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2.3 Not measuring up: low-income women receiving welfare benefits

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Introduction

The central notion of this chapter is that every person has the right to an elemental standard of social life, as a citizenship entitlement. However, segments of our society, such as women who rely on government payments as their primary source of income, do not enjoy full social citizenship entitlements and are instead socially excluded. Using data from in-depth qualitative interviews, I outline participants’ experiences of stigma, marginalisation and exclusion. I posit that these experiences are the result of policy failure as financial assistance policies fail to fully provide these women with their social citizenship entitlements.

Social citizenship and the provision of welfare

Social citizenship, first introduced by T.H. Marshall (1950) as a subset of general citizenship, ‘exists when a nation’s laws and social provisions override de facto disadvantage based on ascriptive difference and personal misfortune’ (Higgins and Ramina 2000: 137). The crux of Marshall’s theory is that social citizenship is designed to lessen the differentiating effects of the market and enable citizens to participate in society to their fullest. The most common benefits associated with social citizenship are welfare benefits, as the welfare system plays an enormous role in administering entitlements to financially marginalised citizens. Such economic transfers are designed to lessen the differentiating effects of the market to enable those both employed and unemployed ‘to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in society’ (Marshall 1950: 11).

The right to full participation in society is theoretically and unconditionally accorded equally to all citizens; however, this is problematic for low-income women as requirements for single parents’ welfare receipt are conditional on attachment to the workforce. In Australia in 2005 the welfare benefit system was reformed to move single parents from welfare to work (Commonwealth of Australia 2005). These reforms, enacted in 2005 but discursively promoted in policy since the early 2000s, have shifted the focus of welfare away from
issues of social citizenship and onto issues of economic individualism (Cook and Marjoribanks 2005). In this climate of personal responsibility, economic rationalism and reducing welfare expenditure, welfare policies mediate marginalised citizens’ opportunities for social participation and shape the stigma experienced by recipients.

The social exclusion of welfare recipients

Social exclusion is a concept ‘related to notions of poverty, hardship, deprivation and marginalisation’ (Peace 2001: 17), which can be defined as ‘disintegration from common cultural processes, lack of participation in social activities, alienation from decision-making and civic participation, and barriers to employment and material resources’ (Reid 2004: 27). Examining welfare benefits as a mediator of social exclusion has gained political acceptability primarily in the United Kingdom where welfare policies specifically aim to lead people out of social exclusion through participation in paid work (Levitas 1998). Levitas’s analysis of these policies revealed three discourses of social exclusion focusing on financial redistribution, social integration through paid work, or the moral fortitude of welfare recipients. These discourses are also evident in Australia where welfare policies focus simultaneously on promoting paid work and monitoring the moral behaviour of recipients (see for example Cook and Marjoribanks 2005; Carney 2007). This has implications for recipients’ sense of exclusion and social citizenship, as pejorative policies can undermine the ‘inclusive’ aims they set out to achieve. For example, on 1 July 2006 the Australian federal government enacted the Employment and workplace relations legislation amendment (Welfare to work and other measures) Act 2005 (No. 154) which aims to move single parents from welfare to work.

The Australian government describes the benefits of employment for people receiving welfare benefits as ‘higher incomes’, ‘better participation in mainstream economic life’ (Costello 2005: 3), and improvements to ‘wellbeing’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2005: 132). However, these benefits are yet to be demonstrated and overseas experiences of welfare-to-work programs show mixed results. For example, qualitative studies of single mothers’ experiences of moving from welfare to work have documented low wages, few job advancement opportunities, and continued reliance on welfare benefits and family for additional financial and in-kind support, such as health insurance and childcare (Litt et al. 2000; Dean and Coulter 2006). Further, while on average single parents in paid work have higher incomes than those reliant on income support, overseas research suggests that labour market participation by single parents does not necessarily ameliorate poverty (Baker and Tippin 2002; Walter 2002; Williamson and Salkie 2005). However, Centrelink (2005: 2), the Australian government agency responsible for the delivery of welfare services, asserts that ‘paid work provides not only the money to live on and raise a family, but also improves self-esteem and provides a connection to the community’. Research suggests, however, that for both single mothers
returning to work from welfare and for those who remain on benefits, the outcomes are often less optimistic (Baker and Tippin 2002; Hildebrandt and Kelber 2005).

In this chapter, I seek to describe the experience of low-income women receiving welfare benefits in Australia to explore how welfare receipt shapes their social exclusion. In order to explore low-income women’s experience of social exclusion and welfare receipt, interviews were conducted with 28 women in receipt of welfare benefits.

**Women receiving welfare benefits**

Of the women interviewed, seven were married or in de facto relationships, 15 were separated, widowed or divorced, and six were single. With regards to family type, 18 women had at least one child under the age of 16, three women had adult children, and seven women had no children. One woman lived in a share-house environment, whereas all of the others lived either alone or with their immediate family, including children and partners if applicable.

While all of the women interviewed received some type of government benefit, six also worked part-time, three were students and 19 were neither employed nor undertaking further study. This group of 19 women included 12 home-makers and stay-at-home mothers, two women classified as ‘jobseekers’, two women with disabilities, one woman receiving an aged-pension, and two who were in receipt of sickness or injury benefits. Sixteen of the 28 women were under the age of 40.

The following description of the women’s experiences begins from the analysis of two statements made by participants, which encapsulated their experience of social exclusion and social citizenship. These statements were:

*The more you stay at home the less self-esteem you have. You become a hermit really. I’ve got the stage where I don’t want to leave the house anymore.*

_(Christine1)_

*So when I’m stuck at home by myself I feel more confident because it’s more like I’m in my fantasy world where I am in control and everything’s perfect and no one’s judging me.*

_(Irene)_

These statements have direct relevance to issues of social citizenship and social exclusion as these experiences are not indicative of sharing in the social heritage or living to the standards prevailing in society. Unravelling these statements to identify the basis of such exclusion is the grounds for the following analysis. The purpose of providing the findings as an unfolding analysis is to enable the reader to take the same analytical journey as myself. By documenting key analysis decisions and directions, the reader can judge for
themselves the perspective taken by the researcher and to what extent it is useful for their own work. This is similar to the style of Becker (1993) in his process-oriented article ‘How I learned what a crock was’ where results are presented as an unfolding story where each layer of meaning, influence and understanding is revealed, and is reflected upon in light of the knowledge gained previously.

To summarise the two accounts, Christine states that she has less self-esteem as a result of staying at home, whereas Irene contends that she is more confident. The point of this exercise is not to determine which of these statements is ‘true’, but, rather, under what social circumstances the two statements can be compatible. As this process unfolds, the following analysis will draw upon not only the experiences of Christine and Irene, but all of the participants to provide a detailed account of how they experienced social citizenship and social exclusion.

Unravelling low-income women’s social exclusion

The following analysis begins from the previous two statements which identify self-esteem as an issue for low-income women receiving welfare benefits, and a key to understanding their marginalisation and social exclusion. Healey (2002: 1) defines self-esteem as ‘a sense of personal efficacy and a sense of personal worth. It is the integrated sum of self-confidence and self-respect. It is the conviction that one is competent to live and worthy of living’. Christine speaks of her self-esteem being eroded by being at home and presumably isolated (as a ‘hermit’) whereas Irene talks about being more confident when she is not being judged. The overall result, however, is that these women are socially excluded as they remain at home due to issues related to self-esteem.

The first question to be asked of the data, therefore, is ‘why is it that one woman experiences increased self-esteem and another experiences decreased self-esteem as a result of the same situation”? In both cases the women are not receiving feedback from others. For Christine this reduces her self-esteem whereas for Irene this increases her self-confidence. It is feasible, therefore, that the type of feedback received or not received is important. Christine lacks positive feedback now that she is at home, whereas Irene feels better because she lacks negative feedback. These assumptions, however, are by no means taken as given. What is now required is a thorough examination of this issue, to be tested and refined through the following data analysis, in order to develop an emerging theory (Agar 1999).

Feedback from others

With reference to the development of self-esteem, Wells (2001) describes ‘first, and most basic, is the idea of reflected appraisals, in which people learn who they are and how well they are doing through the social responses of others to them’. A basic summary suggests that receiving positive appraisals
bolsters self-esteem and receiving negative appraisals reduces self-esteem (Owens et al. 2001). The receipt of positive and negative appraisals is also supported in the data; however, the women’s receipt of negative appraisals was far more common than the receipt of positive appraisals. Some of the appraisals low-income women received during their day-to-day activities included the following:

I did a course about five years, six years ago and I was best in the class. I did so well. Confidence went over the top. Until this guy, their father, he put me down, put me down and now, if I want to do something, I’m not confident enough. I lost that. I went down to the bottom. And [my confidence] suffered a lot.

(Eva)

I hate being on the [welfare] system. I want to get off it. I want to get out of it. And I think I have for a long, long time but I’ve never had the encouragement to I suppose. It’s a rut. And the longer you’re in the rut the longer it is to get out of it.

(Lisa)

I notice that the area where [my son] goes to school it’s a fairly expensive area and the mums roll up in their big cars and their tennis skirts and they all, they’re all really cliquey and a lot of them won’t talk to me because I’m a single mum.

(Beth)

As Poole (2000: 141) notes ‘our self-concept develops through our interactions with others. If we are defined as “ugly” or “fat” or “stupid” then we may begin to see ourselves as such and behave accordingly’. Both positive and negative examples of such appraisals were evident in the data, which reinforced the women’s marginalised position and contributed to their social exclusion. For example:

Because he would put me down. ‘You don’t know nothing. You are dumb.’

(Eva)

And anyway we ended up, one night we had a few fights and I, I got hurt because he, because I wasn’t eating properly. He was telling me that I was too fat. I was actually really underweight, but I didn’t see it.

(Beth)
course and my husband said ‘Oh you’re no good for that’, you know. ‘No good for that.’ So, ‘who’s going to look after the kids?’

(Fiona)

These are but a few of the many ways in which women were told, and interpreted, that they were not meeting social expectations. Being told they weren’t good enough represents a direct evaluation of a negative appraisal. For example, Eva was told she was dumb. Beth was told she was fat, and Fiona was told she was wrong for being a single mother, and that she was not good enough to do a computer course.

In the above instances, the women experienced stigma, which ‘is associated with those inferior attributes which are commonly regarded as major norm infractions’ (Page 1984: 4). In his classic work, Goffman (1963) identified three ‘types’ of stigma, or facets by which a person can be stigmatised. These include physical deformities, deficits in character and lineal inadequacies, which are all based upon socially accepted norms. Failure to adhere to such norms can result in stigma. The above examples, of being dumb, fat, or a single mother, all fit into the ‘deficits of character’ type. Unsurprisingly, stigma was also experienced by the women interviewed. As Lisa attests:

You feel trapped. And you feel a little bit isolated sometimes and you feel like you’ve got this stigma over you. ‘Oh, single mother. Sole parent.’

Appraisals regarding these stigmatising attributes contributed to the feelings of marginalisation experienced by the women. As Cook and McCormick (2006) note, the mechanics through which people are marginalised and excluded include both the stigma associated with breaking social norms, and ‘differentiation’, which is the creation and maintenance of boundaries through divergent identities (Hall et al. 1994). While these examples demonstrate interpreting feedback as a negative indictment on character, not receiving appraisals also negatively contributed to the women’s self-esteem and social exclusion.

Lack of feedback from others

Returning to one of the original two statements, for Irene, a disabled woman who lived alone, not receiving negative appraisals has made her feel ‘more confident’ as ‘no one’s judging’ her. Vicky also described how her confidence improved as she moved from a wealthy suburb, where she didn’t ‘fit in’ and was excluded, to a low-income suburb where she felt ‘normal’:

[Low-income Suburb]’s quite a good area to be poor in! Although there is sort of some money around, but generally people aren’t as superficial. Yeah, or aren’t as judgemental about that sort of thing as they are in other places. A lot of people here are the working class kind, in the suburbs.
So I don’t feel, you know, that disadvantaged. Although when I lived in [High-income Suburb] before I moved over to this side of town, I did feel it a lot more there

(Vicky)

Irene’s and Vicky’s experiences are challenges to the original proposition, as no direct appraisals are being made. These examples, however, rather than dismissing the emerging theory, provide refinement on two issues: first, there is evidence of the common-sense strategy of avoiding negative appraisals (Rosenberg 1979); and second, there is evidence of generalised appraisals being perceived from others. Avoiding negative appraisals would account for Christine and Irene’s withdrawal from society as they preferred to be at home, and Vicky’s move to a suburb where people weren’t as ‘judgmental’. Generalised appraisals refer to the women feeling that they were being judged, even when no direct verbal communication was being made to them. The nature of these generalised appraisals is outlined below.

**Generalised feedback from others**

Analysis of the data revealed that the perception of generalised feedback from others was a common experience. Tying this to theories on self-esteem, the women’s experiences reflect the concept of ‘social comparison’, first put forward by Festinger (1954). Here,

> ‘other people provide important reference sources for calibrating social reality and anchoring self-appraisals. Social skills, attributes, and identities lack absolute value and a clear evaluative metric. Thus, other people serve as essential reference points for deciding what is normal and what is good, providing external standards by which persons can comparatively assess their own merit or value’

(Wells 2001: 305–6)

Again, as with the interpretation of direct appraisals, negative generalised appraisals far outweighed positive generalised appraisals, which were effectively non-existent. The following excerpts illustrate the women’s experience:

I mean, you know, they can point their finger at me, and say I’m a sole parent and an ex-commission woman.

(Prue)

And that makes me sad to some extent, where I feel as though I always have to defend myself to someone. I mean, even though they’re not asking, I see their eyes. I know what they’re thinking even before they open their mouth.

(Glenda)
Well, they do look down on people who get the pension … And people do look at you, you know, like, ‘Well, she thinks she’s so important. We’re not paying out tax to support her!’

(Carley)

In the above excerpts, demonstrating how negative appraisals were received despite no direct communication with others, the women felt they were being judged, and judged negatively. This adds weight to the presupposition that welfare stigma contributed to social exclusion, as low-income women withdrew from society to avoid the negative direct and generalised appraisals they constantly perceived.

The emerging theory, however, does not end with what women felt other people thought of them, as their withdrawal from public life was also impacted upon by what the women thought of themselves. When direct or generalised appraisals were not made by or in reference to others, the women made self-appraisals. Some examples include:

It’s like I’m a lower member of society because I had a child when I was younger and we split up.

(Beth)

I mean, where do I fit in society? Just one of the many cretins just lurking about, trying to exist, I think. That’s about all I can say. You don’t feel very important. Just a cretin.

(Olivia)

Well, [my daughter] doesn’t get to go on all the [school] excursions. And I speak to the principal and I have no pride. I am not allowed to have pride. And my husband’s not allowed pride.

(Nora)

Probably the biggest deal was having to go on a single mother’s pension and going and having to apply for that was sort of a big deal. I found it really embarrassing.

(Vicky)

The above quotes are examples of negatively self-perceived behaviours and attributes; such as having a child when you were young, having to apply for the pension, not being able to afford school excursions, or being a cretin. Again, these self-appraisals overlap feelings of stigma, as the negatively perceived attributes and behaviours contravene major social norms, such as having children in stable relationship at an appropriate age, being financially secure, and being a respectable person. Additionally, these self-appraisals share the assumptions of Cooley’s (1902) classic conception of the ‘looking glass self’ where individuals imagine their appearance and the reaction of others.

In addition to the self-evaluation of attributes, behaviour and activities, the women also reflected on their social position by evaluating social symbols.
Again, sociological theories on self-esteem support this conceptualisation. Such evaluations are known as ‘identification’ (Wells 2001), where individuals include their association with highly regarded others or objects in their own self-concept. It has been asserted that this is especially pertinent for women, who emphasise their connectedness to others, such as being in desirable social relationships or belonging to favourable groups, as important to their own self-regard (Josephs et al. 1992). Such evaluations have a dynamic and recursive connection to social exclusion. Women who are marginalised, isolated or excluded may have poor self-esteem, as Eva exemplifies:

Because you’re just at home and nothing to do. You get lonely. Because I have no friends, I just go to the shop. Look after them two [children] and you know, you get lonely in a way.

(Eva)

Additionally, women with poor self-esteem may not wish to socialise or connect with others, explaining Christine’s depletion of self-esteem to ‘the stage where I don’t want to leave the house anymore’ (Christine).

Below are some illustrations of identification with particular social or cultural groups and the women’s self-evaluations. As can be seen, women who identified with socially valued, and hence socially included, groups or relationships, such as workers, good mothers, and those who contribute to society had more positive self-evaluations, whereas women who identified with self-perceived undesirable groups and relationships, and were thus socially excluded, such as single mothers, welfare recipients, or the disabled had more negative self-evaluations.

One explanation for such conceptions is that identifying with socially valued groups and relationships conforms to major social norms, whereas identifying with undesirable social groups and relationships contravenes major social norms, and therefore is both marginalising and attracts stigma. The following excerpts reflect this assertion, beginning with socially valued groups and relationships identified in the data, such as workers, good housekeepers, contributors to society, and good mothers:

I think it’s very good for your soul and your health and your mental health and your ability to mix with people. It’s interesting and sometimes it’s fun. I like working and I think it’s very good to be busy. So, I think it’s a good thing. It gets you up out of bed, everyday, going off. So, you feel it’s very good for self-esteem and importance.

(Olivia)

I am a very good financial controller. I manage the house, bills, me, [Partner] and two kids. And the house is $200 rental a week, but still I do OK because I know how to manage my money.

(Tania)
Oh, look, I mean once upon a time, it would have been, ‘Oh, society’s providing for me’. Whereas I feel that society should be extremely happy with me because I’m providing a great environment for my kids so they won’t be social misfits. Because they’ve had the care and, you know, a pretty stable environment.

(Prue)

The flip-side of the above, socially valued roles, is the experience of not measuring up, of being part of a cultural group that is socially undesirable. These include the experiences of welfare recipients, single and young mothers, and the disabled, and once again, the negative experiences far outweighed the positive experiences: ‘When I’m on the pension I feel like I’m no-one’ (Fiona); ‘I’m fed up. And I’m fed up with feeling like not being in, not contributing the way I should be. And society basically saying so’ (Lisa).

I’ve thought about this for about two years now, three years now. If I go bankrupt then, because I’m a nothing in society pretty much, I’m a student, I’m on security, you know. I’m not managing my own business or you know, or I’m not planning to move overseas and start my whole new, you know, corporation, then I’m pretty much a no-one in society.

(Jacky)

As such, one of the most pervasive attitudes of the women interviewed was that they were ‘nobodies’ in society, that they didn’t amount to anything, and that they were different from others in a negative way. As such, these women felt socially excluded from the mainstream that did not value them and to which they did not contribute. While some women articulated that they weren’t contributing (and that such contribution amounted almost exclusively to economic or professional contribution rather than motherhood), most women talked about their life not amounting to much, or not being of much value. As such, these sentiments tie together notions of self-esteem with broader social issues that contextualise what it is to contribute, and to be of value. Additionally, this contribution is what low-income women perceived as participating in society in a socially valued way, and as such, by not participating they were socially excluded and lacking in social citizenship status. The following excerpts illustrate this point, beginning with the more obvious examples containing explicit references to contribution, and then moving on to more abstract or obscure references where women imply their experiences are of no value to themselves or society. The first excerpt, provided by Lisa, indicates that motherhood alone is an insufficient contribution. Her excerpt clearly outlines that contribution equates to financial contribution towards her son’s future.

I would hope to get to that stage where I’m off [welfare]. I don’t want it. I don’t want to have a fifteen year old saying, ‘Mum. You sat on your bum
and’, you know. And I want to be able to turn around and provide for my son. Say, ‘Here’s a nest-egg son’. Or provide for the, just be able to contribute. Just be able to contribute to the future.

(Lisa)

Similarly, Irene, a disabled woman without children, and Yvonne, a married childless woman, make appeals to the worker role as the only legitimate contribution to society:

I thought, ‘yeah if I can get to two years full time [work] then I’m a real member of society … I want to achieve something. Be regarded as legitimate by society.’

(Irene)

I still wanna keep trying and I really hope that this [plan for employment] works out, ’cause I’ve got no other thoughts after that. Yeah, it’s just depressing for me that I’ve done different things and they haven’t amounted to anything in this world.

(Yvonne)

Below is one woman’s experience which provides a potential challenge to the emerging theory. Here, Prue’s sentiments were originally similar to typical constructions of the worker role as primary. However, her attitude changes after watching news reports about the negative effects of childcare on young children. In this instance she goes against even her own assumptions regarding economic acquisition as a contribution to society and instead promotes the role of mother to be of prime importance.

But I couldn’t give up the job. Then [I was injured at work] and I had the six months off work. When I went back, the news every night while I was at work was how parents with a child under six-months were returning to work which affects them for life. And I ended up doing it [returning to work] while the height of all this was on the TV. I walked into the payroll office and gave two weeks’ notice. And it was such a relief when I did it. I mean this job was gunna be my, ‘Oh, I’m gunna get a home out of this for my kids’. When really, you know, if I had to work those awful hours and then, I don’t know, I never saw my kids … So, isn’t it better for society to help a little bit in one way, rather than to, you know?

(Prue)

Prue’s example contradicts the contention that financial contribution is primary. However, the key aspect of her statement that differentiates it from Lisa’s and from other women’s experiences is her identification with socially accepted claims, presented through news stories on the benefits provided by stay-at-home parents. At the time of her decision to leave
work, these stories legitimated motherhood as a contribution to society. Rather than dismissing my contention that what it is to contribute is socially circulated, Prue’s example strengthens this argument. If social trends change to favour the primacy of parenthood over financial independence, then the stigma associated with welfare mothers would diminish. However, at present in Australian society we see a reduction in the promotion of the mother role for low-income women and a focus upon economic contribution (Cook and Marjoribanks 2005). This position is now enshrined in policy, such as the *Employment and workplace relations legislation amendment (Welfare to work and other measures) Act 2005 (No. 154)* where all single parents whose youngest child is over the age of 6 must return to work. Welfare policies, in both Australia and the United Kingdom (Cook and Marjoribanks 2005; Levitas 1998), have promoted work as a route out of social exclusion. However, in Levitas’s (1998: 23) study of New Labour, the terms social exclusion and exclusion from paid work were used virtually interchangeably, while a similar elision occurs between “people” and “workers”. This is, however, problematic for low-income single parents as the types of jobs low-income women are being encouraged to take up in order to improve their connection to the community typically attract low wages and lack advancement opportunities (Litt et al. 2000). Such marginal and problematic employment can serve to further exclude low income women as they struggle to meet the demands of both their mother and worker roles (Smith et al. 2000).

**Conclusion**

In the above analysis, two points were identified that are paramount to understanding low-income women’s experience of marginalisation and social citizenship. First, self-esteem mediated the extent to which low-income women felt they wanted to venture outside their homes, and participate in society. Second, how low-income women viewed themselves depended on reflected appraisals which hinged on whether they perceived they were regarded as fulfilling a socially valued role or not. Performing a socially valued role legitimated low-income women receiving welfare benefits, as they thought of themselves as contributing to society. Not fulfilling a socially valued role stigmatised women, as they regarded themselves as not contributing. It was interesting to note that mothering was rarely regarded as a socially valued role. Instead, socially valued roles focused on work and financial contribution. The lack of respect accorded to low-income women welfare recipients de-legitimates their identities as mothers, carers, domestic workers, feminised workers and citizens. There is a need for low-income women to reclaim these identities, as is proposed by feminist scholars (see for example Lister 1997). However, as Link and Phelan (2001a) note, felt stigma typically results in strained and uncomfortable social situations with potential stigmatisers, more constricted social networks, low self-esteem, depressive symptoms and unemployment and
loss of income. These challenges may make women’s transition from welfare to work even more difficult.

As Calhoun (1994: 15) suggests, there needs to be a new focus on ‘claiming, legitimating and valuing identities commonly suppressed or devalued by mainstream cultures’. As long as this process fails to occur, a culturally imperial situation is created, mirroring Young’s (1990) fifth form of oppression. As she states, ‘to experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspectives of one’s own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one’s group and mark it out as the Other’ (Young 1990: 58–59). This experience was evidenced in the low-income women’s experiences when they spoke about not feeling normal and being judged by others. While meagre welfare benefits subject low-income women to impoverished lives, failing to make ends meet and failing to provide adequately for their families reinforced stigma and shame. As such, welfare benefits, instead of providing social citizenship as is commonly understood, can be seen to perpetuate low-income women’s depleted social citizenship and social exclusion. Providing low-income women with inadequate financial assistance with normative strings attached can be seen to reduce low-income women’s self-esteem, echoing de Tocqueville’s ([1835] 1997) claim ‘the right of the poor to obtain society’s help is unique in that instead of elevating the heart of the man who exercises it, it lowers him’ (Goldberg 2001: 299).

What is required is a shift in attitudes towards low-income women receiving welfare benefits, to dispel pejorative conceptions of them as ‘welfare cheats’ and ‘dole bludgers’. Additionally, increases in benefit levels, and meaningful programs and services to connect low-income women to the community with opportunities for skill development, self-esteem enhancement and self-improvement will assist women to become socially involved and better integrated into communities, enabling them to participate in the social practices other citizens take for granted.

Note

1 All names in parentheses are pseudonyms to protect the participant’s identity.