful—either because people who appear to be eligible (i.e., "in need") choose not to participate, or because those who participate do not receive the type of help *they* think they need. In short, excluding those living in or near poverty from "the political conversations in which [their] needs are contested and defined" (White, 1990, p. 49) has resulted in policies and programs that inappropriately define what those needs are and who has them.

Implications for Social Welfare Policy and Research

What might our programs, and our research about program participation, look like if we did indeed attend to people's own interpretations of their needs? How might we account for the multidimensional and contextual ways in which people think about their life circumstances?

First, we must begin with different questions. Both research tools and program applications must find ways to combine their current objective measures of need (income, household size, assets, etc.) with questions that shed light on people's own interpretations of their need. These might include questions as simple as "Do you feel that you are able to meet your household's basic needs with your current income?" or a more complex scale, similar to that used by the Current Population Survey (CPS) to assess food security. Asking respondents about the frequency with which they struggle to pay basic household bills, the number of times in the past year they have had to make choices about which expenses to meet and which to forgo, and their anticipated likelihood of such struggles in the future could give us a clearer picture of how people think about their own need. While questions like these are already being asked on national surveys, they do not tend to be used in participation research or on program applications, as we continue to rely on fairly objective measures of need and eligibility.

Based on my respondents' narratives of need interpretation, it might also be beneficial to ask program applicants and research participants about needs that are not strictly financial but still related to household well-being. These might include questions about work history and opportunities, time spent at work and with children, and individual perceptions of household need. Asking questions like these on program applications would obviously take more time and detailed attention, which would likely require an increase in the number and training of caseworkers available to handle applications, but if such questions result in more adequately meeting families' needs, this investment could prove worthwhile in the long-run.

Attending to individuals' interpretations of need—and how those interpretations are constructed—also has implications for the fundamental design of our public antipoverty policies. The

multidimensional and contextual ways that people think about their needs reminds us that these needs are not simply financial.

Redesigning public antipoverty policies from the perspective of potential participants would require significant restructuring of current public assistance programs. One possibility for such restructuring would be to group programs to meet the needs of people in particular life circumstances rather than setting them up in silos, as our current programs are. Instead of providing income eligible households with distinct forms of assistance for housing, food, health care, and other financial needs, we might group such assistance into program "packages" based on the dimensions and context of self-defined need. Such packages might include a time-limited crisis package for those in emergency situations (health crisis, disabling accident, unanticipated job loss, etc.), a supplemental package for working families whose jobs do not pay enough to meet basic needs, an early childhood package for those who interpret their needs as arising mainly from the desire to be good parents to very young children, and a transitional support package for those who foresee being able to improve their own circumstances after a short period of time focused on education or otherwise enhancing their employment prospects. Each "package" would require specialized case managers with knowledge of not only public assistance programs but also non-governmental programs to which recipients might be referred.

While different households use current programs in each of these ways (i.e., in crises, as supplements to earned income, etc.), they are often forced to balance multiple application and recertification processes in order to cobble together several forms of assistance, none of which quite meets their needs. Thinking of anti-poverty policy as a means of meeting participants' self-defined needs would not only make programs easier to navigate but also better able to lift, and keep, families out of poverty.

Designing anti-poverty policy from the perspective of potential participants, as suggested here, would require approaching poverty itself in a new way, transforming our discourse from one of mistrust (Levine, 2013) to one in which those living in poverty are viewed as legitimate members of society and therefore appropriate sources of ideas for policy design. It is also possible, of course, that if "new policies create new politics"

(Schattschneider, 1960), designing new programs may be exactly what we need in order to change our discourse and begin to meet the needs that those living in or near poverty view as the most significant.

Study Limitations

As an interpretive project, this study involved a relatively small sample, and while my respondents' life histories, current circumstances, and experiences with public assistance programs varied considerably, all of these existed within a particular geographic context. In continuing to develop and test theories about need and participation, it will be important to conduct similar interviews in other geographic areas, broadening the sample to encompass respondents in more rural communities as well as cities and suburbs with different historical, social, and economic realities. It will also be important to develop and implement larger scale, quantitative or mixed-method approaches to testing the relationship between these concepts.

A second limitation of the study is one common to research on participation and nonparticipation in public assistance programs and arises from the challenge of estimating program eligibility. Estimation methods vary from study to study, but all face two major issues. First, as Ashenfelter (1983) and Shaefer and Gutierrez (2011) have noted, income may be endogenous to participation, such that households who are "near eligible" (i.e., just above the income or asset cutoff for a particular program) could be eligible with slight changes to their income or assets. If these households are making a conscious choice to be ineligible, excluding them from consideration may result in researchers' failure to examine important factors in participation decisions. Second, as states have implemented a range of restrictive eligibility policies that continue to change over time, particularly in connection to TANF, families who appear income- and asset-eligible for a program may be deemed ineligible by other state restrictions such as time limits and low earnings thresholds. To combat this issue, Trisi and Pavetti (2012) use the TANF-to-poverty ratio (the ratio of families receiving TANF cash assistance to the number of families in poverty) in estimating TANF participation rates, but this is an aggregate rather than individual-level measure. Both of these

issues make it difficult to accurately classify my respondents as eligible or ineligible participants or nonparticipants in public assistance programs.

Conclusion

As the U.S. continues to confront a poverty rate of nearly 15%, with millions of households exceeding 100% Federal Poverty Level (FPL) but still eligible or near-eligible for assistance from public assistance programs, it is imperative that we find new ways to understand not only the impact of participation on people's lives and well-being but also the reasons why large numbers of households who could receive assistance fail to do so. This study presents a new theory for explaining how low-income households make participation choices and demonstrates, through the use of in-depth interpretive data, the ways in which this theory contributes to broader research on participation. It also serves as a call to those who design and implement our public antipoverty policies, reminding them that if we want to assist low-income families in meeting their needs, we must first attend to how they interpret those needs for themselves.

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