Working after Welfare

Seefeldt, Kristin S.

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Peeking inside the “Black Box” of Employment Transitions

At the start of the WES, many respondents could have conceivably been characterized as “long-term” welfare recipients. The average woman had spent more than half of her adult years with this support. Many had also experienced substantial portions of their childhood on welfare. By the end of 2003, nearly 80 percent of the sample had left welfare, although not all of those exits were permanent. Just under two-thirds of our sample experienced some level of wage growth, and many workers moved out of the “poverty wage” labor market (very narrowly defined). How did this happen?

The findings from the multivariate analyses presented in the previous chapter provide insights into some of the characteristics that are associated with various patterns of employment for former welfare recipients. However, the analyses of the survey data cannot tell us much about how women embarked on these pathways, the choices they made, and various obstacles and opportunities they might have encountered. This type of information is provided in the qualitative interviews, which allow us to peer more closely inside the “black box” of employment transitions. By better understanding women’s decision making and their experiences over this time period, I argue, more effective policies to support low-wage workers can be developed.

This chapter describes the qualitative study sample, including the methods used for collecting and analyzing the data. Appendix B provides additional details about the methodology. I then introduce a number of the participants from the study, using their stories to trace out their employment paths. A number of the most relevant themes about work and family are highlighted and then expanded upon in the subsequent chapters.
In order to obtain more detailed information on the employment experiences of former welfare recipients, a qualitative component of WES was undertaken in early to mid-2004, after the final wave of survey data collection was completed. Thirty-two women, selected based on their employment histories and the ages of their children, were interviewed in depth about their experiences with work and raising children. More information about this sample follows. A greater explanation about selection into the qualitative sample and the methods used to code the data can be found in Appendix B.

Sample

Eighteen of the 32 women interviewed were African American, and the other 14 were white. Table 4.1 provides some basic demographic information on the sample, with comparisons to the larger WES sample. More detail is contained in Appendix B. As shown in Table B.1 in Appendix B, this distribution of 56.3 percent African American and 43.8 percent white is nearly the same as the racial breakdown of the larger survey sample, which is 56.4 percent African American and 45.4 percent white. Women ranged in age from 26 to 46, with a median age of 33. In 1997, when the study started, the vast majority, 75 percent, had at least one very young child living in the house; by 2003, only 15 percent of women in the qualitative sample had very young children, although most had one or two minor children living with them—one woman had seven children. Compared to the rest of the WES sample, qualitative sample members looked no different statistically in terms of the number and ages of their children.

Because I limited the qualitative sample to women with very steady employment records (see Appendix B), qualitative sample members, compared to the larger WES survey sample, worked in more months in each year of the survey; after 1997 qualitative respondents worked in almost every month, compared to about eight months for the rest of the sample (see Figure 4.1). As Figure 4.2 shows, the hourly wages of qualitative sample members track those of the rest of the sample, with the exception of the fifth and final survey wave in 2003. However, the
range in hourly wage in 2003 was wide for the qualitative sample, from a low of about $3 for a woman receiving reimbursement from the state for providing day care for her sister’s children to a high of around $19 for a couple of respondents. Hours worked by respondents also varied considerably. A few respondents reported working more than full time (e.g., 45–48 hours a week); 12 worked full time (40 hours a week);
and 4 nearly full time (35–39 hours). However, 10 of the women in the qualitative sample worked under 35 hours a week.

Qualitative sample members worked in more months, and early analysis from the WES showed that the presence of various barriers was negatively related to employment (Danziger et al. 2000). Thus, I wondered if the qualitative sample was more “advantaged” in terms of the human capital members brought to the labor market as well as by their personal and family situations. Despite working more, qualitative sample members resembled the larger WES survey sample in terms of their education, skills, and physical and mental health challenges, although a few differences are present. On the one hand, qualitative sample members were very likely to have previously worked in jobs that met the Holzer definition of “skilled,” as described in the previous chapter. On the other hand, a larger percentage of qualitative sample
members, 37.5 percent, reported using drugs, compared to about 21 percent of the rest of the sample.

In short, despite some restrictions placed on the construction of the qualitative sample (on a variety of demographic, human capital, health, and other measures), the women participating in the qualitative interviews looked remarkably similar to the WES sample. This does not mean that the findings from the qualitative sample are necessarily generalizable to the experiences of all WES sample members or to former welfare recipients more broadly. However, I show these similarities to demonstrate that the qualitative supplement did not necessarily comprise the “best” cases or the most “successful” cases in terms of outcomes post–welfare reform. Rather, they represent a variety of employment experiences.

Figure 4.2  Median Hourly Wage Rates, WES Sample and Qualitative Sample ($)

NOTE: Years represent the five survey years.
SOURCE: Author’s tabulations from WES data.
Data Collection

The interviews for the qualitative supplement, like the WES surveys, generally took place in women’s homes and lasted about 90 minutes. The questions covered a range of topics, including impressions of what constituted a good and a bad job, what women liked and disliked most about their jobs, how well (or not) they got along with supervisors and co-workers, how they made decisions about their employment, and what aspirations they held for their futures. Through this qualitative inquiry, I hope to be able to provide, as Angel, Lein, and Henrici (2006) note, “deeper insights” into the factors that give rise to particular employment patterns and “the subjective reality that lies behind them” (p. 15).

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM WOMEN’S EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES?

The women we interviewed in depth represented a wide array of employment experiences. Seven were employed in food services, four of those specifically in fast-food chains. Four had housekeeping jobs, either in hotels, hospitals, or in private homes. Another four worked in health services, in jobs ranging from health care aides to a licensed practical nurse (LPN). Three worked for transportation companies in management, dispatching, and assistance roles, and another three were cashiers in retail outlets. Two worked in manufacturing jobs, two in public safety/security, and six in other occupations, ranging from a day care provider to a pharmacy technician. Finally, one of the women, although working when surveyed in the fall of 2003, was unemployed when the qualitative interviews were conducted in spring 2004.

As in the analyses presented earlier (see Tables 3.2 and 3.3), I divided the women in the qualitative study into five groups: those who progressed from a low-wage job into a higher-paying one, those who stayed in a low-wage job, those who moved from a higher-paying job to a lower one, those who did well in both periods, and those who lost jobs by the end (see Table 4.2). All of the names used in this and other chapters are pseudonyms. In addition, certain details about jobs and families
have been changed to protect individuals’ identities. In these stories, I also note the various barriers that the surveys identified these women as having and the ways in which women did (or, as was often the case, did not) recognize the challenges as having an impact on employment.

**Poverty Wage to Above-Poverty Wage**

Lorraine is an example of one of the 11 women in the qualitative sample who moved from a lower-paying job to a higher-paying one. Lorraine never finished high school, dropping out when she became pregnant at 16 and going on welfare. When the study started, she worked at a series of cashier jobs, making just over the minimum wage at all of them. In 1999 she was alerted by her sister about an opening for a janitorial position within a large local hospital where her sister worked. The position paid more than $7 an hour, at the low end of our cutoff for an “above-poverty-wage” job, but nevertheless an improvement over her previous wages. She received two raises, and by the end of our study was making about $8.50 an hour. However, the higher wages were not why she reported taking the job. At first she told us that she looked upon the hospital position as an opportunity to learn new skills, to try her hand at something she had never done before. However, more questioning led to the real reason: as a cashier, Lorraine often worked the second shift, leaving her children on their own after school. The unsupervised time, she believed, resulted in poor academic performances, and Lorraine decided that she should find a job that allowed her to monitor her

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transition type</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tr>
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<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poverty wage to above-poverty wage</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Above-poverty wage both periods</td>
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<td>Above-poverty wage to unemployment</td>
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**Table 4.2  Employment Transitions, 1997/98 to 2003, for Qualitative Sample Members (n = 32)**

NOTE: A poverty-wage job is equivalent to $6.15 an hour or less in 1997 and $7.05 an hour in 2003.

SOURCE: Author’s tabulations from WES data.
children’s homework and be with them when they returned home from school.

Although Lorraine thought that her lack of education prevented her from obtaining an even higher-paying job, none of the other challenges documented by the survey were a part of her narrative. Lorraine was one of the women who, at least initially, did not know many workplace norms. She also met the criteria for having mental health and transportation problems at one or two of the survey waves. Rather, it was concern about her children’s school performance that prompted her to look for a different job.

Regina, too, started in a lower-wage job and worked up the employment ladder. Instead of attributing her climb to any of her own characteristics, she claimed that she got her job through connections. She reported that she was employed as a facilities manager of a convention center because she was romantically involved with the person doing the hiring. This change took her from a less-than-minimum wage, off-the-books job as a maid into a situation in which she became a supervisor, obtained health benefits, and saw her wage rise to more than $10 an hour. While Regina noted that the higher pay was important in her decision to switch jobs, also of priority was the work schedule, which was first shift.

Additionally, although she said that her current employment at the convention center was stressful, in that many of her tasks had to be completed on short notice or in a small amount of time, Regina believed it was much less of a strain than some of her previous jobs, including a stint working on the night shift at a convenience store. On that job, she was held up at gunpoint. She quit immediately thereafter. While Regina had mental health problems at a couple of times during the WES data collection, I was not able to ascertain whether or not the robbery at her previous job and her reports of stress at work were related.

Tia spent the early years of the WES moving from one low-wage job to another. She characterized her early employment trajectory as “Just working all these deadbeat jobs that weren’t paying anything for all these hours.” At the time she was making these lateral moves, however, Tia returned to school to complete a certificate program in health care, a credential that, interestingly, is not captured by the survey. When we interviewed her, she was working as a medical secretary, making more than $15 an hour. Nevertheless, Tia believed that she would not
have been able to handle work, family, and school responsibilities without significant help from the father of her children (and now her husband). She described him as an active participant in the children’s lives, assisting them with homework so that she could complete her own: “You couldn’t ask for a better dad, as far as homework that’s not done—he takes [the kids] and he’s going to put them on that computer and he’ll say, ‘We’re doing this, this, this.’ As far as projects, he’ll get down to the basement so I can be upstairs finishing my work.”

Lorraine, Regina, and Tia eventually found higher-paying jobs by moving from one employer to another, with few breaks in their work history. Some of the literature suggests that moving from one job to another may be the best strategy for mobility out of the low-wage labor market (Andersson, Holzer, and Lane 2005; Loprest 1992; Neal 1999; Topel and Ward 1992). In part this may be related to changes in the employment market. Recent research has documented increased “stickiness” among lower-skilled service-sector jobs. That is, opportunities for advancement within a particular firm are limited, and on-the-job training, which might provide skills to move up within the organization (or to a different employer), is minimal (Bernhardt et al. 2001).

However, I found many women who were able to advance by staying at the same job and getting raises or by being promoted. Barbara started working for a trucking company in 1998 in a clerical position. She made less than $6 an hour, although she worked a great deal of overtime. By 2001, she was a manager earning $14 an hour with benefits. Jackie had worked in the same grocery store for about five years, but several years ago she was promoted into an assistant manager position. A raise that accompanied the promotion, coupled with yearly wage increases that kept pace with the cost of living, resulted in a change in the categorization of her job from poverty-wage to above-poverty-wage. Jackie believed she could have made even more money as a supervisor, but doing so would have entailed a commute to a more distant store, something she did not want to do, largely because of her daughter. Physical and mental health problems, which the survey found, were again not part of the story she told about her work decisions.
Continuous Poverty-Wage Employment

A nearly equal number of women in the qualitative sample remained working in very low-wage jobs as progressed to higher-paying positions. Some of these individuals had been in the same position for four years or longer, while others moved from job to job, trying to improve their lot. Two were getting paid by the state to take care of disabled relatives. Mishon made just above the minimum wage when she started working as a hotel housekeeper in 1997. Although she quit for a period of a year, she went back to the hotel in 2000 and was still working there when we interviewed her. When asked if anything in her job had changed in the past year, Mishon replied that no, “Everything is the same.” What was also the same was her pay, which had increased only by about 50¢ per hour over the years. However, she had been given a new title of assistant manager, prompting her to tell us that yes, she had advanced on the employment ladder.

Looking at how women fared by comparing their wages in 1997 to those in 2003 sometimes masks the bumpy road that they faced along the way. Anita had a job as a machine operator in an auto supply plant, and by 1999 she was making more than $8 an hour. However, she became frustrated at the slow rate at which her pay was rising, saying, “I was there, like, five years, and we was just getting 17¢ raises, 12¢ raises. We were in a factory, we were doing car parts and stuff. I’m like, it’s not worth it. I had enough there!” Unfortunately, as a high school dropout, the jobs she could find subsequently were even lower paying. When we met with her in early 2004 she was working part time at a fast food establishment. While she had married, her husband’s wages were also relatively low, and child support obligations to his other children meant that their finances were always tight.

Maylene, a self-professed “honest worker,” had bounced around from job to job, often, it turned out, due to conflicts with her employers over schedules or perceived unfairness. As she told her interviewer Amber, on her last job in a factory she worked “sunup to sundown, Sunday through Sunday.” Frustrated by her inability to get time off (overtime was seemingly required) to tend to errands and to her family, Maylene quit. Maylene also left positions because employers asked her to do work she believed to be outside her job description or because she got “bad vibes” from co-workers. Indeed, Maylene might have exempli-
fied the type of welfare recipient that many policymakers worried about in the years after implementation of welfare reform: the person who could get jobs but not keep them because of interpersonal difficulties. However, Maylene stressed repeatedly that her foremost responsibility was to her family, noting that jobs were easy to come by but she only had one family. When we spoke with her in 2004, she was getting paid about $130 a week by the state to care for her bedridden grandmother. However, like Sierra, the other woman in our sample who was taking care of a disabled relative, Maylene had a few sidelines. Maylene supplemented her income by providing day care; Sierra hustled for various odd jobs, or “little things I’ve got going,” when she had a bill that needed paying and money was tight.

The WES survey data document that both Anita and Maylene had multiple challenges. In addition to their lack of education, both had mental health problems the majority of the time, both had periodic transportation difficulties, and both were frequent drug users. It is easy to imagine that any of these problems could account for their frustrations. For example, Maylene’s conflicts with her employers might have been exacerbated by her depression. However, her rationale that family came first was a sentiment shared by many other women in the study, regardless of the types of employment barriers the survey may have found.

Above-Poverty Wage to Poverty Wage

For other women in our qualitative sample, the movement on the employment ladder was downward. As noted earlier, more than a third of WES workers saw their wages decrease, and many who started in above-poverty-wage work ended up in poverty-wage jobs by the time we concluded the study. Four women in the qualitative sample experienced this downward transition. Janelle was one of these individuals. In 1997, Janelle left welfare for a job in an auto manufacturing plant. The commute was very lengthy, upward of two hours each way, so she quit and returned to welfare, receiving benefits on and off through 2000. Although she was working most of this time, her wages were around $6 an hour, low enough to qualify her and her four children for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). A friend alerted her about a job opening as a maid in a local hotel. The pay, about $7 an hour, was not
anywhere near the $17 she was making at the plant. However, the loca-
tion was very close to her home, and she found the work easy. While
Janelle did not lack transportation—the survey found that she had no
barriers to employment—the length of time she needed to be in the car
to get to a higher-paying job was not worth the effort to her.

Not all downward moves were necessarily detrimental. Kathleen
quit a relatively well-paid job ($9.50 an hour) as a receptionist in an
office, in large part because she did not get along with her co-workers.
When interviewed, she was working in a day care center. Although her
pay was only slightly above minimum wage, Kathleen loved working
with children and was able to place her son in care at the center, free of
charge. She called it her “dream job.” However, the fact that her hus-
band had a very high-paying job, and no obligations to children from
other relationships, likely enabled her to take a job she loved rather than
one that paid better. Most women we interviewed were not in Kath-
leen’s situation.

A few women experienced downward employment mobility even
though they remained in the same job. Denise, a caregiver in a group
home, had worked for the same company for quite a few years but had
not received much in the way of additional pay. Purported financial dif-
ficulties led Denise’s employers to lower her hourly wage from nearly
$8 to $6.50. When we interviewed her, Denise repeatedly used the word
“frustrated” to describe how she felt about her job. However, she never
mentioned the pay cut as the reason for her dissatisfaction. Rather, she
talked extensively about feeling marginalized by her co-workers, whom
she described as “cliquish,” and snubbed by her supervisors, who she
believed gave prime shifts to their favorite employees. While Denise
never reported that she felt any workplace discrimination (as measured
in the survey), she believed that the actions of her co-workers and bosses
were preventing her from advancing.

Similarly, Ellen firmly believed that favoritism at her place of work,
a clothing store, kept her from getting promotions and a better schedule.
Over the course of the study, Ellen’s wage stayed roughly the same,
hovering around $6 an hour; with inflation, this amounted to a decrease
in pay over the years. She had worked in a variety of jobs initially but
had been with the same employer for about three years when we inter-
viewed her. Ellen was one of the few individuals in the qualitative sam-
ple who had “low work experience,” which is among the key variables
in the multivariate analyses that distinguished women who advanced and those who did not. By working steadily between 1997 and 2003, she certainly accumulated a great deal of employment experience and never identified this as a challenge to further advancement.

Continuous Above-Poverty-Wage Employment

Six of the women interviewed worked in above-poverty-wage jobs throughout the 1997–2004 period in which we observed them. Recall again that “above-poverty wage” is simply defined as more than $7.05 an hour in 2003.

Two of these women worked for auto-parts manufacturers, the quintessential “good” job in Michigan for people without postsecondary schooling. Johnetta made nearly $12 an hour and had just had her six-year anniversary at the plant when we interviewed her (although she was briefly laid off for a time in 1998). Interestingly, Johnetta never mentioned the pay as the reason for applying for the job. Instead she said she thought that “it would be a good job for a single mother.” Initially, Johnetta’s shifts were four 10-hour days, leaving her free on Fridays to schedule doctors’ appointments for her son. Although her son had physical health problems throughout the study, Johnetta’s arrangement allowed her to accommodate his health needs while not missing work.

However, even some of the women in higher-paying jobs worried about their prospects for the future. Toni, who worked as an aide in a local elementary school, had been a long-term welfare recipient when she noticed that the rules were beginning to change. She told me that, in the mid-1990s, when she heard that the welfare agency would soon no longer allow participation in education and training to fulfill the work requirement, she quickly completed her GED. Once welfare required women to work, she said, “My caseworker didn’t need to tell me to get a job.” With the exception of a short time in 1998 when she was employed in fast food and earned just over the minimum wage, Toni’s jobs had paid fairly well. When I interviewed her in 2004, she was making more than $11 an hour. However, the school board had been laying off support personnel, and Toni thought she might lose her position. She knew that with only a GED, her prospects for a job paying equally well were slim. As did many other women we interviewed, she talked vaguely of going back to school but did not have an idea of where and
what field she might study. In the meantime, again like so many women in this study, making sure her teenaged sons did well in school and stayed out of trouble was Toni’s primary concern.

Unemployment

We selected our subjects from a pool of women who had jobs at the time the final survey was administered in the fall of 2003. However, several months later when we went to interview her, one of the individuals in our qualitative sample had lost her job, putting her in the category of transitions into unstable employment. Brenda, in her early thirties, had seen her wages rise over the years as she worked as a health care aide, first for one employer and then another. A series of health problems of her own and of several family members led her to quit her job so that she could take care of herself, her mother, and her daughter. For Brenda, it was easier to quit her job and try to find a new one than to attempt to negotiate time off with her employer. Also, for Brenda, responsibilities to her family came first, a message we heard repeatedly in these interviews.

This brief overview of some of the women’s stories represents the major themes we uncovered in our interviews. Although satisfactory pay is certainly an important component of a “good” job, women considered many other aspects—schedules, commute times, workplace environment—when making decisions about whether to take a new position or stay in their current one. The next chapter explores in greater depth these other characteristics of jobs, as well as provides more detailed descriptions of what women actually do in their work and how their own employment experiences might influence decisions about career advancement. As some of the women’s narratives demonstrate, work schedules, particularly as they relate to children’s needs, are one of the more important factors that individuals in our sample considered, regardless of the number or ages of those children. Many women knew that their lack of education held them back; some were trying to figure out if they could manage work, school, and family. Interestingly, with the exception of education, very few women talked about other “employment barriers” as potentially affecting their prospects. Even though I focused on these characteristics in the previous chapter as a way to parse out potential factors that might be associated with different career
trajectories (and also used them to describe this sample), domestic violence, mental health problems, and drug use were rarely discussed, and if they were, the context was not about employment. Rather, it is the shared experiences of struggling to maintain dignity and to be a good mother while working in the low-wage and low-skilled labor market that emerged as most salient.

**Note**

1. All quotes are verbatim responses of the respondents, as transcribed.